

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

on

Youth and the Internet: Fighting Radicalization and Extremism

UNESCO headquarters, 16&17 June 2015

Introduction

Information and communication technologies provide enhanced opportunities for access to information and the creation and sharing of knowledge, enriching exchange as well as intercultural dialogue. The Internet, in particular, has catalysed innovation across all spheres of contemporary life and between a wide range of actors. This is especially relevant for young women and men, who are important actors and beneficiaries of the digital age.

At the same time, the Internet has been associated with rising challenges with young people, including through the emergence of gated communication and virtual communities, which can lead to isolation and marginalisation, and, in their most extreme form, may present a security issue.

In this respect, the Internet has been embraced by violent extremist groups, which are increasingly effective in using this technology in order to:

- Promote hatred and violence, based on ethnic, religious and cultural grounds;
- Extend outreach and recruitment efforts, particularly among young people;
- Create on-line communities with global reach, in which violent extremist views and behaviour can be encouraged, thereby contributing to processes of radicalization¹.

The Internet has become a strategic tool for enhancing the visibility and influence of groups advocating for sectarianism and thriving as virtual communities, even if they develop offline on the margins of societies.

¹ Radicalization occurs when groups or individuals come to approve of and use violence to achieve their political objectives.

It is important for the international community to understand more clearly the role of the Internet as a recruitment tool for extremism and radicalization and craft effective tools in response. Violent extremism is an affront to the principles of the United Nations, embodied in universal human rights and fundamental freedoms. With a mandate to foster cooperation and solidarity through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information, UNESCO must support States and civil society actors in responding to extremism and radicalisation on the Internet.

Media and information literacy programmes are essential in this respect, along with education for global citizenship and the integration of human rights in all education and life-long learning. It is essential to foster new skills and competencies among young people, including critical thinking, global solidarity as well as individual and collective responsibility. This calls for new forms of cultural literacy, in line also with the goals of the *International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures* that UNESCO is leading across the world.

Tackling extremism and radicalisation on the Internet requires action across the board. This includes raising awareness about hate speech, its causes and consequences, and the creation of new platforms and networks for dialogue and mutual understanding. Data collection and research is important to establish early-warning mechanisms and produce evidence-based recommendations. The mobilization of civil society, as well as online communities and Internet Intermediaries (e.g., search engines, Internet service providers, online social networks), is important. The linkages between the Internet and other media should be taken into account, notably regarding the role of bloggers and social media platforms, including training of future journalists in reflecting diversity and promoting understanding. The Internet is increasingly important in terms of how cultural diversity is expressed and perceived, as well as how cultural expressions are created, produced, disseminated and accessed.

Young people stand at the forefront of many of these developments. They are also among the most vulnerable groups, especially in the context of challenging social and economic conditions, including unemployment, poverty, and enduring situations of conflict.

To build inclusive knowledge societies requires the active engagement of all young women and men through information and communication technologies, drawing on relevant quality content, on the basis of human rights and dignity. We see the rise of 'digital natives' today — our task is to nurture a new generation of 'digital citizens' at the global level.

The Internet must be supported as a tool to empower young people, enabling them to express and reach their aspirations for the benefit of all society. This calls for new skills in media and cultural literacy, as well as quality education and new forms of global citizenship. Young people should be engaged through the Internet as active citizens in ways that challenge the appeal of extremist groups exploiting perceptions of alienation and rejection, building on the Internet as a tool for enriching their world's perception. This means ensuring that young people have

access to a wide range of positive opportunities for self-affirmation, engagement and solidarity, involving them in meaningful activities to tackle the challenge of extremism and radicalisation.

Proposed areas of intervention

This initiative will be taken forward at two levels:

1. An international conference will provide a platform for the engagement of young people regarding the challenges of extremism and radicalization on the Internet. It will also provide a framework to share experience amongst experts and policy-makers on effective policy interventions, projects and processes.
2. The knowledge shared at the Conference will be taken forward thereafter through pilot projects, which, taken together, will act also as a learning lab for more effective policy responses.

The Conference will bring together officials, academics, policy-makers, youth NGOs, experts and practitioners from a range of institutions and disciplines, to share experience, highlight gaps and explore options in moving forward.

The Conference will also seek to identify areas for UNESCO action, across all its areas of competence, to support States in tackling the challenges of violent extremism and radicalisation on the Internet.

A network of conference participants will be established to support post-conference advocacy and knowledge sharing.

Beneficiaries

The conference will seek to attract around 250 delegates over the course of two days and will be conducted in English and French.