

## Freedom of expression and countering hate speech online to prevent youth radicalization

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### Introduction

UNESCO is working a lot on the issues covered by this panel, including an integrated approach that combines our expertise in research, education and communication-information policy and capacity building. We convened the UN's first conference on this topic last year, are following up with another substantial international gathering this year, and we have presented our views at numerous international fora, including the European Parliament. Recently, UNESCO produced a pioneering study "[Countering Online Hate Speech](#)".

Taking stock of this work, I have come to realize that the topic can be assessed in terms of three paradigms - which for shorthand can be titled "Protection", "Preparation" and "Promoting Prospects".

Each has some insight to offer; and we will miss key insights if we remain within a single of these paradigms. And, we especially need to give more attention to the third paradigm – the "Prospects".

### Paradigm 1: Protection

The **Protection** paradigm is what it says – and in this case, we are talking about protecting society from destructive potentials of youth, and our modality is to protect the youth from what we assume to be a cause in unleashing such harm. In this paradigm, we need to shield or quarantine this vulnerable social category from dangerous messages, which can co-opt and shape their identity towards committing violence against the public.

The implications for freedom of expression is to protect young people from websites that can inspire a commitment to violence. This seems to be an easy solution – in fact, too easy, as I will argue below, because the causes are much deeper than mere exposure to online content.

The protection paradigm is also relevant to the right to privacy, which is a strong contributor to freedom of expression. Protection in this perspective means that there needs to be close attention – possibly even mass surveillance - in order to intercept, spot and neutralize early manifestations. With data trails increasing by the day, and big data analysis becoming increasingly available, this also seems like an easy solution to youth radicalization issues – in fact, also too easy, as I will also caution below.

We can liken the protection paradigm to a reactive medical approach: we have to stop the inflow of germs, especially foreign ones, and we have monitor the youth for symptoms. But the difficulty here is *that we also have to protect freedom of expression*, just as we should *also protect privacy*. We should therefore seek to avoid a situation where we protect youth but at the expense of protecting their rights to free expression and to privacy.

In fact, this can be done. Protective actions that involve restrictions of speech or interference with privacy should always be required to meet the three classic tests of the international standards of legality, proportionality and necessity and legitimate purpose as set out in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. If not, the restrictions become violations of the core right.

In addition, so as to keep speech restrictions to the exceptional, and to narrow them only to actually dangerous speech, reference can be made to the six-part test proposed by the Rabat Plan of Action that was developed by the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. This test concerns criteria for justifiable restrictions in relation to advocacy to incitement to hostility, discrimination and violence, such as the status of the speaker, the reach of the communication, and the likelihood that it could actually trigger practical harm.

With these safeguards, the Protection paradigm can be a part of the solution. But on its own, it is likely to achieve very little. This brings us to the second paradigm.

### **Paradigm 2: Preparation**

The **Preparation** paradigm looks less at the content supply side, and more at the receiver end. It can be seen as the other side of a 'medical' approach: we have to reduce vulnerability to infection.

From a freedom of expression point of view, this means providing young people with Media and Information Literacy, so that they can understand the ways in which media and social media work on emotions in an attempt to hijack and shape their identity.

There is also the view that there's a need to spread disinfectant in the environment as widely as possible – in other words, the Preparation paradigm provides for counter-messaging as a strategy.

It is easy to understand the Protection and the Preparation paradigms. And indeed society does need to protect and prepare young people. Certainly, it would be a mistake to think that protecting alone is the answer, because the reality is that young people do encounter hateful information and communications - for which they should be prepared. We can start with empowering them with knowledge about how advertising and propaganda work, and how they can detect ideology and cultural bias in the news. This kind of critical literacy can help them identify the manipulation entailed when they are targeted for radicalization, or even if they explore out of curiosity and become susceptible to self-radicalization processes.

### **Considering the limits of Protecting and Preparing**

At the same time, while the two paradigms have a place, they also have their limits. Their close resemblance to medical models should caution us – because we are dealing with issues that are far more complex than biological chains of cause and effect.

For a start, the way that our ideas and actions are shaped is patently far more complex than a virus infection. A stimulus-response model of the effect of media and social does not explain why some people radicalize.

It is easy to blame the Internet, partially because it is new and a relatively wild frontier. Yet, who we are relates to experiences and interactions way beyond the realm of exposure to online hate content – and has a great deal to do with our engagements with families, close friends, institutions like schools and prisons, opportunities, exclusions and inclusions.

And we know that there are financial bases as well. For example, there are massive resource flows, with and without state involvement, which subsidise elements who construct climates for religious or

other resentment, for social conformity and for propagandizing us-and-them dogmas, and which can be built upon by those who seek to recruit, train, equip and organize for violence. Financial factors are also implicated in the form of resource gaps which provoke feelings of inequality, deprivation and personal or social injustice. To focus primarily on Protection therefore is to risk the illusion that by banning access to certain content is an adequate and proportionate solution to the problem.

Such actions, like content bans and surveillance, also encounter grave risks of not just limiting, but in fact violating, the right to freedom of expression, which includes the freedom to both impart and to receive information and ideas, as well as excessively interfering with the right to privacy. UNESCO is frequently called upon to sound the alarm here. It is essential that these restrictions on rights are not weaponized for repressive political purposes, because this is a recipe for discrediting the legitimate role of the state in reconciling rights to expression and privacy with those to security of the person.

However, one reason for its popularity is that the Protection paradigm lends itself to exploitation for short-term political advantage. In this, youth radicalization is treated as if it were only a security issue. Decisions are driven by fear and the need by governments to be seen to be doing something - anything. Yet, a kneejerk response that intensifies censorship and surveillance is the equivalent of using the prism of a medical emergency to tackle problems with much deeper roots (such as malnutrition and HIV-Aids). We have to get beyond Protection.

In this context, the second paradigm, Preparation, clearly serves to complement the first one, providing a more nuanced and holistic conception, and pointing to the importance of more medium-term prevention strategies. One risk, however, is that while the Preparation paradigm points to empowering people, it can risk instrumentalising their autonomous narratives to become persuasive communications; in the process discrediting their authenticity. Worse is when it opens the door to propaganda wars – including those that compromise the potential of journalism to provide the vital independent and credible information needed to impact on heads as a counter-balance to the heart.

On the other hand, the Preparation paradigm itself also aligns with a medical approach – this time focusing on inoculation and a flood of wholesome vitamins to counter infectious material. And again, we are dealing with something that is much more complex than can be captured by a medical-style analysis and response.

### **Paradigm 3: Prospects**

This brings us to the third paradigm, the need to promote **Prospects**. In this perspective, youth are recognized as subjects, not merely objects to be protected and prepared. With this paradigm, it is possible to draw attention to the need for societies to address what prospects, i.e. what possibilities, there are for young people.

At the social and economic level, this really challenges power holders – both public and private - to think beyond own narrow interests and to develop far more innovative approaches to social inclusion, education and entrepreneurship. And to ensure that there is no cause for grievances and angers to be founded on the basis of violations of human rights locally or abroad. We have specially to call out cases of attacks on journalists and bloggers, because it is in the absence of opportunities to give public voice to grievances that the uptake of physical channels for violent expression come to be seen as justifiable by silenced actors.

In essence, the Prospects paradigm highlights that youth can and should be authors of their own identity. This means their agency. And this requires that they have opportunities to express themselves – and that they can learn how to do so with expertise and efficacy. This has to be a major part of Media and Information Literacy, which therefore cannot be confined only to the important task of critical

capacity when consuming content. Promoting prospects needs to include attention to how young people, in the evolving Knowledge Societies, can even develop to earn a living by producing content which can attract and build audience attention as a basis to underwrite this service.

In this paradigm, youth talent and innovation should be encouraged, recognized, and released. This in turn requires an environment where young people can access and impart a wide range of content with the absolute minimum of restrictions and privacy intrusions.

In this way, youth themselves can be freed from being associated with danger, and instead come to be seen as being co-creators of personal meaning, and of causes that provide fulfilling alternatives to extremism. These causes may be sports, or climate change, or anti-bullying, or music, or religious. Perhaps they may even be human rights. But they represent self- and peer-made choices, enabling young people to mix, match and create, and to become brave masters of their own multiple identities, achieving their own recognition and glory, but in non-violent ways.

It may be said that this Prospects paradigm is too ambitious and too idealistic. This could indeed be a limitation of this third way of looking at the issues. On the other hand, we have to believe in young people and their ability to ultimately shape society for the better. We need to embrace, not suppress, their idealism. We cannot reduce them to the status of a threat. But without a focus on Prospects, and the requisite freedom of expression that goes with this, the paradigms of Protection and Preparation are likely to miss a key dynamic. In English, Prospect means to explore in search of value, as in the phrase “prospecting for gold”. In this spirit, let us all begin to give greater attention to this third, but relatively neglected, paradigm.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, there is a role for narrowly tailored interventions at the Protection level, though one which firmly preserves the right to expression to the maximum possible. This is important not just in itself, but for the viability of the Prospects model. There is also a role for Preparing young people for engagement in an offline and online world in which they will experience attempts to enlist them for hatred. This helps them to identify threats to their own ownership of self-actualisation, and to defend against manipulation.

Most of all, however, we need to promote the Prospects for young people, both online and offline. In this way, young people develop offensive capacity – particularly in regard to building an autonomous identity, and resisting the allure of polarizing and binary attractions. For this to happen, we need to be sure that young people have the full benefit of freedom of expression, because it is only through this that they can make informed choices in the difficult decisions which they face as they mature their personal identities and modes of action.

Taken together, these three approaches point us towards more freedom of expression for young people, not less. And through this kind of holistic approach, the Digital Age can be viewed as an opportunity to promote peace, sustainable development and respect for human rights more broadly across the world.