TECHNOLOGY AND HATE SPEECH: FRIEND OR FOE?

Session 2 of the "Decoding Hate Speech" series, a MIGS–GAAMAC collaboration

8 October 2020 9.00 am EST | 3.00 pm CET – Online

Concept Note

BACKGROUND

History has shown that hate speech often precedes the commission of serious human rights violations and atrocities. A decade ago, social media was an agent of positive change, enabling democratic movements, giving access to new knowledge, and empowering individuals and communities around the world. However, by revolutionizing the way we communicate and interact, the Internet and social media have also considerably amplified the rise of hate-fuelled rhetoric and polarization that we have seen in recent years.

Online hate speech has had a significant impact in the offline world: inflammatory speech online has contributed to ethnic cleansing and mob violence in places such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka; hate speech escalated to violence against Europe's Roma during the global pandemic; ISIS weaponized social media to radicalize people all over the globe. Democratic societies are not immune. Racist speech by white supremacists in the U.S. led to real violence in Charleston and malign actors are spreading disinformation on social media in order to exacerbate existing social tensions.

Global actors have reacted in different ways to this growing phenomenon. Some governments are hesitant to regulate freedom of speech while governments with authoritarian tendencies have imposed social media rules to crack down on activists and journalists. Big Tech Companies, meanwhile, have failed to admit the inherent flaws of their platforms and business models that encourage outrage and hate speech, radicalize opinions and promote extremism and polarization.

Big Tech companies have abdicated responsibility for malign activities on social media that have already affected the lives of people and the fate of nations. Their business interests are currently incompatible with democratic values and the respect for human rights. Although some steps were taken, they remain opaque, fragmented, and inconsistent.

Can information and communication technologies still be used for positive change and democracy, and if so, how? How can we prevent Big Tech from profiting from online harm and once again become a tool for positive change? What tools, mechanisms and approaches can be used by states, civil society and the private sector to counter online hate?

The second session of the "Decoding Hate Speech" series will address the complexity of this social media phenomenon with an informed and multi-partied approach to prevent the harmful effects of Big Tech on human rights, and develop strategies to make technologies work for the benefit of our societies.

OBJECTIVES

The high-level discussion will seek to:

1) Provide an understanding of how social media algorithms and business models encourage outrage and polarization, and what tech means for authoritarian states and countries on the brink of authoritarianism
2) Inform the public about the offline impacts of extremism, disinformation and hate speech online
3) Discuss ways to combat digital threats to democracy and human rights, including through policy, regulations, advocacy, and civic engagement
4) Discuss ways that technology can benefit human rights and atrocity prevention, including by identifying and countering websites that incite hatred, or using mobile phones networks to document abuses.
5) Provide an online space for the atrocity prevention community to exchange views and ideas about countering online hate and extremism

FORMAT AND PANELLISTS

The event will take place online on **8 October from 09.00 am to 10.00 pm EST** as a facilitated discussion of 30 to 45 minutes followed by a Q&A. Participants will be able to submit questions before the event via email and during the event via the live chat.

All stakeholders active or interested in atrocity prevention are invited to participate in this discussion including government, international organizations and civil society representatives.

Moderator and introductory remarks:

- Kyle Matthews, Executive Director of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (MIGS)

Panellists:

- Savita Pawnday, Deputy Executive Director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect.

- Christopher Tuckwood, Executive Director of The Sentinel Project

- Meetali Jain, Legal Director at Avaaz and international human rights lawyer

EXPECTED OUTCOME(S)

The results and conclusions from the discussion will feed into an overall report which will be shared during the GAAMAC IV global meeting taking place in November 2021.

Participants will be encouraged to continue the conversation online through GAAMAC's virtual platform.

ABOUT THE "DECODING HATE SPEECH" ONLINE SERIES

The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (MIGS) and Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC) are organizing a series of four high-level online conversations bringing together leading voices to discuss the linkages between hate speech, technology and atrocity prevention. The series aims to increase the understanding of and raise awareness about online hate speech within the atrocity prevention community and beyond in the lead up to GAAMAC IV, a global meeting taking place in November 2021 which will address hate speech, incitement and discrimination.