

United Nations Economic and Society Council: Social Media, Regulation and Oversight

MtAUN 2019: EcoSoc Committee Background Guide



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Forum:	Economic and Social Council
Issue:	Social Media: Regulation and Oversight
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Positions:	Co-Directors of the Economic and Social Council

Nota bene: The Economy and Society committee (EcoSoc) differs slightly from the general assembly as the focus of this committee is on economic and social importance. As such, delegates should prepare their stances on the issues with these focuses in mind. Additionally, this committee will feature a crisis element that involves Twitter. I encourage delegates to familiarize themselves with the use of Twitter, if they are not familiar already. The goal of the crisis element in this committee is to introduce delegates to how a crisis works in Model UN. Additionally, it is highly encouraged for delegates to prepare researched position papers that outline their countries stance on the issues of this committee. This process assists in making the simulation more realistic as well as help delegates spark discussion in the committee.

Overview

Social Media is a global community, it's where we share information and connect with our friends and family. What is posted, stored, and collected, however, is not always up to the users. In the Mount Allison Model UN Economic and Social Council committee, delegates will debate the role of the UN and government oversight in Social Media, and the extent to which it is or is not regulated. Delegates will focus on government regulation and monitoring of social media as well as an individual's rights to social media accounts and expression. Additionally, the committee will discuss the accountability of Social Media corporations in the regulation of content, collection of information, regulation of users, and more. This committee will include crisis elements and will utilize Twitter during sessions in real time.

Key Words

Net Neutrality

The concept in which Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are required to treat all internet traffic the same, not to discriminate between destinations and/or content.

Op-ed

The page in a newspaper that is reserved for special features, it is often juxtaposed to the editorial page.

Deep Fakes

Refers to when a computer program replaces the face of someone in a video with that of someone else, often a celebrity or a government official, and that edited video is passed off as real.

Dark Web

Intentionally hidden parts of the internet that are accessible by conventional search engines, and are only available through the use of special programs. Typically the dark web is used to deal in illegal activities/goods (Ex: child pornography, weapons, organ trafficking etc..)

ISP

Stands for Internet Service Provider, companies that sell access to the world-wide web. An example we can see in Canada would be Bell.

Data Broker

A company who sells information to other companies or people for a variety of uses (ex: advertising, marketing, etc..)

Big Data

A collection of data that is too vast and complicated to be navigated using traditional data managing programs, in the context of this paper, it refers to the data collected of citizens by social media sites.

Twitter

The initial design of Tweets as being, 'a short burst of inconsequential information.' has far surpassed what it has come to now. Conceptualized in 2006 by @Jack, @Ev, and @Biz, Twitter has become a social media platform necessary in the means of global connectivity. From Presidents to the 'eggs' they retweet, information is shared a million times a second, and not all of it is entirely truthful. One's tweets can cost, or create jobs; they can break news and leak information. *Twitter will be used as an interactive component in the ECOSOC committee sessions.*

Issue Part I: UN and Government

Summary

In a time where *Deep Fakes* are posted side by side with OpEds in the *New Yorker*, Social Media is constantly a-buzz with information, and what consumers decide to do with the information given has proven time and time again to culminate in powerful actions. As users, we follow figures and voices we want to hear from on a daily basis, social media has become a form of catharsis and validation. However, people seem to rely on social media as a source of information, with a survey finding that 62% of adults in the US use social media for news. In an article by (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). With the rise of fake news sites on social media, due to the relative ease of making a website and the opportunity for revenue from advertisement, the potential for the spread of misinformation has never been higher. The rise and dissemination has never been easier, and media literacy is, thus, a paramount issue.

Next, in a broader view, the Internet represents a huge innovation. The Internet is used for a variety of activities, from intellectual inquiries to entertainment to commerce and much more, to almost all aspects of modern life. With its pervasiveness today, policies on access to the Internet varies between countries. An important concept in the differing views on the regulation of internet access is Net Neutrality. Net Neutrality refers to treating all internet traffic equally, and not discriminate based on destination, content, etc. in terms of cost of service and/or restriction. The regulation of who can access the internet is a crucial topic that encompasses many issues, such as structural violence, inequity, and human rights.

Example: China

In China, the content that citizens can access is heavily regulated by the state. This is done by the Chinese government requiring Internet Service Providers (ISP) to block a predetermined list of URLs and keywords that have been deemed to contain potentially harmful information/content. Additionally, the government requires Internet Content Providers (ICP) to regulate the content they create. The government also has access to the emails and other personal information of its citizens and can access them if they are suspected of a crime. They heavily censor the internet to protect the public interest, and thus restrict the freedom of its citizens to access content.

History:

The most prominent official UN action in the realm of internet governance is an amendment to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 2016. This resolution also contains 15 recommendations on additional rights. These recommendations, unlike amendments to articles, are not binding nor enforceable. Additionally, expanding and regulating the internet is a part of many goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of goals to work on the betterment of people. It provides specific goals for governments over the next few decades, in which 193 UN members have signed, but the goals themselves are recommendations

Issue Part II: Private Corporations

Summary

With Social Media's prevalence, an issue presents itself, privacy. One facet of this issue is what people choose to post on social media sites and, consequently, what happens to that information. A common adage "what you put on the Internet will be out there forever" highlights the nature of this issue. Social media sites are open to the public to varying degrees, and what information citizens choose to release onto these sites are easily accessed and used by these social media sites that is not often entirely understood by its user's, as the user agreements for their services can be difficult to understand by a layperson. With this in mind, the control over who views information and how it is used by companies is of major concern.

Another part to the privacy issue is Big Data and data brokers. Data brokers are companies that use the large sum of citizen's personal data, termed Big Data, for some profitable end. In terms of social media, data brokers use the accessible information of private citizens to construct profiles for citizens. Then, they sell these profiles to organizations for use in such activities as advertisement. The issue with data brokers comes from their use of citizens information without citizens consent or knowledge as well as selling this information. This brings up a big question, who is watching the watchers, who is overseeing these data brokers who traffic in the information of others. And if these companies can collect this information, who else can find the same information and potentially use this information in malicious ways.

Next, another point of importance is what content is allowed on social media sites. For the most part, companies regulate themselves when it comes to content. Users are required to agree to some sort of set of rules concerning what can and can not be posted. However, due to the vast nature of these sites, enforcement of these rules are often done by algorithms that censor inappropriate content. This brings the question of what content is inappropriate and who should determine that distinction. Additionally, how responsible are companies for the content its users generate?

Take for example ISIS's presence on social media sites like Twitter. This extremist group uses social media sites as a platform for their beliefs. With the relative ease and wide-reaching nature of the Internet, groups like ISIS can spread their message and distribute other extremist images and videos to the public. At what point does free speech become dangerous? On the other hand, social media can be host to other groups that use social media to spread less violent or extreme. All this to say that social media is a platform for political expression, but at what point does this expression become dangerous or harmful and who determines this? As it stands, it has been largely left to the companies themselves to regulate, but should this continue?

Questions to Consider

- What degree of independent sovereignty does each country have to regulate the internet, should they have any?
- What rights do individuals have to their own information? What rights do companies have to collect and distribute that information?
- How responsible should governments be in educating citizens about the Internet? Managing citizens' private information?
- When does expressions of speech become dangerous? Should extremist views and organizations be restricted in the interest of security?

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