5 May 2017

Counter-narratives: how to support civil society in delivering effective positive narratives against hate speech online

Summary of the conference

7 April 2017, Balzan, Malta.

The conference organised by the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the EU, in collaboration with the European Commission, gathered representatives of international organisations, EU and national authorities, civil society activists, journalists, IT companies and marketing experts to discuss projects and ideas on how to deliver effective positive narratives to counter hate speech online.

Attendance

The conference was attended by 55 participants, representing 17 Member States, international organisations (UNHCR, IOM, Council of Europe), the European Commission, the Council Secretariat, FRA, non-governmental organisations (ENAR, PICUM, ILGA Europe, SOS Malta, INACH, CEJI, Amadeu Antonio Foundation, Fundación Secretariado Gitano, African Media Association, People for Change Foundation), universities and think-thank (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, ,University of Leeds), digital strategists and IT Companies (Gerald Hensel/Fearless Democracy, Google and Facebook). Two speakers (UNHCR and Council of Europe / No Hate Speech Movement) intervened via video conference.

Opening remarks

Owen Bonnici, **Minister for Justice, Culture and Local Government**, introduced the works highlighting the importance of the fight against hate speech online, stating the education is key in this endeavour. Minister Bonnici commended the government's efforts to amend the criminal code ensuring better protection of victims of hate crime/speech on grounds of religion. The risk of the proliferation of hate speech is that it reduces

participation in the public sphere. The minister emphasised the need to protect children from hatred online.

The **Attorney General of Malta**, **Peter Grech**, addressed the importance of producing effective alternative narratives to counter extremist propaganda. In recent years, several incidents were recorded in Malta: while the perpetrators were a vocal minority, Peter Grech still expressed concerns about the growing wave of racism and xenophobia not only in Malta but also across the EU. There have been several cases where the perpetrators of hate speech on the web were prosecuted, enforcing the provisions of the law transposing the Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA.

Paul Nemitz, Director of Fundamental Rights and Citizenship - Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers in the **European Commission** stated that the compass for action against hate speech online is represented by the values laid down in Article 2 of the TEU and in the current climate we cannot leave it to extremist and populist voices to steer the narrative. Through the Code of Conduct the Commission is asking IT Companies to respect the rules and to remove speech that is illegal. The fight against hate speech is not about censorship, it is a duty we all have to respect the law and safeguard participation of citizens to the public debate, free from fear or intimidation generated by online hate. It is vital that we not only pursue illegal hatred but that, through positive democratic narratives, education to tolerance, we bring back extremists and haters into the public sphere.

The following is a summary of the key outcomes of the panel discussions.

1st panel: Setting the Scene (Chairs: Attorney General of Malta and Victoria Buttigieg, Assistant Attorney General, Malta)

- **Vasco Malta** from the **EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)** presented data from their latest monthly report (November 2016) on hate crimes against migrants as well as a number of good practices (e.g. in Poland and Germany); he also discussed how to communicate effectively about fundamental rights stressing the importance of the work done on human rights education and warning that providing facts may not be enough and that real stories can be effective;

- **Ojeaku Nwabuzo**, **ENAR Europe**, introduced some findings from the 2017 shadow report on racism in Europe, which signals worrying signs in particular in relation to the increase of hateful extremist speech by political representatives, which triggers and legitimates disinhibition on the web and proliferation of hate;
- **Johannes Baldauf** presented the work of **Amadeu Antonio Stiftung** in particular sharing some data on the proliferation of hate crimes and attacks against refugees and hate speech online against migrants in Germany.
- **Leigh Foster** and **Christopher Reardon** from **UNHCR** spoke about different ways to counter hate speech. Leigh presented the #WithRefugees campaign, which focuses on using an upbeat narrative to tell the refugee story and using a petition to demonstrate global support. Chris spoke about how positive stories of welcome and support have engaged very large audiences, helping to reframe the refugee narrative and show that integration can work, bringing benefits to hosts and newcomers alike.

2nd panel: Supporting civil society in the development of counter narratives (Chairs: Attorney General of Malta and Victoria Buttigieg, Assistant Attorney General, Malta)

- **Christel Mercadé-Piqueras** from the **European Commission** presented the work on the Code of conduct in particular in relation to counter narratives, referring to the Commission's role of coordination and monitoring of the commitments in the Code. She stressed the importance of ensuring all players (national authorities, civil society organisations and IT companies) work together to fight illegal hate speech, and this is crucial also in developing effective counter narratives. She also mentioned important EU funding opportunities on counter narratives against hate speech.
- **Paul Giannasi**, from the **UK Police** presented the UK approach to countering online hate, introducing good practice initiatives such as "Facing Facts!" and "No Hate Speech Movement UK". The UK Police has initiated the "True Vision" website/project to support victims of hate crime, which receives up to 8000 visitors a week, and 4000 reports annually.

- **Timothy Zammit** from the Cyber Crime Unit of the **Maltese police force** presented the activities of his team, in particular addressing education in schools and collaboration with service providers during investigations".
- **Freddie Singleton**, **People for Change Foundation Malta** presented preventive approaches as well as relevant projects (such as C.O.N.T.A.C.T and TACHAS) to counter hate crime tactics, including in the online sphere.
- **Katerina Jamborova, Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic** focused in particular on the "Hate Free" campaign on Facebook, initiated by the office of Government, which aims to transmit in particular to young people positive narratives and correct information about phenomena (such as migration) which may trigger hate speech.
- **Javier Saéz**, **Fundación Secretariado Gitano** , described the collaboration with civil society organisations against hate crime and hate speech, also online. He furthermore stressed the added value of cooperating with grassroots NGOs in developing counter narratives and presented the successful "Most Painful Tattoo" campaign, conceived to counter Roma discrimination in Spain.

INACH took the floor to raise attention of national authorities about the difficulties especially for small NGOs to work on hate speech effectively, both in the monitoring of the web and in the development of counter narratives.

3rd panel: How to tailor counter-narratives and how to design effective campaigns (Chair: European Commission, Christel Mercadé-Piqueras)

- **Anna Giustiniani** from the **International Organisation for Migration** (IOM) introduced two core campaigns within IOM's communication strategy to counter toxic narratives against migrants and refugees and bring perception change regarding migrants' vulnerabilities: "I am a Migrant" (@Iamamigrant) and "Aware Migrants". They both are examples of how putting true stories at the centre of the campaigns can have an impact in the global and local media discourse around migration. Aware Migrants was developed jointly with the Italian Ministry of Interior
- **Irina Drexler**, spoke in video conference about the No Hate Speech Movement youth campaign of the Council of Europe aimed to address and combat hate speech by mobilizing young people to speak up for human rights and democracy online, and to reduce the level of acceptance of hate speech

by reporting and denouncing it. She presented their newly launched "We CAN!" manual which helps stakeholders to take action against hate speech through counter and alternative narratives, referring also to plans of the Council of Europe in what concerns the continuation, after 2018, of their work on combating hate speech, both offline and online.

- **Elisabeth Schmidt-Hieber** from **PICUM** presented their recent campaign "Words Matter" which targets in particular media and policy makers and seeks to educate about the importance of an accurate terminology in reference to all migrants and the impact of discriminatory language.
- **Tanya Silverman**, from the **Institute for Strategic Dialogue**, presented their work on developing counter narrative campaigns. She gave the examples of the Emmy award winning campaign video "Life After Hate" which promotes the work of an association of former extremists. Tanya also presented practical steps to design counter narrative campaigns, in particular the importance of identifying the right audience, platforms, messages and of involving credible messengers.

4th panel: How to boost the effectiveness of counter narratives: the role of media, social media platform and digital companies (Chair: European Commission, Tommaso Chiamparino)

- **Aibhinn Kelleher**, **Facebook**'s Product Policy Manager in Dublin introduced the company's approach and community rules to counter hate speech content on their platform. She presented several initiatives in support of civil society organisations who are working on counter narratives and against hate speech, including the Online Civil Courage Initiative, the web hub *https://nonprofits.fb.com/*, capacity building, sponsorship and advertisement credits and training in particular on how to report about hate speech.
- **Enrico Bellini** from Google, Public Policy Italy and Malta presented YouTube's 5 fundamentals for social change videos as well as their initiatives on promoting and supporting ambassadors and video makers who spread messages of tolerance (e.g. e.g. YouTube Creators for Change).
- **Gerald Hensel**, a marketing expert formerly working on digital advertisement spoke about the NGO he has recently funded, **Fearless Democracy** and the #NoMoneyForTheRight and #StopHateverstising campaigns. Fearless Democracy aims to help civil society organisations and public authorities in

undertaking effective social media strategies for campaigns against hate online.

- **Rosemarie Calleja** from the **African Media Association** reiterated, focusing on the Maltese context, some key points, such as the importance of balanced and correct storytelling by media and of understanding the dynamics of hate online.

After the presentation, criticisms were expressed by some participants to Facebook and Google's business models on their advertisement policies, as well as on the effectiveness of their practices on removing hate/offensive content. Facebook took the floor to respond to the criticisms reiterating the commitment on fighting hate speech on their platform. Further interventions included a question by the Slovakian authorities to Facebook on how to approach the company to receive training and a point by the delegate from Belgium stressing the importance of understanding the main drivers of hateful behaviour and the landscape of hatred, as a crucial step to tailor counter narratives effectively.

Conclusion

The conference was closed by Dr Peter Grech who thanked all the speakers and the participants for the contributions, the good practices presented and the good spirit of collaboration. He highlighted this is the first step of a process which should see all the players (public authorities, civil society organisations, media, experts and IT Companies) working together to design and promote positive narratives to counter hate speech. To quote an initial statement of Minister Bonnici: *"It is crucial to teach our children, from a young age, about respect and tolerance. Teach them about the values but also the benefits that come from showing respect and tolerance towards each other, irrespective of our differences. Because we might be different from one another in many ways but we are united in diversity."*