Human rights: The online pursuit of life, love and happiness

The advance of online technologies and their penetration in our lives is challenging and changing today's world in extraordinary ways. Younger generations, as the early adopters of online technologies, are arguably the generation most affected by these technological advances. Yet, the transition to online platforms and digitalisation have an impact on the most mundane aspects of our daily routines to the most heartfelt expression of our values – even when exercising our human rights; from the way we buy our groceries, to the way we vote and express our political opinions. There are very vivid discussions about the future of online technologies and their impact on human rights – their scope and how we exercise them. It is your opportunity, young Europeans, to have your say and give your ideas. Here is some food for thought.

Freedom of expression...

Freedom of expression is one of the basic and indispensable characteristics of democracy, and a fundamental human right. Today, we cannot imagine our societies without freedom of expression. This has not always been the case. Freedom of expression gained its status only after centuries of political and social struggles all around the world. The long path leading to freedom of expression can be traced back for centuries, through documents such as Magna Carta. The understanding and standards of freedom of expression have evolved over time and today they are enshrined in documents such as the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right to freedom of expression includes 'freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers' (Article 10, ECHR). However, it also includes duties and responsibilities related to security and public safety, crime prevention, protection of health, morals, privacy, reputation and the rights of others. But even these contemporary documents must often be adapted to technological advances. Online platforms can further enable access to information, but even online, freedom of expression is sometimes threatened. There are many places in the world where citizens are still struggling for their rights to freedom of expression.

... but also hate speech and defamation

The right to freedom of expression is fundamental, but it is not unlimited and comes with responsibilities. For journalists, this is enshrined in their professional ethics and standards, for example the duty not to distribute false information, especially if this would lead to defamation. Some online platforms can blur the boundaries between professional journalism and citizen-generated news. Information is becoming increasingly more accessible to the general public and a blogger, a person with a smart phone or someone with a Facebook or Twitter account can gather a wide audience and have a larger impact (positive and negative) than established media outlets. Journalists and ordinary citizens all need to observe moral and legal standards for not inciting violence, and especially avoiding hate speech or online bullying, for example.

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Access to information...

Today's technology can create the feeling that everything is only a click or two away. The freedom to have access to information is a right that was there prior to the internet. However, online platforms make sharing information technically much easier. Digitalisation and the transition to online technologies is perceived as a guarantee for easy access to information and pluralism – from multiple TV and radio channels, to accessing the decisions and actions of public institutions, thus increasing transparency, direct access to information by anyone and enhancing democratic accountability. The EU aspires to be a frontrunner in this area. Facilitating access to information enables citizens to make informed political and other choices, to participate in public and social life, to get to know and understand different fellow citizens, and to hold power and institutions to account. All these actions are important not only for the individual, but also for society as a whole.

...but also information overload and the 'filter bubble'

Easy access to information however, also means that we need to navigate our way through a seemingly endless sea of information. Many people can become overwhelmed by it, and challenged when trying to find a particular piece of information or keep themselves constantly updated. Some people find it hard to distinguish between credible and unreliable sources, between sources representing minority opinions and those representing large groups of people. False information can become viral in a very short time and before it is disproved, it can cause significant damage. People need to use even more sophisticated strategies to deal with the flow of information today, in comparison to 'offline times'. The actual volume of information online creates the need to filter, and we do that intentionally or unintentionally. In theory, all information is out there, but in practice, we access only a tiny proportion of it. Many online platforms use cookies and algorithms to tailor the information that we see according to our online history. We also filter the information that we see by visiting only particular websites – often those that are in line with our values and views; or by having a social network of friends who share our views and values. According to Eli Pariser, this information selection and filtering leads to a potential limitation to learning only about the things that we approve of. There is a danger that people can live their lives in a biased 'filter bubble', ignorant even about the existence of different people and opinions, or at least not understanding them.

...as well as leaks and breach of privacy

Easy access to information can, in some circumstances, be a threat to security and privacy. Digitalising information and using online platforms makes it technically easier to leak and distribute significant amounts of information, including sensitive data. Persons such as Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden have become household names, and judgements of their actions vary from 'performing their civic duty' to 'threatening national security'. It would seem true to say that the scale of the leaks and their outreach would have been incomparably smaller during the offline period.

The leaking of information is not related only to data belonging to national institutions. Personal data of private people are also leaked, regardless if they are in the public eye or not. Threats of breaching our privacy come from different sources having different motives. Some are perceived as negative, such as institutions that handle our data without the necessary level of protection, others as criminal, like the hackers who want to steal our bank details or peek into our private lives. Another source of debate are the advertisers who use our data to target us with tailored messages. The multitude of online traces that we leave is highly valuable for advertisers who want to increase the efficiency of their message distribution. Indeed, collecting our data is beneficial for targeted advertising, but it can also be intrusive for our personal lives and create suspicion about other ways this information can be used. Fears exist about the ability and the willingness of state institutions to use the advance of online technologies to monitor citizens – is it threatening our privacy or is it helping the state to deal with terrorism and crime?

Cross borders in Europe

The information and type of communication that online platforms provide are very much in line with the dynamic way of life of young Europeans today. Who we talk to, who and what we are interested in, where we work, study, go for holiday is often not limited by national borders just as the internet is not. Online platforms help in the exchange of information, collaborating and getting to know each other better... and we do this in many languages. There is always a balance to strike between privacy and security, transparency and information overload, freedom of expression and not harming others, the EYE will be an opportunity to debate this well-known enigma.