PM+: EU must counter IS's terrorist narrative on twitter

Written by Roberta Bonazzi on 29 June 2015 in Opinion Plus
Opinion Plus

The European commission must ensure that social media companies will respect national laws against incitement to religious hatred and violence, says Roberta Bonazzi.

The internet is rightly celebrated for revolutionising the nature of global communications. We have seen what it can achieve for social justice and political change: the internet has demanded transparency, it has shone a light on oppressive regimes, empowered and given a voice to millions.

But the internet has also revolutionised the nature of conflict: establishing countless new channels for the dissemination of hatred and violent content. This has become especially apparent since the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS); a terrorist organisation which has used various online platforms to extend the frontiers of war far beyond the combat zones in Syria and Iraq.

Through social media in particular, the fundamentalist ideology is now being heard in the homes and work places of thousands of Europeans. The content is as varied as the methodology is sophisticated.

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Videos, montages and photographs are in constant circulation; some of which are highly graphic in the brutal scenes they depict; some openly stoke hatred; while others are simply propaganda, presenting a highly idealised image of life in the IS caliphate.

The extent of this phenomenon is not unknown in Europe. In March, in a memo to the Council, Europol stated that, over a period of four months, more than 46,000 Twitter accounts were used by supporters of IS with 90,000 tweets a day produced in support of its radical violent, ideology.

Numerous experts in this field have demonstrated that the internet - and social media in particular – is IS's most effective tool for radicalising and recruiting individuals from all over the world.

In the US, the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) has been very successful in drawing attention to blatant abuses of Twitter, and has achieved some major feats in encouraging the company to amend its behaviour policy for users.

But much more needs to be done to develop a proactive response to this problem. At present, we risk presenting the younger generation with an online environment that is unclear in its values and its rules, and that bears little resemblance to the structures that are present in civil society.

We at the European Foundation for Democracy want to see an extensive debate on this issue at EU level. Now is the time for European policymakers to lay the foundation for a safer online environment in Europe, to reach out to social media companies to find proactive solutions and to prevent online platforms from being misused by extremists.

This is a pressing issue for Europe; not least given the well-documented number of youths we have seen leaving EU member states to join the ranks of IS, but it is also a pressing issue for the future.

IS is not the first organisation which has followed an extremist agenda in Europe, and it will not be the last. To deter extremists and to send out a clear message about safeguarding European values, it is necessary for the laws which underpin our civil society to be upheld online too.

With that in mind, we would like the European commission to explain how it proposes to ensure that social media organisations, Twitter in particular, will adopt robust policies to ensure that extremists are denied the ability to radicalise and recruit.

We would also like to hear in detail how the commission will ensure that social media companies respect national laws against incitement to religious hatred and violence.

We are pleased that MEPs have become actively involved in the debate and will be convening a public hearing where social media organisations can present their proposals on how they will be more active in preventing their platforms from being utilised and abused by extremists.

About the author

Roberta Bonazzi is executive director of the European Foundation for Democracy

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