



7th Global Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations
Baku, Azerbaijan, 25-27 April, 2016

Breakout Session “Media Literacy: Tools for Building Resilience to Violent Extremist Propaganda”

Background

Most of our perceptions of the world are strongly informed by overlapping media environments, which shape the understanding of the community where we live, of the others and of ourselves. Our opinions and values often are but a reflection of the media messages that ubiquitously are embedded in our daily life. We certainly spend more time consuming (and producing media) than with our families and friends. Young people devote more time to media than to learning in formal educational settings. The power of media in shaping taste and opinion has been well established for many decades; what is in fact new is the speed and scope with which the Internet and digital media have exploded reaching all areas of the world. In some regions of the planet it is easier to connect to the Internet via mobile technology than to access clean drinking water. Some individuals of our world will access the Internet without ever having truly experienced television.

This media explosion is indeed very beneficial for a great number of human activities. But at the same time it facilitates, as never before, the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and the dissemination of polarizing opinions effectively provoking violent confrontations. Social media, this wonderful platform of freedom of expression, is also the platform for spreading violent extremist propaganda.

Censorship is ultimately counterproductive; the ingenuity of individuals, particularly in today’s multi-layered cyber space, will always find ways to access the media messages deemed negative for the wellbeing of the individual and the community at large. Protection needs to come from education and from the development of critical thinking skills, not from the control of information.

Media and information literacy is indeed an educational platform designed to strengthen critical thinking skills, enrich civic education, and further develop global citizenship. While media and information literacy can in fact deepen indigenous cultures, it also connects the individuals with the world. It does so by offering open perspectives where the narrow views of propaganda messages encouraging violence and ethical disregard for others are detected and discarded.

As Ms. Irina Bokova, UNESCO’s Director General, recently wrote on an op-ed article, “The Internet is not a playground -- it is a world, where young people roam freely. We need to provide them with maps and with survival skills, to avoid dangers, to assess information critically, to dispel lies, to stand up for human rights and respect. Halting tweets and websites is important but not enough with modern technology -- every young person must be taught media literacy, to become digital citizens and not just digital users.”

Points of Discussion

- Why is Media and Information Literacy essential to global citizenship and civics education?

- How can Media Literacy be included in the core curriculum of primary and middle school education?
- Which research and resources can be highlighted as examples of best practices where Media Literacy plays a key role in developing critical thinking skills confronting violent extremist media messages?