



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

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Issues and summaries of the discussions

What lessons from Covid-19 should be drawn for the topic of education and the digital era?

Topic 1: “Data reliability and hate speech”

Topic 2: “Is the current health crisis and the transformation of society likely to destroy the boundaries of civil liberties? Will data tracking destroy fundamental freedoms?”

Topic 3: “The right to connection as a fundamental right”

Topic 4: “Gender equality”

Topic 5: “The education industry: between democratization and content control”

Topic 1: “Data reliability and hate speech”

Speakers:

William Acker, jurist, blogger, "traveller" of Romani origin (Sinti).

Henri Braun, lawyer, specialized in minority law and the fight against racism.

Issues

Hate speech on the Internet is an illustration of conflict among diverse groups, both within and between societies; it is a definite sign that transformative technologies such as the Internet allow both innovative opportunities and challenges, which demand a stable balance between fundamental rights and principles, including freedom of expression, and the defense of human dignity.

During this unique lockdown, the Internet has provided a significant opportunity for people to access information and this raises the question of the confidence in the information that is being presented (fake news, hate speech, freedom of speech also).

- In a crisis situation, data is considered an essential tool for crafting responses, allocating resources, measuring the effectiveness of interventions, such as social distancing, and telling us when we might reopen economies.
- However, incomplete, inaccurate or incorrect data can obscure important nuances within communities, ignoring important factors such as socioeconomic realities, and creating false senses of panic or safety, not to mention other harmful aspects such as needlessly exposing private information, fake news and hate speech.

On the other hand, control would result in limiting freedom of speech.

Is the alarming trend of hate speech and fake news an opportunity for leaders to curb free speech? Should we be advocating for laws that regulating hate speech and fake news that might also be used to suppress free speech?

What is the borderline between securing information and freedom of expression?

Summary

The Covid-19 crisis has more than ever highlighted the importance of digital education, online networks, and digital data. Since the beginning of the COVID crisis, governments, schools, universities and companies have been making every effort to get online. The growing importance of digital technology raises many questions; issues related to the reliability of data and hate speech have been of particular concern to us, and we have decided to focus on Roma and Traveller populations.

The lawyer William Acker is conducting studies on hate speech affecting Travellers on social networks. Every year he counts several tens of thousands of racist messages on Twitter alone. Anti-Gypsyism also strongly affects online media that do not moderate comments. Hate speech is based on 4 themes: the arrival and settlement of Travellers, delinquency, money, the (supposed) incompatibility of the community with the organisation of society. In the context of the epidemic, Roma and Travellers have been regularly accused of being 'epidemic propagators' on social networks.

These online hate speeches testify to a strong lack of knowledge about this community, their way of life, their attitude toward work, or the reception systems. The role of the media in processing information about Travellers and the semantics used contribute to the stigmatisation of these populations. William Acker notes, in particular, a lack of awareness of anti-Gypsyism in press editorial

offices, the almost systematic use of institutional sources alone, as well as specific racist and reductive formulations. He also points out the responsibility of some political representatives, who do not hesitate to engage in speeches reflecting an uncomplicated anti-Gypsyism. These dominant political and media discourses construct and fuel extremely negative social representations of Roma and Travellers. Their image also suffers from a double marginalisation, both public and spatial: they are repeatedly discriminated against by the public administration, they are not represented or consulted at the political level, and they are forced to settle in remote and unattractive areas, also finding themselves relegated and isolated from the rest of the population.

According to lawyer Henri Braun, the current period marked by the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a hardening of ideological differences, particularly between sedentary and nomadic people, as confinement has resulted in the forced sedentariness of the population. Yet a large proportion of Roma and Travellers have a lifestyle and work activities that depend on regular travel. According to the Honorary Public Prosecutor of the French Republic Gilbert Flam, the most challenging period of COVID has been detestable for these populations in practically all European countries. The state authorities took discriminatory measures against them, with many restrictions, more significant than for the rest of the population, particularly in terms of movement and access to education and health.

Speakers also stressed the need to distinguish between Travellers and Roma at the European level. According to lawyer Henri Braun, the issue of Travellers only arises in some Western European countries, whereas the issue of anti-Roma racism in its culturalist, and sometimes even racist, version occurs throughout the continent. We should, according to Henri Braun, ask ourselves what the treatment of Roma tells us about the construction of European states and the construction of Europe, whether in its community dimension, or its "Council of Europe" dimension. It is this reflexive return that we must make, and we will realise, for example, that by asking the question of the control of Romani populations, we are asking the question of the control of everyone, because the gypsies often served as a laboratory for control and surveillance systems, which were then generalised.

Topic 2: “Is the current health crisis and the transformation of society likely to destroy the boundaries of civil liberties? Will data tracking destroy fundamental freedoms?”

Speakers:

Gilbert Flam, President of the "International" Commission of the International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism (LICRA).

Henri Braun, lawyer, specialized in minority law and the fight against racism.

Issues

In looking at civil liberties and the governmental responses to the current pandemic, there is a significant paradox between the freedom and rights of democracies on the one hand and the security of the State, in terms of the health and welfare of its population and the need for policies of lockdown on the other hand in response to the terror of a global pandemic.

- Will the freedoms of association, expression and movement enjoyed in a liberal democracy be conducive to the planning and execution of acts of civil disruption, designed to destabilise or destroy State structures, post-pandemic, when severe economic hardship and exclusion become recurrent themes resulting from the measures ?
- Is this an illustration of the difficult juxtaposition of civil liberties and national well-being and security, in which the delicate balance between health and economic welfare is disrupted?

As data is increasingly used to inform policy, to what extent is it necessary to guarantee that the required data protection safeguards are implemented when dealing with exceptional measures for instance to defend public health and well-being?

Will states be at risk in becoming engaged in a permanent state of emergency on their own soil. Does the loss of economic stability and functioning in turn pose a threat to the fundamental rights and freedoms which characterise democratic societies?

Is it, consequently, imperative to ensure that steps are taken to secure people’s rights, and the sensitive data processing that is proportionate to the legitimate purpose for which the information is being sought?

How can we ensure data is erased?

Should we forgo the protection of our data for the good of the community?

Summary

The speakers discussed the link between the fight against hate speech and the preservation of civil liberties. Concerning racist comments on social networks, the lawyer Henri Braun considered that they should be sanctioned, as the fight against racism should not lead to the control of freedom of expression. Hate speech must be dealt with in a specific way, by courts, and with specific procedural rules to guarantee this fundamental right. Under no circumstances should the administration or the GAFAM be allowed to act as a court or police force. A distinction must also be made between an ordinary Internet user who creates a hateful statement on a social network, which is undoubtedly reprehensible, and speeches made by politicians who carry greater weight and responsibility and who

must be punished accordingly. For Gilbert Flam, the position taken by the Parliament in its plenary session is that hate speech cannot be seen as mere opinions, it is a crime, which must be dealt with under criminal law. According to the prosecutor, this is also perfectly compatible with the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, which, on one hand, insists on the need to regulate social networks as quickly as possible to obtain the conviction of perpetrators when they can be identified, which, on the other hand, is not always possible when they are hosted on platforms in Russia, for example. This also raises the problem of the role of platforms and a particular form of complicity.

More generally, for Henri Braun, the health crisis that we are experiencing has necessarily led, temporarily, to a drastic reduction in fundamental freedoms: freedom of movement, association, expression... He calls for vigilance concerning the implementation of a state of emergency, which may be legitimate from time to time, but which must not be perpetuated. We have seen this in France in the anti-terrorist state of emergency, and we risk seeing it also in the state of a health emergency. Several provisions that had been adopted temporarily are tending to become part of ordinary law, which is leading us increasingly towards a surveillance and control society. And from this point of view, the coronavirus crisis risks acting as an accelerator and undermining the defence of liberties.

Gilbert Flam recalls that the state of emergency is a derogatory regime provided for by the European Convention on Human Rights, which lays down strict conditions for the implementation of such a system. The Secretary-General of the Council of Europe recalled that the European Convention, during this derogation period, prohibits standards that would create or aggravate discrimination, and which would call into question inclusion policies. The rights to privacy, data protection, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly and association must also be respected. Finally, she reiterated that "the pandemic should not be used as a pretext to silence whistle-blowers or political opponents". The review should, therefore examine how the Council of Europe member states have fulfilled their obligations. According to the Prosecutor, it is clear that some European governments, such as Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Russia, have taken advantage of this period of crisis to change the functioning of institutions, take discriminatory measures against minorities or weaken the counter-powers of the judiciary and civil society.

However, NGOs have a fundamental role to play in societies, in the fight against dysfunction and injustice. Gilbert Flam considers that it is their responsibility to find or create spaces for collective reflection, particularly on the use of technology and the consequences it can have on the functioning of our democracies. NGOs must also focus on their missions: to educate, federate, and train to improve the functioning of our democracies.

Topic 3: “The right to connection as a fundamental right”

Speakers:

Sandra Coulibaly Leroy, Deputy Director, in charge of Foresight, Analysis and Strategic Intelligence within the Programming and Strategic Development Department of the International Organisation of La Francophonie.

Mona Laroussi, Deputy Director of the IFEF (Institut de la Francophonie pour l’Education et la Formation).

Lune Taqqiq, author, lecturer, founder of Freebip, member of the Association for Voluntary Action in Europe (AVE).

Issues

According to the World Economic Forum, “among the many inequalities exposed by COVID-19, the digital divide is not only one of the starkest, but also among the most surprising. Even in developed countries, internet access is often lower than you might think.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has required immediate and fundamental shifts that influence all perspectives of our lives. Public health policies have been introduced to attempt to control the spread of the virus.

- The result has been to severely limit mobility.

Schools, businesses and cultural venues have been ordered to shut and to establish online social communication for work and education.

- This placed an immense reliance on the services offered by the Internet and Cloud Computing through the pandemic.

Many people are already accustomed to the seamless interconnection of online and offline lives, where networks meet the demand of more schooling, working, and playing at home in response to pandemic strategies.

- We also are aware that those who are in higher-paid jobs have more opportunities for teleworking than others and that students in low income families face a widening ‘homework gap’ because they are unable to get online.

- Therefore these children and the youth are a highly disadvantaged group in Europe and have the right to be connected.

Various factors define child and youth poverty: social and family changes and the growing incidence of lone-parent families, changes in the world of work (low economic growth, migration of unskilled workers and job insecurity) and changes in social systems that are becoming harder.

- Child or youth poverty is not merely a rejection of children's or youth's fundamental rights but also a warning to the future well-being of European civilisations.

- Parents' health difficulties have a meaningful influence on them. Parental poverty and social exclusion have an inherent impact on children's and youth's cognitive growth and educational achievement.

It is necessary to understand the poverty of parents and to give them the first place in their children's future by providing the assistance they need.

But the current crisis is exposing a widening gap between digital ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ And what’s missing from many of the conversations around digital inequality during lockdown is the immense importance of shared public spaces and human connectivity in closing the digital divide.

- How can we ensure the right to connection for all?
- What measures need to be put in place?
- Whose responsibility is it?
- What education lessons are needed?

Summary

Mona Laroussi, Deputy Director of the "Institut de la Francophonie pour l'Education et la Formation", considers that the Covid-19 crisis has served to amplify and reveal existing inequalities in terms of digital technology in general and connectivity within countries. According to figures provided by the International Task Force on Teachers for Education, an alliance coordinated by UNESCO, and based on data from its statistical institute, during Covid-19 "some 826 million pupils and students, or half of the total number of learners, do not have access to a computer at home and 43% (706 million) do not have Internet at home. Even though digital distance learning is being used massively to ensure the continuity of education in the vast majority of countries. Disparities are particularly marked in low-income countries: in sub-Saharan Africa, 89% of learners do not have access to home computers, and 82% do not have Internet access". Even when there is a computer in the home, it is used by about 10 people, so the child has no real access to it. "Besides, while mobile phones can enable learners to access information, connect with each other and with their teachers, about 56 million learners live in places not served by mobile networks, almost half of them in sub-Saharan Africa. »

Connectivity, however, has emerged as a fundamental need, increasingly essential to daily life, according to Mona Laroussi and Lune Taqqiq. Today, this generation, known as the "digital natives", consider the Internet as vital, like access to water or electricity. Each technological innovation indeed makes us more and more dependent on the internet. Connectivity is recognised as a fundamental right by the United Nations through reports and special procedures. Access to the internet is indispensable not only for the exercise of the right, freedom of expression but also for the exercise of other rights: the right to education, the right to free association, the right of assembly, the right to participate in social, cultural and political life, the right to participate in economic and social development. A resolution adopted within the United Nations Human Rights Council underlines the importance of bringing a human rights-based approach to the establishment and development of Internet access so that it is open, accessible and enriched by the participation of all actors.

That being said, these are only solutions to get around the usage, we need to find answers so that mainly Africa and other countries are better connected because beyond the respect of this fundamental right, everything goes through the internet now: we do our shopping on the internet, we cultivate ourselves on the internet, we book our holidays on the internet, and several countries are setting up electronic voting.

At the European level, even if access is much wider in terms of quantity, the question of the quality of access arises. For a household with one or more children, it isn't easy to follow an online education when there is only one computer available. There is therefore, a problem of unequal access to online education, even within developed countries.

Topic 4: “Gender equality”

Speakers:

Isabelle Collet, founder of the Association for Gender Research in Education and Training (ARGEF), professor at the section of Educational Sciences of the University of Geneva.

Issues

According to the UN Chronicle, education is a pathway towards gender equality. Karam (2018) suggests gender-based discrimination in education is both a cause and a consequence of deep-rooted differences in society. Disparities, whether in terms of poverty, ethnic background, disability, or traditional attitudes about their status and role all undermine the ability of women and girls to exercise their rights.

Gender equality in education means equal educational possibilities, in terms of entrance retention and learning, for every girl and boy, as well as having a gender balance in teaching staff and administrators. This leads to gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the power, governance, services and funding of the education systems, including for states, local education associate groups, school administration organisations and other points of contact with local people.

To stop the perpetuation of gender inequality through schools as well as to address its existence in society at large, it can be argued that initiatives to promote gender equality in and through schools are imperative.

- This is because schools have enormous potential to effect change in gender relations, views and practices vis-a-vis gender, and create gender-sensitive and gender-equal generations of men and women.

On the other hand, perhaps the problem belongs to society and not to the school system as such.

- Is it embedded in the role models portrayed by women?
- For instance, in terms of equality, should women forsake the tradition of seizing sole responsibility for the upbringing of children?

It might be argued that gender inequality is not the outcome of specific legislation nor was it the fault of girls.

- However, was it the result of an education system and curriculum that helped boys by continually pointing to male role models and patriarchal culture?

- If so, should this state of affairs be replaced, and an emphasis placed on equality, intercultural relations and democratic values?

It is clear that the media has an important role to play to educate society.

What should media be doing?

Summary

According to Isabelle Collet, a specialist in gender issues in education, there is no digital divide in terms of use between men and women. The digital divide is not in access either, as long as access is possible, but it is on the side of digital literacy. That is to say that, at present, the digital world is mostly designed, developed, parameterised and maintained by white men from higher socio-professional backgrounds. This poses a problem of social justice, mainly because there are strong power issues linked to digital professions: good salaries, good careers, secure jobs, etc.

Then, digital developments tend to focus on concerns constructed as socially masculine. Finally, this results in the exclusion of women from the digital transition, and from the decisions to be taken on the increase of technoscience. So, what are the solutions?

It is essential to act on teachers so that they provide egalitarian education from kindergarten to university. Above all, however, teachers must be trained to realise that equality can be learned and that for now, we are somewhat elevated to inequality. Equality is also transmitted through professional gestures, the distribution of speaking time between boys and girls, content... It is an objective shared by the European Union, which has produced many texts on the subject. We must also be particularly vigilant concerning gender violence: it is only in the universities that we are beginning to become aware that there is harassment towards female students and also towards LGBTQI students. On the issue of digital, since in some countries we are beginning to train primary and secondary school students in digital issues, it is specifically the teachers who work on digital issues who need to be trained in gender issues, to be certain that what they will be transmitting is a gender-friendly vision of the technology.

But the teachers are not the only ones responsible. Awareness of institutions is necessary, as their very functioning reproduces inequalities. Isabelle Collet believes that the introduction of quotas is not a discriminatory measure, that it is a voluntary catch-up measure, considering that we cannot be satisfied with a proportion of 15% of women in the digital world indefinitely.

Topic 5: “The education industry: between democratization and content control”.

Speakers:

Janice Richardson, expert to the Council of Europe on digital security and education issues.

Sandra Coulibaly Leroy, Deputy Director, in charge of Foresight, Analysis and Strategic Intelligence within the Programming and Strategic Development Department of the International Organisation of La Francophonie.

Mona Laroussi, Deputy Director of the IFEF (Institut de la Francophonie pour l’Education et la Formation).

Issues

Even before COVID-19, there was already high growth worldwide in the adoption of education technology. Now, online and recorded courses are a regular part of students' daily lives.

- One can wonder about what this means for the future of learning and whether the content and educational forms of these courses are influencing the students and teachers involved based on the platforms, networks and learning approaches used.

Online courses are a break from face-to-face teaching and mainly provide an asynchronous mode of communication. Is learning online as effective?

- Does it remove creativity and spontaneity and provide highly controlled, managed learning situations? Does this result in poorer learning experiences?

- Should there be a concerted effort to provide structured learning environments but go beyond replicating a physical class/lecture through video capabilities?

- Or should educators be using a range of collaboration tools and engagement methods that promote “inclusion, personalisation and intelligence”

- Does recent experience imply that the integration of information technology in education will be further accelerated and that online education will eventually become a fundamental component of school and university education?

Will the “new normal” lead to the emergence of a new hybrid model of education, with significant benefits?

Post-pandemic, what sort of education do we want?

- How will the methods of production and dissemination of rich educational content take place? Will there be merchandising, standardization of content, globalization of teaching methods, dissemination through networks, commercialisation of learning etc.

- How can we ensure the quality of online education? What will the level of autonomy (empowerment) of learners be, how will critical awareness be developed, transmission of values and construction of the democratic citizen, or will it just be the massive dissemination of “knowledge” on networks controlled by GAFA?

What are the challenges that need to be overcome?

Summary

Concerning the democratisation of content, the digital citizenship and education specialist Janice Richardson reminds us of the need to rethink the tools used for the education of children. Literacy is one of the key objectives, and technology is an essential tool for its progress. Given the very rapid evolution of knowledge, all content must integrate and adapt to the use of new technologies. Critical thinking, too, is a central issue today and educational content must aim to help children to clearly differentiate between "information" and "infox" to ensure that they conceive information intelligently. Surveys show that during the COVID crisis, videos were among the educational resources most used by learners.

On this question of content, the Council of Europe expert also notes that they are designed for the mainstream (the dominant population) and that more consideration should be given to the youngest and the elderly, who therefore need them most. On the other hand, it considers that there is a lack of good practice because there is not enough sharing and exchange of experience. She believes that school remains a microcosm, closed to many of the learning opportunities offered by the virtual environment. Teachers have no right to emancipate themselves from the current curriculum, which no longer meets the learning needs of the 21st century. Assessment methods are no longer adapted to young people and are based on concepts from the past. There is a need to reinvent content that corresponds to these 5 criteria: literacy, critical thinking, creativity, values and attitudes, and inclusion.

On the issue of distance education, Mona Laroussi and Sandra Coulibaly are surprised at the severity of the criticisms levelled at distance education. The latter considers that it is an extremely powerful technology, linked to artificial intelligence in particular and that teachers must be trusted in their ability to develop strategies for innovation and contextualisation compared to traditional teaching. She sees Covid-19 as an absolute drama for Education, but the pandemic has forced teachers and public authorities to recognise that there was an essential shift to be made in the use of technology to renew educational practices and educational content if only to better respond to this generation of "digital natives" and users of new technologies that are the learners. According to Janice Richardson, studies show that children picked up their bad habits when schools were closed or even reinforced them. The discussions she was able to have with the students reflect that very few of them gave priority to the resources recommended or expected by their teachers, and that most had difficulty getting used to distance learning and hoped for blended learning in the future. By way of conclusion on this subject, Sandra Coulibaly Leroy considers that we are moving towards a "phygital" model, i.e. a hybrid model (physical and digital), on which both schools and education systems can rely on two legs: face-to-face teaching and digital.

It also insists on the INGOs duty of vigilance and their responsibility, shared with States, governments and international organisations working on the development of public education policies, to promote diversity strategies and avoid formatting induced by the massification of data, by scaling up and the dark side of technologies.