

**By Ema Rapavá, Gymnázium Jána Hollého, Trnava**

*“As the world attempts to respond to COVID-19 and recover better, what can young people do to help build a world where everyone thrives in peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet? How can youth contribute to tackle misinformation, mobilize for the planet, fight inequality, stand for inclusion and realize gender equality?”*

In today’s modern society, we as humans exist in two worlds – in the real world and in the digital world, both ever evolving. Our presence in the digital world is becoming more and more important with the fast development of technology. People spend increasingly bigger amounts of time online, so it is important that their basic human rights are protected in this digital world too.

These rights are called digital rights – and basically come from UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights but applied to the online space. They include for example: universal and equal access, right to freedom of expression and communication, right to privacy and data protection, right to anonymity, protection of intellectual property, etc. We can see these rights applied to the online space in the forms of data encryption, consent, age restriction or the recognition of ownership. I still believe though, that we are behind our own technological advancements and that there is plenty of work to do regarding the protection of human rights in online spaces.

Around one third of the world’s population aren’t able to practice the very first digital right: universal and equal access to the Internet. We call this phenomenon the digital divide. It is needless to say that the effects of the divide were only amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lives of the poor of this world were made difficult, many not being able to work from home and having to risk their health. The same goes for their children – some students couldn’t continue their studying from home, online. Their parents had to make a decision between sending their children to school and risking the spread of the virus or leaving them at home, deprived of education. So, we see that the inability to access the Internet furthers the gap between the rich and the poor. What can be done to close this gap? In 2011, the UN recognised the Internet as a “catalyst” for practicing human rights, such as freedom of speech. In 2016, a non-binding resolution was released, condemning the restriction of accessing the Internet. Many countries have implemented legislations to ensure universal access. Estonia developed a program as early as 2000, expanding access to the countryside. Finland and Spain, in 2010 and 2011 respectively worked with universal service providers to offer one mega/bit per second broadband connection to their citizens. Rwanda launched a nationwide project called “Smart Kigali” and continues to build a fibre-optic network across the country.

I think that during the pandemic in Slovakia, the government failed a good portion of its people, specifically in relation to their right to education. Tens of thousands of children particularly from Roma communities couldn’t learn because they lacked the necessary means: they either didn’t have Internet access, didn’t own a computer or simply didn’t possess the

technical skills for proper virtual education. This further broadened the differences between the poor Roma children and the majority and made it difficult for them to adapt when the schools opened up again. I believe that Slovakia has a lot of work to do in this area and should take inspiration from the aforementioned countries. For example, providing schools with enough technical gadgets, so that the education of children isn't halted even in situations like the pandemic and providing free broadband connection. Providing access to the Internet for everyone is only one of many steps we are to take to reach a better, more equal society.

The spread of misinformation is another topic related to online spaces that became increasingly more important in recent years. Through internet we are able to communicate with people all across the globe and receive information within seconds. During the pandemic people began to spend even more time online and engaged in more public discussions. Since I have the privilege of access to the Internet, I got the chance of getting a closer look at people's behaviour online and learned a lot of things, mainly: in a time of uncertainty and societal change, we tend to mindlessly cling to any piece of information we find comforting, however untrue it may be. The beginning of the pandemic comes to mind: people first not believing the virus to be real, calling it divine punishment for our sins or a down-right biological weapon made to wipe out humanity.

The Internet should be a place for all people to practice their freedom of speech. This however results in all kinds of information circulating the global online sphere and eventually massive spreads of hoaxes and misinformation. What can be done to stop this? Policy makers would first need a clear definition of what can be classified as misinformation. Frankly, I find this task to be too tricky and the battle against misinformation could very easily lead to censorship. Government institutions cannot monitor all information available online. Platforms owned by private companies have their own systems of monitoring content published by users, but even they have difficulties with this. What I believe to be an effective solution is teaching digital literacy. Our school systems are very much behind in this area and the pandemic should serve as a wake-up call for all people responsible. We need to adjust the education process of students so that it is up to date with problems relevant in today's "digital" society. Learning how to navigate the online world (verifying information, checking news from various sources, differentiating between real and fake news etc.) is a helpful a sustainable way of truly combating misinformation.

When it comes to harassment online, it is safe to say that my generation has been familiar with this concept. Being born in the beginning of the new millennium, we basically grew up with the Internet and were introduced to the concept of harassment and cyberbullying in elementary school. They still penetrate online spaces today, in various forms. It is another unfortunate feature of a digital society, where people of varying opinions and ways of thinking meet. The Internet makes the process of harassing or bullying someone easier than ever: it's fast, the aggressor can stay anonymous and can reach a larger spectrum of people. Platforms like Facebook or Instagram have implemented helpful ways of prevention and protection from harassment. Features such as "block" or "report" are simple examples of this.

Though it is true that people can still create multiple accounts or move platforms and spread hateful content/harass people elsewhere.

Another problem we saw emerge in the last few years is the improvement in the algorithm accuracy of most social media platforms. Thanks to these algorithms, aggressors are being sent targeted content which allows them to connect easily with like-minded people, organise and continue their hateful behaviour. This creates rabbit holes and environments ideal for radicalisation of especially young and impressionable people. Unfortunately, I am not very hopeful when it comes to change coming from private companies themselves – they will continue to prioritise profit. This was only confirmed by Facebook’s most recent whistleblower, Frances Haugen, who exposed these platforms to be harmful and damaging to young people and our society in general.

The legal system protects victims of online harassment and we should continue to spread awareness about the dangers of the Internet. Once again, putting emphasis on and directly implementing digital literacy to our education system can only help improve online spaces.

In conclusion, injustice and inequality are present both in the real and in the digital world. My country has got a great challenge ahead of itself. I am of the opinion that ensuring equal and safe access to the Internet and modernising our education system are good starting points. From there, we can continue to change online spaces into environments where everybody’s human rights are protected.