Topic #1: Mitigating human rights violations in the digital domain

I.   Introduction

The digital domain has transformed the world as we know it. In this rapidly developing sphere, we need to be prepared to face further challenges. Digital space can be a great tool through which human rights are exercised, however as well violated. Just as there are several economic and social benefits and opportunities, digital space also brings many risks. Although it helps us to connect and address our rights through digital platforms, it can be misused by companies, governance and other individuals.

We must note that all sorts of political, economic and social rights can be easily violated through networks and technology. Some of the most pressing issues, that are being debated on the issue of human rights violations nowadays are: online harassment, massive surveillance, social scoring, microtargeting, algorithmic bias etc. Restraining them has been debated for years, however, the solutions to those restrictions need to be durable and effective.

We need to apprehend how to manage regulations that will not restrain innovation and will balance human rights and digital rights. Human rights should not be controvertible to digital rights. The digital future needs to be human-centric, this transformation should better the lives of individuals, not undermine them.

II.   Definition of Key Terms

Digital domain – a virtual realm that consists of digital technologies and networks. In this space, data is created, transmitted, accessed and processed

Hate speech – public manifestation that expresses hatred against a group or individual based on race, sexual orientation, religion gender etc.

Surveillance system—Modern technology is used as an instrument to monitor, collect, and analyze data about each individual. They are used for law enforcement, commercial purposes, traffic management, security, etc.

Social scorning – classifying and evaluating people based on the data of their social behaviour. It serves to socially regulate people and encourage conformity.

Algorithmic bias - refers to repeatable errors in a computer system that lead to unfair results, such as unduly favouring one group or category over another. Therefore, those results deviate from the intended purpose of the algorithm.

Online harassment – use of digital platforms to abuse other individuals and their rights through harmful and threatening behaviour

III.   Background Information

On a platform as wide as the digital area the interference of individual human rights is commonly talked about, most notably addressed in the topic of freedom of expression vs privacy rights. Regarding this topic, there still is a line that needs to be drawn, that would truly distinguish the borders separating hate- speech and freedom of expression.

But it is not only these two specific human rights issues, all thirty (UNHCR) human rights subdue the digital domain. We need to talk about what are the root causes of human rights violations in the digital domain and why and how are they violated in the first place:

One of the causes of human rights violations, specifically violation of aforementioned privacy rights is excessive surveillance and data collection. This data collection is often not authorized and in the hands of governments, companies etc. harms individuals faced by bigger actors. This collection of data by governments also contributes to world order inequality. Global powers and other larger actors that dominate the digital domain exploit other nations and their data, leading to violation of human rights within those countries.

Digital platforms, being sources of information, can be destructive tools when used against people. Instead of beneficial support for humankind's day-to-day life, they become an instrument for violation of human rights. For instance, the right for information can be taken by authoritarian regimes through censorship. Misinformation and manipulation can be spread through those platforms impeding individuals from a range of their human rights. In an extreme form election interference done by manipulating people through the digital domain endangers democracy: the basis of human rights protection.

When talking about human rights, we need to take a look at marginalized groups. It is often the marginalized groups and individuals who suffer the most from the misuse of technology. The digital platform works as an amplifier to already existing inequalities.

There is a great digital divide in technology access, low-income communities often do not have the necessary access to technology and innovation, as technology devices and Internet services are usually expensive. This often contributes to an even bigger divide and marginalization of low-income groups.

Through digital platforms, such as social media, marginalized communities can become a target of online harassment and misinformation spreading. In addition these communities can be often discriminated against by the algorithm itself, leading to problems in hiring, law enforcement and social scoring. Discrimination of those groups remains one of the critical issues of digital use.

Lastly, the issue that human rights in the digital world face today is that the current legal frameworks become quickly outdated in this constantly developing sphere. It is simple to violate human rights with little to no punishment.

IV.   Past Actions

- Global Digital Compact (22 September 2024)[1]
    o adopted as a part of Pact for the Future that includes a Global Digital Compact and a Declaration on Future Generations
    o a framework for global governance of digital technology and artificial intelligence

- Global Initiative for Digital Rights[2]
    o Non-profit organization launched by the UN, that promotes the necessity of using digital domain to promote human rights rather than abuse them.

- Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of digital technologies (19 December 2023)[3]
    o resolution that addresses comprehensively the issue of the intersection of human rights and digital technologies and the need to pay increased attention to the promotion and respect of human rights in rapidly developing digital sphere

- In the past UN has also made efforts to integrate digital rights into broader human rights frameworks, such as: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) etc.

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948)
    o Freedom of expression (Article 19)
    o Right to privacy (Article 12)

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[1] Homepage | Global Digital Compact. (n.d.). https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/en

[2] Global Initiative for Digital Rights, Speegle, S., & The United Nations. (n.d.). *Chapeau*. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sof-global-initiative-digital-rights-input-zero-draft-pact-for-future.pdf

[3] United Nations. (2023). Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of digital technologies. In *United Nations*. https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/422/28/pdf/n2342228.pdf#:~:text=Affirms%20that%20human%20rights%20and,20.

V.   Possible Solutions

In order to mitigate human rights violations in the digital domain, we need to ensure that human rights are embedded in the lifecycle of digital technologies. Legal frameworks, that would protect human rights online just as much they do offline need to be implemented:

Transparency and accountability are key issues that contribute to several human rights violations, including algorithm bias or information leakage. There is not enough transparency around where the data are collected and how it can be possibly withdrawn. Procedures protecting individuals face from governments and organizations collecting their data are a necessity.

Digital awareness is to be promoted to teach people how to behave in the digital area.

There is also the question of Artificial intelligence, which is momentarily a crucial issue in navigating human rights in the digital space. Although certain measures have been taken by international governments a constructive solution needs to be developed that will truly react to this rapidly transforming technology.

VI.   Sources & Useful Links

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