

Forum: General Assembly Fourth Committee

Issue: The Question Relating to Information Especially Concerning Social Media Conglomerates

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Introduction

In this era of digitalization and technological advance people are constantly relying more and more on information they are presented with. While digital technology has transformed the society today it has also brought with it challenges one of them being the debate on media conglomeration. Conglomeration has increased rapidly in the 21st century worldwide. The effects of conglomeration have also become apparent in social media.

In the western world and most of Asia excluding China, social media conglomeration can for instance be seen through Facebook owning various social networking platforms such as Instagram and Whatsapp. Similarly there is a well known Chinese conglomerate called Tencent that has ownership over various companies. While conglomeration has become normal in social media, there is still the question of reliability and trustworthiness of what sort of content is presented to audiences and how well their privacy and information is kept safe. On top of this social media conglomeration has almost become a monopoly leading to lack of competition in the industry. Nonetheless there are both positive and negative aspects.

One of the biggest negative aspect to conglomeration is that it can result in media consolidation. If there is a lot of conglomeration it means that there are only a few companies that can control what a consumer sees and doesn't see therefore having the ability to manipulate consumers. Nonetheless media consolidation can make the use of social media easier for a consumer. Adding to this, companies make the most profit when they offer consumers what they demand for.¹

Companies also control algorithms so they decide what is first presented to an individual. Therefore it may suggest things that may not be of one's interest. Furthermore with the access to modify algorithms social media conglomerates may easily change ongoing discussions. On top of this on social

¹ <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/social-media-in-the-era-of-consolidation-infographic/453973/>

media platforms there may be a lot of propaganda and false news or advertisement in certain places and since there would be a lack in competition it'll be hard to tell true and false news apart.

Definition of Key Terms

Media consolidation

Also known as the concentration of media ownership. Refers to a process in which more and more media companies are falling into the hands of fewer owners. Therefore what is presented in media becomes limited and diversity of content decreases.

Conglomeration

Conglomerates are companies that either partially or fully own a number of other companies. In social media the leading conglomerate is currently Facebook. A fairly new phenomenon in social media.

Social media

Social media is computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the building of virtual networks and communities. By design, social media is internet-based and gives users quick electronic communication of content

GDPR

Short for General Data Protection Regulation. It is a regulation in EU law on data protection and privacy for all citizens of the EU.

Media plurality

State of having access to various diverse viewpoints and perspectives on the media platforms. The state of being able to consume and put out different opinions and analyses freely without much restriction.

Database

A large amount of information stored in a computer system in such a way that it can be easily accessed .

Explanation of the Question

Various social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have become essential to free expression in the digital age. From the Arab Spring, to Turkey, to major electoral reform rallies in Malaysia, it has been apparent how movements around the world have used internet-based platforms to communicate, organize, and share critical information that impacts their lives. Social media platforms such as Facebook that may have started small now have billions of users, therefore the decisions that social media companies make can impact the rights and the privacy of many. As a result of social media conglomeration, the decisions of a bigger company which owns many other influential social media companies can impact news and access to information largely. ²

As stated previously there are both disadvantages and advantages of media conglomeration. However as of recent occurrences, problems and criticism have been brought up with information concerning social media conglomerates. The government has minimal control of social media so the extent of control that corporations which own social networking platforms have over information on individuals and ability to present content as they please, is huge. This can also be considered good as then the media will listen to consumers and provide for them what they want. If the government or politicians were to gain too control of social media platforms it could lead to restriction on a lot of content and deprive social media users from their freedom of expression. In conclusion government involvement can also lead to monopolies. ³

When only few companies own different social media platforms the media easily becomes consolidated. Other smaller companies have little to no chance in competing against large social media conglomerates resulting in loss and lack of competition in the industry. As one corporation grows big and becomes responsible for various platforms the control and quality of content becomes harder to control. A few corporations being in control of tools that are used everyday means they can modify platforms algorithms therefore possibly reducing media plurality and media freedom. Still social media being consolidated can also be good as it will be directed more at things consumers might be interested in.



*Information on media freedom and access specifically in Europe.*⁴

While many platforms follow the same regulated set of rules with the increase of social media conglomeration the variability in sources becomes sparse. A further huge issue that has come to our knowledge is that since many companies are working under one corporation the information that is provided to one platform becomes easily accessible to a larger crowd. A lot more data can be collected from an individual which is then used to better ads and make them more tempting even if it's false. Adding to this what one does in one form of social media can be tracked and the data can be misused. When there's only one big database information leakage can be large and damaging as has been seen with platforms such as Facebook.

The European Union has taken into power The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in which there are laws necessary for protecting human rights. This was driven by scandals involving digital data breaches and targeted advertising. Violation of these regulations could lead to a fine. These regulations went into effect in 2018 across EU's 28 Member States. This was based upon an older EU Data Protection Directive released in 1995. The EU General Data protection Regulation includes protections such as companies have to explain how a person's personal data is used or stores and that data breaches must be reported to authorities.

While many nations outside the European Union such as the US lack proper social media privacy laws the laws in other places including Europe impact U.S based companies such as Facebook or Google that operate internationally. As a result of controversies from social media platforms many nations have had to set new regulations and laws as to how social media companies can operate.

In many Asian countries such as Vietnam and Singapore the government has a say in what is published in Facebook. Facebook being one of the leading social media conglomerates and becoming somewhat pro-government can be quite problematic. In these Asian states there are laws and restrictions on publishing certain types of content such as anti-state content. Posting anti state literacy can result to a punishment. In this case people have less freedom in speech and their human rights can be violated.

UN has taken notice of the situation and affirms that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers

⁴ https://cmpf.eu.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Media-Pluralism-Monitor_CMPF-report_MPM2017_A.pdf

and through any media of one's choice, in accordance with article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁵

Facebook

Just like other social media platforms Facebook governs themselves therefore being able to publish content as they prefer. On average citizens of only the United States and United Kingdom have spent more time on Facebook reading news than going to established networks' websites or watching news on their televisions making it easy for false information with eye catching headlines to be spread on Facebook with a large amount of shares. The inability of Facebook to diminish this spread of false information has led to false news being treated as real news. Phenomenons like this can result to difficult situations in social media as Facebook also owns other large social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Whatsapp therefore making the spread of false information, inappropriate content and misuse of personal data easier. By owning Whatsapp Facebook also has access to millions of phone numbers. Facebook has claimed that 30 000 people around the world are working on safety and security. Most of this work is done automatically therefore it also removes unharful content. As a result of numerous controversies Facebook has called for more government regulation and help in social media platforms.

Key Member States and NGOs Involved and Their Views

Human Rights Watch

The Human Rights Watch are consistently working on improving human rights on internet. Human rights watch has done this by for instance demanding Facebook to fix its real name policy.⁶ Human Rights Watch doesn't support pro-government social media either and strives to achieve fair access to media platforms

⁵ <https://www.article19.org/resources/un-hrc-maintains-consensus-on-internet-resolution/>

⁶ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/what-can-social-media-platforms-do-for-human-rights/>

China

Sites such as Twitter, Google and Whatsapp are blocked in China. Services that are used instead are for instance Weibo and Wechat which are both owned by a company called Tencent. These and other Chinese social media platforms are also famous around other Asian countries. Similarly to other social media conglomerates Tencent has faced controversy for data breach and allegedly spreading damaging information in their platforms. The Chinese authorities have taken measures to solve this by having thousands of cyber police, who monitor social media platforms. However too much government control can result in media consolidation. This has recently become more apparent in Asian media platforms.⁷

Australia

After the shootings in New Zealand in March 2019 Australia passed the Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material Act on 5 April, introducing criminal penalties for social media companies. In 2015 the Enhancing Online safety Act created an eSafety Commissioner with the power to demand social media companies to take down abusive posts.

Russia

Under Russia's data laws from 2015, social media companies are required to store any data about Russian citizens on servers within the country. Russia's communications regulator is taking action against Facebook and Twitter for not being clear about how they planned to comply with this.

United States

United States doesn't have as good data protection regulations as EU does and the data transfer pact between U.S and Europe was ruled invalid. Therefore Facebook or other companies from U.S won't be able to access European's online information. Human rights watch and Amnesty international concluded that US intelligence surveillance is lacking. The United states has some laws regarding social media safety such as the Privacy Act of 1974 or The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. Nevertheless they are still lacking in many areas.^{8 9}

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-47135058>

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<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2012-title5/pdf/USCODE-2012-title5-partI-chap5-subchapII-sec552a.pdf>

⁹ <https://consumer.findlaw.com/online-scams/social-media-privacy-laws.html>

Nigeria

The use of social media platforms owned by conglomerates such as Facebook is being used but under restrictions on social media that are set by a Social Media Bill proposed by the Nigerian senate. Request for Digital Rights and Freedom Bill was rejected therefore putting Nigerians at greater risk of deprivation of human rights in social media. Nigerian government doesn't offer too much plurality of media.¹⁰

Hungary

Hungary has a new Pro-Government media conglomerate that threatens media plurality. Mostly applies to newspapers and online news portals but has also somewhat affected social media platforms.

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Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1974	A United States federal law: The Privacy Act of 1974

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/26/nigerians-should-say-no-social-media-bill>

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https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/detail-alert?p_p_id=sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_count=10&sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet_alertPK=44208036
https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/detail-alert?p_p_id=sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_count=10&sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet_alertPK=44208036

December 13, 1995	Data Protection Directive (Directive 95/46/EC). Regulation of processing personal data in the European Union
January 21, 2014	Resolution: The right to privacy in digital age
September 2018	Facebook security breach. Security breach exposes accounts of 50 million users
May 25, 2018	The EU General Data Regulation (GDPR). Regulation in EU law on data protection and privacy for all individual citizens of the European Union
July 4, 2018	The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet. A resolution by UN on human rights in social media.
2018-2019	Various social media companies such as Facebook, Inc and Tencent face data breaches
March 15, 2019	Christchurch mosque shootings
April 6, 2019	Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material Act. Australian law passed in 2019 that requires social media companies to remove abhorrent violent material.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

UN has taken notice of the role of social media conglomeration and possible issues related to misuse of social media platform ownership. Rather than putting out resolution the UN has set Social media guidelines.

- The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet, 4 July 2018 **(A/HRC/38/L.10/Rev.1)**.

A resolution that addresses human rights issues in the internet and calls on social media companies to take responsibility in respecting human rights. Has been adopted by many European countries, but has also gained opposition from countries such as Russia.¹²

- Media pluralism and media freedom in the European Union, 12 April 2018 **(2017/2209(INI))**¹³
- The right to privacy in the digital age, 21 January 2014 **(A/RES/68/167)**

¹² <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/38/L.10/Rev.1>

¹³ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0144_EN.html?redirect

In this resolution UN recognizes the privacy issues that may appear concerning social networking platforms and urges States to make sure human right laws are being thoroughly followed.¹⁴

Possible Solutions

Media conglomeration has some positive attributes however ultimately the negative ones weigh them out therefore we should strive to fix them.

Education

Even though things such as the GDPR have made regulations such as online services have to ask for consent in order to use of personal data there will still be people that lack understanding of data usage. These people may give consent to data processing. Ultimately, the digital society may require many more substantive protections than a consent-based model can provide. Therefore improving education on data usage, privacy and rights on social media is an essential step for bettering online human rights. Countries should strive to better understand the risks involved in media conglomeration and actively inform their citizens of their rights online and how social media platforms work. Forming NGOs or some sort of events to spread awareness related to the issue can also be helpful.

Government involvement

As media conglomeration is hard to prevent and is easier to use for consumers the only possible thing to do is to set numerous laws and put more effort into the surveillance of how social networking platforms carry out their tasks. Government involvement should still stay minimal but each state should still make sure that social media corporations and the content they display in their country follow the rules and regulations in Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human right treaties concerning online privacy and freedom. Companies should openly provide information about their activities so the state. Instead of setting restricting laws nations should set fair guidelines and instead strive to fix other systematic problems in the society that lead to unwanted events in social platforms.

Countries should try to avoid having pro-government social platforms and not set strict laws and brand various topics as false news but should allow media plurality with fair limits. Governments should put

¹⁴ <https://undocs.org/A/RES/68/167>

more effort into cooperating with the technical community, civic society and the private sector in order to provide a safe online community.

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Resolutions

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