

INACH

Bringing the Online In Line with Human Rights

**4-5
NOVEMBER 2021**

**Annual Conference
‘Social media, helping or
hindering democracy’
Full report**

2021

International Network Against Cyber Hate – INACH

INACH was founded in 2002 to use intervention and other preventive strategies against cyber hate. The member organisations are united in a systematic fight against cyber hate, for example as complaints offices, monitoring offices or online help desks. In their respective countries, they provide important contacts for politicians, internet providers, educational institutions, and users.

Funding for INACH is provided by its members, the European Commission, the BPB and other donors. The International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH) unites multiple organizations from the EU, Israel, Russia, South America, and the United States. While starting as a network of online complaints offices, INACH today pursues a multi-dimensional approach of educational and preventive strategies.

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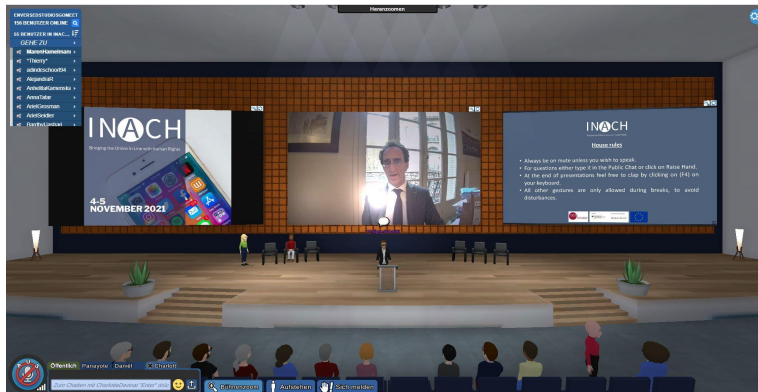
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Demokratie **leben!**

Introduction

INACH's conference in 2021 took place on the 4th and 5th of November. The title of the annual conference was 'Social Media, Helping or Hindering Democracy?'. With a mixture of academics, representatives of NGOs and social media platforms, the theme was discussed from different perspectives. Due to the continuing situation with Covid-19, the conference again took place virtually. However, this time not on Zoom but on a brand new platform, called Go.Meet. Over 130 participants registered and joined in this virtual world where they could walk around with their avatar, sit down in the auditorium or take a walk on the beach during the break. During these two days the conference took a look at the state of online hate on social media in Latin America and Africa, while AI and the risks and opportunities it presents were discussed in breakout rooms. The peripheral social media platforms and right wing extremism were also explained and the very first Ronald & Suzette award was handed out.

Day 1



The conference was opened by the moderator, **Julia Mozer**, and the Chair of INACH, **Philippe Schmidt**. Philippe welcomed everyone and took a moment to respect and remember the founders of INACH, and the soul of the organization, **Ronald**

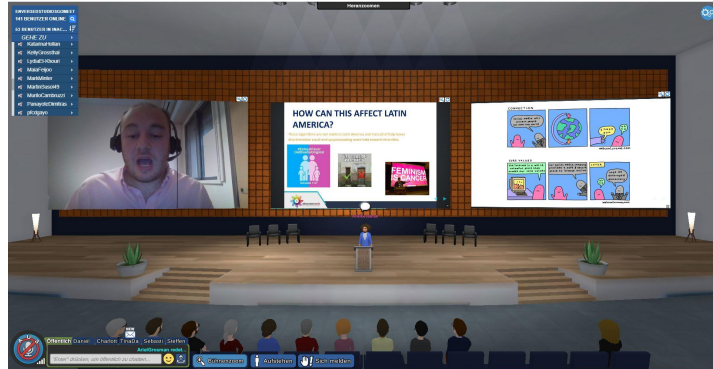
Eissens and **Suzette Bronkhorst**, who both passed away this year. Regarding the theme of this conference, Philippe mentioned that social media needs to be watched with vigilance by NGOs, now more than ever.

The keynote speech was given by **Daniel Gayo-Avello**, Associate Professor in the Department of Informatics at the University of Oviedo in Spain. He started off his speech with entertaining rock music and a video that showed our hope that social media would facilitate mass protests and promote more democracy. However, Daniel quickly realized that the effects of social media are greatly exaggerated. Social media is just a tool, it can



be used to have both a positive or negative impact. There is just as little democracy as there was before the creation of social media. Daniel concluded his speech by expressing his hope that researchers will continue their work and that organizations like ours will demand transparency, data and accountability of social media companies. In the end, political leaders have the power to demand that.

The first presentation was given by **Ariel Grosman**, an analyst with Observatorioweb, that focused upon social media and online hate speech in Latin America. Online hate focuses upon the same groups as it does in the rest of the world (e.g. LGBTQ+, racism, women). However, the biggest factor of discrimination is poverty. Poor



people experience by far the most discrimination both online and offline. 30.5% of the people in Latin America live in poverty and a lack of infrastructure and with that a lack of access to education. Everyone, who has access to the internet in Latin America, is active on social media. The danger of that is that politicians use social media platforms and online hate to their own advantage, an example of that is Bolsonaro in Brazil. Ariel underlined that algorithms should be designed for the Latin American perspective and that the data of social media platforms should be public and auditable.

After the break, the conference was organized in small sessions that focused upon different issues and perspectives regarding Artificial Intelligence.

Session 1: 'AI policy and in practice - concerns and opportunities' with Tina Dakovic and Patrycja Tempska

Tina Dakovic, coordinator of Human Rights House Zagreb, underlined that new technologies are continuously developing, they are not unique. But the topic of Artificial Intelligence is so interesting because a machine is making decisions instead of humans. In other words, it is happening out of our human control. She explained the existing initiatives and lawmaking on the EU level, for example the EU is in the process of preparing laws regarding AI and has called for a ban on facial recognition. Patrycja Tempska works as head of the Intervention Team for Samurai Labs and has been involved in experiments with AI moderation. She presented us to James Walker, an AI moderator on Reddit, who tried out different strategies of countering hate speech. James received a lot of compliments from other users for his patience and empathic behavior.

Session 2: 'AI: keeping the human in the loop' with Gijs van Beek and Sahana Udupa

Sahana Udupa, Professor of Media Anthropology at the LMU Munich, uses ethnography to understand hate speech beyond the US and then cultivates models on how that hate speech functions. She has found that there is almost no work on hate speech in minority languages and this is a major disparity that needs to be addressed. Her work has created four different kinds of hate speech models: extreme hate speech, derogatory hate speech, dangerous speech and exclusionary hate speech.

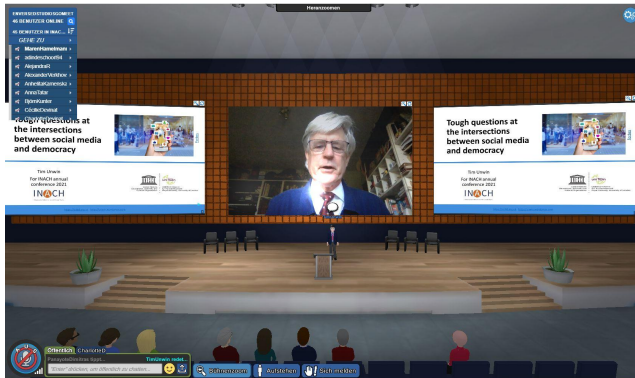
Gijs' company Textgain works on online hatred. They look at hate speech and disinformation in 24+ languages in the European space. They also make toxicity lexicons and use AI to then find more hate speech terms. A big problem both speakers identified is the lack of data available to research, especially from Facebook. Both speakers were greatly concerned about harmful content in languages other than English and the lack of cultural and language competency in the big tech companies. Additionally, the lack of the tech companies' willingness to invest in human content moderators to help the AI learn the cultural and language complexities is a huge hindrance to developing adequate moderation tools to stop hateful and dangerous speech.

Session 3: 'Algorithms and democracy - research and tech view point', by Dan Mercea and Lucy Calladine

Algorithms have come to take the place of institutions "because of their power to structure behavior, influence preferences, guide consumption, produce content, signal quality, and sway commodification". Dan Mercea, reader in Media and Communication at City, University of London, talked about low voter turnouts, a great societal distrust and rising polarisation – all of these are symptoms of what many consider to be a post-democratic status-quo. Through a bottom-up approach, social media allowed for some forms of political innovation by creating a new public space where everyone could ideally be included. However, social media also offered a rude awakening as it quickly became a mirror of society and contributed to political polarisation as algorithms reinforce individual preferences, hence decreasing diversity of opinion and creating echo chambers. Moreover, algorithms centralize control over and amplify the voice of some but not all political groups. We need new accountability of social media to citizens, a public space for political engagement that is free of commercial imperatives, renewed transparency in algorithmic governance and an explicit editorial responsibility on the part of social media. Lucy Calladine, Product Policy Lead in EMEA for YouTube, then walked through Youtube's approach to content moderation. Lucy explained that Youtube focuses on the idea that they need to "increase the good, decrease the bad" through removing content that doesn't respect the community rules of the platform (e.g. outright hate-speech, content that infringes upon laws, disinformation), reducing borderline content (by decreasing recommendations of low-quality/potentially harmful content) and raising high-quality and trustworthy content.

******END of DAY 1******

Day 2



On the second day of the Annual conference, the participants were welcomed back by **Julia Mozer**. The second keynote speech was given by **Tim Unwin**, Chairholder of the UNESCO chair in ICT4D and Emeritus professor in Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London. His presentation concentrated on the tough questions that need to be asked

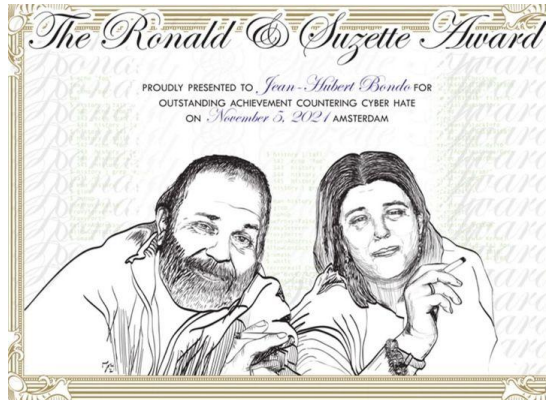
about human rights and social media. He gave a warning beforehand, asking these questions can be painful. Tim talked about the consequences of choosing for a relativist or universalist perspective. The famous expression, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' could be even questioned here, because how do I know what you would like me to do to you as what I would like you to do to me? Tim also asked what kind of democracy we want social media to benefit, as there are many different types of democracy as well. His conclusion was that digital technologies do not cause anything, but their use can lead to differing outcomes. It is the interests, underlying design, production and use that are the cause.



The next presentation was given by **Yves Renuixen-Mencel** and **Alejandra Camjalli** of CST in the United Kingdom and explained the danger of the new social media platforms that serve as a safe haven for extremists. The research done by CST focused mostly upon the platforms 4Chan, Bitchute, Telegram and Gab, but of course there are more. The challenges with these platforms are the lack of moderation, anonymity, encryption, transnationality, dynamism and platform migration. The content originates from these

new platforms but migrates to the mainstream platforms and is spread there. Extremists talk to each other on these platforms about strategies on how to spread the content on mainstream platforms. On mainstream platforms extremists often use more moderate content and announce their real accounts on the other platforms, or they use different accounts with very similar names because they know their accounts will be canceled one by one by moderators. Finally, the glorification of previous violent attacks happen often on these platforms and besides sharing practical knowledge, they inspire each other to plan more deadly attacks. What could be done? To get rid of anonymity

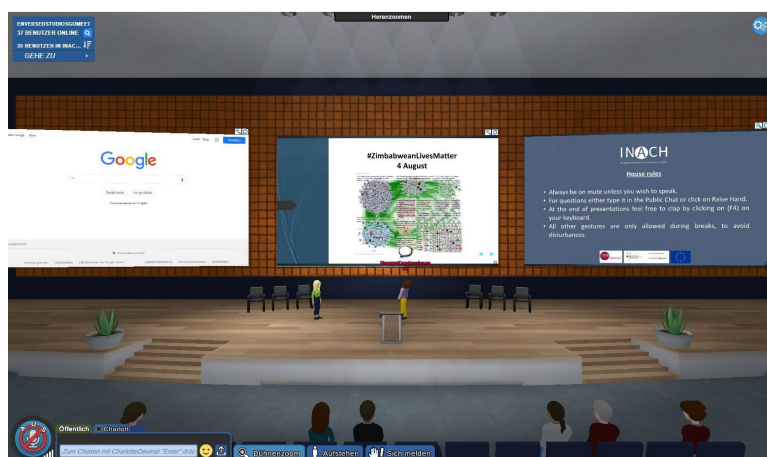
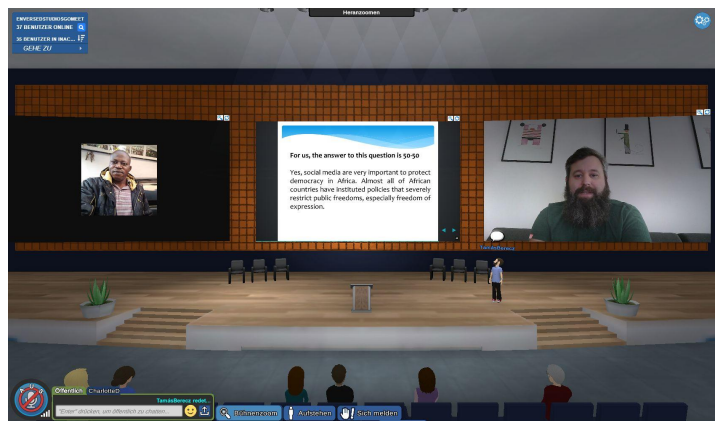
would be a first step, to balance the right to privacy with protection and to make sure laws are up to date with the current situation.



After the break, the very first **Ronald & Suzette award** was handed out by **Mellouki Cadat**. Ronald Eissens and Suzette Bronkhorst were the founders of INACH but more importantly, they were the soul of the organization. They were both pioneers in signaling the problem of online hate speech and fighting it, and both fought until the end until they passed away this year. The prize is awarded every year to (an) organization(s) and/or (an) individual(s) that develop(s)

innovative ways to combat cyber hate or work towards “Bringing the Online In line with Human Rights”. This year, the award was handed out to **Jean Hubert Bondo** and his organisation Africa Sans Haine in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The winner of the Ronald & Suzette award, Africa Sans Haine, had prepared a presentation about the state of online hate on social media in Africa. Due to internet problems, this presentation was given by **Tamas Berecz** instead of **Jean Hubert Bondo** himself. There certainly is a tension between democracy and social media in Africa, as it is elsewhere in the world. Social media in Africa means excessive freedom of expression, sanctioned by hate speech, fake news and disinformation while Africa’s democracy is defined by coups, unfair elections, constitutional violations and the threat of dictatorship.



Jean Hubert’s conclusions were underlined by the next presentation about Zimbabwe, given by **George Karekwaivanane**, who is a Lecturer in African Studies at the University of Edinburgh. George explained how he researched the hashtag #Zimbabweanlivesmatter.

On the 31st of July 2021, there were protests planned in Zimbabwe against the government, demanding reforms. However, the police arrested the organizers before the protests could take place. Instead, the protests moved online to the aforementioned hashtag. It went viral quite quickly due to the fact that prominent Africans with an international following shared the tweet, as for example the actress Lupita Nyong'o. George's research focused upon the efforts made by the Zimbabwean government to stop this online protest by having a troll army of only 70 accounts, tweeting continuously daily, sometimes more than 200 tweets per day. Probably these were less than 70 people, managing different accounts at the same time, who actually had some success in using strategies like counter messaging, character assassination and by using distraction. It was an under-resourced government that hired an under-resourced troll army but this research showed that even then, it managed to have quite the reach.

Julia Mozer closed the INACH annual conference by thanking all presenters, participants, organizers and the technical team of Go.Meet for making this conference a success. It was a very diverse and insightful conference that gave a lot of food for thought. We will see each other next year for the 20th anniversary of INACH and its annual conference in Amsterdam.



******END of the CONFERENCE******