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The intersection of civil society and understanding hate: Institute for Strategic Dialogue Germany internship reflection

In the contemporary state of the online landscape, extremism is on the rise, affecting a wide range of actors, from individuals to states. With the rise of generative AI, disinformation, and harmful propaganda, the way ideologies spread is rapidly shifting, driving radicalization and phenomena such as the rise of the far right into unknown levels. To protect communities and youth deeply affected by the rapid rise of social media usage while advocating for democracy, the need for an action of education, research, and policy advocacy is reaching its highest importance.

Institute for Strategic Dialogue, an international “Think and Do Tank” operating in the USA, Canada, the UK, Germany, and Jordan faces extremism and hate in all shapes and forms, offline and online, providing diverse responses to global events with the goal of protecting the values of democracy and Human Rights. As ISD’s work stretches among continents, its focus is extremely broad ranging from local scale educational workshops to projects fully dedicated to policy recommendations.

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Within my three months at ISD, I got to see multiple projects and approaches to the problematic of the rise of extremism, giving me a great overview of the strategies NGOs use to monitor and fight against threats to democracy. Throughout my internship, I have identified three main fields ISD works in, and I have fortunately had the opportunity to experience all of them. These different areas of focus are analysis, including research and threat monitoring, education, and policy recommendations. I mainly contributed to the education and analysis workstream at ISD, giving me both theoretical knowledge and practical experience within civil society.

Personal Involvement with Projects:

At ISD Germany, a major focus of my work involved contributing to its long-term project called CCOA (Coalition countering online antisemitism). Because of my experience in both interfaith communities and educational environments, I focused on translating ISD's vast resources and expertise into easy to understand, interactive educational modules and workshops. Shifting away from a purely academic form of knowledge delivery in order to create an engaging learning environment for civil society participants is a challenging but extremely intriguing and important task. Helping individuals critically evaluate mainly digital information and recognize online tactics meant to spread antisemitism is a necessary skill needed to objectively assess information in the digital space. Within CCOA's focus on education, I also got to contribute to an interfaith event intending to

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create a safe and constructive dialogue between Muslim and Jewish communities, religious organizations as well as civil society. Focusing on how online spaces push narratives that polarize minorities, interfaith spaces perform the opposite of online echochambers and algorithmic traps, countering the hateful discourse that is becoming more and more radicalized.

In addition to designing educational modules, I contributed to research on contemporary antisemitism, looking specifically at implementation of usage of social media into antisemitism education. I got to have conversations with innovative developers about strategies on how to implement a modern view on already outdated antisemitism education, taking into consideration communication forms such as memes, viral narratives, and code phrases used on social media instead of slurs. Bringing that research into the educational modules meant we weren't just talking about abstract hate, but giving people the actual vocabulary and tools to spot how modern antisemitic tropes disguise as everyday political discourse or online humor. This really emphasized how crucial it is for NGOs to bridge the gap between threat research and grassroots, human-centered education, this collaboration made me realize the importance of innovative digital tools in the topic of hate, especially in education.

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Outside of working with the Coalition to Counter Online Antisemitism, I supported internal communications processes helping phrase out complex and professional research into digestible and clear outputs for external partners, our communication channels and media. Seeing both sides of research, its complexity of being created and the challenge of communicating it clearly and effectively to the masses, I understood the need for a well developed structure of communications processes in an organization. Even though this part of the work might seem more administrative, it holds great stakes for an NGO. I learned how vital structured communication channels are for ensuring that research insights, policy recommendations, and educational resources actually reach their audience and decision-makers who need them most. In addition, I supported keeping a database of our interactions with media and tracking how our research interacted with public engagement. Managing the database gave me a look at the background of the media environment surrounding extremism research, showing me which topics gain popularity, how journalists frame digital threat reports, and the constant stress required when communicating sensitive security issues to the general public. This revealed that public advocacy isn't just about what you publish, but how strategically and carefully you time and target your output so it actually drives constructive conversation rather than just panic or pure backlash.

How does ISD understand hate?

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To fully evaluate ISD's methodology, it is necessary to examine their essential epistemology of the concept of hate. ISD does not conceptualize hate speech merely as an individual psychological failing or an expression of prejudice between online personas. Instead, they treat hate as a systemic, weaponized product facilitated by modern platform design and commercial business models. Through interviews with my fellow ISD colleagues, I learned how social media business models inherently reward outrage, controversy, and emotional polarization because higher engagement drives advertising revenue. Consequently, online radicalization is understood as a structural design flaw of the attention economy. By focusing heavily on digital footprint mapping, open-source intelligence, and policy advocacy directed at tech corporations, ISD positions itself at the intersection of civil society and regulatory accountability, pushing for legislative tools like the European Union's Digital Services Act to force platforms to mitigate systemic harms.

Furthermore, ISD recognizes that online hate functions as a political tool. Whether examining far-right extremism, gender-based misogyny, or weaponized antisemitism, the organization tracks how hate acts as a tool for extremist networks. Antisemitism, for instance, is analyzed not just as isolated prejudice or as it often is regarded as racism only, but as a flexible framework that extremists use to explain complex societal changes

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and justify attacks on democratic institutions. ISD maps these extremist efforts and their organization and offers countermeasures often in the form of policy recommendations.

Space for improvement

ISD's data driven approach is very exceptional and successful at mapping out digital hate. Nonetheless, many of their solution-based approaches within the field of digital hate tie back to improved platform moderation, content removal, or switching up the algorithm. Instead of focusing on the roots of the issue, thus hate, these solutions seem to rather hyperfocus on the effects of the root cause. As online radicalization does not happen in a vacuum, but rather reflect real material anxieties, economies, polarization and other crises, reports hyperfocusing on the digital sphere often lack the vast implications and causes of online hate on the material world. While tracking online threats is extremely important, long-term resilience against extremism and hate requires working both with digital threat analysis and addressing community level inequalities which end up contributing to the radicalization of individuals in the first place. Society cannot depend solely on digital fixes as a solution to a real physical problem rooted in social, economic and political structures.

Emotional risks and challenges

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Interning at ISD was not just about analyzing data points or building educational modules, on a deeply personal and emotional level, it was an exercise in confronting how digital hate quietly alters the way we relate to one another as human beings. When one spends the whole day consumed by the environment of online hate, decoding how memes, dog whistles, language, and conspiracy theories trap people in digital echo chambers, it changes their perspective on the broad public. One starts to notice how easily fear and outrage are weaponized against vulnerable communities, and how vulnerable youth are to online spaces that promise community but offer radicalization.

Dealing with such topics on a daily basis, the people working at NGOs fighting hate are extremely prone to burnout, including my colleagues at ISD. Analysts have great passion and a sense of purpose, making it easy to overwork and stop seeing boundaries to the work one is doing. The hateful content also takes its price from being consumed daily and the emotional weight is hard to escape even after working hours. Even though ISD has some great resources to battle this specific aspect of this line of work, mental health hygiene is in my opinion an aspect that should be consistently actively checked upon and adjusted to people's individual needs. Sustaining civil society work isn't just about research, the right strategies or funding, it also requires building internal structures that actively protect the mental health and well-being of the people doing the mentally challenging work behind the screens of a report.

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On a personal growth level, the internship forced me to sit with uncomfortable truths about how fragile the contemporary democratic discourse really is. It was at times a very heavy and overwhelming feeling as a result of the scale of disinformation and far-right mobilization online. But working alongside passionate colleagues at ISD who refuse to sit back and watch made me realize that civil society isn't some abstract political concept, it is made of people choosing to care, to educate, to act, and to build spaces where mutual understanding can not just survive but also thrive.

Conclusion

The three months I spent at ISD Germany fully changed how I look at the intersection of civil society, technology, democracy, and hate. From designing interactive workshops for the CCOA project to exploring how modern antisemitism shifts its form through digital memes and code names, I saw for myself why modern civil society organizations must be just as adaptable as the extremist networks they monitor. Countering the rise of extremism requires a specific combination of ISD's, data-driven frameworks and a deeper cultural awareness of structural inequalities. By threat analysis, education, and community-building such as interfaith dialogues, we can move closer to building resilient communities, both online and offline, that can defend democratic values and fight off hate.