

ADDRESSING ONLINE HATE SPEECH IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE: THE ROLE OF MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY

CONCLUSIONS AND FOLLOW-UP

The Sarajevo conference organized on 17 October 2013 in the framework of EU-UNESCO Project “Media accountability in South East Europe”, having examined the professional, legal and political conditions in which media in the region work, confirmed that one of the greatest challenges facing media and public policymakers is the growth of intolerance in online communications. Very often this is hate speech and incitement to violence or hatred against minorities based particularly on differences related to ethnicity, religion, politics, and sexual orientation.

Although the liberating impact of an open information landscape has strengthened democracy and free speech and has created unprecedented opportunities for greater transparency and accountability across all areas of public life, the impact on journalism is mixed.

There are signs of progress in the quality and capacity of traditional journalism in some countries of region, but at the same time media in all countries report a serious challenge from the expansion of online communications where there is little if any self-regulation to minimize the threat of hate speech.

In particular, the conference noted that access to traditional media and the freedom to comment on the work of journalists provides opportunities for intolerant and extremist expression and when these comments are published without moderation by media professionals, they can undermine professional and ethical standards.

The way media are able to deal with these problems is made complex by internal and external challenges.

Inside media there is fierce competition; precarious working conditions; and limited financial resources, all of which conspire to weaken the capacity for adequate supervision of published material. The rush to publish in a competitive media market and notions of immediacy have further undermined standards of fact-checking and verification of information in journalism both online and on traditional platforms.

Externally, political pressures, the undue influence of special interest groups and the use of law to constrain media and journalism remain in place in some countries. This also leads to forms of self-censorship.

The changing nature of journalism and the participation of the audience in gathering and dissemination of information work adds to the pressure on ethical journalism. A lack of adequate editing and moderation of submitted material creates a stark contrast between journalistic work and public comments.

The following suggestions arise from the conference discussions and point to areas where public policy could be directed towards assisting journalists and media in ensuring quality and reliability of their published works.

In particular, these points aim to raise awareness both within media and among the public at large about the dangers in hateful communications and the need for responsibility in the use of information in an online environment.

Political and Public Responsibility for Online Hate Speech

- Political leaders and political parties at all levels must recognize that intemperate, intolerant language in political discourse is a major reason for the widespread dissemination of hateful information found in traditional and online media that incites violence and division in society. Political groups should impose internal controls to limit and counter political speech that is intolerant. Public officials who promote hatred between communities should be held to account.
- Similarly, people in the leadership of groups representing specific religious, cultural or language communities or other groups identified by cultural or language groups should oppose and act against all forms of communication which are designed to promote hostility or to target other communities.
- In communities that remain polarized because of political or cultural differences it is important that media and journalism do not compromise the cardinal principle of editorial independence. All media, whether public or private, should strive to respect the core principles of ethical journalism.

Public Information Policy to Combat Online Hatred

- Investment in media and information literacy is essential. Public investment should be provided to support programmes for raising awareness at all levels of society, through the educational system and media, to encourage public responsibility in the use of information.
- Such investment should also encourage media to engage with the audience in raising-awareness on the dangers of intolerant and hateful speech particularly in the online environment. However, such public money should not at any time be used to compromise the editorial independence of journalism.
- At the same time there should be increased investment in training on this issue for journalists both inside media houses and across the different platforms of media.
- Media self-regulation bodies are also important instruments for engagement with the audience and should be used to support and implement such campaigns.

Use of Law and the Challenge of Definition of Hate Speech

- Governments should reinforce free speech rights and avoid imposing legal controls that limit journalism or online speech in the name of combatting hate speech except in circumstances where there is real and imminent threat to public life.
- Laws pertaining to hate speech should be harmonized and clearly defined so that no one is penalized for the dissemination of hate speech unless it is been shown that they published information with the intention of inciting discrimination, hostility or violence.

Journalism and Media Ethics

- The right of journalists to work freely and to decide how best to communicate information and ideas to the public should be respected, particularly when they are reporting on racism and intolerance.
- National journalistic codes of ethics should be adapted to the digitalized media landscape.
- All types of online journalistic media (websites of traditional media, news portals, blogs, etc) should be invited to sign up the code of ethics. Fresh dialogues with the online media community and traditional media should be encouraged to reach agreement on a common approach where this is possible.

Self-regulation and online speech

- In all countries media should work together to try to agree on common standards and a common approach in dealing with hate speech, particularly where it concerns the moderation and management of user-generated content and online comments on journalistic work. This should involve reaching agreement on editorial guidelines and acceptable codes.
- Codes should be followed up with media self-regulatory bodies that ensure their implementation. These mechanisms should be tailored to meet the needs of a converged media environment with particular attention to online communications.
- Media self-regulatory bodies should be voluntarily established, ideally at a national level, and should be free of undue political influence. Such bodies should be supervised and managed by media professional groups and where appropriate in co-operation with public representatives.
- Where the establishment of a self-regulatory body is not possible, each media house should be encouraged to establish and publish the terms and conditions which they apply in accepting and publishing online comments. A

clear demarcation must be kept on online media between forums for the public and editorial content.

- The media should always monitor their websites and try to prevent the publication of content that violates human dignity. The public must be given opportunity to report to editorial offices about inappropriate content.