

Short report on the INACH conference 2010

Modern times, new networking: Youth, Hate and Web 2.0

On the agenda of the INACH Conference in Vienna in November 2010 were the massive increase of incitement to racial hatred and the dissemination of extreme right-wing ideas in Web 2.0 services. Around 70 participants – representatives from anti-racism and anti-discrimination organizations, IT and Internet industry, from the Austrian justice department, government, education and science departments agreed on at least two points: We love the Internet – but we don't like racism and hate speech on the Net.

In 2010, the INACH member organizations received a total of 15,000 reports, showing that the topic of hate on the Net becomes increasingly important. Often it was not possible to take legal action against the reported content. Since there is no legislation for the Internet at the world level, except for child pornography, the biggest problem for anti-racist organizations is getting racist content removed from the Net. This only works if ISPs are willing to become active and remove cyber hate, or if countries use existing hate speech legislation.

Social networks – social responsibility: The role of the industry

Cooperation with Internet providers is effective wherever there is personal contact; this is what the INACH Secretary General Suzette Bronkhorst confirmed during the conference. However, the providers often refer to national legislation and take no responsibility for content on their servers – the Internet belongs to everyone and the content is private, so they claim. This is also how representatives of Microsoft Europe defend their policy: if every company had their own terms of service, there would be no room for freedom of speech.

Facebook even went a step further and said social networks were a private platform for communication; without exchange of information, no opinion-forming. At the conference, Richard Allan, Facebook Policy Officer for Europe, said Facebook believed in the victory of good over evil and that the Internet would regulate itself. Still, he promised INACH to find ways to evaluate racist content according to their terms of service on request. Facebook already collaborates with some countries, e.g. with Germany, and deletes reported illegal hate propaganda. Sadly, Facebook does not want to change its policy of considering Holocaust denial not always as a form of hate. Richard Allen was criticized heavily on that issue, both by Philippe Schmidt, chairperson of INACH and board member Ronald Eissens.

Private companies should not act only according to their own principles; they also have to follow the laws. However, depending on the laws, only the persons responsible for the content can be prosecuted. It is difficult to make service providers abroad liable for the content on their servers. According to Gertraud Eppich from the Austrian Ministry of Justice, identifying and locating the user is also very difficult.

Defining ethical behavior: Codes of Conduct

In order to create awareness and promote a more conscious approach towards racism and cyber hate, we need codes of conduct; guidelines for dealing with these two phenomena in Internet forums or social networks. Philippe Schmidt, Chair of INACH, made it clear that providers can fulfil their social responsibility by helping human rights succeed - e.g. the protection of human dignity, the right to non-discrimination and the right of freedom of speech, and by setting policies going well beyond legal provisions. Additionally, codes of conduct would make transparent what is allowed and where limits are exceeded. Here, providers should also establish reporting points to monitor the guidelines.

Countering discrimination online: Strategies and imperatives

At present, many civil society organizations provide monitoring and work with individuals in the field of cyber hate. They raise consciousness among youngsters or governments and initiate interdisciplinary dialogues with the aim to develop new strategies in dealing with

racism and hate on the Internet. Monitoring social networks and combating hate-content is extremely time-consuming. Furthermore, persons or groups being the target of incitement to (racial) hatred and who are victimized on the Internet again and again, need protection. Here, state organizations have to be involved; even if there is no legal (national or international) basis to take action.

The international collaboration of the INACH members makes it possible to identify strategic cases and to start legal proceedings in test cases. Landmark decisions can function as a deterrent and increase awareness for the issue. Additionally, racism and incitement by Internet users should be on the political agenda in order to enable national governments to implement international recommendations -e.g. for the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and their Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)- and to exchange best practices.

Educating and empowering youngsters: Give racism a ban

As long as cyber hate is not sufficiently prosecuted there still is a need for civil society organizations. Those raise awareness and educate youngsters to be prepared when stumbling across racist content and symbols on the Internet, and to be able to withstand propaganda. According to Ulrich Dovermann of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education, racism is not a problem of the schools, but a problem brought into the schools; peer education could play a key role here. Together with media literacy this could be a promising model to warn young persons and save them from a xenophobic attitudes and racist behaviour.

Only together we can succeed in achieving the objectives of INACH: bringing the online in line with human rights.

The next annual INACH conference will be organized by the French INACH member LICRA in Paris, October 10 / 11, 2011.