INACH

bringing the online in line with human rights

VU VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT AMSTERDAM

How to deal with Harmful Hate Speech

Policy Suggestions

By INACH + VU University

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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.

Introduction

INACH participated in a research project set up by the VU University in Amsterdam. Second year's BA Political Science students conducted research based on a research question provided by INACH. They showed their findings and policy suggestions to INACH in the form of a report and presentation. The research question of INACH was:

'What to do against legal harmful speech if it can't be removed based on laws and rules? From the perspective of NGOs, international organisations, governments and social media platforms, what can be done to prevent and/or counter harmful hate speech?'

Description of the problem

From our experience with online hate speech, EU Monitoring Exercises and our conversations with social media companies, we can see that much of the real 'clear cut' online hate speech has been banned. As long as it is illegal (based on national laws or the Terms of Services of the companies) platforms will often remove it. Much of that kind of hate has migrated to other platforms which are not mainstream and do not do as much moderation or are created for that exact purpose: to receive extreme content.

However, legal harmful hate speech is a persistent and complicated problem on the mainstream social media platforms. Legal harmful hate speech comes in different ways: conspiracy theories, disinformation and hateful content that is on the border of what is legal by using dog whistles, dehumanisation, memes etc. The problem is that platforms do not have to remove it because it is not illegal while at the same time it increases the distrust between different groups, between citizens and authorities, and it increases hate against minority groups.

Policy suggestions

The students conducted research, interviewed experts and came up with policy suggestions focused on four levels of influence: NGOs, social media platforms, governments and international organisations. Here is an overview of the policy suggestions that INACH found particularly interesting regarding advocacy, research and education. The students argued that a multilevel approach is needed.

1. More education and awareness is needed about harmful hate speech. Not only targeting citizens but especially to train authorities, law enforcement and social media platforms.

2. More research is needed on the trends of harmful hate speech. Not just broad research but also on local trends and 'smaller topics'. Hate speech is usually in line with current national political debates or social events and therefore it is essential to research that in order to map out the hate and gain a deeper understanding of it.

3. A change of social norms is needed. Hate speech should not necessarily be divided in illegal and legal sections. Hate speech should be considered as harmful, regardless of its illegality or legality. This change of social norms can only be reached with a holistic approach.

4. Advocacy by civil society on setting up broad soft law is needed. With that we mean: soft law that is broad enough to stand a chance to be adopted by all the countries in the EU and would be flexible to adjust to existing local context across European countries. There is already hard law and soft law regarding illegal online hate speech present, but there is opportunity to lobby for soft law regarding harmful hate speech as well.

5. One needs to be aware of the politicisation of hate speech; citizens and groups of people who are already inclined to distrust authorities will only feel reinforced in believing in conspiracy theories. Legal action therefore can come across as censorship and generate more hate as a counter effect. More awareness raising about this is needed, as well as more research into how to prevent this from happening while at the same time protecting minority groups.

6. Governments in general, and politicians especially, need to be aware of the exemplary role they play ethically. The use of disinformation, conspiracy theories and hate in order to attract voters has been normalised. Politicians know where to stay within the line of what is legal while at the same time contributing to the division and distrust between citizens and governments. It has been an accepted strategy. There is room for civil society to call governments out on their responsibility.

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