

Reeta Pöyhtäri, Paula Haara ja Pentti Raittila: Vihapuhe sananvapautta kaventamassa (Hate speech narrowing freedom of speech). Tampere University Press 2013

Summary

Finland has recently witnessed an ongoing discussion about cyberhate, hate speech, and their effects on the atmosphere of society. This book's foundation lies in the research conducted in 2012–2013 at the Tampere Research Centre for Journalism, Media and Communication (COMET) at the University of Tampere. The research discusses aggressive online discussions, cyberhate and hate speech, particularly in relation to journalism and freedom of speech.

The starting point for this project was a concern that the of aggressive discussion in the media might begin to stifle public debate. From the perspective of freedom of speech, aggressive speech causes two types of problems: on one hand, it may lead to a reduced variety of opinions due to an atmosphere of hate and fear, and on the other hand, it raises the question of whether freedom of speech could be restricted and to what extent if that freedom is used to offend and threaten people.

This research analyses the experiences journalists and experts have of aggressive public discussion, and the threats and limitations it poses to freedom of speech; the circulation of arguments within aggressive online discussions and journalistic texts; and the moderation practices in online discussions both in the news media and on discussion forums in Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK. The research data comprise interviews with journalists, experts, online writers and moderators responsible for online moderation; news journalism and online discussion content; and documentation that steers online moderation practices.

We use case studies to illustrate how journalism operates in relation to cyberhate and hate speech. One of the case studies deals with euthanasia, another with Finns' attitude towards Swedish-speaking Finns, and the other two with the discussion on immigrants. Journalism endeavours to achieve free and unrestricted communication, but at the same time, it tries to take ethical considerations into account. The case studies presented demonstrate how the circulation of aggressive materials depends both on the individual case and the people involved. When a politician or other significant public figure is in the spotlight, journalism tends to repeat the aggressive expressions used online. However, journalism exercises greater caution and ethical consideration when the discussion touches on people requiring protection and when the hate speech is estimated punishable.

The interviewed journalists and experts reported having experienced both cyberhate and other types of hate. Even though they considered the effects of hate and threats to their personal freedom of speech to be minor, the respondents thought that hate speech and cyberhate restricted freedom of speech in society at large. Experts also criticised journalism for its tendency to use and recreate the aggressive expressions of online discussions.

Similar regulations govern the supervision and moderation of online discussions in all four countries studied: legislation, self-regulation, and terms of use drawn up for the members and moderators of online forums and discussion platforms. The media's quality objectives and reputation in the news media, and the atmosphere aspired to in the discussion forums, define what is considered acceptable within that forum. In moderation of online discussions, self-regulation is considered a better practice than legislation. However, self-regulation also has its

dangers if it becomes too restrictive. Both overly extensive ethical considerations by the media and excessive self-regulation by users can hinder freedom of speech. For freedom of speech to be realised, it is crucial that the moderation of online discussions is transparent and consistent. Commercial objectives and the related normative selection of discussions and participants may also restrict discussion.

There are two approaches to the freedom of speech in relation to restricting hate speech. Some focus on the use of responsible language and on the indirect consequences any breaches have on society, indicating that those in weaker position in the society should be protected. Others are in favour of unlimited freedom of speech, with only direct threats forbidden. The holders of this view think that discussion should not be restricted too much on ethical or moral grounds. The challenge for journalism, then, is to consider both points of view and to provide a discussion environment that both protects participants and allows divergent views to be aired.