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**Region: South East Europe**

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The good news



from Europe's troubled Western Balkans is that media are getting better. In general there is less hate speech in journalism across a region which 20 years ago was ravaged by war, brutal community violence and acts of genocide.

The bad news is that the slow progress towards more responsible journalism is being derailed by an upsurge in hate-speech from the audience, much of it through online sources which use media outlets as a platform for incitement to violence.

These mixed messages emerged in discussions between media support groups, journalists, academics and policymakers organized in Sarajevo last week.

Sarajevo is no stranger to war. The siege of the city in the 1990s remains an iconic reference point for the last war on European soil and in the coming months the city will be in the spotlight again to mark the centenary of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand which triggered the First World War.

Although the bullets have stopped flying, an information war is still in progress as extremists take advantage of intolerant political and religious speech to manipulate media and incite hatred and division between communities. The major platform for hostilities is the internet and the open information landscape.

These grim findings emerge from a discussion organised by the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media which recently carried out a survey tracking online hate speech in the Balkans and Turkey. The research, supported by UNESCO and the Ethical Journalism Network, was conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey with supporting work in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, and Slovenia.

Despite an encouraging trend towards more editorial responsibility, the research suggests that media are used by unscrupulous and irresponsible politicians and religious leaders who cynically generate hate speech.

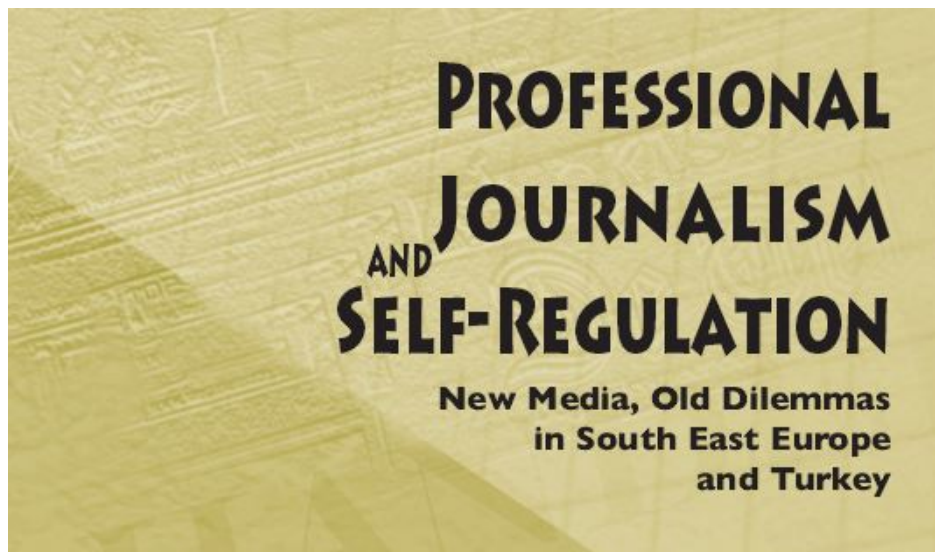
Even when media try to do the right thing – and there is still enough intolerance inside media houses to cause dismay among many campaigners – they often find it impossible to ignore the intemperate and bigoted language of extremist leaders whose political speech is designed to inflame uneasy community relations.

This problem is further exacerbated by online sources who use opportunities to comment on journalistic work to spread hate messages. The meeting was told that in Bosnia online hate speech can be found on only one per cent of traditional journalism, but the context and the inflammatory content of such speech makes it more problematic than the numbers suggest.

Provocative, intemperate and often violent attacks are directed at vulnerable groups, particularly

ethnic and religious minorities and the LGBT community.

This rising information crisis is made worse by a number of other factors – the precarious working conditions in which journalists work; corruption and a lack of transparency in media ownership; and a lack of clarity over what constitutes hate-speech.



Even the best media struggle when there's confusion over what we mean by hate-speech. Editors and journalists are expected to apply principles acceptable to all groups, but there is no acceptable and clear international definition of hate speech and although many countries have passed laws that outlaw acts of hatred, there are few prosecutions. Many of these laws, particularly in the field of information, remain unused.

The meeting heard that systems of self-regulation are undeveloped and hardly effective where they do exist. The best of them, in Bosnia, where international support funds the press council, efforts to put a cap on the language of intolerance are limited because media only act to remove hate speech when the press council intervenes.

Some media in Bosnia – it was said “a huge majority” – do try to moderate comments to eliminate hateful speech, but in most countries intolerant comments are widely published. One reason is that media compete vigorously for online “clicks” and some editors willingly sacrifice editorial standards to expand their Internet audience.

Some websites in Albania, for instance, give free range to hate speech and can achieve up to a million “clicks.” Now some media are applying filters to try to control the flood of information poison.

The situation in Turkey where three major media groups control much of the journalism and online information in a highly-concentrated market, the state practices direct political interference. The meeting heard that around 32,000 Turkish websites are blocked by the government, although none for reasons related to hate speech. Many of the extremists who peddle online hate targeting ethnic minorities – the Jewish and Armenian communities in particular – do so with impunity. At the same time the country’s Islamist and conservative media focus on hate speech against the LGBT community.

Everywhere, journalists and media face a well-organised and media savvy community of racists and extreme nationalists who often work together on online media.

Describing the problem is always easier than finding lasting solutions. The meeting heard from experts from a range of regional groups, including UNESCO, the European Broadcasting Union, which has established its own campaign on values for its members and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe which has published a [Guide to online Self-regulation](#) , and the

[Ethical Journalism Network](#)

which is seeking to promote more solidarity among professional groups to work on improving ethical standards and self-regulation.

But there was unanimous agreement that much more needs to be done and the meeting drew up a comprehensive list of practical actions that should be supported by policymakers and public funders. Among the conclusions were calls for

Political and community leaders to make a stand against the people inside their groups who generate hate-speech;

Campaigns on media literacy at all levels and for all ages to publicise the dangers of hate speech;

Fresh resources to support structures for effective self-regulation, both inside media and across all platforms of online expression; and

More media solidarity to strengthen national professional groups and to promote more co-operation between journalists, editors and media owners to create viable structures for dialogue with policymakers, academics, NGOs and civil society groups.

Part of this discussion will have to focus on how to define hate speech and provide legal clarity that will help journalists and editors identify the information that must be banned. Laws need to be harmonised to ensure that no media are penalised for the dissemination of hate speech unless it is shown that they published information with the clear intention of inciting discrimination, hostility or violence.

This will help, but in the end editors and journalists are not going to be able to duck their responsibility to help turn back the tide of web intolerance. They should start by moderating all online comments to ensure that all branded media websites are cleansed of hate.