

EU funding for projects to counter online hate speech

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The internet has become an integral part of our everyday life. Social media in particular allows people to remain connected in a context where the pace of life is rapidly increasing. Few are those who do not make use of the internet to keep in touch with family or friends or to follow and share news and other content.

However, a negative aspect of the internet is that it has created platform for hate speech. This is becoming increasingly widespread. Some social online media platforms have tried to address this issue. For instance, on certain social media platforms, there exist what are referred to as “community standards” - a set of rules for users to abide by, aimed at helping protect users as much as possible from inappropriate messages or hate speech.

Other internet-based methods of communication, including e-mails, online fora or blogs, have also exacerbated the problem of hate speech since they afford greater possibility for individuals to post racist comments for instance. In such cases, regulation and monitoring are governed by the terms of use of the e-mail provider or forum administrator (depending on the case). It is also possible for victims of hate speech propagated through such online media to take legal action.

Legal definitions of what constitutes illegal online hate speech exist both at EU and national level. They are based on the Council Framework Decision on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law (2008/913/JHA). This Decision lists public incitement to violence or hatred through the use of images or other material, as well as denying or trivialising acts of violence such as cases of genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity as hate speech.

Hate speech not only impacts the victims of such abuse but also erodes the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination, which are core values of the European Union. It is, therefore, important to have systems in place to regulate such cases, protect victims of online hate speech abuse and prosecute perpetrators.

The European Commission has prioritised the issue of combating hate speech in Europe. On May 31 of last year, following consultation with leading IT companies, it published a Code of Conduct on counteracting online hate speech.

IT Companies signing the Code of Conduct are committed to maintaining efforts to tackle illegal online hate speech including through the continued development of internal procedures and staff training. Such measures are implemented to guarantee that such companies review requests for the removal of hate speech content in less than 24 hours and, subsequently, remove such content when it is found that it constitutes hate speech.

A new call for project proposals under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship funding programme was published. Entitled ‘Monitor, prevent and counter hate speech online’, this call aims to support projects which promote the implementation of the EU Code of Conduct. This includes understanding and countering hate speech online on social platforms, capacity-building of civil society to notify IT companies of any posts that incite hatred, promoting the development of critical thinking by internet users, as well as tackling online hate speech against journalists, collecting data related to online abuse against media actors and analysing its effects on democratic debate.

Eligible activities that may be incorporated in such projects may include research, development of web tools countering online hate speech (such as reporting systems), awareness-raising activities, mutual learning/ exchange of good practices among stakeholders, capacity building and training activities.

Applicants may either propose national projects or projects which involve partners from other eligible countries (EU Member States, Iceland and Liechtenstein). The deadline for the submission of applications under this call is June 29, 2017. The EU grant will cover up to 80% of eligible project costs.

For further information on this call, the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme or other EU funding opportunities, kindly contact MEUSAC by sending an e-mail on info.meusac@gov.mt or by calling 2200 3300.