

"For freedom of speech – against online harassment"

An appeal of the Media Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia (LfM) against discrimination and harassment on the internet

Düsseldorf, 20 November 2015

Democratic and tolerant coexistence is also of vital importance on the internet. However, harassment, hatred and discrimination are becoming more and more prevalent online – especially in social networks, forums and comment columns. The Media Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia (LfM) and the members of its media commission therefore call upon all users and online platform providers:

There is no room for racism, anti-Semitism, discrimination and harassment on the internet. Defamatory statements are to be condemned and must not be downplayed or trivialised. Online hate campaigns are a catalyst for real-world violence. As is demonstrated by the current political debates and events surrounding the refugee situation, hate speech and real-world violence are often closely intertwined.

The LfM therefore calls upon social media operators in particular to shoulder their responsibilities more than before. Given their reach, online platforms such as Facebook and YouTube have a special significance and therefore also a special responsibility. They are financed through advertising revenue and other revenue models that rely on a high number of users. This must not lead to the boundaries of permissible content to be stretched too far in order to generate ever higher numbers of users.

It is beyond dispute that it is important for the internet community to adopt a clear position through opinions and arguments in the social media; however, we have to be able to maintain a culture of discussion that has no room for discrimination and harassment. For this reason, the providers of online services themselves have to exert more influence, take action and take a stand. This responsibility must not be shifted to the users; the prevalent culture of communication in the social media must not be left to its own devices.

More and more often, journalists and their reports on current events are becoming the target of attacks and defamation. The websites of newspapers and magazines, and private and public television and radio stations experience more and more hostility, sometimes in extreme forms. The same applies here: Hatred and harassment must not become the norm or be given the chance to be seen as a socially accepted means of expressing an opinion. Discriminatory, harassing, racist and spiteful comments must not be trivialised as being part of the legitimate range of opinions; there must be no room for hate speech against the media and media professionals and it must not be accepted.

The LfM calls upon all operators of social media platforms and all users to stop hatred and harassment. And it calls upon all social groups to advocate freedom of speech and to take a stand against online harassment.

For recommendations about adequate online communication visit www.klicksafe.de.

The media commission is the principal organ of the LfM. The commission has 41 members (including one deputy each) from relevant social groups and associations. The NRW state parliament has appointed eight members. The commission's chairman is Prof. Dr. Werner Schwaderlapp. The members of the media commission are volunteers and represent the public.

www.lfm-nrw.de