

Abuse of Online Participatory Journalism in Slovenia: Offensive Comments under News Items

Karmen Erjavec*

Melita Poler Kovačič**

SUMMARY

The question of abusing the opportunity of participatory online journalism through the use of offensive speech has generally been neglected in scholarly research. This study tries to fill this research gap by uncovering the characteristics of offensive speech in comments under online news items as well as journalists' and editors' opinions on offensive speech. A textual analysis of comments containing offensive speech posted under nine news items, written by influential Slovenian journalists in the nine most-visited Slovenian online news media, was combined with semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors. Offensive comments mostly included general attacks on human dignity, attacks based on the supposed political orientation of a journalist, attacks based on the supposed belonging of journalists to social minorities, and attacks based on the political orientation of a media company. Journalists and editors did not share homogenous views on the use of offensive speech in comments. The majority of interviewed journalists cited commentators' anonymity as the main reason for offensive speech. The crucial conclusion of this study was that editors abused the idea of participatory journalism; with the excuse of audience participation, they allowed personal attacks on journalists in comments under news items, as their actual goal was to maximize profits. The reasons for the

* Karmen Erjavec, Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. E-mail: karmen.erjavec@fdv.uni-lj.si.*

** Melita Poler Kovačič, Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. E-mail: melita.poler-kovacic@fdv.uni-lj.si.

relatively frequent occurrence of offensive speech commentary in online news media can be attributed to the market orientation of media companies, the low level of common political culture in Slovenia and a general dissatisfaction with the political, economic and wider social situation.

Key words: online news media, participatory journalism, comments, offensive speech, anonymity

Introduction

In the winter of 2013, two of the most influential Slovenian journalists said in their regular online commentary that one of the crucial contemporary methods of attacking a journalist's professional and personal autonomy was an abuse of participatory online journalism, when an editorial office allowed "anonymous individuals to participate in online news commentary in a way that completely discredits a journalist, both personally and professionally" (Žerdin & Markeš, 2013). What are the characteristics of this offensive speech? What opinions do other influential journalists have on the publication of comments with offensive speech under their news items? What are the opinions of editors?

The exploration of offensive speech under online news items is important for participatory journalism because the practice has a potential impact on journalists as well as on audience members. Current studies on participatory online journalism are mainly concerned with the question of whether and how online media audience participation can contribute to the democratic process in society (e.g., Hibberd, 2003; Dahlgren, 2005; Albrecht, 2006; Gripsrud, 2009; Ruiz et al., 2011). Some authors focus on the integration of user-generated content in the professional culture of traditional journalism (e.g., Chung, 2007; Domingo, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008). They research the degree of audience members' participation and the type of content (e.g., Domingo et al., 2008; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011; Larsson, 2012). Others focus on the audience members' reasons for participation (e.g., Bergström, 2008). However, the question of abusing the opportunity of participatory online journalism by using offensive speech has generally been neglected, although some studies (e.g., Chung, 2007) have suggested that the possibility of interactivity does not yet guarantee the realisation of participatory journalism.

This study seeks to fill the research gap by uncovering the characteristics of offensive speech in comments under online news items as well as journalists and editors' opinions on offensive speech. We try to reveal how writers of online comments

abuse their right to participate by attacking journalists, a practice tolerated by editors and the media because of market-driven interests.

Theoretical Framework

An important turning point in the history of audience participation in news is connected to the development of new technologies. With the use of the internet, participatory journalism has changed from the top-down journalistic model to a bottom-up phenomenon of information distribution, with the news audience having the possibility of increased control over, and greater involvement in, the news consumption process (e.g., Chung, 2007: 44). Even though interactivity with news providers is not a new phenomenon, the development of new technology has meant a change from the old way of writing letters to editors: the editorial staff is more accessible and the former barriers of time and space are considerably lower with new technology (Bergström, 2008: 61–63).

Media users are now able to instantly interact with traditional content providers through interactive facilities such as comments on news sites (*ibid*). Previous studies of comments under news items have dealt with the effects of comments on readers (e.g., Lee, 2012), journalists' attitudes towards the comments posted in response to articles (e.g., Santana, 2011; Nielsen, 2012; Loke, 2012a), and comparisons between online comments and letters to editors (e.g., McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012). Some authors also express concern with anonymity in online news comments (e.g., Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Rosenberry, 2011; Shepard, 2011; Reader, 2012), particularly with regard to legal implications and regulation (e.g., Ritvo et al., 2006). Only a few studies have researched different forms of inappropriate speech in online news comments, such as hate speech (e.g., Erjavec & Poler Kovačič, 2012), particularly racial discourse (e.g., Loke, 2012b, 2013), and the so-called impolite reader responses to news (e.g., Neurauter-Kessels, 2011). However, even those rare studies that deal with inappropriate online news comments are mostly limited to the use of a single method – either interviews with journalists (e.g., Nielsen, 2012) or text-based analyses of such comments (e.g., Neurauter-Kessels, 2011; Loke, 2012b, 2013).

Offensive speech is a crucial form of inappropriate speech. Offensive speech “harasses, bullies, threatens, defames, invades privacy, and inflicts reputational damage as well as emotional distress” (Levmore & Nussbaum, 2010: 5). According to Lawrence (1993: 74), offensive words are considered “dirty, impolite, or personally demeaning”. Offensive speech often takes the form of swearing, which can shock

and appal those who hear it or read it (Anderson & Trudgill, 1990). However, what is considered offensive speech varies according to culture, on how the message is delivered and on the sex of the speaker (Asbury & Haas, 2008). Because previous studies have not detailed the discourse characteristics of offensive speech in online comments, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: *What are the discourse characteristics of offensive speech in comments under online news items?*

Knowledge of journalists' opinions is relevant since it enables one to reveal their attitudes towards production practices that significantly impact news production (Schudson, 1997). Since we want to establish journalists' and editors' opinions about offensive speech, we pose the second research question:

RQ2: *What are journalists' and editors' opinions about offensive speech in comments under news items?*

Method

To answer the first research question, we used critical discourse analysis, a useful method for uncovering discrimination discourses in news items (see Van Dijk, 1988; Richardson, 2007). Textual analysis was performed both on the macro and micro levels. To reveal the key messages in comments which included offensive speech, we conducted an analysis of macropropositions. According to Van Dijk (1980, 1988), macropropositions analysis is based on an identification of the most relevant pieces of information in a text, derived from the local meanings of words and sentences by macro rules, such as deletion, generalisation and construction. Such rules combine similar meanings with higher-level abstract meanings or construct different meaning constituents in higher-level events or social concepts, which enable us to identify the main idea unit in the form of several sentences, a paragraph, an entire news item or even multiple news items. The study also included an analysis of keywords which constituted a particular discourse. Keywords direct discursive attention towards a specific segment of the society's world (Fowler, 1991: 82). Through an analysis of keywords, we examined the vocabulary used by writers of comments under news items. For the textual analysis, we selected reader's comments containing offensive speech posted under nine news items written by influential Slovenian journalists in January, February and March of 2013. These journalists regularly published news items on domestic politics in nine of the most-visited Slovenian online news media (Moss, 2013): the commercial broadcaster PRO PLUS (24ur.com); Planet Siol.net (siol.net); the public broadcaster, (rtvslo.si); the free journal Žurnal24 (zurnal24.

si); the main daily newspaper Delo (delo.si); the tabloid Slovenske novice (slovenskenovice.si); the regional daily newspaper Dnevnik (dnevnik.si); the financial newspaper Finance (finance.si) and the regional daily Večer (vecer.com).

To answer the second research question about Slovenian journalists' and editors' opinions on offensive speech in comments under their online news items, we used semi-structured interviews. This method was appropriate for our goal because it generally enables a researcher to go deep, uncover new guidelines, open novel problem dimensions and provides clear, accurate and inclusive opinions based on personal experiences (Burgess, 1982). We conducted interviews with nine influential Slovenian journalists – authors of news items under which comments containing offensive speech were posted. We also interviewed editors of these news websites. We sent requests to journalists and editors via e-mail. They responded within a week, arguably indicating their need to articulate the problem of offensive speech.

Our questions to journalists and editors targeted the following crucial areas: (1) their reading of comments under news items; (2) their opinions about comments containing offensive speech; and (3) editorial policy regarding comments with offensive speech. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The authors of this article analysed each interview together. Because some interviewees wanted to remain anonymous, all statements will be identified with capital–letter signifiers.

Results

First, we will present the results of the critical discourse analysis, followed by the results of the analysis of in-depth interviews.

Offensive Speech in Comments under Online News Items

Our critical discourse analysis showed that writers of comments used different kinds of offensive speech. A notably common characteristic was that writers did not criticise arguments used in a news item. Instead, they attacked journalists on a personal level or the media company that published the item. Due to space limitations, we cannot present all cases, but only the typical ones in each category of offensive speech.

General Attacks on Human Dignity

The comparison of macropropositions revealed that comments under news items in all analysed media included the following message: *A journalist published a biased*

news item because (s)he's sick, stupid and dishonest. This prevalent macroproposition included three different characterisations of journalists, which could also be recognised in the use of keywords.

The first group was based on labelling a journalist as mentally ill, describing him/her as “sick”, “crazy”, “an idiot”. By using these words, the commentators tried to discredit a journalist as mentally ill. A typical example was a comment by Jurij4, who commented on a news item written by Suzana Kos (2013) in *zurnal24.si*: “You are a plain idiot. Only an idiot can write this way. First, they should cure you in a hospital so that you won't be so crazy.”

The second group referenced pejorative characterisations of journalists as “stupid”, “irrational” and “ignorant”. Thus, the commentators tried to discredit a journalist by presenting him/her as stupid. A typical example was a comment written by Bon27 who commented on a news item by Dejan Steinbuch (2013) in *finance.si*: “Dejan Steinbuch is stupid, he understands nothing. Nothing worthy comes from him. This is an example of a totally irrational columnist.”

The third crucial characteristic attributed to journalists was dishonesty, including words such as “dishonest”, “liar”, “a man of no principles”, “having no honour”, “selfish”. The commentators tried to discredit journalists by presenting them as dishonest. A typical example was a comment written by Sofia, who commented on a news item by Janez Markeš (2013b) in *delo.si*: “Markeš is a man with no principles, no character, no honesty, and no honour. A man who only goes after his private interests. This is the secret of Markeš's conversion, which brings benefits, of course.”

Attacks on Personality Based on the Supposed Belonging to Social Minorities

A comparison of macropropositions also showed that all analysed media had the following crucial message in comments under news items: *A journalist published a biased news item because (s)he belongs to a social minority.* Among social minorities, there were two which prevailed: people from the former Yugoslav republics and women. The commentators tried to discredit journalists by claiming that they belonged to social minorities, which were given an explicitly negative label. These journalists were presented as people with no individual professional integrity, as mere tools in the hands of social minorities.

The commentators attacked journalists, claiming that their writing was biased because they belonged to or sympathised with the nations from the former Yugoslav republics, which were negatively described as “trenirkarji”¹ and “jankovići”². In this way, their comments clearly included elements of nationalism. A typical example was a comment written by Stari Slovenec, who commented on a news item written

by Matija Stepišnik (2013) in *vecer.com*: “Stepišnik, you are totally wrong. You sold the Slovenian soul for jankovići who steal our money. Go shoot yourself.”

The commentators attacked female journalists, saying that they were stupid, that they had “an empty head” because they were women. Three commentators used vulgarisms such as “pussy”, and animal metaphors such as “chicken” or “sheep”. These comments were sexist and misogynist. A typical example was written by Sonja999, who commented on a news item by Anja Hreščak (2013) in *dnevnik.si*: “Listen, you are a cute pussy, but you write as a chicken which is typical of women. You know nothing. Go and do something else.”

Attacks on Personality Based on the Supposed Political Orientation of a Journalist

One of the crucial macropropositions was the following: *A journalist published a biased news item because (s)he adheres to a particular political orientation or party.* The majority of such cases referred to the journalist’s presumed adherence to left-leaning political parties. The commentators used words which negatively described the supposed political orientations of these journalists, such as “political activist”, “red”, “leftist”, or “agitpropovec”³. Thus, they tried to discredit journalists by presenting them as biased because of their presumed adherence to political parties or political orientations. These journalists were described as having no individual professional integrity and as tools in the hands of political parties. A typical example was a comment written by *Novi_butalec*, who commented on a news item by Janez Markeš (2013a) in *delo.si*: “Why do you even get upset because of Markeš? He’s a political activist of the left and a tireless red agitpropovec who is not worthy to be talked about.”

Attacks on Personality Based on the Supposed Political Orientation of a Media Company

One of the prevalent macropropositions was the following: *A journalist published a biased news item because (s)he works for a politically biased media company.* The majority of offences in this group implied that the media was in favour of left-oriented political parties. Commentators used words such as “red”, “leftist”, “communist” media, being “in the hands of red masters from the back”. They did not evaluate news items based on arguments; instead, they equated the journalist with the media company which supported particular party or political orientation. A typical comment was written by *Ancient*, who published a comment under a news item by Slavko Bobovnik (2013) on *rtvslo.si*: “What else could we expect from Bobovnik, even though he’s known as the best journalist, when all the journalists at RTV are political payees? It is obvious that RTV is in the hands of the red masters from the back.”

Journalists' Views on Offensive Speech in Comments under News Items

An analysis of interviews showed that there were three groups of journalists' views on offensive speech in comments under their news items as well as journalists' views on editorial measures.

The first group of three journalists admitted that they read comments under their news items and that they felt aggrieved because of attacks on their personality. They believed that editors allowed the publication of offensive comments because they wanted to attract larger audiences for reasons of profit maximisation. For this reason, they felt exploited and would like to see the prohibition of audience comments or the strict deleting of comments with offensive speech. Because editors allowed publication of offensive speech, they were also co-responsible for the low level of political culture in Slovenia. Journalists also claimed that these comments did not contribute to quality news reporting and that they represented a misuse of participatory journalism. Journalists did not delete comments with offensive speech because they did not have time for this; besides, they felt this would be an underestimation of them. A typical statement was:

I believe that the media are among those who are to be blamed for the low political culture in Slovenia. The media allow constant political disqualifications, invasions and attacks on the personal level, as if this was something normal and self-evident. Our editors allow attacks on journalists when leaders of political parties give orders that we should be disqualified on the web. In my articles, I always use appropriate language, cogent arguments and professional criteria. On the other hand, editors allow anonymous writers, who have obvious psychological problems or act as soldiers of political parties, to attack and humiliate me on the personal level in comments under my articles, publish lies about me and write quasi-comments with no arguments. And our company allows this to happen, as if it was normal, professional ... even more, as if it was something better ... a new form of journalism ... But it's clear to everybody that it's not participation in the sense of the journalistic value of being better informed and offering diverse opinions, but it's plain libel. You see, our company actually exploits us to increase visitors to our website. And we are the victims of wrong editorial decisions. In this case, I'm exploited for the profits of our company. I must admit that I'm aggrieved ... Of course I will not delete comments by myself; I don't have time for this. Besides, it would be really underestimating. Should I deal with an individual sick writer, while the editors don't protect me? We really don't need an editorial policy for this!
(Journalist M)

The second group of three journalists also admitted that they read comments and that they felt aggrieved. However, they said that audience participation via comments under news items was necessary to enable interactivity; despite hateful and offensive speech, comments have more positive consequences. They argued for only extreme offensive speech to be deleted by moderators, and were opposed to removing the possibility of audience comments under news items. A typical statement was:

It's a very unpleasant phenomenon, both in terms of attacking personal and professional integrity. You can try to ignore it; you can assert that it's anonymous people's nebulousness which can't hurt you; but, it probably touches you at least a bit. However, facing it becomes easier when you mature personally and professionally. From a professional point of view, I find it inevitable. Of course it demands some reaction, editorial moderating of comments, but in no way should it be the renunciation of this kind of interactivity. I think that the positive result of offering a possibility to comment is much more important. This can generate initiatives for further articles, corrections, critiques based on arguments ... everything that makes a journalist and journalism better and more responsible. From this standpoint, it's easier to bear the attacks ... I believe that communication on the web should be as open and democratic as possible; I'm against the discontinuation of commenting. Of course, a wise editorial policy that deletes hate speech and very grave personal discrediting is necessary. But we must be aware that some attacks will always be here. (Journalist N)

The third group of three journalists said that they no longer read the comments, so they could no longer feel aggrieved because of them, or that they tried to ignore them. These journalists placed all responsibility of managing offensive speech on editors and the editorial policy of media companies, which are not inclined to delete such comments because of profit motives. According to these interviewees, editors feared reproaches of censorship and decreasing visitor numbers to their website. They also linked offensive speech to the low level of political culture in Slovenia, for which above all, top politicians were responsible. A typical statement was:

Such comments are irrelevant to me because I don't read them anymore. I ignore them; I don't worry about them. Personal discrediting reveals the commentators' low level of communication, because obviously they are not able to found their views or arguments, but rather try to prove their point by discrediting a journalist and those who agree with the news item. In fact, this way of communication in comments under news items is not some exceptional situation, because the same is happening at the top of politics. For example, if a prime minister can discredit a former journalist on public television, we should not be

surprised if anonymous commentators do the same on the web. The only thing that bothers me is that they accuse me of being politically oriented. It doesn't bother me if they say that I'm stupid, or that I know nothing about a particular topic that I reported on, even though it's not true. But the commentators who ascribe political motives to me, claiming that I have written a news item in favour of Janković, for example, or that I support a right-wing party, they really bother me. They frustrate me because if it is reiterated, it becomes the truth for readers ... Otherwise I believe that comments under news items are part of an editorial policy, therefore editors should take responsibility for them and begin to face the problem systematically and on a daily basis. I know that our editors are not inclined to interfere with comments too much, because they are afraid that they would be reproached with censorship. The most important reason is that in this way, they would divert commentators, and thus readers, from visiting the website. So the market aspect is in the forefront ... To tell you again, somehow I have reconciled myself to the fact that this is part of my everyday work and I try to ignore it as much as possible. (Journalist V)

Editors' Views on Offensive Speech in Comments under News Items

All interviewed editors said that on principle, they condemned offensive speech. They also said that the crucial problem was commentators' anonymity which further stimulated the writing of offensive comments. They argued that because of different forms of restricting anonymity, such as the introduction of commentators' registration, the number and severity of hateful and offensive speech has reduced. They unanimously rejected halting the possibility of commenting under news items because of offensive speech. They emphasized that interactivity and audience participation on news websites was the basic characteristic of their media. They also agreed that there was no clear definition of offensive speech or hate speech, and that they had serious problems defining such speech in their everyday practice. A typical statement was: "I think that the biggest problem is the definition of hateful and offensive speech. In Slovenia, we have a major dilemma and we have different opinions about such speech. The problem is that the experts also have different opinions. It's very difficult to define the boundaries of what is acceptable and what isn't." (Editor M) Differences among interviewed editors were seen in understanding the role of an editor regarding online media content and reasons for the weak moderation of comments under news items.

Two editors argued that they were not responsible for the content of comments under news items as this was not journalistic content, and because of this they opposed deleting offensive and hateful speech:

As an editor, I cannot interfere with matters that are not part of journalistic work. That's why I'm also against the ethical code of the Association of Slovenian Journalists, which says in Article 16 that editors are also responsible for users' content and comments. My opinion is that I, as editor-in-chief, cannot be held responsible for comments which are not part of editorial policy, but a matter of audience. What do they think about a particular topic, an article or whatever is not my business. So I don't strive to delete this content. However, every journalist has a chance to delete comments if (s)he so wishes. Let me add that I don't agree with it because this is not a journalist's business either. (Editor U)

The second group of editors accepted responsibility for publishing audience comments under news items. In their editorial offices, they have moderators, and journalists can also delete offensive speech under their news items. Editors in this group had different opinions about reasons for not moderating offensive speech. According to this group of three editors, the main reason was the lack of financial resources which reduced the number of people employed to moderate offensive speech. Moderators could hardly delete hate speech. These editors explained that moderators did not delete offensive speech also because they were more tolerant to offensive speech when compared with hate speech for which they would be responsible under criminal law. They also feared audience members' reproach for censoring comments. They said that journalists probably did not decide to delete comments out of fear of being accused of censorship from commentators and other journalists, and also because of a lack of time. A typical statement from this group was:

In my opinion, media companies are responsible for all online content. But the question is how to realise this. When I started work as an editor, we did not have moderators, and journalists were checking comments by themselves. It was up to each individual whether a comment that offended a journalist or a media company was deleted. Now we have succeeded in getting moderators who check comments and make decisions based on internal regulations. However, due to the chronic lack of employed moderators, they can only occupy themselves with hate speech and don't even get to offensive speech. If they were concerned with both hate speech and offensive comments about journalists and other persons, they would have too much to do. Therefore, they can only remove hate speech, which is required by law. Besides, we have to hold back on offensive speech because of reproaches of censorship. We would have to know more clearly where the boundary is. Of course, all our journalists have access to comments under their own news items and if they find a particular comment disturbing, they can delete it. But as far as I know, nobody does it because they simply don't have time for this, and also because they fear that they will be accused that they can-

not stand criticism, so they censor. Such reproaches could come from commentators as well as other journalists. (Editor N)

In the third group, there were four editors who said that besides fear from reproaches of censorship, there was another reason not to delete offensive speech: fear from dissuading readers from visiting their website. According to these editors, maximizing profits is the key reason for not moderating offensive speech. A typical statement from this group was:

We have been thinking about demanding more data from readers when they register ... However, on the other hand there is a problem of collecting personal data, so we asked the information commissioner for advice. We are waiting for her response. But let me tell you that our management is not enthusiastic about it. We are afraid to be reproached with censorship, and deleting comments may dissuade commentators and readers. Today, every click counts. I believe that only this is important today, and that's why there is a problem with moderating offensive speech. (Editor V)

Discussion and Conclusion

Traditional journalism mostly enabled audience participation through letters to editors or writing complaints, which journalists either took into consideration for future reference, or immediately published as corrections. Today, online media give audiences an opportunity to comment on news items directly. However, according to some authors (e.g., Nip, 2006; Karlsson, 2008), the potential of online news media to increase audience participation is seldom realised. Since the problem of abusing the opportunity of participatory online journalism by using offensive speech has generally been neglected, we tried to fill the research gap in this study. The crucial conclusion of this study was that editors abused the idea of participatory journalism; with the excuse of audience participation, they allowed personal attacks on journalists in comments under news items in the name of profit maximisation.

The combination of textual analysis and in-depth interviews turned out to be very useful, as it revealed discursive characteristics of offensive speech in comments under news items as well as journalists' and editors' views on the publication of offensive comments. The discourse analysis also made it possible, during interviews with editors, to prove to them that their statements about not publishing offensive speech were untrue.

The main finding from the critical discourse analysis was that comments included general attacks on human dignity, attacks based on supposed political orientation of

a journalist, attacks based on supposed belonging to social minorities, and attacks based on the political orientation of a media company. A comparison of analysed keywords of offensive speech in this study and the keywords which were used by commentators before the media companies began to more actively moderate hate speech (Erjavec & Poler Kovačič, 2012) showed that comments no longer included explicitly offensive words or expressions. Instead, they used new words which could be understood as offensive only through contextual familiarity. This finding implies that commentators now try to avoid their comments from being deleted, but still find it necessary to humiliate journalists and other social actors.

An analysis of views showed that journalists and editors did not share homogenous views on the use of offensive speech in comments under news items. Some journalists interpreted the attacks on their personality as being sacrificed by editors for motives of profit maximization. This was also explicitly confirmed by some editors.

Journalists used different strategies to deal with offensive comments. Some of them read the comments regularly and were very distressed because of them. They therefore demanded that such comments be strictly deleted. Others protected themselves from attacks by simply not reading the offensive comments. However, this was not an appropriate solution as in this way they did not get feedback from their audiences. The third group of journalists read comments under their news items regularly and while they were distressed because of them, they accepted the attacks as the only negative consequence of audience participation, which was primarily positive. Since they were convinced that online media was an important component of participatory journalism, they insisted that offensive comments should be published.

Even though we have not conducted a quantitative analysis, we can maintain that offensive speech is published relatively frequently, as we have identified it under at least one news item in the domestic politics section of the analysed media each day during the selected period.

The initial problem of editorial policy towards the use of inappropriate speech was the lack of knowledge about the definition of offensive speech or hate speech. Since some studies (e.g., Erjavec, 2012) have also confirmed that journalists were generally unaware of basic definitions of inappropriate speech, such as hate speech and offensive speech, it is necessary to educate both current and future journalists and editors about this topic. There is a need to understand the definitions of offensive and hate speech as well as the potential consequences of their use.

The majority of interviewed journalists cited commentators' anonymity as the main reason for offensive speech. Commentators remained anonymous despite mandatory registration in the analysed media. At registration, they usually did not use their real

names and chose nicknames, thus concealing their true identity. Studies have shown that anonymous or pseudo-anonymous discourse can contribute to more democratic discussion, but can also cause more destructive behaviour, as people behave more aggressively when they believe that they cannot be caught or observed (Citron & Norton, 2011). The important role of anonymity could already be seen in a brief comparison of how the same news items were commented in online news media and on Facebook. Interviewed journalists also said that on social networking sites, commentators mostly signed themselves with their real names, and there was a lesser magnitude of offensive or hate speech comments. However, all interviewed editors said that they were afraid to demand the true identity or more personal data of commentators. They believed that in this way, they would divert commentators from using their media, which would result in less advertising money. At the same time, they claimed that interactivity and audience participation on news websites were the basic characteristics of their media. Thus, the market motive was the crucial element in deciding not to restrict inappropriate speech in online new media, a conclusion corroborated by other studies on hate speech (Erjavec & Poler Kovačič, 2012).

Besides the market orientation of the media, one of the reasons for relatively frequent offensive speech comments in Slovenia is the low level of common political culture and the general dissatisfaction with the political, economic and wider social situation (Erjavec & Poler Kovačič, 2012). The possibility of commenting on news items gives people the space to express dissatisfaction, and the publication of comments gives them a feeling of importance and empowerment, which they do not have in traditional forms of political participation, such as elections (Erjavec & Poler Kovačič, 2012).

The number of offensive comments could be reduced by educating journalists and editors about offensive speech, as well as by more active moderating of comments and cancellation of anonymity. Politicians should strive to be positive examples of appropriate public communication, since their use of offensive and hate speech provides people with an excuse to behave in a similar way.

The research also showed that the use of offensive speech under news items limited the practice of participatory journalism. Journalists who perceived offensive speech under their news items as an attack on their personal dignity did not read comments under their news items and did not get feedback from audience members. Thus, there was no possibility for the exchange of ideas between journalists and audience members. The research dealt with Slovenian media only. However, based on similar social and media contexts, we can anticipate that results would be similar if we analysed the media scene in Croatia and maybe even in the majority of ex-Yugoslav republics.

The main deficiency of this study was that only qualitative research was conducted, which did not allow us to make general conclusions. Future research should include views from those who write hate speech in comments under news items. In this way, their motives could be revealed. Audience members' views should also be researched to find out about their interpretation of offensive comments.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ After the center-left Positive Slovenia Party won the parliamentary election in 2011, a note appeared on the website of the second-placed center-right Slovenian Democratic Party. It said that Zoran Jankovič, at that time the leader of Positive Slovenia, owed his victory to the so-called “trenirkarji” – people who come from the former Yugoslav republics and who wore “trenirke” (Slovenian expression for training suits).
 - ² The word “jankoviči” is the surname of a well-known Slovenian politician, Zoran Jankovič, written in plural. He is the mayor of the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, and an ex-leader of the Positive Slovenia Party. He was born in the ex-Yugoslav republic, Serbia, but moved to Slovenia while attending primary school.
 - ³ The word denotes those who worked for the Department of Agitation and Propaganda in the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and who disseminated communistic ideas and controlled the media on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia a few decades after the Second World War, following the example of the Soviet Union.
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Zloupotreba internetskog participativnog novinarstva u Sloveniji: Uvredljivi komentari ispod vijesti

Karmen Erjavec

Melita Poler Kovačič

SAŽETAK

Pitanje zlorabe participativnog internetskog novinarstva korištenjem uvredljivoga govora, zanemareno je u stručnim istraživanjima. Ovo istraživanje pokušat će popuniti tu istraživačku prazninu, otkrivajući karakteristike uvredljivoga govora u komentarima ispod internetskih vijesti kao i mišljenja urednika i novinara o takvom govoru. Tekstualna analiza komentara koji sadržavaju uvredljiv govor, napisanih ispod devet članaka čiji su autori utjecajni slovenski novinari, na devet najposjećenijih slovenskih internetskih medija, kombinirana je sa semi-strukturiranim intervjuima s novinarima i urednicima. Uvredljivi komentari najčešće uključuju opće napade na ljudsko dostojanstvo, napade utemeljene na navodnoj političkoj orijentaciji novinara, napade utemeljene na navodnoj pripadnosti nekoj društvenoj manjini i napade utemeljene na političkoj orijentaciji medijske tvrtke. Novinari i urednici ne dijele homogene poglede na korištenje uvredljivoga govora u komentarima. Većina intervjuiranih novinara navodi anonimnost komentatora kao glavni razlog uvredljivoga govora. Presudan zaključak ovog istraživanja jest da urednici zlorabe ideju participativnog novinarstva; s isprikom sudjelovanja publike, dopuštaju osobne napade na novinare u komentarima ispod vijesti sa stvarnim ciljem povećavanja profita. Razlozi relativno česte pojave uvredljivoga govora u komentarima na internetskim medijima mogu se pripisati tržišnoj orijentaciji medijskih tvrtki, niskoj općoj političkoj kulturi u Sloveniji i općem nezadovoljstvu političkim, ekonomskim i širim društvenim situacijama.

Ključne riječi: internetski mediji s vijestima, participativno novinarstvo, komentari, uvredljivi govor, anonimnost

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