Chapter 7

Hate Speech Towards Syrian Refugees in Turkish Online Reader Comments

Nurhan Kavaklı
Uskudar University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the hate speech in the reader comments towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. Within the framework of this purpose, the reader comments made on the news about the violence towards a Syrian child, which took place on the web page of national newspaper Hürriyet, are analysed. It is hoped that, this study will help reveal the concerns or motives which lie behind the negative point of views and opinions towards Syrian refugees. Thus, it may make a contribution to determining the counter-strategies against the intolerance and hostility towards the refugees.

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Turkey draws attention as a country to which Syrians escape to from war by either taking refuge in or using as a bridge on their way to Europe. A majority of the Syrian refugees, whose population is more than 2.5 million (UNHRC, 2016), are living in difficult conditions inside or outside refugee camps. Among the many difficulties that the refugees face are being a target group for intolerance, hostility and hate speech. New media allows the users to participate in media content and therefore, contributes to the democratization of social communication. This is also one of the places where Syrian Refugees could be a target group for hate speech.

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The benefits of new media technologies and forms contrast traditional media. Such as being digital, interactive, hypersexual, visual, easily shared, and having a multimedia form. These could also pave a new way for production, dissemination and accession of hate speech. Alongside the different new media applications that let the user-derived contents (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc.) get into circulation, there are also practises in which the online newspapers give place to reader comments. Owing to the reader comments, the passive position of the readers in traditional journalism that only allow the readers consume news content, has turned into an active one. News readers, herein after, have the chance to transfer their own point of views and opinions of the subject of the news to a public sphere more easily. This situation is positive in terms of building up democratic participation. However, on the other hand, as already mentioned above, it could be a new communication platform where all kinds of hate speech can either be produced or popularized. In other words, the reader comments could degrade into a vehicle for hate speech when readers post malicious comments and direct hatred toward a particular group in the society.

However, to what extent the opinions expressed in the online reader comments are their own opinions is questionable. If we follow in the footsteps of Stuart Hall and Teun van Dijk, we can see that these comments are not formed by themselves independently from dominant ideologies; in other words, power relations in society. According to Hall, “A discourse is a way of talking about or representing something. It produces knowledge that shapes perceptions and practice. It is part of the way in which power operates. Therefore, it has consequences for both, those who employ it and those subjected to it.” (1992: 318). Hall (1979: 340) also indicates that the media, which is a powerful source of discourses, constructs for us a definition of ‘other’. The media which has become a part of social structure cannot be conceptualized apart from social structure and practice. According to Hall, the media has a dominating power in political, cultural and economical domains: Media legitimates the power relations in a society via its representational practices, which are constructed constantly in the superiority relations of society and, are presented to the society by being repeatedly reproduced. Power relations have to be legitimized continuously by the media as a result of the fact that media is a place in which opposing discourses can flow and struggle to become dominant (1979: 341-346). Van Dijk (1991: 35, 226) regards news as a discourse; however, how the dominant ideologies direct public discourse via media in society is realized by their formation of social cognition on individual level. The dominant ideologies transferred to society by the discourses in media affect the social representations that shape the attitudes, opinions and beliefs of individuals towards a certain social group. The social representations which are re-interpreted by the interaction of individuals in a public sphere are used in the reconstruction of the dominant ideologies in the end. Therefore, the answers of such questions e.g.
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