

Fear speech can be more dangerous than hate speech

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Credits: Hollandse Hoogte

Sowing extreme fear is a far more direct cause for violent escalations between groups than sowing hate. This is what NWO researcher Antoine Buyse from Utrecht University states in the article "'Fear Speech,' or How Violent Conflict Escalation Relates to the Freedom of Expression', which was published in November in the journal *Human Rights Quarterly*. The research was made possible by a Veni grant from NWO.

What are the boundaries of freedom of expression with respect to the

risk of [violence](#)? There are many cases from history which demonstrate that words can contribute to the perpetration of violent attacks and murders, such as in Nazi Germany, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. It is therefore important to know how the impact of such harmful words can be reduced.

Up until now, lawyers have mainly emphasised that hate speech about the opponent (in which the other group is stigmatised) can be dangerous. Professor of Human Rights Antoine Buyse argues in his article, based on insights from academic disciplines other than law, that the sowing of extreme anxiety is a better predictor for the escalation in violence. He has therefore introduced the term fear speech. These are statements that can incite the fear in one group that 'the other group' plans to use violence or even to completely destroy them in the very near future. Sowing hate can be a breeding ground for violence, but extreme fear speech is the figurative detonator in the bomb.

Escalating factors

In his article, Buyse identified several factors that can accelerate words eliciting violence. Both the content of the message and its context are relevant in this. It not only matters who makes a certain statement (how influential this person is) but also which media are used and what their scope is. Of course it is important whether alternative media are available that can broadcast a different message and can reach the same public. An important predictor is to look at the frames through which possible violence between two groups in the past is being interpreted or justified. Is a violent act explained as an incidental crime or as part of a large-scale threat of violence from one group towards the other? Is a group or a person blamed and does that involve the use of stereotypes? And the more inhuman the stereotypes used, the lower the threshold to using violence. This threshold is also lower if, in a certain statement, non-violent solutions are rejected as an option.

Calling a halt to an escalation in violence

Buyse emphasises that jurisprudence is just one of the instruments for tackling violent escalations between groups. Education and promoting awareness about the mechanisms that increase or decrease violence are, according to Buyse, equally important instruments for preventing the escalation in violence. Keeping the public debate alive is another important way of reducing the risk of an escalation in violence. In the debate alternative frames can be presented alongside or opposing the prevailing violence-promoting frame. Allowing other views to be heard can call a halt to the escalation in violence at an early stage.

What makes Buyse's research so interesting is that he has combined insights from different academic disciplines (law, the social sciences and conflict studies). According to the researcher, judges and policy makers can benefit from the insights about conditions in which words elicit violence and this can help them to take more carefully considered.

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