

Cyberbullying Policies: a Long Way from Ideas to Practices

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Abstract:

The monograph *Protecting Children Online?: Cyberbullying Policies of Social Media Companies*, written by the media scholar Tijana Milosevic, investigates the controversies of the anti-cyberbullying policies, elaborated and implemented by social media companies (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Ask.fm etc.). Milosevic inspects the public debates around high-profile cyberbullying accidents and subsequent legal regulations. She focuses on the companies' corporate documentation addressing this issue and shares the results of her interviews with social media e-safety experts and NGO representatives. This book puts cyberbullying in a broader context of the various contradictions, such as censorship and freedom of speech, state control and industry self-regulation, e-safety and data privacy. Based on her analysis, Tijana Milosevic concludes that it would be extremely challenging to study and prevent cyberbullying without a clear understanding of its context. The book's detailed focus on legal regulations could be found rather excessive; however spotlighting the crucial differences between the 'ideal' corporate principles and its practical implementations surely deserves the attention of media and cultural scholars.

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Milosevic, Tijana: *Protecting Children Online? Cyberbullying Policies of Social Media Companies*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018. 280 pages, 35 USD. ISBN: 9780262037099.

Abstract:

The monograph *Protecting Children Online?: Cyberbullying Policies of Social Media Companies*, written by the media scholar Tijana Milosevic, investigates the controversies of the anti-cyberbullying policies, elaborated and implemented by social media companies (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Ask.fm etc.). Milosevic inspects the public debates around high-profile cyberbullying accidents and subsequent legal regulations. She focuses on the companies' corporate documentation addressing this issue and shares the results of her interviews with social media e-safety experts and NGO representatives. This book puts cyberbullying in a broader context of the various contradictions, such as censorship and freedom of speech, state control and industry self-regulation, e-safety and data privacy. Based on her analysis, Tijana Milosevic concludes that it would be extremely challenging to study and prevent cyberbullying without a clear understanding of its context. The book's detailed focus on legal regulations could be found rather excessive; however spotlighting the crucial differences between the 'ideal' corporate principles and its practical implementations surely deserves the attention of media and cultural scholars.

'Suffering Children' are traditionally one of the most powerful images for political mobilization, so the demand for legal regulation of cyberbullying in online social media is not surprising. The enormous media and public attention on the high-profile cyberbullying cases that involve the suicide of children obliges social media companies to take measures against the online harassment. A failure to publicly address this issue can lead to serious business consequences. The monograph - "*Protecting Children Online?*" by Tijana Milosevic investigates the anti-bullying policies of 14 social media companies (from the industry giants like Facebook and Twitter to the lesser-known start-ups and messengers). The book focuses on the public and legal debates around online abuse and e-safety, companies' documentation

(e.g. Terms of Service) and provides the results of interviews with social media experts and NGO employees.

In order to highlight the complexity of cyberbullying, Tijana Milosevic emphasizes its connection to the 'offline' culture of humiliation and other social conditions, which might trigger online harassment. According to the author, public 'media panic' (blaming social media for cyberbullying), with subsequent legal restrictions, fails to take into account children's rights and could be a serious obstacle to a broader understanding of this phenomenon (p. 24).

The matter of liability is one of the main motives of the book. As the author shows, there is a noticeable trend for social media companies to position themselves as an 'intermediary', a 'platform' for content sharing (p. 49) and keep their distance from direct legal responsibility. Online harassment became a matter of the 'bullies' individual liability and corporate policies are protected from direct state control due to the potential violation of freedom of speech. Most online platforms have developed instruments of self-regulation (e.g. Terms of Service), which define the rules of content sharing and interpersonal communication. These instruments allow social media to reserve the right of removing 'unacceptable' content or block 'undesirable' users. Companies usually adopt cyberbullying policies as an element of corporate social responsibility, as a part of a public relations strategy, which helps to create positive images of their platforms.

Milosevic suggests that promotion of the 'online citizenship' (p. 162) and a culture of dignity can prevent tragic consequences by affecting the causes of cyberbullying rather than dealing with its symptoms (p. 193). The book also illustrates the most common practices of e-safety policies (e.g. reactive/proactive moderation; 'social reporting'; hotlines; etc.) and the issues of their implementation. Milosevic underlines the absence of the unified definition of online harassment, which could have fostered cooperation between social media companies, NGOs and legal regulators. At the same time, insufficient corporate transparency, unwillingness to disclose the related data (key performance indicators; budget; number of in-house/outsources moderators; etc.) does not allow the researchers to develop an integral approach to cyberbullying (p. 144). The book also underlines the difficulty of the autonomous evaluation of the e-safety measures. Since various NGOs have close ties to the social media companies, it is rather hard to understand them as independent investigators and evaluate their contribution to the industry decision-making processes (p. 156).

The most interesting part of the book is its focus on the practices of anti-harassment policies implemented by the social media companies. Interviews with corporate e-safety specialists remain the major source of Milosevic's 'practical' conclusions. At the same time, the aforementioned lack

of transparency and subsequent non-disclosure agreements led to the removal of several significant findings from the monograph's materials (p. 199). In my opinion, the particular actions against cyberbullying (or their absence) deserve more attention rather than the published and distributed 'public' guidelines and corporate concerns, which were created to maintain the positive image of the media enterprises. In case of this particular research, Milosevic focuses on both of these issues. While Milosevic openly states that comparison of various legal systems addressing cyberbullying is not an aim of her research (p. 18), the whole of chapter 5 is dedicated to an overview of several countries' juridical regulations. Undoubtedly, providing legal background could be fruitful in understanding the context of the social media policies and showing the 'normative' side of e-safety, however such a detailed attention to this aspect can draw away the focus from the factual implementation of these norms. It would also have been interesting for Milosevic to provide a deeper understanding of the notion of 'culture of dignity', which she sees as a key to overcoming the contemporary cyberbullying environment. Perhaps, a broader analysis of this concept could lead to better comprehension of the author's theoretical framework and its connection to her empirical findings and suggested solutions.

Protecting Children Online? presents different approaches to the phenomenon of cyberbullying. This research depicts online harassment as a complex issue, and puts it in economic, political, cultural, and ethical context. This monograph reveals the enormous amount of controversies that accompany contemporary e-safety policies. Its practical focus allows its readers to have a look beyond media statements and access the 'backstage' of anti-cyberbullying policy implementations despite the challenge of corporate opacity. The book's excessive focus on the countries' legal regulations might contradict the primary goals of this research. Instead, a more detailed overview of theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of online harassment and related terms such as 'culture of dignity' might have benefited Milosevic's arguments. This monograph definitely contributes to the field of media and 'digital' cultural studies. Taking into account the contemporary online privacy concerns (following the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal and the new GDPR regulations), the issues described in this book can be used in the debates around online anonymity, freedom of speech, e-safety and surveillance, or the questions of corporate transparency and public trust in the social media companies.

German Abstract:

Cyberbullying-Richtlinien: Ein langer Weg von den Ideen zu den Praktiken

Die Monographie *Protecting Children Online?: Cyberbullying Policies of Social Media Companies* von der Medienwissenschaftlerin Tijana Milosevic untersucht die Anti-Cyberbullying Richtlinien von Social Media-Unternehmen (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, ask.fm etc.). Milosevic analysiert die Debatten über bekannte Cyberbullying-Vorfälle und die darauffolgenden Regulierungen. Ihr Fokus dabei liegt einerseits auf der Dokumentation der Vorfälle innerhalb der Unternehmen, andererseits präsentiert sie die Ergebnisse ihrer Interviews mit Social Media-Experten und NGO-Vertretern. Das Buch zeigt Cyberbullying im weiteren Kontext vielfältiger Widersprüche, wie beispielsweise der Zensur und Meinungsfreiheit, der Staatskontrolle und Selbstregulierung der Unternehmen oder der E-Security und des Datenschutzes. Basierend auf ihrer Analyse, kommt Tijana Milosevic zu dem Ergebnis, dass die Analyse und Verhinderung von Cyberbullying ohne ein klares Verständnis des Kontextes eine große Herausforderung bleibt. Der Autor legt den Fokus unnötig detailliert auf gesetzliche Regularien. Nichtsdestotrotz verdient das Aufzeigen der Unterschiede zwischen den 'idealen' Unternehmensprinzipien und wie sie in der Praxis implementiert werden sicherlich die Aufmerksamkeit der Lehrenden des Medien und -Kulturbereichs.

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