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Freedom of expression – freedom of science

Greeting from the President

Under a democratic state governed by the rule of law, freedom of expression is the foundation of social participation. According to Section 12 of the Constitution of Finland, everyone has the freedom of expression. Freedom of expression entails the right to express, disseminate and receive information, opinions and other communications without prior prevention by anyone. Freedom of expression is not only a fundamental political right, but also guarantees freedom of science, art, culture, entertainment and other forms of self-expression. The freedom of science, the arts and higher education are guaranteed as educational rights under Section 16 of the Constitution. Freedom of science is the freedom to choose the subject and method of research and the right to publish research results.

Traditionally, freedom of expression has provided protection against those in power and against preventive censorship. This is also reflected in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights,

which guarantees freedom of expression “without interference by public authority”. In contrast, the protection of freedom of expression against other users of this freedom has been given less attention, even though the development of expression platforms and technologies has taken the issue of “co-users” of freedom of expression to a whole new level. There is a lot of constructive, forward-looking civil discourse in society, but in addition, everyone has to put up with the abuse of freedom of expression by other people, including bad behaviour, vulgar expressions and unfair criticism. However, there is too much online hate and targeted harassment that goes beyond the boundaries of freedom of expression, especially on social media.

Targeted harassment usually refers to mass harassment, pressuring or hate speech directed at a specific person with the intention of interfering with their work. Targeted harassment is often directed at people who exercise public authority in their work, such as judges, prosecutors, police



officers and social welfare authorities. Another target group is people who exercise freedom of expression in their work, such as journalists, researchers and artists.

While you are allowed to criticise another person's actions, even strongly, cruel mockery or putting pressure on a person is not part of freedom of expression. Online hate and targeted harassment create a chilling effect and erode freedom of expression from within. For example, a researcher who chooses a research topic related to gender, equality, development aid or immigration issues is at risk of becoming a target. Research funding decisions can also easily cause controversy, if people feel that the research in question is useless. For example, a study on the position of women in developing countries may be subject to ridicule.

In addition to the chilling effect, the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation has a harmful effect on the freedom of expression and science. While science aims to produce the most reliable knowledge possible, data and research results may be deliberately distorted or invalidated by disinformation. For example, false information contrary to scientific evidence may be provided for example about climate change, biodiversity loss, vaccinations, cancer treatment or nutrition. Those who spread misinformation, on the other hand, may act in good faith and believe strongly in the accuracy of the information they disseminate.

According to the World Economic Forum Global Risks Report 2024, misinformation and disinformation are considered the most severe global risks over a two-year period – ahead of extreme weather events, societal polarisation and cyber insecurity. AI-generated false information is seen as particularly dangerous.¹ On the other hand,

the result shows that the dangers of false information are now recognised: it is not only storms and floods that pose dangers, but also unfounded “information”. Misinformation and disinformation threaten not only scientific results, but also democracy and the principle of the rule of law.

Academic freedom has declined across the world, according to the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) 2024 report, which assesses levels of academic freedom based on five indicators: freedom to research and teach; freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; institutional autonomy; campus integrity; and freedom of academic and cultural expression.² On average, academic freedom has regressed to where it was in 1973. Although Finland's ranking was good (13/179), it has dropped a few places since the previous report. The decline in academic freedom follows the same trend as the global decline in political rights and liberties over the last two decades. The Freedom in the World 2025 report states that the role of democracy and global freedom will continue to face serious challenges in 2025.³ Despite the decline in academic freedom, citizens in different countries still have a relatively high level of trust in scientists and science. Finland, however, ranks only in the middle of the list of countries in an international comparison published in Nature in January 2025.⁴ The Finnish Science Barometer 2024 study provides a different picture: Finns' trust in science has remained high and is extremely high by international comparison.⁵

Freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin: if we allow our liberties to be eroded, we are also reducing the responsibility of others to respect them. But what can we do to defend academic freedom? Targeted harassment should be criminal-

ised, even though criminalisation is a last resort and often not even an effective means of curbing harmful phenomena. There have been two studies in Finland on the criminalisation of targeted harassment, but there has been no political will to move the issue forward.

Representatives of the media have sometimes contacted people who have expressed extreme opinions on social media to ask whether they really meant what they said. Artificial intelligence could effectively manage this task of holding people accountable for their opinions. The EU Digital Services Act (EU) 2022/2065 could include provisions on the introduction of AI-based screening systems so that, for example, a message identified by algorithms as hate speech would be transferred into a “penalty box”, where the sender would have to verify their identity and confirm the message or otherwise it would be deleted.

Or is it the case that social media is losing its power as more and more people, feeling tired or frustrated, are deleting

their social media accounts? However, with billions of social media users worldwide, the decisions of individual users to boycott social media are of little consequence. It is also worth remembering that social media can be a vital lifeline for people experiencing loneliness or reduced mobility. As such, social media is not harmful, but the abuse of freedom of expression on social media is detrimental.

The people who will be exercising their freedom of expression in the future are currently sitting in classrooms. Young people need to be told that freedom of expression also includes taking responsibility for their words. Through insight, they should be shown that research-based knowledge is the foundation for health and a good life. Various “Ask a Researcher” and “Meet a Researcher” projects may spark an interest in science in a child or young person and, ideally, an appreciation for scientific outcomes. In the name of cultural and social sustainability, I want to believe that future generations will respect both freedom of expression and freedom of science.

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