Introduction

Hate speech in communication: Research and proposals

Guest-edited special issue:
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Hate speech has become one of the most prolific and influential topics in contemporary social sciences (Paz et al., 2020). However, this phenomenon, which seeks to denigrate or attack a particular social group or known individuals, is neither new nor exclusive to our time. Human history documents frequent episodes in which minorities, individuals and groups have been targeted by campaigns aimed at stirring up contempt and animosity towards them and, in extreme cases, justify their physical extermination. Examples include the alleged infanticides attributed to Jews in medieval Europe, which often preceded pogroms (Bemporad, 2021), or the demonization of the black population in the United States to justify lynchings (Smileya & Fakunle, 2016).

Today's technological and media context has increased the visibility and exposure of hate speech (Matamoros-Fernández & Johan-Farkas, 2021), mainly due to the popularisation of social network sites (Chetty & Alathur, 2018), which tend to fuel social polarisation (Urman & Makhortykh, 2021), and the possibility of anonymous posting (Paz et al., 2021), in addition to the host of new formats through which hatred can be spread online (Askanius, 2021). Apart from the direct and immediate objectives of specific groups that fly the standard of hatred to promote their ideology and recruit new members (Phadke & Mitra, 2020), the proliferation of hate speech is disturbing, not least for its potential negative consequences.

Hate speech in its different manifestations can profoundly affect public opinion. One of its most common forms consists of attributing characteristics (negative, naturally) to a particular group or linking people according to their ideology, gender, religion, race, or nationality with crimes or other problems for society (Piazza, 2020). This association places this phenomenon in the third level of agenda-setting (Guo & McCombs, 2011), i.e., it establishes a conceptual relationship between issues and topics that is reflected in the media and can lead the public to identify a particular group with, for example, rising crime rates or economic cuts in the welfare state.

Similarly, the propagation of hate speech may cause a change in the Overton window (Conway, 2020), that is, the range of ideas that are considered debatable or subject to discussion in society at a given time. Thus, sustained exposure to hate speech may widen this window so that ideas or proposals that attack the rights, dignity, or even physical integrity of a given group or collective are accepted as a legitimate part of public debate. The instrumental use of hate speech is particularly acute in times of crisis (e.g., political unrest), when it could increase social tensions and justify the use of violence (Gaufman, 2015; Makhortykh & Aguilar, 2020).

While no direct link can be drawn between hate speech and the commission of criminal acts, hate speech can foster a permissive breeding ground for statements harming, humiliating or dehumanizing groups and individuals. In this regard, hate speech can inspire acts of so-called "stochastic terrorism", i.e., attacks by individuals who do not necessarily belong to a criminal or paramilitary organisation (Amman & Meloy, 2021). Such incidents include the

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Introduction

Christchurch shooting in New Zealand in 2019 and the Anders Breivik massacre in Norway in 2011.

Given the considerable social, political, legal and civic implications of the problem, we need to gain greater insight into this phenomenon to provide tools for collective reflection and direct actions towards combating these practices. There is also a need to design messages through the media (Gómez García et al., 2021) or educommunication (Nagle, 2018) that will help, if nothing else, to raise awareness of these issues. Hence, this monograph contributes empirical evidence and studies that point in this direction.

The five articles herein tackle different aspects of hate speech. Authors Sebastian Wachs, Alexander Wettstein, Ludwig Bilz and Manuel Gámez-Guadix present the "Motivations for Hate Speech Perpetration Scale" (MHATE), which measures factors that promote and enable efforts to express hostile messages towards certain groups. The results obtained from this scale tool show that young people commonly engage in these behaviours less out of ideology, conformity, status enhancement, exhilaration or power, and more out of revenge. There is no single driver behind hate speech but rather a complex patchwork of ulterior motivations. The findings of this article provide fundamental clues to target actions for prevention and intervention.

This monograph also attaches particular importance to the application of computational methods to Communication Studies, one of the most promising methodological approaches to address research questions in the current media landscape (van-Atteveldt & Peng, 2018). In "Hate speech and social acceptance of migrants in Europe: Analysis of tweets with geolocation", Carlos Arcila-Calderón, Patricia Sánchez-Holgado, Cristina Quintana-Moreno, Javier-J. Amores and David Blanco-Herrero investigate attitudes towards migrants in 27 European countries. Their results broadly reveal a negative correlation between the size of a country's immigrant population and the level of hate messages against it on Twitter. However, less hate speech was found on this platform in countries where there is more support for immigration

Following on with big data analysis, José-Manuel Robles, Juan-Antonio Guevara, Belén Casas-Mas and Daniel Gómez, in their article "When negativity is the fuel. Bots and Political Polarization in the COVID-19 debate", describe the role of bots –automated accounts– posing as individuals as a weapon of propaganda in the full context of the SARS-Cov-2 health crisis in Spain. Their findings show that bots were used to politicise the pandemic, leaving the social or - in this case - health issues in the background. Thus, these bots create a hostile environment, polarise debate and incite hostility against the government. The tactics employed include personalising attacks on specific individuals –the president– and forecasting catastrophic consequences of government decisions. In the field of research on emotions, which is becoming increasingly relevant in Communication Studies (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020), this issue of Comunicar offers a study that contributes to understanding how emotions affect hate speech. "Analysis of hate speech as a function of ideology: Emotional and cognitive effects", by Natalia Abuín-Vences, Ubaldo Cuesta-Cambra, José-Ignacio Niño-González and Carolina Bengochea-González, concludes that individuals respond with greater emotional intensity to hate messages sent from the opposite end of the political spectrum. In other words,

recipients of progressive ideology feel angrier when they read a hate message from the conservative side. Further, the study indicates that ideology exerts a moderating effect on emotional response and cognitive processing, thus strengthening the scientific evidence for confirmation bias in online hate messages.

Finally, this monographic issue surveys the Eurocentric bias in the international literature on hate speech, which often focuses on Western settings. "A systematic review of the literature on representations of migration in Brazil and the United Kingdom", by Isabella Gonçalves and Yossi David, draws on seeks to address the lack of comparative studies between scenarios, principally between the West and the Global South. To this end, the authors discuss and contrast studies analysing media representations of migrants in the UK and Brazil. In both contexts, the representation of migrants and refugees in the media often adopts a negative tone that links them to problematic issues such as criminality while ignoring their own perspectives. Their methodology analysis shows that, as is generally the case with Hispanic American research on communication (Segado-Boj et al., 2022), hate discourses in Brazil have been studied from an essentially qualitative perspective.

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