

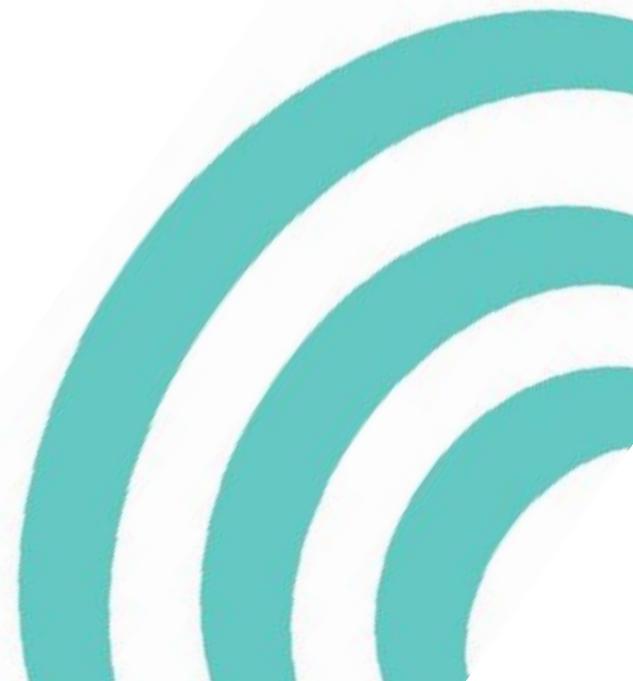


Platforms, Experts, Tools: Specialised Cyber-Activists Network

# **Hate speech trends during the Covid-19 pandemic in a digital and globalised age**



Project funded by the European Union's Rights,  
Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020)



## About the Project

The EU-funded project sCAN – Platforms, Experts, Tools: Specialised Cyber-Activists Network (2018-2020), coordinated by Licra (International League Against Racism and Antisemitism), aims at gathering expertise, tools, methodology and knowledge on cyber hate and developing transnational comprehensive practices for identifying, analysing, reporting and counter-acting online hate speech. This project draws on the results of successful European projects already realised, for example the project “Research, Report, Remove: Countering Cyber-Hate phenomena” and “Facing Facts”, and strives to continue, emphasize and strengthen the initiatives developed by civil society for counteracting hate speech.

Through cross-European cooperation, the project partners are enhancing and (further) intensifying their fruitful collaboration. The sCAN project partners are contributing to selecting and providing relevant automated monitoring tools to improve the detection of hateful content. Another key aspect of sCAN is the strengthening of the monitoring actions (e.g. the monitoring exercises) set up by the European Commission. The project partners are also jointly gathering knowledge and findings to better identify, explain and understand trends of cyber hate at a transnational level. Furthermore, this project aims to develop cross-European capacity by providing e-learning courses for cyber-activists, moderators and tutors through the Facing Facts Online platform.

**sCAN** is implemented by ten different European partners, namely ZARA – Zivilcourage und Anti-Rassismus-Arbeit from Austria, CEJI – A Jewish contribution to an inclusive Europe from Belgium, Human Rights House Zagreb from Croatia, Romea from Czech Republic, Licra – International League Against Racism and Antisemitism from France, Respect Zone from France, jugendschutz.net from Germany, CESIE from Italy, Latvian Centre For Human Rights from Latvia and the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences from Slovenia.

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### Legal Disclaimer

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## Introduction

Since the beginning of 2020, a global infectious disease has shattered human social, economic and political life conditions in many countries. Today on all continents a growing part of humanity is on lockdown. As the pandemic expands, online phenomena of conspiracy theories, rumours, fake news and hateful contents connected to this global disease are growing.

It is quite obvious that the Internet and in particular social networks reflect societies' questions, information as well as their existing fears and attempts to explain. While there seemed to have been a pause in hate speech online when the crisis erupted in Europe, looking as if all the haters were more concerned with their health than with hating, the online world quickly restored its 'business as usual'. Because of the confinement procedure, people are more likely to search, discuss and interact online through social media. Online hateful theories and discourses found during the pandemic impact new traditional or possibly new patterns to be widely disseminated based on the scapegoat mechanism, rumours and fake news dissemination. This well-known social and psychological phenomenon has already been sadly observed during previous dangerous global pandemics episodes, as for example the Black Death during the Middle Ages.

Almost every social, economic and health crisis may cause the rise of conspiracy theories including hateful beliefs. The scapegoat theory explains how the victim's sacrifice allows the society to recover after a crisis: the victim is defined as the one responsible for the crisis and the one who allows society's serenity back. A close link is obvious between the sacred and violence, not only because of the scapegoat's biblical origins, but also because of the victim's role in solving the crisis issue. Violence must focus arbitrarily on a chosen victim - an innocent victim - to express itself. According to the French historian and philosopher René Girard, there are two main steps in the process: the release step and the pact step: the sacrifice is an outlet used to release group hostility and bring the community together in a recovered peaceful context. Regarding the dissemination of conspiracy theories, it is neither an idea nor an ideology. It could be considered as a "logic" in itself: a way to decipher world's mysteries. Discovered plots grant access to "rationality" and "explainable phenomena". Thought processes help supporting an "omnipresent wrongdoing will" from the target group: "this rational effort leads to a legitimated hatred". The same goes for rumours, it is a complementary social mechanism. Online rumours can be defined as pieces of unverified information - most of the time based on stereotypes - at the time of posting. Their impacts can be very harmful both to target groups and people who believe in them.

Crisis as pandemics could indeed split societies by the spread of rumours, conspiracy theories, accusations and, as consequence, violent acts against the "Other". It is not an automatic phenomenon: some pandemics may also "bring societies together rather than divide them"<sup>1</sup>. In our modern societies, information - including rumours and hate speech - is spread very quickly by people from all over the world. Fake news is noxious especially in a pandemic context. Fortunately, access to Internet also provides ways to detect and debunk fake news.

For all these reasons, it is crucial to observe, to identify and to propose some key-explanations about possible mechanisms of the interaction between hate speech and the rise of a global pandemic in the

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<sup>1</sup> Danblon Emmanuel and Nicolas Loïc, *Les rhétoriques de la conspiration*, CNRS Editions, 2010: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-d-histoire-de-la-protection-sociale-2012-1-page-61.htm#>

age of the Internet and social networks. Differences between people because of their supposed membership or non-membership to a group regarding protected characteristics are often used as tools to highlight an alleged incompatibility between them.

This analytical paper aims at analysing online hateful trends on this pandemic period including an historical perspective. Ten partner organisations provided input and contributed with their extensive experience to this analytical paper:

- CEJI (Belgium),
- CESIE (Italy),
- Human Rights House Zagreb (Croatia),
- jugendschutz.net (Germany),
- Latvian Centre for Human Rights (Latvia),
- Licra - International League Against Racism and Antisemitism (France),
- Respect Zone (France),
- Romea (Czech Republic),
- University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences (UL-FDV) (Slovenia),
- ZARA– Zivilcourage und Anti-Rassismus-Arbeit (Austria).

Since the scope of the sCAN project does not allow the participating organisations to provide an extensive picture of hate speech trends on social media during the pandemic, we decided to focus on exemplary case studies.

## Anti-Asian hate speech, misinformation and geopolitics

With the overall expansion of the pandemic, stereotypes are disseminating and rumours resulting from stereotypes seem to be even more amplified. Rumours' spread can be compared to the extension of a pandemic with similar steps: incubation period, infection, spreading and then overall generalisation. Rumours appear when the person responsible for a wrongdoing is unknown or uncatchable, when the phenomenon is beyond comprehension. It doesn't comply with human societies standards and rules. Fear takes the lead and rumours - including fake news and conspiracy theories - have their rightful place.

Moreover, since geopolitical conflicts are more and more present on the online sphere, misinformation based on rumours and fake news' spread is one of the most efficient tools for promoting distrust and disruption.

### ***Anti-Asian racism: first online hate speech manifestation of the crisis***

Anti-Asian racism, more precisely anti-Chinese racism, is one of the first online manifestation outcomes of the covid-19 pandemic. Initially, some hateful contents based on "classical", long-lasting negative stereotypes against the Chinese community as well as against European citizens originating from Asian countries or from China have been circulating. When the reports on the quarantined city of Wuhan and the Hubei province were published, some of Croatian daily newspapers started xenophobic reporting on Asian tourists, portraying them as the main source of infections<sup>2</sup>. This caused verbal or even physical attacks against some Asian tourists visiting Croatia<sup>3</sup>. In Italy, the most relevant episode concerns the sentence from the Governor of Veneto, stating: *"We all know Chinese people eat rats"*, which nearly led to a diplomatic incident.

In France, many insults and negative comments were disseminated on online social media regarding so-called Asian food habits and traditions. In addition, videos were posted on Twitter, portraying people assumedly originating from Asian countries, who were affected by exclusionary acts in public transports and in streets. In Austria, people perceived as Asians, or more specifically with Chinese background, have also been confronted with physical attacks and direct online attacks because of their perceived or actual Asian background automatically linked to the worldwide disease.

Quickly, mostly actually or perceived Chinese were targeted by hate speech blaming them for "inventing" and spreading the virus. In Austria, an online article reported to ZARA states that the virus was deliberately on Chinese New Year, explaining it by saying that many Chinese people travel there. In Latvia, the most notable case includes a Latvian blogger who posted a fake news video on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, who stated *"generally those Chinese [censored] should be liquidated, the entire country should be. Nothing good ever comes from there"*.

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<sup>2</sup> Epodravina, EPIDEMIJA KORONAVIRUSA U Hrvatsku stigao autobus pun Kineza iz grada iz kojeg je krenula smrtonosna bolest, Sanjin Bojic, 26. siječnja 2020:

<https://epodravina.hr/epidemija-koronavirusa-u-hrvatsku-stigao-autobus-pun-kineza-iz-grada-iz-kojeg-je-krenula-smrtonosna-bolest>

<sup>3</sup> State police (Valsts policija) (2020). Valsts policija par nacionālā un etniskā naida izraisīšanu aiztur vīrieti, 3 February 2020, <http://www.vp.gov.lv/?id=69&said=69&yrid=2020&relid=16828>

## Misinformation and geopolitical strategy

The anti-Asian racist speech trend online also turned on the dissemination of misinformation and rumours accusing the Republic of China to be responsible for the spread of the virus. In terms of semantic, covid-19 is sometimes called “Chinese virus” despite WHO recommendations<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the pandemic was presented as a biological weapon developed in China. Thus, in most of the countries monitored, the coronavirus is said to be created intentionally by laboratories in Wuhan. Many conspiracy theories argue that this is a way for China to spread its hegemonic power over the planet.

The main underlying mechanism of this hate speech trend comes from (strategically) spreading the message is that the virus is used by countries or influential stakeholders against rival states or ideology. Since the pandemic is perceived as a weapon ensuring a domination, other countries are also facing presented as “responsible” of this pandemic. Many partners report that one of the main theories is that the United States of America are preparing an invasion of Europe.

In Slovenia, this theory was even supported by pictures of the US army disembarking in Europe (the actual source of the pictures was a US-led multinational military exercise DEFENDER-Europe 20). It states that the United States of America are preparing a hostile takeover of Europe.

In Czech Republic, first misinformation about the coronavirus appeared online in late January, when a server administered by the Russian Defence Ministry accused the United States of having developed Covid-19 as a biological weapon: "*The narrative that the virus is an artificial, biological weapon created by the American government for use against China was later taken up and spread by Chinese Government propaganda*" according to [Semantic Visions](#) company<sup>5</sup>. The Press Agency Reuters also reported according to a European Union document, that Russian media have launched a "*significant disinformation campaign*" against the West in order to worsen the impact of the pandemic and disseminate distrust and panic<sup>6</sup>. Spreading rumours, conspiracy theories and misinformation are also an efficient tool frequently used in the geopolitical sphere.

## Conspiracy theories, new world order and antisemitism

Another transnational observation is that crises, as currently visible in the form of a pandemic, are a conducive environment to foster conspiracy theories. The fear, distrust and uncertainties - already present before the pandemic in many European countries - in “rulers”, heads of states, political authority figures and in “elites” are increasing. In addition, because of the seclusive new way of life people pay more attention to extremist and radical hateful speech. Moreover, they are keen on believing authoritative arguments without challenging their relevance.

Therefore, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories presenting similarities with traditional stereotypes, rhetoric and mechanisms, are commonly spread via social media. Big platforms are working to combat disinformation and conspiracy theories by linking to fact-checking and authoritative sources. Nonetheless, it is important to underline that alternative platforms, messengers

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<sup>4</sup> The Hill, WHO official warns against calling it 'Chinese virus,' says 'there is no blame in this', 19/03/2020:

[www.thehill.com/homenews/administration/488479-who-official-warns-against-calling-it-chinese-virus-says-there-is-no](http://www.thehill.com/homenews/administration/488479-who-official-warns-against-calling-it-chinese-virus-says-there-is-no)

<sup>5</sup> Romea, Disinformation about COVID-19 in Czech first spread from Russian server, according to new analysis, 3/04/2020:

<http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/disinformation-about-covid-19-in-czech-first-spread-from-russian-server-according-to-new-analysis>

<sup>6</sup> Romea, EU reports that Russia has launched a disinformation campaign about COVID-19, 19/03/2020:

<http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/eu-reports-that-russia-has-launched-a-disinformation-campaign-about-covid-19>

and chain mails also play an important role in spreading conspiracy theories. On platforms like Telegram and VK, German or French users openly post antisemitic and antiparliamentary content. Haters have also jumped on the opportunity to celebrate openly the passing of the first Israeli victim, a Holocaust survivor called Aryeh Even.

## **Resurgence of old antisemitic stereotypes**

These “traditional” conspiracy theories have first led to a reinforcement of antisemitism. Far-right extremist websites as the French “*Démocratie Participative*”, have disseminated several antisemitic conspiracy theories. These theories are using the same rhetoric and mechanisms as traditional medieval stereotypes about “the Jews”, spread during the Black Death. Several articles published in January 2020 were already disseminating forms of “old” antisemitic rhetoric: “*Poisoning: the Jewish hyena Buzin [the name of the ex- French Minister of Health] with her declaration that we “can’t close our borders” for stopping the coronavirus business*”; “*Crash oil, stock exchange in a free fall, mass-quarantine: the divine punishment against the Jewish Occident is occurring*”. These stereotypes are referring to the antisemitic speech widely spread during pandemic times in the Middle Ages. Indeed, medieval accusations against the Jews were linked to waves of epidemic crises such as the bubonic plague, the so called “Black Death”. In the mid-14th century, the Black Death plague was a particularly deadly disease in Europe. When the Black Death plague started, religious fervour as well as fanaticism bloomed: Jewish population were accused of ritual murders and of host desecration against Christians. They were presented with horns and tails and associated with the Devil. They were also alleged of the “blood libel” namely sacrifices of Christian children at Passover to obtain blood for unleavened bread. Jews started to be blame and considered as responsible for the plague.

The concept of “divine punishment” is also present on today’s online hate speech. It is disseminating by ultra-religious groups as for example by German Islamist groups who promote the theory that the virus is a “divine punishment” for “sinners”.

## **New World Order, “anti-elites” speech and traditional conspiracy theories**

The concept of a “*plot behind it all*” is widely shared by extremists. The underlying idea is that government and elites, mostly manipulated by Jewish organisations, according to the theory, are using this pandemic for “*reformatting the world*”. In Germany, “*secret elites*” are using the virus to establish a “*New World Order*”, concept directly referring to a very well-known antisemitic theory. This trend is also targeting the politicians accused of manipulating their population for implementing a dictatorship. Same in Slovenia where it is related that there is no virus and that politicians are implementing a dictatorship under the guise of Covid-19 pandemic. In other monitored countries, traditional conspiracy theory involving the concept of “*New World Order*” are also very popular.

In France, a candidate to French local elections Alain Mondino liked on V Kontakte a video called “*Coronavirus for goyim*” and shared it on Twitter. According to this video, the covid-19 virus was created by “*the Jews*”. Jewish people are being identified as “*they*” and accused to have plotted for spreading the disease so they could ensure their hegemonic power.

When it comes to Latvia, one of the most widespread theories disseminated in Latvian, Russian and English is that Bill Gates invented the virus in order to earn more money on global vaccination of people, who are against or sceptical of it. Also, that coronavirus is portrayed by some as a bioweapon created by George Soros. In Austria, many hateful comments referring to conspiracy theories were posted under right-wing Freedom Party Austria (FPÖ) politicians. Some comments refer to *“the Soros puppet”* and to *“Bill Gates and the rest of the Kabbalah”*.

These theories are frequently connected to antisemitic conspiracy theories implicating that Jews rule over the world. Same theories are spread in Croatia. The content referred to conspiracy theories of foreign foundations as responsible for the pandemic of COVID-19, but this time for targeting different civil society groups and individuals. Right-wing extremists seem to use the pandemic to provide a new angle to already established conspiracy theories. These long-lasting conspiracy theories including the “new world order” concept, are also spread by Islamist groups in Germany.

## Fear of the "internal enemy", exclusion of the foreigner and scapegoating mechanisms

Finding a scapegoat is more than a trend in periods of crisis. Target groups portrayed as “the enemy” are constructed based on actual or perceived characteristics, such as e.g. sexual orientation, gender, age, origin and social conditions as the most common characteristics targeted

*“Showing the Nation as a besieged city or as a city infiltrated by people who want to ruin it, creates a consensus based on fear and hatred”* according to the Historian Anne-Marie Thiesse. Covid-19 has resurrected old rhetoric and stereotypes: some groups would be unable to adapt. Poor people wouldn’t be concerned neither. These groups embody “the curse” or the “internal/interior enemy” the dominant group must declare war on. Also, other groups, as for example, Muslims are portrayed as the “enemy”, stating that “they” take advantage of the situation by instating the “Great replacement”.

## Fear of the “Other” and great replacement

In many countries monitored, refugees and migrants are perceived as responsible for spreading the virus, and there has been deliberate attempts by politicians to link the two – as well as to downplay the virus in comparison to the ‘threat of migration’, as Viktor Orban did in the beginning of the pandemic. This is not the first time this hate trend is disseminated. In the early 20th century, doctors and institutions developed a keen interest in “hygienic medicine” as a new field to be explored. Some specialists drew comparisons between health risks and economic benefit migration could lead to. They also regarded strangers both as diseases’ carriers and transmitters of their own hereditary characteristics. The danger “they bring” was assessed, and risks for “the population and the race” were seriously considered. For this reason, migrants were targeted as a national curse. Medical policies implemented before World War II strived to combat migration. Medicine was used as a scientific tool. In fact, scientific information has tremendous influence on people.

On various, even some of the largest media, in the user-generated comments sections, our Slovenian partner has identified increased and more graphic hate speech toward refugees and migrants in rela-

tion to the pandemic. Refugees and migrants are perceived as a health threat, because they supposedly disseminate the virus uncontrollably. This theory actually builds upon some of the previous hate theories, present on social media before the pandemic, regarding refugees and migrants bringing various deadly diseases with them. Some media promote click-bait titles about apprehended migrants having fever and other symptoms of infection, which presumably raises fear in people and ignites the “fuse” for hateful comments. In Latvia, hate speech occasionally targets migrants and refugees blaming them for spreading the virus within the EU. The virus is presented a “by-product of open borders”.

In Austria, the daily newspaper Oe24 published an article with the title “*Virus, Terror: Why the new asylum-storm is so dangerous*” and the following sub-headline “*Migrants could be infected with the coronavirus. And in masses terrorists want to infiltrate’, warn secret service experts. The Greeks are still keeping the EU’s external borders closed*”. Another example is the FPÖ (right-wing Freedom Party Austria) politician, Mario Kunsak who shares an article of the heute.at, a daily free of cost news portal, on Facebook. When “advertising” this article about migration and pandemic, he uses the word “*Asylant*” (a negatively connoted word in the German speaking context used to devalue asylum seeking). He also portrays the “untested” “asylants” as specifically dangerous.

In Germany, right-wing extremists use the closing of national borders to avoid the spreading of Covid-19 as proof that closing national borders is indeed possible and according to them “necessary”. They claim that, therefore, the opening of German borders to refugees in 2015 was a deliberate strategy by the German government to further the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement”. Furthermore, the arrival of refugees in Europe, especially in Greece, is likened to the spread of the Coronavirus. The comparison to a virus is dehumanising refugees and is used to propagate drastic (even violent) actions against them. Same in Slovenia, content disseminated on social media refer to the same concept of “Great replacement”. It states that the country lockdown and quarantine were all a plan of NGOs and members of left parties for bringing migrants into the country without any resistance. It seems Covid-19 gives haters just another “excuse” for instigating hate speech against refugees and migrants.

In France, the “great replacement” connected to the so-called “islamisation” of the country has also been used by far-right influencers. On Twitter, the extremist account “Napoléon” has shared an anti-Muslim analysis of the ban of alcohol by the Prefect of Aisne. He stated that the Prefect was Muslim due to his Arabic name and that the decision was taken because of the application of Shariah. According to this conspiracy theory, it was a clear proof that Muslims were taken benefit of the pandemic context for continuing the “islamisation” of the country.

### ***“Internal enemy”: minorities and social disadvantaged groups***

The pandemic context turns the light on other types of hate speech based on origins and social conditions. In France, the right-wing newspaper *Valeurs Actuelles* articles contribute to spread racist contents by targeting popular areas. For instance, the newspaper ran as a headline: “*Barbès, Château Rouge, La Chapelle: areas where people laugh at shelter in place measures*”. These aforementioned areas of Paris are among the most popular ones. In other words, this headline aims at targeting a group of persons based on origins and social class. The lockdown is presented as not respected in some working-class areas because of the concentration of “immigrants” and “poor people”.

In Italy, as well as all the other countries, most of the hate and anger was diverted towards disadvantaged groups, especially those without stable housing and people from poor neighbourhoods who still gather, as for instance the case of the “Easter barbecue” organised on the rooftop of a building in a

disadvantaged area of Palermo<sup>7</sup>. It is somehow a new phenomenon: the polarisation seems to be between the “good citizens” who are responsible and stay at home against the “others”, “the enemies” who are disloyal against the country and considered as a public treat and an obstacle towards the rapid resolution of the crisis. Our Czech partner also underlines that there are some examples on how anti-Romani racism is being exploited during the pandemic. Anti-Roma narrative have also been observed in Croatia on unexpected pages and groups.

## **Misogyny and cyber-harassment**

Many reported cases, as always, contain hateful content directed against people and groups due to more than one characteristic. Online intersectional hate speech is a highly perceived phenomenon also amidst the Covid-19 hate speech trends.

Hate speech directed specifically at women was also observed, targeting female journalists, defenders of human rights, politicians as well as Muslim women. In Croatia, the most disseminated hate message is connected to the incident on Easter in the city of Split and it triggered a lot of hatred on social media. The incident happened when a group of men organised a protest in front of a church to express support for the Catholic priest that held a mass despite the ban of assemblies. The journalist that came to the church for reporting on the violation of the ban on assemblies was physically attacked. After the incident, a group of men gathered in front of the church, highlighted the banner with the hateful message “journalists - worms” and shouted racist salute “Ready for the Homeland”, the local equivalent of the “Sieg Heil” salute. The priest joined the group of men and is visible in the video standing behind the racist insignia. Photos and videos with this message were widely spread through mass media and social networks<sup>8</sup>. Although the mass media reported about this incident as an attack on journalists, a lot of hate speech comments regarding the journalist occurred on social media.

In Austria, another narrative shared by (far) right-wing actors is that migrant women are being preferred throughout this corona crisis. Even a hashtag is being circulated: #migrant-preference for sharing the following hateful fake news that border restrictions are stricter for Austrians than for “migrants”. The message is spread that no one is allowed to leave the country. Nonetheless if a “migrant” especially a woman only says “asylum” at the border, the person can pass. Moreover, intersectional hate speech has been directed against Muslim women. In a conspiratorial article posted on the website “fisch und fleisch”, Muslims women are presented as resistant to the coronavirus.

In France, since the beginning of the lockdown, women including young women are victims of hateful and cyber-harassment campaigns. There is a resurgence of so-called “fisha accounts” on SnapChat which are used for spreading revenge porn content<sup>9</sup>. The same phenomenon has been observed on Telegram: popular channels are used for disseminating “raids” campaigns in which followers are invited to follow Instagram online stories of young women for asking them to send nudes which will be then registered and published on other accounts.

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<sup>7</sup> Palermo Today, VIDEO | Pasqua con grigliata sui tetti dei palazzi allo Sperone: il Coronavirus non ferma le "arrustute", 12/04/2020: <https://www.palermotoday.it/cronaca/coronavirus-pasqua-grigliate-tetti-sperone.html>

<sup>8</sup> Telegram, Zamaskirani muškarci stali su sa splitskim župnikom pred crkvu, s natpisima ZDS i 'Novinari crvi'. Policija istražuje, 12.04.2020: <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/zamaskirani-muskarci-stali-su-sa-splitskim-zupnikom-pred-crkvu-s-natpisima-zds-i-novinari-crvi-policija-istrazuje/>

<sup>9</sup> Le Monde, “Harcèlement sexuel : avec le confinement, le retour en force des comptes « fisha » sur les réseaux sociaux”, et , 07 avril 2020: [https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2020/04/07/harcèlement-sexuel-avec-le-confinement-le-retour-en-force-des-comptes-fisha-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux\\_6035853\\_4408996.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2020/04/07/harcèlement-sexuel-avec-le-confinement-le-retour-en-force-des-comptes-fisha-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux_6035853_4408996.html)

## Conclusion

Combating hate speech is always a necessary and crucial need even more in contexts of pandemics. Indeed, conspiracy theories, misinformation and racist content are increasingly prevalent in times of global crises including health, economic and social ones. The current crisis is a breeding ground for online hate speech. Also, because there are so many theories broadly disseminated and circulating, it could easily lead into dividing people furthermore based on their opinion and characteristics.

One main challenge will be the intensification of the phenomenon of social “bubbles”, where different people have profoundly different responses to the official decisions in their countries based on the information they receive through social media. It gives even more credibility to misinformation in some people’s minds, especially those who are already looking for scapegoats. It also contributes to form “us versus them” mentality using scapegoating mechanism, where target groups – The Others - are perceived as potential threat and enemy.

Government, media and IT Companies have an important responsibility in countering these forms of hate content, and while there has been an increasing application of automated tools by social media companies to weed out hate speech online, algorithms and automatic moderation clearly have not managed to fulfil their purpose.

Fostering education in *the field of hate speech online seems to be one of the most relevant and effective tools in order to* tackle this challenge. Also, it is crucial to provide legal, psychological and social support to specifically help people who are being attacked because of their actual origins, social conditions, gender, etc. Many good practices have already been developed in monitored countries and within the sCAN partnership, such as the Facing Facts Online courses on hate speech, and Research papers as well as Monitoring tools - they must be continued and strengthened, especially when the lockdown period is over.

## Resources

Conspiracy Watch, *Online world map of conspiracy theories related to coronavirus*, 2020:  
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