



Platforms, Experts, Tools: Specialised Cyber-Activists Network

Hotspots of Hate

The online responsibility of public figures



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 counteracting 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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Content

About the Project 2

Introduction..... 4

Hate speech by public figures rarely met with consequences..... 5

The “grey area” of hate and incitement..... 7

Moderation is key..... 8

Consequences for society..... 9

Conclusion 9

References..... 11

Introduction

Social media have not only changed the way we communicate and interact, but also shape public opinion and political debate as more and more people use social media as their primary source of political information. A recent study by Reuters found, that the internet and especially social media have replaced traditional news sources like printed newspapers and television as primary news sources, in particular for younger audiences.¹

Public figures such as politicians, journalists and online influencers have a high credibility with their audience. They utilise their social media profiles to communicate with their followers almost instantly and shape their perception when a given situation is developing. With their enormous reach and the quantity of content, social media are the perfect tool to influence public opinion. Their wide reach is the reason they bear special responsibility when it comes to spreading disinformation or implicit (or sometimes explicit) incitement to hatred.

In several European countries, leading politicians and other public figures use their online presence to incite hatred or to encourage hate speech by posting biased and populist comments to their social media profiles. Those “hate influencers” use similar communication methods as classical influencers, but actively promote hate speech on their channels. Even if their posts do not constitute illegal hate speech themselves, they incite hatred and stimulate hate speech in the comment sections. As the original post doesn’t always involve explicit incitement to hatred, it can be challenging to counter the instance while upholding freedom of expression. If the original post remains online, it continues to attract hateful comments.

A culture of online communication in which hate speech appears to be accepted (or even encouraged) can lead to a poisoned political debate and violent threats against the perceived political “enemy” and can even turn violent.

In addition to the responsibility of public figures not to disseminate or encourage hate speech and to effectively moderate the comments on their social media profiles, civil society has the responsibility to discourage hate speech and show solidarity with the people and communities targeted online.

Nine partner organisations provided input and contributed with their extensive experience to this analytical paper on the online responsibility of public figures:

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

Since the scope of the sCAN project does not allow for the participating organisations to provide an extensive picture of hate speech “hot spots” on social media, we decided to focus on exemplary case studies.

¹ Reuters Institute (2019). *Digital News Report 2019*. Available at <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/> (last accessed 13.12.2019).

Hate speech by public figures rarely met with consequences

Several project partners reported that leading politicians and other public figures in their countries use their online presence to incite hatred or directly spread hate speech. This is particularly worrisome, as those people are seen as role models by their followers and can therefore normalise hate speech and prejudices as part of everyday communications. This can also influence users who did not hold discriminatory views before.

In an Italian example, the newspaper *Libero* published an article online attacking climate activist Greta Thunberg using a play-on-words combining the girl's name and the Italian insult "cretina" (i.e. idiot) to create the term "Gretina"². A few months later, in occasion of Fridays for Future, a global strike in defence of the climate inspired by the young Swedish girl, *Libero's* editor-in-chief Vittorio Feltri posted on his personal Twitter account comparing Greta to Hitler and Stalin. The tweet received 2726 likes but was strongly criticized on Twitter as well as on other platforms and newspapers. Nonetheless, Feltri received support from wide segments of the public and there have been no negative consequences. Even though the tweet contained hate speech, it has not been removed from the social network.

In several European countries, online hate speech is also spread by politicians. A member of a Slovenian far-right political party published a post spreading hate about the influence of the LGBT community on children, portraying the LGBT community as a threat to a "normal" way of life and linking LGBT with paedophiles. With this, the author plays on protective parental emotions, primarily inciting fear for "our" children to become "poisoned" by the LGBT movement. The post contains incitement to hatred and exclusion. Most of the comments reproduce hate against LGBT and even include calls for physical violence.

In Austria, the topic of "kosher butchering" triggered a heated debate in 2018. Under the pretext of animal welfare, the highest official of the administrative of Lower Austria, Gottfried Waldhäusl (FPÖ), had suggested to create de facto lists of names of Jewish citizens in order to keep track of the kosher (and halal) meat consumption. The online debate built upon fake news spread by the FPÖ and specific FPÖ politicians, which triggered a huge amount of online hate speech against people with a Jewish and a Muslim religious affiliation. The federal government and Lower Austria's governor refused to register customers.

In the Czech Republic, the assistant to Jaroslav Foldyna, a member of the Czech parliament for the Social Democratic party, published an article titled "Is Future of Europe Islamic?"³. In the article, Mr. Kraft incited hatred towards Muslims and migrants, inter alia calling for military action against refugees arriving by boat. Jaroslav Foldyna endorsed the article and its social media iterations and refused to take disciplinary actions against his assistant.

In August 2019, Matteo Salvini, at that time the Italian Interior Minister, posted an antigypsyist tweet threatening the forced eviction of informal Roma settlements in Italy.⁴ Salvini's racist statement was

² *Libero* (19 April 2019). Greta Thunberg, Pietro Senaldi difende il titolo di *Libero*: perché i rompiballe siete voi. Available at <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/opinioni/13454031/greta-thunberg-senaldi-difende-titolo-libero-rompiballe-siete-voi.html>;

Libero (20 April 2019). Vittorio Feltri demolisce Greta Thunberg: "Rompiballe per definizione. E qualche imbecille a Bergamo..." <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/personaggi/13454270/vittorio-feltri-greta-thunberg-rompiballe-per-definizione-ci-ammorba.html> (last accessed 20.01.2020).

³ Walter Kraft (2019). Je budoucnost Evropy islámská? Available at <http://www.stret-civilizaci.cz/walter-kraft-je-budoucnost-evropy-islamska> (last accessed 19.12.2019).

⁴ *The Independent* (3 August 2019). Italy's Salvini launches racist attack against 'dirty gypsy' woman: 'The bulldozer is arriving soon'. Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/italy-salvini-gypsy-attack-racist-twitter-lega-far-right-a9037706.html>;

Euronews (2 August 2019). Italy's Matteo Salvini accused of racism after 'dirty gypsy' comments. Available at

released on the eve of the Porrajmos, the European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day, provoking a wave of indignation among the political spectrum. Many public figures and politicians responded to Salvini trying to counter his racist remark. However, the posts did not lead to serious consequences for him or his political party. On the contrary, his popularity remained steady at 38%⁵.

During a press conference⁶ in 2018, the president of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman, cited manipulated figures about employment rates among the Czech Roma population. He stated that only 10% of Roma living in the Czech Republic are working. His statements were widely discussed and disseminated on social media. However, there is no institution in the Czech Republic that collects ethnically segregated data on employment. Although we cannot say that false statistics are per se hate speech, disinformation about Roma (un)employment based on scarce data incites hatred and supports the antigypsyist trope that Roma are parasites on the social benefits system, especially when coming from the country's top political authority.

While in the above-mentioned cases, the hate speech did not appear to have any consequences for the account owners, there are examples in which hate content was removed, their profiles banned or they faced offline consequences. In Austria, Martin Sellner, head of the Identitarian Movement, continuously and regularly publishes videos containing discriminatory and extreme right content on his YouTube channel with 115.000 sub-scribers. Some of his videos have been removed after being reported to YouTube and official reporting services. His accounts on Facebook, Twitter and/or YouTube as well as other social media platforms have been regularly banned. Nevertheless, the accounts were available again after a short time.

In France, well-known anti-Muslim commentator Eric Zemmour gave a speech at the "Convention de la Droite" ("Convention of the Right") in which he violently attacked Muslims as "migrant colonisers" whilst comparing Islam to Nazism. The live broadcasting of his speech on a well-known TV channel was promoted on his official social media pages and widely discussed on several public accounts with large following and groups acting as a "fan club". In reaction to these posts, the civil society initiative "Sleeping Giants" has launched a successful campaign calling for brands to stop advertising on his shows. Furthermore, Eric Zemmour has already been sentenced several times for anti-Muslim hate speech, including but not limited to incitement of racial hatred.

In Croatia, a member of the assembly of the city of Rijeka made a statement on radio, evoking the racist expression "Hang Serbs to the willow trees" (in Croatian, this is a short rhyme: "Srbe na vrbe"). She asserted that since Rijeka only has a small population of Serbs (6,5%), the city does not need many willow trees. After a public outcry, she resigned from the position of the president of the Council for national minorities of the Assembly. However, she remained a representative in Rijeka's city assembly.

Croatian diplomat Elizabeta Mađarević, first secretary of the Croatian Embassy in Germany, posted an image of the Adriatic sea on Facebook with the caption "Pure and authentic Europe. Just white Europeans as it used to be only 30 years ago in the whole Europe. This should be a good advertisement for vacations. One would think this is no longer possible but luckily, it is." She already had a history of xenophobic and homophobic posts and rejected the idea of universal human rights. In reaction to the hate speech posted on Facebook, Ms. Mađarević has been suspended and withdrawn from her position in the embassy.

<https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/02/italy-s-matteo-salvini-accused-of-racism-after-dirty-gypsy-comments> (last accessed 20.01.2020).

⁵ TG.La 7 (29 July 2019). Il sondaggio politico di lunedì 29 luglio 2019. Available at <https://tg.la7.it/sondaggi/il-sondaggio-politico-di-luned%C3%AC-29-luglio-2019-29-07-2019-141070>; Today (23 August 2019). Il verdetto dei sondaggi, la crisi d'agosto punisce la Lega: "Salvini ha sbagliato i tempi". Available at <http://www.today.it/politica/sondaggi-agosto-2019.html> (last accessed 20.01.2020).

⁶ Idnes.cz (2018). Za komunismu netrpěli, ani se nehlásí ke své národnosti, uráží Zeman Romy. Available at https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/zeman-romove-zamestnani-fotografie-narodnost-urazky.A181005_114131_domaci_kop (last accessed 19.12.2019).

The “grey area” of hate and incitement

Hate speech is not always spread in this overt form, however. It is important to keep in mind that many far-right figures have a deep knowledge of the legal antiracist framework of their countries and manage to remain in the “grey area”.

A member of a Slovenian far-right political party posted insults against african foreigners, mocking their alleged lesser mental abilities and inciting their exclusion from the supposedly more developed world. The post highlighted the social climate of current anti-refugees mentality where it is common to insult refugees or people of African or Asian descent and their supposed supporters. Even though the author of the original post didn't answer to any of the comments, he did “like” some comments containing hate speech and “warnings” about a supposedly changing European cultural and racial profile.

In Austria, the vice mayor of Vienna, a member of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), published a picture on Facebook, showing a group of women (wearing headscarves) and children, meeting and having a picnic in a park in Vienna. He added the following comment to the picture: “No far-distance travel picture, but strange impressions from the ‘Türkenschanzpark’ [a park in Vienna]. This is what it looks like on our ‘Viennese’ leisure oases...”. The posting did not contain illegal hate speech, but incited hateful comments by implying that women with headscarves make Austrian parks “strange”. By making a connection to a “far distance travel picture”, he insinuated that women wearing headscarves are foreign and not part of Austrian society.

Janis Dombrova, a member of the Latvian parliament for the right-wing nationalist party “National Union” (Nacionālā apvienība), published an article “Time of fake students will come to an end soon” on the website of the National Union and shared it through social networks. Mr. Dombrova is regularly asserting that the majority of foreign students from non-EU countries arrive in Latvia for employment purposes and not for studies. He also asserts that foreign students are a threat to the economy and local businesses and to the Latvian language and culture. His posts provoke xenophobic and racist speech by other internet users. With more than 7,000 followers on Facebook and 4,600 followers on Twitter, Mr. Dombrova has a large influence on Latvian political debate. The local anti-migrant Facebook group “Latvija nav iebrauktuve” regularly reposts his posts.

Some online influencers and other public figures employ specific communication strategies to incite hatred and encourage hate speech from their followers without crossing the legal threshold themselves.

For example, Czech politician Tomio Okamura is regularly using his social media channels to spread fake news and incite hatred against migrants, Muslims, Roma and the LGBT community. Many of Okamura's posts pretend to be conveying facts and warnings in the public interest, but their meta-communication reinforces the principle of collective blame. Mr. Okamura doesn't offer citations or reference his sources and often uses examples from other countries that the average monolingual Czech social media user is unable to verify. Coming from an elected official, his authoritatively framed communications fuel the intensifying atmosphere of hatred and xenophobia in the Czech Republic.

When a police agent attacked and killed his colleagues at the Prefecture of Police in Paris in October 2019, French politician Marion Maréchal reacted on Twitter by linking the attack with Islamist terrorism. Maréchal, granddaughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen who founded the far-right party Front National, is the new face for the extreme Right Wing in France. Because of her influence, the simple inclusion of the word “l'islamisme” in relation to the three fatalities was enough to provoke anti-Muslim hate speech and anti-government rhetoric.

Marion Maréchal is supported by anonymous French influencer “Napoléon”, whose twitter account has 23.700 followers. The account is also associated with the conservative anti-LGBTIQ “La Manif pour

Tous". It uses a very specific communication strategy: according to Nicolas Vanderbiest from the University of Louvain, the account is "far from the traditional activist who share frantically their candidate's messages".⁷ Instead of posting about specific candidates or politicians, "Napoléon" disseminates biased news on a wide range of topics. For example, "Napoléon" has posted a lot about violence and crimes against women, which is an important and relevant debate in French society. However, he utilizes this debate to incite hatred against immigrants by implying that only migrants – especially Muslim migrants – are responsible for violence against women.

In Italy, the editor in chief of the newspaper La Verità attacked migrants on Twitter, posting content intended to incite fear and spread fearful stereotypes against them⁸. By creating a purported syllogism between sea arrivals of migrants and crimes committed in Italy, he employs a rhetoric of invasion to depict migrants as dangerous criminals, or even terrorists, who came to Italy to commit crimes against the Italian population.

In Germany, YouTube-Influencer "Leon-Lovelock" provides a platform for antisemitic conspiracy theories among motivational fitness or lifestyle videos. His channel has more than 380.000 followers and mostly caters to young viewers. With a "just-asking-questions" mentality, he uncritically reproduces conspiracy theories and thus legitimizes them as seemingly viable alternatives to scientific findings.

Moderation is key

In order to minimise hate speech online, it is important that public figures accept the responsibility to moderate the comments on their profiles. Especially for channels with wide reach and a large audience, identifiable and consistent moderation is key. Research shows, however, that account owners do not take this responsibility seriously enough. Oftentimes, biased and sensational reporting reinforces a spiral of hatred in the comment sections. But even a well-balanced reporting can face incitement and calls for violence in the comments, if there is no effective moderation.

In Hungary, an originally fun and humorous meme-site called "Tibi atya" (Tibi priest), triggered a series of anti-LGBT hate speech by posting about LGBT rights in a defamatory tone several times in 2019.

In Germany, the lack of comment moderation was particularly striking among a number of high-reach videos on the YouTube channels of Spiegel TV, a media outlet associated with well-known political magazine Der Spiegel. In the comments on a Spiegel TV report with over 500,000 views on homeless squatters referred to as Roma in Mallorca, a "tough" crackdown by the state is called for. The racist term "Zigeuner" ("Gypsy") was also introduced into the debate. As a result, the discussion escalated. At first, commenters suggested that the owners of the squatted house could engage "criminal thugs" for the eviction. Thereupon some users stated to be willing to volunteer for this and made references to appropriate skills and the availability of various weapons. Finally, the discussion escalated in such a way that killing fantasies were openly exchanged and decisively described. Particularly drastic comments received many likes.

Not only media outlets, but influential social media channels in general, should take their responsibility to moderate more seriously. For this, it is paramount that account holders adopt a netiquette or similar communication rules for their channels and enforce them effectively.

⁷ Adrien Sénécat (2016). "Prince de l'amour", le roi de l'intox sur Twitter. Available at https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/12/21/prince-de-l-amour-le-roi-de-l-intox-sur-twitter_5052636_4355770.html (last accessed 10.12.2019).

⁸ Maurizio Belpietro (22 September 2019). Tweet available at <https://twitter.com/BelpietroTweet/status/1176008877499912192> (last accessed 20.01.2020).

Consequences for society

Hate speech disseminated or encouraged by officials can have serious consequences for the culture of communication in democratic societies. A culture of online communication in which hate speech appears to be accepted (or even encouraged) by politicians and prominent public figures can lead to a poisoned political debate and violent threats against the perceived political “enemy”. This normalization of hate speech then boils down to all levels of society, weakening the social fabric and creating an atmosphere of disrespect at best and of pure hate at worst. Furthermore, as online and offline cannot be considered separate spheres of life anymore, online threats can easily turn into offline harassment.

In Austria, author for the online magazine Vice, Alexandra Stanić, was targeted with a “shitstorm” of hate speech after her column titled “Warum ich Österreich hasse” (translation: Why I hate Austria) was widely shared on social media. In this column Alexandra Stanić writes about her experiences with racism and her perception and resentment of Austrian politics. As a consequence, she announced turning off her phone for a few days, while friends would sort out her messages. This is an example of how hate speech can lead to the (temporary) exclusion of the targeted persons from online public discourse. However, she also received solidarity and encouraging messages from social media users and politicians.

In Latvia, Janis Dombrova’s statements allegedly have resonated outside the online space. According to information received from a representative of Indian students, an organized group of people has been conducting raids to kebab restaurants on the lookout for different violations. The members of this group are trying to provoke persons employed in these places and compete in who submits more complaints to different inspections such as the Food and Veterinary Service, the State Language Inspectorate, and the State Labour Inspectorate. In order to avoid harassment, some owners of kebab restaurants even began renaming their restaurants.

In more drastic cases, persons actively fighting hate speech online and offline are targeted with hate campaigns ranging from discrediting or degrading posts to death threats. Right-wing extremist propaganda online creates a basis for legitimizing offline violence. The murder of former German district president Walter Lübcke in June 2019, for which the prime suspect is a right-wing extremist with ties to the neo-Nazi group Combat 18⁹, can be seen as tragic example for this. Since a video of his statement in support of taking in refugees went viral in 2015, Mr. Lübcke faced countless threats of violence and death threats online. After his murder, right-wing extremists trivialized or even glorified the murder in online discussions.

Conclusion

The developments highlighted above demonstrate the importance of civil society organisations and the public to work together to combat hate speech and ensure an online sphere where all people can express their opinions freely and safely. The possibilities for this are manifold.

Apart from removing manifestly illegal content from their platforms, social media companies should take greater efforts to enforce their community guidelines effectively and encourage respectful online communication. Politicians and news outlets need to take their responsibility to moderate comments on their profiles and channels more seriously.

Users can also challenge hateful expressions with counter speech, deconstruct hateful stereotypes and debunk fake news and manipulation. It is also important to express solidarity and support for targeted individuals and communities.

⁹ Der Spiegel (2019). Verdächtiger hatte offenbar Kontakt zu militanten Neonazis von "Combat 18". Available at <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/walter-luebcke-verdaechtiger-hatte-offenbar-kontakt-zu-militanten-neonazis-a-1272817.html> (last accessed 19.12.2019).

Civil society initiatives like the Sleeping Giants pursue another approach. They lobby popular brands and companies to stop advertising on hateful content. This form of advertising boycott is an attempt to put economic pressure on actors to moderate their online presence.

In the case of public figures deliberately encouraging hate speech by remaining in the grey area of hate and posting inflammatory content that does not cross into illegality itself, effort countering hate speech need to be more nuanced. Social media companies need to examine these instances closely and start exploring ways for addressing it on their massive scales.

Incitement works like a single match causing an entire forest to catch fire, therefore hotspots of online hate need special attention from social media companies: they cannot be ignored, nor underestimated.

Civil society organisations countering hate speech cannot stem the tide by themselves. The growing social engagement of users is a positive sign.

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