

ACADEMIA

Hate Speech in the Digital Era

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The conviction that hate speech is somehow acceptable in online communication may have disastrous consequences, threatening to turn us into a hostile society devoid of empathy or even basic manners.

Ever since the Internet became a permanent part of everyday life, some people have called it – sometimes very vocally – a space filled with aggression, cruelty, and wrongdoing. In recent years, there has been a popular tendency in Poland to describe all these negative online phenomena using the noun “*hejt*” (borrowed from the English “hate”). Worldwide, numerous NGOs and many scholars studying the Internet are warning that there is an increasing need for a comprehensive program of prevention and education aimed at combatting hate speech online. However, the question we should be asking in the first place is this: What are the specific mechanisms that promote online aggression? In other words, why do some people, after turning on their computers and going online, sometimes turn into digital barbarians who are completely devoid of empathy and recklessly attack other Internet users? Clearly, that is something we still know too little about.

What the victims of online hate speech must feel is not hard to guess: humiliation, fear, and anger. A virtual, online attack is mentally as painful as one in the non-virtual world, even more so as we perform more and more everyday activities online and the importance of the Internet in our daily lives grows every year. But what are the perpetrators of online hate speech, often known as Internet “trolls,” actually feeling? Research by Hatice Odacı and Çiğdem Çelik from Karadeniz Technical University in Turkey has found that such people exhibit a certain combination of personality traits that favor various problematic behaviors: namely, a high level of aggression in combination with... shyness. The Internet offers many people a very strong sense of anonymity, which translates into a sense of security, a feeling that is extremely important for shy people in social contacts. The Internet gives them a space where they can aggressively attack others without feeling embarrassed. More often than not, such aggression is not aimed against anyone or anything in particular; it is aggression for the sake of aggression.

When we go online, we often lapse into a condition that could be described as “the paradox of virtual presence.” Thousands, or indeed even millions, of other Internet users may be present on the same website at

the same time, but we have absolutely no idea who they are. We can only see the signs of their presence in cyberspace, a virtual version of Plato’s cave, where what we see on computer screens are mere reflections of their real emotions and beliefs. Such a situation may in some cases prompt us to dehumanize other Internet users: they can’t be seen, so it’s easier to attack and insult them. Research by Andrea Flores and Carrie James from Harvard University has shown that the Internet is dominated by extremely individualistic thinking: “whatever suits me is also right.” Such thinking is just one step away from the belief that doing harm to another human being in cyberspace is something acceptable.

Discussions concerning the Internet often involve the extremely dangerous argument that online aggression and hate speech are “merely a certain convention.” In social media, there are groups whose members engage in rivalry based on whose behavior is more insulting and aggressive. What emerges from such behavior is a pathological hierarchy of hatred. Indeed, the findings of numerous studies in the field of Internet psychology present one consistent conclusion: many people (especially the young) believe that conventions about what is acceptable and permissible on the Internet are completely different from the conventions existing outside the Internet. The impression is that what happens there is somehow “not for real,” because it becomes blurred in the infinite online universe. The conviction that hate speech is somehow acceptable in online communication may have disastrous consequences for all of us, in both micro- and macrosocial dimensions, threatening to turn us into a hostile society devoid of empathy or even basic, everyday manners.

The Internet has given us more than any other tool in the history of mankind. However, it is still at the “infant stage” of development. The new technologies have opened up infinite possibilities – some beneficial and developmental, others that may have dramatic consequences. Research shows that we must react, that we need to rethink the philosophy of the Internet. Otherwise, it may soon be too late. ■