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MASTER NARRATIVES
OF HATE SPEECH

A Multimodal Analysis

PAOLO 
LOFFREDO

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INTRODUCTION

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out Hate, only love can do that.*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.¹

A powerful quote is always a good way to begin an Introduction. In this case, the quote is particularly poignant as it sets things straight: darkness resists light as hate resists love, implying that hate is as detrimental as darkness, and both are morally unacceptable. Yet eradicating hate by the sole power of love and light is an arduous task, especially in a world in which this basic emotion (Ekman 1999) is constantly on the rise, becoming one of the most globally disputed social phenomena involving incidents of violence, discrimination and criminal activity (Sellars 2016).

The expressive manifestation of hate, more commonly known as hate speech, is inclusive as it does not exclude or exempt anyone from becoming its victims. In its many forms and shapes, hate speech could manifest itself in more recognizable semblances, such as homophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, bigotry, political disparagement, misogyny, harassment, but it can also adopt less recognizable disguises and appear in the discursive representations of hateful falsity, denialism, conspiracy, and even radicalization which is the driving force of all hate-motivated speech at all levels of severity, including terrorism. Physical violence is indeed a worrying byproduct of hate speech which means that verbal forms can easily turn into hate crimes punishable by law. Whether the so-called haters express themselves online or in person, it is primarily through the use of language, symbols and images that the representations of individual and group identities contribute to the shaping of the discourses of hate.

To contrast this unprecedented rise of hate speech, all western democracies² who are signatories of international agreements, such as the *United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (1969),³ the *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms*

¹ Source: "Loving Your Enemies" Sermon, Christmas Day 1957.

² The term western democracies is used in this context in reference to European countries, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-elimination-all-forms-racial>

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of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981),⁴ and the more recent *United Nations (UN) Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech* (2019),⁵ have pledged to be responsible and accountable for banning, restricting, and punishing offensive and hateful speech in their own countries. In particular, the *UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech* agreement has documented the recent exacerbation of hate speech on multiple channels of communication, establishing the principles and values of human rights standards to be respected internationally. Within this frame of reference, and in this same document, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, warns against using hate speech to provoke discrimination and intolerance towards vulnerable members of society, emphasizing that:

*Hate speech is in itself an attack on tolerance, inclusion, diversity and the very essence of our human rights norms and principles. More broadly, it undermines social cohesion, erodes shared values, and can lay the foundation for violence, setting back the peace, stability, sustainable development and the fulfillment of human rights for all.*⁶

As hate speech does not occur in a vacuum, it is described by using a plurality of labels according to the conception of the hate phenomenon taking place within a specific context. For example, words such as *dangerous* or *offensive speech* might be used more to describe rumor or fearmongering, while reference to *violent speech behaviors* might be more fitting when describing racial hate, and terrorism. Expressions such as *hate-induced language, hate-inspired/motivated/triggered speech or behaviors* are also quite commonly encountered in the literature about hate speech as well as in the present narratives, but they all have a common denominator: a substratum of verbal, non-verbal, visual and non-visual language instantiations, including material, mental, and relational social practices embedded in the broad affective state of hatred. There are of course nuances of meaning that are inherent to these different expressions, but the main issue here is the implicature involved in identifying fixed characteristics that can be attributed to the multifold emotional dimension of hate and its countless manifestations (Ekman 1999).

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-all-forms-intolerance-and-discrimination>

⁵ <https://www.un.org/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/hate-speech-strategy.shtml>

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Understanding what hate speech is and how it works is not simply a matter of definitions, but it is a necessary one especially to discern when this kind of speech reaches dangerous levels that would warrant legal regulation. In facilitating the task of discriminating what constitutes hate speech, one must consider at least three major aspects. The first is that hate speech gains momentum in time – this occurs because it inhabits the realm of a range of topics, such as science, health, the environment, immigration, racism, terrorism, and politics; after a while, hate speech repertoires become ubiquitous. The second and very closely related aspect is based on the fact that in a digitalized world, hate speech spreads across every media channel and every platform until these repertoires become part of a normalized conversation, thus becoming even more difficult to discern. The third aspect is dependent on contextual circumstances in that hate speech also comes in different shades as it is adapted, attenuated or intensified to fit the case in point.

From the above, one might assume that the hate speech phenomenon is somehow always ‘difficult to explain’ or ‘there is never a single definition’ or there are always ‘fuzzy boundaries.’ In all probability, this seems to be an attempt to conceal the lack of certainty or firmness of opinions regarding this and other critical issues of our times whose definitions usually span between two value-laden extremes, such as *hard* as opposed to *soft*, *extreme/far* as opposed to *normal/regular* formulations. The elusiveness of populism as a movement, party or ideology is a fitting example, much like the indefinability of right/left political paradigms, censorship rights, conspiracy theories, freedom of expression, and the dispute regarding the credibility of scientific evidence (Rasulo 2017b).

Hate speech, as mentioned, needs a space to become performative, or to constitute and reconstitute reality through the performance of language, gesture and sign (Butler 1988), thus subverting the use of ordinary speech to commit non-ordinary discursive acts of violence. The most productive milieu in which hate speech can achieve its discursive goals and proliferate is the media. At its best, hate speech is disseminated indiscriminately through diverse media outlets, including social media platforms, creating a dangerous entanglement with discussions about other crucial societal issues. It follows that the media, especially news platforms on the Internet, are the source of data for this book’s master narratives as evidence is drawn from right-wing affiliated news networks, such as *Fox News* and the *New York Post*, alternative or independent networks such as *Breitbart News* and the *Digital Freedom Platform*, The social media network *Twitter* (in corsivo)

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has also provided sample tweets (Zappavigna 2011) investigated in Chapter Three.

While the general public in the US is definitely more familiar with *Fox News Network* and the *New York Post* and their political affiliations, some people might still be in doubt as to the position of alternative or independent outlets within the media landscape at large. In fact, in today's multifaceted media environment, it is not an easy task to distinguish between different types of media, especially when it comes to making a distinction between mainstream and alternative networks. Broadly speaking, the power and centrality of mainstream or more traditional outlets have long dominated mass media communication, influencing large numbers of people by exercising their role as major providers of information. In an ever-changing digitalized world, however, the media landscape has broadened its reach to include alternative communication platforms that encourage diverse conversations beyond established mainstream boundaries; these platforms also include social media networks (Zappavigna 2011). In particular, the enhancement of alternative communication *per se* is now consistently acquiring importance as a means of representation of the private sphere. One of the reasons is that this kind of communication provides the opportunity to voice one's beliefs, ideas and opinions, especially considering that the majority of ordinary people feel they are removed and disfranchised from mainstream media and the political or public spheres (Rasulo 2020b).

When the discussion about alternative communication shifts towards alternative media networks, the point of view necessarily changes as the above-mentioned good intentions that generally characterize alternative communication are not always fully respected in alternative spaces. Indeed, alongside the seemingly democratic function of alternative communication, another less worthy role, which is widely discussed in the narratives, is to facilitate the spreading of dangerous discourses, such as those involving discrimination, conspiracy, and hateful falsity; these can then gradually shift from their alternative fringe position to mainstream representation (Rasulo 2020b).

There is a caveat that should be considered before delving into more specific issues. The necessary and intense discussion about the role of the media, and alternative and right-wing media in particular, in the dissemination of hate speech must not distract from the real focus of this book's master narratives which is to argue that hate speech continues to resist prohibition and limitations, thus causing physical, psychological and reputational harm to groups and individuals, and affront to their dignity. No

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such discussion is possible, however, without involving media networks. Hate speech is familiarized in and through their channels, wreaking incalculable damage especially when responsibility as providers of correct, and unbiased information is consistently avoided, and their role as intermediaries between information and the general public is deliberately dismissed.

1. The Pyramid of Hate

The overall perspective of this book's master narratives is based on the ungainly issue of definitional implications of hate speech. In acknowledging the importance of approaching such an issue, even in terms of providing some sort of understanding of the many nuances of the term, a continuum metaphor is applied to explain the type, severity level and circumstances of the events contained in the single case studies. This construct is the Pyramid of Hate (Figure 1), devised by the Anti-Defamation League.⁷ Consisting of higher and lower levels or tiers, the Pyramid affords insight into how discursive representations of each group of attitudes escalate from one level to the other, becoming progressively more dangerous along the way, and more worryingly inclusive of social phenomena that represent real or perceived threat.

The first level of the Pyramid is self-explanatory as it comprises more familiar and perhaps less severe categories of hate speech embedded in discursive phenomena, such as *stereotyping*, *insensitive remarks*, *microaggressions*, and *non-inclusive language*. Also part of this first level of hate attitudes are other biased ones that can be considered

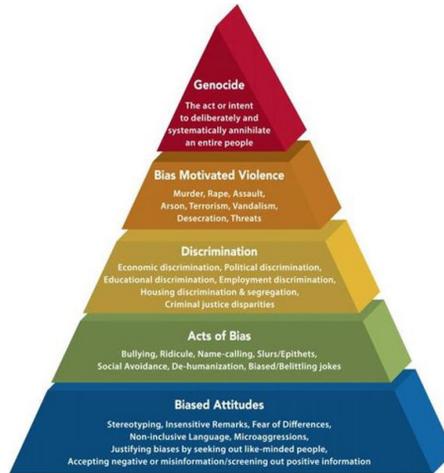


Figure 1. The Pyramid of Hate (Anti-Defamation League: <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/pyramid-of-hate.pdf>)

⁷ <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/pyramid-of-hate.pdf>

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as primers of more damaging behaviors (see Chapters Four and Five), and consist in spreading hateful falsity by *justifying biases, accepting negative or misinformation and screening out positive information*. The second level intensifies the degree of hate in biased speech acts that are recognizable in social practices such as *bullying, name-calling, slurs, social avoidance, de-humanization, and belittling jokes* (see Chapter Three). The third level of the pyramid presents discriminatory behaviors that are not always considered as having a hate speech matrix but, as the book argues, derive from the intersection of false claims, denialism, conspiracy and oppression that can cause survival or organizational problems, and hinder decision-making processes that are necessary in everyday life. These impediments are often overwhelming for the general public due to the pressure of *economic, political, social, and educational discrimination* deriving from this kind of hate speech (see Chapter Four). The fourth level of the Pyramid describes some of the most horrific instantiations of hate: *vandalism, threats and terrorism* (see Chapter Five). These attitudes also contain the seeds that lead to the fifth and final level of the Pyramid, the most horrific one, labeled Genocide; much of what happens during terrorist attacks and war can be ascribed to this level.

The Pyramid is to be read in its vertical and horizontal configuration. Vertically, the rationale is to explain how hate phenomena progress from one level to the other according to the degree of gravity, which means that each hate event should be viewed not so much as an isolated symptom of social malaise, as its horizontal reading would suggest, but as a driving force that connects to all others, which becomes clear in its vertical reading. More importantly, the upper levels are supported by the lower levels, as in any pyramid construction. The support of the lower-level attitudes in themselves might not appear to constitute imminent or worsening danger, but if both interpretative paths are applied, it becomes clear how seemingly innocuous hate-induced behaviors can escalate, and also become normalized through an intense disseminating process that often goes unnoticed. What the pyramid conveys in its fundamental simplicity is the idea that stereotypes, name-calling and jokes can give way to hateful speech, explaining the millennia-old practice of attributing undesirable traits to specific individuals, communities, minorities, and nationalities.⁸

In the case in point, by depicting women politicians as dangerous

⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974507/20210331_-_CRED_Report_-_FINAL_-_Web_Accessible.pdf

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individuals (Chapter Three), Dr. Fauci as a conspirator against his own country (Chapter Four), climate science as the destructor of a lifestyle, and radicalization as another way to belong to an ingroup (Chapter Five), ensuing violence, whether physical or verbal, becomes normalized and even expected in the minds of people. In other words, the Pyramid of Hate demonstrates that inequitable or false information, censorship, protest, and radicalization, occupying the higher levels of systemic discrimination or biased-motivated violence, are phenomena that are built upon the acceptance of behaviors described in the lower levels of the structure.

2. Book chapters

This book is the result of years of research into critical issues that have in many ways transformed society and its cultural, economic, political and religious institutions. The investigative work underlying these initial studies regarding issues of gender discrimination, civil injustice and criminal contagion and tactics (Rasulo 2017, 2018, 2021, 2022) has perfected this book's methodological structure, a complex and multi-layered framework which enables an all-round analysis of global conversations regarding political discourse and discrimination, environmental hazards and scientific discrediting, conspiracy infodemics and manipulation, radicalization and public subjugation. In their own way, and within their specific contexts, background literature, and analytical criteria and tools, these individual studies have prepared the ground for a more wide-ranging, but also in-depth analysis of the phenomenon under discussion. In fact, this book intends to go a step further and find a *fil rouge* that joins individual stories under the unifying structure of master narratives, and with a common denominator which is the all-pervading theme of hate speech. The underlying effort is to deal with the emotion/notion of hatred not as disconnected phenomena, each belonging to its own hate category with definitions and meanings, but as connected primers or consequences of all levels of hate speech.

The multi-layered notion of hate speech is expressed through diverse constructs of aggressive behaviors, such as bullying, shaming, and other discriminatory practices that provoke the hate-induced emotions of fear, distress, horror, and extreme anxiety. Yet these practices are readily recognized as consequences of hate speech compared to other behaviors that are less straightforwardly labeled as such on the Pyramid of Hate. These cases are based on the fabrication of lies, economic damage, employment