

Homing in on Hate:
Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech,
Discrimination and Inequality
in the Digital Age

GIUSEPPE BALIRANO & BRONWEN HUGHES (eds)

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Il presente volume ha adottato un sistema di valutazione dei testi basato sulla revisione paritaria e *anonima* (double blind *peer review*).

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In copertina: *Hate speech*, di Matteo Cosentino


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80128 Napoli, via Ugo Palermo, 6 - paololoffredoeditore@gmail.com 

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In what now seems to be a far-removed moment in the distant past, the advent of the internet and attendant digital technologies was initially celebrated with immense optimism as an opportunity for novel and highly versatile forms of online communicative practices. The digital ecosphere was destined to challenge the traditional role of mainstream information outlets while fostering the development of unprecedented democratic forms of global citizenship.

The fluid process of digital emancipation has indeed opened up new terrains for participatory culture, offering significant opportunities in the fields of education, business, and socialization. Moreover, in recent years we have witnessed a proliferation of social media hashtags designed to counter forms of political and social inequality. Amongst others, the #MeToo and #Blacklivesmatter movements have respectively challenged the *status quo* by calling out sexual misconduct and racism.

It was also initially believed that social networking sites would offer a level playing field where, should one so wish, issues of race, religion, sex, gender, age, physical ability or appearance, could be circumvented and rendered irrelevant. A myth of digital democracy for the more gullible cybernauts.

Sadly, we are all aware that today that field is far from level, the digital revolution has paved the way for language aggression, violence, and unrivalled displays of hatred. The double-edged sword of anonymity allows online haters, trolls and keyboard warriors to take their cause seriously and devote time and energy to the task of choosing and targeting their designated victims while rounding up others who share in their convictions.

Thus, the advent of new technologies has not simply enabled discriminatory practices to move *tout court* into a new environment, it has honed the very nature of hate speech through specific forms of harassment such as doxxing, trolling, cyberstalking, revenge porn, swatting, and others, each of which possesses its own set of ever-evolving rules and codes.

When dealing with the issue of hate speech, be it online or offline, there appear to be two conflicting principles at stake: freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination. Both values are held in high esteem in liberal, Western democratic societies, though the term 'freedom' often resonates louder

than the word hate, and the idea of restricting free speech stands as a threat to an open exchange of thoughts, opinions and views. Less attention is granted to the fact that hate speech often forces the discriminated against individuals or categories to retire from public debate thus effectively curtailing their democratic rights. While accepting that the value of free speech and expression is undeniable, the unbridled, uncontrolled manifestations of those who use the cyberspace as a vehicle to engage in hateful, discriminatory acts cannot be tolerated in civil society.

However, while national and supranational legislation, together with the dominant social media regulators, have attempted to take steps to tackle hateful content, they have mostly been unsuccessful. Many forms of online abuse are not recognised as harmful or are not classified as hate crimes across laws and legislation and, of course, what qualifies as hate speech *per se* also varies across countries and continents.

The definition of hate speech online and the laws curtailing such forms of speech are in a constant flux due to the supranational character of the internet, the slippery nature of online harassment, and the porous relationship between actual violence and discriminatory speech. Besides the hateful messages propagated across social networking platforms and micro-blogging sites, the recent rise of live-streamed hate has also captured public attention forcing governments and internet providers to contend with the issue of how to prevent and punish such online activity.

As many of the contributors highlight throughout this volume, the term 'hate' itself is extremely difficult to define, stemming as it does from the extremes of socio-psychopathic impulses, an inability to regulate emotion adequately, or merely from a lack of empathy. In some cases, the denigrators do not even hate their victims, they are merely pliable individuals who feel the need to emulate the sentiments of a strong cohort of denigrators in order to gain 'insider' status. Such individuals, however, are no less to blame than the hate mongers themselves, since they actively contribute to an echo chamber which serves to amplify and reinforce the hatred deployed. Whether they truly detest their targets or merely emulate the apparently dominant group, the aim of haters, be they online or offline, is to relegate the victims to a generic category of 'others', and in hate speech the other is always the enemy. The concept of 'Othering' is linked to a number of analogous dichotomous segregational categorizations such as inclusion/exclusion,

superiority/inferiority and dominance/subordination. The differences between the 'us' belonging to the dominant grouping, and the 'them' banished to the out-group are magnified in hate speech: the insiders are safe, legitimate, normal and rational, the outsiders are dangerous, different, threatening and antagonistic. As Lister states: othering is a "process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between "us" and "them" – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained" (2004: 101).

Although the focus of this volume concerns, in the main, the digital environment, the editors and contributors are all well aware that hate speech online does not occur in a virtual vacuum, its effects are dramatically real for those individuals who are on the receiving end. Cyberbullying and hate speech impinge upon the lives of individuals from social, economic, professional and psychological standpoints (see, amongst others, Van Dijk 1987; Delgado 1982; Graumann 1998; Tsesis 2002; Klein 2010; Herz & Molnar 2012; Sindoni 2017, 2018; Fruttaldo 2020), and increase the sense of fear and vulnerability of entire communities.

The ever-encroaching discourse of online hate has, to date, only been partially mapped, and available studies have mostly focused on forms of misogynous attacks in the male-dominated online tech and gamer communities or against feminist activists (Potts 2015; Hardaker and McGlashan 2016). Additionally, there seems to be a tendency to forget that ongoing, low-level hate speech is far more common than the dramatically violent hate crimes that capture public imagination.

Whether by investigating the ripple effect triggered by a single controversial tweet, the manipulation of gender ideologies in ethnic radio discourse, or the re-semiotization of the 'city' as a nurturing space for Jihadist hate narratives, this book intends to address, from a wide and comprehensive multimodal perspective, the prevailing gaps in research literature and the dire need to contend with rampant vitriolic discourses today.

Chapters overview

The chapters in the 'Homing in on Hate' volume are presented in two strongly inter-related sections examining hate speech in a media context (1. *Hate speech in the media*), and from a legal and institutional point of view (2.

Hate speech, institutions, and the law). Although each chapter focuses on one main instantiation of discriminatory discourse, a number of intersectional themes are also dealt with within the chapters and across the volume. The authors draw on examples from multifarious discourses of hate, spanning 'old style' media such as radio talk and newer, more technological, social media platforms. The aim of the volume is to showcase original, ground-breaking research that serves to frame the current scenario while, hopefully, shaping future perspectives.

In the first chapter of the 'media' section of the volume, "Fat Chance! Digital Critical Discourse Studies on Discrimination against Fat People", Balirano and Hughes examine the manner in which online twitter prosumers (Ritzer/Jurgenson 2010) discursively assemble and unite around the theme of 'fat female bodies' and, by exploiting the affiliation devices available on social networking systems (Zappavigna 2014a; Zappavigna/Martin 2018), either shame or praise those who are considered (or who consider themselves to be) overweight.

Over a five-year timespan, the authors investigate a number of discursive instantiations reflecting highly critical attitudes towards 'fat' individuals/bodies in two geographically adjacent contexts, specifically the UK and France. As Balirano and Hughes illustrate, negative fat-shaming discourses are inevitably linked to other significant facets present in both Anglo and Francophone contemporary cultures such as hatred expressed against minority groups and in particular against women and race. The interconnection of lesser represented social identities becomes a common discursive tool through which hate is propagated, drawing its strength from previously well-trodden hate-based tropes in order to easily reach and broaden the catchment area of online fat shaming.

In Chapter two, entitled "Discriminatory Speech in Ethnic Radio Talk Shows: The Case of the Spanish-Language Radio Station WKKK FM Latina 100.3", the author Angela Pitassi investigates gender ideologies with respect to heteronormative and prejudicial discourses instantiated by hosts and callers in a Spanish language radio program. To this end, the interventions of hosts and callers are contrasted across two different periods: the first preceding February 2019, when the radio show was hosted by DJ Gato, a Latino male in his 50s; the second, running from March 2019 to the present day, with a younger team of radio hosts made up of two male and two female co-hosts. The study

compares and contrasts the top-down strategies (employed by DJ Gato and the other hosts) and the bottom-up strategies (used by the callers) to delineate identity-building strategies. Throughout the interactions, special attention is paid to gender identity performance and to the reproduction of hegemonic gender roles and ideologies, in order to ascertain whether or not such exchanges constitute hate speech.

In Chapter three “Online Abuse and Disability Hate Speech: A Discursive Analysis of Newspaper Comment Boards on Harvey’s Law” written by Maria Cristina Nisco, we move into the field of hate speech online addressed at people with disabilities. This chapter focuses on a recent event that drew extensive media coverage: the Katie Price petition to make online abuse a specific criminal offence, which ensued from vitriolic online attacks against Price’s disabled son Harvey. The study concentrates on the online comment boards of some of the main British tabloid newspapers and seeks out instances of hate speech against Harvey and/or disabled people in the online posts. As the author states, such comments can offer a lens to frame public attitudes towards hate speech, located as they are at the intersection between a discourse dimension and a social dimension. Indeed, such reactions may offer interesting insight into people’s beliefs and views, reflective as they are of some attitudes and values present within British society towards disability hate speech.

Chapter four written by Angela Zottola and entitled “When Freedom of Speech Turns into Freedom to Hate. Hateful Speech and ‘Othering’ in Conservative Political Propaganda in the USA” leads us to a terrain that has become sadly familiar in recent years, that of right-wing hate speech. By focusing on the live-streamed lecture-videos of the conservative political commentator Ben Shapiro, the author illustrates how othering tactics and hate speech are linguistically and discursively constructed to disseminate Shapiro’s unprogressive views, while masquerading as free speech. An in-depth investigation of the commentator’s non-verbal and rhetorical cues allows the author to illustrate how, although Shapiro never endorses physical violence explicitly, by demonizing and dehumanizing leftist people and by publicly making fun of others, he validates a type of behavior that is aggressive and brutal.

With chapter five “Hate Speech and Covid-19 Risk Communication: A Critical Corpus-based Analysis of Risk and Xenophobia in Twitter” written by Katherine E. Russo, we return to the ambit of micro-blogging sites though

with a wholly different focus. Building on the premise that epidemics are not just an incidental but a predictable trigger of fear, hate, mistrust, and or/ solidarity, the study investigates epidemics as possible sites of intolerance and/ or encounter, connectivity and conviviality. As the author states, in order to communicate covid-19 related risks, online news media coverage of the outbreak often resorts to feelings related to eco-social insecurity such as fear and anxiety. Such feelings arguably engender the promotion of a set of common values which result in hate speech directed at the affected populations. The study therefore investigates whether hate speech has emerged during the pandemic in correlation to fear appeals in risk communication discourse. Russo's chapter provides a thorough analysis of the remediation of covid-19 risk communication discourse in a specialized twitter corpus, and aims to draw some conclusions on how transnational/local news media channel information on epidemics and increase/decrease fear, hate and distrust and or solidarity.

Chapter six "‘To the Streets’. Deploying the City as the Object of Hate Crimes in Terrorist Discourse" written by Margaret Rasulo, combines the field of visual imagery and multimodal analysis with the highly conceptual theory of metaphor. Rasulo examines the connection between hate crime, specifically terrorism and terrorist attacks, and the metaphor of the city which, in terrorist online products, is resemiotized as a nurturing space for Jihadist hate narratives. By analyzing a collection of 300 images of city settings extracted from 264 articles taken from *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* online magazines, the study provides evidence that the violence-ridden narratives embedded in verbal and visual resources depict cities as the custodians of the Jihad hate seed, and as unconstrained signature spaces to conquer and destroy.

In Chapter seven "‘The war is over’. Militarising the Language and Framing the Nation in Post-Brexit Discourse", the authors Massimiliano Demata and Marianna Zummo select Nigel Farage's 24th of December 2020 "The war is over" tweet to illustrate the militarization of political language in digital contexts in the post-Brexit discourse. The authors illustrate how such militarization, which is often constitutive of hate speech, contributes to framing an 'exclusive' concept of the nation whose meaning is reproduced and circulated (as well as challenged) throughout society. The chapter analyses the ideological value of Farage's claim which, in the week following its publication, attracted a growing thread of comments by people who embraced or rejected its ideological value. Demata and Zummo interrogate the corpus of users'

comments, addressing the performative quality of digital political discourse, which takes into account the personalization of politics and the contestation, gamification and derision of/in antagonistic (polarized) exchanges.

Chapter eight opens up the second part of the volume entitled 'Hate speech, Institutions and the Law'. In her contribution "BOOM HATE SPEEEEEEEEEEECH": Languaging anti hate speech legislation in Ireland" Mariavita Cambria investigates the impact of anti hate legislation in the comments-on-the-article section of a number of Irish online newspapers and newsites. The consultation document "Legislating for hate speech and hate crime in Ireland" was launched on the 17th of December 2020 by the Irish Minister for Justice Helen McEntee in an attempt to create a basis for hate crime legislation in the Republic. In order to ascertain whether consensus about countering hate speech effectively circulated among the population in online environments, Cambria's study investigates the attitudes towards the drafting and publication of the Irish report by analysing the lexicogrammatical features and semiotic resources of a corpus of texts comprising the comments to online articles and newsites.

In Chapter nine "When Hate Reaches its Peak. The Italian Case: Hate Comments Against the Anti-discrimination "Zan" Draft Law", Raffaele Pizzo investigates the linguistic patterns reproduced by Italian Facebook users when commenting upon a new anti-discrimination draft law, also known as the Zan law. In his two separate sub-corpora, the author examines the comments to posts published by both right-wing and left-wing politicians. By paying close attention to the way ideas are expressed and deployed within each of the left/right groupings Pizzo provides an insight into these divergent ideologies and the way they can constitute fertile breeding ground for hatred. Two further objectives of Pizzo's study are, on the one hand, to illustrate the need for app developers to improve the moderation procedure applied to user-generated content, and on the other, to exemplify a useful research path for social media data retrieval.

Chapter 10 "Resisting Hate Speech: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of the *Stop Funding Hate* Boycott Campaign in UK" by Maria Grazia Sindoni investigates the Stop Funding Hate boycott platform launched in the UK in 2016. The aim of this initiative was to counter the discourses of hatred and discrimination that some British media outlets include in their publications in order to increase their sales. By examining the visual, verbal, aural and

overall design strategies adopted by the Stop Funding Hate organization to convince advertisers to pull their support from British media outlets, Sindoni illustrates how the website succeeds in “making hate unprofitable”. In her chapter, the author also highlights the possible pedagogical implications of campaigns that set out to deconstruct hate and fear speech by means of boycotting, and suggests that further research should address the question as to whether and to what extent other resistance strategies can feasibly be put in place in the context of fully functioning and profit-driven hate and fear powerhouses.

With chapter eleven “The Migrant *Invasion*: Love Speech Against Hate Speech and the Violation of Language Rights”, Stefania Taviano brings the volume to a close. By examining the denigratory labelling practices enacted by Italian and British politicians in a selection of online newspaper articles, the author illustrates the performative function of mainstream discourses regarding displaced people, and the extent to which they affect the representation of their identities and language rights. In the second part of her chapter, Taviano argues that there is currently a crucial need for ‘love speech’ as new words and a new language of/about migration are of paramount importance when addressing hate speech. By putting forward alternative ways of conceiving citizenship, they can contribute to the safeguard of displaced people’s human rights.

Prosaic though it may seem, as editors we felt it was important to close the volume on a hopeful if not positive note. Stefania Taviano’s investigation of a love speech campaign that promulgates new terminology and sensitizes us all to the social and political significance of words and language struck the right chord.

We sincerely thank all those who have contributed to this volume. Despite the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused numerous setbacks and difficulties in personal and professional lives across the board, our contributors were all willing to participate in this project. All have produced original, ground-breaking studies that serve to frame the current scenario and shape future perspectives on hate speech, discrimination and inequality in the digital age.

The Editors

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