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Manufacturing Hate 4.0: Can Media Studies Rise to the Challenge?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn**Sun Sun Lim¹****Abstract**

This article reflects on the growing scourge of hate speech and its propagation via digital social media networks. It discusses how media studies has drawn attention to salient aspects of online hate speech including technological affordances, communication tactics, representational tropes, and audience response. It argues that insights from media studies are vital for unpacking the societal impact of the media and indeed for tackling a destructive force such as online hate speech. It further encourages media studies scholars to engage vigorously with colleagues in and across other disciplines to forge interdisciplinary research collaborations to address pressing societal issues. It urges media studies scholars to connect with the realms of industry, policy making, and civic society to ensure that the public discourse on the challenges of digitalization and mediatization is academically informed, evidence-based, and finely balanced.

Keywords

hate speech, media studies, racism, advocacy, audiences, representations, interdisciplinary research

The Rise of Manufacturing Hate 4.0

With digitalization coursing through every realm of our lived experience, media as content, conduit, and companion has never been more salient or encompassing. One critical challenge emerging from this intensively mediatized milieu is the fomenting of hate by bad actors disseminating hate speech via digital social media platforms. As populism and identity politics are on the upsurge in many parts of the world (Fukuyama

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2018), the fight for hearts and minds has bled into digital platforms that can swiftly connect people to ideas, and ideologues to followers.

Indeed, in the wake of social media, the steps involved in spreading hate speech are remarkably easy. Simply take one racially charged social media post, add a sprinkling of likes and shares, then layer on a litany of toxic comments. Following which, torch the volatile mixture with an algorithm that draws eyeballs and clicks. That is the simple formula for Manufacturing Hate 4.0. These everyday ingredients and steps for producing hate speech are well within the grasp of ordinary media consumers via platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit.

The emergence of these pervasive digital information infrastructures has made the indiscriminate propagation of hate speech an increasingly potent threat that demands concerted action, both individually and societally. This is where academe, and indeed the discipline of media studies, can champion, amplify, and answer the clarion call for a robust societal response to such growing ills. In our prevailing information landscape, media is the crucial intermediary between people and corporations, citizens and states, and individuals and collectives. Practitioners, policymakers, and the polis are struggling to grasp exactly how media mediates these very relationships and media studies can shed considerable insight on the full spectrum of issues, including and in particular, hate speech.

Online Hate Speech: Highlights from Media Studies Research

The length constraints of this article prohibit me from offering a comprehensive coverage of media studies research on online hate speech, but these have been well-reviewed by Anat Ben-David and Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández (2016) and Samuel Merrill and Mathilda Åkerlund (2018). Commendably, media studies scholars have been quick to bring their analytical energies to bear on this vexing problem, helping to identify, label, deconstruct, and critique the production and reception of online hate speech. I will showcase a strategic selection of research to offer readers a sense of how they have illuminated diverse aspects of hate speech, thereby advancing our collective understanding of this nefarious trend.

One notable study identified the phenomenon of platformed racism, focusing on *technological affordances* (Matamoros-Fernández 2017). Highlighting a high-profile Australian race-based controversy that generated considerable racist activity on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, the author discovered key characteristics of platform affordances that served to encourage and inflame racism among users. Namely, she found that these platforms' protection of humor in their policies facilitated and encouraged the circulation of overtly racist memes, videos, and racist comments. Twitter's sensitive media filter that was designed to enable content uploaders to label content as potentially disturbing or inappropriate, such as sexually explicit material, was misused by some users as a tool to conceal hate speech or avoid being flagged. Furthermore, the platforms' tools for users to like and share racist content served to escalate racism

because YouTube's and Facebook's recommendation algorithms generated similar or even more bigoted content, thereby amplifying hate speech and discrimination.

In the same vein, a Europe-centered study revealed the practice of platformed antagonism, uncovering the *communication tactics* used in systematic hate speech campaigns orchestrated by bad actors. Johan Farkas et al. (2018b) coined the term platformed antagonism to describe the use of fake identities in social media platforms to discredit particular ethnic, cultural, or religious groups. They studied fake Muslim pages on Facebook, purportedly by Muslim extremists living in Denmark who were plotting to rape and kill Danish citizens. These pages further claimed that these extremists were also agitating to dismantle institutional structures and transform Denmark through the imposition of Islamic sharia law. The authors found that by spreading such combative posts, images, and videos, these fabricated pages quickly triggered thousands of user comments and shares. Although some readers questioned the veracity of these pages and reported them to Facebook, the majority continuously echoed the antagonistic discourse pitting Muslims against Danes. The anonymous page administrators were also careful to delete comments suggesting that these pages could be fake. Farkas et al. (2018a) argue that this systematic construction of hostility between Muslims and Danes through the use of visually arresting and emotive content effectively normalized antagonism. They depicted these two groups as being fundamentally incompatible with each other, thereby sowing discord and legitimizing discrimination.

Another significant piece of research concentrated on *representational tropes*, delving into the egregious practice of using humor to disguise hate speech. Robert Topinka (2018) analyzed content on participatory media that camouflaged racist and nationalist views with dark humor. Participatory media include platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, and Tumblr that allow for the uploading and sharing of user-generated content. He collated and studied user-generated images and posts based on the photograph of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy who became the tragic face of the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015 when his body washed up on a Turkish beach. Topinka found that this poignant image of Kurdi was widely repurposed and ridiculed in a community of interest within Reddit. The specific subreddit r/ImGoingToHellForThis had over five hundred thousand subscribers and claims to mock political correctness in the interest of promoting free speech. Posts on this subreddit are patently and unabashedly racist and nationalist. In response to Kurdi's death, many posts made light of his demise. Using macabre humor, they denigrated immigrants from the developing world and poked fun at refugees. In so doing, these posts used humor to mask what were fundamentally racist and nationalist views. "[C]loaks including humour and visual remediation can provide cover if not sanction for such discourses . . . [and] reproduce one of the most dominant and destructive political trends of our times" (Topinka 2018, 2066).

Perhaps, the least researched aspect of hate speech, likely due to the challenge of soliciting individuals' opinions on such an ethically fraught issue, is that of *audience response* to these divisive views. A multicountry study involving respondents from France, Italy, Romania, Spain, and the United Kingdom undertook a primarily qualitative approach, conducting 149 face-to-face interviews with professionals and social media users. Besides analyzing content on social media, online newspapers, and

discussion forums, Olga Jubany and Malin Roiha (2016) also probed young social media users' experiences with hate speech. Disturbingly, they found a heightened normalization of hate speech online with many interviewees seemingly apathetic, dismissing hateful remarks as jokes, playing down their impact or justifying hate speech through the lens of freedom of expression. Others did feel sad and indignant, but attributed hate speech to individual immaturity or group norms. The overriding *laissez-faire* attitude translated into inaction and noninterference in the face of hate speech, with some individuals held back by fears of retaliation should they take action. Yet others would take less confrontational approaches of dealing with perpetrators of hate speech by blocking or deleting them from their social media accounts, or to simply "unlike" pages or leave groups where they encountered hate speech. Indeed, most tended not to report hate speech to platforms because they did not believe that concrete action would be taken against the culprits.

These four salient aspects of online hate speech that media studies research has drawn attention to—technological affordances, communication tactics, representational tropes, and audience response—offer much insight into the problem. As the digital landscape becomes increasingly complex with the growing application of artificial intelligence (AI) and Big Data, broadening its reach through expanding individual, corporate, and state involvement, the factors that allow hate speech to run riot will only multiply. Media studies scholars must therefore concentrate their attention on both media and audiences to analyze "mediatization and datafication precisely by recognizing rather than erasing audiences' relation to both the everyday lifeworld and the public world of citizen action, regulatory intervention, and the wider society" (Livingstone 2019, 170).

Conclusion

As it stands, today's information infrastructures make it difficult to contain hate speech. Emboldened by anonymity, fueled by interactivity, and powered by mass connectivity, online hate speech can sweep through communities swiftly and insidiously if left unchecked. A fleeting like, a casual share, a throwaway comment—all these micro actions can come together in a digital patchwork to create a tapestry of hostility. Social media and participatory platforms have made it all too simple to produce and spread hate speech. Insights from media studies are thus vital for demystifying the societal impact of the media, and indeed for tackling a scourge as destructive as online hate speech.

Furthermore, such multidimensional wicked problems are most effectively understood and addressed through an interdisciplinary lens. It is thus imperative that media studies scholars engage vigorously with colleagues in and across other disciplines to forge research collaborations that help to address pressing societal issues. For example, Lim and Bouffanais (2019) argue that stemming the spread of disinformation through an online social network can be addressed by network science and complexity theory. Experiments on collective decision-making by artificial robot swarms suggest that carefully calibrated perturbations can be introduced to trigger prosocial

responses by the network to tackle threats. Such scientific approaches, combined with social science insights, may offer innovative solutions to what are fundamentally sociotechnical issues.

Above all, media studies scholars should also connect with the realms of industry, policy making, and civic society to ensure that the public discourse on the challenges of digitalization and mediatization is academically informed, evidence-based, and finely balanced. We cannot surrender authority for our communication to technological infrastructures, even as hard-wired algorithms increasingly rob us of our agency. A great deal more must be done to overhaul our information infrastructures so that problems such as hate speech and online disinformation are minimized, if not obliterated, and media studies can play a pivotal role in this urgent effort.

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