

ONLINE HATE SPEECH. EDUCATION AS PREVENTION

DISCORSI D'ODIO ONLINE. L'EDUCAZIONE COME PREVENZIONE

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Abstract

The *hate speech* category includes hate speech aimed at harming the dignity and freedom of the person addressed to subjects belonging to specific social groups or minorities. Online hate is an example of how the Internet offers opportunities but also difficult challenges with regard to freedom of expression and human dignity. The Internet has allowed a global dialogue in which people experience the freedom of expression and the amplified dissemination of their messages, including those that express hatred. The evolution of digital communication tools and the development of social networks seem to have given impetus to a pervasive proliferation of hate speech online. A wide and complex phenomenon such as online hate cannot, however, be dealt with through legal provisions alone, rather it requires cultural work. In this regard, effective initiatives can be found in terms of education and communication. These are the aspects this contribution intends to dwell on, focusing its attention primarily - but not exclusively - on the debate and initiatives that have developed in Italy.

Nella categoria *hate speech* rientrano i discorsi d'odio finalizzati a ledere la dignità e la libertà della persona rivolti a soggetti appartenenti a specifici gruppi sociali o a minoranze. L'odio online è un esempio di come Internet offra opportunità ma anche sfide difficili per quanto riguarda la libertà di espressione e la dignità umana. Internet ha reso possibile un dialogo globale nel quale le persone fanno esperienza della libertà di espressione e dell'amplificata diffusione dei loro messaggi, compresi quelli che manifestano odio. L'evoluzione degli strumenti di comunicazione digitale e lo sviluppo dei social network hanno, in effetti, dato impulso ad una pervasiva proliferazione dei discorsi d'odio in rete. Un fenomeno ampio e complesso come l'odio online va affrontato con norme giuridiche adeguate, ma richiede anche e soprattutto un lavoro di tipo culturale. In questo senso, le migliori iniziative sono riscontrabili a livello educativo e di comunicazione. È su questi aspetti che il presente contributo intende soffermarsi, focalizzando l'attenzione in maniera prioritaria – ma non esclusiva – sul dibattito e sulle iniziative sviluppatesi in Italia.

Keywords

Communication; Digital; Internet; Intolerance; Educational strategies.

Comunicazione; Digitale; Internet; Intolleranza; Strategie educative.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies, the Internet represents a fundamental space for expression, production and dialogue between individuals and groups. People seem to appreciate both the open nature of the Web and its apparently less “regulated” nature compared to the physical world, and the availability of tools that allow everyone to speak, circulate their thoughts and get in touch with similar interlocutors and others. However, for the same reasons, the Web is also a place of expression for hostility, for the lowest instincts and for the various forms of hatred that are typical of human groups (Ziccardi, 2016).

The Internet has allowed a global dialogue in which people experience the freedom of expression and the amplified dissemination of their messages, including those that express hatred. The evolution of digital communication tools and the development of social networks seem to have given impetus to a pervasive proliferation of hate speech online.

To prevent the propagation of discriminatory opinions and those that are not respectful of human dignity, it is necessary to define the role and possible responsibilities of IT intermediaries, since they contribute to the dissemination and permanence of digital content on the Internet, but also because they are the main players who are able to remove illegal messages.

The platforms are called upon to make relevant choices regarding access to information, its selection and dissemination. As demonstrated by the Digital Services Act proposed by the European Commission (2020) and recently approved by the European Parliament (January 2022), legislators, in turn, are committed to defining a strategy on extremism, disinformation, the manipulation of sentiments and the amplification of hate messages that have restricted the space for public speech and have increased its focus in the media.

A wide and complex phenomenon such as online hate cannot, however, be dealt with through legal provisions alone, rather it requires cultural work. In this regard, effective initiatives can be found in terms of education and communication (Gagliardone et al., 2015). In recent years, numerous educational and training interventions and research projects (Ranieri, 2016; Vitullo, 2019) have been dedicated to the prevention and contrast of hate speech, with the aim of implementing the critical skills of minors who surf the Internet and training future digital citizens who are able to communicate online correctly and effectively, preventing the production of offensive and violent content. These are the aspects this contribution intends to dwell on, focusing its attention primarily - but not exclusively - on the debate and initiatives that have developed in Italy.

DEFINITION AND PHENOMENOLOGY OF ONLINE HATE

It is not so easy to say exactly what is meant by hate language, speech and words. Not for a lack of examples, but because, as Sellars (2016) points out, the range of feelings, states of mind and reactions that these expressions evoke is so wide and diversified that it goes beyond a single definition.

There are a few definitions that can be referred to, taken from documents specifically dedicated to the subject, such as Recommendation No. R (97) 20 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on “Hate Speech” (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 30 October 1997): «the term hate speech shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin».

There is also the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) General Policy Recommendation N° 15 on Combating Hate Speech - adopted on 8 December 2015, which defines hate speech as: «the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms of expression - that is based on a non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics or status that includes “race”, colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation».

As suggested by “Article 19” (2015), the British organization for human rights that defends and promotes freedom of expression in the world, the concept of hate concerns subjective experiences which therefore cannot be standardized. It can produce manifest forms of profound intolerance and prejudice, to the point of denying the humanity of others, constituting an incitement to carry out acts of violence against individuals or entire communities.

Expressions of hate are certainly not a phenomenon linked to technological development, since they have also found space in the past, either verbally or in traditional media. Hate has always existed in the history of humanity. As Byung-Chul Han (2020, p.9) claims, there are things that don’t disappear. Violence is one of them. «Violence is simply protean. It varies its outward form according to the social constellation at hand. Depending on the social conformation, the ways in which it manifests itself change. Today it is shifting from the visible to the invisible, from the frontal to the viral, from brute force to mediated force, from the real to the virtual». Turning our gaze to contemporary digital communication tools, the way in which the affirmation of the Internet and, above all, social networks, has led to an increase – at least from a quantitative point of view - of the forms of intolerance does not go unnoticed (Gasparini, 2017).

Online hate is an example of how the Internet offers opportunities but also difficult challenges with regard to freedom of expression and human dignity. UNESCO identifies four substantial differences between online and offline hate. The first is the permanence of hate online, that is, the possibility that it could remain “active” for long periods of time and in various formats. The second difference is the unpredictable return of online hate speech which, even if removed from one place, can reappear elsewhere. The third difference is the importance that anonymity assumes online: in itself it is a right that allows, under certain conditions, to bring out information that one might otherwise be afraid to communicate. However, the use of pseudonyms and false names can make people less aware of the value of their words and generate more or less legitimate expectations of irresponsibility and impunity. The fourth difference is transnationality, which increases the effect of hate speech and makes it more complicated to identify the legal mechanisms to combat it (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

Although in substance it does not differ from offline hate, online hate is expressed in a context in which communication is fast, it moves in potentially very large spaces, it develops particular languages and rhetorical techniques, with indirect or implicit forms of hostility (Ferrini & Paris, 2019), often difficult to understand for those not directly involved. In addition to the changing nature of the forms of hate speech, it is necessary to consider the vast number of players, the uncertainty and sometimes indistinct nature of roles (producers, propagators, victims) and the speed of the dynamics of propagation. These are all elements that contribute to the complexity of the phenomenon.

THE NEED FOR REGULATORY MEASURES

In the context of democratic and pluralistic societies, in which diversity represents a value to be protected and not a reason for discrimination, the intervention of legislators has been requested on several occasions, with the aim of guaranteeing equality among citizens and freedom from any form of discrimination.

On 30 May 2016, the European Commission signed a code of conduct to combat hate speech online (The EU Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online)¹, signed by the major players in the online market: Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter, which were joined by Instagram, Google+, Snapchat, Dailymotion and jeuxvideo.com in 2018. The Code of Conduct, referring to the Framework Decision 2008/913 / JHA of 28 November 2008 (Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA of 28 November 2008 on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law)², requires signatories, among other things, to adapt their internal procedures in order to ensure a rapid and incisive response in the event of hate speech conveyed through their respective online platforms. In this regard, the European Union carries out an annual monitoring of the Code of Conduct against hate speech (Reynders, 2021), to verify whether IT companies actually remove the reported content. All monitoring lasts six weeks and involves local authorities or associations.

¹https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online_en

² https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec_framw/2008/913/oj

As in most European countries³, Italy has no specific legislative regulation on the subject of hate speech. However, various regulations of its legal system concern this issue⁴, although not explicitly. It is sufficient to refer to the Constitution, in its fundamental principles and in the entire first part (Rights and Duties of Citizens, Articles 13-54). The Italian Constitution, born precisely with the intention of reacting to a dramatic past of violence and discrimination, as demonstrated by the attention given by the Constituents to the elaboration of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution, cannot in any way legitimize hatred. «It is, therefore, in the principle of equality and in the protection of the inviolable human rights that the rationale behind the measures aimed at combating hatred and discrimination must be traced, as well as the limit to the constitutional freedom of speech, referred to in Art. 21 of the Constitution» (D'Amico & Siccardi, 2021, p. XIX).

In Italy, a Bill was introduced to combat online hate on 10 March 2021 by MP L. Boldrini⁵, who was a personal victim of repeated verbal violence during her political career. The Boldrini bill introduces a monitoring and intervention procedure through a self-regulatory body of the platforms which must verify the illegality of the content of the report within twenty-four hours. Hence the obligation for operators to adopt a very clear and extremely effective procedure that allows a user to report hate speech quickly. The novelty therefore lies in being able to make a report using a rapid procedure characterized by well-defined steps. It is also interesting that the website operators must report to users from time to time, by telling them the nature and number of the reported cases and what measures they have taken.

The debate on the need to regulate hate speech is still open. However, the alarming pace of hate speech is evident, and it brings with it violent drifts preluding to the preparation of a ground and a portrayal of intolerance capable of releasing negative energy and being transformed into violent actions against the victims of discrimination.

What is lacking so far is a joint and agreed action among European countries. But these policies in no particular order seem destined to find coordination, since on 15 December 2020 the European Commission published the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act)⁶. The aim of the proposed Regulation is to «establish uniform rules for a safe, predictable and trusted online environment, where the fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter are effectively protected» (Article 2, paragraph 2, letter b). The new Regulation, approved with some amendments by Parliament on 20 January 2022, establishes a “notice and action” and guarantee mechanism for the removal “without undue delay” of illegal online products, services or content. The Members of the European Parliament then included stricter safeguards to ensure that the notices are treated in a non-arbitrary and non-discriminatory manner and in compliance with fundamental rights, including freedom of expression. The following step will consist of the necessary negotiations with the Member States and the European Commission. Once the whole procedure is completed, the new Regulation will constitute a common legislative basis for all EU countries.

³ At the moment, Germany is the only European country that has intervened, in 2018, with very ‘strict’ specific legislation with regard to platforms and aimed above all at imposing greater collaboration on the part of the major social networks. In other countries, studies and political initiatives are currently underway which are aimed not so much at repressive practices but at trying to understand how to “govern” and “mitigate” hate online, all with the aim of collaborating with platforms (Gruppo di lavoro Odio Online, 2021, p.9).

⁴ In the Italian legal system, the requests for the criminalization of hate speech have resulted in the introduction, with Art. 3 of Law n. 654 of 13 October 1975, of the crimes of spreading racist ideas, inciting discrimination and racist violence and association aimed at inciting hatred or discrimination. These provisions have been subject to subsequent amendments, first of all with the entry into force of Legislative Decree n. 122 of 1993, converted with amendments by Law n. 205 of 25 June 1993 (known as the Mancino Law), which reformulated the previous regulations and introduced the aggravating circumstance, having a general scope, of the purpose of discrimination or hatred; and then with Law n. 85 of February 24, 2006, which further amended the defining terms of the criminally relevant conduct. More recently, the legislator introduced, with Law no. 115, the aggravating circumstance of denial (further amended by Law n. 167 of 20 November 2016). Lastly, the provisions quoted so far have been transferred to the criminal code and included in Chapter III of Title XII of Book II of the Criminal Code, which governs “Crimes against equality”.

⁵ <https://documenti.camera.it/leg18/pdl/pdf/leg.18.pdl.camera.2936.18PDL0133410.pdf>

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0825&from=en>

PREVENTION THROUGH EDUCATION

Santerini (2021) wonders what makes our minds hostile. Several examples of battles fought against entire groups are recorded in history. These are wars waged with terrible weapons, such as prejudice, intolerance, aggression and discrimination. Collective hatred often chooses precise targets, but by no means are they guilty of anything. In an attempt to understand the connections between emotions and reason, the researcher invites us to reflect on how hatred is not inevitable, but connected with a moral disengagement that can be contrasted.

Hate has an evolutionary origin, linked to our survival instinct. The need to create distinctions between groups (us - them) also has to do with strengthening our original identity and with simplifying the complexity of the world. This is an innate mechanism that might suggest that hatred, aggression and prejudice are inevitable. This would justify the repetition of the destruction and extermination of entire peoples or groups. However, as neuroscience shows, mankind also has a natural predisposition to empathy, to feel the other intimately (Santerini, 2011). Our brain is endowed with extreme plasticity and what is inherited is not a 'verdict', it is not inevitable. Genetically inherited mechanisms can be fuelled or switched off and a lot depends on the educational and cultural system we are a part of. Through culture and education, the tendency to distinguish "them" from "us" can be discouraged, thus promoting the value of the concept of diversity.

Byung-Chul Han (2017) notes the disappearance of the figure of the Other in a world dominated by digital communication and by neoliberal relations of production. The uniqueness of the Other disturbs the constant circulation of information and capital, and its removal gives way to the flourishing of the Equal, which enhances the speed and functionality of social processes. But whenever it is only the positivity of the Equal that is promoted, the philosopher warns, life is impoverished.

In an attempt to counter hate speech, some initiatives that have been taken appear to be particularly relevant. At European level, at the instigation of the Council of Europe, a campaign against online hate speech has been launched, aimed especially at young people. The "No Hate Speech Movement"⁷ Campaign, which was created following the terrorist attack in Utoya on 22 July 2011, is an international youth initiative that involves 44 countries, and it promotes human rights education, media literacy, youth participation, counter-narratives and alternative narratives.

With regard to Italy, in May 2016, at the Chamber of Deputies, the "Jo Cox" Commission on Intolerance, Xenophobia, Racism and Hate Phenomena was established, and in 2017 its works produced a final report that has provided specific recommendations for preventing and combating hate. They include measures to be implemented on a social, cultural, educational and informational level. Some of the recommendations stress the need to support and promote blogs and non-hate activists or newspapers that promote counter-narratives and information campaigns on hate speech, especially in the non-profit world, schools and universities, as well as the need to counter stereotypes and racism by empowering the media and raising their awareness, especially online, in order to prevent hate speech, by strengthening citizenship education aimed at respect, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and the fight against intolerance and racism.

In December 2018, the CO.N.T.R.O. project – "COunter Narratives Against Racism Online" was launched and was presented within the call REC-RRAC-HATE-AG-2017, Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program (2014-2020) - Directorate General for Justice and Consumer of the European Commission. The coordinator of the project is the Office for the promotion of equal treatment and the removal of discrimination based on race or ethnic origin (UNAR). Included among the main actions developed during the project were the detection and analysis at the national and European level of the tools and practices that can be used to effectively prevent and combat racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance spread through hate speech online. Through the creation of a mapping, some significant experiences and methodologies for the production of counter-narratives realized at a national, European and international level were introduced, in order to launch a discussion aimed at producing, at a subsequent stage, proposals for the development of effective counter-narrative campaigns (Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale, 2019, p.3).

As it emerges from these initiatives, one of the most effective methodologies is represented by counter-narratives, a term that identifies the opposition to online hate speech through the development of a contrasting narrative consisting of online content

⁷ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign>

that is produced to respond to a hate message. This content can aim to delegitimize and refute the hate speech message and can also include additional content, aimed at promoting tolerance, equality and respect for differences (Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale, 2019, p.7).

Another initiative worth mentioning is the one carried out by the experts of the Vox-Osservatorio Italiano sui Diritti⁸, who, starting from the evidence that emerged in the various editions of the Mappa dell'intolleranza⁹, have devised a course model on the subject of the language of hatred and cyberbullying, addressed to high school students and adaptable to the specific nature of individual contexts. The method is based on the participation of students in discussions with teachers and in the development of group work. From the latter point of view, students are called to develop real communication campaigns, by creating videos and presentations with the aim of communicating to their peers, through the method of peer education, the theoretically learned content with regard to hate phenomena (D'Amico & Siccardi, 2021, p.XVIII).

From what has been analysed so far, it emerges that, in contrasting hate speech, the most profound activities that can be planned to achieve long-term results are those that affect culture, in terms of education, information and communication.

The so-called digital natives have fewer opportunities for interactions mediated by the physicality of the body, thus reducing both the ability to feel empathy and to understand the other. Although they are encouraged to experience many emotions, paradoxically their ability to manage and recognize others' emotions decreases (Galimberti, 2007; Parisi et al., 2009). According to Pata (2018), we are faced with an emotional illiteracy that can promote incitement to hate speech online; the process involves the transformation of media contents into experiences or narratives that can modify the emotional state of an individual. The researcher highlights how emotional illiteracy has three specific characteristics: the absence of awareness, the inability to understand the reasons for one's own emotions and lastly the inability to relate to the emotions of others. Communicating hate speech without looking our interlocutor in the eye is, moreover, much easier than when it is done having to relate with others.

Vitullo (2021) analyses the link between education and tolerance to hate speech. Education can also play a key role in the use of the Internet and in understanding the content shared through the network and the language used: extensive research shows that fewer offline skills often correspond to fewer digital skills. Offline and online illiteracy feed off each other, contributing to the propagation of hate speech and increasing inequalities between those who have the skills to benefit from the Web and those who do not.

As the EU Kids Online report points out, the assumption that young people are digital natives is partly erroneous, since, for example, many of them lack the necessary skills to control the sources of news that is spread on the Internet. This makes them potential victims of fake news spread online, while exposure to a certain type of content (such as memes and black humour pages which young people produce and consume at the same time) makes them more tolerant to a more violent language (Mascheroni & Ólafsson 2018).

According to the Gruppo di lavoro Odio Online¹⁰ (2021, p.12), a great educational program for digital awareness is necessary, aimed not only at young people, but at society as a whole. In this regard, the 'players' that should be involved are: schools, the family, companies and the media. The Ministry of Education has the task of launching a major program of cultural modernization, strengthening the educational path for the conscious use of digital technology as part of the teaching of civic education introduced in Italy in 2019¹¹ and investing in the digital training of teachers, «both to foster a creative use of digital solutions - also in

⁸ It should be pointed out that the Osservatorio Italiano sui Diritti (Italian Observatory on Rights) is part of a wider network, the Rete Nazionale per il Contrasto ai Discorsi e ai Fenomeni d'Odio (National Network for the Fight against Speeches and Hate Phenomena). The Network was born in 2020 and includes, among others, NGOs such as Cospe and ActionAid, various associations, the transnational movement No Hate Speech Italia, researchers from Italian universities, research centres, a Study Centre, two Observatories, the National Bar Council, the National Office against Racial Discrimination (<https://www.retecontroloodio.org/>).

⁹ The *Mappa dell'intolleranza* (Map of Intolerance) is one of the first initiatives developed in Italy in an attempt to monitor hate online. Now in its sixth year of monitoring, the Map allows the extraction and geolocation of tweets that contain words considered to be sensitive and aims to identify the areas where intolerance is most widespread, trying to detect the sentiment that animates online communities (<http://www.voxdiritti.it/la-nuova-mappa-dellintolleranza-6/>).

¹⁰ This is a team of experts set up in 2020 in Italy by the Ministry of Technological Innovation and Digitization, in agreement with the Ministry of Justice, to combat hate speech phenomena.

¹¹ Art. 5 Education for digital citizenship, Law n. 92 of 20 August 2019. Introduction of the teaching of civic education in schools.

view of a modernization of teaching that technologies can foster - and to increase teachers' awareness of the opportunities and risks of the employment of digital technology in everyday life».

In a country such as Italy, still characterized by the digital divide, media education can be fundamental to provide the skills necessary for the correct use and production of online content and to combat inequalities (Pasta, 2018). If it is true that schools play a primary role in the education (including digital education) of young people, we also need policies that are parallel to those aimed at the mere distribution of technologies, which may fill the gaps regarding the responsible and critical use of the latter (Vitullo, 2021, p.67).

In recent years, a vast literature has been devoted to the benefits brought about by the acquisition of digital skills and consequently to the disadvantages of not having them (Sparks 2013; Van Dijk 2005; Witte & Mannon 2010). Media education and in particular the correct use and production of online content, especially among young people, are also key issues of the policies of the European Commission which, in 2017, published DigComp 2.1: The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, a document which aims to standardize digital skills and the tools needed to acquire them (Carretero et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

For many years now, the debate on online hate speech has involved the highest institutions. We are faced with a problem that does not only have to do with online haters or with the anonymity under which they hide. The problem is more general; it is in society and it is political and cultural.

The analysis carried out so far has highlighted the need for a more specific regulation of activities affecting cyberspace, especially in consideration of the increasingly active role that providers play, and the ever greater incisiveness that online systems have on people's lives.

This need appears even more obvious if we look at the pervasive spread of manifestations of hate on the Web, which exploit the communicative potential of the Internet. Furthermore, it is a change that involves all levels of communication, including the political and institutional one: hatred generates cohesive power, allows the masses to be mobilized and the achievement of consensus (Ziccardi, 2016).

Hate speech must be opposed on the grounds of awareness and knowledge. To this end, it is desirable to have a strategy that includes, on the one hand, regulatory innovation capable of building a legal framework suitable for the digital environment for both private companies and citizens who use digital services, and on the other hand, preventive actions, with long-term objectives, focused on education, research, information and communication. Narrating, counter-narrating, analysing and deconstructing hate language are some of the possible activities which can involve students, teachers, educators, trainers and researchers. We must also keep in mind that, by moving around in an environment such as the virtual one, subject to constant changes, it is not easy to succeed in standardizing long-term educational models.

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