Words Are Stones: Countering Hate Speech Among Young Generations in Europe

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Abstract

While the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) City's framework highlights the objectives of global social inclusion using digital tools and resources, the phenomenon of online hate speech poses a grave threat. To provide policymakers, professionals, and educators with fresh insight into this phenomenon; this chapter presents the results of the research conducted within the European project "Words are Stones." Through a campaign of focus groups conducted in eight European countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Italy, Romania, and Spain) in 2018; the research highlighted the low level of digital awareness and scarce digital empathy that characterize the use of digital media among young adults. These elements create fertile ground for hate speech. To build functional MIL cities, this chapter advocates for new initiatives that promote full and mature MIL among so-called digital natives, to help: 1) understand the deep interconnection and interaction between online and offline spaces in everyday life, 2) raise awareness on the phenomenon of hate speech, and 3) explain the contributions that MIL stakeholders, such as families, schools, and NGOs, can have in preventing and alleviating hate speech.

Keywords: hate speech; policy; policy revision; focus groups interview; digital inclusion; digital natives, young adults.

The recent UNESCO's *Media and Information Literacy Cities* campaign has reconditioned the long-lasting debate on media and information literacy, hereafter MIL, and added a grassroot perspective initiated from the level of state intervention to cities, and communities action (UNESCO, 2019). The campaign suggests a multi-stakeholder approach that involves public institutions (schools and libraries), enterprises, NGOs, and the civil society to raise citizens' awareness about MIL and promote positive initiatives of reform. The possibility for the present and future generations to functionally access new media technologies poses a threat, however, it provides the opportunity to use these tools and resources to empower citizens, and nurture innovation, integration, and collaboration on a national and international level. Hence, all the actors are committed to promoting positive use of the digital media and fostering a language of social inclusion and practice of cultural dialog. Thus, the rising phenomenon of online hate speech is a key challenge to tackle.

Hate speech, referred to as HS henceforth, is consistent all across Europe (Waldron, 2010), being among commonly reported hate crimes (Hall, 2014) and main topics in public debate due to its diffusion and the difficulties in its regulation (Banks, 2010). Cases of HS include the public use of names and phrases that promote denigratory stereotypes and incite discrimination and violence against specific people and particular groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities. HS also involves the public display of symbols, such as fascist iconography, aimed at promoting discrimination, violent behavior, and hate. The Internet has proven, over time, to be a fertile ground for the spread of this kind of offensive, intersubjective communication particularly through the use of the social media. Accordingly, online HS has affected virtual and physical public spaces. While the European mediascape is pluralized with cases that involve single individuals: mostly young people (Warner & Hirschberg, 2012), posts and comments as well as insults, attacks, and threats are more common. Insofar as major social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have enforced strict policies including the removal of such materials or banning their authors. Despite these actions, online HS is still common and remains perilous toward achieving the MIL cities' objectives.

To challenge the rise of hate speech in Europe, the consortium led by the Istituto Europeo per lo Sviluppo Socioeconomico, hereafter ISES, (https://www.associazioneises.org/en) launched "Words are Stones" (https://www.wordsarestones.eu), WAS, henceforth. This project was funded in 2017 by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program 2014–2020 and ran its course until 2019. The project analyzed HS in eight European countries, designing and offering peer-to-peer educational programs and digital tools in order to sensitize the European population, particularly teenagers and young adults, to recognize and respond to HS through grassroots initiatives.

This chapter investigates the main cultural factors that prompt online HS based on the first phase of the WAS research (Autumn 2017 to Spring 2018) in order to understand the strategies that stakeholders of any MIL city should embrace to counter the phenomenon. The research particularly investigated:

- The level of digital awareness linked with everyday use of digital media;
- The aims of HS in connection with the victim and hater's community.

This chapter analyzes the main findings of the WAS research collected during the focus groups organized in the eight countries involving young users and other stakeholders directly interested in the spread of HS. Data have been qualitatively analyzed, with particular focus on rhetoric and storytelling in understanding the virtual space and HS among users and professionals.

The research confirms the diffusion of HS throughout Europe but also indicates an alarming relationship between the new generation and their use and perception of information technology. This chapter expressly indicates the overall superficial digital awareness of the users; it begins by introducing HS. The chapter moves on to present the WAS research providing more details concerning the methodology and field activities. The data are presented and discussed subsequently. This chapter concludes with recommendations aimed at software and policy changes as well as new campaigns to help reinforce MIL among young users.

Hate Speech and Media and Information Literacy

HS is any hateful message directed against people based on the social labels attached to them. It is often connected to stereotypes of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation but can also have other motivations (Daniels, 2008). While the term "hate speech" refers to practices that may occur in a physical and digital environment, this word (Williams, 1983) is becoming common in reference to materials published through the use of a computer system or electronic communications (Warner & Hirschberg, 2012). The phenomenon is consistent across Europe and well-founded among the most common hate crimes. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' Hate Crime Data (http://hatecrime.osce.org) highlights the incessant rise in reported cases of hate crimes across Europe over the past decades. Victims of these attacks are: women; religious and ethnic minorities (particularly Muslims); LGBTQ+ people; and, since 2015, asylum seekers as well as those acting on their behalf.

Digital media allows offensive, intersubjective communication to spread with worrying haste. Although hateful messages may only be diffused online, they can

affect virtual and physical spaces in every sphere of daily life: at school, in the family and social circles, in public space, at work, and in times of crisis and peace. The phenomenon is at the center of unprecedented political debates that are developing locally and internationally, which sees politicians of almost all political factions demanding solutions and instruments to help minimize or control this destructive phenomenon and misuse of the Internet (Banks, 2010). Yet, the media consistently reports cases of HS and its tragic consequences, mostly among teenagers (Anis et al., 2017). What seems to be overlooked is the broader ways in which media and information tools are accessed, used, and understood by most people who are the anthological foundations (Weber & Bookstein, 2011) upon which HS is based.

The rise in HS suggests that most people who use digital tools are completely unaware of the consequence of their actions in the digital space, as though the web was *immaterial* rather than intangible; HS raises ethical and technical questions directly linked with MIL (UNESCO, 2015). The global framework of MIL cities draws our attention to the necessary development of effective strategies to raise awareness among digital users about the effective implications of their virtual actions and organize activities able to support media literacy to promote diversity and tolerance.

Words Are Stones: The Project

Against this backdrop, WAS was launched in 2017. The research was funded by the European Union and aimed at combating online racism and discrimination by equipping young social media strategists/managers, bloggers, and activists (young people in general) with the necessary competencies to recognize and challenge the spread of HS. WAS was led by ISES and involved public and private partners: Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance (BG), Budapest Centre (HU), CEPS (ES), CPIP (RO), Demetra (LT), Family and Childcare Centre (GR), Komunikujeme (CZ), Newton (IT), and Politechnica University of Timisoara (RO) from eight European countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Italy, Romania, and Spain). The partners were chosen based on their involvement in the field of education and experience in promoting social inclusion and innovation.

This research built upon other European projects implemented recently to educate the population and provide them with necessary tools to combat online HS. The research aimed at raising the general level of MIL in the younger generation to challenge instances of online HS and equip users of information technology—focusing on young people—with the competencies necessary to recognize and act against such human rights violations. For successful completion, the project envisaged the organization of a train-the-trainers course for young social media strategists/

managers, bloggers, online activists, and YouTubers in England as well as each participating country. The research externalized a "Youth media campaign" with on/offline local activities in the eight countries, and the establishment of a European competition for the "Words are Stones: Hate Speech Award": a European celebration enabling young people to report on and vote for the best cases of HS management and the best conduct of internet users toward a more inclusive Internet. Table 1 summarizes the specific objectives and activities of the research.

Table 1. *The steps, beneficiaries, and priorities identified and acted upon by the project.*

ACTION	BENEFICIARY	PRIORITY MATCHING
Improved knowledge of relations between offline-online hate speech thanks to young social media strategists/managers, bloggers, online activists, Youtubers well trained on defending human rights online and how to manage "trolls," "haters," hate posts/discussions…	Young social media strategists/managers, bloggers, online activists, and Youtubers, aged 18–30.	Strengthening the capacities of online media experts in the EU to recognize and fight hate speech and speech that spurs violence and crime out of hatred.
Owning to the focus groups organized for the course and the activities of the campaign, awareness about (online) hate speech increased	Young social media strategists/managers, bloggers, online activists, Youtubers aged 18–30; young people aged 14–25; and the general population	The detection and perception of the problem as well as an active role in the project will allow young people to activate relational strategies and enable them protect themselves from the problem.
Young people will contribute to make the internet a safer space for their peers due to their direct involvement in the campaign.	Young people aged 14–25	
Trained social media strategists/managers, bloggers, online activists, and Youtubers will become trainers in national editions of the course to initiate a process of cascade training to mobilize and engage a wider number of actors in the field and young people.	Young social media strategists/managers, bloggers, online activists, and Youtubers, aged 18–30	Strengthening the capacities of online media experts in the EU to recognize and fight hate speech and any speech that spurs violence and crime out of hatred.

WAS sought to empower young people through multifaceted educational strategies that develop their ability to instigate good relationships and respect for diversity while being aware of their own behavior and its impact on others. Participants interacted directly with other young people during the research, which strengthened their ability to think critically and exercise judgment, particularly in internet and social media contexts. This open interaction provided them with instruments to distinguish facts from opinions, recognize propaganda, and identify and question hateful content online by understanding some of its assumptions, biases, and prejudices while encouraging confrontational arguments to help enhance MIL.

Study Design

To accomplish the goals and understand the level of digital awareness as well as the motivations behind HS, WAS intended its first step to investigate the perceptions of the digital space among young people, their use of digital tools, and understanding of HS.

While open debate concerning digital nativeness (Helsper & Eynon, 2010) tends to convey an idea of full understanding, awareness, and use of the web by the younger generation, WAS's research intended to check this assumption and investigate the differences and similarities between the eight countries involved. The research particularly desired to collect qualitative data concerning experiences in digital space by assessing the possible forms of interactions different stakeholders had when dealing with HS events.

Hence all the partners were asked to conduct at least five focus groups involving professionals in mass media and communication, activists in the field of the third sector (preferably human rights activists) and young adults between 16 and 26 years of age who are the final users of the social media and main target of the project. WAS requested an even distribution among all three categories; all the participants also had to be under 35 years old. Selecting participants was based on their interest in the topic and lack of direct relationships with other participants in the focus group. Newton designed the format, activities, and materials used for all the focus groups. Each section was facilitated by a professional selected by the local partners and had to last 180 minutes (being the time allocated in precise activities) in accordance with Table 2.

All the results of the focus groups have been recorded, translated, and transcribed. The findings have been qualitatively analyzed to highlight the perception and use of the digital space, the emerging understanding of HS, and the measures taken to combat it.

Table 2. *The table shows the activities of each focus group.*

ACTIVITY	MODALITY	DURATION
1. Welcome & Who is in the room	Speech & Roundtable	5 min
2. Introduction: the «why» of the focus group	Speech & Questions	5 min
3. What hate speech is, Origin and characteristics.	Speech & Questions	35 min
4. How does «digital» change the scenario?	Speech & Questions	35 min
5. Storyboarding session; What happened to the victim? Put yourself in the perpetrator's shoes: are they aware of the consequences of their actions?	Working session in groups and debriefing in plenary	70 min
6. Brainstorming session: initiatives to close the gap. How to prevent and react to hate speech?	Discussion with post-its	25 min
7. Expectations for the project	Discussion with post-its	5 min

Overall, the partners ran 41 focus group panels involving 367 people between February and April 2018. The composition of the social sample investigated by the focus groups followed the general requirements, with minor divergences. As Table 3 shows, the proportion of participants in the third sample, (that of final users), was higher than expected. This divergence has been accepted by the leading partner because its effects on the qualitative analysis of emergent trends are not negative; it allowed for better focus on the final users' experience, who are the actual target of the project.

Table 3. *The table presents the total number of participants in the different workshops.*

	IT	BG	E	RO	LT	GR	CZ	H
ACTIVISTS	13	12	2	15	15	12	15	19
PROFESSIONALS	14	11	13	19	15	11	15	19
USERS	13	12	7	50	15	20	15	15
TOT	40	35	22	84	45	43	45	53

Analysis

The research highlighted a level of MIL among young generation starkly different from the reassuring idea popularized by the concept of digital nativeness. The panels suggested young digital users and professionals use web resources and social media limitedly. Table 4 indicates only a few social media sites are normally used and known: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Information is gathered from the Internet through specific websites or social media. These digital tools are also used to interface with small and selected groups of individuals as well as identity groups who share the same affects or experiences.

Table 4. *The table provides a summary of the emergent trends concerning HS, the mediascape, and possible strategies to be implemented in each country involved in the project.*

COUNTRY	SOCIAL MEDIASCAPE. MAIN SOCIAL MEDIA IDENTIFIED	EMERGING PERCEPTION OF HS.		COUNTERING HS. MAIN ACTIONS IDENTIFIED
		CAUSES	TARGET	
IT	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp.	Cultural bias.	Minority groups; Gender; Ethnicity; Diversity.	Specific training courses (civic education) in school curricula; Public awareness campaigns about HS and its effects; Implementation of proactive steps to denounce HS.
BG	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Viber, Messenger, WhatsApp.	Insecurity.	Gender Ethnicity	Specific training courses (civic education) in school curricula; Public awareness campaigns about HS and its effects; Implementation of proactive steps to denounce HS; Implementation of proactive steps to protect one's privacy.
E	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp.	Cultural bias; Fear; Boredom.	Diversity.	Specific training courses (civic education) in school curricula; Public awareness campaigns about HS and its effects; Implementation of proactive steps to denounce HS; Implementation of proactive steps to protect one's privacy; Legal reforms to enforce stricter penalties for HS.

COUNTRY	SOCIAL MEDIASCAPE. MAIN SOCIAL MEDIA IDENTIFIED	EMERGING PERCEPTION OF HS.		COUNTERING HS. MAIN ACTIONS IDENTIFIED
		CAUSES	TARGET	
RO	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter.	Perverse irony; Search for individual's acceptance; Sense of prowess.	Diversity; Unprotected groups.	Specific training courses (civic education) in school curricula; Public awareness campaigns about HS and its effects; Legal reforms to enforce stricter penalties for HS.
LT	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat.	Cultural bias.	Diversity.	Specific training courses (civic education) in school curricula; Public awareness campaigns about HS and its effects; Implementation of proactive steps to denounce HS; Implementation of proactive steps to protect one's privacy.
GR	Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter.	Search for superiority; Envy.	Diversity; Subjects who are envied.	Specific training courses (civic education) in school curricula; Legal reforms to force social media to control and limit HS.
CZ	Facebook, Instagram, Tinder, Snapchat, Google+, YouTube.	Cultural bias.	Minority groups.	Specific training courses (civic education) in school curricula; Public awareness campaigns about HS and its effects; Legal reforms to enforce stricter penalties for HS; On- and offline censorship; Software implementation to block HS.
H	Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Tinder, Twitter.	Racism; Cultural bias.	Minority groups.	Specific training courses (civic education) in school curricula; Public awareness campaigns about HS and its effects; Legal reforms that foster stricter penalties for HS; On- and offline censorship; Software implementation to block HS.

The informants' digital experience comprises a closed environment made of a plurality of bounded communities. This plurality exposes the users to new contacts and can connect them with people who live very far away. To some extent, the digital landscape is only an extension of the physical world and facilitates contact with

people seen and known by the user on a daily basis, via messaging tools such as WhatsApp and Messenger. However, the informants suggest that a perceived greater simplicity existed in approaching other people or expressing their thoughts online rather than offline. Thus, the user lives in a space that extends from the offline world into digital space. This virtual dimension is as well part of the world inhabited by the user and a distinct space of socialization where the cultural filters and mediations that underpin personal interactions are weakened and reduced. The articulation of this human geography is not fully understood by the informants as they are not fully aware of the consequences that ensue. Hence, rather than being an echo chamber, digital space is an accelerator of feelings and affects that can escalate far beyond expected limits in an offline situation and have direct repercussions upon the physical space.

The informants were aware of the concept of HS and could offer examples of it from the news or their private lives. In all the examples, they indicated the strong link between what happens online and its offline consequences, however, they consider them as separate entities. This emerges clearly when the topic of HS is challenged.

Research notes that HS plays a key social role in reinforcing a sense of belonging to a precise community which shares the same rhetoric (Carrithers, 2005); HS is not just an expression of the individual's feelings or cultural bias, rather it works on a group level as a bonding practice among peers. In fact, the victims of HS are mostly subjects outside or on the margin of the groups within which HS is generated. An attack toward an outsider, outcast, or someone on the fringe of society is instrumental in strengthening group identity through common practices and language by developing collective identity in contraposition to a common target. This dynamic is common, psychological, and cultural, pre-existing the development of the web. However, the research suggests that this insider/outsider mechanism emerges in such a vivid way through the internet and social media for three main reasons:

- the perception of unreality that binds to the digital experience ("*What happens on the Internet is not real and does not touch the real world*," using the words of an informant);
- the loosened inhibitions in intersubjective behaviors and perceived online anonymity ("*It's easier for me to say certain things on the Internet, rather than in person*");
- the permeation of digital instruments in everyday life ("*I just look at the phone and find my friends and continue the discussion*.")

Thus, it is not surprising that informants link the diffusion of HS with the characteristics of social media and digital space and the ways of using them. Consequently, three main strategies have been suggested to limit this phenomenon while influencing

both the development of the digital medium, its use, and the users, as fig. 4 points out. These three-pronged approach encompasses:

- software changes aimed at automatically censuring HS and limiting the access of hate speakers to social tools;
- policy revision designed to enforce stricter controls against HS and introduce more severe penalties;
- a change in education intended to raise the level of MIL among young generations and users at large, starting from informing them about the interconnectedness of the digital and physical spaces and their human implications and enlightening them about HS and the threats it poses to individuals and social stability.

Conclusion

The research conducted in eight European countries investigated the use of new media by young users and their understanding of HS. It points out HS is rooted in a particular vision and use of digital resources based on limited MIL. Thus, MIL development appears to be fundamental in the fight against HS, and a main field of action for the MIL Cities.

While policy revision can provide the first tools to raise awareness and discourage harmful acts, and software changes can be aimed at developing new algorithms that limit the creation of online echo chambers, public attention and efforts should concentrate on the significance of education. In fact, developing MIL further enlightens users of the complete impact of their actions online, as well as aid them develop complete digital empathy (Terry & Cain, 2016), which seems to be missing presently. This is central for accomplishing the MIL cities' goals.

Conclusively, the research conducted opens new studies on the emerging human geographies that links physical to virtual spaces. Likewise, the research advocates educators, activists, and media professionals to develop new educational projects to strengthen MIL. The research particularly suggests that for this project to achieve efficacy against HS, it should:

- Identify the fictitious division between online and offline worlds; showing the interconnection and interaction between the two spaces in everyday life.
- Clarify the category of HS and its online phenomenology, detailing the places and ways in which it emerges, because the overall perception is limited.
- Explain the actual contributions that actors, such as family, state, and NGOs can have in preventing and alleviating HS.

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