

**DISABILITY IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH.
PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION IN THE NAME OF INCLUSIVITY AND
ALTERNATIVE STORYTELLING**

**LA DISABILITÀ NEL MIRINO DELL'HATE SPEECH ONLINE.
PREVENZIONE E INTERVENTO IN NOME DELL'INCLUSIVITÀ E
DELLA NARRAZIONE ALTERNATIVA**

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Abstract

Hate language against diversity is particularly bloody on the WEB and among the targeted categories we find not only women, foreigners and homosexuals but also disabled people. According to a survey by Vox Diritti, in 2021 disability becomes the third most hated category on Twitter, with a percentage of hate messages of 16,43%. In these “virtual squares”, haters externalize their hatred, conforming to the masses, unable to accept an ever-changing scenario. We must respond to these attacks with alternative narratives, building narratives about ourselves and the world based on empathy and positivity, showing courage, practicing dissent and rejecting indifference, animated by a critical spirit. In the perspective of "words to love", this contribution describes the results of a research on the theme of incitement to online hatred conducted with teachers of several secondary schools in Calabria, with the aim of providing project proposals and concrete interventions in the name of inclusion.

Il linguaggio d'odio contro la diversità è particolarmente cruento sul WEB e tra le categorie prese di mira troviamo non solo donne, stranieri e omosessuali ma anche persone disabili. Secondo un'indagine di Vox Diritti, nel 2021 la disabilità diventa la terza categoria più odiata su Twitter, con una percentuale di messaggi di odio del 16,43%. In queste "piazze virtuali" gli haters esternano il loro odio, uniformandosi alla massa, incapaci di accettare uno scenario in continua evoluzione. È necessario rispondere a questi attacchi con narrazioni alternative, costruendo narrazioni su noi stessi e sul mondo basate sull'empatia e la positività, mostrando coraggio, praticando il dissenso e rifiutando l'indifferenza, animati da uno spirito critico. Nell'ottica delle "parole da amare", questo contributo descrive i risultati di una ricerca sul tema dell'incitamento all'odio online condotta con i docenti di alcune Scuole Secondarie di Secondo grado della Calabria, con l'obiettivo di fornire proposte progettuali e interventi concreti nel segno dell'inclusione.

Key-words

Hate speech online, Disability, Inclusion, Alternative narrative, Field research.
Linguaggio d'odio online, Disabilità, Inclusione, Narrazione alternativa, Ricerca sul campo.

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Introduction

Hate speech, translated as incitement to hatred, indicates a type of insult motivated by any form of discrimination against people or a social group, which is very frequent especially in the digital era (Floridi, 2014; Capellani, 2018; Tapscott, 2011; Veen, 2006). Hate speech (Bianchi, 2021; Ziccardi, 2016) became established in the 1990s and the exploration of this phenomenon as well as the commitment to counter it are not new to the world of education. In past years, this commitment was focused mainly on racial hatred and anti-Semitism, while in contemporary society, educational attention has increased as societal dynamics have broadened the phenomenon, which now includes religious minorities, especially Muslims, as well as other categories such as women, LGBT people and the disabled (Lascioli, 2015). Among the characteristics of hate speech we can certainly find the anonymity; the vastness of the audience, the Web (Byung-Chul, 2013); the pervasiveness and accessibility, since the haters or the cyberbully can reach the victim at any time and in any place; the persistence of hatred as the structure of social media allows messages to remain visible for a long time; the unpredictability of a possible return of the message, as hate speech can become visible again on various platforms through dissemination by other users; the lack of emotional feedback: the cyberbully, not seeing the reactions of his victim to his behaviour, is never fully aware of the damage he does, showing himself more uninhibited and with a low level of self-control (Smith et al., 2013).

According to Recalcati (2020), «the language of violence prevents communication, transforms it into insult, insult, defamation. The word is denatured, it loses all symbolic value to assimilate itself to the stone, the dagger, the bullet». It is precisely speed and instantaneousness that lie at the heart of web communication. The Internet not only facilitates, as Santerini (2021) explains, but also encourages visceral, spontaneous reactions, unthought-out judgements, and unfiltered comments. The horizontality of the network allows news or images to be conveyed easily and quickly (Levy, 1994), but also to share news without verification of reliability, to share without thinking, in a way that goes in the opposite direction to Paulo Freire's strategy, «have you thought about it enough?», proposed by Rivoltella in *Le virtù del digitale* (2015). Often, it is more comfortable to support not what we really think but what we believe will win us appreciation. Digital fortitude (Rivoltella, 2015), on the contrary, must lead us to dissent, to critical thinking, without giving in to conformism. But how is it possible that some human beings can ignore the humanity of others? Baron-Cohen (2012) speaks of the “erosion of empathy”, taking up Buber's thought that when our empathy is extinguished, we activate the “I” mode, relating to people as if they were things and ignoring their subjectivity. Goleman himself (2011) states that «when interlocutors are deprived of the presence of the body and interact assiduously through a medium, the risk of fostering “emotional illiteracy” increases». And it is precisely the inability to feel emotions, the lack of empathy and compassion, the aggressive attitude towards the other perceived as an enemy, the inability to react in the face of inhuman events... that are all facets of emotional illiteracy.

1. Online hate speech and disability

Hate speech (Pasta, 2018) is particularly bloody on the WEB and among the targeted categories we find not only women, foreigners and homosexuals but also disabled people, who are increasingly targets of hate speech, cyberharrasment and hate crimes.

In general, people with disabilities - sensory, intellectual, motor and mental - are more at risk of harassment, violence and crime, also in the digital world. According to data published by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 50% of people with disabilities reported experiencing harassment in a 5-year period, compared to 37% of people without disabilities. In Italy, according to a survey by Vox Diritti, in 2021 disability became the third most hated category on Twitter, with a percentage of hate messages of 16.43%, while in 2020 the percentage stood at 1.95%.

Often the words used in a derogatory way and characterising disability - among the most frequent: Demented, Mongoloid, Brain-damaged, Handicapped - are addressed to other categories, a symptom of a lexicon tinged with stereotypes that goes beyond the boundaries of the original context of use: this is evident from the negative tweets collected for disability and Islamophobia. Some discriminatory or negative terms belonging to these two categories were used to define the actions of some politicians, especially in relation to the management of the pandemic (such as “Taliban” or “demented”). Thus, words uprooted from their semantic territory of belonging favour a shift in reasoning conditioned by wrong or distorted perceptions, prejudices (Allport, 1976) and ideologies, which inevitably influence the thoughts and words of the hater. This is probably the reason for the exponential increase in antidisability terms.

In these virtual squares (Paccagnella et al., 2016; Papacharissi, 2010, Livingstone, 2010), haters express their hatred, conforming to the masses, unable to accept a scenario in constant evolution. They are people driven by a binary logic: inside-outside, good-bad, black-white, man-woman, hetero-man. People who are incapable of accepting and dealing with social and cultural transformations, insecure in the face of diversity and therefore forced to resort to a scapegoat. This creates a dividing line between in-group and out-group, between those who are inside and those who are outside the group, a polarisation between “us” and “them” (Eco, 2020).

2. Methods and Results

This paper describes the partial results of a survey on the theme of incitement to online hatred carried out with teachers in various Secondary schools in Calabria, through the administration of a structured questionnaire consisting of 14 multiple-choice questions.

The research consisted of three phases:

- a first phase that saw the realisation of several training and professional development meetings on the topic of hate language, with the aim of providing analytical and operational tools to recognise, prevent and combat hate, online and offline (Benedetti et al., 2020; Buccoliero et al., 2017; Fedeli et al., 2019);
- a second phase in which an exploratory study was conducted, through the administration of questionnaires, in order to investigate the teachers' perceptions of their awareness of the virtual, their knowledge of the tools for reporting inappropriate content provided by social platforms, and, more generally, their representations of online hate speech;

- a third phase devoted to the analysis of the research materials collected.

The areas investigated include:

- the type of topics most commonly discussed on social networks
- the different types of roles adopted by the reference sample on social networks,
- direct experience with online hate speech,
- the categories of subjects most affected,
- the reaction of the reference sample,
- the role of silence,
- the repercussions on opinions or attitudes expressed offline,
- the escalation of the situation during the Covid-19 emergency situation,
- the skills to be promoted to curb the phenomenon of hate speech
- a project proposal to be activated with students.

Concerning the reference sample, 75,5% of the respondents were female, 24,5% male; the sample consisted of 34% of teachers in the 50-60 age range, 30,2% of teachers in the 41-49 age range, 24,5% of teachers in the 30-40 age range, 9,4% of teachers over 60, only 1 teacher was under 30.

Among the topics most frequently discussed on social networks with friends and acquaintances, in first place we find "school and education" (73.6%), "current affairs" (50.9%), art, music and culture (39.6%), social issues (30.2%), health and well-being (28.3%), cooking (20.8%), environmental issues (9.4%), sport (9.4%).

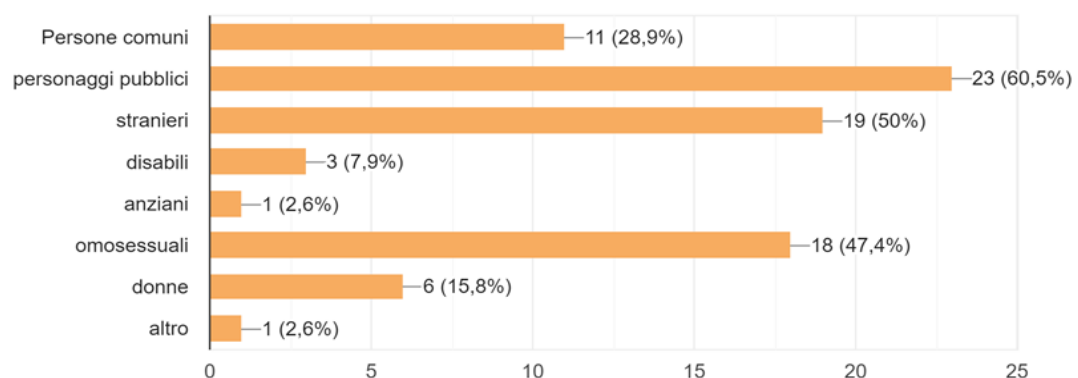
The answers to the question: Which social network(s), in your opinion or based on your experience, contains the most hate content?

Almost 70% of respondents said they had come across a racist, homophobic or hateful post/comment against a person or group of people.

In particular, only 8% of respondents stated that they had come across disparaging comments against disabled people, while posts against women and foreigners were more frequent.

5. Se sì, verso quali categorie di persone erano rivolti i post/commenti denigratori?

38 risposte



Graph. 1 (Which categories were the racist comments directed towards?)

73% believe that online hate speech could have repercussions on opinions or attitudes expressed offline because:

- Those who express hate and discuss it online feel empowered to use the same language or translate it into violent actions offline, failing to identify that fine line between real and virtual;

- Online hate-speech could affect young people in particular, who often do not know how to properly filter what they read on social media, as they lack a solid critical conscience.

- Hate speech may have a negative impact on fragile individuals or adolescents, who are emotionally hurt by the judgement of others and may engage in self-harming behaviour.

- Hate speech stimulates aggression and normalises certain behaviours just because they are accepted by the 'masses', contributing to forming a distorted view of reality.

- Nowadays, statements of any kind, including those that are disparaging and clearly hateful, seem to take on greater credibility if they are written and 'shouted' on social media, especially if they are disguised by apparently legitimate motives.

- The more likes and views a post has, the more repercussions it will have on social attitudes, especially among young people, who, given their lack of experience, are more vulnerable prey and therefore more likely to be influenced by certain ways of thinking.

- The repercussions could be manifold: racism, bullying, homophobia, prejudice, stereotypes, educational poverty.

Respondents thus answer the question: What should education focus on in order to curb the phenomenon of hate speech and to make young people become active agents of change?

- Culture of debate

- Cooperation and collaboration

- Human rights education

- Self-esteem building

- Digital citizenship

- Seeing others as resources

- Increased awareness of the use of words and social media

- Critical awareness

- Emotional intelligence

- Literary, historical and scientific knowledge

- Conscious use of social networks

- Courage to express one's opinion and dissent

- Education in culture and respect for the opinion of others

- Civil awareness based on tolerance and respect for others

- Correct emotional analysis of language and dialogical confrontation

- Diversity as a resource and not as a limitation

- Making hateful statements verifiable

- Critical sense

- Empathy

- Seeing otherness as a resource

- Awareness that words have weight and that the other is a being with sensitivity.

- Learning to dialogue while respecting the opinion of others.

- Civic and intercultural competences

- Listening skills

- Emotional literacy

Varied and original ideas emerged from the question: Briefly present a project proposal to be activated with the students:

Looking at the other as being equal to me	Autobiographical narration workshop
Workshop on human rights	The "words to hurt" from Gianni Rodari to Tullio de Mauro
Raising emotional intelligence through the narration of experiences and lived experiences	Meeting and confrontation with differently abled athletes - "Abilmente diversi".
Learning the weight of words, through videos, guided reflections, meetings-debates.	Etymological and semantic study of offensive terms in order to understand the "weight" of words.
Young people and the net: "surfing the net safely" Guys and technology: "surfing the net safely".	Role playing - Putting oneself in the shoes of others, learning to think and see with "different" eyes.
"Le parole fanno male" (words hurt): a journey through listening to music: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - F. Mannoia, Le parole perdute; - C. Cremonini, Le tue parole fanno male; - N. Fabi, Io sono l'altro 	Civilian service or training courses in migrant reception centres, centres for eating disorders, advice centres.
Insight into the Holocaust through the voices of the protagonists (Primo Levi, testimony of Liliana Segre, Sami Modiano, Andra and Tati Bucci)	Musical journey against social prejudices by listening to the song Vengo dalla Luna by Caparezza.
Improving relationships and knowledge of others by describing themselves with the help of objects or images	Theatrical performance of the arrival of a train of deportees in a concentration camp and the vicissitudes of a family

Conclusions

The data presented leads us to rethink the way we act, to adopt another point of view and respond with alternative narratives, constructing narratives about ourselves and the world based on empathy and positivity, showing courage, practising dissent and rejecting indifference (Rivoltella, 2015).

We live in an age of increasingly radical transformation, so change is an important aspect of culture and history, and for this innovation to occur, human creativity, curiosity and freedom must be present. As Freire (2021) says, if our presence in the world implies making choices, taking decisions then it is not a neutral presence:

«if my presence in history is not neutral [...] if in fact I do not exist simply to adapt to the world but to transform it, if it is not possible to change the world without dreaming or designing a different one then I must take advantage of every opportunity not only to talk about my utopia but also to actively participate in practices consistent with this utopia».

Men and women, as presences in the world, should not passively adapt themselves to the conditions in which they find themselves but become transformative beings, open to novelty, diversity, innovation, doubt. So, even in the digital world, adapting means remaining static, accepting everything that is thrown at us, passively accepting the thinking of others, accepting injustice, remaining silent. Hate speech can be legitimised not only by words and attitudes of approval but also simply by silence. Silence in fact normalises the disparaging content, silence ratifies the authority of those who use hate speech.

Instead, we must become active agents who practice dissent, who rebel against common sense and prejudice, who denounce injustice.

Being "active agents" means being aware of the risks and potential of technological tools and social media (Bonaiuti et al., 2017; Cavallo et al, 2015; Cheung, 2010; Faggioli, 2010; Tisseron, 2013), acquiring and knowing how to spend those digital skills through a responsible and critical use (Di Bari et al., 2018; Hattie, 2016; Limone, 2012; Ranieri et al., 2013; Rivoltella, 2017; 2020). Being "active agents" means not letting oneself be engulfed by the mass, defined by Freud as influential and uncritical. Becoming part of the mass means regressing and losing one's critical judgement in exchange for feeling protected and fused into one big collective body.

Today, kindness understood as sharing, generosity and altruism has become a disvalue: a society such as ours that promotes the value of unhealthy competition, a society that exalts the winners and denigrates the losers cannot but generate wickedness. The mass media, television, cinema, video games, present us with models of youth violence (Bruno, 2009; Costanzo, 2012a; 2012b; Galimberti, 2008; Lancini, 2019) as an expression of strength and vitality. In a culture founded on the disvalues of oppression and competition, it becomes almost natural to prevail over the weaker.

It is necessary to deconstruct in order to reconstruct.

Alternative narratives contribute to the promotion of human rights and empowerment processes by breaking the divisive 'us-them' dynamics. They can propose different options to solve a problem and, in this way, help to change negative stereotypes, appeal to democratic values and call for cooperation and dialogue as a way of addressing problems.

The Council of Europe, through the 'No hate speech movement', produced a handbook entitled "We can" in order to propose viable alternatives to hate speech, not simply by telling different stories, but by constructing and distributing more truthful and in-depth information about the world around us, encouraging everyone to challenge prejudices and think critically.

«In Europe, hate speech is one of the most prolific forms of intolerance and xenophobia, particularly online: the Internet is frequently abused by those who want to propagandise and discriminate against certain groups or people» writes Thorbjorn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, in the preface to the handbook. «Increasingly, in political discourse, we see a toxic mix of hate speech, fake news and 'alternative truths' that seriously threatens freedom and democracy. Our organisation has taken a leading role in defining hate speech and ensuring that those who use it are

stopped. Education is the surest antidote to hate speech and we work with member states to teach young people the value of tolerance and a democratic culture».

For example, through 'The Living Library' (De Latour et al., 2017), people who have experienced hate speech and discrimination share their stories as if they were books in a library that can be opened by readers, who, by asking questions, come into contact with a topic and have the opportunity to question previous information and prejudices, gaining new perspectives and insights. Another initiative is the video of Amnesty International's 'Look Beyond Borders' campaign, which aims to break down negative perceptions about refugees in Europe through a series of meetings with refugees, who were asked questions in an atmosphere of listening and empathy.

And it is precisely towards the strengthening of empathy that educational strategies should tend, with the aim of knowing and recognising emotions, accepting unexpected events and flexibly adapting one's own behaviour, taking on the perspective of others and putting oneself in their shoes (Moderato, Copelli, Scagnelli, 2020).

Through an alternative narrative it is possible to tell a different story from the one proposed by the discriminatory or hate speech against disability (Carruba, 2014; Mangiatordi, 2019), unhinging the story based on disadvantage, on impairment (Schianchi, 2019). It is necessary, instead, to educate to diversity as a wealth, an advantage, a resource. The gaze that rejects the relationship with the other must be contrasted with the gaze that becomes an encounter, the gaze that seeks contact with the other, the gaze that welcomes and does not deride disability (Bocci, 2013). We must respond to a society based on rivalry, on oppression, on the division between winners and losers with the value of kindness, understood as empathy, sharing and altruism (Rosenberg, 2015).

Bobbio (1998) wrote, «meekness is not submissiveness, it is not humility, it is not modesty. Meekness is not overestimation, nor underestimation of oneself: it is an attitude, it is a disposition towards others. Meekness is a gift and does not need to be reciprocated è [...] The meek man is the man that the other needs in order to overcome the evil within himself».

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