

TO BE OR NOT TO BE RADICAL. FROM ONLINE DISCURSIVE AGGRESSIVENESS TO OFFLINE AGGRESSION

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Abstract

The exponential development of virtual collective communication favours not only the personal development of individuals but also new ways of expressing negative feelings and thoughts stimulated by the possibility of anonymity and real time dissemination of the opinions. Actually any field of the social life can be reached by the phenomenon of discursive aggression and online harassment, as well as by the launching of rumours or expressing unfavourable opinions towards an individual, a social group (regardless of the catalyst that underpinned its creation – ethnicity , religious, professional or other) or a community.

The new form of harassment, called cyberbullying, can reach mass dimensions when its support are social platforms that favour the rapid distribution of content, adhesion and rallying to a cause, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube, and the forms in which carry out include: repeated humiliation of a person; sending obscene messages and offensive content; ridiculing by creating a bogus account or blog containing biased information. From the same perspective, online aggression can have multiple effects, manifested individually or together: diminishing the sense of security; increasing anxiety; changes in mood or behaviour; feeding racial or religious prejudices.

On the other hand, whatever it is called cyberbullying, cyberstalking or hate speech, online aggression can be speculated by entities interested in generating short-term or medium-term social tensions or animosities among supporters of diverging political trends, with direct impact on the occurrence of violent incidents, and in the long term generate a fracture between governors and citizens, or even to a diminished the cohesion of a nation, social disorder and dilution of the rule of law.

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The advanced technologies: better communication and freelance hate

Developing technologies that enhance communication in the virtual environment has positive effects on the personal development of individuals but also negative effects, by opening the door for new and effective ways of spreading negative feelings and convictions, the spread of which is directly proportional to the possibility of anonymizing authors and the real-time dissemination of their ideas.

A 2015 study by researchers at the University of Minnesota and New York University says that increased access to the Internet may explain a growth in the number of hate crimes. Using a large data set compiled from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Federal Communications Commission, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the U.S. Department of Labour, the authors concluded that in countries in which broadband Internet access became available at the beginning of the century, the incidents in which hate played a significant role increased by almost 20%. Extended access to the Internet didn't lead to an increase in the foundation of hate groups acting offline, but may have augmented the efficiency of spreading hate ideology and stimulating like-minded persons to carry out attacks (Chan, Ghose, Seamans, 2016, pp. 381-403).

Online tools enable international propagation of message and ease of access (Weede, 2016) to victims, making it problematic to alleviate or hamper negative experiences among users (Cole, 2016) which spend a substantial amount of time operating in that setting. The function of social media is essential in the advancement of social individuality (Popescu, 2016) and self-representation. The online environment adds an extremely pivotal aspect to spiteful and injurious content, furthering its development into something pernicious. (Keipi et al, 2017)

The increase and expansion of the social media has generated significant opportunities for people to communicate and engage in the virtual world. Social media makes it possible for people who would not have been heard in the past, to express themselves. People have access to a vast amount of information on the Internet. Unfortunately, given that social media provides the ideal instrument for fast, limitless and harmful spread of aggressive discourse, it has acted also as a double-edged weapon (Back et al., 2010) by creating an online platform for people who use hate as a mean to attract wider audience often under the veil of anonymity that allows to discard and bypass control and regulation (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Blair, 2003; Citron, 2014;

Hodges & Perry, 1999). The Internet therefore provides new opportunities for cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008) and cyber hate (Jaishankar, 2008).

The new form of harassment, called cyberbullying, can reach mass dimensions when it is carried out on social platforms that favour the rapid distribution of content, adhesion and rallying to a cause. These platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube, allow harassment to be carried out in ways that include: repeated humiliation of a person; sending obscene messages and offensive content; ridiculing by creating a bogus account or blog containing biased information. From the same perspective, online aggression can have multiple effects, manifested individually or together: diminishing the sense of security; increasing anxiety; changes in mood or behaviour; feeding racial or religious prejudices.

According to administrative data collected by Active Watch (a Romanian NGO working on the topic of the freedom of expression), for the years 2014-2015, the NCCD registered 53 petitions concerning hate speech (in the form of the violation of the right to personal dignity, G.O. 137/2000, art.15). The most targeted groups were Roma persons, members of the Hungarian minority, people with disabilities and members of the Jewish community. For the same period, the NCCD registered 19 petitions against hate speech purported by politicians, against the Hungarian and the German minorities. The NCCD also registered 10 petitions against hate speech by journalists, against the Hungarian and the Roma minorities (Romani CRISS, 2016).

The Centre for Monitoring and Combating Anti-Semitism in Romania (MCA Romania) publishes yearly reports on anti-Semitic incidents and speech in Romania. MCA Romania published a report summarising the results of the organisation's activity of monitoring Anti-Semitic incidents between the years 2009 and 2014. For the reporting period, MCA Romania identified 65 websites which are considered the main source of disseminating anti-Semitism and discrimination; out of these, 27 websites are active and frequently updated (Monitoring Report, 2015).

Between the hammer of imagination and the anvil of reality

Even if the aggressive discourse in the Romanian social media has not been translated so far into real life through street conflicts between supporters of various ideological camps, what could happen if supporters and opponents of violent ideas were subjects of carefully orchestrated operations by state or non-state entities, interested in creating in our country an explosive situation, generating instability and social fractures? To find any

answers, we can take an analytical look beyond the Atlantic, and if the information disseminated by the media over the past years is not believable to be credible or will be interpreted as part of an informational war, we can consider that what follows is just an exercise of imagination with roots in the real world.

After the violent riots which took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, from August 11 to 12, 2017 under the aegis of Unite the Right, Facebook and Instagram reacted by pulling down accounts and extremist posts from white supremacists. Among the accounts removed were Awakened Masses, Right Wing Death Squad, Vanguard America, White Nationalist America, Right Winged Knight, Physical Removal and Awakening Red Pill, all of which being known for launching calls filled with racial hate. Moreover, because of the links to hate groups, Facebook removed the "Unite the Right" event page as well as posts linked to an article that attacked Heather Heyer (a woman killed by a car that got into a crowd of counter-protesters), published in The Daily Stormer – an American neo-Nazi, white supremacist, and Holocaust denial commentary and message board website (Wong, 2017).

But what happened in Charlottesville and how was it possible for a discursive aggression to lead to the unrelenting achievement and overcoming of the point of no return?

In the Unite the Right rally, also known as the Charlottesville rally or Charlottesville riots, the protesters were members of the far-right and members of the alt-right, white nationalists, neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, various militias. The marchers chanted racist and anti-Semitic slogans, carried semi-automatic rifles, swastikas, Nazi symbols, Confederate battle flags and anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic symbols. The event turned to violence after protesters and counter-protesters clashed (amongst counter-protesters was a large number of Charlottesville citizens who wanted to show their rejection of white supremacy ideologies, but also supporters of far-left ideologies, like Antifa), and in the aftermath, in the Charlottesville area, in the present days the rally is referred as A12 or 8/12.

According to media, during 2017, the white supremacists practiced military training and they planned the violence that eventually ensued at the "Unite the Right" rally, utilizing specific websites, chat rooms, and social media platforms. They used "alt-tech" platforms like Gab.ai and Discord, and for disseminate operational details they were increasingly used some encrypted chat rooms and apps such as Signal and Telegram. An important detail is that between June 2017 and the moment of the rally, there were over 35,000 extremist messages on the gaming platform Discord (Hu and Brooks, 2018).

Addicted to Chaos

Last August, republican Representative Tom Garrett told CNN, that in a closed briefing the FBI director asserted that Russian interference efforts played a role in inciting what happened in Charlottesville (Foran, 2018). Even if Tom Garrett didn't go much into details, his statement could be related to a BuzzFeed analysis from October 2017 that concluded that an account entitled @Ten_GOP, frequently nominated by media as a fake Russian Twitter user, "appears to have been one of many influential tweeters for the event".

According to BuzzFeed, fake Russian accounts launched over 6,000 tweets that mention Charlottesville, the big majority targeting the sympathizers to the white supremacists. Among these accounts, the aforementioned @TEN_GOP account (which had around 140,000 followers), wrote that they were "Watching America destroy itself.. #Charlottesville" and another media reported prominent fake Russian account, @Pamela_Moore13, (with roundabout 70,000 followers) said: "Who invented white nationalism? The Democrats. And black nationalism? Ditto. So don't try & blame this on the GOP #Charlottesville".

While the majority of the Charlottesville-related tweets appear to be trying to reach those on the right or even far-right, a number also were aimed at those Americans that oppose white supremacy. That means Russian efforts didn't aim simply at one ideological segment but they did all the best to reach Americans of all political ideologies.

There is no evidence that Russian accounts were involved in organizing the Charlottesville rallies, or they explicitly embolden the white supremacists to commit violence. As with many other events – such as the 2016 elections – is difficult (if not impossible) to quantify the offline impact of their messages. However, as the thousands of tweets show, Russian accounts had an ardent interest in the violence connected to Charlottesville – and we can say that the potential precedent it already set, especially as it came to play with potential or existing divisions.

Reports emerged in media that @TEN_GOP, a Twitter account purportedly managed by the Tennessee Republican Party, was in fact controlled by a Kremlin-backed company, Internet Research Agency, which operated a vast network of troll accounts. Reports show that @TEN_GOP tweeted Russian propaganda, as well as polarizing political content, but it's difficult to assess the size of its influence since Twitter suspended it August (Warzel, 2017).

A hashtag analysis drafted by multimedia artist Erin Gallagher offers a possible clue at how the troll account worked in the case of Charlottesville.

Based on around 6,000 tweets from before, during, and after the Charlottesville #UniteTheRight protests, the chart shows that @TEN_GOP arose as one of many influential message carriers, even if nothing can be said about WHAT it was tweeting and IF it was clearly in favour of or against the white nationalists (Warzel, 2017).

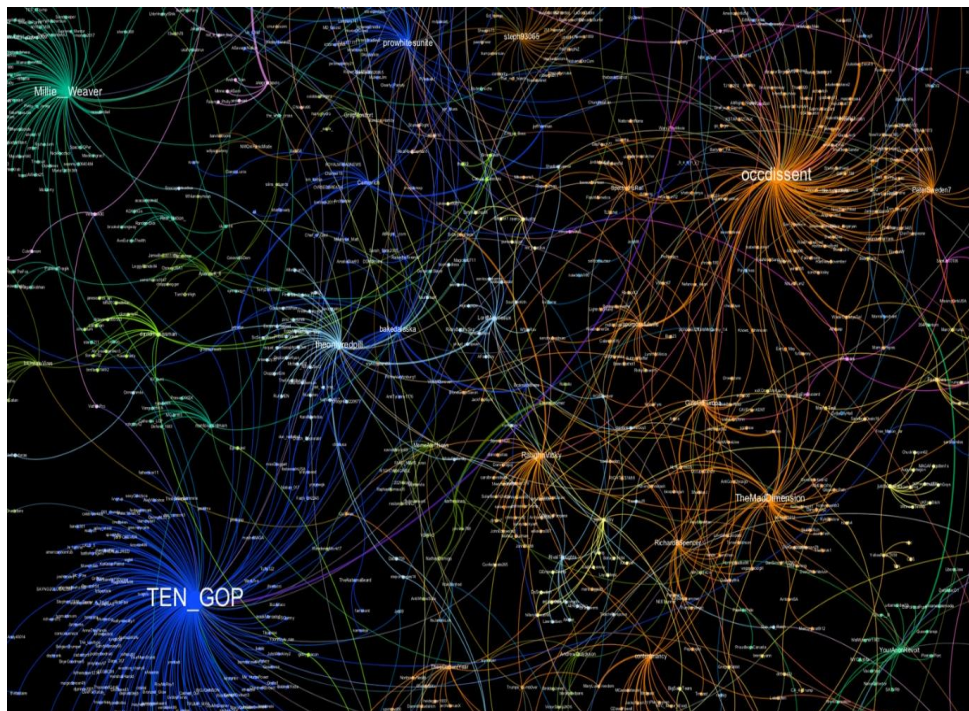


Figure 1 – The position of @TEN_GOP account in the social network created by the Twitter accounts that used the # UniteTheRight hashtag. (Source: www.buzzfeednews.com)

An interesting detail is that #UniteTheRight wasn't the unique case of the @TEN_GOP involvement in something that could have turned into clashes between the partisans of some ideologies and its opponents. Other situations in which media reported the presence of @TEN_GOP were:

- The 2017 Berkeley protests – a series (February 1, March 4, April 15 and 27, August 27, September 14 and 24–27) of protests followed by clashes that occurred in the city of Berkeley, California between organized groups of anti-Trump protesters (including socialists, anarchists, antifa groups) and pro-Trump groups.

- The "March Against Sharia" rallies – in June 11, 2017, a civic organisation, ACT For America, organized (in 28 cities from 21 states) a series of rallies to protest against “the threat to U.S. society posed by the set of traditional Muslim practices”, namely honour killings oppression of women, female genital mutilation and homophobic violence.

The Matrioska from social media

The important point is that @TEN_GOP is probably part of a tremendous information war waged across Twitter and other segments of the internet. Even if on its own @TEN_GOP has a limited reach, in the big picture it contributes little by little at the creation and expansion of a narrative aimed to political discord and instability.

On February 16, 2018, the US Justice Department indicted 13 Russian people and 3 Russian companies, accused of conspiracy in order to influence with “US political and electoral processes, including the presidential election of 2016” (Apuzzo and LaFraniere, 2018). The indictment focused especially on the Russian company Internet Research Agency (IRA), whose social media posts and online ads were “primarily intended to communicate derogatory information about Hillary Clinton, to denigrate other candidates such as Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, and to support Bernie Sanders and then-candidate Donald Trump”.

In the indictment, Facebook and Instagram were mentioned 41 times, while Twitter was referred to nine times, YouTube once and the electronic payments company PayPal 11 times (Frenkel and Benner, 2018).

More than that, the document underlined that:

“Defendants and their co-conspirators also created and controlled numerous Twitter accounts designed to appear as if U.S. persons or groups controlled them. For example, the ORGANIZATION created and controlled the Twitter account «Tennessee GOP», which used the handle @TEN_GOP, falsely claimed to be controlled by a U.S. state political party”.

On May 11, 2018, Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee released the conclusions of an enquiry that revealed the amplitude of IRA activity on Facebook (Exposing Russia’s Effort to Sow Discord Online: The Internet Research Agency and Advertisements, 2018):

- 3,393 advertisements purchased (a total 3,519 advertisements total were released after more were identified by the company);

- over 11 million American users exposed;
- over 470 Facebook pages created by IRA;
- 80,000 elements of organic content created by those pages;
- exposure of organic content to more than 126 million Americans.

At the same time, the IRA activity on Twitter in the period between September 1 and November 15, 2016 revealed:

- over 36,000 Russian-linked bot accounts that tweeted about the U.S. election;
- approximately 288 million impressions of Russian bot tweets;
- around 130,00 tweets by accounts linked to the IRA.

As Ranking Member Adam Schiff stated during the Committee's November 2017 open hearing with senior officials from Facebook, Twitter, and Google:

"[The Russian] social media campaign was designed to further a broader Kremlin objective: sowing discord in the U.S. by inflaming passions on a range of divisive issues. The Russians did so by weaving together fake accounts, pages, and communities to push politicized content and videos, and to mobilize real Americans to sign online petitions and join rallies and protests.

Russia exploited real vulnerabilities that exist across online platforms and we must identify, expose, and defend ourselves against similar covert influence operations in the future. The companies here today must play a central role as we seek to better protect legitimate political expression, while preventing cyberspace from being misused by our adversaries."

A comprehensive radiography of Internet Research Agency was published in mid-2015 by The New York Times Magazine (Chen, 2015) and The Telegraph (Parfitt, 2015), revealed some juicy information about the organization. Evoking an ex-IRA employee cited as Ludmila Savchuk, the authors pointed out the intense work at IRA, which is happening during 12-hour shifts (two shifts in a row, followed by two days off), the 400 employees, and the monthly budget evaluated at \$400,000. The ex-IRA confessed that IRA had many departments that created content for every well-known social platform: LiveJournal, VKontakte, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, but also for the comment sections of Russian news outlets.

According to the articles, the employees (most of them around the age of 20) were preoccupied that, after arriving at their job, the main care was to

switch the Internet proxy service, for hiding their IP addresses; over the two shifts they had to accomplish a quota of 5 of the political category, 10 non-political posts and around 200 comments posted by work colleagues. For this job, Savchuk' salary was \$777 a month.

Conclusions

With the proper tools, adequate human resources and a generous budget, online aggression, even it is called cyberbullying, cyberstalking or hate speech and irrespective of its ideological roots, can be speculated by entities interested in generating short-term or medium-term social tensions or animosities among supporters of diverging political trends, with direct impact on the occurrence of violent incidents, and in the long run lead to a rift between governors and citizens, or even to social disorder and dilution of the rule of law.

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