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Online hate, how do we understand it and how do we approach it

The aim of this paper is two-fold: share findings of a qualitative study “Hateful and aggressive expressions in on-line space in Slovakia” and communication and campaign strategy and some results from efforts of the Open Society Foundation in campaigning against the prejudices and internet hate.

Research Methodology

The qualitative research was conducted in June and July 2015. Ten selected experts who deal with on-line hate in their daily professional life were interviewed (structured interview) and the interviews were analyzed (with a use of software Nvivo 10 for qualitative research.) The selected professions included: psychologist for children and youth, ethnologist, sociologist, pedagogue, lawyer, psychiatrist and journalist, all with a distinct and deep knowledge about online hate and its effects on individual and social levels.

The hate speech, or hate was defined as an expression, which offends, attacks, threatens, or spreads attitudes with elements of hatred against groups based on their nationality, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation of is based on ideologies that deny basic Human Rights (Sekulová, 2015). The hate speech was for reasons of this research defined more broadly, extending beyond hate speech as defined in international documents and legislation. The decision was made in order to examine effects of this kind of phenomenon on different groups and its role within the growing extremization in the society. The decision also collides with ambition of the Open Society Foundation Slovakia (OSF) to implement different activities with an aim to work against hate and wide spread prejudices against specific social and vulnerable groups. The types of prejudices and stereotypes were measured in different studies and demonstrate significantly high levels across different social strata with only a small change in time. Thematic focus of the research included: conceptualization of the internet hate by respondents, dynamics of expressions of hate in the online

environment and its effects on individual, symbolical and social levels.

Basic trends and characteristics

Aggressive expressions, attacks and cyber-bullying are according to experts on the rise and have become a standard part of the on-line public discourse. Furthermore, the on-line environment supports spreading and sharing of these expressions. The on-line environment has a few distinct and decisive features: such as possibility of (1) seeming anonymity which tends to allow for harsher judgements and communications unlikely or less likely to be expressed in other social off-line contexts, (2) easy accessibility of on-line media and possibilities and feeling of being linked to “our” community, people that upheld similar attitudes and opinions, (3) feeling of privacy and trustworthy environment of social media where users share also private content. (4) appearance of aggressive and hateful expressions in close vicinity or directly as part of on-line editions of mainstream or tabloid media, which are important opinion making platforms (Sekulová, 2015). Although hateful expressions aimed at different social groups, they are not new and were present in different forms in various historical contexts. The new specific possibilities of spreading of hate by different individuals and groups supports its growth and diversification of its formats.

The dehumanization of certain social groups, attacks on dignity of individuals and groups is amongst the very severe effects that hate in online has on the society. Humor, sarcasm and cynical expressions containing elements of hatred have potential to increase acceptance of hate towards specific groups. Humor, sarcasm and cynical expression seem to support acceptance of hateful remarks that would not be acceptable in other context. Hate can be directed against any group or individual and can include vulnerable groups, famous commercial brands, celebrities as well as successful professionals. However, the online hate in Slovakia is mostly directed against ethnic minorities including Roma and Hungarian as well as against migrants, refugees and religious minorities (e.g. Muslims).

Dynamics and pattern of hate on-line

There is not a single pattern of hate and its spread in the on-line environment. However, it has specific dynamics.

Young people are very specific group when it comes to hate on-line. In comparison to the rest of the

population, they are much less inflicted by inherent prejudices and social identities widely spread amongst the adult populations. At the same time, young people are most vulnerable group effected by online hate and cyber-bullying, with long-term negative effects on personal level. Members of this group are also most likely to become targets of on-line hate.

Despite the wide presence of on-line hate and despite certain familiarity of internet users with hate, where most of the people have witnessed hateful expressions or were targeted by them, the majority of the on-line users tends not to react and are passive when facing the online hate (Sekulová, 2015). Experts point out that overlooking, downplaying and ignoring of this phenomenon leads to significant and severe social consequences. The spiraling of silence, ignorance and passivity when faced with online hate is pressing problem of our societies. While the entire phenomenon should be studied and carefully treated, the cyber-bullying and offensive online behavior deserves even closer attention aiming to teach youth how to stop, report and deal with such harmful expressions and decrease its effects on vulnerable groups.

Online environment is influential and opinion-forming

The traditional modern opinion-making platforms and sources such as newspapers, television and radio and personal meetings were joined by different online media, social-platforms, web-sites etc. Internet facilitates creation of individuals with similar attitudes into groups, increases its potential to quickly influence, mobilize and organize as a group. Internet is an environment with lower adherence to social norms and social control. The expressions used in this environment are often harder, more open, but also more openly attacking than in face-to-face communications. Many of the real life situations do not allow for different hateful and extremist expressions, which are largely acceptable in online environment due to lower social norms. Also, communications within homogenous groups (that share similar ideas) tend to support and escalate the hate. Another fact that supports spread and use of aggressive expressions is lack of the visible social reactions, which in face-to-face communications provide for certain level of social control (Sekulová, 2015).

The motivation of the majority of online users is to share their opinions and experiences in homogenous groups. The number of people interested in open discussions and exchange of arguments within certain topics is decreasing. Experts have also concluded, the internet decreases critical thinking (Sekulová, 2015). The hateful and aggressive expressions are also linked to low skills to constructively work with large amounts of information. Other aspect, which supports

hateful expressions is also linked to low understanding of internet users about the fact that internet links private and public space and hence, as such is fully governed and binding by existing legislation.

Motivation and reasons

Based on their specific experience and expertise, the experts concluded that there are no specific attributes or characteristics that would indicate stronger inclination to use hateful expressions (Sekulová, 2015). The inclination to use, formulate or spread online hate is present in all social groups (age, sex, education, and region). The psychologists frame these expressions within a larger phenomenon – expressing of emotions. The psychologists also point out on the negative experiences, events or problematic relations in the past or present may lead to hateful expressions. Hence, certain topics and interpretations become channels to express negative feelings, which are, however, linked to different causes and personal frustrations. Aggressive and dominant behavior can also compensate for low or problematic self-confidence and self-appreciation.

Effects

Aggressive and hateful expressions in online environment bare an effect on multiple levels: psychological, emotional as well as social. They effect perceptions of self and of the others, relationships between different people and social groups and it has short term, long-term or life-time consequences on individuals. The most severe effects are found in cases of direct, longer lasting and intensive attacks on individuals. The reactions and ability to deal with such severe attacks is very subjective and changes from person to person. Youth and children are the most vulnerable groups. Their “psychological” defense is not as developed as in cases of adults, given the ongoing personal formation.

The hateful online discourse is continuous, repetitive and present daily. It tends to aim at certain vulnerable groups and is usually linked to prejudices and stereotypes in society. Combined with “silent” and passive attitudes of majority of internet users, this leads to further legitimization or negative perceptions and furthermore also to social exclusion. It is especially the wide appearance of hateful comments and expressions that legitimize discrimination, symbolic and real exclusion.

Responsibility and solutions

The online hate should be addressed at levels of state / government / public offices, media, schools, family and also individuals. The state competencies should focus on education and sensitization of general public towards the Human Rights. The aim to decrease the existing social tensions, based on stereotypes and prejudices, require a long term orchestrated efforts of proper and wide public education campaigns. Other recommendations include: education in media and critical reading of content. The other strong requirement on the level of the state is consequent enforcement of existing legislation.

Mainstream media need to take full responsibility in monitoring and moderating media and journalistic content as well as discussions. The high quality reporting on vulnerable groups, combined with moderated on-line debates might lead to smaller amount of hateful and aggressive comments.

Families are also responsible and should be active in monitoring and supervising the time that children spent on internet. The youth and children as well as adults should be aware of potential risks of un-monitored internet browsing.

On the level of the individual, it is useful to participate and visit web-sites and platforms with constructive, even critical context. The actual act of selecting and spending time on particular platforms is already a statement against hate. By giving credit to the well-written, well resources and no-hate channels we implicitly discredit the others that do not meet these criteria.

The individual reactions on hate range from passive ignorance, explanation and humor and might all be used depending on kinds of attacks.

Strategy of OSF in working and campaigning against hate

The conclusions of the research of the “wider” and “soft” hate, i.e., hateful and aggressive expressions, have placed it into the wider dynamic of dehumanization and acceptance supported by its omnipresent and daily appearance in online environment. The effects of it are severe and should be payed careful attention to, especially with regard to most affected groups: children, youth and members of different vulnerable groups. Clearly, the type of hate that we are talking about is not easily, if at all, legally persecuted. This, however, should cause relevant institutions and individuals to dedicate special, focused attention into dealing with this problem, which clearly has its firm and

specific functions in contributing to extremisation of the society.

Responses to online hate include better education, rising of public awareness about the phenomenon and of its negative effects on victims and society as such. Breaking the culture of silence and kind of “deafness” towards this phenomenon is amongst key challenges. Being aware of the research findings, the communication strategy of the Open Society Foundation, dedicated to working against hate, identified spreading the knowledge and understanding about the hate as crucial at this stage.

The basic misconception about the online hate is that it is an expression of critical thought or of an opinion of a person. The basic assumption when creating a concept of our campaign “Tell it to my eyes” was, that hate is not criticism, it is an attack on a person. It dehumanizes the hated subject and carries a power to legitimize negative prejudices and stereotypes. It contributes to acceptance of disadvantageous position of minorities within society. It increases the hatred and tension within societies and may lead to physical violence towards vulnerable, dehumanized groups. Individuals / victims effected by hate bare psychological and emotional consequences, which might be short, long term or life-long.

The key problems to be addressed by the campaign were defined as three fold:

- hate is damaging
- affects entire society
- amount of hate on internet is increasing.

Furthermore, from different research we were aware of the fact that people do not care about hate. Only 22 percent of Slovaks considered spreading of dangerous and harmful content online to be a serious problem (IVO, Digital literacy in Slovakia, April 2015). The simple rational explanation would most probably not work. Furthermore, it is difficult to campaign about hate when haters are ready to attack you with their “noisy” communication vis-a-vis the “silent” majority.

The communication goals of our campaign were to increase sensitivity and awareness of public about the online hate, get the message across that hate is stupid, spiteful and hurtful. Hate is not a result of critical thinking.

Relatively small group of people actually elaborates and spreads different kinds of hateful content. There is also a relatively small group of people that try to explain hoaxes, point out different methods of manipulation with information or dubious information resources. The third part of the population is the “silent majority”. Without attempting to verify different online messages, people often spread harmful content because they “trust” or are in a “friendship” relationship with someone who people intentionally spread false or harmful information. Unfortunately, we have no specific research that would describe the size and characteristics of this group.

Strategically we have defined three specific focus groups: (1) silent majority, (2) media and (3) activists. The goals were to incite thinking and rationalization about hate and its harmful effects (1), create campaign that will win media who are also effected by the online hate in negative way and get their spontaneous participation, sharing and supporting of the campaign (2), attract activists that share our mission and get their support (3) and “hard-core haters” were we did not aim to convince them. The only goal was not to become attacked by these groups.

The key features of the campaign included: working with emotions that may move a person at deeper level and motivate him/her to share, comment and actively endorse the campaign; create a campaign that will easily connect and resonate with wider public and will be more or less resistant against possible attempts to silence the campaign in its beginnings.

The knowledge extracted from the research have led to following insight: It is not difficult to be tough online. When we find our-selves in face-to-face communication, the situation and our ability to say / spread hate changes. We lose our courage and become aware of the harmful consequence of hate.

The creative idea of the campaign was to use real hates found online, that targeted different publicly know personalities / celebrities who also represent different vulnerable groups (singer with speech impediment, foreigner, member of Hungarian minority). We have created four videos and microsite where more attention to hate and its effects was given.

The campaign was very successful in number, won awards, but most importantly succeeded thoroughly in audience engagement. Some facts about the campaign reach are: 1.5 mil Facebook

users was reached. 700 000 views of videos, 34.000 likes plus numerous comments and shares. The videos were also 400 times “hidden” from the Facebook, and about 100 times the entire Open Society Foundation FB profile was “hidden” probably by haters. The videos were also reported as “unsuitable”. The positive reactions included spontaneous use of the campaign’s headline “tell it to my eyes” by journalists, activists and online users. The campaign was active from 9th of July until 15th of July. The topic of hate was covered by numerous media, the campaign and its headline were often quoted and referred to. The campaign was distributed freely online and picked up by different media for about another two months after its “official” ending.

The analysis of innovative features and effectiveness of the campaign suggest following:

- New insight and perspective on hate that involved the public emotionally was able to explain negative effects of the hate in easy and comprehensive way.
- Good selection of target groups, i.e., we have “attacked” and “disclosed” hate in the medium where it is daily present.
- Emotional reach to large group of people, thanks to collaboration with celebrities that also represented different vulnerable groups (three out of four). We have worked with the ethnicity and otherness very carefully. It was implicit in videos but only once (in the case of Hungarian actor) mentioned directly in the selected hate.
- The campaign naturally attracted media, activists and civil society representatives. It was also picked up internationally (in the Czech Republic) thanks to the viral character of its content.

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