

THE YOUTH AND THEIR PERCEPTION OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH

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Abstract: *Young people, as the most sensitive category of society, are daily exposed to hate speech through numerous communication channels. Media content that promotes violence, content that clearly expresses intolerance towards differences, content that promotes wrong value systems and allows daily disparagement, insults and belittling, contribute to the creation of an inadequate society for growing up and educating young people. Precisely with the aim of determining the attitude of youth towards hate speech to which they are exposed in the online space, a survey was conducted on a sample of 108 respondents. The results of the survey showed that more than 90% of young people witnessed some form of hate speech, which was most often directed at political dissenters or members of the LGTB+ community. Also, in the largest percentage, they condemn every form of violence, including verbal violence, believing that hate speech on the Internet can affect mental health. However, young people are not sufficiently informed about hate speech and do not know how to react in situations where they are exposed to it. Additional education is necessary, as well as the reduction of content that propagates this type of communication.*

Key words: Media, internet, information, hate speech.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet provides access to an almost unlimited amount of information, facilitates work and speeds up communication between people. Internet has partly assumed the role of means of mass communication, which contributed to the increase and democratization of communication. On the other hand, the negative aspects of the Internet are the facilitated creation and spread of half-truths and unverified information, the expansion of cybercrime, hate speech and many other negative social phenomena (Veljanovski, 2012). Social networking sites are especially popular on the Internet, and they have become an almost indispensable part of everyday life, as a channel through which information is collected, communicated and further distributed (Krivokapić et al, 2021). Social networking sites represent the most widespread form of "social media", which implies the creation of user-generated content (Miladinović, 2015). The advantages of social networks are structural flexibility and fast communication flows that enable easier association and spontaneous organization of individuals based on common interests (Andrade & Pischetola, 2016).

However, internet media and social networks can become a suitable environment for the manifestation of negative social phenomena, among which hate speech stands out. Hate speech can be defined as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor" (United Nations, 2019). As the Internet and social media are characterized by physical distance and the virtual presence of users, the spread of hate speech is facilitated, especially due to the presumed anonymity as well as the relatively inexpensive and convenient place for wide communication (Daniels, 2008).

In discussions about the concept of hate speech in the media, two opposing positions are represented. On the one hand, hate speech is identified as a negative social phenomenon that should be banned, and on the other hand, it is considered that such a ban would threaten the freedom of expression. Many experts nevertheless agree that education is necessary to oppose hate speech, in order to eradicate prejudices, misconceptions and stereotypes that lead to it (Sikorskaya & Gafarova, 2014).

Since young people are daily users of the Internet, and especially of social networking sites, they are particularly susceptible to their negative influence. The fact that they feel more free online than in direct communication speaks in support of the understanding of the great popularity of the Internet among young people (Nikšić-Rebihić & Smajović, 2021). However, the World Health Organization pointed out the negative impact of the Internet on human health, especially young people, and that the excessive use of digital technology is a public health problem (WHO, 2014). What is more, research entitled "Communicative aggression in Serbia 2019" showed that in the period of one month, almost 20,000 texts

with elements of aggressive communication, hate speech and sensationalism were published in the most widely read print and online media in the country. These data indicate a high exposure of the population to hate speech through the media, which can lead to many negative consequences (CEPROM, 2019).

In this paper, the analysis is limited to the perception of youth¹ in relation to the hate speech they encounter on the Internet. The subject of the research was the attitudes and opinions of the research participants about hate speech in the online space. The goal of the research was to determine the general attitude of young people towards the use of hate speech, that is, whether they are familiar with the term "hate speech", whether they have been exposed to hate speech, whether they react to it (and in what way), as well as whether they are sufficiently informed about this phenomenon on the Internet and the ways in which they can best approach it.

In many countries, there are debates about the optimal way to balance seemingly opposing values – freedom of expression, on the one hand, and the imperative to ban certain types of communication that encourage violence, hatred and discrimination, on the other. Internationally, the right to freedom of speech is provided for by numerous international legal instruments, but certain limitations of this freedom are also prescribed. International law prohibits the incitement to hostility, violence and discrimination, rather than the hate speech as such. However, hate speech can be harmful, given that it promotes intolerance and discrimination, which can lead to serious crimes (United Nations, 2019).

Numerous media operate in the online space, whether they are just internet presentations of traditional media, with an editorial policy or the social media, among which the most numerous are social networking sites (such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, etc.), which lack a responsible editor. Regulations generally regulate hate speech found on traditional media websites, while the issue of regulating hate speech on social networks is still controversial and unclear. Thus, different countries approach the problem in different ways. For example, in the US, social media have wide freedom to adopt and enforce their own rules, while not being responsible for the actions of their users. On the other hand, under new social media rules in India, the government can order platforms to remove posts within twenty-four hours based on a wide range of violations, as well as identify the users who made the offence (Laub, 2019). In the European Union, a significant shift in legal regulation was achieved with the adoption of amendments to the Directive on Audiovisual Services (2018), which extended the original rules, that only applied to traditional media, to platforms for sharing video content (such as YouTube), as well as to audiovisual content shared on other social media platforms, in order to protect minors from harmful content, and all citizens from incitement to hatred, violence and terrorism. Although this represents a change in terms of legal regulation of social media, a large part of the activities of network users remains unregulated. The situation is further complicated on the sites of editorially designed Internet pages, which have the possibility of commenting by the user. At the international level, there is still a dilemma as to whether the media is responsible for the comments of its readers (Atanacković, 2020).

In the Republic of Serbia, there are several laws that are relevant to the field of combating hate speech: Law on Advertising (Article 8), Law on Public Information and Media (Article 75), Law on Prohibition of Discrimination (Article 11), Criminal Code (Articles 317, 387 and 138), Law on Electronic Media (Article 51), etc. (Ivanović & Stojanović, 2022). However, due to the disparity of regulations and the possibility of legal protection, individuals often find it difficult to navigate it and do not know who to turn to (Atanacković, 2020). That is why solutions are often found in self-regulation – adopting legally non-binding, but very significant documents, such as ethical codes and guidelines of behavior of certain social networking sites that prohibit socially unacceptable behavior of users.

Therefore, in order to reduce hate speech in public discourse, social engagement is necessary on several fronts – on the level of regulation, self-regulation, ethics and education. As the legal regulations cannot fully sanction hate speech on the Internet, it is considered that the key role in recognizing and reducing hate speech should be played by the education of young people through media literacy. Media literacy is defined as a set of viewpoints that we actively apply in media consumption to interpret the meaning of the messages we receive (Potter, 2011).

2. METHODS

The conducted research was of a quantitative type, while data collection was carried out based on the survey method. A specially structured electronic questionnaire was used as a research instrument,

¹ According to The Law on Youth ("RS Official Gazette", no. 50/2011 and 116/2022 – other law) of the Republic of Serbia, young people are persons from the age of 15 to the age of 30.

created through the Google Forms option, with open and closed answer modalities offered, and a set of questions formed according to the Likert scale. The online questionnaire contained 13 questions, grouped into two parts: socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants (four questions) and the attitude of the research participants towards hate speech on the Internet (nine questions). The online survey process was conducted via e-mail and Viber, with the limitation of "one address – one answer". In this way, potential misuse was prevented, i.e. it was impossible to reply multiple times from the same e-mail address. The obtained data were processed through a statistical program directly on Google Forms. Participation in the research was voluntary and anonymous for all respondents. The research was conducted in the period from May 5 to 19, 2023.

3. RESULTS

The research sample consisted of 108 respondents, of which 57.5% were female and 42.5% were male. Adult young people between the ages of 18 and 30 participated in the research, with the average age of the respondents being 24.8 years. Among the research participants, there were mostly highly educated people, that is, those who completed four-year studies (46%), followed by those who only completed high school (29.9%). An equal number of research participants had a master's degree and a higher education degree – 11.5% of them each. The largest number of respondents stated the city as their place of residence – 95.4%.

Almost all research participants were familiar with the term "hate speech", where 58.6% of them were fully familiar with the meaning of this term, and 36.8% were partially familiar with it. A negligible percentage of respondents – 3.4%, were not sure what the meaning of the mentioned term was, while only one (1.1%) respondent did not know what was meant by "hate speech". The largest number of research participants (77%) heard about this term via the Internet, an almost equal percentage of them via the media or in an educational institution such as school and college – 48.4% each, from their family members 16.1%, and from friends – 14.9% of respondents.

The results of the conducted research confirmed that more than 90% of the research participants witnessed some kind of "hate speech" on the Internet, but with different frequency (Graph 1). Thus, "hate speech" was witnessed daily by 23% of respondents, occasionally by 36.8%, and rarely by 31% of them. There were 5.7% of those who were not sure whether they had witnessed this type of internet violence, and only 3.4% of those who estimated that they had not witnessed it.

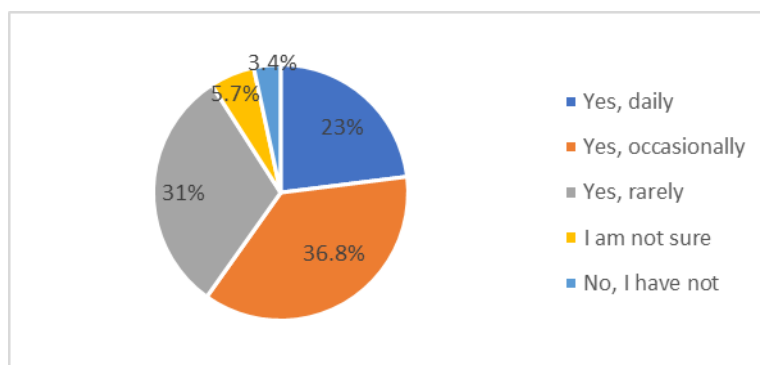


Figure 1: Exposure to "hate speech on the Internet"

The "hate speech" witnessed by research participants in the last three months was in most cases directed towards members of the LGBT+ population (62.1%), political dissidents (60.9%), members of another nation (47.1%) and other religions (41.4%), but also towards migrants (27.6%) and people with disabilities (8%).

Although they witnessed "hate speech" on the Internet, more than half of the respondents did not react to it in any way (51.7%). Nevertheless, there were those who reacted, most often in one of two ways: either they blocked the person who spread "hate speech" (20.7%), or they reported "hate speech" online, that is, the page where they noticed it (13.8%).

Research participants who did not react to "hate speech" on social networks but noticed it, were asked an additional question, i.e. what was the reason for their decision to do so. As the most common reason, they stated that "they don't like to publicly express their position on sensitive topics" (40%) and that they "didn't want to enter into discussions in the online space" (40%), and there were also those who "didn't

know how to react" (15.6%). Although a large number witnessed hate speech on the Internet, a small number of research participants – 6.9% of them were directly exposed to it, while 19.5% of respondents were not sure whether it was or not. Those who were directly exposed to it, as a form of this type of internet violence, stated that they were insulted and ridiculed because of the posts they posted, then because of a conflict of opinion on certain topics, or on a national basis.

Based on a five-point Likert scale, the degree of agreement with the respondents' statements regarding the use of "hate speech" on the Internet was assessed. Thus, the largest number of them, in different situations, never used "hate speech" (Figure 2). Constant and frequent use of "hate speech" by research participants was negligible, so in the online space, "hate speech" was rarely used in the context of "offensive and derogatory names" (11.49%), "to ridicule groups or individuals" (11.49%), and in the context of "expressing and/or spreading offensive stereotypes" (10.34%).

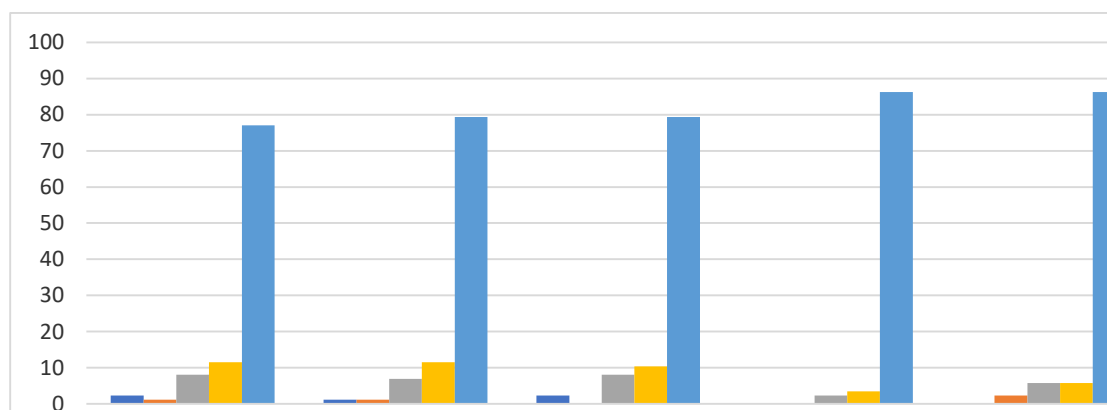


Figure 2: The use of "hate speech" in the online space

The largest number of research participants fully agreed with the assessments that they "condemn all forms of violence, including verbal violence" (73.56%), and that "hate speech can seriously affect an individual's mental health" (56.32%). Also, the largest number of them agreed with the statements that "hate speech contributes to the formation of a general negative attitude about an individual or group" (45.98%), that "hate speech on the Internet often leads to violence in a real environment" (43.68%), that "prejudice is most often behind hate speech" (40.23%), and that "it is expected that you will be attacked on social networks if you publicly speak about things that are not acceptable in society" (26.44%). On the other hand, respondents completely disagreed with the statements that "they do not see a problem in the use of hate speech in the online space" (68.97%), that "violence on social networks cannot seriously harm anyone" (48.28%), and that "some individuals or groups of people deserve to be ridiculed" (43.68%). These results clearly indicate a developed awareness of the negative consequences of the use and exposure to "hate speech", but also a direct condemnation of the use of this form of communication. However, the majority of research participants were of the dominant opinion that young people are not sufficiently informed about "hate speech" on the Internet (58.6%), stating that there should be more discussion about this topic in educational institutions (81.6%), that it is necessary to additionally educate parents on how to act in case of exposure to "hate speech" (63.2%), but also to launch a greater number of educational campaigns that will be advertised through social networks (60.9%) and traditional media (37.9%), including the launch of specialized websites (23%).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Numerous studies (Ivanović & Stojanović, 2022; Al Serhan & Elareshi, 2019), including ours, confirm the knowledge of the concept of hate speech among Internet users. Some even indicate that it is the category of young people that is most affected by hate speech in the online space, especially if they are politically engaged or members of specific social minorities (Obermaier & Schmuck, 2022). In Germany, 40% of the population witnessed hate speech on the Internet, while 73% of young people aged 18 to 24 were exposed to hate speech victimization on social networking sites (Geschke et al., 2019).

Although more than 90% of the young people who participated in our research witnessed some form of hate speech, a smaller number of them were directly exposed to it. On the other hand, although they noticed it, they did not react to it. Data from the UK Safer Internet Center (2016) confirm that young people do not react to this type of incident in the online space most often due to a lack of appropriate

competences such as limited knowledge of what is meant by hate speech or due to insufficient knowledge about what actions they can take to oppose it.

As the young population is most sensitive to negative thoughts and comments, and is daily exposed to hate speech, especially in connection with sexism, offensive texts and religious differences, this can lead to various disorders, such as depression, learning difficulties, social discomfort (Sarfranz et al., 2022), but also a feeling of fear, insecurity and sleep disturbances (Obermaier & Schmuck, 2022). For the above reasons, dealing with this topic is extremely important.

It can be concluded that young people's awareness of the harmfulness of hate speech was at a high level, although they expressed concern about the level of media literacy, and they believe that additional education by formal and informal educational organizations is necessary.

Given the delicacy of the topic, the main limitation of this research is the sample size and potential bias in answering the questions, according to socially desirable behavior. The sample should be expanded to respondents of a younger age category, considering that teenagers spend the most time on the Internet, and grow up exposed to the influence of the virtual world, where there are still no clear legal restrictions regarding the spread and propagation of hatred. This can have unforeseeable consequences in terms of personality development and being in a real environment. Also, it is desirable to launch initiatives to limit and suppress the use of hate speech on the Internet, not only through the introduction of legal regulations, but also through various dedicated, educational content.

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