

Mirroring Bias: Online Hate Speech and Polarisation

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July 2, 2021

Public figures like politicians and journalists are no strangers to hate speech and online harassment. Though this is not a new phenomenon, our globalised age has seen the internet become a new terrain where vitriol thrives and spreads. With a focus on Italy, Sofia Cherici traces the roots of the hate that permeates the online and offline worlds to reinforce exclusionary structures and silence the voices of women and minorities. With cyber hate at crisis point, democracy itself is at stake.

On 30 October 2019, Liliana Segre introduced a motion on the floor of the Italian Senate that, if passed, would set up a commission to combat hate speech both on and off the internet. The move was a historic turn in the ongoing debate around online hate speech in Italy.

The motion aimed at fighting forms of hate speech such as intolerance, racism, antisemitism, and incitement to hatred and violence. It was approved amid widespread support and 151 votes in favour, a victory that was partially overshadowed by a controversial 98 abstentions from the centre-right. That Liliana Segre – a Holocaust survivor, prominent public figure, and senator for life since 2018^[1] – was the spokesperson for a parliamentary body against hate speech puts this episode in broader historical context. Segre has twice been the victim of incitement to hatred, albeit in different eras and forms: first, aged 14, when ideologies of hate saw her deported to the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau; and second, when the escalation in online insults and threats forced her to start receiving police protection in November 2019.

Segre reveals the invisible thread that connects different chapters of contemporary history: her story reminds us that hate speech is not unique to the social media age, but rather a historical global phenomenon that has been amplified by modern communication technology.

A line can be drawn between the episodes of totalitarianism that marked the 20th century and the mindset of hatred that targets marginalised groups in society today, suggests University of Turin sociologist Marinella Belluati. This is because hate speech does not just play out online but also in politics, with the two levels interacting: “the origins of the phenomenon lie in a tendency inherent to a type of argumentation that is typical of forms of power and interaction at the highest levels of society”.

While incitement to hatred may not be an uncommon behaviour in our system of social interconnection, social media, as an incubator and amplifier of contemporary culture, reproduces and enhances this model of interaction. Due to the hunger for sensationalism and drama that fuels the media, social networks tend to radicalise the various forms of extremism found online. And so a culture of hate is driven by networked online

communication platforms.

This tendency reaches extremes when hate speech floods the political arena. Because of their visibility as public figures, political leaders are particularly exposed to online abuse. All the more so if they are women or belong to a minority group: research published in 2016 highlighted the scale of online harassment faced by women and minorities active in politics across the world. The risk is that the social division sown by hate speech is reinforced by social media echo chambers: now that the political battlefield has moved online, the digital space poses new challenges to the principles of inclusivity and representation that underpin democracy.

Patterns of hate speech

Online attacks against political leaders are a global phenomenon. From the United States to India to Finland, the psychological abuse aimed at female parliamentarians and politicians takes many forms: from sexist comments, rape threats, bullying and digital voyeurism to the use of images and photos as a means of humiliation. Yet these attacks are just part of a much wider sociocultural problem: around three quarters of female internet users have been abused online. Social media is a new frontline of gender-based violence.

Europe is no exception, according to a 2018 study commissioned by the European Parliament. Women with public profiles, such as activists, politicians, artists and journalists, are a particular target for online hate speech in the European Union. In Italy, many women working in the media have been harassed online: a 2013 study by the International Women's Media Foundation revealed that approximately two thirds of the 149 female journalists surveyed had experienced online abuse. Furthermore, an Amnesty International Italia study of Twitter and Facebook posts between November and December 2019 showed that female influencers attracted a third more online attacks than male influencers, with one in three of these explicitly sexist.

Risks increase for women belonging to minority ethnic or religious groups. In the United Kingdom, research by Amnesty Global Insights in 2017 exposed the extent of Twitter abuse directed against black and Asian women MPs, calculating that on average they receive 35 per cent more abusive tweets than white women MPs.

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Research has also confirmed that technology-facilitated sexual violence (which refers to the use of digital technologies to facilitate both virtual and face-to-face sexual violence) is more likely to affect women and members of the LGBTQI+ community. In this respect, the structure of hate speech online mirrors the paradigms of various forms of offline discrimination, violence and harassment.

This is certainly the case in the public sphere, where for centuries there has been structural political exclusion of women due to gender stereotypes associating them with the private

sphere. Research has distinguished the structural prejudice faced by women in public office from other forms of political violence and identified cultural violence as a means of exclusion: certain cultural norms tolerate particular types of abuse when targeted at specific social groups. This is the case for some forms of sexualisation that shift the terms of the debate from a discussion on competence to a judgement on morality and appearance – as seen, for instance, in the media coverage of Sarah Palin during the 2008 US presidential election campaign.

Italy's rising tide of hate

In Italy, online hate speech is now a tool in political debate. In a 2018 study on the use of offensive language in political discourse, Belluati found a link between the use of hate speech as a propaganda device and the crisis in rational argumentation in politics, with this growing trend threatening democracy.

The study showed that the heaviest users of violent language against the politicians, particularly prominent figures such as Democratic Party MP and former president of the House of Deputies Laura Boldrini and former minister Maria Elena Boschi, were the populist parties the Five Star Movement and the Northern League (Lega). By employing hate speech at will, these anti-establishment parties fuel a narrative of conflict, thereby enhancing their own public profiles.

Social destabilisers such as economic crises and changes in migration flows seem to alter trends in online hate speech. In the 1990s, it was minorities from Albania, Romania, Morocco and China who were stigmatised in Italy; today, Muslims are the main target of hate speech in the country. In recent years, the societal backlashes fanned by hate speech, especially on the subject of immigration, have regularly been exploited by politicians on the populist right with the aim of energising their supporter base and furthering their political objectives.

Hate speech may be favoured by the anti-establishment fringes and nationalist right, but it is used across the political spectrum. Leader of the far-right Brothers of Italy party Giorgia Meloni has been both an instigator and victim of hate speech. In February 2021, Meloni was at the centre of a controversy that saw her targeted with sexist insults online.

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When loathing oozes from institutions, the disease of hate speech has become endemic in society. Belluati highlights the key role played by intermediaries such as traditional media and social networks, which operate between public opinion and the country's leaders: "In Italy, the media still has little capacity for self-reflection and assessment of its own cultural practices, such as the perpetuation of a certain type of inegalitarian thinking". Studies have shown how gender stereotypes promoted by traditional media are replicated on social media: here in the *terrae nullius* controlled by big tech firms lies the real potential for hate speech to thrive. Belluati explains that big platforms like Facebook and Twitter, motivated

by profits that depend on traffic levels, have little interest what is actually said so long as it produces market value. “This situation might have been fine in social media’s ‘wild west’ phase, but now the time has come to regulate”, Belluati adds.

Democracy under threat

Online hate speech against politicians is often seen as inevitable. The phenomenon is still poorly understood and its impacts are hard to measure, but research has confirmed the ability of cyber hate to survive in different environments: like a virus, hate speech online can adapt to thrive outside its original context. This is how its effects seep into the offline world.

The investigations following the car bombing that killed the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in 2017 showed 30 years of online threats in a completely different light. Her story is all too similar to those of British MP Jo Cox, CNN’s Filipino-American reporter Maria Ressa, and Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh. Hate crimes with different narratives but the same worrying leitmotiv: the victims were all targets of incessant online attacks. Although it is impossible to draw a direct link between cyber hate and hate crimes, the many killings of female journalists and politicians point to a possible connection.

The question of how online hate impacts women’s political participation is more complicated than it first seems.

When it comes to how online hate speech impacts democracy, the issue becomes knotty around the effects on the political participation of the most exposed groups. Many activists and academics claim that there is a relatively clear link between the chronic under-representation of women in politics and their higher chance of being targeted with online hate. A Finnish study found that 28 per cent of municipal decision-makers who had experienced hate speech were less willing to participate in decision-making as a result. So the very real risk of being abused online can discourage women from participating in politics. In the United Kingdom, unions have highlighted how online trolling dissuades women from standing for public office. Similarly, the relentlessness of virtual violence is forcing many female journalists to change their working methods and online presence, and even to look for new careers.

However, the question of how online hate impacts women’s political participation is more complicated than it first seems, argues Belluati. “It’s true that women, especially those at the top, are easy targets for this type of violence. But to say that women are under-represented in politics because they’re put off by fear of greater exposure to abuse is too simplistic. In fact, women were already participating less before the internet took off.”

Belluati explains that the question of female participation in public life is bound up with a more systematic mechanism. For years, the Italian political landscape has suffered from levels of representation for women and minorities that are far below the European average. While the first Giuseppe Conte government (2018-2019) saw female members of parliament reach a record high at 334 (35.8 per cent of all elected parliamentarians), finally

exceeding the European average after decades without progress, this was largely down to electoral laws on gender equality. “After the roaring 1970s, when women’s activism was making strides in all areas, we have to ask ourselves why in 2021 women remain locked out of politics unless there are regulatory mechanisms like quotas”, Belluati says.

She suggests that the problem is work-life balance: “Some careers are demanding and require choices and paths that have not yet been normalised for women. Then there’s the cumulative effect as cultural resistance, over time, has resulted in women’s disinterest, especially when it comes to the top jobs. As a result, something that should be reaching a critical mass stops of its own accord at a certain point.”

Belluati shows how these mechanisms are exposed when looking at the number of women involved in local politics in Italy compared with national politics: there is strong female participation at the regional level, while the biggest gender participation gap is at the top level, with no woman ever having held the position of president or prime minister. “This system that locks women out has led them to lose interest in running for the top jobs – with a few exceptions. The cost of involvement is one that women are not always willing to pay.”

A vaccine for online abuse

Some phenomena can become viral, Belluati explains: “The pandemic has shown us the perverse effects of virality. Just like a virus, online hate speech can be combatted by defence mechanisms; society is building up a series of antibodies in response, like identification tools, debunking, and proactive countermeasures.” However, the best cure, says Belluati, remains creating a system for detecting and reporting abuse, alongside protection schemes for at-risk groups.

In Italy, there are many such initiatives led by civil society organisations. For some time now, Amnesty International Italia has been running a task force for countering hate on social media. The Carta di Roma organisation has become a leader in the fight against migration-related hate speech, and the social start-up Chi Odia Paga (Who Hates Pays) has developed Italy’s first legal tech platform for helping victims of online hate crimes to seek redress through the justice system.

For Belluati, these initiatives offer useful evidence that can be used to devise effective policies, establish good practices, and provide innovative tech responses. The problem, however, is when there is “no response at the highest levels”. Indeed, it is only recently that online hate speech has entered the political debate. The first initiatives have come from parliamentarians such as Boldrini and Segre who actively raise awareness of the issue.

So long as the feminist, anti-racist and LGBTQI+ struggles remain apart, the fight against online hate speech will flounder.

Boldrini has often been the target of ferocious online attacks because of her positions on immigration and gender equality policies. After years of abuse online, her decision in 2017 to report her virtual attackers to the police drew considerable attention. Building on her

2016 parliamentary work with the Jo Cox Commission on Intolerance, Xenophobia, Racism and Hate Phenomena (with the name referencing the British MP who was murdered the same year), in 2018 Boldrini worked with Segre to set up the commission to combat hate speech. In March 2021, Boldrini introduced a bill that would create penalties for sites that do not remove hate content from their web pages. The fines imposed would be used to finance prevention and digital education programmes.

But social and legislative mechanisms alone are not enough to combat hate speech. “Given how complex and widespread it is, this phenomenon must be fought in the spheres of education, culture and regulation by involving different parts of the system, including politicians, the media and the big social network companies”, concludes Belluati. “There needs to be ownership of the problem in every part of public life: at the local, national and supranational levels. Without coordinated action, all efforts risk being undermined. We all have a role to play: scholars who study these phenomena, the media world that highlights them, those with the socio-technical knowledge for building infrastructure, and those with the institutional knowledge who must regulate.”

The question of raising cultural awareness of the issue remains: how to foster a culture that combats hatred instead of breeding it? Social movements fighting on the frontline against discrimination based on gender, race and sexual orientation may be able to lead a grassroots awareness campaign that can bring about the cultural shift necessary to counter the many forms of online hate speech. But Italy lacks an intersectional movement capable of taking the different demands of minority groups and uniting them as one voice: so long as the feminist, anti-racist and LGBTQI+ struggles remain apart, the fight against online hate speech will flounder.

The complexity of hate speech and the role this has played in the unfolding of historical events show this is an enormous problem that threatens to divide our societies: a crisis we can no longer afford to ignore. A democracy in which participation is suppressed by systemic discrimination risks becoming a mere shadow of itself. Inciting hatred, perpetuating stereotypes, and spreading disinformation in the name of the false gods of freedom will turn social media into a breeding ground for demagogues and political parties that use populist rhetoric to radicalise the electorate.

[1] Senators for life in Italy are members of the Senate who are either appointed by the President of the Italian Republic “for outstanding patriotic merits in the social, scientific, artistic or literary field” or former presidents.



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Published July 2, 2021

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/mirroring-bias-online-hate-speech-and-polarisation/>

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