

Bielefeld, 10 July 2019

We are an interdisciplinary and multicultural group of students from Germany, Turkey, Greece, Italy, and Mexico. In the seminar “Hate Speech and Disinformation on Social Media,” taught by Monika Hübscher (Haifa University), we increased our awareness of the global threat of hate speech and fake news on social media. While dealing with the topic, we understood that, particularly in Germany, existing counter strategies are insufficient when viewed in contrast with the extreme outcome that fake news and hate speech on social media can have. In its gravest consequences, disinformation can disrupt democratic exercise, as seen in the US election campaigns in 2016, and hate speech has been found to enable ethnic cleansing as in the ongoing violence against the Muslim Rohingya minority in Myanmar.

Universities have a responsibility to address contemporary, global and social issues, however only few faculties have a focus group working on this topic. We find this alarming because hate speech and fake news on social media need interdisciplinary research and cooperation to be fully understood and confronted. We see an urgent need for action, and thus please find below our recommendations based on the research and work we have done in our seminar. Our hope is to raise your awareness and to begin a discourse that leads to appropriate reactions from the accountable actors and most importantly, prevention of harm from disinformation and hate on social media. We hope that our definitions and recommendations can serve as an impulse and starting point for research on hate speech and disinformation, specifically focusing on social media.

Please get in touch with us for more in-depth discussion.

With kind regards,

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Update, September 2019:

Working group on Hate Speech and Disinformation on Social Media

Concerned about the state of research and events surrounding the topic hate speech and disinformation on social media, a small group from the seminar has decided to continue to work on the issue.

Mona Corsmeier, Dominik Goertz, Vanessa Walter, and Monika Hübscher will continue to debate and research on the topic. Additionally, Marc Grimm, a researcher at the Centre for Prevention and Intervention in Childhood and Adolescence and the Faculty of Educational Science, has joined the group and will serve as the contact at Bielefeld University.

We are looking for students and researchers from all disciplines to join our group.

Currently we are organizing an interdisciplinary get together on the topic.

If you are interested in our work and if you consider joining, please send an email to:

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Action Plan to establish social media studies at Universities

From the students of the seminar “Hate speech and disinformation on social media”

Under the guidance of Monika Hübscher

Quote as: Hübscher, M.; et.al: Action Plan to Establish Social Media Studies at Universities, 2019.

1. Working Definition of Fake News and Hate Speech on Social Media

Social media providers, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, are globally operating companies that allow users to create profiles and use the platforms in exchange for the users’ data. In our research we found many definitions of hate speech and fake news, but none specifically defined the phenomenon on social media.

Fake news on social media entails intentionally created deceptive content in the form of, for example, counterfeit videos, articles, audio files but also posts, images, memes, gifs, and files attached to online posts (documents, audio, visuals). They are put to work with the intent to influence, mislead, polarize, impersonate, discredit and to purposely deceive the public.

Specific to social media are tools to engage with the content such as like buttons and share, comment, and streaming options. Additionally, social media providers and specialized companies offer the opportunity to increase dissemination through bots and trolls as well as micro-targeting ads. It is due to these tools that social media can be weaponized to deceive the public and to influence public opinion and the social climate on a large scale. It can potentially lead to distrust and delegitimization of political systems, the media and academic and state institutions. The dissemination of fake news can create an environment of fear and as such, has the potential to inform hate speech. Hate speech on social media is any form of expression that can hurt and harm people, physically and mentally, intentionally and unintentionally. Hate speech is used to target a group or the individual as a representative of a group.

Due to social media specific tools, as mentioned above, hate speech can be circulated widely and thus has not only the potential to create individual harm, but can have severe offline consequences such as the incitement of violence. Hate speech can turn into endangering speech and thus can incite people to engage in further hate speech or to commit offline hate crimes. This can even take the form of organized campaigns.

In the past it has been used by governments, religious leaders, media, military, public figures, trolls, interest groups and individual users. The aim is to target groups by creating, releasing sharing and commenting on content with the intent to dehumanize and incite discrimination, hate and ultimately even crimes against humanity.

2. Targeted Groups and Victims of Hate Speech and Fake News

On the individual level, the dangers of hate speech are often overlooked. Most commonly targeted groups of hate speech on social media are groups with a history of discrimination. During our research we have observed harm on the following groups. The list is unfortunately not exhaustive:

Hate speech is used to target groups according to their ideologies, religious beliefs, sex and gender expressions, sexual orientation, appearance, ethnicity, socio-economic status, lifestyle, and disabilities.

3. Possible Online and Offline Effects of Hate Speech and Disinformation

During our research we have observed various reported harmful effects of hate speech on social media. The list includes but is not limited to: physical violence, group polarization, fear, psychological issues, discrimination, increase of prejudices, exclusion, and/or crimes against humanity.

4. Recommendations:

Universities should establish an interdisciplinary social media focus group. This focus group organizes regular conferences with the aim to establish a network of political actors, NGOs, scholars, representatives of social media companies, experts from the tech industry, educators, teachers and police. They need to create an environment of trust and open discussion, develop a network and divide tasks accordingly.

1. Universities: coordinating and organizing the conferences that raise awareness of the global issue of disinformation and endangering speech on social media and its on- and offline consequences; a focus group has to monitor results of the studies by scholars and the results of the education programs for educators, teachers and subsequently pupils in

schools; it needs to educate teachers on the topic of social media and make it a mandatory component of study programs. Ultimately, social media should itself become a discipline at the university.

2. Political actors: coin definitions of fake news and hate speech on social media to spread awareness; hold the social media providers responsible to enforce laws; advance social media literacy as a regular school subject.
3. Social media providers: create easily accessible, transparent local headquarters around the world that can work according to local customs and laws; develop technical tools to identify and eliminate fake news and disinformation. In the meantime, the number of content moderators should be increased, and their training improved. Content moderators should also review content exclusively in their own language in order to guarantee they understand the issue from their cultural background. Content moderators should have access to regular supervision, training and psychological support.
4. Educators and teachers: participate in continuing education programs on social media literacy and transmit the knowledge to pupils. Easy access to teaching material online needs to be guaranteed.
5. It is a long-term goal to institutionalize the research on online hate speech as to guarantee that young scholars can build careers on focusing that topic. A short-term recommendation is to draw attention to the following topics and research question.
 - What characterizes the interdependence between hate speech on social media and offline hate crime?
 - How does it influence our trust in the German political system?
 - Is there a relation between online and offline behavior?
 - Is there a specific characteristic or trait that makes people more susceptible to commit hate speech on social media?
 - Is there a relationship between education level and hate speech literacy on social media?
 - Does hate speech have structure?
 - Why is the existing legal framework to combat hate speech and fake news insufficient?
 - What is the relation between fake news and the increase of anti-democratic tendencies?
 - How do “likes” on social media influence the belief system of the users?

- How is the dissemination of fake news and hate speech on social media organized on a formal and informal level?
- Is hate speech on social media influencing peace processes in places of conflict?
- How can artificial intelligence be used to combat hate speech?
- What is the role of algorithms and social bots in the dissemination of fake news and hate speech on social media?