



Hate Speech on Trial

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ABSTRACT *Despite the increasing diversity of our online and offline communities, hate speech continues to divide us deeply. We urgently need to examine its ghastly omnipresence and our growing numbness to its harms. This article aims to identify mechanisms that exploit the right to free speech as a cover for the proliferation of hate speech in contemporary society. Chief among these is the manipulative tactic of equating resistance to today's culture of uninhibited expression – which includes hate speech – with censorship. To begin with, I demonstrate that the idealistic “marketplace of ideas” endorsed by free speech absolutists becomes as repressive as the tyrannical censorship it fears when participants are constantly pressured into conformity. Next, I show that in this unregulated market, the idea of open dialogue gains more traction when participants are divided by hate. Finally, I examine how digital technology fosters seemingly benign habits that enable the online and offline amplification of harmful speech.*

KEYWORDS free speech; marketplace of ideas; hate speech; rhetoric; amplification; digital technology

Introduction

As modern technologies continue to bring diverse groups of people physically and virtually closer together, one would expect a growth in inclusive communities and a reduction in hate speech. Invariably, however, we witness the opposite. Hate speech is all around us – graffitied on public walls, disrupting workplaces and classrooms, weaponized in political campaigns, and polluting social media feeds. Systematically categorizing its different types to better understand it proves futile due to its sheer volume. Legal bans will not eliminate this menace, as it sneakily finds ways to resurface. This article does not seek to propose a new definition or classification of hate speech, offer new arguments for stricter regulations against it, or inspect the content of specific examples. Far more urgent, I argue, is analyzing the drive behind its ghastly omnipresence, the worrisome consequence of which is a contagious numbness to its harms in general. A substantial quantity of hate speech is produced and

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circulated today simply because it is possible. It is, therefore, important to understand the conditions that foster the unnecessary increase in hate speech, conditions that operate under the aegis of the right to free speech.

In textbooks of rhetoric, free speech – known as *parrhesia* to the Greeks and *licentia* to the Romans – is typically discussed alongside rhetorical figures to highlight its stark contrast with them. Quintilian, for instance, asks, “What is less ‘figured’ than true freedom?” (95 CE/2001, p. 49), leading Michel Foucault (2001) to describe *parrhesia* as “the zero degree” of rhetorical devices (p. 21). For teachers of rhetoric, this unrhetorical figure refers to blunt, unvarnished statements intended to criticize or correct those in authority, usually under circumstances that could pose serious consequences for the speaker. In *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, it is advised that when the frankness is overly acrimonious, the speaker should include praise of the addressee’s positive traits to mitigate the harshness (90 BCE/1954, p. 351). Similarly, George Puttenham (1589/2007) recommends in his treatment of the “Licentious” that a “fine and subtle persuader” should “bespeak pardon beforehand” so that their “liberal speeches, which might breed offense or scandal,” may appear more palatable (p. 312). What is of more interest in these classical manuals, however, is the rhetorical application of unrhetorical free speech. Both *Institutio Oratoria* (Quintilian, 95 CE/2001) and *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (90 BCE/1954) provide instruction on different methods for strategically employing candid statements to achieve particular objectives. With this in mind, the question that runs through the following three sections is: What hidden rhetorical strategies exploit the right to free speech to enable the proliferation of hate speech in contemporary society?

In the first section, I examine the well-known concept of the “marketplace of ideas” endorsed by free speech absolutists to shed light on its idealism. Although the identity of an uninhibited, unregulated speech market is founded on a sustained fear of tyrannical censorship, the constant pressure to conform and contribute to this free market makes it as stifling as the censorship it fears. The permissive atmosphere of this market – thriving only when its participants need not fear any restrictions – should not distract us from its controlling nature. And how better to perpetuate this indulgent market than by permitting hate speech and its attendant toxic pleasures, often at the expense of social justice? Next, I analyze the strategies that amplify hate speech itself, which lead to a growing desensitization to its harms. These strategies reframe hate speech as an enlightening and tolerance-building opportunity where hate speakers and their targets can engage in open dialogue. In this scenario, both parties are treated as equals in that neither is to fear being silenced. Drawing all attention to the speech in hate speech diverts attention away from its hateful nature, and the continual repetition of this diversion aims to hush up the hate altogether. In the final section, I turn to the role digital technology plays in further amplifying the marketplace of ideas and hate speech. The convenient habits formed by the hurried consumption and production of information that

these technologies facilitate create the ideal breeding ground – both online and offline – for the deadening accumulation of unthoughtful expression.

Conversely, academic environments, strongholds of creative and critical thinking, serve as ideal breeding ground for developing and advocating measures against the unchecked market of free expression. Unfortunately, this places a target on academia. The normalization of unrestricted speech impacts academic institutions in various ways. First and most obviously, this normalization inevitably permeates all institutions in society. Moreover, the nature of this culture of uninhibited expression is bluntly hostile toward academic work, which requires patient reflection and constructive communication. And most terrifyingly, academics whose research and teaching endeavour to dismantle the underlying causes of discrimination and promote social justice face a heightened risk of verbal and physical assaults. The increasing attacks on academia are evidence that this free market will go to any lengths to preserve itself, ironically, at the expense of the intellectual exchange of ideas. Ultimately, this article contends that we must be wary of the prevalent manipulative tactic that equates resistance to this culture of uninhibited expression – which includes hate speech – with censorship. In countering this culture, academic settings are more relevant than ever due to the amplified dangers in our technological communities.

Let There Be Speech

The value of the right to free speech is indisputable but not absolute. This is why the concept of the marketplace of ideas continues to provoke controversy. Built on faith in the inevitable unveiling of truth, this concept demands that all ideas – regardless of their justness or unjustness, their benefits or harms, their pleasantness or offensiveness – be permitted to flow freely in society. “It is as unfair,” Ronald Dworkin (2009) claims,

...to impose a collective decision on someone who has not been allowed to contribute to that moral environment, by expressing his political or social convictions or tastes or prejudices informally, as on someone whose pamphlets against the decision were destroyed by the police. This is true no matter how offensive the majority takes these convictions or tastes or prejudices to be, nor how reasonable its objection is. (p. viii)

Its proponents insist that the unrestricted clash of ideas creates a competitive public forum where, in due time, good ideas will prosper and bad ideas will perish. Additionally, it is hoped that this open confrontation of diverse ideas will strengthen our respect and tolerance for one another. Obviously, there are tangible obstacles to the concept of an absolutely free market in the real world, despite all the efforts of its staunchest adherents. Certain ideas are prevented from circulating in society due to various factors, including prevailing norms of decency and politeness, as well as what Judith Butler (1997) describes as

explicit and implicit forms of censorship. The Internet, however, bypasses these barriers, enabling the easier dissemination of forbidden or unwelcome content. In this regard, the global information medium manifests as the Freudian dream, haunting us with its intricate network of pleasing and disturbing images intertwined. What distinguishes the Internet from a dream is that we do not dream alone on the Web. In this collective dream, each idea that appears instantly before our eyes is backed by a digital army of followers from around the global village.

Critics of the marketplace of ideas are not opposed to free speech itself but to the relentless ambition for *absolute* freedom (see e.g., Waldron, 2012). Their arguments are derived from the same well-known premises to which their opponents are devoted. Yes, speech evolves through dialogue, but this implies that the notion of completely unrestricted speech, although appealing, is fundamentally unattainable. No speech is born in a vacuum. To hold any meaning or impact whatsoever, speech is shaped by various constraints. As Stanley Fish (1994) puts it, “restriction, in the form of an underlying articulation of the world that necessarily (if silently) negates alternatively possible articulations, is constitutive of expression” (p. 103). In addition to the official and unofficial rules of every society that determine what can and cannot be spoken or written, we must also take into account that every act of speech carries meaning and impact because it is determined by its relations with other speech acts, sharing certain features with one group and differing from another. Speech, in short, is restricted by its nature and by convention. Although the desire to strip speech of all restrictions sounds liberating – as does any other longing for absolute freedom – the prospect of a future society with uninhibited freedom of expression is only a utopian dream. Even if it were realized, it would amount to muddled and incoherent noise. The ultimate conclusion of the marketplace of ideas would resemble the punishment for the hubris of constructing the Tower of Babel. Has not the hubris of the Internet already opened the floodgates of misinformation and divisiveness?

According to critics of the marketplace of ideas, as speech is always already restricted, our task should be to *reform* the restrictions we place on it based on other values we hold dear in our society and the demands of present circumstances. Fish’s (1994) proposal, for instance, is to prioritize the “pragmatic (anti)principle of considering each situation as it emerges” over “general principle”:

The question of whether or not to regulate will always be a local one, and we cannot rely on abstractions that are either empty of content or filled with the content of some partisan agenda to generate a “principled” answer. Instead we must consider in every case what is at stake and what are the risks and gains of alternative courses of action. (p. 111)¹

¹ For a critique of Fish’s anti-foundationalism and “penchant for the local and partisan,” see Eagleton (2000). Eagleton (2000) contends that Fish ultimately serves conservative purposes. His critique operates on two levels. First, he argues that Fish is vocal only about immediate, local

This brings us to the rest of the arguments put forward by proponents of moderated free speech. Yes, free speech should be defended because it fosters critical thinking; then why, they argue, should we permit speech that is based on lies or entirely lacks mature thought and sound reasoning?² Yes, free speech must be safeguarded because it strengthens our tolerance; then why must we protect speech that condones and even encourages bigotry?³ Yes, free speech is a sign of a thriving democracy; then why must we accept speech that undermines the dignity of certain individuals or groups in society?⁴ In sum, as Brian Leiter (2016) states, “free speech jurisprudence” should concentrate on curtailing the “very real harms” of speech “without undue cost to its positive values” (p. 407).

Ultimately, these and similar arguments converge on one crucial point: all would become irrelevant – in fact, the entire debate on free speech would be put to silence – if freedom of expression is established as categorically good, regardless of any other consideration.⁵ While free speech absolutism defines itself through sustained opposition to tyrannical states that categorically forbid free speech, it risks becoming the flip side of such tyranny. The unconditional stance that the value of free speech outweighs all other values is self-contradictory, as it endeavours to gag the debate on free speech itself. “Repressive forces,” writes Gilles Deleuze (1995), “don’t stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves” (p. 129). Absolute free speech arguments do more than advocate for free speech. They are so devised to constitute the “good side” in a rigid binary of their own making, the binary of democracy (embracing free speech) and tyranny (embracing censorship). Eric Heinze (2016), for instance, argues that free speech is not merely a democratic right but is constitutive of his notion of a “longstanding, stable, and prosperous democracy,” which he pits against “non-

problems – such as hate speech – without acknowledging the broader American economic and political systems that fuel these problems. Second, he asserts that Fish is indifferent to how U.S. policies contribute to larger global problems such as war, economic exploitation, and environmental degradation.

² Étienne Brown (2023), for example, argues that laws prohibiting fake news on social media are, in fact, compatible with the principle of free speech.

³ Richard Delgado (1982) and Mari Matsuda (1989), for example, advocate for legal sanctions against racist speech.

⁴ According to Jeremy Waldron (2012), speech restrictions should aim to protect individuals from assaults on their dignity rather than shielding them from being offended:

The distinction is in large part between objective or social aspects of a person’s standing in society, on the one hand, and subjective aspects of feeling, including hurt, shock, and anger, on the other. A person’s dignity or reputation has to do with how things are with respect to them in society, not with how things feel to them. (p. 106)

Waldron (2012) explains that attacking a person’s dignity is also offensive and hurtful, but causing offence to a person “may or may not be symptomatic of indignity” (p. 108).

⁵ For a brief sketch of the debate between consequentialist and deontological (or libertarian) views on free speech in the context of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, see Fish (2010). This piece was written in response to *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision that the First Amendment shields independent expenditures in elections from government interference.

LSPDs” (non-democracies and weaker democracies). Matthew Kramer (2021) claims that the need to restrict speech is already a sign that the democratic state has failed to foster a respectful and tolerant citizenry, and thus the state “degrades itself when its legal powers of prohibition and physical powers of prevention are wielded against modes of expression which it should be in a position to tolerate” (p. 146). Arguments such as these envision a perfect state where the slightest deviation from absolutism is considered undemocratic. By reducing the complex and ever-evolving issue to two neat categories, this simplistic binary is further amplified through worries about the chilling effect of restricting harmful speech and the slippery slope toward a totalitarian state if we do not revolt against such restrictions.⁶ For the sake of free speech, then, we must resist such idealistic binary logic. To preserve our right to express ourselves freely, we must exercise it cautiously and tactfully, maintaining a safe distance to withstand the alluring yet destructive urge to surrender completely to it. Icarus flew too close to the sun because he identified too much with the wings of wax that were designed to set him free.

Let There Be Hate

The discourse surrounding free speech is further complicated by the menace of hate speech. Even when verbal hate does not lead to physical harm, no one should ignore that certain words, gestures, signs, and flags are so loaded with a history of violence and cruelty that they have the power to lacerate and maim – sometimes even more deeply than any weapon. Free speech purists may acknowledge the resentment and malice that fuel injurious speech, as well as the shame and humiliation that it inflicts; nevertheless, they prioritize the principle of freedom of expression (see, for example, Baker, 2012; Dworkin, 2009).⁷ According to this viewpoint, hate speech further contributes to the free flow of the marketplace of ideas. This market, as mentioned earlier, has a higher purpose: in the long run, truth will gain the upper hand and emerge victorious. Every instance of hate speech will gradually be defeated by more truthful speech. The hope is that the more we dump into this market, the sooner its purpose will be realized. We must have faith that the omniscient and omnipotent market will deal with hate speech in its own time. Moreover, encountering and patiently coping with hate speech build tolerance. If contending with opposing speech makes us more tolerant citizens fit for our diverse societies, then sparring with hate speech is an even greater workout. Last but certainly not least, their ultimate argument is that hate speech – no matter how untruthful, intolerant, or hurtful it may be – is still a subspecies of free speech and therefore must be protected at all costs. Free speech is of value

⁶ For an analysis of the chilling effect of speech regulations, see Schauer (1978). For an analysis of the slippery slope argument in free speech debates, see Schauer (1985).

⁷ Regarding concerns about the “malign consequences” of hate speech, Dworkin (2009) writes that “many of those claims are inflated and some are absurd” (p. vi).

in and of itself and must not be compromised because certain individuals abuse this right to assault others.

The misleading question of whether hate speech falls under free speech should not distract us from the pernicious ploy of hate speech apologists to pervert freedom into a licence to hate. The concept of free speech, in the words of Butler (2009), is “twisted” to “ratify” hate speech (p. 130). Creating a vicious cycle, free speech and hate speech begin to generate one another, and this escalating interplay aims to blur the distinction between the two. In this deceptive trap, condemning hate speech is falsely equated with condemning free speech. Consider, for instance, Jordan Peterson’s (2023) tweet, “Hate speech is inevitably defined by those who hate speech.” Furthermore, in the total advocacy of free speech, the (intended and unintended) targets of hate speech are reduced to unfortunate victims whose sacrifice, to which they have not consented, is for the sake of a great cause. Their suffering is trivialized as collateral damage in the ongoing war to establish the ideal social order marked by uninhibited expression. “This resolution,” writes Fish (1999), “to sacrifice the needs of men and women now suffering documentable harm to a bodiless hope explains the cheerful (almost gleeful) rehearsal of speech-related harms in opinions that finally rule against any remedial action” (p. 97).

Those targets of hate speech who survive the trauma of their injuries are encouraged to speak back – engaging in what is popularly known as “more speech.” Fish (1994) dismisses this “solution” as ineffective because it is incapable of canceling out the effects of hate speech (p. 109). One point that must be acknowledged, however, is that many – though not all – targets of hate speech who were previously silenced now have the opportunity, especially through the Internet, to speak out about the injustices they suffer, provided they conform to the marketplace of ideas. In this section, I argue that there are mechanisms in place that, while encouraging victims to speak out, ultimately render their speech ineffective and at the same time encourage further hate speech.

With more speech becoming a dominant social norm, it is worth delving into it more closely. As the name indicates, it involves amplification. Kenneth Burke (1969) points out that amplification – “the most thoroughgoing” rhetorical device – operates in three ways: reformulating an idea in a more exalted translation, intensifying its importance, and extending it through repetition or “sheer accumulation” (p. 69). Let us explore the three mechanisms through which more speech amplifies hate speech.

Firstly, more speech elevates hate speech into dialogue with its counterspeech. As more people speak out against discrimination, the issue enters offline and online public forums, inviting everyone to express their opinions. Hate speakers and their followers are also further empowered to propagate their prejudices.⁸ Over time, it ceases to be viewed as an act of hate

⁸ Alice Marwick (2021) categorizes online harassment into three types: *dyadic harassment*, which involves direct one-on-one interaction between an attacker and their target; *normalized*

speech and instead transforms into a subject for debate. However, this debate is not open to further scrutiny or deliberation but rather becomes cemented as a topic with two unyielding opposing sides. Participants publicly declare their allegiance to one side and echo the same proofs that have already been widely circulated. For both the confirmation and refutation of the content of the hate speech, there emerges an “acceptable” term to which one can subscribe. While the hate persists beneath the surface, the public is encouraged to engage with the acceptable terms and discard the hurtful ones. The rhetorical figures involved in this form of amplification are *paradiastole* and *meiosis*, which reframe an offence in a more palatable translation so as to take the sting out of it.

Wendy Brown (2019), for example, examines cases where discrimination against minority groups is legally recast as a free speech issue, “rebuffing state-mandated egalitarianism” (p. 134). In this scenario, the state appears undemocratic should it curtail individual expression. This red herring justifies the offence and elicits sympathy for the offender by framing them as a victim pitted against a potentially oppressive system that threatens their right to free speech. Bigotry is no longer recognized as bigotry – not through blaming the victim, but through commiserating with the perpetrator. Another manifestation of this pattern is found when a print or online source publishes a blatantly provocative advertisement, cartoon, or article not to publicly endorse its message but to announce to the world that it endorses free speech (see Moon, 2024, pp. 189-190). It is not difficult to find examples where promoting free speech through deliberately hurtful expressions unabashedly boosts circulation and revenue.⁹ In the name of open debate, this trolling tactic instigates flame wars that may or may not escalate into physical violence. What is more disturbing than the “rage-baiting” content of such offensive expressions is the intention propelling them: if people gradually come to terms with the most obscene and repulsive expressions, then the principle of uninhibited expression will finally hold dominance. Ethical considerations aside, a serious consequence of this tactic is its general anaesthetic effect. Becoming numb to vulgar expressions does not stop there – the numbness grows. Nowadays, the bigger problem is not that people, especially in cyberspace, are moved by

harassment, which refers to abusive behaviour that has become common among participants in a specific virtual space; and *networked harassment*, which involves multiple members of an online community collectively attacking the same target. With regard to the latter, Marwick (2021) argues that the harassment is driven by moral outrage, prompting members of a group to defend their shared values when they perceive that someone has violated them, thereby reinforcing those values. The amplifying force in such cases usually comes from high-profile social media influencers who champion the group’s values.

⁹ A “structural problem” with Facebook, explains Siva Vaidhyanathan (2018), is that its newsfeed prioritizes content that evokes strong emotional reactions. This design feature is engineered to easily spotlight extreme content, including hate speech – “the most inflammatory material will travel the farthest and the fastest,” while “sober, measured accounts of the world have no chance on Facebook” (p. 6).

disinformation, but rather that they are no more moved by useful information than disinformation.

Secondly, more speech enables hate speech to become more pronounced. One method to intensify hate speech, as demonstrated above, is to expose it to a large audience. This visibility rallies others with similar prejudices to openly voice their views. There is also a more indirect method: instead of foregrounding hate speech to foster its growth, attention can be diverted from efforts to resolve its root causes in society, allowing it to circulate with less hindrance. It is true that a considerably larger number of those harmed by hate speech can now speak out, but concentrating on their adaptation to the marketplace of ideas obscures the need to identify and tackle the circumstances that breed hateful encounters. Emphasizing the importance of sharing how one is affected by hate speech passes off the act of sharing itself as the solution to hate speech. Victims are, in a sense, silenced by speech. And following this speech remedy, they can return to “normal” life. What is the sign of their recovery? Their participation in the ever-expanding market of more speech. This trend reduces the serious societal issue of hate speech to the problem of the individual. In the smoke screen of more speech, targets of hate speech are expected to adjust themselves through self-representation. While the right to an equal voice in society is crucial, it is vital to bear in mind that drawing all focus to the counterspeech of the victim draws focus away from the underlying causes of hate speech.

To put it differently, as a result of the first two forms of amplification, more speech creates the illusion of democratic dialogue between equal participants by providing the appearance of a level playing field where neither hate speakers nor their targets face the threat of being silenced. In this ideal democracy, the right to free speech acts as a unifying element while disregarding the hateful power imbalance.¹⁰

Thirdly, more speech incites a surge in the volume of exchanges between hate speech and its counterspeech. Since the accepted form of dissent against hate speech has become its narration, there now exists an overwhelming number of narratives about hate speech, interspersed with just as many, if not more, fabricated ones. The problem extends beyond the drowning out of truth in a torrent of untruths; it lies in the growing impotency of narration itself. In our digital age, speaking of one’s encounter with hate is increasingly losing its power to inspire reform, let alone genuine sympathy. The devastating and large-scale consequence of this regimen of more speech is the normalization of hate and apathy toward it. The strategy becomes discernible: the more we are steeped in hate, the less we are to be disturbed by it. Constant exposure is to lead to indifference. This is a variation of the strategy described by Burke (1973) as “a fabulous state of affairs whereby free speech is preserved only to

¹⁰ To resolve this unequal power dynamics, Katharine Gelber (2012) argues that the counterspeech of those marginalized by hate speech must be amplified through “institutional, educational, and material support ... both to contradict the messages contained within the hate speech and to counteract the effects of that speech on their ability to respond” (p. 51).

be mocked at”: to prevent the opponent from questioning one’s position or upsetting the status quo, one can subject them to “an *avalanche* of arguments, condemnations, prophecies of dire calamity, ‘statistical proofs,’ pronouncements by private and institutional ‘authorities,’ a barrage, a snowing under, a purely *quantitative* mode of propaganda” (p. 175). In the hate speech variation, victims unwittingly participate in the propagation of the marketplace of ideas.

In all these amplifying techniques, more speech grants undue credibility to hate speech, allowing it to take centre stage to speak on behalf of free speech. And when targets of hate speech or their advocates (scholars, journalists, artists, government officials) raise objections that even remotely suggest that absolutist free speech policies embolden hate speech, they are immediately ostracized for attempting to stifle free speech. In addition to clever tactics to sidestep criticism, there are direct assaults on critics of hate speech. Perhaps most unsettling is the hate speech directed at academics whose work addresses the conditions that contribute to the perpetuation of discrimination.¹¹ This targeting in academia is further evidence that the marketplace of ideas will stop at nothing to protect its interests, ironically, at the expense of genuine discourse.

In summary, the purpose of the first two sections of this study was not to advocate any form of censorship; instead, it was to identify and analyze mechanisms that drive the rise of hate speech in our societies, desensitize us to its effects, and demonize any attempts at resistance by dismissing them as censorship. In the following section, I will concentrate on the role digital technology plays in exacerbating these mechanisms.

Let There Be Information

Long before the advent of the Internet, Friedrich Nietzsche warned of the dangers of modern culture overwhelming us with an unprecedented volume and variety of impressions: “the tempo of this influx *prestissimo*; the impressions erase each other; one instinctively resists taking in anything, taking anything deeply, to ‘digest’ anything” (1968, p. 47). Exposed to a relentless and rapid barrage of information, we turn into mirrors – only “epidermally interested” in what we encounter. Our energy is wasted on “*reactive* talents,” resulting in a “deep heaviness and weariness” (p. 47). This superficial busyness, coupled with exhaustion, according to Nietzsche (1968), characterizes modern life. Obviously, the Internet significantly contributes to the “thoroughgoing” amplification of this desire for information. In this

¹¹ For example, Bourgeois (2020) demonstrates how appeals to free speech are often weaponized by those in positions of power and privilege – not only to shield dominant systems of oppression but also to silence and suppress scholars from marginalized communities whose voices challenge these systems. In doing so, such tactics undermine social justice initiatives and reinforce existing hierarchies.

environment of speed, urgency, and immediacy, individuals become voraciously adept at consuming, producing, and distributing texts, images, and videos. This section explores the broader cultural tendency to deify information and its role in escalating hate speech in contemporary society.

Our online consumption of information gives us a false sense of god-like omniscience as we flip through post after post after post. Digital technology tantalizes us with the prospect of knowing everything. The urgency driving this consumption does not concern the content of information or its necessity; it is about preserving the desire for more information. And very quickly, browsing for information ceases to be a voluntary act. Consider the implication of hurry in the names of digital platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Zoom, Telegram, TikTok. Time is running out! The trending hashtag will soon be outdated. The user – much like any addict – is petrified by the thought of missing out. The rush is instant. Persistent notifications keep us longing for the next scroll. The intervals between them become shorter. Infinite scrolling – the web design technique that seamlessly conjures up more and more content before our eyes – discourages taking breaks. Similarly, techniques such as microinteractions and simple hover animations imperceptibly keep us hooked to the screen for as long as possible. Whether we are anxiously doomscrolling through a sleepless night, mindlessly swiping through day-long Instagram Stories at a family gathering, swiftly surfing through Facebook feeds during a lecture, or listlessly binge-watching YouTube videos on the bus ride home, there is no time allotted to critically reflect on the massive amount of information we absorb, no time to be moved by any of it, even as the content calls for our immediate attention. That would defeat the purpose. The omniscient consumer must remain unmoved and uncritical, resembling divine objectivity.

Moreover, the legion of fleeting content that invades our personal phones, tablets, and laptops is inspired by our past activities and sifted through the sieves of mysterious algorithms.¹² This cryptic manipulation shapes our personalized echo chambers and filter bubbles, flatteringly tailoring our online experience to reflect our likes and dislikes. Due to this “ghettoization,” as Sarah Joseph (2012) explains, we unknowingly find ourselves segregated into virtual spaces that agree with our preconceived views and are “artificially shielded” from alternative ones (p. 175). The mishmash of important and unimportant information in the newsfeeds of our virtual comfort zones deters us from slowing down our consumption, because slowing down could lead to questioning not only the message but also its medium.

¹² The increasing reliance on algorithms, writes Tarleton Gillespie (2014), which constantly produce and recommend information, is becoming “as momentous as having relied on credentialed experts, the scientific method, common sense, or the word of God” (p. 168). Gillespie (2014) stresses the need for a sociological inquiry into algorithms. While it is important to continue to “unveil their inner workings and spotlight their implicit criteria,” it is even more critical to investigate the broader implications of algorithms emerging as “a credible knowledge logic” (p. 191).

This sense of hurry is mirrored in the creation and dissemination of information. In this culture of unlimited information, what is urged above all else is *instant* expression. Not only do computer keyboards enable faster writing than pens and typewriters, they are also, as John Tomlinson (2007) notes, “forgiving of error” (p. 110). Virtual communication is free from the burdens of correct spelling, extensive vocabulary, and proper grammar. Consider the autofill function or the habitual reliance on memes and emojis in online conversations. In lieu of words, users limit their self-expression to ready-made digital symbols. A quick selfie says it all.¹³ In virtual interactions, speed trumps substance and style. Social media environments spur us to comment on any content that piques our interest, normally without in-depth knowledge. Every bit of information that appears before our eyes demands an immediate and superficial reaction. One can simply retweet the opinion one presently favours. Proofs, evidence, and logical arguments are virtually a drag; users hasten to demonstrate their approval or disapproval by giving or withholding the red heart. Generative artificial intelligence – capable of promptly producing content with minimal human input – is yet another tool that can be exploited to assist this culture that places a premium on unmeditated, unmediated expression.

Freud (1989) identifies megalomania and the withdrawal of interest from the external world as the two defining characteristics of narcissism. Armed with our digital devices, we literally hold a world of data in our hand and pass swift judgment from above. With the double tap feature, our thumb acts as the gavel we apply nonchalantly to assert ourselves in our private chambers, and the judgment reverberates back to us with the double tap of the like-minded other, reinforcing the fantasy that we have the final say in all matters. Online platforms encourage us to shun the complicated intricacies of human interaction, only to arrest us with our own mesmerizing virtual image. Brooking no introspective contemplation or dialogic exchange, we fix our gaze on the more appealing and malleable likeness on the screen, catering to its every whim. Kornbluh (2024) writes,

An insistence on recognition is at the core, often distending into demands to be recognized in a particular way, and flattening the other as mirror, mere vehicle of reflection. This negation of the other perpetuates sameness: where there is no

¹³ “Never more than an arm’s length away,” Anna Kornbluh (2024) describes the selfie, foregrounding its intimate, instant, and improvised nature (p. 191). She contends that the selfie has emerged as the defining art form of our time, embraced by both ordinary people and celebrities: “paramount immediacy premiums like flash connection and intense charge converge in this every-man form perfected by topflight glitterati” (p. 191). Zooming in on Kim Kardashian’s book of selfies, Kornbluh (2024) captures the experience of the spectator:

Fixed to the gloss, scrolling the monotonous abundance, privy to self-deprecating disclosure, numbly engrossed in the sheer effusion of images without momentum, we unite with the bare spectacle as well as with the aspirational art: anyone can be highly personal with Kim, and anyone can self-publish their own *Selfish*. (pp. 191-192)

opacity or desire, there is no contradiction and no distinction, only replicating identity. (p. 52)

We groom our virtual identity by subjecting it to convenient adjustments and trendy tweaks, providing ourselves with the gratifying illusion of self-fashioning and self-improvement. Despite all the time that digital technology saves us, the only type of communication for which we find time is shallow validation. All this “frantic abolition of all distances,” in the words of Martin Heidegger (1971), and yet “no nearness” (p. 163). Through this conformist self-representation, our digitally improved identity – now quite intolerant – is geared toward others in terms of simple binary oppositions: those who are like us and those who are not, those who like us and those who do not.¹⁴

The virtual world presents another alarming aspect: the online disinhibition effect (see Suler, 2004). In the absence of traditional gatekeepers, online interactions are unencumbered by many of the restraints found in the real world. Communication gravitates toward direct and candid expression, with ample opportunities to shield oneself from repercussions. The consequences of this trend of uninhibited exchange of ideas include the proliferation and normalization of fake news, cyberharassment, and hate speech, as well as academic integrity violations in educational settings. This is not to suggest that such misconduct did not exist prior to the Internet. In fact, one can learn more about trolling, flaming, or doxing from Iago – Shakespeare’s master agitator – or Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar* than from any present-day cyberbully.¹⁵ Rather, it is to emphasize that, due to the affordances of the Internet, such harmful behaviour now occurs with unprecedented speed, frequency, and bravado.

This is precisely what must not be ignored: how this culture of fast-paced consumption and production of information in online environments impacts our social behaviour. Digital devices and their latest software elevate human interaction into exciting new forms, intensify communication by enabling more immediate and far-reaching connections, and increase the frequency of our virtual exchanges by ensuring that we are constantly reachable. Yet they also possess the power to make even the most pointless or harmful expressions become digitally attractive, gain quick and widespread impact, and be

¹⁴ In their definition of *social network sites*, dana boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007) clarify their preference for the term *network* over *networking*, noting that the latter “emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers” (p. 211). While these sites do allow for networking, this is not their defining feature. What distinguishes these platforms from other forms of virtual communication is that “they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks,” typically involving individuals with existing offline connections (p. 211).

¹⁵ Iago, for instance, taking advantage of the cover of darkness, conceals his identity to freely use inflammatory rhetoric – with “timorous accent and dire yell” (1.1.74) – to incite Desdemona’s father and his armed attendants against Othello. And out in the forum, Mark Antony slyly becomes the extension of the assassinated Caesar to “cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war” (3.1.273), inciting the mob to “cumber” Italy with “domestic fury and fierce civil strife” (263-264).

reiterated indefinitely across the global village. We should not underestimate how consistent Internet use subtly alters the ways we relate to ourselves and others, even in offline settings. Marshall McLuhan (1994) cautions that the “continuous embrace” of our technological extensions leaves us in a Narcissus-like state of “subliminal awareness and numbness” (p. 46). This condition underlines the etymological connection between Narcissus and narcotic. McLuhan (1994) insists that we not overlook that, in the original myth, the beautiful boy fails to recognize the object of his love as an extension of himself. His captivating reflection becomes a hypnotic fixation that transforms him into a blind “servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image” (p. 41). The real threat, in short, is the numbness that accompanies unchecked technological amplification: it dulls our awareness and distracts us from critically reflecting on its effects. Relevant to the present study, does the digital amplification of the traits examined in this section – notably, uncritical acceptance of information, hasty and uninformed judgment, unhealthy attention to self-image, and rigid adherence to a single viewpoint – not lay the groundwork for the direct and indirect escalation of hate speech in online and offline social spaces?

Conclusion

An alluring selling point of any technology is its convenience. Beyond ease of use, convenience implies that while we may be well-versed in utilizing the technology for personal or professional purposes, we need not understand its inherent mechanisms or its impact on ourselves, those around us, or our environment. Like Narcissus, we tend to use technology without recognizing how it uses us. The Internet is no exception. The global information medium can be strategically employed to amplify both good and bad in the world through the content it readily makes available. More importantly, however, this technological amplification has a tendency to stupefy us, leaving us endlessly longing for more use, longing for exposure to more information. As digital technology races forward at a frightening speed, it is vital that we increase our awareness of its controlling mechanisms. Drawing on McLuhan’s (1994) work, Michael MacDonald (2006) explains that we must view the media environment indirectly to avoid being “bewitched” by its manipulative influence: “unlike the reflection that mesmerizes Narcissus, the mirror of Perseus enables us to ‘de-mesmerize’ ourselves” (pp. 507-508). Our task, as Deleuze (1995) puts it, is not to dismiss new media in favour of traditional ones but to be on guard against the “domesticating forces” and pressures of market conformity that all modes of expression conveniently enable (p. 131).

We must be equally vigilant against the repressive mechanisms that desensitize us to the spread of hate speech. Both sides in the free speech debate agree on the need for measures against hate speech. One camp argues for legislation; the other, for more speech. This article aimed to demonstrate that

the Internet has rendered this binary – prohibition or counterspeech – largely ineffective. In today’s virtual marketplace of ideas, all that is silenced returns with renewed digital ferocity, and all that is spoken back is muted by the chaos of excessive information. What should take centre stage in discussions of free speech is not only addressing the content of the massive volume of hate speech circulating in our societies but, more importantly, identifying and tackling the subtle mechanisms that cultivate seemingly benign habits that enable the online and offline amplification of harmful speech.

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