

How understanding the perpetrator perspective can contribute preventing online hate speech

Introduction

This study carried out from a social work perspective was undertaken to fill a perceivable gap in research regarding **perpetrators** of online hate speech. Working with the rationale that if we can find out who is committing online hate speech and understand their reasons and motivations, we will be in a better position to develop preventative measures, the two main research questions are: 1. Which factors contribute to posting online hate speech? 2. What role can social work play in the prevention of online hate speech. A secondary research question asks what commonalities, if any, exist between hate speech offenders? Do patterns that exist in online hate speech offender profiles?

Methodology

The study was carried out between January and May 2022 in Graz, Austria. An equal status mixed methods research model with a sequential explanatory design was used to address the research questions. The quantitative stage of the research involved the analysis of 224 files from participants of an Austrian nationwide intervention programme for online hate speech perpetrators run by the national probation service 'Neustart'. The programme called 'Dialog not Hate' which started in 2018 was developed as a response to deal with the increase in prosecutions due to online hate speech. In total 30 variables from the Risk-Needs-Responsivity Inventory used in the 'Neustart' documentation system were selected. These were in the areas of: "biographical data (age, gender, nationality ...), social economic status (living and financial situation, education) delinquency (previous convictions, circumstances of offence), interpersonal aspects (family, social environment, and relationships), intrapersonal aspects (mental health).

The results of the quantitative stage of the study are used to inform the qualitative phase which consisted of episodic interviews with perpetrators of online hate speech and semi-structured interviews with professionals working in the field. The interviews were analysed using Kuckartz's thematic method of analysis.

Results

The results of the research indicate six main factors which contribute to posting online hate speech.

1. **Perceived Unfairness:** Offenders see themselves as disadvantaged in life and in some way as the victim rather than perpetrator. They often seek a distraction and somewhere other than themselves to place the blame for their dissatisfaction and frustration.
2. **Ignorance of legal implications:** Users were generally not aware, prior to posting, of the laws surrounding online hate speech in Austria. They did not know that what they were posting may be illegal.
3. **Lack of Digital and/or Media Literacy:** Some offenders, especially older ones, simply lacked basic technical skills which would enable them to choose the desired audience for their opinions in the privacy settings. Many offenders were not aware of processes going on in the background (algorithms/filter bubbles) which means they do not have access to balanced opinions in topics of debate. They also do not critically question content for credibility or quality making them unable (or unwilling) to identify fake news.
4. **Need for recognition:** Appreciation, recognition and a sense of values is missing in some offender's lives. Gaining many 'likes' online can be a form of compensation.
5. **Societal Influences:** One outcome of modern neoliberal society's emphasis on individual responsibility and profits is a reduction in social interaction and a lack of solidarity towards those less fortunate.

6. **Invisibility of the Victim:** Because of the online setting perpetrators do not see any hurt they cause in expressions or body language nor do they have to justify their opinions to a counterpart.

Social work cannot be active in all areas of prevention. Tighter controls by social media sites themselves, changes in the law and employing technical solutions all play a role in prevention. However, areas where social work could contribute to prevention include:

- School social work and youth work – in the areas of digital and media literacy, as well as workshops on the topic of online hate speech and legal implications.
- Community social work: more focus on bringing people into contact with each other would allow those in the community to get to know each other and see similarities rather than only differences. Inclusion is a key word here.
- Political activism: social work is political and social workers can advocate for client groups whose voices are not heard. They can fight for political change which would lead to society's values aligning with the principles of social work: social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities". These are all principles which are harmed by online hate speech.

The relatively high proportion of older and retired people committing online hate speech is a surprising and thought-provoking discovery from this study. A definitive answer to the question of commonalities between the perpetrators proves problematic, since in general the participants in the Dialog not Hate programme were diverse. However, certain tendencies could be found.

- Male: Almost 80% of online hate speech perpetrators in the data set were male.
- Austrian: the vast majority (almost 95%) of online hate speech perpetrators were Austrian despite the fact that 16% of the population of Austria are not Austrian citizens and non-Austrian citizens are responsible for 42% of other types of criminal offences.
- Otherwise, law abiding: Perpetrators involved in this research perceived themselves to be law abiding citizens and a large majority (almost 90%) had no criminal record or previous convictions.
- Media illiterate: many offenders were ignorant of how social media processes work and did not critically examine content.

Discussion

This research shows that alongside detecting and removing online hate speech which although necessary and useful happens *after* the abuse has taken place, by being aware of the motivations and reason perpetrators have for posting abuse, it may also be possible to prevent online hate speech being posted in the first place. This is surely the preferred solution. Some online hate speech could be prevented by awareness raising – by informing citizens of the laws around hate speech and increasing media literacy. On the other hand, where societal issues are at the root of the problem, change will be more difficult to instigate and take more time and effort.