



Full length article

Did the risk of exposure to online hate increase after the November 2015 Paris attacks? A group relations approach

Markus Kaakinen ^a, Atte Oksanen ^{a, *}, Pekka Räsänen ^b^a Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tampere, Finland^b Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Turku, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 April 2017

Received in revised form

28 August 2017

Accepted 18 September 2017

Available online 18 September 2017

Keywords:

Online hate

Uncertainty–identity theory

Social categories

Social identity

Groups

Terrorism

Immigration

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the impact of the November 2015 Paris attacks on online hate. On the basis of social identity based theories of group relations, we hypothesized that exposure to online hate will increase in social climate of fear, uncertainty, and polarization. We expected that the increase of hate will be evident in the case of online hate associated to ethnicity or nationality, religion, political views, or terrorism, but not specifically other hate-associated categories. Societal level determinants of the temporal changes in online hate exposure have not been tested before. Our study utilized two cross-sectional, demographically balanced datasets to analyze the change in online hate exposure among Finnish young people aged 15 to 30. The first sample was collected in May–June 2013 and the second one in December 2015, only 1 month after the November 2015 Paris attacks. The results supported the hypotheses indicating that the quantity and quality of online hostilities are affected by the wider societal conditions. We suggest that more evidence of societal level determinants of online hostility is needed in order to understand online hate exposure rates at different times.

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1. Introduction

Online hate (i.e., cyberhate, online hate speech) is a global phenomenon and may take many forms and target others based on their religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, or some other group-defining characteristic (Banks, 2010; Hawdon, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2016; Perry & Olsson, 2009). Notably, online hate is not an exception to the rules of interaction in the online setting but rather rooted in mainstream experience, and exposure to online hate has varied from 31 percent to 67 percent in different samples across countries (Costello, Hawdon, Ratliff, & Grantham, 2016b; Hawdon et al., 2016; Oksanen, Hawdon, Holkeri, Näsi, & Räsänen, 2014).

The widely present hateful and xenophobic content online has raised concern in average online users but also in policymaking on a national and international level (Council of Europe, 2015; European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, 2016; Gagliardone, Gal, Alves, & Martinez, 2015). Hostile online behavior bears hurtful consequences to its victims (Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen, & Räsänen,

2017; Näsi, Räsänen, Hawdon, Holkeri, & Oksanen, 2015; Tynes, 2006; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhorn, 2006), but it can also be considered a threat to societal inclusiveness and a potential motivator for hateful acts offline (Awan & Zempi, 2016; Douglas, 2007; Waldron, 2012). Especially in the times of social crises, such as terrorist attacks, online hate becomes an example of the increasing acts of violence and abuse faced by ethnic and religious minorities (Awan & Zempi, 2016).

When tackling online hate phenomena, we need wider empirical information on the prerequisites of online hostility. Earlier research has identified several correlates of violent online behavior on the levels of individual characteristics (e.g. low self-control, and high impulsivity, psychopathy or internalizing symptoms) and social interaction (e.g. anonymity, low social control and group norms) (for review see e.g. Peterson & Densley, 2017). These correlates can explain why certain individuals and interactional contexts make hostile online behavior more probable. However, we lack empirical research on how wider societal (or macro) level phenomena can motivate changes in the quantity and quality of online hate over time and how this change is manifested in the viewership of such content.

Witnessing tragic and unexpected societal events may explain why manifestations of anger and hate take new forms online.

* Corresponding author. Faculty of Social Sciences, 33014 University of Tampere, Finland.

E-mail address: atte.oksanen@uta.fi (A. Oksanen).

Previous studies have shown that online discussions escalate after dramatic events such as rampage shootings (Lindgren, 2011). These types of attacks may also act as trigger events and direct contents of online hate. Williams and Burnap (2016) have recently demonstrated how particularly racial and religious cyberhate in Twitter escalated after a murder by Islamic extremists in the United Kingdom. However, earlier studies have stressed relatively short time periods and specific discussion topics on certain social media platforms. Thus, there is a need for research-based knowledge about the dynamics of online hate during longer periods of time and the wider viewership-centered point of view. Only this would allow us to assess how frequent is the experience of being exposed to online hate among social media users and whether the probability of exposure changes over time. This study is also the first one to approach temporal change in online hate from the perspective of group relations.

In this paper, we analyze how social conditions marked by fear, polarization, and uncertainty are manifested in online hate exposure after the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015. On November 13, 130 people in Paris were killed in attacks by the terrorist organization ISIS, and the assault caused major societal reactions throughout Europe. The atmosphere in Europe was already insecure at the time, as several strikes by international terrorist organizations had occurred around the world that year (Haugerud, 2016). One devastating example in the European context was the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January, which led to the death of 12 people. These attacks also motivated antagonistic reactions toward immigrants, and concerns were raised that refugees were potential terrorists despite the fact that many of them were escaping the terror caused by ISIS in the Middle East (Nail, 2016). Immigration was already a matter of growing societal debate throughout Europe due to the so-called “immigration crisis” caused by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, forcing over 1.2 million people to seek out asylum in Europe, and the figures of incoming first-time asylum seekers peaked during September–November 2016 (Eurostat, 2016).

1.1. Online hate and group relations

Our intergroup stance to online hate is based on the rich tradition of social psychological research explaining how prejudices are grounded on intergroup behavior (Allport, 1954; Brown, 2010; Tajfel, 1970). The starting point is grounded on previous empirical studies showing that online hate is typically targeted toward different social groups (Banks, 2010; Gagliardone et al., 2015; Hawdon et al., 2016; Perry & Olsson, 2009). Since the early days of domestic Internet, there have been both formal and informal hate groups disseminating hateful speech or ideology online. They have a wide variety of targets and ideological views, ranging from terrorist organizations to gangs of various types (Gerstenfeld, 2013, pp. 130–131).

Currently, different affordances of social media make it possible for people to group up with likeminded individuals without spatial restrictions and then disseminate their thoughts. Thus, social media can provide a social context of opinion congruence and empowerment in which people are more willing to express thoughts and ideologies that might be rejected elsewhere (Chun & Lee, 2017; Lee & Chun, 2016). This makes social media a particularly suitable platform for disseminating hateful or “fringe” opinions and ideologies (Barkun, 2017). In addition, the socio-technological environment of online interaction that enhances the group identifications and the intragroup processes of online groups can legitimate and amplify extreme attitudes (Douglas, 2007; McGarty, Lala, & Douglas, 2011; Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & De Groot, 2001; Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002). It is perhaps not a

surprise that hate is often disseminated through those channels that make group formation and engagement very easy and that facilitate the clash between different ideological views (Erjavec & Kovačić, 2012; Hutchens, Cicchirillo, & Hmielowski, 2015).

Our theoretical framework of group relations is based on work done on social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). First, SIT suggests that individual identity is based on social categorization and comparison between different categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). People conceive themselves as members of certain groups (the in-groups) and as non-members in others (the out-groups) that strive to maintain positive social identity by favorable comparison between those groups. This search for self-enhancement leads to so-called intergroup bias in which the in-group is favored over the out-groups. The activation of intergroup bias is dependent on the level of individuals' identification with the in-group, the relevance of the comparison between the groups in a given social situation, and the relevance of the out-group as a reference point (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Second, according to SCT (Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987), an integral part of the social identity approach, identifying oneself as a representative of a certain category also leads to depersonalization (i.e. a tendency to conceive the self in terms of group identity instead of personal identity). As a consequence, one strongly identifies with the stereotypical conception of an in-group member and with the group attributes and norms (Brown, 2010; Marqués, Abrams, Paez, & Hogg, 2001; Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987).

In social reality, favoring one's in-group over perceived out-groups ranges from “mere categorical exaggerations” to extreme forms of out-group hostility (Billig, 2002, p. 178). Thus, a proper understanding of societal circumstances can help us to explain why and when biased perceptions of out-group members are likely to escalate. When societal conditions threaten the satisfaction of basic human needs, such as the need for security and control over one's own life, those out-groups perceived as responsible for the unsatisfactory circumstances are often targeted by increasing hostilities (Staub & Bar-Tal, 2003). Indeed, there is plenty of historical evidence showing how different group conflicts arise in times of fear, economic hardship, social and political segregation, and perceived in-group threats (see, e.g., Baumeister, 1997; Staub, 1989; Staub & Bar-Tal, 2003).

According to the terror management theory (TMT) (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), anxiety caused by the awareness of one's own vulnerability and death functions as a motivator to increase intergroup bias. In other words, people will seek to buffer the terror of mortality salience by more strongly identifying with worldviews shared within one's in-group. In addition, people are more likely to discriminate against out-groups that threaten, or do not validate, their anxiety-buffer (the in-group cultural worldview) (Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon 1990). TMT has gained support from several studies reporting that mortality salience is related to out-group discrimination and support for extreme and violent attitudes (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof, & Vermeulen, 2009; Greenberg et al., 1990).

The theory of uncertainty-identity (UIT) (Hogg, 2007, 2014; Hogg, Kruglanski, & van den Bos, 2013) predicts that, at times of social uncertainty, individuals perceive the safety or manageability of their everyday life as endangered and, thus, tend to categorize the social reality according to more rigidly and exclusionary defined groups for overcoming the experienced uncertainty. As a consequence, the intra-group bias becomes inflated, leading to the adoption of more radical attitudes toward out-group members. A series of research has shown that, as a consequence of uncertainty, individuals tend to identify more with clearly distinctive groups

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