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Language, Media and the Weaponisation of Hate. By Way of Introduction

During the summer of 2024, the impact of hate speech was catapulted to international front-page news, following a series of far right and anti-immigration protests and riots that happened across England and Northern Ireland from July 30th to August 5th. These riots were initially catalysed by a senseless mass stabbing in Southport (Merseyside, UK), where three children were killed and another eight were seriously injured. On 1st August, the police confirmed that the attack had been carried out by a 17-year-old British national born in Cardiff and raised in the UK,[1] but by this point damaging misinformation about the attacker's identity had quickly taken root on social media, including false claims that the attacker was a Muslim immigrant or asylum seeker. This misinformation, circulated by far-right groups via a range of social media platforms, was further stoked by prominent right-wing politicians like Nigel Farage, who published videos critical of the police's handling of the attack, questioning whether "the truth is being withheld from us".[2] Although the police were following the legal requirement that a defendant under the age of 18 is granted anonymity,[3] this lack of transparency was quickly exploited by the far right. As Thomas Colley observes,

> because [the attacker] was seventeen and thus not yet an adult, the police delayed naming him for legal reason; but adhering to the law violated a key rule of politics: leave an information vacuum, and others will rush to fill it. Within hours, anti-immigrant politicians and influencers, mostly from the political right, spread conspiracy theories that this was yet another jihadist terrorist attack.[4]

While the riots very concretely played out in streets and squares across England, a battlefront simultaneously raged online, where far-right personalities, such as Tommy Robinson (also known as Stephen Yaxley-Lennon), attempted to orchestrate and manipulate racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim sentiment through social media posts and videos.[5] This intersection of 'real-world' violent protest, against a backdrop of rampant online misinformation, hate speech, and amplification of racial incitement, meant that although hundreds of protestors and rioters were pursued for a range of criminal charges based on their off-line activities (including destruction of property, violent disorder, theft, and anti-social behaviour).[6] Dozens more were charged and sentenced after posting messages intended to

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[1] Following Institute for Research on Male Supremacism guidelines on reporting male supremacist violence (IRMS 2024), and specifically the principle of 'no notoriety', we do not name the attacker in our discussion.

[2] See also Sean O' Grady, "This is what Nigel Farage is really up to on I'm a Celebrity...", *The Independent*, 20 Nov. 2023, https://www.independent.co.uk/, accessed 30 April 2025; Vikram Dodd, Ben Quinn, and Rowena Mason, "Former counter-terror chief accuses Farage of inciting Southport violence", *The Guardian*, 31 Jul. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[3] Janet Daley, "Nigel Farage is only offering shameless opportunism", *The Telegraph*, 3 Sept. 2024, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/

[4] Thomas Colley, "The Impact of Disinformation: Contrasting Lessons from the UK", 03 Oct. 2024, Australian Institute of International Affairs, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[5] Pamela Duncan et al., "Local. Left Behind. Prey to populist politics? What the data tells us about the 2024 UK rioters", *The Guardian*, 5 Oct. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com, accessed 30 April 2025.

[6] Vikram Dodd, Ben Quinn, and Rowena Mason, "Former Counter-Terror Chief Accuses Farage of Inciting Southport Violence".

incite racial hatred on social media, including posts calling for asylum seeker accommodation to be burned down or mosques to be bombed.[7]

The UK riots are, of course, only one instance in a tapestry of ongoing incidents of hate speech in recent years, but they nevertheless highlight the reality that hate speech is a pressing concern in the ever-evolving landscape of contemporary communication, casting a shadow over the foundational principles of diversity and inclusivity.[8] The urgency to address this issue is emphasised by the alarming escalation of divisive rhetoric in public discourse, thus recognising the need for more focused and thorough explorations. In this sense, linguistics, as a discipline, provides a unique perspective to dissect the intricacies of hate speech, uncovering the strategies, forms, and practices which characterise it. This exploration importantly extends to the evolution of hate speech in the digital age[9] and a consideration of the role of online platforms and social media in amplifying its reach and impact.[10] The interplay between linguistic expressions, digital communication, and the dissemination of hate speech poses a unique set of challenges that warrant scholarly attention.

Accordingly, the articles in this issue tackle these concerns through close analyses of hate speech across a range of online and digital contexts, demonstrating not only ongoing advances in the field, but also showcasing how far hate speech has infiltrated even apparently mundane spaces. In doing so, the articles shed light on the underlying mechanisms, identify recurring discursive patterns, and unravel the sociolinguistic aspects which contribute to the perpetuation of hate speech. By examining the linguistic dimensions of hate speech, the articles explore how language is weaponised to propagate discriminatory ideologies and incite hostility. This examination not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the problem but also contributes to the development of strategies and interventions aimed at mitigating the impact of hate speech on diverse communities.

In the first part of this introduction, we set out the background to the special issue, positioning the collected articles within a specific social and intellectual context. We then tackle some underpinning definitional issues, focusing on hate speech, harassment, and the related concepts of trolling, doxing, and other manifestations of discriminatory and practices. During this discussion, we also consider the social function of hate speech, particularly in relation to (dis)affiliation and othering. In the final section of our introduction, we provide brief summaries of each of the articles which comprise this issue, before concluding with some general observations about the broader utility of this scholarship beyond academia.

1. Background to the special issue

This special issue is the second collection of articles to emerge from a conference held at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" in 2023 titled "Negative Solidarities: The Age of Anger and Hate Speech in the

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[7] Patrick Comerford, blog, 09 April 2024', https://www.patrickcomerford.com/2024_04_09_archive.html, accessed 5 October 2024; Maya Oppenheim, "The women involved in far-right riots across UK as social media awash with hate speech", *The Independent*, 7th August 2024, https://www.independent.co.uk/, accessed 30 April 2025; Mariana Spring, "They were arrested for posting during the riots – will it change anything?", *BBC News*, 27 Sept. 2024, https://www.bbc.com/, accessed 30 April 2025.
[8] Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Naples: Paolo Loffredo, 2020); Majid KhosraviNik and Eleonora Esposito, "Online Hate, Digital Discourse and Critique: Exploring Digitally-Mediated Discursive Practices of Gender-Based Hostility", *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 14, no. 1 (26 Jun. 2018), 45–68, https://doi.org/10.1515/lpp-2018-0003.
[9] Balirano and Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate*; Zizi Papacharissi, "We Have Always been Social", *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 1 (1 April 2015), DOI: 10.1177/2056305115581185, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305115581185; Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).
[10] Tom Singleton and Graham Fraser, "Ofcom: Clear link between online posts and violent disorder", *BBC News*, 22 October 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70w0ne4zexo, accessed 30 April 2025.

Anglophone Globalized Public Sphere".[11] Responding, in part, to the growing political, cultural, and democratic crises across the Anglosphere, including the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), the Capitol Hill attack (2021), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), the conference invited contributions which explored the broader socio-cultural context within which hate speech operates. This includes examining historical precedents, societal attitudes, and the role of institutions in either perpetuating or countering the proliferation of hate speech. As such, the conference aimed to bring together presentations which dissected the linguistic dimensions of hate speech but also provided a holistic understanding of its societal roots and implications.

Since then, the world has seen further gains by right-wing nationalist political parties (as witnessed in the electoral successes in 2024 by the National Rally Party in France, the Freedom Party in Austria, and the Reform Party in the UK), escalation of the Israel-Hamas and Israel-Lebanon conflicts (2023), alongside rampant misogyny and sexism, increased rates of violence against women and girls, and the entrenchment of trans-exclusionary discourses, all set against a broader backdrop of a cost of living crisis, a climate change crisis, a mis/disinformation crisis, a healthcare crisis, mass migration, electoral tampering, the Artificial Intelligence movement and more. Not only do many of these issues further foment a destructive form of 'us vs. them' separatist politics, but they also work as a set of interconnected and intersecting 'polycrises',[12] what Lawrence et al. describe as "the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects".[13] Such a febrile environment is ripe to be exploited by nefarious social actors seeking to advance their own ideological agenda to "establish clear lines of superiority and inferiority according to race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, and sexuality".[14] This includes a range of racist, anti-immigrant, nativist, nationalist, white-supremacist, anti-Islam, anti-Semitic, and anti-LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others) belief".

Key to the conference (and by extension this issue) was Hannah Arendt's notion of 'negative solidarities', first used in her 1951 book *Origins of Totalitarianism*[15] and developed further in her 1957 essay "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the world?".[16] Reflecting on the media and technological developments that underpinned the post-World War 2 era (including nuclear power and the atomic bomb), Arendt posits that although these advances facilitated, in many ways, a "unity of the world", they could "just as easily destroy it and the means of global communication were designed side by side with means of possible global destruction". It is this collective fear of annihilation that Arendt characterises as 'negative solidarity", going on to note that "this solidarity of mankind in this respect is entirely negative; it rests, not only on a common interest in an agreement" but also "on a common desire for a world that is a little less unified".[17] For Arendt, negative solidarity also relates to the "structureless mass of furious

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[11] The first collection of articles is presented in Rossella Ciocca and Sabita Manian, "Representing 'Negative Solidarities' in Contemporary Global Culture: An Introductory Note", *Anglistica AION*, 25.2 (2021), 1-7, http://www.serena.unina.it/index.php/anglistica-aion/article/view/9789, accessed 30 April 2025.

[12] Edgar Morin and Anne Kern, *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium* (New York, NJ: Hampton Press, 1999).

[13] Michael Lawrence, Johan Rockström, Thomas Homer-Dixon, and Scott Janzwood, "Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement", *Global Sustainability* 7 (2024), 2, https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2024.1. See also Tamsin Parnell, Tom Van Hout, and Dario Del Fante, eds., *Critical Approaches to Polycrisis: Discourses of Conflict, Migration, Risk and Finance* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2025).

[14] Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2020), 6.

[15] "It was of no great consequence for the birth of this new terrifying negative solidarity that the unemployed worker hated the status quo and the powers that be in the form of the Social Democratic Party, the expropriated small property owner in the form of a centrist or rightist party, and former members of the middle and upper classes in the form of the traditional extreme right". Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1962), 315.

[16] Originally published in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (Schilpp, 1957) and republished in Arendt's collection of essays titled *Men in Dark Times* (1968). For a related discussion, see also Rossella Ciocca and Sabita Manian, "Representing 'Negative Solidarities' in Contemporary Global Culture".

[17] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 83.

individuals"[18] who only have in common a contempt for the present order, ultimately leading to a "world without connection and friendship, where the only basis of collective action is some kind of awful combination of anger and desperation". [19]

In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt is particularly concerned with the notion of hate as a function of negative solidarity, charting how it becomes weaponised by both the masses and the elite.[20] Extending this further, one of the vehicles through which negative solidarity is enacted is language, with hate speech arguably its most explicit articulation. As Reshaur[21] observes, "Arendt's writing documents how the idea of humanity, to which we give ourselves and from which we receive confirmation of our identity, has become a notion which terrorizes, haunts, grieves and burdens us". Hate speech, then, becomes one of the means through which negative solidarity is achieved, pitting groups and communities against one another, sometimes influenced (or even directed) by prominent public figures.[22] This interplay between the 'elite' and the 'masses' is a key part of understanding how hate speech becomes legitimised by culturally powerful groups, in some cases leading to an escalation of violent action spurred on by a manipulative frontman (or woman).

Such processes have historically been facilitated through a variety of broadcast media outputs, but it is fair to say that the democratisation of online (social) media platforms over the past 10-15 years has widened the sphere of influence.[23] More specifically, the shift to self-authored and self-published online media platforms[24] has led to substantial shifts in the vectors through which hate speech is transmitted. This also means that any consideration of hate speech must also take into account the role of different forms of media. Writing more than 70 years ago, Arendt[25] made the point that "for the first time in history all peoples on earth have a common present". Since then, this "common present" has become even more pronounced through the invention of social media, the ubiquity of high-speed internet and smartphone technology, and the hyper-connectedness of contemporary society. All of this has implications for the easy transmissibility of hate speech, outstripping even the reach and range of more traditional forms of broadcast media. Indeed, despite the democratic advances the internet has facilitated, especially in terms of civic participation in contemporary events, politics, and current affairs, the

> […] double-edged sword of anonymity allows online haters, trolls and keyboard warriors to take their cause seriously and devote time and energy to the task of choosing and targeting their designated victims while rounding up others who share in their convictions.[26]

We expand on some of these issues in the next section of our discussion.

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[18] Ibid., 315.

[19] Sean Illing, "The philosopher who warned us about loneliness and totalitarianism", *Vox*, 8 May 2022, https://www.vox.com/vox-conversations-podcast/23048597/vox-conversations-hannah-arendt-totalitarianism-the-philosophers, accessed 30 April 2025.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ken Reshaur, "Concepts of Solidarity in the Political Theory of Hannah Arendt", *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique,* 25.4 (1992), 731.

[22] See, for example, McIntosh's 2020 discussion of Donald Trump and hate speech, where she points out that "when authority figures express things once unexpressible, the masses feels like they have social license to follow suit". In Christopher McIntosh, "The Trump Administration's Politics of Time: The Temporal Dynamics That Enable Trump's Interests to Determine American Foreign Policy", *Time & Society*, 29. 2 (1 May 2020), 362–391, DOI:10.1177/0961463X20909048.

[23] For an extended discussion of the role of the media in promoting hate speech and facilitating discrimination see Robert Lawson and Laura Coffey-Glover, "Introducing Mediated Discrimination: Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Media Discourse", *Discourse, Context & Media*, 56 (2023), 100739, https://www.sciencedirect.com/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[24] In the form of Twitter/X, Discord, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, as well as the less regulated forms of 'alt-tech', such as Gab, Rumble, and Truth Social; see Mario Peucker and Thomas J. Fisher, "Mainstream Media Use for Far-Right Mobilisation on the Alt-Tech Online Platform Gab", *Media, Culture & Society*, 45. 2 (1 March 2023), 354-372.

[25] Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York, NJ: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 83.

[26] Balirano and Hughes, "Editors' Introduction", in *Homing in on Hate*, v.

2. 'Hate Speech' and Digital Media

At this point, it is worthwhile giving more consideration to what 'hate speech' is as a concept. This discussion is complicated by the fact that 'hate speech' is not a monolithic entity, since different countries, laws, and organisations define and operationalise hate speech in different ways, while online forms of hate speech are arguably even murkier in terms of definition. Indeed, Balirano and Hughes[27] make the point that "many forms of online abuse are not recognised as harmful or are not classified as hate crimes across laws and legislation and, of course, what qualifies as hate speech per se also varies across countries and continents". This is further complicated by the tension between freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination.[28] While it is impossible to offer a comprehensive definition of hate speech in the space available, we can nevertheless briefly sketch out some of the main frameworks (both legal and otherwise).

At a global level, the UN's definition is a useful starting point, which notes that hate speech is

> […] any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.[29]

Similarly, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance defines hate speech as "forms of expressions which advocate, incite, promote or justify hatred, violence and discrimination against a person or group of persons for a variety of reason".[30] Looking more closely at legal approaches, the UK Public Order Act 1986 makes it an offence for a person to use "threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour that causes, or is likely to cause, another person harassment, alarm or distress",[31] with later amendments adding specific clauses for the incitement of religious or racial hatred or hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation, while a specific sub-section of the Communications Act 2003 (specifically Section 127) makes it illegal to send via a "public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character".[32]

As noted previously in this introduction, the affordances of digital media have shifted the landscape of hate speech in dramatic ways. Not only is it possible to send malicious communications via email, forum posts, public comments, Twitter messages, Facebook posts and more, digital media has "honed the very nature of hate speech through specific forms of harassment such as doxxing, trolling, cyberstalking, revenge porn, swatting, and others, each of which possesses its own set of ever-evolving rules and codes".[33] There are also many documented examples of stalking, harassment, and hate speech directed towards women, whether they work in the public eye (as journalists, reporters, actors, or musicians) or outside these industries,[34] alongside the less reported cases of sex-based hate speech

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[27] Ibid., vi.

[28] For an extensive discussion of this debate, see Toni M. Massaro, "Shame, Culture, and American Criminal Law", *Michigan Law Review*, 89.7 (June 1991), 1880, https://doi.org/10.2307/1289392.

[29] United Nations, "What is hate speech?", 2023, https://www.un.org/, accessed 30 April 2025.

[30] Council of Europe, "Hate Speech and Violence", European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/hate-speech-and-violence.

[31] UK Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1986, sec.154, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/64/section/4/data.pdf

[32] UK Communications Act 2003, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/section/127.

[33] Balirano and Hughes, "Editors' Introduction", in *Homing in on Hate*, v.

[34] See Laura Barton, "'At first I tried to be polite, not to hurt his feelings': how a regular 'liker' on social media became my stalker", *The Guardian*, 16 Sept. 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/, accessed 30 April 2025; Tamsin Hinton-Smith et al., "'It's

presented throughout the auspices of the manosphere.[35] Consequently, hate speech has shifted from simply being an articulation of negative sentiment towards a supposed 'outgroup' to something all the more sinister, a collection of practices which exploit the interconnectedness between people's online and off-line lives to attack, silence, and suppress. The high-profile cases of individuals charged with social media hate offences in the aftermath of the UK riots in 2024 (see opening discussion) highlights the extent to which hate speech in digital spaces can also persuade and manipulate people to engage in further violent action. This threat is ultimately one which raises questions about social media companies' responsibilities in terms of moderating, policing, and intervening in cases of digital hate speech and their spill-over effects. For example, in recent years there has been several high-profile examples of "live-streamed hate", including shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand (2019) and Buffalo, New York (2022), where social media platforms have been unable to remove video clips of these events due to the proliferation of sharing on their sites[36] while videos of the religiously-motivated church attack in Sydney, Australia in 2024 were quickly shared across Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and elsewhere. More problematically, Twitter/X (since its take-over by Elon Musk in 2022) has refused to remove reported hate tweets and violent content[37] while simultaneously reinstating controversial racists, sexists, and extremists after they had been banned on the platform.[38] As a self-declared 'free speech absolutist',[39] Musk appears to be positioning Twitter/X as a real-life case study of what happens when the limits of freedom of expression come up against legal frameworks which protect people from freedom of discrimination. To that end, some governments are taking a much more proactive approach to tackle these problems. For example, the UK's Online Safety Bill (due to be introduced in 2025) is not only intended to bolster custodial sentences for those found guilty of posting or disseminating hate speech, but it also implements harsher penalties against social media companies if they fail to tackle or remove harmful content.[40]

The growing threat of different forms of hate speech can also be seen in relation to the concerning trend for the mainstreaming (and subsequently normalisation) of extremist positions, where previously fringe ideologies are given wider exposure through more well-established platforms.[41] For instance, up until late-2022, male supremacist and social media influencer Andrew Tate promoted his (explicitly misogynistic and sexist) views almost exclusively via videos and podcasts shared on YouTube, Twitter,

Not Something That We Think about with Regard to Curriculum'". Exploring Gender and Equality Awareness in Higher Education Curriculum and Pedagogy', *Gender and Education* 34.5 (4 July 2022), 495-511, https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1947472; David Mercer, "Forensic Psychologist Tells of 'Terrifying' Stalking Ordeal - and Reveals Why Some Celebrities Are Targeted", *Sky News*, 20 Jan. 2023, https://news.sky.com/

[35] See, for example, Frazer Heritage, *Incels and Ideologies: Exploring How Incels Use Language to Construct Gender and Race*, (Berlin: Springer Nature, 2023); Alexandra Krendel, "The Men and Women, Guys and Girls of the 'Manosphere': A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Approach", *Discourse & Society*, 31.6 (1 Nov. 2020), 607-630, https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520939690; Robert Lawson, *Language and Mediated Masculinities: Cultures, Contexts, Constraints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[36] See Yasmin Ibrahim, Yasmin, "The Sharing Economy and Livestreaming of Terror: Co-Production of Terrorism on Social Media". In Kamaldeep Bhui and Dinesh Bhugra (eds.), *Terrorism, Violent Radicalization, and Mental Health,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 65-77; and Mac Ryan, Kellen Browning, and Sheera Frenkel, "Livestreams of Mass Shootings: From Buffalo to New Zealand", *The New York Times*, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com.

[37] Jason Burke, "Twitter Faces Legal Challenge after Failing to Remove Reported Hate Tweets", *The Guardian*, 10 Jul. 2023. https://www.guardian.com; Josh Taylor, "Elon Musk's X v Australia's Online Safety Regulator: Untangling the Tweet Takedown Order", *The Guardian*, 23 Apr. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com.

[38] Kate Conger and Sheera Frenkel, "Hate Speech's Rise on Twitter Under Elon Musk is Unprecedented, Researchers Find", *The New York Times*, 5 Dec. 2022, https://www.nytimes.coml; Arwa Mahdawi, "Elon Musk is Intrigued by the Idea Women Can't Think Freely Because of "Low T"', *The Guardian*, 7 Sept. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Zuhal Demirci, "UK's Online Safety Bill to be Fully Enforced Next Year", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 20 Aug. 2024, https://www.aa.com.tr; Tom Singleton and Irman Rahman-Jones, Imran, "Tech Firms Told to Hide 'toxic' Content from Children", *BBC News*, 8 May 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk.

[41] Liz Fekete, Liam Shrivastava, and Sophia Siddiqui, "Mainstreaming Hate: How the Right Exploits the Crisis to Divide Us, 2024, *Institute of Race Relations,* https://irr.org.uk/article/mainstreaming-hate-how-the-right-exploits-the-crisis-to-divide-us/.

Instagram, and other social media sites. Following his 2022 arrest in Romania on charges of rape, sex trafficking, and forming an organised crime group to sexually exploit women, however, he was consequently platformed across a range of major news outlets, including the BBC, the *Piers Morgan Show*, and other prime time televised news broadcasts, in addition to being the focus of several documentaries and countless news articles and opinion pieces. While these platforms may not have intended to directly amplify Tate's viewpoints, they undoubtedly facilitated their movement from the periphery of social awareness to a much more central position, consequently raising Tate's profile and introducing him to a wider audience which might not have otherwise engaged with his views.

3. Functions of Hate Speech

This special issue explores a range of critical themes associated with hate speech, including othering**,** collective identity, persuasive language, and the consequences of hate. Othering**,** as a concept, is central to understanding how individuals and groups are marginalised and excluded from social narratives, thereby creating an in-group versus out-group dynamic that fosters hostility.[42] This process intricately relates to the formation of collective identities, wherein individuals may experience (dis)affiliation based on shared characteristics or beliefs, further deepening societal divisions.[43] Throughout this issue, articles explore how the persuasive language employed in hate speech not only incites emotional responses but also reinforces these identities, often leading to broader societal consequences. Such language serves to normalise intolerance and perpetuate cycles of discrimination, revealing the profound impact that hate speech can have on social cohesion.[44] The volume also engages with the urgent call issued by Balirano and Hughes,[45] who remind us that "there seems to be a tendency to forget that ongoing, low-level hate speech is far more common than the dramatically violent hate crimes that capture public imagination". This observation underscores the need for a comprehensive discourse that addresses not just the extreme manifestations of hate but also the everyday forms that may go unnoticed yet have significant implications for public perception and social dynamics. By examining these interconnected topics, this special issue aims to foster a deeper understanding of hate speech and its ramifications in contemporary society.

4. Article Overviews

The first group of articles examines *Hate Speech in Political and Social Discourses*, exploring the pervasive presence of hate speech in political and social narratives and revealing how it is entrenched in everyday discourse. Through a focus on political rhetoric, social media, and public health communication, the authors explore the ways in which power dynamics and societal fears manifest as hate-filled language. From the rise of ethnic supremacist rhetoric in Italian politics to the manipulation of health crises like Monkeypox, these papers uncover the complex interplay between ideology, identity, and language in shaping modern hate speech.

In "Ethnic Replacement: Unfortunate Expression or Unacceptable Supremacism?", Guerra, Merlin, and Milani provide an interdisciplinary exploration of a highly charged political discourse in Italy. They focus on the inflammatory rhetoric used by Italian Minister Francesco Lollobrigida in April 2023, who

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[42] Fred Dervin, "Cultural Identity, Representation and Othering", *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication* (London: Routledge, 2012), 195-208.

[43] Merlin Brinkerhoff and Kathryn L. Burke, "Disaffiliation: Some Notes on "Falling from the Faith", *Sociological Analysis*, 41.1 (1980), 41-54.

[44] Benjamin Igbeaku, Evelyn Mbah, Friday Ikani, Fabian Ude, Peter Achadu, Doris Odo, and Dorathy Igbeakụ, "Hate Speech and National Cohesion", *EBSU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 14.4, 2024.

[45] Balirano and Hughes, "Editors' Introduction", in *Homing in on Hate*, vi.

warned against ethnic replacement. The paper analyses reactions from both Italian and English-language media and social platforms, revealing how this phrase, deeply linked to far-right ideology, ignited public debate. Through linguistic and media analysis, the authors highlight the complexities of interpreting such divisive language in the context of migration and national identity.

In "#Ready4Dishy? Assessing Twitter/X's Controversial Engagement in UK Political Communication", Francesco Meledandri offers an analysis of public responses to institutional communications on Twitter/X, focusing on reactions to Rishi Sunak's appointment as UK Prime Minister in October 2022. The study utilises manual content analysis to assess the prevalence of supportive, non-supportive, and hateful commentary, revealing a significant predominance of negative and hostile engagement. By examining these interactions, the author critically addresses the implications of such discourse for political communication and the relationship between public figures and their constituencies in online environments.

In "Breaking the Chains of Bias: Investigating Monkeypox Narratives in Public Health Discourse", Cangero and Fruttaldo analyse how the monkeypox outbreak (July 2022–May 2023) has been disproportionately linked to gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with men (GBMSM), leading to increased stigma and discrimination. The study utilises both quantitative methods to examine media coverage and qualitative discourse analysis of official documents from the UK, US, and Italy, framed by Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) theories. This approach aims to uncover how these narratives have marginalised LGBTIQ+ individuals and to advocate for a more inclusive and evidence-based public health communication strategy.

The second collection of articles deals with *Intersectionality and Hate Speech in Online Spaces*. In this section, the authors take an intersectional approach to explore how hate speech functions in digital spaces, particularly on platforms like TikTok and YouTube. The studies illustrate how ableism, fatphobia, sexism, and other discriminatory discourses coalesce to target marginalised individuals. By focusing on these overlapping identities, the authors emphasise the deeply personal and often invisible harm caused by online hate. This section highlights the digital landscape as both a breeding ground for exclusion and a site of resistance, where diverse identities collide with hate and resilience.

In "Analysing Intersectional Ableist and Fatphobic Discourses in Digital Spaces", Nisco and Raffone examine the intersection of ableism and fatphobia within online environments, specifically on TikTok. The study highlights the lack of consensus on whether obesity constitutes a disability and investigates how stigma related to both obesity and disability manifests in digital spaces. Utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods, the paper aims to shed light on discriminatory behaviours against fat people with disabilities (FPWD) and how these hateful intersectional discourses are constructed and enacted by social media users.

In "Shades of Veg*nism (and Beyond): A Socio-Cognitive Discourse Analysis of Dietary Hate Speech in YouTube Comments", Nacchia examines the relationship between dietary choices and identity, alongside the prevalence of hate speech in digital spaces. Adopting a socio-cognitive discourse analysis approach, the study analyses comments on a YouTube video to investigate the manifestation of hate speech against vegan, vegetarian, reducetarian, and meat-eating groups. The findings indicate that veganism is predominantly targeted by negative portrayals, with the discourse often rooted in moral and ethical debates about animal rights.

In "Beyond Words: Exploring Sexist Hate Speech Online and in the Multimodal Advertising System", D'Angelo examines the multifaceted nature of sexist hate speech and its subtle yet harmful impact on gender identity. The paper explores how such speech serves to oppress and exclude individuals, even in the absence of overt violence, and analyses its manifestation in advertisements across Italy, the UK, and France. It also reviews recent EU practices aimed at combating hate speech and supporting member states in addressing these issues.

Our third section considers a range of issues related to *Gender Identity, Representation and Hate Speech*. This section critically engages with the fraught relationship between gender identity, representation, and hate speech. Through an exploration of drag performance, media portrayals of femicide, and the toxic masculinity that fuels online hate, these papers focus on how gender is constructed and weaponised in contemporary discourse. The authors shine a light on how individuals and communities resist, reclaim, and subvert harmful narratives, making space for new forms of expression and solidarity. The research here is not only academic but deeply human, reflecting the lived realities of those navigating hostile discursive terrains.

In "Get in Some Good Trouble! Meaning and Representation in Drag Response to Hate Crimes: A Stylistic and Multimodal Analysis", Esposito examines the rise of intersectional activism following George Floyd's murder. The study analyses drag queen performances from RuPaul's Drag Race season 13 to understand their response to hate crimes through a Stylistic and Multimodal framework, and explores how these performances convey resistance and solidarity by investigating the representation of social actors and semiotic processes.

In "The Shadow Pandemic. An Analysis of Femicide in British News Coverage", Scotto di Carlo investigates the representation of femicide in the *Daily Mail* throughout 2021. The study critiques how media narratives often depict femicide as isolated incidents driven by individual motives, rather than addressing the complex socio-cultural factors involved, and examines the framing of these incidents in light of the UN's designation of femicide as a Shadow Pandemic. By employing Bacchi's framework alongside Critical Discourse Analysis and Thematic Analysis, the study aims to challenge misleading media portrayals and advocate for more responsible and sensitive reporting practices.

In "Hegemonic Masculinity and Toxic Technocultures: Discourse in the Review Bombing of HBO's The Last of Us", Spallaccia explores the phenomenon of review bombing as a form of ideological conflict and social distress from gaming communities. The study focuses on the cyber hostility directed at HBO's adaptation of *The Last of Us*, analysing the discursive strategies used against its inclusive representations. By applying Discourse Studies and the Discourse Historical Approach, the paper interprets review bombing as a manifestation of collective political resentment and toxic masculinity, offering insights into how these dynamics act as barriers to participation in contemporary media.

The final collection of articles explores *Cultural Representations and Hate Speech in Media*. The section turns to the role of media in either challenging or perpetuating hate speech, with a particular focus on cultural representations. Whether through Disney's portrayal of diversity or the biases in educational materials, these studies reveal how media shapes societal views and influences discriminatory attitudes. The section also addresses hate speech against historically marginalised groups, such as the Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities, exploring how online platforms can both amplify and counteract prejudiced narratives. Through a critical lens, the authors expose the power of representation in fostering either division or understanding.

In "Under a Sea of Anger: A CDA of Hate Speech in Facebook User Comments on Disney's Representation of Diversity in the USA and Italy", Aiezza examines social media reactions to Disney's commitment to cultural diversity. The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis and multimodal techniques to analyse user comments on Disney's official Facebook pages concerning the remakes of *Lightyear* (2022), *Peter Pan & Wendy* (2023), and *The Little Mermaid* (2023). The findings reveal polarised opinions on Disney's inclusivity initiatives, with some users praising them while others criticise them as 'wokeism' or forced inclusivity, highlighting a range of toxic fan behaviour and discriminatory attitude.

In "Exposing Bias, Disinformation, and Hate Speech in Educational Materials", Rasulo and De Santo explore how hate speech manifests in educational contexts, focusing on both overt acts like bullying and subtle forms such as bias and disinformation. They analyse the influence of PragerU, an organisation criticised for its K-12 teaching materials that allegedly distort historical and scientific facts. Using the

Pyramid of Hate framework and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, the authors examine how PragerU's narratives normalise biased ideologies and contribute to divisive discourse. The study highlights the rhetorical strategies used to evoke emotional responses and reinforce stereotypes, demonstrating how these narratives can escalate from subtle bias to overt hate speech, aiming to determine whether such content fosters an environment conducive to conflict and societal polarisation.

5. Conclusions and Implications

This special issue underscores the urgent need for more critical and interdisciplinary approaches to addressing hate speech and its online and offline manifestations. The collected articles reveal the challenges in accurately detecting, contextualising, and, most importantly, responding to hate-based language and behaviour, whether on an individual, community, or systemic level. As hate speech increasingly permeates media and digital platforms, ultimately seeping into offline environments, scholars are faced with a growing need to analyse how hateful narratives are constructed, disseminated, and normalised through various semiotic resources and media affordances.[46]

From a legislative and policy standpoint, the findings in this special issue emphasise the importance of adopting flexible frameworks that must account for the variety of hate speech forms, the underlying ideologies driving them, and their specific cultural, historical, and social contexts.[47] Legislation that narrowly defines hate speech based on a limited set of linguistic features or protected categories may overlook the evolving nature of hate speech, particularly in online environments where hateful discourse often operates subtly or through coded language. Consequently, legal and regulatory bodies should consider more context-sensitive approaches to combat hate speech, acknowledging that what constitutes harmful speech may differ across time, platforms, and social groups.[48]

At the heart of this argument is the pivotal role of linguistic research in deciphering the construction and normalisation of hate speech. Linguistics equips us with a potent arsenal of tools to dissect the discursive strategies and rhetorical elements that enable hate speech to flourish, such as the manipulation of grammar, word choice, and broader sociocultural narratives. This special issue thus underscores how, through the affordances of digital media, hate speech has morphed into new forms of expression, often intertwined with multimodal and algorithmically driven content.[49] For instance, memes, hashtags, and video content play a key role in amplifying hate speech, blurring the lines between online expression and offline consequences.[50]

Moreover, this research draws attention to the disconnect between academic inquiry and real-world interventions. While scholars have made significant advances in understanding hate speech's mechanisms, there remains a gap in translating these insights into actionable strategies for combating hate speech in practice. Policymakers, tech companies, and civil society organisations must collaborate closely with researchers to ensure that anti-hate initiatives are grounded in robust empirical evidence and are responsive to the lived experiences of affected communities.[51] This means developing better detection systems and fostering meaningful engagement with those most vulnerable to hate speech. Research has shown that online hate speech detection often relies on computational techniques that focus

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[46] Balirano and Hughes, 'Editors' Introduction", in *Homing in on Hate*; Darren Kelsey and Majid KhosraviNik, eds., *Social Media, Discourse and Politics: Contemporary Spaces of Power and Critique* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

[47] Barbara Perry, *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes* (London & New York: Routledge, 2021).

[48] Alex Brown, *Hate Speech Law: A Philosophical Examination* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015).

[49] Eleonora Esposito, "The Visual Semiotics of Digital Misogyny: Female Leaders in the Viewfinder", *Feminist Media Studies* 23.8 (2023), 3815-3831.

[50] Zizi Papacharissi, "We Have Always Been Social".

[51] Danielle Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

on surface-level features like keywords and slurs. However, such methods may fall short of capturing the context-dependent nature of hate speech. [52]

Furthermore, there is a pressing need for diachronic studies that track hate speech's digital footprint over time, mirroring the phenomenon's inherently dynamic nature. Social, political, and cultural factors continually mould hate speech, implying that what may be classified as harmful or inciteful in one context may dramatically shift in another. [53] As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, digital hate speech possesses a fluid quality that adapts to changes in societal discourse, making it challenging to apply static definitions or regulatory frameworks. For instance, the surge of populist and nationalist rhetoric in recent years has contributed to the mainstreaming of hate speech that once existed on the fringes of public discourse. [54]

The discourse around hate speech solutions remains fraught with disagreement, particularly when balancing freedom of speech with protection against discrimination. [55] Developing effective interventions is thus a complex task, as the boundaries of free expression are continually contested, especially in digital environments where anonymity and rapid dissemination complicate efforts to curb hate speech. [56] Nevertheless, this collection of studies offers valuable insights into the structural and linguistic dimensions of hate speech, providing a foundation for future research.

As society grapples with the challenges of hate speech in the digital age, this special issue advocates for more responsible, inclusive, and socially aware media practices. This necessitates collaboration not only between scholars and practitioners but also between governments, technology companies, and civil society to ensure that the fight against hate speech is rooted in a shared commitment to equality, diversity, and human dignity. The implications of this line of research are clear: addressing hate speech must transcend reactive measures, focusing instead on proactive strategies that foster critical media literacy, platform accountability, and the promotion of inclusive public discourse.

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[52] Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández, "Platformed Racism: The Mediation and Circulation of an Australian Race-Based Controversy on Twitter, YouTube and Facebook", *Information, Communication & Society*, 20.6 (2017), 930-946.

[53] Majid KhosraviNik, "Connecting the Digital with the Social in Digital Discourse: An Introduction to the Scene", in Majid KhosraviNik, ed., *Social Media and Society: Integrating the Digital with the Social in Digital Discourse* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2023), 1-14.

[54] Ruth Wodak and Majid Khosravinik, "Dynamics of Discourse and Politics in Right-Wing Populism in Europe and Beyond: An Introduction", in Ruth Wodak, Majid Khosravinik, and Brijitte Mral, eds., *Rightwing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xvii-xxviii; Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: SAGE, 2015).

[55] See Jack Balkin, *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018); Toni Massaro, "Equality and Freedom of Expression: The Hate Speech Dilemma", *William and Mary Law Review*, 32, 1990, 211-267.

[56] See Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*.