RESEARCH ARTICLE

Citizens' Media Practices in the Face of Online Hate Speech

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a novel perspective on online hate speech, framing it as a discursive weapon strategically deployed by political actors, particularly on the far right, that civil society can politically contest. It focuses on studying citizens' media practices as potential collective responses enacted by networked publics. Drawing on qualitative interviews with activists and communication and law professionals, the study pinpoints four key practices: identifying and assessing hate communications, making and sustaining personal connections, envisioning and spreading alternative narratives, and promoting changes on the media channels. Each one involves strategic decision-making—such as whether to engage in counterspeech or opt for tactical silence, use hegemonic or peripheral frames, or act publicly or behind the scenes. While counterdiscourse is essential for challenging hate, it may inadvertently reinforce hatemongers' strategies if not critically framed. In digital contexts, where far-right actors exploit audience outrage for visibility, tactical silence emerges as a deliberate alternative. Also, some behind-the-scenes actions—such as citizen-led efforts to influence advertisers to discourage the unintended funding of hatred—seem promising. The findings suggest that transitioning collective action from immediate problem-solving to aligned strategic actions sustained over time may increase communicative resilience in the face of hate speech, opening paths for future research and action on how networked citizens can increase capacity building to defend pluralism and democracy.

KEYWORDS: Hate speech, Political antagonism, Media practice, Counterdiscourse, Tactical silence

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1. Introduction

Hate speech has become a significant social problem, attracting scholarly attention across disciplines due to its impact on social relations and the quality of democratic public life. In today's global, hyper-mediated context, far-right movements are using hate speech as a political weapon to undermine the integrity of the public sphere (Martín Jiménez 2023; Pascale 2019). From this perspective, hate speech can be seen as an expression of political antagonism (Schmitt 2020) and, therefore, a politically contested phenomenon. Nevertheless, systematic studies on how citizens address their encounters with online hate speech through their everyday media practices remain limited.

Recognizing that hate speech is not casual but "fabricated" (Martín Jiménez 2023) requires some updates to the classical definitions of the phenomenon. Most definitions describe hate speech in terms of danger and moral turpitude, which can hinder an in-depth understanding of its political function. That was the conclusion drawn from consulting several major systematic literature reviews on the concept [see, for instance, Gracia-Calandín and Suárez-Montoya (2023); Montero, Laforgue-Bullido, and Abril-Hervás (2022); Tontodimamma, Nissi, Sarra, and Fontanella (2021); Paz, Montero-Díaz, and Moreno-Delgado (2020); Castaño-Pulgarín, Suárez-Betancur, Vega, and López (2021); Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2020); or Chetty and Alathur (2018)]. While ethically laudable, these approaches towards hate speech may impede researchers from identifying the strategies behind its deliberate use as a political weapon, which is crucial for devising effective countermeasures (Hietanen and Eddebo 2023).

This paper contributes to addressing some of these limitations by studying online hate speech from the perspective of citizens and civil society actors in their efforts to mitigate its impact, providing a situated and empirically grounded standpoint for analysing its political function. It examined daily media practices against hate speech, conducting a qualitative analysis of 18 interviews with key social actors involved in combating it in Spain in recent years.

In the interviews, participants were asked about their experiences, perceptions, and reflections on citizens' interventions against online hate speech attacks, whether they had experienced them directly or witnessed them. Four primary practices were found: (1) identifying hate communications, (2) cultivating connections to support victims, amplifying messages, and acting strategically, (3) devising and disseminating alternative narratives, and (4) promoting changes in media channels that amplify hate speech. Practices were described using Mattoni and Ceccobelli's (2024) framework for examining activists' media resilience practices in everyday life, allowing the integration of this study's insights into the existing literature.

The article presents a theoretical framework (Section 2) explaining the role of hate speech in far-right antagonistic politics (2.1); examining how these actors fuel hate speech online by exploiting social dynamics within the hybrid media system (2.2); situating the position of pro-social activism and communicative resilience in a media system that is unequal (2.3); and introducing the concept of media practice and its potential for compiling networked responses to online hate speech (2.4). The article then outlines the methodology (Section 3), presents the identified actions and practices (Section 4), discusses the significance and limitations of the findings (Section 5), and concludes by summarizing the main contributions and by advancing future studies (Section 6).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Role of Hate Speech in Political Antagonism

Hate speech involves the promotion of hateful expressions—such as denigration, harassment, negative stereotyping, or stigmatization—based on a non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics or statuses, including "'race,' colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation," according to European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) Recommendation No. 15 of Council of Europe (2015). This form of hostile communication can lead to discrimination, potentially excluding targeted individuals and groups from the public sphere (Waldron, 2012).

Hate speech is increasingly being understood as a deliberate strategy for extremist political movements (Martín Jiménez 2023; Fuchs 2019; Duncan 2017). Hate speech reinforces the "sense of belonging" to an "in-group" by positioning others—the hate speech targets and their supporters—as a common enemy to be defeated to protect the in-group (Allport 1954, 42). From this perspective, groups targeted by hate speech function as proxies for consolidating in-group identities (Szanto 2020; Ahmed 2005). The repetition of the formula leads to "habitualization of hatred" in the in-group (Szanto 2020, 1), leading to a "shift" in the "boundaries of acceptable attitudes" to "make people more open to more radical standpoints" (Schäfer, Sülflow, and Reiners 2021, 6).

This sharp distinction between an in-group (us) and an out-group (them) resembles that one made in antagonistic politics between friends (in-group members) and enemies (out-group members). Schmitt (2020) argued that political actors define their actions and motives through "the distinction between friend and enemy" (p. 20), a fundamental divide most visible in moments of acute conflict but inherently present in all political behavior (p. 24). Mouffe (1999) contended, for her part, that the role of the political is to "domesticate hostility" and "defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations" (p. 754). This understanding allows for the coexistence of difference, where the other is viewed not as an enemy to be destroyed but as an "adversary" whose ideas can be contested but whose right to express them is respected.

For Laclau and Mouffe (1987), antagonism represents "the failure of difference," and it arises at "the limits of language," so the language of antagonism can only exist as a "disruption" (p. 215). From this perspective, hate speech is an expression of exacerbated political antagonism. This definition emphasizes the functionality of hate speech for openly antagonistic actors, rather than just its inappropriateness. This perspective does not deny that online hate speech can inflict genuine psychological suffering (Nyman and Provozin 2019), which renders it reprehensible; it just leads the way for understanding how it serves as a political weapon for certain actors in the public conversation.

2.2 The Fueling of Hate Speech within the Hybrid Media System

In the current media system, dominated by a hybridization of social media, new media, and legacy media logics (Chadwick 2013), far-right actors have found a favourable environment for spreading hate speech (Farkas, Schou, and Neumayer 2018; Fielitz and Thurston 2018; Jakubowicz 2020). On platforms, they benefit from the possibility of using anonymous profiles (Brown 2018) and from the interactivity and mass connectivity to fuel hostile messages toward broad audiences (Lim 2020). They artificially generate high engagement with hate content (Elmas, Overdorf, Özkalay, and Aberer 2021) to attract the attention of recommendation systems, which prioritize popularity over substance, and prompt algorithms to promote it to new audiences (Goel, Sahnan, Dutta, Bandhakavi, and Chakraborty 2023; Schoch, Keller, Stier, and Yang 2022). These networks

exploit the outrage of users who oppose hate speech, as their reactions generate additional clicks that further amplify the content (Gandesha 2024), a tactic known as "ragebait" (Wiktionary s.f.). Ideologically, they promote racist (Jakubowicz 2020) and anti-feminist (Díaz-Fernández and García-Mingo 2024) positions, targeting "Muslims," "the weak," and "the left" with hateful language (Renton 2021, 140).

They also try to confuse journalists by fabricating incidents that ultimately receive media coverage, thereby transferring hateful messages from online fringes to mainstream media (Phillips 2018). Additionally, programmatic advertising, with its lucrative incentive structure for fake news publishers, represent a key factor enabling the unchecked spread of hostile content online (Díaz-Ruiz 2025; Braun and Eklund 2019).

2.3 Pro-social Resilience in an Unequal Media System

In the context of hate speech reception, interpreting such disruptive communication is "empirically different" (Barth, Wagner, Raab, and Wiegärtner 2023, 209). From a "resilience-based approach," it is crucial to grasp "what is keeping people resistant to violence, rather than what is making them vulnerable to it" (Gerrand 2022, 2). Resilience is often defined as the ability to adapt to or withstand conditions of strain or stress (Kirmayer, Sehdev, Whitley, Dandeneau, and Isaac 2009). However, as Gerrand (2022) adverts, violent extremist groups are themselves resilient; therefore, it is important to distinguish between pro- and anti-social forms of resilience. In the context of this research, the potential for responses to hate speech is considered a field for examining pro-social resilience.

On its part, communicative resilience has been defined as "a framework for communities to both define and pursue resilience through collaborative dialogue" (Goldstein 2012, 366). In their pursuit of resilience, networked communities in action have the potential of not just to restore the existing conditions but also to transform them for a social change (Goldstein 2012). This may happen by acting in "the right now" but also over more extended periods of time, and by focusing not only on "immediate problem solving" but also on "collaborative capacity building" (Goldstein 2012, 361-363).

The potential for pro-social actors' resilience in the face of online hate speech is shaped by the inequities in access to means and data within the current hybrid media system. Intervening (or not) at the right moment and saying the right thing (or saying anything at all) is not just a matter of having access to speak publicly, but also of managing the data that allows the speakers to broadly understand the situation and shape their discourse in consequence to achieve their goals. Access to these data has become increasingly critical (Gutiérrez 2018) as digital media have evolved into massive-scale extraction machines of human-generated data (Zuboff 2022) and shifted into non-neutral political actors (Hickey, Fessler, Lerman, and Burghardt 2025).

However, some authors argued that, even if narrowed, there is still margin for renewed experiences of digital activism that challenge the dominant social media inequality (Gutiérrez 2018; Treré, Dencik, Hintz, and Redden 2024). These experiences, defined as data activism, present "new social practices rooted in technology," in which pro-social actors use their "capacity of reflection to make data [and algorithms] work according to their needs" (Treré *et al*. 2024, 243-245), as well as "for meaning-making, coordination and change" (Gutiérrez 2018, 1). Therefore, new forms of digital activism may be expected in response to online hate speech, even in unequal media conditions.

2.4 The Potential of Media Practices to Combat Online Hate Speech

Knowing how to make data work for one's own needs is not always intuitive. To facilitate a systematic approach to the set of alternative responses, some concepts are introduced and situated within the framework of media practices performed by networked publics.

Media practice occurs through interactions between individuals and "a heterogeneous, ubiquitous, and perpetual data stream" with which they must "come to terms" (Mattoni and Ceccobelli 2024, 1). To analyse these interactions, researchers can examine people's actions within and through the data stream and the logic behind them (Swidler 2001). Here, action refers to "what an agent does, as opposed to what happens to an agent" (Blackburn 2016, n.p.).

Media practices may be observed through the formation of "networked publics" (boyd 2010, 1), which coordinate individuals' actions through "affects" such us "tension and excitation, disgust or calm" that are transmitted by the media (Lünenborg 2022, 4). From this perspective, the media and the messages are more than just information channels; they are "emotional conducts", which are key to "boosting the mobilization" (Gerbaudo 2012, 14). The analyst may observe the specific actions and feedback loops that shape the persistence or the decline of public attention to issues, and how actors frame their messages and influence public opinion dynamics (Rosa 2022; Emirbayer and Sheller 1998).

Analysing citizens' preferences for enabling one response over another, as well as their framing choices, provides a theoretically grounded framework for examining communicative resilience practices as collective means to confront hateful messages online. The analyst may observe these preferences in a set of non-mutually exclusive online responses to hate speech that can vary to adapt to different contexts: strategic silence vs. counterspeech; hegemonic vs. counterhegemonic frames; in public vs. behind the scenes actions.

A political strategy is a plan designed to achieve a major objective; in contrast, tactics are the specific manoeuvres political actors use to adapt to environmental contingencies (De Nardo 2014). For De Certeau (1980), strategies are employed by powerful, autonomous actors, while tactics are the actions performed by the actors who lack control over the environment, using their weak position to turn into a stronger one. Assuming that hate receivers are the weak counterpart, they may opt for two primary tactics to counter hate speech: strategic silence (Donzelli 2020; Li, Cai, and Wohn 2023), following the "do not feed the troll" maxim (Binns 2012, 1); or active counterspeech, in case that priority is to send "an inclusionary message" to hate targets (Baider, Millar, and Assimakopoulos 2020, 174). For counterdiscourse to be effective, understanding the friend-enemy divide is crucial to prevent reinforcing the very mental associations it seeks to challenge (Lepoutre 2019), which requires "critical thinking and ethical reflexivity" to discern "the context" and the "underlying assumptions and prejudices" [in the messages] of hatemongers (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves, and Martínez 2015, 48-51).

Hegemonic perspectives are propagated by publics that "take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted," while counter-hegemonic standpoints are driven by counter-publics aiming to be "transformative, not merely replicative" (Warner 2002, p. 121). Therefore, by examining the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic aspects of the practice, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of the action under scrutiny.

Also, citizens may organize their actions either "behind the scenes" in private or semi-private spaces or "in public," visibly to others (Mattoni and Ceccobelli 2024, 125), two distinct modes of collective action with potentially differing implications.

These conditions revitalize public opinion theories like the "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann 1974, 43), where the fear of isolation discourages minority views. In the digital public sphere, this manifests in a "centrifugal expansion" of "accelerated communication" producing an "ambivalent explosive force" (Habermas 2022, 158). Yet, despite the apparent chaos, empirical evidence suggests actors actively make sense of the data stream. This sense-making process is precisely what can be observed and potentiated through media practice.

3. Methodology

To analyze citizens' media practices in response to online hate speech, 18 semi-structured interviews with relevant Spanish public actors were conducted. The methodological approach followed the principles of "information power," which narrows the dialogue with participants who best hold relevance on the topic (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016, 3). Instead of widening the sample to achieve data saturation, it was preferred to focus on some prominent actors and deepen the reflection among the data collected (Braun and Clarke 2019). This decision was based on the specificity and novelty of the topic and the urgency for mapping and disseminating practices against online hate speech, regardless of how widely they have been adopted. One of the factors that highlights the relevance of conducting the study in the Spanish context is the fact that, at the time of the interviews, Spain was one of the European countries where the far right had not gained power in the national government—showing, at least a priori, some communicative resilience in the ground that is worth exploring.

Table 1 – List of participants

Code	Name	Description
01	UCFR	A member of UCFR Catalunya (Unitat Contra el Feixisme i el Racisme; translated as Unity Against Fascism and Racism), defined as a revolutionary socialist
02	Proyecto Una	Two members of Proyecto Una, a writing collective that investigates digital forms of feminist resistance
03	-	A trans-feminist activist who manages various social media accounts for artistic and LGTBIQ+ projects
04	Regularización Ya	An agitprop activist for advancing anti-racism, in charge of the social media accounts for a campaign on migrants' rights
05	-	A legal advisor who supports victims of hate speech
06	Observatorio Proxi	A member of Observatorio Proxi, an extinct network of digital activists that published anti-hate comments in news media stories
07	Hateblockers	A member of Hateblockers, a community against hate speech and fake news on the internet promoted by the Aragón Open Government Laboratory (LAAAB) of the Government of Aragón (Spain) and Cámara Cívica
08	Por Causa	A member of Por Causa, an organization that aims to create and spread new narratives on topics such as migrations
09	UCFR	A member of UCFR Catalunya, defined as anti-racist activist, part of Afro-descendant communities
10	El Salto Diario	A journalist at El Salto Diario
11	UCFR	A member of UCFR Catalunya, in charge of the organization's social media accounts
12	Boleto de Ida	A professional who runs a YouTube channel offering legal advice to migrants
13	Rodillo Club	Two members of Rodillo Club, an anti-capitalist advertising agency
14	Ecos do Sur / Ciberrespect	A communications officer at the NGO Ecos do Sur, leading the project Ciberrespect, which promotes narratives to curb hate speech
15	#IamNotAVirus	A journalist and an anti-Asian hate activist who joined an anti-Sinophobic online campaign during the Covid-19 pandemic
16	Laintersección	A communications professional and digital rights and feminist activist who is a member of Laintersección, a collective for narrative change
17	-	A journalist who presented himself as a leftist
18	És País Valencià	Two members of the grassroots organisation És País Valencià, in charge of the project No finances l'odi (Do not finance hatred)

Source: Own elaboration

While participants' personal identities remain confidential for anonymization and protection purposes, all participants share a common role: they engage—professionally, as activists, or both—in addressing online hate speech and navigating its challenges in their daily digital interactions. The interviews took place between April 21 and October 19, 2022. Participants were identified through social media observation, document analysis, and referrals. They were contacted via publicly available information or through references. Some interviews

were conducted in person in Barcelona, while others were online. All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between one and two hours, depending on the amount of information shared by the participant.

The interviews covered four main topics: personal information, collected solely to aid the analyst in data interpretation and not published; media usage in activism, where participants discussed their engagement with social media and mass media from an activist perspective; experiences with online hate speech, including direct or indirect encounters, its impact, individual and collective responses, and the strengths and limitations of these actions; and perspectives on social movements, exploring views on their potential to intervene in the contemporary public sphere.

An initial inductive coding process, inspired by qualitative grounded theory approaches (Corbin and Strauss 2015), resulted in the identification of three types of actions: those carried out individually by users on the platform, constrained by its design; those that led to the formation of a public; and those in which that public engaged in confrontation with a political antagonist. This emergent framework showed resonance points with similar analytical models found in the literature, such as that proposed by Mattoni and Treré (2014). The various actions described by interview participants were categorized according to this framework.

After mapping these actions, further abstraction was developed to describe the general practices underlying them, observing how citizens engage with the constant stream of data provided by digital platforms. Mattoni and Ceccobelli's (2024) framework, which conceptualizes media practice as a continuum of engagement with the data stream, proved helpful in this process. These authors identified four core media practices commonly employed by activists in Southern Europe: gathering information, forming connections, organizing politically, and achieving visibility. In this study, four media practices also emerged through a constant comparison between the interview data and the mentioned analytical model. Among them, obtaining information and making connections were central to how informants responded to online hate speech. While organizing politically and achieving visibility remained relevant, they appeared more fuzzy. Instead, the data highlighted two other prominent concerns in participants' daily engagement with hate speech: envisioning alternative narratives and promoting changes in the media channels.

4. Results: Four Practices to Combat Online Hate Speech

4.1 Identifying and Assessing Hate Communications

The practice of identifying and assessing hate communications encompasses both communicative and discursive dimensions. It involves actions such as locating the source of the hate message, identifying the amplification channels, evaluating its reach, and analysing the strategic objectives it may serve.

Identifying Actors, Practices, and Amplification in Communication

Interviews revealed two key factors in identifying and assessing the impact of hate speech: the sender's identity and influence, and the coordinated nature of the attack. As the interviewee with code 05 explained, the process begins by "unmasking who emits it, with what objective, and with what alliances." The impact is then evaluated: "An anonymous user is different from someone who leads a political party or a religious congregation." It is also assessed whether it is a lone user or a coordinated network. Another participant, with code 16, noted that "around 2015," hate speech shifted from being the work of isolated disruptive "trolls" or "people who simply posted hateful messages" to the moment in which "it started to become very noticeable that these were coordinated messages with a strategy behind them, not just angry people at home." A third

interviewee, with code 13, recognized the "intention to sink [his] reputation" in a coordinated attack he suffered, thanks to his prior experience performing similar tactics for pro-social causes.

Assessing the Strategy and Tactics behind Hatemongers' Behaviour

According to interviewees' observations, hatemongers exploit or initiate public debates on social media to introduce friend-enemy frames that may resonate across ideological and social divides. As one of the participants, coded 17, noted, the topics vary depending on context, though they often favour "securitarian topics" and prejudices against groups such as "Muslims, gypsies, transgender people, whatever is required in a given moment."

Once audiences are engaged in the conversation, hate broadcasters steer public discourse toward the divisive terms of their preference. The same participant (17) observed that far-right actors take advantage of segments of "the left" that may inadvertently align with hate speech frames: "For example, a campaign against sexism in an Arab country. We on the left criticize sexism itself [...]. The far right will sometimes use these examples not to criticize sexism, but to criminalize certain people because of their religion or origin." In his view, the reason for this to happen is that "prejudice, something the far right often appeals to, cuts across the political spectrum." For participant 05, it is key to admit that hatred has become "an instrumental strategy" for "mobilising certain insecurities, and fostering adherence to values such as the nuclear family, the State-nation, and anything that mobilise conservative vote."

Other interviewees argued that online confrontation with hatemongers becomes particularly problematic at this point, when individuals try to disentangle the framing overlap. The participant coded 08 said that "they [individuals who engage with hate speech content] don't realize the [hate speech] emitters are using them to amplify the message," and considered this is "due to their pride." Seemingly, participant 16 explained: "We realized the problem was our 'casito'—our engagement—making hate messages go viral." A third interviewee, coded 18, named this tactic "ragebait", and described it as "provoking us into taking the bait." The hatemongers' strategy may, then, be summarized as a combination of intertwined frames to provoke a reaction in the audience, together with the exploitation of the interaction-based logic of social media recommendation systems. The repeated execution of the previous steps leads to the habituation of public discourse around hate-framed narratives, increasing the likelihood of support for discriminatory positions. Several interviewees (02, 06, 10, 14, 18) referred to this process using metaphors such as "moving the Overton window," "shifting the general frame," or "moving the discourse to the right."

4.2 Making and Sustaining Personal Connections

Interviewees frequently emphasized the importance of cultivating personal connections, which enable other practices, such as supporting victims of hate speech and amplifying alternative messages. This relational work is also tied to the need for strategic action, though how such coordination must be organized was underexplored in their comments.

Giving Mutual Support

By creating connections in digital spaces, victims of hate speech can find like-minded individuals who "legitimize the impact and feelings" caused by hate, as two interviewees, coded 02, explained. These encounters often occur in private or semi-private spaces like Telegram, where the targeted person finds a community to share their experience and get support: "Everyone is sending them encouragement, and they are

back on solid ground, they are feeling better." Support can also take place publicly, with social media users engaging in actions like "lovebombing," which consists of posting supportive comments on the victim's profile, according to the same informants.

Another tactic, following up on 02, is organising a "mass report" of a hateful user, by utilizing the platform's features. Another interviewee, coded 18, added that "certain content is not banned unless it is reported" and stated that "there should be a report indicating that a person is continuously violating the rules." However, both 02 and 18 complained that platforms often do not remove reported messages and accounts. Additionally, informants 02 stated that organizing collectively for carrying out this type of action was not a priority: "We don't miss having a space like a 300-person chat room to report this or give support to that." Instead, they said, "We would like to have spaces where medium- and long-term strategies could be drawn up on how to put an end to this."

Amplifying Alternative Messages

Two key actions for amplifying alternative messages involve: creating connections with journalists and high-followership accounts, allowing for timely message amplification; and recommending who to follow on social media, promoting the expansion and density of the response network.

Whether counterdiscourse emerges publicly (openly and visibly) or is strategized behind the scenes (in semi-private spaces) carries different implications. Publicly, collective action often emerges spontaneously, driven by shared emotions rather than structured coordination. The interviewee coded 15 shared her experience during an anti-Sinophobic campaign at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. She noted there was no "great coordination," just a visible wave of hate speech, followed by a fleeting response from Chinese diaspora-based activists who launched the #IAmNotAVirus campaign. She and her community joined the global network by replicating the campaign in Spain—sharing photos and testimonies with the hashtag—without any formal planning. However, she also pointed out the challenge of sustaining the momentum: "Ok, the campaign, how cool, [but] in terms of material effects, it didn't have as much impact, and it disappointed me."

When counterdiscourse occurs behind the scenes, the immediate emotional momentum may be lost, but the experience becomes more embodied, increasing the likelihood of lasting connections. Interviewees noted that this support often comes from those with pre-existing emotional ties. Participants 02, for instance, explained that "not being alone does not mean a bunch of anonymous accounts tweeting at you; it means that people close to you are holding space, helping you figure out what you want and need."

Participant 05 emphasized the importance of having pre-planned strategies for potential hate targets, including deciding who will stand by them (actions aimed at giving mutual support) and also what roles they'll play, and which allies can be mobilized for (actions aimed at amplifying alternative messages). This planning should start with an "individual exercise to reflect on what social media means to us, what level of self-care we want to take." According to the same informant, "Not having a clear order of priorities makes it very difficult for you [the hate target] to make decisions and for those around you to understand what decisions need to be made." This exercise is essential for setting "the limits" when "asking for help." For political collectives that burst into the public sphere with messages that are likely to be interrupted by trolls and hatemongers, she contended that "it is also important you have done some work [...] to know who are the people who will be by your side at this moment, what is expected of them, what roles they will play, etc." And offered some examples of acts of preparation:

Will they give you support from their profiles? Will they take over your social media and continue posting from your profile? Have you already thought about who your allies are? Will they be there when you receive an attack? Who will you mobilise? Have you notified them in advance? (Participant 05)

These suggestions involve that practices established during calmer periods can substantially strengthen active responses during heightened hostility.

Acting Strategically

Digital communities on platforms like Discord, Patreon, and Telegram are serving as spaces where, apart from providing support to victims of hate speech, individuals can retreat and gain a broader vision and understanding of what is happening.

Some interviewees highlighted the need to transition from providing punctual support to developing joint strategies. For participant 05, it is crucial to combine being there, "holding space, saying things like 'Let us take three breaths, we are with you, let us think together'" with gradually aligning practices for more strategic collective action over time. For the participant coded 10, the priority is to "leave" spaces such as "Twitter." In her view, pro-social actors should focus on spaces where to "discuss what we want to propose, rather than exposing ourselves to that toxic material."

However, these digital communities face several challenges. Some interviewees acknowledged that the communities they knew were not as effective as they would like in fostering deep reflections, aligning practices, and coordinating actions. For achieving this, they preferred meeting in physical spaces. In the words of the participant coded 08, "We should reflect on shared spaces for debate, but in the end, I think everything is resolved body to body. I am increasingly convinced that real change will come from the street."

Additionally, digital communities managed by a single individual or a small team often struggle to manage the interaction volume. One interviewee, coded 12 noted, "People who do not even follow me but write to me can exceed a hundred per week. I will never be able to reply to all of them." Beyond that, another interviewee, 17, highlighted that digital community activism is "very permeable to infiltration," noting that while it works for organizing "affinity groups," it is less effective for coordinating spontaneous contacts.

The term organization was mentioned in the interviews generically, without specifying the political subject being organized, and often as a synonym for "entity," referring to associations, foundations, or NGOs. The interviewee coded 15 remarked, "Every organization has its agenda and is very busy with its things," adding that "organizations need to be more aware that social media is important and essential today." Another, from the collective coded as 02, highlighted the disconnection between audiences and content that should ideologically align: "People who hang out in anti-capitalist environments do not make their consumption of YouTube something political, but rather use it as a means of escape." As a result, "Anti-capitalist" creators are "creating content and have terrible numbers compared to the 'fachatubers'"—a term used in the Spanish left to refer to far-right-leaning content creators—; "they are not receiving support from real networks of people organized in analogue form."

In recent years, several projects have emerged aimed at providing an organizational response for networked action, combining small affinity communities behind the scenes with public collective actions. Projects like Observatorio Proxi, #AquíEstamos, and Hateblockers served as networks for alerting people to the propagation of hate speech and activating counter-speech actions. Observatorio Proxi, launched in 2014, was a pioneer in training digital activists to publish anti-hate messages in comment sections of news media. Projects like #AquíEstamos and Hateblockers followed them, focusing on social media platforms. Their interventions are aimed "to break the spiral of silence," which involves presenting "a positive message to ambivalent audiences" so "non-radical voices may see other references," in the words of the interviewee coded as 07.

Participant 07 also argued that, although the tactic of "counterdiscourse" may seem to "conflict a bit" with the tactic of "not feeding the troll," it is actually "compatible" with that one. The issue of opting for one or the other is contextual, as activists ask themselves, "When should you engage or not?" For participant 16, opting for both silence and counterspeech is not only possible but productive: "It is the tactical part that matters. It's not about saying nothing, but about fighting back in more effective ways." That implies, she argued, "not reacting or not giving visibility to hate messages," and "complementing this by visualising positive messages, narratives that are truly empowering and that can oppose those who try to spread hatred."

4.3 Envisioning and Spreading Alternative Narratives

Creating an alternative narrative to that of hate involves actions such as understanding the friend-enemy divide that hate emitters seek to evoke, and composing a counterdiscourse that can engage with as many receivers as possible while avoiding overlap with hatred messages frameworks.

Decodification: Figuring Out the Friend-Enemy Divide

Understanding the friend-enemy divide that hate speech seeks to evoke is crucial also for crafting counterdiscourses that avoid reinforcing the same semantic associations. As explained by some participants before, hatemongers attempt to resonate with underlying biases and prejudices in society. The interviewee coded as 14 also provided the example of a campaign against sexism in an Arab country: "One finds people from both the left and the right saying the same thing [...]; There is where the far right finds a point of contact," she continued.

Composition: Crafting an Alternative Friend-Enemy Divide

In the composition processes between diverse political subjects, the key linguistic issue is the delineation of friends (and allies) and enemies (and adversaries). For two interviewees, coded 01 and 11, the definition of friends is broad, with few entry requirements. One of them (11) explained, "If someone follows us [on social platforms] and is not a Nazi, we follow them back." The other (01) emphasized that, in his view, "99% of people are anti-fascists, so that anyone can be part of our network."

When analysing specific situations, the definition of 'friend' becomes more nuanced. The participant coded as 08 described experiencing friendly fire after defending a pro-immigration narrative on television: "Part of the problem with hate speech is the left itself, which does not want hate speech, but loves hate speech because it is a space where they can debate with total release." On her side, participant 10 reported the same type of experience after publishing journalistic reports on topics such as "prostitution and trans rights." Despite not labelling those attacks as hate speech, she stated feeling "hurt" by comments from "reactionary abolitionist," who questioned her feminism when she delved into the complexity of these topics.

Another limitation to expand the notion of friend arises in the "tokenization" of content creators, where individuals with dissident identities and social causes are at risk of being exploited for profit: "There is always that risk that maybe, okay, that account wants to take you out, but in the end what it is doing is tokenising you and using you," explained participant 15.

Regarding the definition of the enemy, most interviewees agreed it includes "far-right movements." However, delimiting the line between hate supporters and political adversaries is not always clear-cut. Some individuals may appear sympathetic to hate groups, but can be dissuaded with the right interventions. One interviewee, coded 09, shared a story from a small town where the Islamic community faced opposition to a

new worship centre. Some opponents withdrew opposition upon learning that far-right groups were behind the campaign. The interviewee imagined that those who changed positioning had reasoned: "I may be against the construction of the place of worship [...], but I am not a fascist [...], so I am going to rethink the arguments so that I am not a sympathizer of these groups."

Furthermore, there are actors who, although ideological opponents, may not be seen as enemies but rather as potential allies in the face of hate speech. One of the participants in the collective coded 18 explained this distinction using the example of her perception of the Spanish newspaper ABC: "It is one thing to have a very conservative outlook or to write a story that I might not agree with, and another thing is to fabricate news or write headlines that violate people's dignity." Based on her experience with journalists from this outlet, "[our actions] are well received because, for them, it [hate speech monetization] also violates their work, [...] it denigrates the profession for which they have worked so hard." This reflection suggests that some political adversaries could even become allies against hate speech, particularly when the speech's intent is overtly harmful in broader terms.

Emission: Connecting Counterdiscourse with Audiences

When relocating the friend-enemy divide, the task of crafting a counterspeech must consider the affections it will arouse among its receivers, a crucial issue for engaging broad audiences. The success of a speech aiming to challenge hateful narratives lies in persuading audiences to consider those targeted by hate as part of the friendly side of the divide.

Two opposing views emerged on how to frame counterdiscourses, with differences related more to political strategy than to purely communicative considerations. For some, the priority is ensuring that the counterdiscourse resonates with the so-called "middle audiences," defined by Laintersección (2022) , a group of communicators for social change, as those who "are unsure, who doubt, or who experience internal conflicts" due to "fears" or the "narrative framework" they encounter through news, political speeches, and conversations. In contrast to the "base audience" and the "authoritarian audience," which have fixed antagonistic views, "middle audiences" are considered "persuadable."

Those prioritizing resonance with middle audiences in counterdiscourse aim to evoke "empathy" that fosters "solidarity." The participant 14 gave an example of an intervention driven by her organization targeting this type of audience. In a Facebook group like "You are not from [city] if you do not...," members occasionally post claims such as "a woman wearing a hijab enters a pharmacy with a child, collects a stack of prescriptions, receives all the medicines for free, and takes them back to her country to sell." The counterdiscourse reframed the image interpretation as "a mother who likely has someone very sick at home, which is why she needs so many medications." According to the interviewee, such interventions can help reduce polarization among "publics not deeply engaged in debates on migration or inequality."

In contrast, for others, the priority is to utilize the grassroots communicative efforts to introduce overlooked political views, such as those of anti-racist activists. The tension between these two perspectives is well exemplified with the following story, provided by the participant coded as 04. In the context of a campaign for migrants' regularization in Spain, in which activists from both perspectives collaborated together, the middle audience-based perspective proposed seeking the campaign towards "finding common values" with the public, focusing the claims on "empathy, care, and essential workers, for empathizing with the person who cares for your grandmother," in the words of participant 16. According to participant 04, such strategy clashes with an anti-racist political subjectivity: "It's not just essential to wipe your grandfather's bum, you know? I mean, yes, it is important, but to link that we are essential people because we are functional to the needs of the Global North, no."

On the other hand, expanding knowledge on topics often targeted by hate speech, such as immigration laws, can help counter false claims. Two interviewees (12 and 14) shared how a strong understanding of these issues allowed them to debunk anti-immigration rhetoric. For instance, participant 12 explained that:

> When I was in meetings with people spouting hate speech and intolerant narratives on 'menas'—a derogatory form of calling to unaccompanied foreign minors, based on an administrative acronym in Spanish—I say, 'okay, but have you read the regulations? Because in such-and-such article, this is what happens. There is precisely a loophole that makes them become irregular when they turn 18.' And people, this happens to me a lot when I'm in person, stop and say, 'Oh, well, I'll look it up.' (Participant 12)

However, according to both informants, while this approach may be practical in interpersonal communication, it becomes ineffective in mass social media settings, where emotionally driven discourse is rewarded over deliberation.

4.4 Promoting Changes on the Media Channels

Despite platforms offering users reporting tools, informants shared that mass reports often fail to result in content removal or bans on hate emitters. This neglect on the part of platforms has led to activist strategies that incentivize actors within the advertising and journalism markets to reduce their tolerance for hate speech.

Persuading Advertisers to Demonetize Hate Sites

Persuading advertisers aims to demonetize hate emitters by making such content financially unprofitable. Initially launched in the U.S. by groups such as Sleeping Giants and Check My Ads, this strategy has been replicated in Spain by the association És País Valencià through the project No financis l'odi [Don't finance hatred]. It involves contacting companies whose ads appear on hate-filled pages or profiles. According to two of the members of the project (coded 18), all started after "spending a little time studying how far-right discourse works globally."

They started replicating the strategy with the journal Mediterráneo Digital, "one of the five digital media most on the far right." Based on the assumption that "advertisers don't want their adverts to appear alongside blatantly racist news stories, if they are a respectable company," the activists notify companies that their advertisements are being displayed on such pages. The reaction from companies when they receive a notification from activists is "usually quite good," according to the same informants: "[Companies say] 'we didn't know it, we'll ask the company that manages the advertising to remove it.'"

Activists' advanced knowledge of how the advertising market works helps them to communicate with companies effectively: "This is programmatic advertising. They [the companies] don't decide where their advertising is being placed; it goes automatically." Moreover, they found out that advertisers respond "more quickly to internal or private communications than to public communications." For demonetization to effectively reduce hate speech, it is also crucial to generate and sustain connections, involving a significant number of people in detection, outreach, and follow-up to ensure that ads are indeed removed.

Negotiating Changes in the News Media Coverage

The second strategy based on promoting changes on media channels involves encouraging media outlets to change how they cover topics related to social groups that are frequent targets of hate. The participant coded

as 14 described a successful case where the Observatory of Islamophobia analysed media coverage of Islam and Muslim communities. "[They] analysed news published in all Spanish media outlets that include terms and news items on topics related to Islam, and Muslim people, and classified them as 'Islamophobic' or 'non-Islamophobic'", she explained. The observatory members talked to the media outlet' editorial chiefs with the highest percentage of Islamophobic news items. As a result, the outlet reduced Islamophobic content in future coverage. According to the same informant, "these studies are necessary," and require not only "to do research," which implies having "clear criteria," but also "to go and talk to an editor-in-chief and say, 'Look, your media outlet is Islamophobic, it's causing this.'" In summary, this strategy requires resources to conduct studies and involves direct negotiations with media editors.

5. Discussion

The four media practices identified in the analysis exemplify communicative resilience in the face of hate speech, highlighting the types of actions and strategies that, through collaborative dialogue (Goldstein 2012), enable people to resist violence (Gerrand 2022) and adapt to stressful conditions (Kirmayer *et al.* 2009). The discussion centres on three key ideas: the use of hate speech by the far right as a form of political antagonism, the delineation of the room for manoeuvre that still exists for pro-social collective action, and some reflections on the strategisation of action that may help to increase resilience.

Firstly, framing hate speech as a deliberate strategy to advance political antagonism (Schmitt 2020; Laclau and Mouffe 1987) has proven to be a productive approach. Participants mostly showed a confident understanding of the far-right strategies behind the use of hate speech. More specifically, some of them pointed to the hatemongers' intent of taking advantage of public discussions in which two or more forms of discrimination intersect, selecting one of the discriminated social categories as a hate target to confront different disadvantaged groups.

Hate speech works both as a tactic and as a strategy. As a tactic, it creates friend-enemy divides (Schmitt 2020) that adapt to context (De Nardo 2014), exploiting contradictions across ideological and social divides, and leveraging the engagement feedback loops created by the contesting audiences to gain increased visibility. This engagement leans partly in the rage created in those who oppose hate. According to some participants, one of the limitations for the articulation of adequate responses to hate speech lies in the fact that many users do not read hatemongers' behaviour as tactical, so they contribute to enhancing hate speech spread when they may want to combat it. More research, particularly on audience perceptions of the functioning of interaction-based popularity systems, is needed to understand this contradiction better. As a strategy, its ultimate aim appears to be to habituate audiences to view hate as an acceptable attitude (Szanto 2020; Schäfer *et al.* 2021), contributing to political viewpoints that question social advances for traditionally discriminated groups.

The ability to detect antagonist strategies and tactics behind the use of hate speech is possible by combining accumulated knowledge from previous political backgrounds with direct observation of contextual data and applying it to one's own needs (Treré *et al.* 2024).

Secondly, the room for manoeuvre for pro-social collective action appears to be constrained, to begin with, by the very functioning of social media platforms. According to participants' experiences, platforms are negligent in removing hate content. Additionally, they noted that providing informed arguments constitutes an effective way to dismantle hate speech in offline interpersonal situations. Considering, moreover, that social media functions as emotional conducts (Gerbaudo 2012), it can be argued that social media platforms do not provide the best material conditions for deploying discourses that have a chance to dismantle hate narratives.

In short, actors using social media platforms to convey hate emotions have an advantage over other types of discourse that require arguing to be effective.

However, although narrowed, some room for pro-social manoeuvre still exists. It requires networked publics to perform coordinated action, which involves agreeing on the interpretation of contextual data for assessing the strategy and tactics of hatemongers, as well as on the adequate countertactic(s) to follow in each case. The analysts may observe these manoeuvres through the study of the four practices pinned down in this paper: identifying and assessing hate communications, making and sustaining personal connections, envisioning and spreading alternative narratives, and promoting changes in the communication channel.

Furthermore, this paper offers, based on participants' contributions, a rich exploration of why and how to shift the focus from providing punctual support to hate victims to developing joint strategies; or, following Goldstein (2012), from immediate problem-solving to collaborative capacity-building. While acknowledging the feelings of people impacted by hate speech remains important, strategizing the action is a priority. For instance, by creating private or semi-private digital communities, where citizens can share contextual information and make tactical decisions for collective action; by envisioning long-term strategies such as connecting anti-capitalist content creators with anti-fascist audiences; and by pre-planning actions of resistance in response to likely hate-based political attacks. Another set of long-term strategic interventions involves influencing crucial actors in the media system, such as advertisers and legacy media, as well as platforms themselves, if that were possible.

Some insights would benefit from more research. One of them is the tension that emerges between favouring counterdiscourses that are more likely to resonate with middle audiences (hegemonic viewpoints) and benefiting discourses that directly reflect the needs of discriminated populations, such as migrants (counterhegemonic or peripheral viewpoints). Another is the process by which pro-social actors make decisions about who are friends, allies, enemies, and adversaries, and whether those decisions have an impact on practical responses to hate speech. It would be particularly interesting to understand the collaborative dialogue underlying these processes and whether and how it adapts to evolving contexts affected by social media feedback loops. Additionally, although superficially explored, it remains unclear how pro-social actors may combine in public and behind the scenes actions to improve their strategies. What already seems clear is that the problem of combating hate speech in the online realm entails giving answers to questions rooted equally in communicative, sociopolitical, and sociotechnical issues.

6. Conclusions

This article presented hate speech as a weapon employed by political actors, particularly those on the far right. The article approached the phenomenon from the perspective of pro-social citizens' networks which, through media practice, can counteract hate speech by acting strategically in a coordinated manner. It pinned down four main practices: identifying and assessing hate communications, making and sustaining personal connections, envisioning and spreading alternative narratives, and promoting changes in the communication channel.

The findings show the inequality of opportunities between hatemongers and pro-social actors contesting hate speech attacks in the current hybrid media system. However, it also suggests that there is some room for manoeuvre for pro-social actors if they can transition from immediate problem-solving to collaborative capacity building, which involves strategizing collective action by aligning communicative tactics and addressing complex political questions in forms compatible with digital environments.

The article also highlighted some tensions in selecting tactical interventions, whose analysis was not more than superficial, providing material for further research. Some topics requiring further investigation are the contradiction between wanting to confront hate speech but contributing to its spread; the relations between hegemonic- and peripheral-based counterspeeches; the collaborative dialogue involved in deciding who are friends, allies, enemies, and adversaries; and the strategic potential of emerging pro-social online communities organizing out of haters' sight.

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