Until recently, scholars of political communication in stable democracies treated hate speech as a marginal phenomenon. That changed with the entry of various anti-establishment and anti-pluralist tendencies into the mainstream electoral politics of the United States and Western Europe. In 2016, Donald Trump’s election and the Brexit referendum jolted dominant paradigms in communication studies, reordering research priorities and challenging assumptions about normal democratic discourse. Information disorders, ranging from individual-level ‘post-truth’ preferences to the distortions wrought by computational propaganda, are now central to the field’s concerns. Hate speech is a key constituent of this basket of deplorables.

As suggested by the title, this chapter focuses on organised campaigns that promote hate to achieve larger political objectives. Examples abound from contemporary politics. In India, false rumours of forced marriage, cow slaughter, and child abductions are used to unleash violence against minorities, terrorising their communities into submitting to majoritarian domination (Harsh 2020). In South Africa, the Gupta oligarchs bankrolled a disinformation campaign to shift attention away from allegations of state capture. Designed by the public relations multinational Bell Pottinger, the covert programme involved stoking racial hatred with a narrative of ‘white monopoly capital’ (Wasserman 2020). In Europe, the far right has amplified reports of sexual harassment by people of colour into a ‘rapefugee’ crisis, riding on the #MeToo movement to grow support for their xenophobic and nativist agenda (Sorce 2018).

Hate propaganda has a history measurable in millennia, considerably longer than the digitally assisted misinformation that has triggered concern in recent years. Hate studies, similarly, have a long pedigree. The well-established study of hate can benefit from dialogue with the flurry of new research into online misinformation – and vice versa. Much of the recent research on online misinformation makes only cursory reference to the rich literature on how hate agents work. This chapter tries to engage in such a conversation.

**Hate speech**

Hate speech is the vilification of an identifiable group in order to stigmatise its members and cause them harm. The group in question could be distinguished by race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, immigrant status, gender, sexual orientation, or any other feature that is applied in an unfairly discriminatory manner (Parekh 2012). United Nations bodies fighting racial...
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discrimination treat hate speech as ‘a form of other-directed speech which rejects the core human rights principles of human dignity and equality and seeks to degrade the standing of individuals and groups in the estimation of society’ (CERD 2013, 4). Hate speech can hurt its targets directly by inflicting emotional distress (Matsuda 1989) or causing them to retreat fearfully from public life (Fiss 1996). But it is most harmful when it incites others to discriminate or inflict violence against the target group. Hate speech has been harnessed by state and non-state actors to whip up hostility against enemies while uniting followers and allies. Such propagandistic use of hate speech has facilitated all the major atrocities that peoples have inflicted on one another in modern times, from slavery to imperial rule, land dispossession, war crimes, ethnic cleansings, and genocides (Gahman 2020; Meisenhelder 2003; Said 1979; Thompson 2007; Tsesis 2002).

The term hate speech straddles such a wide spectrum of harms – from the diminution of self-esteem to the decimation of a people – that many scholars have proposed more precise terminology. Benesch (2012), for example, uses ‘dangerous speech’ to refer to expression that increases the risk that its audience will support or perpetrate violence against another group. Observing Europe’s Roma being routinely subjected to a ‘language of negation, destruction and erasure’, Townsend (2014, 9) suggests the term ‘genocidal discourse’. Most legislation sidesteps the term hate speech entirely. Laws refer to explicit calls to action as incitement. Others make reference to insult, offence, or the wounding of religious or racial feelings, for example – categories that liberal jurisdictions tend not to criminalise.

The hate speech that attracts the most attention and regulatory or societal intervention tends to be expression that is shocking in and of itself, such as when President Donald Trump tweeted that certain progressive Democratic congresswomen – referring to four women of colour, three of whom were born in the United States – should ‘go back’ to the countries where they ‘originally’ came from (Coe & Griffin 2020; Rothe & Collins 2019). But hate campaigns can be much more indirect. They do not have to be fuelled by foul language or ethnic slurs. Some of their most effective work has been pseudoscientific (such as nineteenth-century physiognomy, which stratified different races based on their outward resemblance to apes) or critically acclaimed for its artistic merit (like Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem ‘The White Man’s Burden’, justifying American imperial rule over the Philippines). Holocaust denial was dressed in scholarly garb, though it is now obvious to most that it served no purpose other than to normalise anti-Semitic negationism. Many other examples of disguised hate propaganda have wider sway. Tactics include inserting Islamophobic talking points into the formal public sphere, through referenda and legislative proceedings ostensibly to fight non-existent threats such as minaret building in Europe (Cheng 2015) and religious law in the United States (Lemons & Chambers-Letson 2014).

Therefore, the individual hateful message, no matter how incendiary, is not the most illuminating unit of analysis for students of hate propaganda. Scholars have learned more by studying long-running campaigns. For example, Whillock (1995) focused on hate appeals systematically inserted as talking points woven into an election campaign. Hamelink (2011) takes an even longer view, showing how the aggressor’s calls to action count on historical prejudices and deep anxieties within the groups being mobilised.

Full-blown hate campaigns start with an us/them framing of collective identity. Enlarging and intensifying in-group commitments is often the hate agents’ main strategic objective, constructing an out-group being just the other side of the coin. The process involves the essentialising of identity: a set of arbitrary attributes is reified as definitive of the group (Gahman 2020; Said 1979). While the in-group is essentialised as exceptionally noble and civilised, the out-group’s members are caricatured as barbaric, alien, or bestial, thus suggesting that they are
not fully entitled to equal citizenship or human rights. Next, hate agents scapegoat the Other (Tsesis 2002). They blame the in-group’s genuine grievances and anxieties on the out-group. In its most advanced form, scapegoating becomes ‘accusation in a mirror’ (Marcus 2012; Kiper 2015). A term associated with the Rwandan genocide, this refers to the technique of depicting the out-group as the real aggressor. In-group members come to believe that pre-emptively eliminating this threat to themselves and their families would be nothing more than an act of self-defence. This helps explain why ordinary people are prepared to inflict violence on a weaker community when leaders flag off war crimes, pogroms, and genocides, let alone lesser evils such as separating children from immigrant parents. The final step is the call to action. This often follows a trigger event, such as news of an attack on in-group members or some other intolerable provocation. Leaders opportunistically transform the event into an ‘injustice symbol’ (Olesen 2015), framing it the ultimate outrage that requires now-or-never retaliation.

Every stage in what Hamelink (2011, 21) calls a ‘spiral of conflict escalation’ involves deception and manipulation. The us/them binary is deceptive because everyone actually has plural identities. Portraying a single identity as supreme and exclusive (one’s religion or race, for example) while discounting all others (including species) promotes a myth of ‘choiceless singularity of human identity’ (Sen 2006, 16). As for essentialising the out-group, this is a form of ‘epistemic violence’ (Spivak 1988). Scapegoating and accusation in a mirror, similarly, invariably involve messages that mislead. Anti-Semitic propaganda paving the way for the Holocaust included the publication of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, an elaborate hoax intended to add weight to the conspiracy theory about a Jewish plan for global domination. Contemporary hate merchants carry on the tradition. India’s Hindu nationalists have constructed a ‘love jihad’ conspiracy theory about Muslim population growth (Rao 2011). Muslim hardliners in Indonesia, meanwhile, have strengthened their hand by reviving the communist bogey, as well as stoking fears of domination by the small minority of ethnic Chinese and Christians (Miller 2018).

Finally, the triggering injustice symbols may be partly or wholly fabricated. In Indonesia, the 2016 demonstrations leading to the prosecution and ouster of Jakarta’s Christian, ethnic Chinese governor were provoked by viral videos misquoting him as claiming that the Quran was lying to Muslims (Peterson 2020). Hate campaigns do not necessarily depend on pants-on-fire lies. The European ‘rapefugee’ myth, for example, can be sustained through the selective highlighting of factual news reports of sexual offences involving a suspect with a foreign-sounding name, supported by centuries of stereotypes concerning brown and black men (Sanos 2018). Nonetheless, the campaigns in their totality are maliciously deceptive. Hate propaganda is thus a trick or ‘stratagem’, says Whillock (1995). Tsesis (2002, 1) builds this observation into his definition of hate speech, calling it ‘misinformation that is disseminated with the express purpose of persecuting targeted minorities’.

Digital hate

Not surprisingly, most of the research into hate propaganda over the past two decades has focused on the internet. The exponential growth in online tools and spaces has helped hate groups organise, mobilise, and spread their messages to new audiences (Levin 2002; Caiani & Parenti 2016). The salience of digital hate and incivility means that researchers are less likely to underestimate the internet’s role than to exaggerate it. It is not obvious from most of the evidence presented whether the internet has multiplied the incidence and intensity of hate speech or just its styles and visibility. It is certainly not the case that the internet is indispensable for hate agents. Ethnographic studies of intolerant movements and case studies of their campaigns show that most are technologically promiscuous. They are ‘innovation opportunists’, adept at
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‘finding openings in the latest technologies’ but not wedded to any particular medium (Daniels 2018, 62). They embrace the internet alongside other modes of communication, from radio and television talk shows to sermons in places of worship.

These caveats aside, it is clear that the internet has added several new dimensions to the communication of hate. First, there is the digital revolution’s impact on the wider information ecosystem. The digital revolution has weakened traditional hierarchies that, at their best, used to maintain a common civic space and help keep toxic expression on the fringes. The decline of public service media in Europe is part of this trend (Schroeder 2019). Furthermore, the platformisation of online interactions and lowered barriers to entry mean that toxic content gets showcased alongside more trustworthy material as ‘equal residing members of the interconnected digital culture’ (Klein 2017, 12). Through this process of ‘information laundering’, Klein says, ‘false information and counterfeit movements can be washed clean by a system of advantageous associations’ (2017, 26). A related concern is the normalisation or mainstreaming of extremist rhetoric both directly through social media (Govil & Baihsya 2018) and indirectly through subsequent mainstream media coverage (Phillips 2018).

Long before the arrival of ‘deepfake’ technologies, the ready access to internet platforms, web design templates, and innocuous domain names was making it easy to disguise extreme content as mainstream. For example, the website with the address ‘martinlutherking.org’ was launched in 1999, not by supporters of the American civil rights leader but by the founder of the pioneering white supremacist site Stormfront (Daniels 2018).

Just as a hate movement can use digital technologies to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, it can also circumvent established political parties that may have moderated the impact of more extreme elements. Govil and Baihsya (2018) cite this factor as a reason for the right-wing-populist shift of India’s Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Digital tools helped BJP leader Narendra Modi roll out a national marketing strategy, ‘India Shining’, which reduced his reliance on the powerful local party bosses and other brokers who used to control access to grassroots vote banks. Personalised text messages and the Narendra Modi app gave citizens the sense that they had a direct and immediate connection with the leader. Thus, the authors argue, ‘digital social networking has given absolutist charismatic fascists new ways of engaging the masses’ (p. 69).

Second, both the production and consumption of hate propaganda have undergone a pathological form of democratisation. The internet allows the creation and circulation of hate messages to be crowdsourced and encourages lone actors to take up cudgels and Kalashnikovs for the cause. One should not exaggerate the novelty of these dynamics. Nazi Germany’s propaganda did not depend only on the centralised efforts of Josef Goebbels and Julius Streicher but was also built on decades of creative work by unknown artists, writers, and small businesses that produced cheaply produced anti-Semitic stickers, for example (Enzenbach 2012). The internet did not create the (misleadingly named) phenomenon of the ‘lone-wolf’ terrorist – embedded in a networked, communal ideology but acting with a high degree of autonomy (Schuurman et al. 2019; Berntzen & Sandberg 2014). Nathuram Godse, who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, probably fit that description (Debs 2013).

What is clear is that the new, more open digital environment brings into play many new kinds of loosely coordinated actors. Modi’s Hindu nationalist propaganda machine comprises top-level ideologues generating talking points, a professionally managed information technology (IT) cell, and perhaps 100,000 online volunteers at home and abroad, not to mention millions of other acolytes who cheer their leaders and troll critics (Govil & Baihsya 2018). When it occurs alongside violence in the real world, trolling can have a chilling effect on the target’s speech (Bradshaw & Howard 2019). Many participants may be treating such online
engagement as fun entertainment, resulting in a banalisation of hate (Udupa et al. 2020). Much of this activity resembles ‘slacktivism’ – low-energy work of seemingly negligible practical impact – but its sheer volume on social media can drown out and intimidate minorities and their spokesmen. The size of the mob can be multiplied with fake online identities or ‘sock-puppets’, automated accounts, and bots (Delwiche 2019). The outsourcing of propaganda work to internet brigades has not made central coordination redundant. Political consultancies and professional public relations and marketing firms are intimately involved in designing hate campaigns (Ong & Cabañas 2019). Despite the aforementioned Bell Pottinger scandal in South Africa, these industries remain under-regulated and under-studied.

Third, data analytic capabilities give hate agents unprecedented power to go far upstream in the process of dividing society. While earlier studies of online hate focused on the digital production and dissemination of messages, the more insidious threat probably lies in the datafication of subject formation. The digital advertising infrastructures built into internet platforms enable the algorithmic construction of identity groups that can be manipulated by influence campaigns. This involves mass surveillance of internet users’ behaviour patterns in fine detail, the data-driven construction of detailed profiles without their knowledge, identifying their cognitive and psychological dispositions, and then micro-targeting them with messages designed to exploit their vulnerabilities (Crain & Nadler 2019; Woolley & Howard 2016). The ‘networked subject’, argue Boler and Davis (2018, 83), is thus ‘fed personalized findings which functionally determine one’s windows on the infoworld’. Hate agents can, for example, heighten a target demographic’s sense of victimhood and vulnerability to make them more open to the scapegoating of minorities by authoritarian populists. Since it is difficult of keep track of which Facebook demographics are receiving which content and why, much of this propaganda work can be done surreptitiously. Counterspeech – liberalism’s recommended antidote for bad speech – is rendered impotent since it is not possible to counter what we don’t know is being spoken or to whom.

### Regulatory dilemmas

The concept of hate speech within political theory, moral philosophy, and law has evolved with the emergence of human rights doctrine over the past century. Traditional societies – including today’s liberal democracies until fairly recently, as well as many contemporary illiberal regimes – protect the powerful from disparagement by the weak. The laws of seditious libel and lese-majeste, for example, are intended to preserve the special veneration that rulers claim they are due. Blasphemy law serves the same purpose for dominant religions and their clerics. The modern human rights standard, however, turns the tables on the powerful, enshrining the right to freedom of expression, including in particular the right to offend society’s most dominant individuals, institutions, and beliefs. As for hate speech, the human rights approach aims to protect the people who are most vulnerable, rather than those with the means to insulate themselves from the harms caused by speech.

International jurisprudence on hate speech is anchored in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the United Nations’ core human rights treaty. Article 19 of the ICCPR, which establishes the right to freedom of expression, states that governments may restrict this right to protect the rights of others. Article 20 goes further, requiring states to prohibit by law the ‘advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence’. Hate speech is thus unique among the various types of disorder under the ‘misinformation’ umbrella – from voter suppression hoaxes to fake science – in that it is the only one that international human rights law requires states to prohibit.
The European Convention on Human Rights contains similar language. Racist hate speech is treated even more stringently under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Article 4 of ICERD requires states to declare as an offence punishable by law not only incitement but also ‘all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred’. Organisations and activities engaged in racist propaganda must also be prohibited, ICERD says.

The laws of most liberal democracies are generally aligned with Article 20 of ICERD. The US is an outlier, applying a much higher threshold for state intervention in speech: most hate speech that occurs in public discourse is constitutionally protected; courts will only permit government to interfere if the speech directly incites imminent violence (Abrams 2012). When the US ratified ICCPR and ICERD, it did so with the proviso that the treaties’ Article 19 and Article 4, respectively, would not trump its own free speech guarantees. The difference in European and American approaches is a major theme in the literature on hate speech law (Hare 2009; Post 2009; Rosenfeld 2012). It has long been a source of frustration among European anti-hate groups who see neo-Nazis from their continent taking shelter in American cyberspace (Breckheimer II 2001; Posner 2014). With Europeans’ online experience now largely mediated by a handful of American platforms such as Google, Facebook, and YouTube, critics argue that the internet’s hospitability to hate is more a product of America’s idiosyncratic commercial and libertarian ethos than of universal values (van Dijck 2019).

The differences in norms among jurisdictions within the liberal West should not obscure their more fundamental similarities. They, along with international treaties, concur that laws should restrict hate speech only if it can be objectively shown to cause harm. They differ mainly in what threshold of harm to apply. But if it amounts to nothing more than subjective offence, the liberal consensus is that society’s response should take non-legal form: opinion shapers can engage in counterspeech while news media can behave ethically by choosing not to spread the offensive content, for example (Garton Ash 2016). The line that liberal democracies draw between harm and offence distinguishes them sharply from illiberal regimes, most of which have laws that punish various kinds of insult and offence. The Indian Penal Code, for example, criminalises the intentional wounding of religious feelings (Section 298). Pakistan’s notorious blasphemy law (Section 295C of its Penal Code) threatens capital punishment or life imprisonment for defiling the Prophet’s name, whether in words or images, directly or indirectly.

The stark difference in attitudes towards offensive expression is a key source of international friction in transborder cultural flows. The quintessential case is the 2005–2006 controversy over a Danish newspaper’s deliberately provocative publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed (Klausen 2009). The Danish government’s refusal to offer even an expression of regret provoked the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to intensify its diplomatic efforts at the United Nations to get ‘defamation of religions’ recognised in international law as a legitimate justification for restricting freedom of expression (Langer 2014; McLaughlin 2010). Muslim governments argued that free speech was being abused to fuel Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslim minorities. Notably, several non-OIC members, such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, voted in favour of a 2009 ‘defamation of religions’ resolution at the General Assembly. India, Jamaica, and many other states abstained, supporting the idea of revising UN standards but arguing that this should be done on behalf of all religions, not just one. Though ultimately unsuccessful, the OIC campaign exposed an as-yet-unresolved concern that the liberal approach is enabling harmful hate propaganda to go unchecked (Appiah 2012; Hafez 2014).

Free speech theory’s harm/offence distinction – especially the First Amendment doctrine’s extremely high harm threshold – has also been challenged from within the liberal democratic fraternity. Critics argue that the prevailing standard is lopsided in its treatment of
democracy’s twin pillars, favouring liberty over equality at the expense of society’s weakest communities (Waldron 2012; Cohen-Almagor 2019; Demaske 2019; Wilson & Kiper 2020). Scholars working within the paradigm of critical race theory say that any assessment of harm must take into account prevailing structural inequalities. Expression that seems only mildly provocative or innocently humourous to members of a privileged community can trigger psychological distress and add to a hostile climate for people already struggling under the weight of historical prejudice and disadvantage (Delgado & Stefancic 2018; Matsuda 1989; Schauer 1995). Although these ‘microaggressions’ have long-term cumulative effects, they may not even be recognised by the victim at the time (Sue 2010). Other scholars continue to defend the liberal standard, arguing that it is too dangerous to give states more powers to police harms that are too hard to verify independently (Heinze 2016; Strossen 2018). Furthermore, in societies where equal rights are not already well protected, communities do not enjoy equal access to the supposed protection that offence laws provide. These laws, such as those against blasphemy, end up being used by dominant groups to punish minorities who are deemed to have caused offence through their speech and conduct (George 2016a; Marshall & Shea 2011).

While critical race theory and related challenges have had little impact on hate speech laws, they have influenced the behaviour of Western media organisations, internet intermediaries, universities, and other cultural institutions. For example, news organisations have over the decades updated their ethical guidelines against stereotyping women and minorities and on how to report extremist newsmakers. But despair at unending injustice and the rise of white nationalism have sharpened activists’ demands for greater sensitivity in speech. In the US and other liberal democracies, activists have mobilised outrage on college campuses and social media, occasionally resulting in the ‘de-platforming’ of speakers, boycotting of celebrities, and self-censorship by media (Hughes 2010; Kessler 2018). Ironically, the mobilisation of righteous indignation by progressives has parallels with the opportunistic offence-taking that many hate groups and intolerant movements have adopted alongside, or in lieu of, traditional hate speech (George 2016a). Predictably, even as it mocks the ‘political correctness’ of ‘social justice warriors’, the right occasionally appropriates the cultural left’s anti-hate language and tactics against its opponents. The most sophisticated examples from recent years are the ‘anti-Semitic’ labels deployed by Israel’s right-wing government and its supporters against critics of the country’s racist policies and practices, including liberal-secular Jews (Davidson 2018). Philo et al. (2019) have exposed as an elaborate disinformation campaign the damaging allegations of anti-Semitism against the British Labour Party and its leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Hate propagandists are also adept at making censorship and regulation backfire. Social media platforms have been developing mechanisms for removing hate speech and other inappropriate content, but online operatives of repressive governments, intolerant movements, and hate groups have been gaming these systems to stifle the voices of their ideological opponents, including human rights activists, progressive cartoonists, and feminist writers. Exploiting the fact that the platforms’ reporting systems are mostly automated, malevolent actors submit complaints en masse, triggering the temporary or permanent take-down of non-harmful content or accounts. This false-positives problem is one of the key challenges facing researchers and technologists who are trying to harness artificial intelligence to detect and counter digital hate (see, for example, Carter & Kondor 2020; Di Nicola et al. 2020; Oriola & Kotzé 2020; Vidgen & Yasseri 2020). A more fundamental problem is that algorithms can only deal with individual messages containing extreme or uncivil expression, rather than large-scale online campaigns, most of whose individual messages may be unobjectionable.
Most of the public debate and scholarly work on misinformation and hate propaganda focuses on the veracity and civility of individual posts, tweets, and other utterances, examining how toxic messages can be identified and then subject to legal prosecution, administrative orders, removal by media and platforms, correction by fact-checkers, and other interventions. Such research and policy interventions implicitly apply a ‘toxic bullet’ model of hate propaganda, even as every introductory media effects course debunks the ‘magic bullet’ theory of persuasion. A policy and research agenda informed by decades of hate research would instead recognise hate campaigns as layered, distributed, and strategic (George 2017).

First, they are layered in the sense that they are composed of multiple messages, motifs, and narratives delivered over years or even centuries. The vast majority of these are not problematic in isolation and may even have been put to positive, prosocial use. Patriotic narratives, for example, can inspire great acts of self-sacrifice as well as war crimes. In some of the examples cited earlier, the skill of the hate propagandist lies in the creative combination of a community’s treasured repertoire of stories and symbols, together with carefully curated news from the recent past, topped off with more pointed observations about current events. To believe that social media moderators and algorithms checking for inappropriate language and fake news can make much difference is to grossly underestimate how the most pernicious hate campaigns actually work.

Second, the work is distributed, with a movement-style division of labour. Different actors take responsibility for the campaign’s different layers. While fringe organisations have no compunctions about using flagrantly racist language, national leaders tend to rely on dog whistles. Or they confine themselves to grand themes like ‘India Shining’ or ‘Make America Great Again’ to help promote an essentialised in-group identity without spelling out their exclusionary intent. The most emphatic statements of Modi and Trump are delivered in silence: by refusing to condemn allies guilty of hate speech and hate crimes, they express their sympathies unequivocally. Think tanks and outward-facing websites try to sound reasonable in order to attract converts (Meddough & Kay 2009). Their efforts also help members who need to rationalise their prejudice. Norwegian white supremacist Anders Behring Breivik, who killed 77 in a shooting spree in 2011, cited American ideologue Robert Spencer and his Jihad Watch blog 162 times in his manifesto.

Third, the most sophisticated hate propaganda is strategic: the communication is designed to achieve goals that go deeper than its superficial intent. In many cases, the strategy factors in the likelihood of pushback. Taking a leaf from how progressive civil disobedience campaigners make censorship backfire (Jansen & Martin 2003), hate groups turn legal and regulatory obstacles into opportunities for generating sympathy and mobilising support. For example, campaigners who purchased advertising space in American metro systems for anti-Muslim billboards expected to be censored; they could then mount First Amendment challenges that would generate news coverage (George 2016b). When white supremacists adopted Pepe the Frog as an icon, it was added to the Anti-Defamation League’s database of online hate symbols and deplored by media and politicians, but the reaction was built into the campaign’s design as ‘a prank with a big attention payoff’ (Daniels 2018, 64; Phillips 2018). In Europe, attempts by governments and internet platforms to rein in anti-immigrant hate speech have been exploited by nativists as evidence that establishment institutions obsessed with multiculturalism and political correctness are silencing people’s grievances – hence, the need to support the far right (Nortio et al. 2020; van Noorloos 2014).
Hate studies have benefited from the recent surge in scholarly interest in Western democracies’ problems with misinformation and populism. But this is a mixed blessing. It trains the spotlight on a limited number of narrow, message-centric questions, such as what social media companies can do about ‘fake news’. Shifting the focus to actor-centric questions would be more revealing of the ingenuity with which hate campaigns are rolled out. Also lacking are demand-side investigations to understand why people are susceptible to hate appeals in the first place and why these seem to be growing. Communication studies as a field is well positioned to investigate the symptoms of this trend. But it should also take an interest in underlying causes. Beneath the surge in intolerance and hate may be resentments arising from the exhaustion of the modern idea of progress, with its deep injustices and inequalities. The claims of populist leaders that they possess humane answers to their societies’ problems is the mother of all disinformation campaigns. But until those who care about questions of justice and equality emerge with better answers themselves, we can expect hate propaganda to continue figuring prominently throughout the world.

References


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