

MORE THAN A METAPHOR

More Than a Metaphor:

The Central Role of Social Media Studies for Tackling Antisemitism

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From the moment the dust settled after October 7th, anti-Israel enthusiasts have gone to extreme lengths to downplay, deny, justify, or even glorify Hamas' brutal attacks. Meanwhile, the so-called enlightened Western world unlawfully rallies in support of an authoritarian cause that unequivocally embodies antisemitism, sexism, racism, and homophobia. It feels safe to say that even five years ago no one could have imagined the current state of mass moral confusion.

Until recently, in fact, many believed that higher education was the key to dismantling such propagandist and extremist narratives. Yet considering that the activities seen at Columbia University — and subsequently spread to dozens of college campuses across the country — are being praised by Hamas and the Iranian regime, one has to wonder how it is that the educated, progressive, and critically thinking class so closely identifies with a sham ideology.

It is conceivable that these individuals are simply uninformed and apathetic, having never bothered to understand the ideologies they appear to idealize. Also plausible is the prevailing disorientation and uncertainty across the West. Throughout history, such disquiet has frequently prompted individuals to, despite their better knowledge, uncritically embrace positions that offer seemingly all-encompassing solutions. Not to mention the relativist bewilderment dominating collective thinking that risks pushing people to the margins.

However, even these explanations cannot fully account for why we are now witnessing this brand of fading moral and intellectual clarity. In reality, it's an amalgamation of the aforementioned factors, reinforced by social media that have fostered an environment defined by materialism, hyper-individualism, and the relentless pursuit of self-validation. They bring to together all of the essential elements for a perfect storm which is characterized by extreme feelings of aggression, fear, and isolation.

For the recent surge in antisemitism, coupled with a widespread repudiation of democratic values, several factors come into play. These phenomena can be partially attributed to malicious actors who manipulate public discourse to serve their own agendas. Numerous reports in the recent past have substantiated this phenomenon, warranting attention to the orchestration of public opinion by rogue actors.¹

Further, the social media platforms' exploitation of algorithms, presumably for commercial gain, nevertheless exacerbates trends detrimental to fostering constructive, empathetic dialogue among online communities.²

¹ <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-in-the-news/information-laundromat-detects-banned-russian-propaganda-across-hundreds-of-websites>; <https://www.isdglobal.org/tag/russia-ukraine-war>; <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-in-the-news/china-russia-and-iran-are-exploiting-the-israel-hamas-conflict-for-their-advantage>; see also <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2022.885362/full>.

² <https://theconversation.com/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-testified-that-the-companys-algorithms-are-dangerous-heres-how-they-can-manipulate-you-169420>.

These issues notwithstanding, there remains **the biggest elephant in the room, the inherent nature of online communication itself**—characterized by anonymity, mutual reinforcement among users, and the dissemination of hateful ideologies. What has been bred is a complex and far-reaching toxicity unparalleled in human history.

Operating under its own set of rules, the interactive web is shaping the consciousness of society at large. Largely neglected by decision makers, this quasi-unregulated “town square,” as Cal Newport³ aptly describes it, is shaping societal thought in an uncontrolled manner. Anything short of a serious assessment of this concatenation of events virtually guarantees lethal consequences.

What can be done to address these communication conditions? As with any contagion, in order to combat antisemitism, **we need knowledge about its ingredients and ways of expression**. As Rob Williams from the University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation puts it, “we have to name it.” Collecting knowledge about its various forms—“these are the first steps we must take in the fight against antisemitism.”⁴ And if we want to understand and combat the most prevalent phenomena of Jew-hatred, we must focus on what is by far the **most important venue for political opinion formation and debate culture. That of course is social media**. We still know far too little about the current state of affairs in the online world—this applies to more conventional online debate venues like YouTube and Facebook as well as to Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, and a host of hate platforms like 4chan. These platforms play a pivotal role in influencing the political perspectives of young individuals, yet they remain largely unexplored, **akin to a black box**.

There are of course **research and civil society initiatives** that deserve credit as they attempt to address the problem. My own Decoding Antisemitism project⁵ is one of them. While my project has attempted to dig deeper by scouring up to the myriad forms of open and coded, implicit antisemitism on the web,⁶ even it has been constrained by various technological, administrative, and financial barriers. As such, most of these initiatives focus on specific platforms during particular measurement periods and employ specific research designs. As a result, they are still far from achieving a comprehensive understanding of the online world, akin to how social scientists describe research objects in the offline world. Consequently, the multitude of expressions—such as denial, trivialization, justification, or even celebration of recent instances of antisemitic violence, as well as antisemitic stereotypes and conspiracy myths across diverse platforms and online environments—are not well understood. **Such an understanding is a fundamental requirement for any effective counterstrategy** whether initiated by educational or political actors.

How is it possible that among the young, critically thinking members of our society, there exists a proliferation of unabashed expressions advocating—or at least tolerating—the targeting of a minority for violence? Alongside concerns about biased

³ <https://calnewport.com/the-real-problem-with-twitter>.

⁴ <https://sfi.usc.edu/video/facing-antisemitism>.

⁵ <https://decoding-antisemitism.eu>.

⁶ <https://link.springer.com/book/9783031492372>.

thinking, the surrounding discourse is pivotal: when individuals are consistently exposed to narratives portraying Jews as white oppressors upholding a colonial, apartheid, or even Nazi-like regime, with the aim of systematically cleansing or even genociding Arabs, this narrative resonates with notions of justice for these individuals. Moreover, when these narratives are amplified with distorted, ahistorical parallels drawn from the colonization of North America or elsewhere, or even comparisons to fascism and Nazism, the emotional impact intensifies. This engagement often stems from oversimplified caricatures – a mere fraction of what has been mentioned – that overlook the complexities of the Middle East conflict. **Now, it's imperative to comprehend precisely how these demographics are lured into this narrative? What additional concepts and analogies gain prominence in shaping their perspectives? How can we monitor the gradual normalization and internalization of these distorted ideas until they solidify into fixed belief systems? What strategies and mechanisms are at play here?**

This becomes even more pertinent when considering cases of physical violence – or worse: murder. Historically, incidents such as those in Pittsburgh, Christchurch, or Halle have been linked to the online environments of perpetrators, where hate speech, conspiracy myths, and calls to violence against minorities like Jews and others are continuously propagated. When individuals are consistently exposed to reality-distorting discourse, there is a heightened likelihood of their beliefs being altered. **It underscores how language and discourse play pivotal roles in shaping attitudes, which, ultimately, can manifest in actions.**

Comprehending these manifestations and the interconnections between stimuli, discourse events (both offline incidents and online occurrences with the potential to stoke antisemitism), and the waves of affirmation of distortions, conspiracy narratives, and disinformation, can enable us to reconstruct the motivations of users, and subsequently, individuals in the offline world, who behave in such ways. It illuminates what appeals to them and what their needs and concerns entail. **This kind of social media research is the best and likely the only way to generate useful insights into societal sentiments.**

While social media has emerged as the most significant destabilizer of our time, it also presents a tremendous opportunity. Over the past century, our societies have made varying degrees of effort to eradicate the deeply ingrained hatred that has permeated cultures for millennia. This enduring challenge prompts many to doubt the possibility of ever completely eradicating this ideology of hate.

Traditionally, surveys were our sole means of gauging the prevalence of antisemitism in society. However, they pale in comparison to the insights gleaned from a thorough analysis of social media discourses. Social media interactions capture voluntary expressions, dialogues among thousands of individuals, and the entire spectrum of human interaction. **Understanding online discourse equates to understanding the shaping of attitudes within our society—a level of insight we have never before possessed in human history.**

But there is more. **The thorough identification of predominant communication patterns online extends beyond the present and can shed light on the future.**

Understanding the emergence of trends within our society and deciphering how hatred manifests, through which means, and employing what messaging strategies can expose where future harm is likely to be done.

What will happen during the next pandemic, a global economic crisis, or escalations due to the worsening climate crisis with the impending resource shortages—or indeed amid a spreading wave of violence against Jewish communities in the West? Whatever unfolds, it often simmers beforehand in the depths of the anonymous web. With the right tools at our disposal, we can promptly detect the warning signs.

To grasp the forthcoming direction of our society—encompassing both online trends and their offline ramifications—**rigorous interdisciplinary research into antisemitism and other hate-based ideologies threatening our free societies, democratic political systems, and social unity is imperative.** This research should utilize all available methodological approaches. Social scientists and data science experts must engage in ongoing dialogue and mutual learning. While the political arena or platforms alone won't solve these threats to democracies, neither can GenAI address them adequately in isolation. Only through collaborative efforts can we discern, in real-time, the evolution of online debates, the resonance and dissemination of specific bigoted narratives, and the individuals or groups who wield influence in shaping the interpretation of pertinent issues.

This text serves not only as an assessment of hate-related social media studies but also as a plea. As a society, we must acknowledge that the traditional methods of upholding social peace, embodied in our political, legal, educational, and security institutions, are inadequate for navigating this new digital domain within our midst. We must dedicate our efforts not merely to exploring the dynamics with a few spotlights, but rather, to comprehensively understanding the phenomenon to identify both the symptoms, their underlying causes, and the potential consequences. This will enable us to initiate a truly well-informed dialogue with the drifting segments of society. And for this, we need robust research and fruitful collaborations between academia and the political arena, as well as other sectors.

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