

## LIBRI IN DISCUSSIONE

**Estrella Gualda**  
(editor)

### **TEORÍAS DE LA CONSPIRACIÓN Y DISCURSOS DE ODIOS EN LÍNEA EN LA SOCIEDAD DE LAS PLATAFORMAS**

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di *Miriam Matteo*\*

Entering into the study of today's society implies recognising its salient traits that can be traced in terms of hypercomplexity (Dominici, 2011) such that, while on the one hand algorithms are embedded in social processes (Benato, 2012), on the other hand the boundaries between offline reality and online virtuality are so blurred that one can speak of an on-life society (Floridi, 2014). In such a scenario, in which information and communication technologies and the social platforms of Web 2.0. enable unprecedented possibilities of interaction and participation on the part of social actors, and the digital environment



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is characterised as a “total social fact” (Marres, 2017) that has the capacity to affect individual action and processes of knowledge and sharing, the book *“Teorías de la Conspiración y discursos de odio en línea en la sociedad de las plataformas”* offers a notable contribution to the international scientific debate that questions the discriminatory and mystifying drifts that emerge from the use of social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, Whatsapp, etc. Through a multi-disciplinary theoretical and exploratory analysis of the narratives constructed around the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants and refugees, and the dynamics related to gender issues and the LGBTQ+ community, the book offers a specific focus on conspiracy theories and hate speech that originate and propagate online. The research, which originated from R&D&I project entitled “Conspiracy Theories and Online Hate Speech: Comparison of Patterns in Narratives and Social Networks about COVID-19, immigrants, and refugees and LGBTI people [NON-CONSPIRACY-HATE!]”, grant: PID2021-123983OB-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/ and by FEDER/EU, coordinated by the University of Huelva, in collaboration with a group of researchers from the areas of Social Sciences, Humanities and Techniques of the Universidad de Malaga and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain), Università degli Studi di Salerno (Italy), Universidade do Algarve (Portugal) and the Universidad Nacional Mar del Plata, CONICET/INHUS (Argentina), broadening the horizon of analysis and reflection on the nature, methods of dissemination and possible strategies of containment of conspiracy theories and hate speech to sociocultural contexts and research experiences overseas. The book includes contributions from researchers working in the above centers and who are involved in the implementation of the project, but it has been joined by several chapters of international researchers who, without being directly linked to the project (Arizona State University, USA; Università degli Studi di Roma Tre, Università degli Studi di Macerata and LUISS of Rome, Italy; Universidad Politécnica Salesiana de Ecuador - Cuenca) have extensive experience in the topics of the chapters they sign, which offers us a richer panorama for the discussion of the state of the art regarding conspiracy theories and hate speeches, as well as for the study of cases from an international perspective.

The contributions made by the authors use different interpretative frameworks, micro-, meso- and macro-perspectives and analytical tools, thus composing an original treatment that highlights the level of impact of conspiracy theories and hate speech, which are closely interconnected, on political processes and phenomena of the broader society, adopting a

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common denominator that recurs in all the essays: the construct of “platform society” (Van Dijck, Poell, de Waal, 2018), which gives the volume, divided into five thematic sections, an adequate internal thematic coherence.

The first section, divided into four chapters, presents general theoretical and conceptual tools useful both to contextualise the phenomena of conspiracy theories and online hate speech, which are specific to the whole treatise, and to guide the reading of the subsequent chapters, which become increasingly specific around certain social phenomena and case studies.

E. Gualda proposes a first chapter on online micro-narratives as evolved and typical forms of digital communication, emerging from the activity of “prosumers” who are both producers and consumers of short, catchy and viral stories or messages spread on social media, which “can play a role in shaping the opinion on sensitive issues” (p. 33) and thus act as “a vehicle for conspiracy theories and hate speech focusing on various vulnerable groups in the context of COVID-19, immigrants, refugees and LGBTIQ+ people” (p. 33) and thus act as “vehicles for conspiracy theories and hate speech focusing on various vulnerable groups in the context of COVID-19, immigrants, refugees and LGBTIQ+ people” (p. 35).

In the second chapter E. Martinez-Brawley proceeds with an examination of the history and conceptualisation of hate speech, explaining how online hate speech presents the traits of an epidemic, due to “two salient facilitating factors: manipulation and contagion effect” (pp. 51-52). In particular, the author emphasises the historical problem of hate speech definitions in the international context, which not only remain linked to the socio-cultural contexts in which they take shape – and are therefore difficult to reconcile within a universal definition – but also oscillate between the need to protect individuals and minorities targeted by hate speech and the need to guarantee expression freedom.

The third chapter, by E. Mangone and S. Donato, presents a reflection on the online communication processes related to the link between hate speech and cancel culture which, “often misunderstood, leads to the ostracization of individuals who violate social norms” (p. 64). The “misinterpretation” referred to by the authors concerns the related hate speech phenomena as an unintentional and paradoxical result of the cancel culture.

M. Zacarias closes the first theoretical-conceptual section with a fourth chapter dedicated to the criticalities and opportunities offered by automatic hate speech detection techniques, emphasising the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to develop effective and above all ethical

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hate speech detection systems. If the effectiveness of Deep Learning algorithms depends on the quality of the available data and the use of human annotators contains within itself the risk of introducing subjective viewpoints into the analysis of a given content, the contextual nature of hate speech emerges once again and, consequently, the need to develop models covering a wide range of languages and cultural forms.

The second thematic section focuses on conspiracy theories, infodemics and online hate around the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon.

W. Juarez and S. Ferreyra propose a chapter on the narratives emerging from the digital activism of the “tuitòsfera en Argentina” (p. 106), related to the social mobilisations during the first months of the pandemic. The analysis develops on the predominant narratives during the mobilisations and the characteristics of the users, showing how the spread of misinformation about the virus and health measures fostered social dissent, also revealing a fragility of democratic processes highlighted by the growth of extreme right movements. In such a context, Twitter has characterised itself as a place of visibility and coordination of protests.

E. Gualda offers a further contribution to the volume by once again focusing on online micro-narratives. Analysing negationist, infodemic and conspiratorial tweets by comparing English and Spanish language micro-narratives about the so-called “plandemic”, according to which the COVID-19 pandemic is the result of a plan orchestrated by a global elite to control the population, the author not only demonstrates how such micronarratives have greatly fuelled the no-vax and anti-quarantine movements, discrediting governments and health systems, aspects that can undermine trust in public institutions and science, but also highlights the contextual character of denialist, infodemic and conspiratorial micronarratives, comparing Spanish and English tweets.

A. Amendola and M. Masullo analyse the production of online narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of fake news, conspiracy theories and hate speech on a platform that has the closed and homophilic characteristics, in terms of values, of a tribe (Maffesoli, 1988; Boccia Artieri, 2012) and therefore hardly escapes the 'filter bubble' effect (Benato, 2012) with which fake news spreads: Telegram, considered by the authors to be one of the platforms most responsible for the spread of disinformation on COVID-19 in Italy, despite the containment measures adopted by the platform in this regard.

E. Borthiry closes this thematic section with a political campaign analysis on Twitter related to the 2021 elections in Argentina, demonstrating the importance of participation in debates on the health emer-

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gency from COVID-19 for all candidates: “the health crisis not only dominated the political and media agenda, but also acted as a catalyst for questioning political differences” (p. 168).

The third thematic section analyses conspiracy theories and online hate speech targeting immigrants and/or refugees through two contributions.

A. Taboada-Villamarín and C. Rebollo-Díaz present the results of a study on the conspiracy theories that have spread on Twitter and that attribute responsibility for the origin and spread of the coronavirus to China, contributing to the spread of cyber-racism and hostility towards Asians. Using methods such as sentiment analysis, the authors reconstructed the main sentiments behind the propagation of such theories, revealing fear and mistrust towards both China and the WHO.

I. Marín Gutiérrez, M. Hinojosa Becerra and Á. L. Torres Toukoumidis analysed fact-checking methods regarding online hate speech on Venezuelan migration to Ecuador. The investigation of news about Venezuelans, exposed by the official Ecuadorian verification agency “Ecuador Chequea”, is useful to reflect on how fake news has negatively influenced the Ecuadorian population behaviour towards Venezuelans.

The fourth thematic section brings together works on conspiracy theories, hate speech and forms of violence online against women and young people.

E. Ruiz-Ángel, P. Ruiz-Ángel and F. J. Santos Fernández present an examination of the sociological literature on the origin of misogyny as a “democratic discourse based on (male) equality” (p. 208), making use of different contributions such as those of philosopher Amelia Valcárcel and sociologist Rosa Cobo, and then dwell on the ways in which social networks propagate in the so-called *manosphere*, “where forums, websites, blogs and social networks are used to create a misogynist and sexist digital environment” (p. 206), a phenomenon that, as the authors point out, “has increased [...] since the confinement of the COVID-19 pandemic” (p. 216).

F. Cubeddu and M. Scocco contribute to this section by focusing on online hate speech as a sub-category of cyberviolence (of a broader and multidimensional nature, encompassing a wide range of online aggressive behaviour), analysing young people’s perceptions of it, the communication practices they engage in and identifying the most vulnerable social groups most affected by cyber-violence.

L. Cabrera Álvarez concludes the section by presenting an examination of the literature on the construct of “cancel culture”, typical of the digital society, asserting that there is no uniformly accepted definition by

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the scientific community, examining above all the relationship between cancel culture, conspiracy theories and hate speech, presented as a consequence of cancel culture. As the latter is an emerging phenomenon, the scientific community should adequately pay attention to it.

The last thematic section concerns an in-depth study of gender studies and the narratives, discourses and social representations relating to LGBTQ+ people, which offers interesting keys to interpreting the phenomena examined through the construction of original typologies.

In the first chapter A. Canillo analyses four lesbian blogs, in terms of use and content, related to LGBTQ+ activism in the early 2000s in Argentina, drawing on the theoretical contributions of lesbian feminist theorists such as Monique Wittig and Adrienne Rich, who interpret heterosexuality as a political regime that generates a system of differences and oppressions, and of Butler, who defines it as a hegemonic discursive regime two main types of content in blogs. The activism that has emerged among such blogs has mainly focused either on the demand for rights and claims against the state (e.g. the right to abortion), or on the visualisation of lesbian identity.

M. Coppola and G. Masullo, through a digital ethnography conducted on a thematic Facebook group related to the Italian transgender community, aimed at exploring hate speech within the online transgender community examined, demonstrate that “in the community examined, cis-normativity and heteronormativity constitute the horizon towards which individuals in transition look to evaluate themselves and others according to sexual normativity” (p. 286). The authors propose an original typology relating to the issue of “passing for normal” articulated in four prevailing types, depending on the degree to which transgender individuals adhere to cis-heteronormative models and the degree to which they achieve certain phenotypic standards.

The final chapter, by F. J. Santos Fernández, E. Ruiz-Ángel and P. Ruiz-Ángel, dwells on the evolution of the phenomenon of homophobia, whereby the authors argue the need to adopt a more appropriate concept to describe the innumerable forms of discrimination that all forms of sexual orientation are subject to: LGBTphobia. They conclude their work with the case study “Gaysper”, a form of counterspeech that uses humour and the construction of positive narratives to counteract hate speech.

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