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Doctoral Thesis

Aggression in Romanian Social Media – a Perspective on its Classification and Quantification

- Summary -

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Technological developments have created conditions for the transfer of aggression from the real world to the virtual world and its extension, so that the effects are difficult to limit when the space in which they take place are social networks designed not only for content distribution but also for diversifying the ways in which appreciation and adherence to an ideology can be expressed, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Youtube.

Changes in people's behavior in the event of their activity in the virtual environment and increased aggression in such situations can be explained by the six factors listed by Suller (2004), namely: dissolution anonymity (the person believes that no connection can be established between it and its online actions), invisibility (the mode of expression could not be judged or criticized, as the physiognomy is unknown), asynchrony (virtual activity does not take place in real time), introjection (the intentions of those with whom we interact in the virtual environment are not known because people are not visible), dissociative imagination (since interactions do not occur in the real environment, it turns out that people are not real) and minimization of authority (in the virtual environment there is full freedom of action because there are no authorities).

The five criteria stated by Benesch (2012) as defining for the effectiveness of a message can also be useful in assessing the level of danger of an aggressive online discourse: the launch by a charismatic speaker, who has the ability to significantly influence the audience; the targeting of an audience whose frustrations can be speculated upon; the clear perception of the message as a call to violence; the appearance of the message in a social or historical context favorable to violence (resource competitions; a succession of relatively recent violent episodes; disinterest or inability to resolve grievances) and, last but not least, the access to a mean of distributing messages with intrinsic influence, derived from its uniqueness as a source of information for the target audience.

Our thesis focuses on a niche of online aggression, namely the discourse motivated by the target's belonging to a group or community based on criteria of race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, a discourse known generic as hate speech.

Identifying an hate speech communication is a difficult process, first of all against the background of disagreements regarding the definition of the concept, and then because a certain message can be aggressive for some and neutral or even non-aggressive for others.

To be more explicit, we will evoke two approaches, that of Warner and Hirshberg (2012), for which the hate speech represents the message that discredits *any generic*

community based on racial, ethnic, religious, gender or sexual preferences, and the one formulated by Waldron (2012), who restricted the addressability of hate speech to *disadvantaged social groups*, that would be harmed either directly or indirectly.

Despite all the differences between the various ways in which the hate speech is defined, a researcher's mission could be facilitated by referring to Parekh's (2012) vision on the characteristics of this type of aggressive discourse, respectively (1) clear targeting to a social group created on the basis of a arbitrary and irrelevant element from a normative point of view, (2) stigmatizing the target by implicitly or explicitly associating traits perceived by the general public as undesirable and (3) perceiving the existence of the target group as undesirable and as a subject of justified hostility.

The way a person reacts to an aspect that produces a negative state varies from the simple expression of frustration or dissatisfaction to the attempt to eliminate or physically remove the source of the unpleasant state. From a discursive perspective, one starts from expressing opinions in a civilized and rational manner, then, as the negative state tends to evolve from acute to chronic, it moves to a higher negative level, that of insults. Proportional or exponential, communication moves to swearing, as an expression of overcoming a bearable level of frustration, and finally reaches the peak of discursive aggression: evoking violence (Stephens & Zile, 2017; Andersson & Trudgill, 2007; Ljung, 2011).

In our paper we tried to build a matrix mechanism for evaluating messages, based on the fragmentation of a message into components and the identification within them of some subcomponents, which correspond to levels of intensity, quantifiable and possibly correlated within an equation. This approach could allow, on the one hand, the observation of the fluctuations in time of the intensity of some negative type communications and, on the other hand, the comparison of the negative communications belonging to different issuers.

The first chapter of the paper contains a series of national legislative aspects related to hate speech, which we considered useful, because for an effective application of legal provisions is needed a tool that provides more objectivity (even if not absolute).

Any form of discrimination and aggressive or hate speech violates the very fundamental law of the Romanian state, the Constitution, which provides, in Article 4, paragraph 2, that Romania is "the common and indivisible homeland of all its citizens, regardless of race, nationality, ethnic origin, language, religion, sex, opinion, political

affiliation, wealth or social origin", and in Article 30, paragraph 7, prohibits incitement to "violence, national, racial, class or religious hatred and discrimination".

For a better clarification of the issues related to discrimination, as seen in the criminal law, we have included here a series of provisions of the New Criminal Code, applicable since February 1, 2014, in which hate speech is regulated in Article 369 , which defines the offense of inciting hatred or discrimination as "inciting the public, by any means, to hate or discriminate against a category of persons". According to the same article, "the deed is punishable by imprisonment from 6 months to 3 years or a fine."

The usefulness of our approach and its reporting to the national legislative framework find an argument in the October 2020 decision of the European Commission, to send Romania a letter of delay, due to insufficient transposition into national law of Community rules to combat forms of expression of racism and xenophobia. The European Commission has criticized our country for the incorrect definition of hate speech, for the defective way in which it treated hate speech inciting violence in the Penal Code and for hate speech being condemned only if it is directed against a social group. , but not when addressed to an individual member.

The second chapter includes the theoretical framework, namely the concepts used during the research, including stereotypes and prejudices, with details on their role in shaping the attitudes and reactions of individuals belonging to the majority of members of minority groups.

The starting point when we refer to stereotypes is the aspect highlighted by Lippmann in 1922, namely that in terms of stereotypes we are dealing with an image built by each of us on the world around us, whose consistency is relative and to which everyone's life relates.

In the part reserved for stereotypes and prejudices, we also showed how they determine the appearance and perpetuation of negative attitudes, including IUDs. In essence, although they have an apparent positive role, which helps us to react to different situations, stereotypes lead us to a sometimes subjective normality, beyond which the marginalization of those who are not like us is foreshadowed. Moreover, stereotypes, in association with perceived threats as coming from a social group, substantiate prejudices (Stephen et al., 2002; Heyer & Reynaud-Paligot, 2017), which in turn correlate with perceived threats (Jedinger & Eisentraut, 2020) and is the foundation of discrimination and rejection (Dovidio et al., 2010; Önal et al., 2021), or, in an extreme form, of violence (Obaidi, Thomsen & Bergh, 2018).

An important section of the second chapter is devoted to the types of aggression in the virtual environment (to show the place of discursive aggression), with details on how social media contributes to the promotion of aggressive discourse in general and the hate speech in particular.

In another section of this chapter we will talk about the different types of discursive offenses (such as racial insults or insults against individual characteristics, be they physical, intellectual, moral or otherwise), while proposing a hierarchy of them. from the perspective of the intensity perceived by those to whom they are addressed.

Also here we will bring to the fore what could be one of the centers of gravity of the paper, namely a concept omitted in research on hate speech identification, namely ethnophaulisms (a concept introduced by Roback in 1944) , those racial or ethnic insults that apparently have no offensive charge, this being camouflaged by the way they are constructed, respectively the caricature or irony of some characteristics of the targets or the use of words used daily, but to which other meanings are attributed.

We emphasize that, for the most part, the purpose of hate speech identification research has been an automated working tool (given the large volume of data circulated through social media) based on lexicons composed of words and phrases typical of hate speech, and the fact that ethnophaulisms are double-meaning words raises obstacles to their identification by an Artificial Intelligence.

Lower in intensity than classical racial or ethnic insults, ethnophaulisms can be classified into six categories, according to the model theorized by Allen (1983), who used as a criterion the type of cognitive representation: physical traits, personal traits, personal names, eating habits, names group, any other representations being included in the "miscellaneous" category.

When ethnophaulisms applied to a social group cover more than one of the categories introduced by Allen, it means that the social closeness to the target group is great and allows it to be known in many aspects of daily life. Therefore, the more a social group is nominated through more than one ethnophaulism, and these can be included in several of the Allen categories, the better known the social group, so the smaller the extent of prejudice against it.

In practice, ethnophaulisms are an intermediate stage between words indicating a social group (for example, those appearing in the dictionary definitions of that community and thus having a neutral character) or are used by that social group to refer to, and words that indicate the same social group, but in a deeply offensive manner.

We considered it useful to use the concept, even if our research is not about an ethnicity, to avoid a minimalist approach to racial insults and to introduce a category of transition between non-pejorative equivalents and racial insults themselves.

Other aspects that we considered useful for our approach are the correlation of stereotypes with perceived threats, the relativization of insults and their transformation into Non-Pejorative Equivalents, the ranking of insults based on their intensity, and the competition between racial insults and those against individual characteristics. All this contributes to the refinement of the analysis of a message and provides arguments for the idea of differentiating between aggressive content and another.

Last but not least, we have reserved a section for those expressions that constitute a verbal equivalent of physical aggression. We refer to swearing, which we considered a factor that should not be omitted in a study of aggressive speech, as it enhances the force of a message and denotes the existence of a high level of frustration of an individual or unfavorable perception of one person by another. . In fact, as we will see, by resorting to swearing and taboo words, an individual signals that he has exceeded the limit of inner tension to which the formulation of insults was sufficient and he needs a mode of symbolic aggression.

The third chapter presents the Research Methodology, developed in accordance with the research hypotheses, respectively:

- I1: Attacks on the person accentuate the intensity of messages containing hate speech towards a social group;
- I2: If there are events related to a social group on the public agenda, then the hate speech against it intensifies.

Subsequent to the research hypotheses, we established three research objectives, namely:

- OB1: establishing a taxonomy of the components and subcomponents of an aggressive message;
- OB2: hierarchy of taxonomy elements from OB1;
- OB3: building a mathematical tool through which the intensity of the aggressive content of a message can be quantified.

We took into account the fact that online aggression is the correspondent of real-world aggression and we tried that, starting from studies and reports on public discourse in Romania, conducted between 1999-2018 by European institutions, local non-governmental organizations and institutions specializing in studying public opinion, to identify the most common targets. The result showed that in our country the aggressive public discourse is most often directed at the LGBT community, Hungarians, Roma, Jews, Muslims and refugees, in this order. The conclusion of our analysis is similar to the results of a survey conducted in 2018 by the Institute for Public Policy, according to which in Romania there is a high rate of distrust in homosexuals (74%), Roma (72%), immigrants (69%), Muslims (68%), people with HIV (58%), people of other religions (58%), Hungarians (53%) and Jews (46%).

For each of the identified vulnerable social communities, we presented the associated stereotypes, in an attempt to better understand the mechanisms that influence aggressive discourse towards them, as well as the Romanian particularities regarding the correlation between stereotypes and the types of threats perceived as generated by those groups. social. The level of depth of stereotypes was analyzed according to their historical character (for which we studied Romanian proverbs, sayings and traditions in which references to vulnerable communities appear), but also the topicality of stereotypes (for which we resorted to studies recent developments on discrimination in Romania).

We also used dictionary explanations regarding the ethnic / racial / social identity of members of vulnerable communities, and for clarification of incomplete information we used media references. The latter have proved their usefulness in the case of the LGBT community, whose historical invisibility has determined its absence from sources such as Romanian proverbs or sayings.

In this chapter we showed the arguments for which we chose the LGBT community for the case study: a series of negative characteristics of public perception of this community and the fact that the annual organization of Gay Pride creates a favorable context for social media comments polarized ones, of which the negative ones include a wide range of elements from the category of aggressive discourse.

We also presented how we established the potential components of an aggressive message, which we called Insult to an Individual Characteristic - ICI; Insult to a Group Characteristic (ethnic, social or racial) - ICG; Curse - IJ; Evocation of Violence (against a person or an ethnic / social / racial group) - EV. We also presented the subcomponents we considered in each of the 4 main components (a total of 20 subcomponents), as well as how

we established a hierarchy of them - based on the literature or, then when we did not identify arguments in the results of other research, based on a questionnaire whose details were included in the annexes.

The taxonomy of aggressive messages thus constructed was completed with what we consider to be a second center of gravity of our work, namely a matrix for quantifying discursive aggression, resulting from the intersection between the main and secondary components of an aggressive message. In the section dedicated to the matrix we detailed how we allocated scores for each hierarchical level, as well as the calculation formula we propose to establish the intensity of the aggressiveness of a message.

We mention that when applying the matrix and the calculation formula we took into account the following aspects: (a) a verbal aggression does not necessarily target a single characteristic of the target and (b) in a verbal aggression repetitions can be used and / or synonyms, so several elements of the same component or subcomponent.

Last but not least, we have shown that, for a more accurate assessment and differentiation between messages, the severity of the message must be taken into account, which is why we considered that differentiation can be made according to the severity of potential effects on the physical integrity of the target. in other words, what would happen if the author of the message acted on the target, translating his statements into deeds. In this way, we came to the conclusion that the impact of the 4 main components must be weighed, in which sense we proposed a calculation option that we consider appropriate.

The fourth chapter presents the results of the application of the aforementioned matrix in the case of a set of comments posted on the social network dedicated to sharing YouTube video content to a series of short films on issues related to the LGBT community. In the research we highlighted the predilection of message authors for certain words or phrases and interpreted the contribution of each main component and each subcomponent of an aggressive message to the intensity of the offense, both from the perspective of individual messages and the entire set of messages.

Overall, the research highlights the placement of most offenses in the area of insults to individual characteristics (50% of all aggressive items), followed by insults to characteristics of the LGBT community (24%) and those containing references to violence. or indications of placing authors under conservative-radical influences (23%). A surprising result is the marginal positioning of swearing (3%), which suggests the predominant attraction for insults, followed by a direct shift to the height of discursive aggression - the evocation of violence.

Regarding the insults to some group characteristics, we noticed the overwhelming share of Non-Pejorative Correlates (81% of incidences), as well as the ascendancy of ethnophaulisms on classical racial insults.

In order to be consistent with the attention paid to ethnophaulisms, we will emphasize that out of the 6 categories established by Allen (1983), we found the presence of those related to personal names, personal traits and, most frequently, group names. From this perspective, the necessary conclusion is that the analyzed set of messages is characterized by a low to medium level of complexity of this particular type of racial insult. As a consequence, the authors of the messages containing ethno-labels have a reduced social closeness to the LGBT community and therefore a poor knowledge of it, which does not favor the diminution of fears.

Insults against individual characteristics were formulated in most cases in the register of the intellect (most likely in the context of opinions related to mental problems that would characterize the community), with the register of morality in the background (we assume that this aspect is related to general negative perception of LGBT in relation to Christian morality).

Not far from the morality register are the sexual register, characterized by a predilection for indirect or allusive formulations (quasi-censorship of trivial words, missed euphemisms, typical abbreviations for social media and puns) and the sanitizing register, often represented by words that reflect LGBT revulsion.

The ranking of insults included in this main component ends with the animal register, whose role was to label LGBT as animals and thus extract its members from the human sphere, and with the least represented register, the physical one, which included mainly references to exterior.

Regarding the curses, although the quantity did not allow a broad analysis, we were able to establish that they are distributed in all subcategories mentioned in the Methodology. An interesting aspect is that, taking into account globally the three subcategories built on the foundation of sexuality, we find that it covers more than half of the total incidences, which indicates the preference for expressions with sexual content.

The violent component of aggressive messages was most often found (57%) in the form of expressing disagreement or distancing from LGBT, this precursor of violence being supported mainly by religious arguments. Although we may be tempted to conclude that promoters of anti-LGBT messages are being held accountable for making threats, we must

keep in mind that there are a large number of messages (40%) that contain references to radical arguments, such as expulsion from country and even lethal solutions.

Regarding the hatred, we found that the largest share was awarded by the apology of organizations or public figures with radical-conservative views.

The subcomponent of non-lethal violence against the individual is to overcome the level of insults (whether individual or racial) and swearing and to cross the border to a space adjacent to the transposition of words. On this level of aggressive discourse, in most situations we have encountered evocations of physical corrections or even threats in this regard. In comparison, in the case of non-lethal violence against the social group, the urges to leave the national territory predominate, which may be the expression of a realism of the authors of the messages, who could have been aware of the effects of a corporal punishment of a community as a whole.

Once we reach the most difficult subcomponent, that of lethal violence, we will see that, if at the individual level we can not talk about a unity of views (it oscillates between generic physical elimination and shooting, rarely by arson), in the case of violence addressed to the entire LGBT social group, the largest share was awarded by elimination by burning, as a divine or profane punishment.

In the context of the first research hypothesis, the results showed that the aggressiveness of a message is all the greater as it includes words distributed in as many of the four main components and what determines the achievement of a score above average is the existence of a reference to violence, such as threats or the evocation of physical aggression, whether lethal or not, against an individual or the social group to which he belongs. Last but not least, what contributes to a high score of hate speech messages is the association with offensive expressions addressed to an individual's own traits, regardless of his membership in a community based on ethnic, racial, gender or similar characteristics.

Regarding the second research hypothesis, the comparison of the comments posted on short films uploaded to the social network YouTube at different times showed that both the number of aggressive messages and their overall score are higher in the presence of an event connected by the LGBT community than in his absence. In addition, we found that verbal reactions to a social group are more offensive when formulated in the context of an event related to that social group and include mostly high-intensity words or phrases. In comparison, verbal reactions to a social group in the absence of an event connected by that

social group include words or expressions with a low level of intensity and, less often, have a high level of intensity.

The fifth chapter presents the conclusions of the research, introduced from our point of view on the problem of aggressive discourse, based on the one hand on realism in terms of the possibility of completely removing the hate speech from social media, and on the other on the basis of analysis on a mathematical tool, which could diminish the subjectivity of human operators and streamline the hate speech identification process.

Other aspects addressed in this chapter will be the elements of theoretical-methodological novelty (respectively the evaluation of hate speech intensity on several dimensions simultaneously, by connecting several components of an aggressive message) and the originality of the research, among which we consider that it is worth mentioning once again ethno-labels, for the contribution to a further refinement of the analysis of insults.

As will be seen in the Conclusions, in terms of the degree of solving the proposed problems, our assessment is that both research hypotheses have been validated.

In the category "unresolved issues" we mentioned the difficulty of establishing a reference score, that boundary that separates aggressive messages from those that are insufficiently aggressive in order to be eliminated by the moderator of a communication channel. Although we might consider that the alert could be the appearance in a message of the evocation of violence, we express our reservations about such a unicriteria reasoning. The reason for our detention is the existence of high-score messages, determined by the presence of a large number of insults against individual characteristics, but from which the evocation of violence is completely missing.

An extremely important aspect is the existence of some research limits, materialized on the one hand in the accuracy of the weights of each main component of an aggressive message in the formula used (those used are only indicative, not scientifically supported), and on the other The non-pejorative equivalent may not be entirely valid, as it is possible that some words, considered offenses neutralized by their use even by the target social group, may maintain their offensive meaning to those who use them to express contempt.

Regarding the applicability of the results, we will mention here only a few aspects, which we consider to be more important: the development, based on the proposed matrix evaluation method, of an automated tool for identifying and eliminating from social media aggressive posts to minorities; evaluation of the tensions generated by socio-economic events

perceived unfavorably at the societal level; analyzing the discourse in the virtual environment of a potential employee.

At the end of the chapter on Conclusions, we mentioned a number of possible directions to follow in future research, the most important of which we consider to be the in-depth analysis of the evocation of violence, which correlates with the other major components of an aggressive message and national and Community legislation. it could contribute to estimating or even setting alert thresholds, which are necessary to detect when an unacceptable level of aggression is reached.

A study of discursive aggressions over a period of time against all vulnerable communities could also be useful, as the graphical overlap of their fluctuations could provide clues to establish the continuous or discontinuous nature of total discursive aggression.

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