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Hate speech and social media: Combating a dangerous relationship

Discorsi d'odio e social media: Combattere le relazioni pericolose

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Abstract. The article proposes a reflection on the configuration of the contemporary digital agora as a powerful 'hate factory', focusing on the dangers deriving from pervasive and planetary practices of divisive news construction and sharing through the social media. In the first part, it will be argued that the increase of lexical choices based on hate or verbal violence must be connected to the characteristics of the contemporary hybrid media system, and considered as a concrete threat for democracies, which challenges institutions to find innovative ways to face it at a legislative as well as at a cultural level. In the second part of the article, some EU recent normative actions against hate speech will be presented in order to underline links with the 2022 "Code on hate speech", promoted by Italian Authority for Communications (AGCOM) in Italy: this document established the binding criteria for the programming of Italian audio-visual media service providers, in order to prevent and combat hate speech by avoiding any dissemination, justification, minimization of violence, hatred or discrimination both in information and entertainment. From all these institutional initiatives clearly emerges the need to reinforce the legal framework for tackling hate speech and discrimination, starting from the normative lack of strict rules in many European countries.

Keywords: hate speech, social media, legislative actions, information.

Riassunto. L'articolo propone una riflessione sulla configurazione dell'agorà digitale contemporanea come una potente 'hate factory', concentrandosi sui pericoli derivanti da pratiche pervasive e planetarie di costruzione e condivisione di notizie divisive attraverso i social media. Nella prima parte, si sosterrà che l'aumento delle scelte lessicali basate sull'odio o sulla violenza verbale deve essere collegato alle caratteristiche del sistema mediatico ibrido contemporaneo, e considerato come una minaccia concreta per le democrazie, che sfida le istituzioni a trovare modi innovativi per affrontarla sia a livello legislativo sia a livello culturale. Nella seconda parte dell'articolo verranno presentate alcune recenti azioni normative dell'Unione Europea contro l'hate speech, per sottolineare i legami con il "Codice sull'hate speech" del 2022, promosso dall'Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni (AGCOM) in Italia: questo documento ha stabilito i criteri vincolanti per la programmazione dei fornitori di servizi di media audiovisivi italiani, al fine di prevenire e combattere l'hate speech evitando qualsiasi diffusione, giustificazione, minimizzazione della violenza, dell'odio o della discriminazione sia nell'informazione che nell'intrattenimento. Da tutte queste iniziative istituzionali

emerge chiaramente la necessità di rafforzare il quadro giuridico per affrontare i discorsi d'odio e la discriminazione, a partire dalla mancanza normativa di regole rigorose in molti Paesi europei.

Parole chiave: discorsi d'odio, social media, azioni legislative, informazione.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary biased use of information has peculiar characteristics in comparison with the traditional spread of fake news as a political weapon to discredit an adversary: the Internet and social media have made possible an extraordinary expansion for accessing information at a planetary level, offering an almost unlimited cognitive resources available to all citizens. The circulation of false news (Albright 2017; Corner 2017), favoured by unaware users, as well as the frequent intentional construction of coordinated disinformation campaigns impose global attention on the topic of the new opacity of the borders between freedom of expression and the need to limit manipulation of information flows. As a matter of fact, the infosphere is dominated by the 'opaque' algorithms elaborated by the platforms (Van Dijck et al., 2018), which are private, transnational companies, founded on the logic of profit and often operating in a context without 'rules', with little or no attention to the risks of the disinformation strategies (Bracciale & Grisolia 2020) or viralization of harmful fake news (Ireton & Posetti 2018). In this article it is argued that the problem of the recent increasing spread of hate speech can be connected to the new challenges brought about by the rise of social media as central actors in the public sphere. We are immersed in a hyper-fragmented, platformized communicative ecosystem, which inevitably creates biases, due to the structural logic of algorithms so that people see what they want to see or what an algorithm 'believes' that they are interested in seeing (Chambers, 2021), producing a variety of emerging phenomena, including political polarization and echo chambers, which often promote the rise of hate speech and, in general, of violence. Consequently, new significant risks to Western constitutional architectures appear, such as 'normalizing' stringent censorship practices or, for totally different purposes, favouring conflicting communication dynamics (Heinze, 2016; Sorice, 2020; Vaccaro, 2020). In this context, as Alkiviadou (2019) underlined, the recent increase of online threats and hate speech confirms the presence of a new dangerous communicative circuit, capable of spreading and exponentially multiplying highly negative and divisive contents, with no precise normative borders or rules in many countries. Social media are more and more used as the central axis and source of information so that the power of

communication technologies to reach strategic audiences has become a central key to influence public opinion; therefore, the proliferation of verbal attacks on line poses concrete risks to democratic participation not only at an institutional level (to combat them), but also in terms of the journalistic profession, since the reputational crisis of many institutions, added to the disinformation increase, has led to a general loss of confidence in the newsmedia ability to 'tell' facts (McIntyre, 2018; Lorusso 2018; Rizzuto 2021). These relevant changes require innovative and adequate legislative actions to face the toxic transformation of the democratic debate emerged in many Western contexts and too often encouraged by political leaders (Heinze, 2016; Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021): on one hand, it is evident the presence of normalizing communicative practices, aiming at a reassuring anesthetization of citizen-users and at avoiding crisis; on the other, in a diametrically opposite direction, a continuous appeal to the emotional sphere of individuals is too often used to arouse anger and hate, useful to precise political strategies (Rossini, 2020). In both cases, however, there is always a clear detachment from recourse to rationality and dialogue in the production of information which, in the transmedia dynamics (Mc Erlean, 2018), helps processes of virilisation capable of destroying political careers, as well as damaging citizens, whose right to privacy protection is strongly menaced (Rizzuto, Sciarrino 2021). All these levels of problems impose a reflection on the potential consequences of contemporary information disorders not only at a theoretical level (all traditional interpretative schemes now seem inadequate), but also to promote innovative and effective educational policies for the young generations of citizens (Cappello & Rizzuto 2020). The following pages aim to propose a reflection on the configuration of the contemporary digital agorà as a powerful 'hate factory', focusing on the dangers of effects deriving from pervasive and planetary practices of divisive news construction and sharing. In the first part of this article, it will be argued that the increase of lexical choices based on hate or verbal violence must be connected to the characteristics of the contemporary hybrid media system and considered as a concrete threat for democracies, as well as a challenge for institutions to find innovative ways to face them at a legislative and a cultural level. Moreover, stopping attacks aiming to ridicule, or even destroy,

individuals, must be connected to the goal of reaffirming the responsibilities of news professionals, since the possibilities of the digital context impose them a greater ability to decentralize the journalistic professional gaze not to become agents, more or less 'unaware', of the construction of hate or of its normalization as an "acceptable" communicative dynamics in relationships among individuals as well as among leaders, peoples, states. In the second part of the article, some EU recent normative actions against hate speech will be presented: from all these institutional initiatives clearly emerges the need to reinforce the legal framework for tackling hate speech and discrimination, focusing on the normative lack of strict rules in many European countries. Finally, the "Code on hate speech", promoted by Italian Authority for Communications (AGCOM, 2022), will be presented in order to underline some links with European political debate and actions: this document has shown a concrete institutional attention to the problem of hate speech in Italy and established the binding criteria for the programming of Italian audiovisual media service providers, in order to prevent and combat it both in information and entertainment.

2. EMOTIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE NEW CIRCUITS OF HATE

The contemporary incivility of public debate (Boccia & Bentivegna, 2021), from Trump's speeches to the no-vax campaigns, is demonstrating that the Internet plays a key role in the diffusion of extremist content, offering individuals as well as political, religious, even terrorist groups, a planetary arena to spread hate, make propaganda or recruit new members. In all these cases there is a shared element in their communication circuits: the use of a rigidly binary logic (us/them), which focuses on emotions, on the sense of belonging to a group, and takes advantage from the possibility of avoiding any source of cognitive dissonance, guaranteed by the relationships in the echo chambers or in online groups (Riva, 2018). Platforms are the new intermediary institutions for politics and are deeply changing the traditional organizations of political parties as well as legacy media (Persily, 2017) and citizens: however, we have to face not only a political risk, but also a cultural problematic issue, with relevant long-term consequences since haters often specifically target adolescents and young adults, who are highly active online: consequently, this is a problem concerning the central dimension of the need to educate young citizens in an innovative way, adequate to the contemporary hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), having effects on the future of democratic societies and strictly linked to

fundamental values such as Respect, Dialogue, Competence, Freedom. In the contemporary media system, a lot of hate speech is daily shared online, even if legacy media (Tv and newspapers) may spread negative contents too. This represents the opposite and dangerous side of the medal: while the Internet can be seen as a space of participation, freedom of expression, an agorà where it is possible to be connected from every place, its peculiarities (horizontal structure, speed, brevity, oversimplified language, anonymity) facilitate the polarization of opinions and tend to reinforce only a perspective on a specific issue (Persily & Tucker, 2020). Due to interconnection and their pervasiveness, social media have become one of the privileged channels for the diffusion of hate speech and, as Chambers pointed out, we also have to take into consideration «the actors inserting fake news into the information flow, and the financial model of social media, dominated by big data, micro-targeting, bots, and proprietary algorithms» (Chambers, 2021, p. 150). The circulation of hate speech has been promoted by the three peculiarities of digital circuits: persistence, recurrence and anonymity. First, hate speech can remain online for a long time, in different formats and platforms and the longer it remains accessible, the greater its negative effect (persistence) may be; secondly, the recurrence of content due to the structure of social media platforms (where content can become recurring in different spaces) so that, even if removed from one place, it can always reappear under another name and/or title elsewhere. Moreover, the possibility of anonymity and, to some extent, of impunity may be considered as another relevant factor of promoting the expression of hateful opinions. Vosoughi focusing on the circulation of information, confirmed that social media seem to systematically amplify falsehood at the expense of the truth more than previous media technologies (Vosoughi et al., 2019): legacy media, which can also arouse emotions and can of course also be false, just do not have the power of virality, while the technological features of social networks can translate emotional reactions into a viral tweet that can be consumed and passed on by thousands of users in few minutes. Moreover, fake news and false rumours reach more people, penetrate deeper into the social network and spread faster than accurate stories (Riva, 2018) but, at the same time, he recognised the relevant role of human psychology which is at the root of this phenomenon since content that arouses strong emotions spreads further, faster, more deeply and more broadly. According to Balzerani (2019) to understand the contemporary process of diffusion of the language of hate it is necessary to start from the scientifically based recognition of the centrality of emotions as the basis of individual and group

behaviour: undoubtedly, acting in apparently distant spheres such as politics, information, as well as the relationships among ethnic groups or religions, the emotional dimension deeply influences social life and, in the digital context, it is often used both at a political level and for news production, since emotions can easily intercept and strengthen the more and more volatile political consensus, as well as attract audiences for the market driven media. From this perspective, politainment and infotainment can be seen as the direct consequences of the increasing importance of emotions in the contemporary society, far from traditional ideological affiliations and traditional informative mediations (Quandt, 2018; Solito & Sorrentino, 2020; Mazzoleni 2021). Reflecting on how and how much emotional communication dynamics have dangerously contributed to horrors and conflicts in the past can prove to be a useful approach and a significant challenge for many disciplines: in today's flood of information, starting a debate on the construction practices and viral diffusion of hate speech is a passage that neither scholars nor journalists can ignore. The theoretical implications of neuropsychological research are numerous and complex: it is necessary to better understand the mechanisms linked to the differences among emotions, since they have a different physiology and activate different areas of the brain, producing complex and concrete physiological reactions. Consequently, it is necessary paying greater attention both to non-verbal factors in behavioural dynamics as well as to the peculiarities of online newsmaking practices, in which the verification of sources and the credibility of communicators have become less central (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2015; Solito & Sorrentino, 2019). On the journalistic level, several studies (Thussu 2007; Santos, 2009; Rizzuto, 2018; Marinov, 2020) have highlighted the centrality of emotional logic in newsmaking practices, connecting it to the dominance of the logic of emotainment, which is spectacular and dramatizing: in a highly economically competitive context, the newsmedia have opted in many Western countries for the adoption of a spectacular narrative logic, focused on conflicts, enemies, dramas. As a consequence, in the last two decades, information products and formats have become successful by using crimes and identification mechanisms, activated through biases like personalisation, fragmentation and dramatization of events, which the increasing presence of social media as source of information, has been accelerating (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). On the political side, the appeal to emotions is not new because it has traditionally been used by charismatic leaders to motivate individuals or to create favourable attitudes in order to produce concrete political or electoral consequences: from this per-

spective, considering the mechanisms of transformation of emotions at a psychological level, the responsibilities of the different social actors appear clearly, especially when leaders and journalists prefer to focus on the emotional component rather than on the sequential cognitive methods to present issues or priorities. If there is no doubt that an emotional communication circuit makes possible in the dense public sphere to attract votes more easily and without intermediaries (Solito & Sorrentino, 2020), it is also evident that both news professionals and political leaders, often risk of becoming active agents in the spread of conflicting communication circuits and violent behaviour models. From this point of view, for example, even the terrorist attacks of the last two decades can be read as the most disastrous planetary outcome of a pervasive and planned activity of feeding hatred towards the Enemies, carried out and promoted above all through media narratives. In a context of strong pervasiveness of communication technologies and of growing cognitive dependence of individuals on the media, the stories proposed on line, and also circulating in the mainstream media, increasingly offer views and models of hate that are easy to communicate and able to activate a dangerous emotional contagion (Mazzoleni 2021). The risk is that a culture of contempt may prevail more and more frequently, promoting negative attitudes towards Other-Enemies which might favour the same dangerous process of emotional escalation (from anger to disgust), which has led to immense catastrophes, like the Shoah or the genocides in the Balkans, in the recent history of Europe. For example, the disgust for the Other seen as an 'enemy' (harmful for the simple fact of existing) is the emotion that has always played a fundamental role in the 'descent of politics into hell': disgust is capable of activating a re-reading of events, even using pseudo-scientific frames, and can lead from verbal violence to physical aggression up to the acceptance of extermination. In a terrifying perspective, a definitive elimination may become monstrously 'plausible' also by using strategies of 'negative' definition of the Other, with a language of hate based on distorting and dehumanizing lexical choices, that favour verbal aggression and ideological clash against the Enemies, perceived as inferior.

3. COMBATING HATE SPEECH: EU LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS AND 2022 ITALIAN AGCOM CODE

The problem of hate speech and its ties with the rise of social media points to some difficulties, since both its theoretical definition as well as practical and legal regulations seem inadequate, not only because the legal back-

ground contains deep roots but also for the new ethical and communicative challenges (Persily & Tucker, 2020). As Hietanen and Eddebo (2022) underlined, the notion of hate speech “builds upon very old legal traditions. Legal aspects are central, not least because hate speech could lead to litigation, which is one of the concerns of stakeholders. In fact, the most recent efforts regarding hate speech regulation are legal in nature; the European Commission’s current proposal is to introduce hate speech as a new «area of crime» (Hietanen & Eddebo, 2022, p.2). Consequently, in the contemporary media landscape new strategies and initiatives to combat it are demanded both to institutions and to media professionals, in order to regulate them and offer a growing set of resources for citizens to rely on and to help navigate. One of the most relevant problems has been the definition itself: firstly, the tension inherent in this concept derives from its opacity (definitions of hate speech are often considered vague or contradictory), and looking at definitions in the literature, the framing tends to be emotional and tinged with a moral tenor since the concept of hate speech is strictly dependent on the peculiar interpretations of freedom of speech in different contexts. It changes over time and in relation to factors such as national laws, international documents, social media self-regulation codes: moreover, it changes if we consider its effects, because not all expressions of incitement to hate, violence and extremism produce a real risk of promoting discrimination or segregation. Although there is no universally shared definition, European and international institutions have tried to establish its boundaries in a series of documents and legislative initiatives: aiming to understand whether we are dealing with hate speech, firstly we need to identify its implied meaning, and not only its explicit content, since it conveys two other messages. The first goes to the attacked individuals (the targeted victims) and aims to weaken their sense of safety and freedom, leading them to think that they have no space (that is, that they cannot be accepted and/or integrated) in society. The other message is addressed to those community members who do not belong to the attacked group, and it seems even more dangerous because of its social consequences: the belief that the opinions behind hate speech are widely shared, even if not always publicly expressed, may encourage some individuals to overcome (potential) spirals of silence as well as to express negative opinions or to participate to hate speeches. In this problematic circuit the role of media, and of their representation of issues and of public opinion sectors in the political debate, is relevant: from this perspective, biased messages or totally false news can contribute to create a fertile

ground for discrimination, hate crimes, human rights violations, with an impact not limited to the influence it can have on online debates on some controversial issues. As a matter of fact, there is no doubt that it also produces negative repercussions on the offline life of the attacked individuals/social groups as well as on the entire community. Both European and, more recently, Italian institutions have promoted and supported a wide political and cultural debate on online hate speech, producing several documents to fight the phenomenon (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017): already in 1997, the No. R (97) 20 Recommendation of the Council of Europe on hate speech through the media argued that «the term hate speech must be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin» (COMMIT, Deliverable 4.1, p.1). In this document, affirming the centrality of the principle of freedom of information as well as responsibility, the governments of member states were recommended to take appropriate steps to combat hate speech, to adopt a comprehensive approach to the phenomenon, focusing on its social, economic, political, cultural and other root causes and to review their domestic legislation. More recently, in 2015 the definition of hate speech proposed by ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance) became broader and included «advocacy, promotion or incitement, in any form whatsoever, to the denigration, hatred or defamation of any person or group of persons, as well as any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat against that person or group of people and the justification of all the foregoing types of expression, whether on grounds of race, colour, ancestry, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and other personal characteristics or status» (COMMIT, Deliverable 4.1, p. 3). Another relevant step is represented by the “EU Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online” (European Commission, 2016), signed in May 2016 by the European Commission with four major ICT companies (Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube) in order to prevent and counter the spread of illegal hate speech online. In 2018 Instagram, Google, Snapchat and Dailymotion joined the Code and Jeuxvideo.com in 2019. TikTok in 2020 and LinkedIn in 2021. In May and June 2022, respectively, Rakuten Viber and Twitch announced their participation to the Code of Conduct. The Code is based on a close collaboration among the

European Commission, ICT platforms and a network of organizations (NGOs and national authorities) located in different EU countries; by signing the Code, ICT companies undertook to permanently develop internal procedures and personnel training to examine the requests to remove hateful content and, where appropriate, delete or make them inaccessible. At a planetary level, the 2019 United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defined it as communication that «attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, gender, or other identity factor» (United Nations, 2019). From the UN perspective, hate speech may undermine respect for minority groups and damage social cohesion but the Internet is seen as a crucial actor, not only a risk factor but also an opportunity for solutions: while it can be used for dissemination racist, sexist, xenophobic, antisemitic materials, it can offer as well unprecedented means of facilitating the cross-border communication on human rights issues, related to anti-discrimination, or used to set up educational and awareness-raising networks in the field of combating racism and intolerance. In the last few years, the European Union (EU) has witnessed a sharp rise in hate speech and hate crime but EU law criminalises such conduct only if related to a limited set of protected characteristics, such as race and ethnicity. In order to cover also hate speech and hate crime, the EU Commission, with the support of the Parliament, has been trying to overcome this limitation by extending the list of 'EU crimes' included in Article 83 of the "Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union" (TFEU) and this can only be done with a Council decision adopted by unanimity and the Parliament's consent. The European Parliament has addressed hate speech and hate crime in several resolutions and documents: in its October 2018 resolution on the rise of neo-fascist violence in Europe (2018/2869 RSP) underlined a link between the dissemination of hate speech and violence, stressing the negative role that politicians and political parties may play in this respect. It therefore called on the Member States to «strongly condemn and sanction hate crime, hate speech and scapegoating by politicians and public officials at all levels and on all types of media, as they directly normalise and reinforce hatred and violence in society». Two years later, in a November 2020 resolution (2020/2009 INI), the Parliament observed that hate speech and disinformation were increasingly used for political purposes in order to intensify social polarisation. It reiterated its calls on the Member States to implement and enforce measures to prevent, condemn and counter hate speech

and hate crime and pointed to the need to reinforce the legal framework for tackling hate speech and discrimination, focusing on the normative lack of strict rules in many European countries. In the last two years, EU institutions welcomed the initiative to extend the list of the areas of crime to encompass hate crime and hate speech, aiming at including sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics as discrimination grounds too. For example, a March 2021 Resolution (2021/2557-RSP) dealt specifically with hate speech against LGBTIQ people: the Parliament condemned the creation of 'LGBTI-free zones' as part of a broader context of increased discrimination and attacks against the LGBTIQ community, which include a rise in hate speech by public authorities and public media. The problem of hate speech targeting LGBTIQ people was further addressed in a Parliamentary resolution of December 2021 (2020/2035-INL), which noted that some Member States have no laws to address this abuse even if it is more and more frequent. In May 2022 Resolution (2021/2055 INI) pointed to a different field, the religious-based hate crimes that still remain under-reported and unprosecuted, calling for establishing comprehensive data collection systems on hate crimes and other discriminatory acts against belief- or religious communities. The attention of Italian institutions to the problematic role of the media in the spread of hate speech has been confirmed in the initiative promoted in July 2022 by the Italian Authority for Communications (Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni- AGCOM), which proposed a "Scheme of regulations on the protection of fundamental rights of the person, respect of the principle of non-discrimination and fighting hate speech" (Schema di regolamento in materia di tutela dei diritti fondamentali della persona, di rispetto del principio di non discriminazione e di contrasto ai discorsi d'odio (AGCOM, 2022) to establish the binding criteria for the programming of audio-visual media service providers. The main goal of this initiative was preventing the violation of the prohibitions of instigating the commission of crimes or their apology. In the first part of the document, the Authority focuses on the main democratic principles involved in media production, underlining that freedom and respect must be the central words not only for information but also for entertainment programmes. As a consequence, basing on the general value of the protection of each person's fundamental rights, the suppliers of audio-visual and radio media services are required to ensure respect to human rights, without prejudice to the freedom of information, of expression of everyone as well as the right to report. According to this document, the dignity of the person must be placed at

the first position by all media producers, who are always compelled to respect rights, while maintaining their freedom of opinion, of receiving and communicating information – also including the rights of criticism and satire. The term ‘adjust’ shows correctly the institution’s effort to find a balance between these fundamental but different rights: the respect of the human dignity and the freedom of the media professionals. In the following part AGCOM emphasizes the need to prevent and combat hate speech: in order to achieve this goal, it indicates some binding criteria to media providers aiming at not presenting any incitement to commit crimes or apology for the same, like, in particular, incitement to violence or hatred against a group of people or a member of a group, as well as to commit a terrorist offense. Consequently, programming must prevent violations by avoiding verbal or para-verbal expressions, images or graphic elements inclined, directly or indirectly, to favour crimes, to offend human dignity as well as to disseminate, justify, minimize or in any other way legitimize violence, hatred or discrimination. Considering the Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and in the perspective of balancing values of equal rank, such as freedom of expression and protection of individual rights, the Authority underlines that journalists as well as media professionals of entertainment programs have the duty to properly present facts or individuals. As a matter of fact, the focus is on the biases used in newsmaking, which can determine dangerous forms of secondary victimization or effect of romanticisation, aestheticization or eroticisation of criminals. From this perspective, therefore, the excesses of media spectacular logic must be avoided by considering the context while producing and disseminating news about subjects at risk of discrimination: media professionals must comply with criteria of truth, essentiality and continence of the news, avoiding reference to data relating to the private sphere of persons such as ethnic or social origin, language, religion or personal beliefs, political opinions or opinions of any other nature not relevant or pertinent for the purposes of the news. Another important element of the document is the attention to the ‘responsibility’ of media producers, above all referring to the potential effects of negative behaviours or statements: in order to protect the dignity of the person the program directors and conductors must ensure deviation and reparation of harmful contents, hate speech or forms of communication praising violence, or the commission of unpredictable and unavoidable crimes, or occurred in a context not subject to prior control by the media service provider. In cases of non-compliance it is specified that some sanctions will be provided and the

National Professional Association (Ordine dei giornalisti) will be informed. The Code also proposes some initiatives and sanctions to fight violations of fundamental human rights and hate speech: however, while private media service providers are ‘invited’, RAI, in its role of concessionaire of the public radio, television and multi-media service, ‘must’ promote the dissemination of contents supporting non-discrimination, inclusion and social cohesion, as well as the fight against incitement to violence and hatred. Undoubtedly, this Agcom’s initiative cannot be considered as the final step of the both institutional and cultural acknowledgment to face hate speech in Italy: however, it is an important and concrete answer, showing the need that there must be structural, regulatory, and ethical responses to the new challenges.

4. CONCLUSION

In this article it is argued that hate speech and verbal violence are strictly connected to the characteristics of the contemporary hybrid media system: while its structural features have facilitated the rise and salience of emotions-based and divisive messages, the growing reliance on social media for news and information has become a global phenomenon that has amplified the potential reach of hate speech and fake. Therefore, even if they have not been politically weaponized in every context, social media have taken on important functions in the public sphere and this represents new challenges and a concrete threat for Western democracies, whose institutions are compelled to find innovative ways to face it at different levels, social, political, legislative, cultural. In the last few years European Union has promoted different actions to favour a concrete interplay among structural reforms, legislative transnational initiatives and a strong educational process aiming to spread a new openness to different opinions and statements. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to learn how to see and interpret the signs of hate, not only to prevent acts of violence or detect a potential danger, but also to promote a recovery of credibility and trust in communication professionals and institutions. Laws, reforms as well as citizen dispositions are called for in this situation: certainly, a reaction and resilience strategy must face this challenge with various measures, from a regulatory production adapted to the new digital context, to awareness-raising, up to training approaches focused on media literacy. In other words, it is a question of promoting a real ‘turning point’ since, as Chambers (2021) pointed out, «a full and adequate response to hate speech requires that owners, users, and regulators of social media recognize the

fact that they now have a political democratic function in the public sphere. This does not mean that Facebook and YouTube need to see themselves as primarily news and information outlets. But it does mean thinking of users as democratic citizens and not simply as private consumers» (Chambers, 2021, p. 161).

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