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Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 2, Pages 109–113
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i2.6663

Editorial

The Process of the Transfer of Hate Speech to Demonization and Social Polarization

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Submitted: 2 January 2023 | Published: 17 May 2023

Abstract
We are living through a time of major political changes due to the rise of populist leaders and the resurgence of extreme ideological movements. The emergence of this phenomenon is due, to a large extent, to the ease with which these political actors can disseminate and spread their messages without any limits through social networks, leaving aside the former "fourth power" of the media as filterers and reinterpreters of information. Generally, the formula used by these leaders and movements is usually based on symbolic social division and polarization through hate speeches that allow demonizing their adversaries while antagonizing the issuers: a discursive "us" against "them" based on verbal violence to dehumanize an "exogroup." We want to discuss the importance of understanding the process of communicational transfer—which begins with hate speech and evolves into demonization and social polarization—as a strategic basis for creating an ideal scenario for the growth and strengthening of populist discourse, which is reductionist and simplifying in nature.

Keywords
hate discourse; political communication; political responsibility; social media

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Hate Speech, Demonization, Polarization, and Political Social Responsibility" edited by Luis M. Romero-Rodríguez (Rey Juan Carlos University), Pedro Cuesta-Valiño (University of Alcalá), and Bárbara Castillo-Abdul (Rey Juan Carlos University).

1. Introduction

Discussions around prejudice and rejection concerning an "exogroup" are extensive and long-standing in the social sciences (e.g., Brewer, 1999; Peherson et al., 2011). There is an intense connection between the use of language and the spread of prejudice toward "the other" (Maass et al., 1989). However, contrary to the paradigm of the intergroup linguistic bias theory hypothesis (Gorham, 2006; Whitley et al., 2016), in the transmission of prejudice through social networks, the most recent empirical evidence shows that descriptions of an exogroup cease to be vague or abstract to become specific, observable, and measurable when they are sheltered in official discourses (Crandall et al., 2018) or networks that allow one's identity to remain hidden (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2020, 2022; Fox et al., 2015).

Throughout history, there are many examples of how hate speech has been used from the discursive podium to demonize and astutely devalue different social groups and minorities. Verbal violence has served to dehumanize "otherness" and eliminate or diminish any empathy that may exist towards a group of "outsiders," symbolically stripping them of their humanity and rights and creating a scenario of forced polarization: an "us" versus "them" narrative that has even historically caused and justified genocide.

In this process, two phenomena implicitly occur: First, the demonization of the "other" becomes necessary to understand it as an enemy, to generate hatred towards

otherness, and place the other at the margins of the interests of the majority. The second phenomenon is the sacralization of the "we," unifying and uniting the heterogeneous group against the "symbolic enemy," giving a halo of heroism to the cause. This generates a "closing of ranks," a reification of "the other," and contributes to the feeling of exceptionality in attitudes and measures against the other. This has been the logic of the dehumanization process of almost all wars and the current basis of populist discourse, regardless of its ideology.

In this sense, populism, polarization, demonization, and hate speech are socio-political phenomena closely connected. They are based on conceptual simplifications that offer society a series of communicatively effective fallacies of causality, since simplistic dichotomies like bad/good, protagonist/antagonist, the people/enemies—without grey areas—have never ceased to be effective in the popular mobilization of feelings, especially the most effective ones of anger and fear.

Not surprisingly, recent research (e.g., Garzia & Ferreira Da Silva, 2022; Nai et al., 2022) has shown that affective-emotional polarization generates a stronger mobilization against a candidate (moved by rejection) rather than in their favor (moved by approval). This is a phenomenon called "negative voting," which is understood as a rational choice, a product of cognitive dissonance and/or retrospective evaluations. Voters may be reasoning less in favor of the best political alternative, instead seeking to avoid the one they deem to be worse. The more voters are flooded by predominantly negative information about some parties, candidates, and voters rather than others, the clearer it becomes that this information, which is readily accessible, "manipulates" their vote; when in doubt as to whom someone should vote for, they are triggered by negative information and moved by negative voting.

With the rise and popularization of the internet and social networks, since the beginning of this century there has been a process of disintermediation, or apomediation, in communication that makes it impossible to limit the spaces for the dissemination of this type of discourse, a role once played by the media as information filterers. This reticular and decentralized digital ecosystem has provided the perfect breeding ground for maximizing the visibility and scope of polarizing and demonizing arguments, which is why the emergence of populist movements, the growth of political disaffection and anti-politics, and the rise of intolerance towards those who do not think the same way are not trivial.

2. Hate Speech and Demonization: The Genesis of Social Polarization

Hate speech involves the promotion of messages that encourage the rejection, disparagement, humiliation, harassment, discrediting, and stigmatization of individuals or social groups based on very diverse attributes such as nationality, ideology, social class, race, creed, gender, or sexual orientation (Civila et al., 2020). In a context in which digital media and social networks facilitate the fast creation and dissemination of these messages, the relevance of hate speech derives, above all, from its role as a trigger for hate crimes. As several researchers suggest, there is a significant relationship between hate speech and physical violence (e.g., Muller & Schwarz, 2018).

Demonization, on the other hand, consists of the process by which the ideas and values of the orator (the source of the hate speech) are made sacred with dialectic and discursive resources, promoting a symbolic construction of reality based on the conceptual simplification of protagonist/antagonist where the "antagonist other" cannot be culturally accepted and is honestly inferior or inconsiderate. This "antagonist other" encapsulates hate paradigms, discriminations, and stereotypes that devalue it morally and perceptively, damaging its social identity and even its self-recognized identity (Goffman, 1963).

Through antagonization, demonization leads to an attitude of distrust against otherness among the public opinion. By turning "outsider" groups into morally inferior groups, criminalizing their opinions and all the while distracting and polarizing society, moral restrictions among the public are eliminated. On the other hand, the ideas of the orator (a sort of self-appointed representative of the majority) are exposed as correct and justified (Romero-Rodríguez & Römer-Pieretti, 2016).

The discursive process of demonization is composed in the following way (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2015): The "demonizing" orator explores the interests of the audience, relating to them and gaining their empathy; they confront the interests of the "antagonist group," building on disagreement points between the latter and their target audience; they defend the interests of their audience and accuse the "antagonist group" of going against them; they use disqualifying adjectives, usually short, blunt, and easy to memorize, and repeat them frequently in their speech—repetition is the key to persuasion and "institutionalization" of realities; finally, they take their attacks to a radical extreme to mark out and stigmatize their opponent (Figure 1).

Continuous exposure to demonization generates polarization, which, from a sociological perspective, is a phenomenon that appears when individuals align their beliefs in extreme and conflicting positions while other individuals hold more moderate or neutral opinions (Isenberg, 1986; Sunstein, 2002).

Symbolic power, as it has a great scope of diffusion, increases the capacity of an individual or institution to construct realities (Searle, 1995; Watzlawick, 1976) and even imposes order on these constructed realities (Bourdieu, 1989). When an individual or institution vested with symbolic power uses rhetoric to construct a "should be unique," adequate or pertinent on pain of being illegitimate, it eliminates any possibility of alternative ways of thinking, crystallizes a stereotype typified as normal—even sacralized—while institutionalizing,

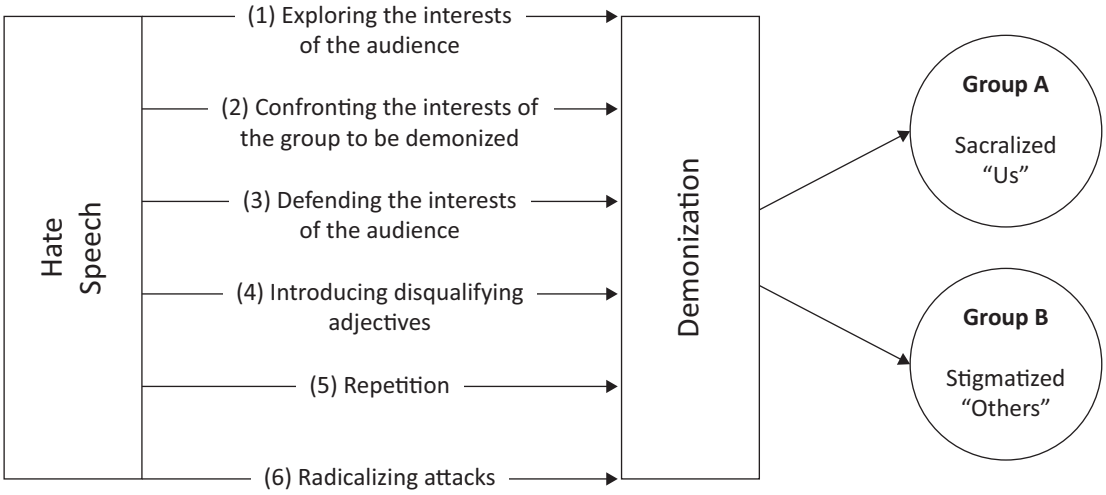

Figure 1. Process of communicational transfer of hate speech–demonization–polarization.

through discursive violence, the "other," disqualifying, trivializing, and rendering its social needs invisible. Society is divided into at least two opposing symbolic sectors, while the people's real problems are pushed into the background by the constant distraction allowed by the mediatized confrontation.

The conflict of polarization is rarely evaded, even if one does not want to enter into the discursive issues of political struggle (Prada Espinel & Romero-Rodríguez, 2018). One's positioning in a polarized scenario is compelled by social pressure—due to the so-called "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) or the "bandwagon" effect (Goidel & Shields, 1994)—to adapt to the group and reduce tensions. In this way, away from all reason and focused only on emotional management, it is in the fragmentation of the social fabric that common sense breaks down, and automatic solidarity appears, even with those leaders who operate against the most elementary human rights.

3. Political Social Responsibility: A Pending Matter for Stakeholders

Political actors, such as parties, candidates, citizen movements and activists, social media, among others, have a pending and unpostponable task on behalf of society: to lessen discursive confrontation, seek moderation, and return to politics as a means to solve people's problems.

No one can deny that polarization and demonization have become very useful and effective stratagems to distract society from the problems that affect them and mobilize the vote out of fear, anger, or extreme rejection. Therefore, the current situation of discursive confrontations in many Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela, among others, have very identifiable responsible parties who should be exhorted to moderation and ethics in the exercise of politics and social conciliation.

On the one hand, through legislative efforts, states must establish mandatory regulations to consider hate speech as a criminal offense while regulating and reducing as far as possible the demonizing and polarizing messages that political parties, electoral movements, activists, or other people with broad social reach in the media and social networks share. These efforts in creating laws that regulate hate speech must, of course, take care of the limits of freedom of expression, in the understanding that not every criticism against a group (ideological, economic, etc.) should be classified as a hate crime, so it is essential to be very accurate in these typifications to avoid that these laws can become a dictatorship of political correctness.

On the other hand, based on the premise that any information that society consumes has a political or economic interest behind it and that many political actors seek to divide society for electoral mobilization or mere emotional distraction, education should provide citizens with media and digital skills that will enable them to acquire critical and reflective analysis skills when consuming informative and opinionated content. Media education should be mandatory in primary and secondary schools since citizens are not usually taught how to consume media and messages (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2021).

Finally, but no less importantly, political parties should establish programs for the ethical training of their bases and youth, as well as internal disciplinary measures against the use of hate speeches and demonizing or polarizing messages, both to their militants and their leaders. Understanding that the responsibility (political and legal) of political parties, as institutions for social organization, is to promote coexistence and not hatred is fundamental. Unfortunately, in many countries, hate speech, demonization, and polarization are becoming the modus operandi of campaigning, either because of the ease of construction of reductionist messages or because this type of content generates fear and anger

in audiences, which facilitates the negative vote or rejection vote.

In this thematic issue, we wanted to open a space for plural debate on the triangulation between hate speech–demonization–polarization and populism, so that researchers from around the world could show the path of these phenomena in various scenarios such as racism, islamophobia, russophobia, hate speech against LGTBI groups, the rejection of economic elites, the nationalist discourse against immigration, the discourses on Europeanization, and the social responsibility of journalism in the face of social confrontation.

Many spaces and social phenomena are currently continuously demonized by hate speeches, so any research intention from the social sciences can be reductionist and simplifying in itself. However, researchers must focus on building spaces for debate and reflection on social polarization to be agents of change toward harmony and citizen coexistence.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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