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PORTUGAL FORWARD



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# RITA GUERRA, CALLING OUT HATE SPEECH

**FEAR** of others, often expressed through stigmatisation and stereotyping, and sometimes through physical violence, has existed throughout history. Today, however, purveyors of hate have anonymity to 'hate at a distance' in the belief that online offers them impunity.

Social Psychologist and academic Rita Guerra was the lead researcher on a remarkable recent project, kNOWHATE, funded by the European Union 'Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values' programme, with the aim to develop tools for identifying and countering online Hate Speech. "Because language is contextually-based, we made a strong argument we needed a project just focused on Portuguese," Guerra explains. "Hate Speech is best understood using an interdisciplinary approach that includes Law, Psychology, Sociology, Linguistics and Computer Science. The more theoretically driven and solid the data you use to train models, the better they perform in detecting Hate Speech. We combined Social Psychology, Linguistics and Computer Science to improve the quality of the detection mechanisms."

The digital transition has changed the way in which we interact with each other, making it easier to share information. An increase in populism and autocracy around the world is coinciding with greater use of social media which easily spreads disinformation and hate, acting as an echo chamber. "Unfortunately, we are tuned to give more weight to negative information," Guerra remarks.

Guerra comments that children are big consumers of social media, more so than adults, exposing them disproportionately to online hate.

The dangers of Hate Speech go beyond the victim, affecting society as a whole. The more we're exposed to Hate Speech, even if we're not ourselves the target, the more we normalize it, becoming desensitized, banalizing hate and feeling less empathy towards others.

"Often we're not aware that by sharing a post, we

may be reinforcing hate. This can have a huge impact on a target of that hate."

Fuelled by populist narratives that portray others as scapegoats or even enemies, Hate Speech normalises aggression. The Pyramid of Hate shows how Hate Speech can be one of the first steps towards hate crimes.

Hate is triggered by the idea that others are a physical, symbolic or economic threat. When people feel threatened, aggressive action becomes legitimized. One of the core motivations of hate is to remove the hate target, through exclusion, aggression, denial of rights of expression, or even killing and extermination.

During the 2024 US election campaign, Vice Presidential nominee JD Vance made the claim immigrants were eating cats. Guerra references a common idea in Europe and the United States that immigrants are a threat to society, taking away jobs, that they are even 'violent and inclined to crime'. "Removing humanity from others through dehumanisation facilitates doing harm. If we don't see others as humans like ourselves, it becomes easier to do negative things to them."

Linguistics shows us how these threats are expressed. Indirect Hate can be especially insidious, subtly employing humour and irony that can't, for now, be picked up by detection algorithms.

Hate Speech is growing worldwide, and scientific evidence proves that online Hate Speech correlates with



Rita Guerra at ISCTE (University Institute of Lisbon)

offline real-life hate crimes. The connection between online and offline events has been monitored in the United Kingdom by HateLab, led by Matthew Williams.

Guerra insists more needs to be done by Portugal's government to combat Hate Speech. "We have to communicate our research-based knowledge to society and policy makers. However, if politicians don't think a particular issue relevant for voters, it probably won't be important to implement. We need to go beyond politicised discussion of hate, characterised by attitudes like 'people

are becoming too sensitive, all this woke stuff...'

"At the policy level, the connection between online and offline hate is not yet taken seriously, with insufficient uptake of research and scientific knowledge. On the other hand, it's extremely encouraging to see civil society partners running awareness campaigns and discussing appropriate regulation."

Six Portuguese academic institutions took part in the kNOWHATE project. "The idea was to co-construct knowledge, using participatory approaches. You can't tackle Hate Speech without

involving its target communities. We involved three civil society partners: Casa do Brasil de Lisboa, who've done extensive work on online aggression and Hate Speech towards immigrants and refugees; SOS Racismo, one of the oldest organisations tackling racism in Portugal; and ILGA, the oldest organisation representing LGBT communities in Portugal.

"By increasing awareness, we can mobilise people to not endorse Hate Speech, develop positive Counter Speech messages and report hate to the authorities. Unfortunately, the tools

we have to produce Counter Speech online are not yet as effective as we would like."

## Creating inclusive identities

How about education? "We need to start as early as possible in schools, for all types of discrimination, not just Hate Speech. We have solid evidence education is key for making people more aware of fundamental rights. However, teachers are not yet fully trained to teach this. Schools need to have the tools to sensitize students. The articulation needs to improve between researchers, schools, communities and civil society, to cross-fertilise. If we don't react, Hate Speech will escalate. We need to face this situation and discuss it."

The Contact Hypothesis, proposed in 1954 by the American social psychologist Gordon Allport, is a time-honoured tool to reduce prejudice. "We have tons of statistics telling us this simple, almost naive, idea works. Bridges can be established through making people aware of what they have in common, creating inclusive identities, talking about 'we', rather than 'us' versus 'them'."

Rita Guerra is feeling optimistic: she has been invited to join a new Portuguese project, Cooperate, funded by the European scheme Serve, due to start in 2026. "It's an interesting project involving multiple stakeholders, from researchers to police officers, for a multi-entry approach, to improve reporting of hate crimes." Society is hot on the heels of those who 'hate at a distance'.

Guerra and her colleagues developed a powerful booklet *Unmasking Hate Speech: Knowledge is Our Weapon* (available online).



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