

МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ, ПРОБЛЕМЫ ПЕРЕВОДА (восточнославянские и западноевропейские языки)

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Bekaryan Lilit Alexandrovna
Yerevan State University
(Yerevan, Armenia)
lilitelt@gmail.com

ZOMBIES VS PIZZA CONSUMERS OR WHAT TRIGGERS CYBERHATE?

The present paper addresses three triggers that may push social website users to engage in hostile communication online. The research is supported by content analysis of the factual material retrieved from the virtual communication unfolding among Armenian users.

Keywords: hate speech, online hostility, Armenian social media users, Gyges effect, cyberhate triggers.

В статье рассматриваются три триггера, которые могут подтолкнуть пользователей социальных веб-сайтов к враждебному общению в Интернете. Исследование подтверждается контент-анализом фактического материала, извлеченного из виртуального общения, разворачивающегося среди армянских пользователей.

Ключевые слова: язык вражды, онлайн-враждебность, армянские пользователи социальных сетей, эффект Гигеса, триггер киберхата.

Increasing advances in technology have not only led to the digitization of education, healthcare, sales or finances, but also to that of disagreement or a clash of opinions. If in the past people opted for face-to-face interaction to voice their criticism, concern or dissatisfaction, the wide reach of social networking websites has maximized their opportunity to criticize, offend and verbally attack others freely. Manifestations of hostility in the social media may take various forms and under conflict-inducing circumstances may exacerbate and lead to what researchers call cyberhate.

Cyberhate is generally defined as electronic communication initiated by groups or individuals, with the purpose to incite violence, discrimination, and hatred against individuals and their community on a number of grounds which include but are not limited to color of skin, religion, sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political convictions, beliefs. In this research, I use the term “cyberhate”

to refer to all hateful online forms of expression whose objective is to belittle, insult or ridicule a person or group of persons who genuinely or allegedly have a background, beliefs and opinions different to theirs

Semantically, cyberhate pertains to the field of hate crime, more specifically that of hate speech, which, as we know, is abusive or threatening speech that expresses prejudice against a particular group, especially on the basis of race, religion, or sexual orientation. [1, 899–900] At the same time, the use of the term *hate speech* is inherent in a variety of contexts whereas *cyberhate* indicates hostile communication unfolding in the virtual space.

The title of the paper might be surprising to those who are alien to the Armenian context, however, it is vividly representative of the current split we currently have in the Armenian social media. The simple and seemingly innocent term ‘pizza consumer’ actually is a reference to the supporters of the previous government, who were believed to be so well-off that could afford to buy pizza for all their supporters during political demonstrations and rallies, whereas the word “zombie” that stands for a creature who is not able to think and attacks other creatures is a label that is often used by social media users in Armenia to target the adherents of the present government.

The factual material for the research was retrieved in the period 2019–2021 from more than fifteen Facebook pages that are open and are managed by popular Armenian influencers and media agencies. Most of the posts and comments under study were initially made in Armenian and I will provide their verbatim translations in English.

The analysis of hostile posts or comments of Armenian Facebook users shows that the most common targets include women, celebrities, government officials, LGBTQ community, and also people who are considered to be outcasts by the norms of Armenian society, e. g. life termers. Since the scope of the present paper does not let me dwell on all the examples, I will address two examples of online hostile communication brought about by two triggers mentioned in the paper: contagiousness and Gyges effect.

Hatred like COVID19 can be contagious. From marketing we know that individual choices may be shaped by those made by other consumers.[2] The same is true for the social media. When we see a hateful comment or a post that has provoked hostile communication, we may not be able to resist the temptation to join the conversation without any invitation, a practice, we would definitely avoid in non-virtual life. Let me illustrate this with an example of a snapshot of Facebook comments on the news that Astra Zeneca COVID-19 vaccine shots will be administered among the Armenian population aged above 15. The post generated a barrage of resentful comments targeted at the Armenian Minister of

Health whose photo was featured in the post /see Example N 1/. The English translation of the presented comments are as follows:

- Here's a new option for a genocide.
- Your voice makes me sick.
- First it should be tested on you so that you and the like of you disappear.

You can see the side effects of the vaccine and still want to use it. Burn in hell.

Example N 1

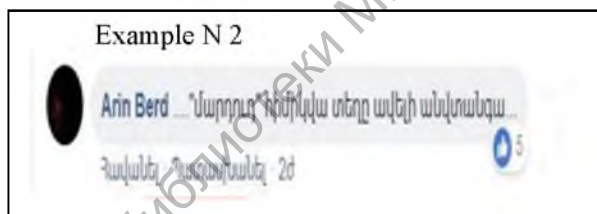


If the first comment sounds critical enough comparing the necessity of vaccinations to deliberate killing, the second comment is an explicit expression of anger and targets the image of the Minister. The comment makes use of possessive pronoun ‘your’ (‘qo’ in Armenian) that is grammatically singular in Armenian and can be used either with someone they know really well or someone they do not respect at all. The third comment following the post retains the same level of ‘respect’ for the Minister suggesting that the vaccine should be tested first on her and people like her (‘the like of yours’). The use of ‘like of yours’ suggests a clash of interests between the class the commentator adheres to and the group the Minister represents. The comment comprises a direct accusation “You can see the side effects of the vaccine and still want to use it” and is marked with an intense level of hostility as reflected in the imperative “Burn in hell”.

Research suggests that people are more inclined to demonstrate their hostility when they are denied the opportunity of keeping their antisocial behaviour in check and following the social cues of their interlocutor.[3] In this respect, it is interesting to note that very often users adopt fake identities as in this way they seek detachment by establishing a kind of distance between them and the recipient of the hostile message.

In psychology, this is known as disinhibition effect, a term suggested by psychologist John Suler. [3, pp. 321–326] Suler explains that people do not do or say things in cyberspace they do in real-time communication. The disinhibited behavior is also referred to as the Gyges effect, in reference to Plato’s myth of the Ring of Gyges. [4] The myth tells the story of a man with a magical ring, which brings him the power of invisibility; being invisible, he commits a number of immoral acts to seize the throne of Lydia. On the Internet, the Gyges effect has come to indicate the role of facelessness or online anonymity and the social repercussions it may take.

To illustrate this, let us consider the following example retrieved from Armenian journalist Zaruhi Mejlumyan’s Facebook page [5].



The comment was originally posted in Armenian and its verbatim English translation goes as follows “Your man is in a safer place now.” If we consider this comment without knowing the circumstances under which it was generated, we can notice no hostility in its message. However, when we probe further into the historical background of the context, we learn that Zaruhi Mejlumyan, the target of the comment, is an Armenian reporter and a human rights’ advocate who has always been defending the rights of life-terminers. Back in 2013, she married Mher Yenokyan, a life-terminer, who is still serving in prison. When the couple failed to publicise their marriage, there was a barrage of criticism against Zaruhi for having fallen in love with a man, who was labelled as ‘a life-terminer. It has been more than ten years that Zaruhi has been trying to prove that Mher deserves pardon after having served twenty-five years in prison.

One of the reasons for Mher not receiving the pardon was that there were lots of people who staged demonstrations in streets chanting that murderer like

him cannot be pardoned and need to stick to prison. The social media user's identity in the first example is worth some attention, as he is obviously not using his real name but that of a fortress /Arin Berd/, which in Armenian translation means 'a fortress of blood'. A psychologist would probably try to find a hidden implication even in the choice of the name, one of the components of which is 'blood'. Having adopted this topographic name for his social media presence, the user obviously seeks to maintain invisibility by faking his identity. The dark image he has chosen for his Facebook account, with the cap concealing most part of the face supports his intention. At the same time, his adoption of a historical landmark of the country as a social media name may speak of his willingness to construct an online identity of himself as someone who represents historical Armenia, does not welcome changes and may defy such unconventional decisions as the one supporting a commuted sentence for a life-terminer.

In his comment "Your man is in a safer place now", the user adopts an extremely informal tone through the use of an informal possessive pronoun despite the fact that he addresses a woman he has not met and does not know. It is also interesting to note his choice of the word 'man' instead of 'husband' and the fact that he placed the word in inverted commas as if questioning the validity of their marriage. Zaruhi, the recipient of the comment, perceived this comment as one threatening the safety and security of her husband, as she reported it.

Finally, boredom may be another reason for social media users to initiate hostile communication. There is an interesting piece of research conducted by Statistics Canada in 2020 that records a dramatic increase in hate crimes on the Internet [6]. While public health measures like the lockdown or quarantines imposed during COVID-19 pandemic deprived people of opportunities to commit crimes, they led to the rise of Internet-related crimes and online aggression. Why did this happen? The rise and spread of COVID-19 created the so-called 'existential vacuum' for most people suggesting alienation, emptiness and boredom. In his book, Austrian neurologist Victor Frankl posits that when facing an existential vacuum in their real life, people may start to fill it with "stuff" that may provide some kind of satisfaction, for example, overeating, excessive drinking or drug abuse [7]. For the 21st -century users this could also mean seeking 'comfort in virtual life, pretending to be part of virtual conversations trying to fill the vacuum with anger and hatred.

To sum up, the triggers for cyberhate are not limited to those shared in the paper. Further research is required to develop a more comprehensive picture of the factors that can generate and incentivize cyberhate, as well as to suggest mechanisms for addressing them.

Sources of Electronic Data

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