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Hate speech in the Mainstream Media: Transforming conflict dynamics through different narratives

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ABSTRACT: From Geert Wilders' complaint about Muslims to Dating Coach Julien Blanc and his hint about Asian women and oral sex, hardly a day goes by without a news item about hate speech being published in European newspapers. How the media deals with this kind of discourse can either scandalize or legitimize exclusion.

This paper aims to show the way in which the media builds narratives of conflicts surrounding hate speech can provide it with legitimacy or contribute to delegitimate such contents. Based on Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action and on Hallin's sphere model, the purpose of this paper is also to identify the variables that lead to communication conflicts being narrated as a scandal, a legitimate controversy or as a litany.

This will be illustrated in three cases of international media controversies surrounding hate utterances: the high profile polemics surrounding US-American geneticist James Watson and German politician Thilo Sarrazin, as well as the "litany" case of US Pastor Steven Anderson.

Introduction

What if a Nobel Prize winner claims Black people are less intelligent than White? Should journalists report on it or not? Should politicians take a position on it or keep silent? Should the representatives of minorities react to that? And how? How should media actors deal with communication conflicts surrounding hate speech?

The purpose of this paper is to answer these questions by illustrating how hate speech can be either legitimized or taken as an illegitimate opinion, depending on the media narrative. Although the influence of extramediatic factors is not denied, the focus of this paper is on the often ignored or underestimated intramediatic dimension. Further, it aims to provide a set of "tools" or variables that lead to a media narrative and consequently, to the legitimation of this kind of discourse.

As dealt with below, narrative determines not only the existence, but also the legitimacy of communication conflicts in the mainstream media. Further, the media legitimizes a hate speech-utterance not by thematizing or winning consensus for it, but by discussing/submitting it to a process of argumentation. As can be seen below, hate speech can be legitimized by media narratives because of the speakers and the network they mobilize, and not because of the contents.

This paper is structured in three parts. First of all, the problem of communication conflicts is raised. Secondly, the question "what is hate speech" is addressed, discussing how the mainstream media deals with communications conflicts surrounding hate speech. The final part analyses the different narratives of hate speech in the mainstream media and their distinctive features. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

Communication conflicts

A communication conflict is nothing more than uttered, communicated contradiction (Luhmann, 1995, 389). Consequently, it involves not only **different**, but also **opposing** opinions (Luhmann, 1995, 392).

The object of this contradiction does not only or not necessarily need to be the truthfulness of the utterance. As Habermas explains, utterances have different validity claims. In the case of constative utterances, the speaker claims truth; in the case of regulative utterances, the speaker claims rightness; and in the case of expressive utterances, he/she claims sincerity (cf. Habermas, 1984, 65). *This means that, in a communication conflict, one does not need to contradict the sentence "They breed like rats"* (cf. Fallaci, 2002, 139) *with the counterclaim "They do not breed like rats". The opponent can also criticize it for contradicting an underlying norm.*

Hate speech

Hate speech can be defined as the public discourse through which a latent antinomy between groups of people is intentionally aroused and the purpose or outcome of which is a hierarchisation of such groups (cf. Delgado and Stefancic, 2004; Butler, 1997; Matsuda et al., 1993).

Consequently, communication conflicts surrounding hate speech involve special kinds of contradictions. In such conflicts, the subject of contradiction is not opposing opinions such as, for instance, opinions about democracy vs. dictatorship or welfare state vs. free

market. Groups of people are targeted, so that people, and not an issue, are the "problem" to be tackled.

The legitimation of a communication conflict

The media can deal with conflicts in different ways. It can:

I. not talk about a conflict;

II. talk about it, while ignoring the conflictive element of a situation and not discussing it[2];

III. define and frame a subject as an issue;

IV. define, frame and discuss it (cf. Lang and Lang, 1981, 466 with regard to the difference between III. and IV.);

V. create conflicts by treating an event or defining a subject as an issue, as something that has to be discussed.

This means that the existence of a conflict outside the media is neither enough nor necessary for a media controversy.

In order for there to be a communication conflict in the media, two kinds of journalistic processing are necessary: thematization and problematization. These forms of processing also result in different media narratives.

Through thematization, the media talks about issues, but does not discuss them. Issues are placed on the agenda, but are not transformed into media issues or into questions which media actors (journalists or sources) argue about.

Through problematization, the media does not only mention or define problems, but also discusses them. In this case, issues generate a media controversy. Only in the case of problematization – when communication is contradicted – is there also a **communication** conflict (cf. Luhmann, 1995).

In this paper, special attention will be given to the mainstream media. This is because although hate speech is also uttered in other kinds of media (such as, for instance, on-line hate groups), the mainstream media has a privileged role and often works as a kind of "legitimation court". So, the question is: How does the mainstream media legitimize the contents of communication conflicts?

Daniel Hallin (1989) identifies three kinds of media narratives, depending on where journalists "allocate" issues. They can be placed in three different spheres: consensus, legitimate controversy and deviance.

In the sphere of deviance, journalists see themselves as keepers of moral rules and values. There is only one right point of view. If sources are heard, then their role is also to condemn the action or utterance.

In the sphere of legitimate controversy, subjects become issues and are accompanied by a process of argumentation. Journalists are compelled to present opposing views. This is the case of debates in parliaments or election campaigns. In this case, journalists play the role of observers and mediators.

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[2] This happens for instance with media coverage about scientific controversies, when media reporting presents a new hypothesis as being "the new truth", rather than one of several hypotheses (cf. Luiz, 2007).

In the sphere of consensus, journalists take shared values and assumptions for granted, so that they do not feel compelled to "hear the other side". In this sphere there are usually no communication conflicts.

FIGURE 1 – HALLIN'S SPHERE MODEL (Hallin, 1989, 117)
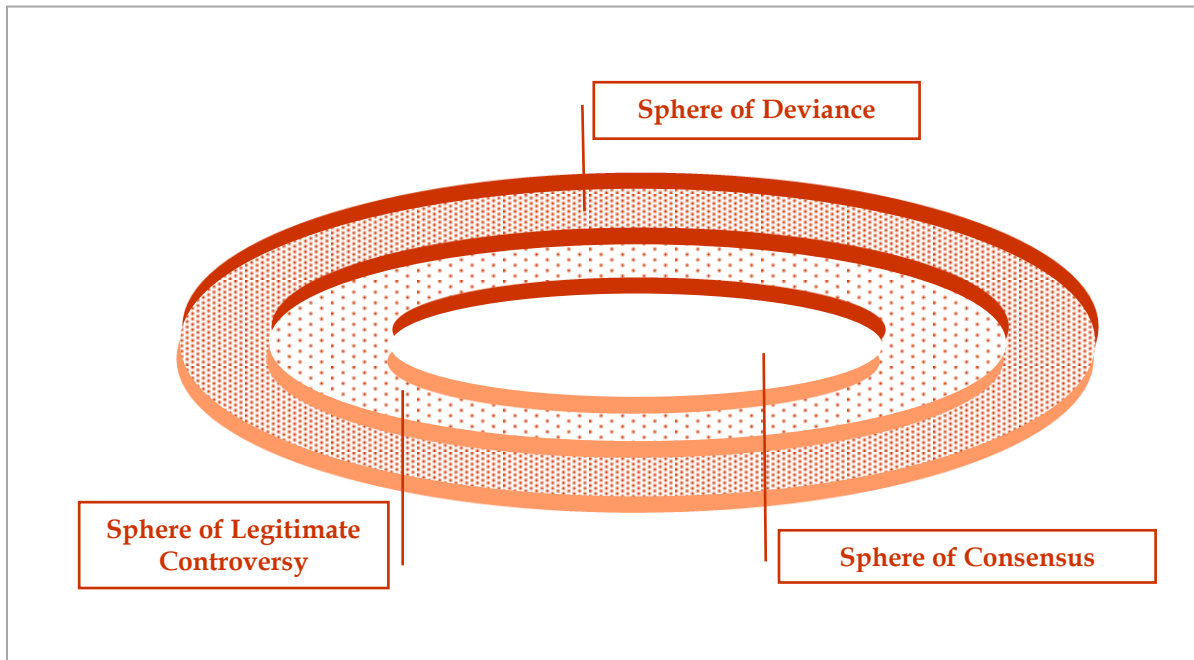
To put it concisely, not only the existence, but also the legitimacy of a communication conflict is determined by the media narrative.

It can therefore be affirmed that the media legitimizes points of view by discussing them or submitting them to a process of argumentation, i.e. by problematizing them, and not by thematizing or agreeing with them (cf. Hallin, 1989, 117; Habermas, 1984, 197).

Problematization, in turn, is a consequence of the media attributing or recognizing a validity claim in relation to such utterances, since – as Habermas (1984, 197) asserts – by accepting a validity claim raised by the speaker, the listener affirms that the utterance is worthy of being recognized (even if he or she does not agree with it).

Media narratives on hate speech

At least three different kinds of hate speech narrative can be identified in the mainstream media: scandal, legitimate controversy or litany (as opposed to consensus). They correspond to an issue being placed in the spheres of deviance, legitimate controversy and consensus.

FIGURE 2 – Media narratives on hate speech
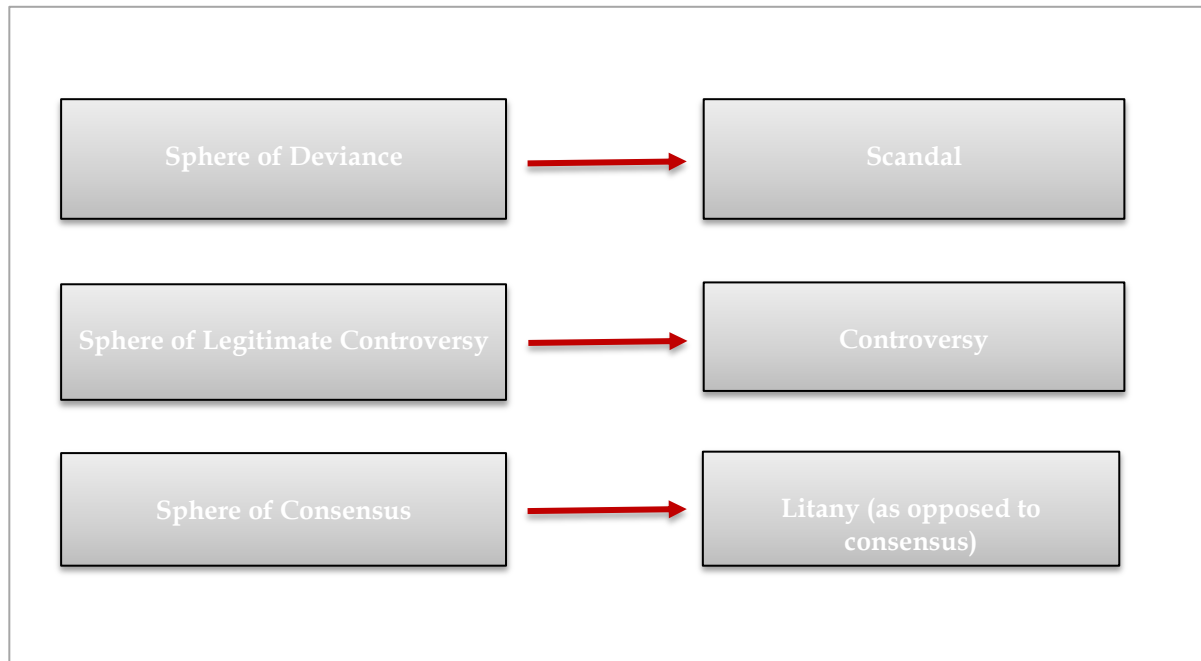
The media can both report and discuss the case and, by so doing, create a communication conflict. In these cases, the discourse and/or the actor is taken seriously and the debate in the media either turns into a scandal or is dealt with as a legitimate controversy.

In the case of scandals, speaker and utterance are taken seriously. It is the act of expressing such utterances, and not their content, that turns them into an issue. In the case of scandals, journalists usually take on the role of keepers of moral rules and values and judge the contents and/or the speakers. If the speaker is heard at all, this occurs just to "pillory" him or her. Either journalists or other sources take the floor, but the speaker has no further chance other than to defend himself/herself. New reporting occasions involve a variety of subjects or frames. This factor prolongs the lifespan and leads to the escalation of the conflict (cf. Kepplinger, 2011, 77).

This was the case of the media controversy surrounding the US-American geneticist and Nobel Prize winner James Watson. In an interview with The Sunday Times on October 14th 2007, Watson asserted:

> "…inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa" …"all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours – whereas all the testing says not really"… "people who have to deal with Black employees find this is not true" (Watson, In Hunt-Grubbe, 2007, 06).

Watson and his statements were taken seriously and his having expressed these utterances became an issue for the mainstream press not only in the UK, but also in North and South America and Western Europe. Although Watson had a chance to justify his point of view in the daily "The Times", the debate was mostly concentrated not on the contents themselves, but rather on the utterance of such contents. Not only journalists, but also sources such as British government's Skills Minister, David Lammy, Professor Steven

Rose (Open University, founding member of the Society for Social Responsibility in Science), Professor Colin Blakemore (Oxford University), among others, took the floor.

Events like the cancellation of Watson's lecture at the London Science Museum or the reaction of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (where Watson worked) about the case provided the media with new reporting occasions which kept the conflict alive. On October 18th 2007 Watson apologized for his comments[3].

Through this narrative, the media reinforces social and moral rules by avoiding the discussion of such contents. The aftermath is the exclusion of these contents from the pool of legitimate opinions. Such speakers catch media attention and can give rise to a debate, but not one surrounding the contents of the utterance.

Hate speech can also trigger legitimate controversies in the mainstream media. In legitimate controversies, the speaker and their contents are not only taken seriously, but also considered legitimate, namely, discussable. The contents of such utterances turn into issues and are submitted to a process of argumentation.

In legitimate controversies, journalists behave mostly as mediators and their sources take the floor. The speaker has the chance to talk about his/her contents. The number and the diversity of sources are greater than for litany and scandals. As with scandals, the network of speakers that the hate speaker arouses generates new reporting occasions. These involve a variety of subjects or frames. Because of this, legitimate controversies on hate speech can last longer than litany and scandals and – as with scandals – the conflict escalates.

This kind of controversy can be observed in the case involving the then Germany central banker and politician Thilo Sarrazin. In an interview given to the generally unknown magazine "Lettre International" in October 2009, Sarrazin made statements about the inferiority of Muslim immigrants. According to this politician, this group is less intelligent than other immigrant groups and refuses to integrate. Ten months later, he amplified his theses about immigrants and Muslims and published the book "Germany abolishes itself". Through it he became the author of the most successful nonfiction book in Germany since the Second World War.

The speaker and his statements were intensively discussed in the German media. His contents about Muslims turned into a national issue, as illustrated by the comment of Professor Ernst Elitz, one of the founders of Deutschland Radio: "Thilo Sarrazin is a scandalous author but he also speaks the truth about Germany"[4].

Sarrazin was able to submit his contents to a process of argumentation in different media, ranging from newspapers to TV talk-shows. An array of sources made pronouncements on these contents, including the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the president of the second largest and at the time oppositional, social democratic party (SPD), Sigmar Gabriel. By themselves the pronouncements of such prominent sources on the case generated newsworthy reporting occasions. Events like the reaction of the German Central Bank or the press conference of the Central Council of Jews in Germany about

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[3] Dean, Cornelia (2007): Nobel Winner Issues Apology for Comments About Blacks. Retrieved 16. July 2015 from http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/19/science/19watson.html?_r=0

[4] Hewitt, Gavin (2010): German angst over immigration. Retrieved 16. July 2015 from http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/gavinhewitt/2010/08/german_angst_over_immigration.html

the case also provided a variety of subjects, thus leading to the conflict having a longer lifespan and its escalation.

Through this media narrative, the media promotes the discussion of such contents. The aftermath is the placement of these contents in the pool of legitimate opinions. Such speakers catch media attention and arouse a debate surrounding the contents of the utterance.

Furthermore, a hate speech-utterance can be treated as litany when the media reports on the case, but does not discuss it. In the media reports about litany, speaker and utterances are not taken seriously. The case is thematized, but generally not discussed or problematized.

No one takes the floor except the hate speaker and the journalist. The journalist does not necessarily feel compelled to act as "the judge" and will not hear "the other side". In cases of litany, no or only a few sources are heard. This form of narrative provides the media with fewer occasions for reporting. New reporting occasions are provoked by new events about the same subject and/or frame.

Press coverage about the comments of the US-American Pastor Steven Anderson illustrates this kind of narrative. In December 2014, in a sermon titled "Aids: The Judgement of God", Anderson told the congregation of the Faithful Word Baptist Church in Tempe, Arizona, that the world could be "Aids free by Christmas" if all gay people were executed[5].

The media covered his comments, but Anderson was not able to trigger a debate about what he assumed to be a link between Aids and homosexuality. This case generated a few reports, in which no other sources were heard. In the articles, journalists refer to other earlier statements made by Anderson – for instance, "women who take the contraceptive pill are 'whores'" and his prayer for the death of President Barack Obama. All these earlier reporting occasions dealt with the same subject and were framed similarly.

TABLE 1 – Features of media narratives on hate speech

	Scandal	Legitimate Controversy	Litany
Problematization	Yes	Yes	No
Object of discussion	Speaker/action of uttering	Utterance (content)	No
Journalist role	Advocating	Mediator	Narrower/Advocating
Sources	Low	High	No/very low

5 Molloy, Antonia (2014): US pastor Steven Anderson says gay people should be executed for an 'Aids free Christmas'. Retrieved 16. July 2015 from
http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-pastor-steven-anderson-says-gay-people-should-be-executed-for-an-aids-free-christmas-9903543.html

Reporting occasions	Few (different subjects/frames)	Many (different subjects/frames)	Few (same subject/frame)
Legitimation of contents	No	yes	No

By choosing this narrative, the media reinforces social and moral rules by treating this kind of contents as irrelevant or nonsense. The aftermath is the exclusion of these speakers from the pool of serious journalistic sources. They catch media attention, but are not able to arouse a discussion.

Conclusions

How does the media legitimize communication conflicts surrounding hate speech? Or rather: Which variables lead to the legitimation of hate speech by a media narrative?

The first variable that leads to a media narrative is the speaker. The ability to trigger a debate or to give rise to a controversy depends on whether the hate speaker already has access to the media and holds a high position in his/her own system (science, politics or economy) (cf. Thiele, 2001, 21). If this is the case, he or she will probably be taken seriously, in spite of the contents. The speaker's prominence also makes possible the upsurge of networks of both opponents and supporters.

This second variable can unfold in three different aspects. The first is the existence of the conflict. If contradictions do not arise, there is no communication conflict. Moreover, the media cannot raise an issue without the participation of other institutions and elites (Lang and Lang, 1981, 446). This also determines the conflict's repercussion or range: if there are no public claims made by **prominent** opponents or supporters, the contents will be considered to be either litany or consensus. Last but not least, not only how prominent the hate speaker is, but also how long their supporters follow them, is pivotal. Losing their support can lead to scandalization (cf. Kepplinger, 1994, 231).

The third variable for identifying the leading factors underlying a media narrative of hate speech is the subject of the argumentation. What is put in the spotlight? The speaker, their utterances or the content of their utterances? If contents are discussed, they are made discussable and, therefore, legitimate.

The fourth and last variable is timing. These conflicts follow attention cycles (cf. Downs, 1972; Luhmann, 2000), according to the generation of new reporting occasions. Generating reporting occasions means keeping the conflict alive. Doing so when media attention is declining can even rekindle the conflict.

How should media actors deal with communication conflicts surrounding hate speech? Considering this set of variables makes clear that what is pivotal is not if, but how journalists report on hate speech. The same applies to the issue of how politicians and minority representatives should react with regard to: Taking a position about what? About the speaker, their utterances or the contents? When to keep silent? When the conflict is arising or slowing down?

Issues surrounding media narratives of hate speech can seldom be answered with Yes/No-Codes. Dealing with this kind of discourse in the mainstream media requires the

consideration of a group of factors or – as mentioned here – a set of variables. This paper aims to offer a contribution to tackling this problem by identifying them.

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