

Anti-Semitism 2.0: Online hate speech is spreading and radicalizing



Analysts say the firestorm over data hijacking has helped users wake up to how social media information is used by marketers and others **Oli SCARFF (AFP/File)**

Anti-Semitic expression can be found in all corners of the internet - in news reporting, in the comments section, in social media posts - even in educational forums meant to help students with their homework.

The general feeling that anti-Semitic sentiments are spreading online is now being backed by a four-year-long German study, which reviewed some 265,000 comments from more than 66,000 websites.

The research by Berlin's Technical University, the results of which were published Wednesday, points to massive increases in the number of anti-Semitic content in

German-language websites.

In 2007, researchers led by linguist Monika Schwarz-Friesel, flagged less than eight percent of the reviewed posts as expressing hostility towards Jews or reflecting anti-Semitic stereotypes. In 2017, their share spiked to more than 30 percent.

“These developments in the virtual world correlate in the real world with anti-Semitic attacks, insults, threats and attacks,” Schwarz-Friesel cautioned.

Analyzing the linguistic nature of anti-Semitism online, researchers also observed a significant radicalization in the expressed views. Anti-Semitic statements in the online sphere have undergone normalization in recent years, they deemed, and what was previously only implied – it now being openly and unapologetically stated.



*Men wear Jewish skullcaps, or kippa, as they attend a demonstration against anti-Semitism in Cologne, Wednesday, April 25, 2018. **Henning Kaiser/dpa via AP***

Three types of anti-Semitic expression were identified: “Classic anti-Semitism” reflecting stereotypes dating back to the Middle Ages; post-Holocaust anti-

Semitism, where Jews are being accused of exploiting “their” Holocaust to promote their agenda; and Israel-related tropes that can be viewed as anti-Semitic if they include “conceptualizations of the classic anti-Jewish sentiment.”

In most of the reviewed time period, classic stereotypes – like the ones depicting Jews as monsters or pests, or referring to the “International World Jewry” or blood rituals – were the most widespread.

The study also noted that even displays of solidarity with the Jewish community in response to violent incidents, fueled hatred of Jews. For example, 37 percent of the online comments on coverage of the “Berlin wears a kippa” campaign last April were anti-Semitic.

Researchers stressed that extremist websites and forums inaccessible to the general public were excluded from the study, evidencing that anti-Semitism is a problem in mainstream society as well. The comments were found on Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, as well as the websites of major news outlets, using keywords such as “Israel,” “Jew,” “Middle East,” and “Anti-Semitic/ism.”

Avoiding these messages is nearly impossible, the study suggests, as they are found even in unrelated online discourses – and the cloak of anonymity provided by the internet allows anti-Semitism to spread on a larger scale, while the authorities or school officials are left powerless to counter it.

“Young people in particular get their first impressions of what happens in the world through online sources,” noted Matthias J. Becker, linguist and expert on online hate speech. “That is why how ethnic and religious groups, historical eras or ideological concepts are explained online plays a crucial role in shaping the mindset of future generations.

“If there is an online climate in which a specific group is permanently defamed and excluded, people might start to act in the same way in the real world.”



*FILE - A Ukrainian woman holding an umbrella walks by anti-Semitic graffiti on a wall in central Kiev Monday, June 5, 2006. Ukraine's Jewish community has complained about an increase in anti-Semitism and attacks in the ex-Soviet republic. **AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky***

But can online anti-Semitism really be quantified? Some journalists reviewing the findings questioned whether a qualitative study on anti-Semitism can accurately determine how often such utterances are being made, as hundreds of thousands of online comments and social media posts are generated daily.

"Anti-Semitism on the internet is responding to triggers," explained Becker. "The amount of anti-Semitic comments in a given year can depend, among other things, on whether there has been a military operation in Gaza or on the intensity of the discourse in that year over the German past and the commemoration culture.

"The internet is a very complex medium and different anti-Semitic stereotypes are reproduced as a response to different triggers. This complexity makes it difficult to assess by how much online anti-Semitism is increasing. However, it is definitely growing."

Becker, who in his own research analyzed Israel-related online comments posted by readers of the left-leaning British and German news websites *The*

Guardian and *Die Zeit*, noticed not only the reproduction of stereotypes, but also the readers' tendency to project onto Israel their own country's guilt over historical injustices committed. Thus, in Germany, they drew comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany, while in the UK, readers likened the Israeli occupation to the British colonial rule.

But studies that shed light on the extent of modern anti-Semitism in Germany are usually met with denial or relativization of their findings, says Becker. Often, the uncovered attitudes are also dismissed as imported by migrants coming from Arab countries.

"But as this new study focuses on anti-Semitism in the whole of German society, the comfortable projection of anti-Semitism on Muslim milieus does not fit in here," he stressed. "That's why this study is much more thought provoking, and it shows that - also in regards to other hate ideologies - parts of the Internet are getting out of hand."

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