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Media Literacy Education and Digital Transformation.
New Challenges for Civic Universities

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Abstract

It is necessary to increase media literacy education to minimize prejudice, violence, languages of hate and religious intolerance and to promote social justice and respect for human rights. Universities' role, in this sense, such as the schools' one, is manifold also in promoting peace and spreading peaceful development because all educational institutions have the task of educating to reflexivity, encouraging responsible citizenship and not merely of transmitting knowledge.

We propose to investigate, as researchers involved in the academic "RUniPace" Italian network, support by contrast to the hate speech in the university social media and the consequent civic protagonism of the universities in their students' education. In particular, universities are promoting a specific language, and a consequent behaviour oriented towards respect for human rights and social justice. MLE, supports and educates the recognition, awareness and avoidance of potentially harmful content spreading online, hate speech inciting violence. At the same time, MLE promotes justice, peaceful and inclusive societies and provides access to justice for all, and builds effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. It is important to promote peace through digital technologies, especially social media, which are a privileged tool of choice, especially for teenagers and young adults.

We conducted a teaching research laboratory. Our students explored Facebook, TikTok and Instagram and specifically unofficial groups that have many college students as users. In the second phase we conducted a qualitative analysis of the content found (60 items) in university groups, pages, and profiles by collecting news, posts, photos, and comments contained on social media. The last phase was intended to encourage students' awareness of productive social media use and content.

Hateful content, violent language, controversy and resentment prevail on unofficial Facebook, Instagram and TikTok university pages, profiles and groups. Students rarely post peace content. The spread and use of violent language also have consequences in non-digital relationships. There is a need for education to produce and understand digital contents, especially on social

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1. Introduction

We live in a digital society (Lupton, 2014) and hate speech is a menace to democratic values, social stability, and peace have for individuals, understood as virtual reality separated from real life. The world of social media is perceived as virtual, and therefore, it is not necessary to follow the standard rules of social behaviour, respect and civil coexistence. However, even in virtual reality, it is necessary to translate sustainable development principles, and it is necessary to educate to live according to precise social rules through educational media literacy.

Goal 16 for a Global Sustainable Development promotes justice, peaceful and inclusive societies, and provides access to justice for all, and builds effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (ONU, 2015).

Several studies show that people exposed to hate speech, hoax news, and religious intolerance on social media have low educational media literacy levels (MacAveney et al., 2019; Muhid et al., 2019; Waqas et al., 2019).

The exponential growth of digitization in the world has led to various advantages, related to the possibility of immediate exchange of information worldwide and between all citizens of the world, especially through the world of social media. At the same time, this exponential growth in digitization is fraught with risks. The risks are mainly related to hate speech, which threatens democratic values, social stability, and peace (Wahyuningsih, 2018). For many people, social media is experienced as a virtual world, which is different from the real world. It is like a "virtual place" that does not exist, where social behaviour, respect, and civil coexistence are unnecessary (Ferdorov, 20155).

So, it is vital in the social media world to support and educate to translate the rules of the real world into the virtual world to live according to precise social rules. Educational media literacy plays a leading role in promoting social justice. In this sense, the educational task of universities is the real challenge of this historical period [UN, 2019].

This research is aligned with UNESCO's overall strategy to combat disinformation by fostering the information as a public good and strengthening the transparency of the internet ecosystem." (Tse, 2015).

The study will contribute to promote just, peaceful, and inclusive societies and to combat xenophobia, racism and intolerance (Michukyan, 2016).

Digital communications are fundamental in the life of every individual. It is crucial to train people by promoting digital literacy in general as well as media and information literacy.

According to UNESCO's reflection on the "Futures of Education, " media and computer literacy development offer meaningful solutions for counter hate speech. Media and computer literacy provide a dimension of how education could be

rethought through awareness of freedom of expression, knowledge of one's rights online, fighting online against hate speech and cyberbullying. Media and computer literacy appear as an essential tool that crosses educational and cultural social contexts.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. *Around the World in a few Minutes: the Spread of Hate Speech*

Social media are becoming instrumental platforms to spread harmful content with a significant impact on conflict dynamics and peace. Furthermore, social media, apart from spreading hate speech, are also used to spread disinformation. Through social media, it takes just a few minutes for false and dangerous news to go around the world and become viral (Lupton, 2014). When it comes to social media, the term "viral" comes up very often. By viral, we mean content that spreads very quickly through new means and social media. The term viral comes from the word "virus" because the message, like the exponential spread of a virus, is transmitted by expanding very quickly, from person to person, through the principle of sharing and re-sharing information, messages, or photos. What makes a content viral is undoubtedly the intense degree of involvement it brings with it and the ability to "take root" in one or more virtual communities, transmitting it quickly and, above all, for free (Wahyuningsih, 2018).

Users tend to underestimate the concrete effects of hate speech and what happens in the virtual and viral world. The problem is that some users do not seem to be aware enough of their social media behaviours (Barry et al., 2017). Many do not seem to realizethe psychological gravity that offenses and insults, even if received online, can have on the recipients. There are also numerous studies in this sense: some, focused on ethnic-racial offenses, show, for example, how in the long-term minorities tend to recognize themselves in the characteristics, albeit negative, attributed to them (Michikyan & Suarez-Orozco, 2016).

There is also an effect of group extremism that makes hate speech such a widespread phenomenon on the web, when everyone is sure of addressing selected audiences such as someone's social circles or users who share someone's positions, everyone has once again less hesitation in manifesting even the most extreme and less respectful positions of the other, sure to enjoy the protection of one's own echo chamber (Council of Europe, 2020). The echo chambers are those contexts and those conditions which, on the media, lead to the creation of a state of ideological isolation of individuals. Inside the so-called echo chambers, in fact, mostly news and sources would circulate with a confirming nature of political, religious positions, etc. of individuals. In the echo chambers, the dissemination of news, contents, photos and information is therefore more viral (Bergsma & Carney, 2008).

2.2. Hate Speech in Social Media World

Hate speech is a set of behaviours, verbal and non-verbal, or attitudes and gestures, that incite violence or are discriminatory of a group (or an individual belonging to a group) based on ethnic-racial, political-religious, sexual orientation (Lupton, 2014). However, in its most common use, the expression "hate speech" refers to all those behaviours, primarily verbal, violent, threatening, and disrespectful of the other, which create a climate of hostility and an environment more generally not favourable to minorities of the kind (Michikyan & Suarez-Orozco, 2016).

Experts distinguish between two primary forms of hate speech. In the first form, the threat does not go beyond the mere verbal dimension; it can be, in a sort of primordial heritage, a response to dangers that come from the environment and involves transformations in the voice, gestures, posture. In the second form, however, the intentions of those who make hate speech ignore only the verbal level, and threats can also be physical and corporeal (UN, 2015).

Hate speech is an older phenomenon than the web, although this expression is used today, and it refers mainly to Internet hate speech (or online hate speech) (Lupton, 2014). The possibility of falling into hate speech, after all, has always been a concrete risk when confronted with others in a public space.

Digital environments, such as is social media, would seem more predisposed to the proliferation of offences, exasperated and provocative tones, disrespectful and discriminating attitudes. The first, more traditional, indicted the anonymity of this type of environment (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). When everyone hides behind the nick and avatar of a social profile, and if someone is protected behind someone screens, everyone would have less hesitation in expressing even the most extreme and less politically correct positions. This was a problem that existed in the old "thematic forums of web 1.0, after all, the so-called flaming (i.e. the publication of messages with hostile and provocative tones) was one of the worries of the moderators (Ferdorov, 2015).

2.3. Peace Speech in Social Media World

In the dialogue for peace, social media takes on extraordinary importance. In recent years, there are examples in social media of campaigns that have successfully mobilized and empowered people, notably the youth, to allow an inclusive dialogue on issues such as climate change (Muhid et al., 2019).

In 2019, thousands of students around the world took to the streets "physically" to demand stronger action on climate change by their governments. Yet they have created a movement that has continued to live on the web above all through social media and through the network they have actively continued to protest. It is called "Global strike for future". It is the global movement of young people who shout loudly: "We do not want your hopes, we want you to join us". The demonstrations, inspired in particular by the young activist Greta Thunberg, will cover more than 100 countries, with young people ready to ask for an intensification of actions to tackle climate change on a global level. A social impetus on the part of young people,

which many would not have expected, used to thinking of today's teenagers as constantly focused on their devices and not very attentive to what is happening in the world (Schilder et al., 2016).

Yet, the demonstrations of these young people seem to be a sign that the great social movements are increasingly starting from the web and social media and are constructively influencing governments. Additionally, there are examples on social media of initiatives and narratives that create incentives for peace rather than violence. There are discussion forums on peace building that encourage that there can be a positive way to "live" in the world of social media (UN, 2015).

2.4. Media Literacy: the Digitization of Educational Processes

Literacy (translated into Italian with the somewhat reductive term of "literacy") indicates the ability of an individual reading and writing and calculation skills (Tse et al., 2015).Media literacy assumes strategic importance, especially for the young population. It has been statistically proven, in fact, that children and adolescents spend most of their time in contact with different media: from television to the internet, to mobile telephony. The use of the media, especially in recent years with the advent of smartphones, represents the activity that covers most of the hours of a teenager's day (Council of Europe, 2020).

And, by the media, young people are continually influenced, both in their intellectual life and in their emotional and social life. It is from there that they draw important elements to build their own identity, their own models of health and well-being, and of social behaviour. It is clear, therefore, that from an educational and training point of view, it is necessary not so much to protect young people from unwanted messages, but to make them skilled in using the media and the information conveyed there in a critical and creative way to promote their individual and social development (Maghsoudi et al., 2020).

For several years, the world of public health has recognized the role and influence that the media exert on people's health choices and behaviours in terms of information conveyed and models of reference. With the advent of social media, smartphones, and new technologies in general, the media are increasingly rooted and pervasive in our daily life, and therefore they must be considered to all intents and purposes as social and cultural determinants of health (MacAvaney et al., 2019).

The media have the power to influence our values, attitudes and behaviours. The images and words that reach us daily reproduce behavioural codes and cultural meanings, and spread stereotypes about life, health, and illness. In the literature, the negative influences of the media on health behaviours have been studied, with respect to the following areas: sexual risk behaviours, obesity, perception of body image and eating disorders, tobacco smoking and alcohol consumption (Schilder et al., 2016).

The need and importance of stimulating people is evident. Individuals, particularly younger people, use critical thinking in relation to the messages, images and values conveyed by the media to understand how and to what extent they can

influence health choices. It is for these reasons that media literacy education (MLE) must be integrated into school and university programs (UNESCO, 2021).

When literacy enters the sphere of mass communication, we speak of media literacy, or the competence in knowing how to read, decode and process the information conveyed by the various media communication: from television to the internet; from music videos to print (Brunori & Pediconi, 2019).

MLE (MLE) is an educational and didactic activity aimed at developing information and critical understanding in young people about the nature and categories of media. The techniques are used by the media to construct, interpret, and disseminate specific messages and languages. The MLE indicates education with the media considered as tools to be used in general educational processes. Media education, which refers to the critical understanding of the media, is understood not only as tools, but as language and culture. The purpose of media education is to offer new generations the keys to understanding the media, but also to promote better media quality and a constructive contribution to the relationships that young people build on the media. The term MLE means "media literacy", i.e. the set of knowledge and skills that allows everyone to use the media and their contents in a conscious, effective and safe way. It is a fundamental element of individual training, which schools and universities should also promote. MLE is that education that is an integral part of the cultural background of an active and responsible digital citizen (Bergsma & Carney, 2008).

Young people spend a lot of time on social media, hence the need to be educated in a careful and conscious way. Young people, with their smartphone or notebook, receive a large number of messages that they do not always fully understand. The MLE is an effective way to teach young people to apply critical thinking to these communications. It is important to find an effective teaching method for MLE. Among these, an effective method could be to start from the current news and guide them in a path of analysis that helps them to reflect on the sources, the language used, the symbols, the visual aspects (UNESCO, 2021).

Another area in which to apply an effective MLE method is the analysis of advertising messages, which can be useful to reflect on how the media are also used to persuade and influence opinions and actions. The media need a literacy process, which is why the promotion of skills for reading and writing MLE media is necessary. Furthermore, students must be supported in such a way that they can develop critical and responsible thinking about the media (Maghsoudi, Shapka & Wisniewski, 2020).

Based on these theoretical premises, the MLE needs its own space in schools and universities. Some argue that they need to be integrated into a subject curriculum in which MLE is taught as a single subject by trained and specialized teachers. There are others who argue that research projects are needed to support students in this constructive learning path of MLE. Hence, MLE is the ability to enable young people to learn how to access, analyse, construct and evaluate media messages in all their forms (positive or negative) (Bergsma & Carney, 2008).

3. Research Questions/Aims of the Research

This research aims to strengthen the attention of Civic Universities such as LUMSA in promoting sustainable development, social justice, and human rights. This is done by promoting MLE, which supports and educates the recognition, awareness, and avoidance of potentially harmful content spread online and hate speech inciting violence. At the same time, MLE promotes justice, peaceful and inclusive societies, provides access to justice for all, and builds effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. It is essential to promote peace through digital technologies, especially social media, which are a privileged tool of choice, especially for teenagers and young adults (MacAvaney et al., 2019). In this paper, designed by researchers involved in the academic "RUniPace" Italian network, the strategies to contrast hate speech promote a culture of peace through increased educational media literacy to minimize prejudice and religious intolerance and promote social justice. In this sense, Universities' role in promoting peace is to encourage responsible citizenship and not merely to transmit knowledge (Bergsma & Carney, 2008).

4. Research Methods

We conducted research divided into three phases.

In Phase1, we conducted a teaching laboratory called "the analysis of the world of social media" during class hours. In this phase, we involved students enrolled at LUMSA in the degree courses of general sociology and developmental psychology, and we studied together (faculty/students) the world of social media. During this phase, the support of the students was essential as they are the primary users of social media. Students explored Facebook, TikTok and Instagram and specifically those (unofficial) groups that have many college students as users.

In Phase2, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the content found (60 items) in university groups, pages, and profiles by collecting news, posts, photos, and comments on social media. In this phase, we used a Google form to collect the data that allowed us to express an opinion if the message coming from social media was connoted by hate speech or not. Students who participated in the first phase focused on content analysis through personal, qualitative research of information from social media.

The Phase 3 consisted of sharing (teachers/students) the qualitative results of analysing the 60 items collected in social media with students. This was to promote and support the constructive use of social media in college students. This phase was intended to encourage students' awareness of productive social media use and content. Specifically, the effects of training on mitigating social media risks include misinformation and disinformation, echo chamber and filter bubble, and misuse of artificial intelligence algorithms.

5. Findings

The principal results of this preliminary survey are as follows.

Hate content, violent language, controversy, and resentment prevail in unofficial university Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok pages, profiles, and groups. Students rarely post peacemaking content. Often, social media is the tool for venting frustrations with the university institution, course organization, and professors. Content of this type has high engagement and finds much acceptance. Hate content is often disguised as polemic language that, while not violent, contributes to the spread of a style of language that is not pacifying and collaborative, but instead one of resentment and social hatred. This has repercussions in every sphere of relational life, and not only in the university.

Figure 1. Polemic speech example
Source: Instagram. Unofficial students group (2021).

Figure 2. Body shaming example
Translate: Dear F.B. Cover that nose... mare!
Source: Facebook. Unofficial spotted students group (2021).

Figure 3. Hate speech example
Translate: Being called a "cunt" during the videolesson in front of 400 people for having asked the teacher to go back to the previous slide.
Source: TikTok. Unofficial students group (2021).

Indeed, the spread of hate language feeds the closure towards the other, prevents the search for solutions for social change and therefore is, in our opinion, the main problem that prevents social and economic innovation. In light of these preliminary

results, we believe that the role of Universities, also in promoting MLE and the conscious and critical use of social media, is central in encouraging civic engagement, the collaboration between citizens and institutions, and the spread of collaborative practices between companies and communities.

6. Conclusions

It is necessary to increase educational media literacy to minimize prejudice and religious intolerance and to promote social justice. Universities' role, in this sense, such as the schools' one, is manifold also in promoting peace and spreading peaceful development because all educational institutions have the task of educating to reflexivity, encouraging responsible citizenship and not merely transmitting knowledge. This is what the post-COVID society needs.

To promote peace and spread peaceful development and promote social and economic innovation, this research follows the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are a series of 17 interconnected goals, defined by the UN (2015) as a strategy "to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all".

They are also known as the 2030 Agenda, from the name of the document entitled *Transforming our world. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which recognizes the close link between human well-being, the health of natural systems and the presence of common challenges for all countries. The Report highlighted some guidelines that could determine significant progress, such as, for example, the development of sustainable finance, institutional modernization, effective international cooperation and multilateral action, better use of statistical data and the enhancement of science, technology and innovation, with a greater focus on digital transformation. Digital education is essential within the 2030 Agenda. In this sense, digital literacy is important, as it aims to guarantee education in the conscious use of digital devices, being an important factor in improving people's lives and making sustainable development feasible.

Furthermore, regardless of the forms taken (written or oral, verbal or non-verbal, explicit or implicit) and the legal scope (any "hate crimes"), it may fall within the definition: hate speech - any violent or discriminatory expression towards other people or groups of people.

Precisely because hate speech affects people for their personal characteristics and/or conditions, actions to combat the phenomenon need to adapt to the context and to the social, economic, political and technological phenomena in progress.

In this sense, the university has a crucial role in combating hate speech today, which crosses the dilemmas and contradictions of the nascent digital age. In a recently published report, the Council of Europe (2020) has included hate speech within the broader problem of information disorder, a pollution of content on a global scale that sees the "pathologies" of hate speech intertwine and of the so-called fake news: disinformation would arise from the encounter between misinformation (dissemination of false but harmless news) and mal information (true news but spread with the intention of striking). In particular, the Council of Europe (2020) argues: *"Over the years, the Council of Europe has worked in multiple manners to*

counter hate speech. The media and internet division's work in this area is based on a <<freedom of expression perspective>>, which focuses on co-operation with member states in preparing, assessing, reviewing and bringing in line with the European Convention on Human Rights any laws and practices that place restrictions on freedom of expression. [...]. Hate speech in the online space requires further reflection and action on the regulation and new ways for combating it."

Thus, the role of University education for the prevention of hate speech is essential because through training, students build the bases of essential principles of media literacy education. In this sense, University training will be essential for the creation of the society of tomorrow based on the promotion of social justice and respect for human rights.

7. Limitations

We also want to highlight another possible limitation that concerns active involvement in the early stages of our very young students, who we immediately considered active researchers. We are aware that young newcomers may not be equipped with social research methodological tools. We know that it is difficult for them to carry out punctual recognition of phenomena with awareness and competence. However, in reality, this limitation is perhaps the value added of this research. If we had not entrusted ourselves to young students who know the language and rules of social media very well, and if we had not delegated to them the exploration and understanding of the digital content of the platforms, perhaps we would not have been able to delve so deeply in these digital spaces closed to many adults. These spaces are a new level of reality that is added to the non-digital one. We must consider them as such and try, as much as possible, to understand the mechanisms of operation. Perhaps we can prevent them from becoming containers of hatred and violence. Perhaps they can be a space to experiment new relationships and new socialities marked by civil and peaceful confrontation.

Degree Course in Educational Sciences, to make it possible to carry out the laboratory in a cooperative mode between the two-degree courses.

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