Hateful Discriminatory Discourse Online in Italy

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LIFE Project

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The aim of Living Safely in a Digital World (LIFE) project, proposed by this consortium is to increase the resilience of the young generation on facing the risks of the digitalization and its impact in their everyday life through empowering youth organizations to be involved in policy dialogue and use non-formal learning in their work with the young people.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The **LIFE – Living Safely in a Digital World** project is a transnational initiative designed to address the challenges of digitalization by empowering young people and youth organizations. Through collaboration among partners from Serbia, Bulgaria, Italy, Tunisia, and Albania, the project focuses on tackling online hate speech, promoting media literacy, and fostering respect in digital spaces.

Beyond Borders, as the Italian partner, has contributed significantly to the project's mission. This report highlights the outcomes of key activities implemented in 2024, including the monitoring of hate speech, community surveys, and focus group discussions.

Project objectives

The LIFE project aims to prepare young generations to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly. Its specific goals include:

- Equipping young people with tools to recognize and counter online hate speech.

- Enhancing the capacity of youth organizations to engage in policy dialogue and non-formal education.

- Promoting critical media literacy and fostering a culture of dialogue and inclusion.

- Advocating for systemic changes to combat hate speech and ensure safer online environments.

2. KEY ACTIVITIES AND FINDINGS

2.1 Report on hateful discriminatory content online

Beyond Borders established an internal panel comprising volunteers trained during international training courses in Tirana and Nis. These volunteers actively engaged with the local community to identify and document hate speech incidents.

- **Panel activities**: Operational since August 2024, the panel utilized a standardized reporting template to collect data on hate speech, detailing the type of incident, perpetrator roles, victim categories, and actions taken by Beyond Borders.

- **Findings**:

  o **49.4%** of reported cases involved racial, ethnic, or religious hate speech.

  o **32.3%** targeted gender and sexual orientation.

  o The remaining cases were linked to socio-economic or cultural factors.

- **Documentation**: Over 20 incidents were documented with links to the original content on websites or social media. However, most reports received no meaningful response from the platforms, highlighting the gaps in addressing online hate.

The report on hateful discriminatory content online highlights the proactive approach of Beyond Borders in tackling online hate speech through a dedicated volunteer panel. By leveraging community engagement and systematic documentation, the panel exposed critical gaps in accountability among digital platforms. The findings underscore the pervasive nature of hate speech targeting race, gender, and socio-economic factors, while also pointing to the urgent need for cultural and institutional reforms to better support victims.

2.2 Surveys

Demographic insights

The survey's demographic breakdown revealed a diverse participant pool, essential for capturing a wide range of experiences and perceptions:

- **Age distribution**:
  - The largest group (33.9%) was aged 15–19, highlighting the prominence of online engagement among younger audiences.
  - A noticeable portion (18.6%) belonged to the 30–34 age group, showing that online hate speech affects not just teenagers but also adults in their early professional or personal lives.
  - The inclusion of 6.8% participants aged 40+ adds depth, indicating intergenerational exposure to hate speech.

- **Gender representation**:
  - While 54.2% were female and 42.4% male, the inclusion of 17% non-binary individuals highlights the project's inclusivity and underlines that marginalized gender groups are crucial stakeholders in this discourse.

Behavioral patterns in digital engagement

- **Frequency of Social Media use**:
  - A significant **78%** of participants use social media multiple times daily, which correlates with higher exposure to harmful online interactions.

- Platforms like Instagram (74.6%) and YouTube (57.6%) dominate usage, indicating that visual and video-based content are central to online communication but also susceptible to spreading hate speech.

- **News consumption habits**:
  - While **45.8%** visit online news platforms multiple times daily, **64.4%** access video platforms for information. This reflects a shift towards multimedia consumption and its role in shaping opinions, potentially influenced by algorithm-driven content.

Exposure to hate speech

- **Frequency of encounters**:
  - A concerning **40.8%** experience hate speech daily, with another **36.7%** encountering it weekly. This high prevalence underscores how embedded hate speech is within digital platforms.

- **Forms of hate speech**:
  - Racism (**70%**) and sexism (**72%**) emerged as the most reported forms, indicating that structural inequalities in society are mirrored and amplified online.
  - **66%** reported homophobia/transphobia, reflecting the digital space as a particularly hostile environment for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Emotional and Behavioral Impacts

- **Emotional Responses**:
  - Hate speech significantly affects mental well-being, with **47.5%** feeling disturbed or angry, and **27.1%** reporting anxiety or fear.
  - Interestingly, **11.9%** stated that encountering hate speech motivates them to speak up, a potential sign of resilience and proactive engagement.

- **Reactions to Hate Speech**:
  - While **30.5%** report incidents, nearly half (**49.2%**) ignore them, reflecting a gap between awareness and action, potentially due to skepticism about the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms.

Perceptions of Platform Effectiveness

- **Efficacy of Reporting Mechanisms**:
    - Only **6.8%** find platforms very effective in addressing hate speech, while **33.9%** rated them as ineffective.
    - This highlights a need for systemic improvements in content moderation and user feedback loops to build trust.

Overall Concerns and Solutions

- **Rising Problem**:
    - **62.7%** believe that hate speech online is increasing, underscoring the urgency for intervention.
- **Preferred Countermeasures**:
    - The most popular solutions include **educating users about hate speech and its effects (66.1%)**, stricter platform policies (**47.5%**), and promoting counter-narratives (**42.4%**).

Conclusion of Analysis

The survey underscores the prevalence and impact of online hate speech, particularly among youth and marginalized groups. While high social media engagement increases exposure to harmful content, the emotional toll and limited platform accountability are significant concerns. The findings also point to a growing awareness among users, with education and systemic reforms emerging as key solutions to counter hate speech effectively.

2.3 Focus Group Discussions

A focus group with high school students (aged 17–18) explored the impact of hate speech, cyberbullying, and mental health.

- **Insights**:
    - Participants identified online hate speech as a frequent occurrence.
    - Emotional reactions ranged from anger to helplessness.

- Proposed solutions included better education, stronger platform policies, and community support for victims.

3. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Quantitative analysis: survey findings

The survey conducted by Beyond Borders provides a detailed snapshot of the online behavior, experiences, and perceptions of hate speech among a diverse demographic group. By analyzing the data, several patterns and insights emerge:

1. **Demographic composition**
   - **Age groups**: The largest demographic (33.9%) falls within the 15–19 age range, reflecting the heightened vulnerability of this group due to their significant presence on social media. The inclusion of participants aged 30–34 (18.6%) and 40+ (6.8%) suggests that online hate speech is not confined to youth alone but affects a broad spectrum of users.
   - **Gender representation**: The balanced representation of males (42.4%) and females (54.2%), along with the notable inclusion of non-binary individuals (17%), indicates an inclusive survey approach. This diversity ensures a holistic understanding of hate speech experiences, particularly those affecting marginalized gender groups.
2. **Online behavior**
   - **Frequency of social media use**: The data reveals that 78% of respondents use social media multiple times daily. This near-constant engagement explains the high frequency of encounters with hate speech, with platforms like Instagram (74.6%) and YouTube (57.6%) being the most commonly used.
   - **News consumption patterns**: The reliance on video platforms (64.4%) and news websites (59.3%) for information highlights the role of algorithm-driven content in shaping user exposure to hateful or inflammatory narratives.
3. **Hate speech experiences**

- o **Frequency**: Alarmingly, 40.8% of participants encounter hate speech daily, and another 36.7% weekly. These figures underscore the pervasive nature of hate speech in digital environments.
- o **Forms of hate speech**: Racism (70%) and sexism (72%) dominate the reported categories, followed closely by homophobia/transphobia (66%). These findings reflect deep-seated societal prejudices amplified by the anonymity and reach of online platforms.

4. **Emotional and behavioral impact**

- o **Emotional toll**: Almost half of the respondents (47.5%) reported feeling disturbed or angry after encountering hate speech, while 27.1% experienced anxiety or fear. These reactions indicate that the impact of hate speech extends beyond the digital realm, affecting users' mental well-being.
- o **Behavioral responses**: A significant proportion (49.2%) of users ignore hate speech, citing skepticism about the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms. Only 30.5% report incidents, suggesting a need for platforms to rebuild user trust in their systems.

5. **Perceptions of platform effectiveness**

- o A concerning 33.9% rated platforms as ineffective, and only 6.8% found them highly effective in addressing hate speech. This disparity highlights systemic issues in content moderation and enforcement.

Qualitative analysis: insights from focus groups

The focus group provided a deeper understanding of the human dimension of hate speech, complementing the quantitative data with personal narratives and group reflections:

1. **Understanding hate speech**

   Participants identified hate speech as a frequent and multifaceted issue, describing

instances of derogatory comments targeting gender, race, and sexual orientation. One participant noted, "it's not just what they say, it's how it spreads so quickly. One post can lead to hundreds of hateful comments." This highlights the viral nature of online hate.

2. **Psychological and social impact**

   Students frequently discussed feelings of helplessness and frustration. A recurring theme was the normalization of hate speech in online interactions, with one participant stating, "people don't even recognize it as hate speech anymore—it's just the way people talk online."

3. **Challenges in reporting**

   Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with reporting mechanisms. One student recounted an incident where they reported a hateful comment but received no feedback or action from the platform, stating, "it felt like my voice didn't matter." This reinforces the survey's findings on the ineffectiveness of reporting tools.

4. **Proposed solutions**

   Despite these challenges, students were optimistic about potential solutions. Key suggestions included:

   o educational campaigns to teach users about recognizing hate speech and its impact

   o community support to promote positive online interactions and support victims

   o stronger policies to enforce anti-hate speech regulations by social media platforms

Synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings

The combination of survey data and focus group insights reveals a comprehensive picture:

- while the quantitative data underscores the prevalence and systemic issues of hate speech, the qualitative analysis adds depth by exploring its human impact and societal normalization
- both data sets emphasize the urgent need for systemic reforms, user education, and more robust support for victims
- together, they highlight the dual challenge of addressing individual behaviors and systemic platform failures to create a safer digital space

4. Recommendations

- Strengthen educational initiatives: expand workshops on media literacy and online safety for youth and educators.
- Advocate for policy changes: work with policymakers to enforce stricter regulations on hate speech.
- Improve reporting mechanisms: encourage platforms to adopt transparent and effective hate speech reporting tools.
- Foster community engagement: promote dialogues involving youth, educators, and community leaders to tackle online hate collectively.

5. Conclusion

The LIFE project has made significant progress in raising awareness and empowering youth to confront online hate speech. While challenges remain, such as the inefficacy of reporting mechanisms, the insights gathered through Beyond Borders' activities underline the potential for creating a safer digital environment. By continuing these efforts, we can foster a culture of respect and understanding in online spaces.