Digital Netizens at the crossroads of sharing and privatising

Francesca Vidal (vidal@uni-koblenz-landau.de)

Irrational discourse as a form of violation of the other with words

Even if language serves as a means of communication, it can nevertheless become a medium of violent action, since "from indirect tactlessness to discriminating hate speech, language can have a violent effect"[1], according to the publishers of a volume about the grammar of verbal disrespect (**ODER** contempt). Thus discriminating speech can by all means lead to psychological and physical harm. Forms of communication are not per se a means of peaceful correspondence, even if a verbal clash does not necessarily leave behind visible wounds.

Nevertheless, according to Petra Gehring[2], one must ask whether violence is indeed the appropriate expression and whether we shouldn't rather say that speech can develop physical force that affects our bodies, harmful, and even more. Speech can be turned into a weapon to fight for convictions, a weapon with seductive potential, and hence an erotic impact, and one that can insult and therefore injure. Precisely this power, employed as a rhetorical tool, demonstrates how it is couched in language itself rather than existing as an external entity. We do not wish to relinquish rhetorical devices such as irony, satire and polemic. We regard them as a means of generating an immediate presence, virtually coercing readers and listeners to renounce their passive indifference and to take a stand. Whether we speak of discriminating rhetoric, accomplished irony or even personally satirical polemic, our cherished rhetorical tools invariably depend on place, time and situation. When and how does speech act as a blow, with a definite physical effect, and how is this experience speeded up [*ODER* magnified] in internet communication? And which options exist to sanction an evidently deranged communication? No consensus even exists whether or not clear-cut 'hate speech', such as 'statements relating to anti-Semitism, religious intolerance, antiziganism, homophobia or transphobia' should be forbidden. The difficulty of getting Facebook to unequivocally distance itself from obvious 'hate speech' is a recent example in hand.

---

[1] 1 Steffen K. Herrmann, Hannes Kuch, Verletzende Worte. Eine Einleitung, in: S. K. Hermann / Sybille Krämer / H. Kuch (Hg.): Verletzende Worte. Die Grammatik sprachlicher Missachtung. Bielefeld 2007, S. 7.
[2] Petra Gehring, Über die Körperkraft von Sprache, in: Verletzende Worte, 211-228.

The philosopher Ronald Dworkin stated back in 2006 – admittedly on the basis of the American First Amendment of the Bill of Rights – "Free speech is a condition of legitimate government"[3], and demanded unrestricted freedom of speech: democracy must even be able to withstand fanatics, should not silence their voices, but rather oppose them in open discourse, unless, that is, the speakers are directly contributing to physical violence.

Opponents of this position first cite the 'subordination argument', and emphasise that this places freedom above equality, since any kind of 'hate speech' impedes the chances of minorities in society, since such speech impinges on the social reality, thus consolidating certain groups' subordinate status. The second counterargument, the so-called "silencing argument", suggests that those affected by sexist and racist remarks would be silenced, thus removing both their chance and the courage to gain awareness. Thus, for instance, sexist language would enshrine the role of the female, which could then in fact lead to 'real harm', i.e., physical abuse. However, we should not overlook the fact that 'hate speech' not only invokes violence, but is itself violent.

Once we accept that words can injure, we must then assume that we are performing an action when express ourselves[4]. As you may notice, I am invoking the linguistic pragmatic which emphasises that a statement – beyond its literal meaning – can conceal far more than can be presumed by the interpretation of the mere wording. John L. Austin spoke of the various speech events. He distinguished between constative utterances – which may be true or false – and performative ones, which represent actions. Performative speech influences worldly processes, since it transforms something in people, which need not always be positive. And, it makes a great difference whether I am performing illocutionary speech acts as an individual or in the name of a socially legitimised entity, thus my assumed role as speaker. Sybille Krämer enumerates the three key strategies pursued when we wish to hurt others using words:

1. The distinctive separation between we and you, i.e., those that belong and those being excluded
2. Stereotyping: differences are obscured by stereotypes or even, frequently, worldviews

---

[3] Ronald Dworkin: The Right to Ridicule. The new york review of books 2006.
http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2006/mar/23/the-right-to-ridicule/
[4] Vgl. z. B. Rae Langton: Sprechakte und unsprechbare Akte. In: Verletzende Worte a.a.O. S. 107-146.

3. Degradation and disparagement via negative connotations

"The closer victims are to the margin of society the more threatening is the discrimination. They threaten to catapult them beyond the brink of the social setting."[5] Accordingly, speech is injurious whenever a human shortcoming is not accepted and when the human is deprived of the opportunity to respond.

Speech, however that is turned into a weapon of criticism, and that can certainly injure too, provokes a reply, and is open to virtually everyone for this is invariably applied as a change for the better.[6]

Now what happens in social networks in which harm emanating from one person can develop into a so-called shit storm?

In the public segment of the social web, a critical utterance based on specific facts, assuming the form of a public debate that becomes emotionally heated, leads to ever more aggressive speech, verbal violations so becoming the core of the discussion.[7] The participants condemn the behaviour of a person, institution or organisation as improper, wish to express their indignation and make use of social web applications to do so.[8]

Once the shitstorm has been set in motion it becomes ever more difficult to distinguish between aggressor and victim, or even between active and passive participants. Everyone participating in such a 'debate' in any way whatsoever can become aggressor or victim. Recipients include not only those accused of improper behaviour, but rather the entire community. It becomes more or less coerced into adopting a position, while each passive participation can be interpreted as approval or rejection, stoking the shitstorm in its own way. Everyone adopting a position is an active participant, i.e., by simply pressing a 'like' or 'dislike' button. Even expressing indignation via Twitter can trigger a shitstorm that no longer even queries the events in question.

The attack is always launched publicly, and is never directed solely at the addressee, but rather towards the platform's public segment. If a member of the public feels

---

[5] Sybille Krämer: Sprache als Gewalt oder: Warum verletzen Worte? In: Verletzende Worte a.a.O. S. 44.

[6] Dies erläuterte der Rhetoriker Gert Ueding am Beispiel des Philosophen Ernst Bloch unter dem Titel ‚Destructio destructionis – der Polemiker Ernst Bloch auf der Jahrestagung der Ernst-Bloch-Gesellschaft im Oktober 2014. Unveröffentliches Redemanuskript

[7] Vgl. Jürgen Pfeffer; Thomas Zorbach, Shitstorms. Social Media und die Veränderungen der digitalen Diskussionskultur, in: Christian Stiegler / Patrick Breitenbach / Thomas Zorbach (Hg.), New media Culture: Mediale Phänomene der Netzkultur. Bielefeld 2015, 125-141.

[8] Die folgenden Ausführungen waren Thema auf einem von mir gehaltenen Seminar an der Universität Koblenz-Landau und wurden in Form einer Hausarbeit von Joana Baumgärtel vertiefend untersucht. Der Beitrag bezieht sich dabei auch auf Ergebnisse der Analyse von Frau Baumgärtel.

called upon to comment, whether out of sympathy to the aggressor or to the victim, he then automatically contributes to the dissemination of the debate. What is particularly harmful are participants' comments about the supposed 'victim', even moving them to the third person via indirect speech "as if they were potentially absent", according to Sonja Kleinke.[9]

A platform offers internet users the chance of publicly accessible communication, in which the infrastructure specifies the terms of use, thus creating the framework in which users can form a community. Even when interaction has initiated between two users, this can spread to the level of the complete community. And should someone share the acquired information with a further net community, the public sphere is thus expanded, even when the intention is to analyse or criticise types of shitstorms. Hence it can transpire that something normally regarded as private or personal can break into the public view. Here Jan Schmidt speaks of the emergence of an "arena of the personal public realm"[10], since intrinsically private content is voluntarily made public.

Those choosing to actively participate in a community virtually unmask themselves, turning themselves into a public person, thus becoming vulnerable, especially when they lose face thanks either to a negative ratings or aggressive forms of repudiation. Sonja Kleinke has analysed such forms, be it in the form of negative content rating, in which someone purports to act as expert, thus attempting to coerce the other into a certain stance, or judging the person rather than the message. Net communication contains a great variety of examples of such forms. For reasons of time, however, we cannot examine examples here.

Of course, not every form of hate speech has the power to trigger such effects. However, the question always arises as to whether the addressee feels at all concerned, especially when the action attracts no further comments. But the addressee is always forced into a position such that potential harm of such words must nevertheless be assumed.

A demonstration of this, for instance, is how an 'old' term could be put into circulation so rapidly using network communication that it starts to be used for the defence of

---

[9] Sonja Kleinke, Sprachliche Strategien verbaler Ablehnung in öffentlichen Diskussionsforen im Internet, in: Verletzende Worte, 311-336, hier: 329.

[10] Jan Schmidt: Onlinebasierte Öffentlichkeit: Praktiken, Arenen und Strukturen, in: Claudia Fraas, Stefan Meier, Christian Pentzold (Hg.), Online-Diskurse. Theorien und Methoden transmedialer Online-Diskursforschung. Köln 2013, 35-56, hier: 43.

irrational discourses.[11] Right wing populist parties invigorated the term both on their internet websites, as well as in public demonstrations, so as to assert that all media reporting – apart from their own – consciously withheld the truth, was politically controlled and hence invariably untrue. It has therefore nothing to do with possible media criticism, but rather deliberate defamation. However, it is important to note that not only right wing protagonists have contributed to the dissemination of the term, but also the established media, in an attempt to react to the accusation. In October 2016 Google Trends showed that the term has been searched ever more intensively in connection with the term 'refugees' and the name of the party 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) [Alternative for Germany] since 2015. If one now analyses the websites of this party, one can demonstrate that one is consciously working with violations; complex issues are fundamentally generalised, while breaches of taboo are consciously in use. Propagation in the internet mobilises, and supporters organise demonstrations, which all the media report. The right wing protagonists are thus invariably visible on the front pages of the papers, on TV programmes and in the internet. The correct designation of protagonists as 'right wing populists' then triggers conscious strategies against established media as a counter-reaction. The wave of indignation is accelerated through irrationality and emotionality. An own reality is constructed, and refugees, for instance, depicted as a mass of water crashing over Germany. The metaphorical description as a force of nature makes it a threat, thus negating the refugees' situation, turning them into an impersonal menace to be halted. Following the fomentation of such irrational fears, all other media are accused of ignoring the supposed facts on inadmissible grounds.

Internet platforms hence enable a rapid protest mobilisation as well as the expansion of communication spheres. The so-called Pegida movement (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) provides an example; after twelve people started a Facebook group, just six months later 10,000 people in Dresden were followers. The social media have enabled this potential in the first place.

---

[11] So ausführlich analysiert in einer von mir betreuten, unveröffentlichten Bachelorarbeit von Alana Dawn Knickman: Renaissance of a tentious term? Cause and effect of the debate ‚Lügenpresse' in the Federal Republic of Germany. An analysis. Koblenz 2016