

Antisemitism in Online Communication

Transdisciplinary Approaches to Hate
Speech in the Twenty-First Century

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5. Countering Antisemitism Online

A Discursive Analysis of *Facebook* and
Twitter/X Comments

Laura Ascone

Since their emergence on the web, social networks have elicited diverging reactions and opinions. If they are appreciated for helping create new forms of social relations, they are also criticised for facilitating both the emergence and circulation of hate speech. On a macro-level, different European countries have been taking a step forward to counter hate speech, but on a micro-level online comment sections show that some users try to counter it as well, namely by taking part in a discussion and/or reporting hate content. This chapter investigates the way users of French media counter antisemitic discourse in both *Facebook* and *Twitter* (now X) comment sections.

The analysis was conducted on 4,230 comments posted on the official *Facebook* and *Twitter* pages of French mainstream media such as *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*. The comments were divided in three sub-corpora according to the event they refer to. This way, it was possible to examine the specificities of the comments countering antisemitism in these three different contexts. The annotation and the analyses performed with the software MAXQDA shed light on the connections between the comments conveying antisemitism and those countering them, as well as on

how counter speech can sometimes fuel antisemitism and other forms of hate speech.

1. Introduction

The number of laws that have recently been enacted across Europe (among others, the *NetzDG* in Germany or the *Loi Avia* in France) are evidence of the European countries' willingness to both limit and counter hate speech. If, on a macro-level, different European countries have been taking a step forward, on a micro-level, online comment sections show that some users try to counter hate speech as well, namely by taking part in a discussion and/or reporting hate content.

This chapter investigates the way users of French media counter antisemitic comments in both *Facebook* and *Twitter* (now *X*) comment sections. This study aims to determine to what extent counter speech is content-dependent, as well as to identify the specificities of the comments countering antisemitism online. The analysis will focus on the argumentative strategies (Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca 1988) that are adopted by users in order to both deconstruct the different concepts mobilised in antisemitic comments (Becker 2021) and make their point of view incontestable by creating an authoritative ethos (Amossy 2010).

The first part of this chapter will present the theoretical background, the corpus and the methods used. The second part will deal with the comments countering antisemitism in *Facebook* and *Twitter* comment sections. To conclude, attention will be paid to the argumentative strategies adopted by users to counter antisemitic comments.

2. Towards a linguistic analysis of antisemitic discourse and counter speech

2.1 Delimiting hate speech and counter speech

The wide range of hateful expressions makes it difficult to establish a universally accepted definition of hate speech. Even though academic and institutional definitions share the core elements of hate speech, none

of them seems to encompass all its facets. For this study the following definition was adopted:

Hate speech is defined as bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived innate characteristics. It expresses discriminatory intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic, and/or prejudicial attitudes towards those characteristics, which include gender, race, religion, ethnicity, colour, national origin, disability, or sexual orientation. Hate speech is intended to injure, dehumanize, harass, intimidate, debase, degrade, and victimize the targeted groups, and to foment insensitivity and brutality against them (Cohen-Almagor 2011: 1-2).¹

Othering plays a crucial role in hate speech. The notion of otherness was defined by Staszak (2008: 2) as “the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (“Us”, the Self) constructs one or many [...] out-groups (“Them”, Other) by stigmatizing a difference—real or imagined—presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination”. By creating an antonymic *Other*, hate speech has a double function: it creates or reinforces the bonds within the in-group (Bernard-Barbeau 2012) while establishing a conflictual link with the out-group.

This link can be reinforced by the phenomenon of “group polarisation” that is facilitated by the internet (Madden 2008): people tend to interact with users sharing the same interests and point of view. This may lead users to perceive their point of view as widely accepted even in cases of hate and extremist ideologies. Likewise, this phenomenon may intensify a sense of identity built in opposition to the out-group.

In this study, I analyse representations of Jews and Israelis as the out-group and consider verbal antisemitism to be “all linguistic elements by means of which Jews are debased, stigmatised, discriminated against and defamed as Jews, i.e. with which anti-Jewish stereotypes are coded and resentments are conveyed” (Schwarz-Friesel/Reinharz 2017: 48). Among the most common stereotypes seen are characterisations of Jews as a community striving for wealth (GREED) and having the POWER to

1 Contrary to Cohen-Almagor’s definition, the one adopted in the Decoding Antisemitism project comprises unintentional devaluation and/or exclusion as well.

influence the media, politicians and economy. These are long-standing representations of Jews, but new antisemitic concepts have emerged in the last decades. For instance, the NAZI ANALOGY—used to target Israel by comparing it to Nazi Germany—has become one of the most prevalent allegations (Becker 2021).

Counter speech is understood here as a discourse countering, in an explicitly antagonistic way, what has been stated elsewhere (Mouffe 2010). In this study, I considered only the comments explicitly countering antisemitic discourse to form a counter speech. We will see, in this context, if counter speech constitutes a “peripheral discourse” within the discursive system (that is, a discourse putting forward a radical break with the dominant ideas and values (Angenot 1989: 22)), or if this understanding of counter speech is problematic since the ideas and values that are dominant in our society are actually advanced and defended by the comments countering antisemitism. Likewise, this chapter investigates the rhetorical (Reboul 1991) and argumentative strategies (Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca 1988) adopted by users to verbalise and legitimise this break with the dominant discourse.

2.2 The corpus

The analysis was conducted on 4,230 comments posted in the *Facebook* and *Twitter* pages of French mainstream media: *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, *Le Parisien*, *L'Express*, *Le Point*, *France Info*, *Marianne*, *France Bleu*, *Valeurs Actuelles* and *20 Minutes*. The rationale for focusing on mainstream media is twofold: on the one hand, “[the media] are a powerful site for the production and circulation of social meanings, i.e. to a great extent the media decide the significance of things that happen in the world for any given culture, society or social group” (Thornborrow 2004: 56). On the other hand, mainstream media represents an ideological apparatus that frames the society’s way of thinking and acting. It is for this reason that the spread of antisemitic content in this milieu—in opposition to extremist contexts—can lead to the normalisation of antisemitism and other hate ideologies. Furthermore, the free-to-access *Facebook* and *Twitter* comment sections allowed examination of the media outlets that require a subscription to read and/or comment on articles on their websites, and that post the same articles on their social networks pages.

The comments were divided into three sub-corpora according to the event dealt with by the articles. The first sub-corpus, which consists of 1,500 comments, is about an escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict in May 2021. In response to the publication of these articles, web users criticised and sometimes demonised Israel.

The second sub-corpus comprises 1,000 comments related to the Pegasus case in July 2021. The spyware Pegasus, developed by the Israeli enterprise NSO Group, allows its users to target smartphones. When it was discovered that certain countries used the software to spy on other governments, some web users questioned the innocence of Israel. French mainstream media paid particular attention to the fact that President Emmanuel Macron was targeted by Morocco through the use of this spyware.

The third sub-corpus includes 1,700 comments posted in response to reports of the antisemitic placard shown by right-wing activist Cassandre Fristot in a demonstration against the Covid-19 health pass implementation in August 2021. It bore the slogan “BUT WHO?” [“MAIS QUI?”] surrounded by names of several Jewish personalities and their alleged supporters. Because the rhetorical question refers to the conspiracy theory that holds Jews responsible for the pandemic, the placard was considered antisemitic.

The specificity of this corpus allowed an examination of the way web users of French media counter antisemitism in three different contexts: one involving Israel, one concerning a French news item, and one dealing with an international event that, at first glance, concerns neither Israel nor France.

2.3. The research design

The comments were collected with a custom-designed data-crawling tool and analysed with the MAXQDA software. Detailed coding guidelines were predetermined in order to categorise both the conceptual content of a comment (e.g., the different antisemitic concepts) and the linguistic structures used to convey the antisemitic content (e.g., puns, allusions, threats, etc.). Given the shapeshifting nature of antisemitism, the research team has regularly updated the categories in order to capture

the nuances of antisemitic expressions specific to a certain discourse event.

Adopting a qualitative approach made it possible to conduct more in-depth analyses, which focused on the argumentative strategies employed in the comments countering antisemitic content. Particular attention was paid to the way authors of these comments refer to the antisemitic stereotypes they are trying to deconstruct as well as to the arguments they advanced to legitimise their discourse. Moreover, this qualitative approach enabled examination of the reactions triggered by the counter speech comments, allowing us to see whether this form of spontaneous counter speech—that is, counter speech produced by random users rather than by moderators—can be considered effective.

This ability to investigate the connections between the comments conveying antisemitism and those countering them proved crucial in this study. Furthermore, the combination of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis shed light on the characteristics of *Facebook* and *Twitter* comments countering antisemitism in relation to three different contexts.

3. Counter speech as context-related discourse

3.1 The link between antisemitic and counter speech comments

Before examining the link between the comments conveying antisemitism and those countering them, it is necessary to have a general overview of the proportions of both antisemitic and counter speech comments in the three sub-corpora.

The comments relating to *Cassandre Fristot*, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the *Pegasus* spyware were found to be antisemitic in 14%, 13% and 4% of cases, respectively. The low amount of antisemitic comments in the *Pegasus* corpus might be due to the fact that French mainstream media primarily focused on President Emmanuel Macron being spied on by Morocco; only a few articles noted that the spyware was developed by an Israeli enterprise.

This analysis found that the comments countering antisemitism are not as frequent as those spreading antisemitic ideas. In both the *Fristot*

and the Arab-Israeli sub-corpora, 7% of comments are categorised as counter speech. As to the Pegasus sub-corpus, only 1% of comments sought to counter antisemitic content. This suggests that users with antisemitic positions post more freely on the web than those trying to counter these antisemitic ideas. Whether in reaction to the Arab-Israeli conflict, to Fristot's placard or to the Pegasus scandal, antisemitic comments are made twice as frequently as those countering them.

In order to have a better understanding of the way counter speech emerges in *Facebook* and *Twitter* comments, I examined the sequence of comments in the threads under investigation. By looking at the position of counter speech comments in relation to comments marked antisemitic or non-antisemitic, the goal was to test the hypothesis that counter speech would tend to be elicited by antisemitic comments rather than by the news item or the general context.

The Fristot sub-corpus confirmed this hypothesis. Of the 121 comments countering antisemitism, 66 (54%) were posted in reaction to comments expressing antisemitic ideas (see example 1 below); in 32 comments (26%), users reacted to neutral statements, whereas 24 comments (20%) were not posted in reaction to any other comment.

(1) A: "So? Is that antisemitic?"

B: "Quoting some Jews to take them responsible for what others have messed up during the corona, yes that's antisemitism" (LEFIG-FB[20211020])²

In this exchange, user A denies that the placard implicitly accuses a group of Jewish individuals of being responsible for the current situation. Therefore, this comment constitutes an indirect form of DENIAL OF ANTISEMITISM (Scheiber 2024). User B then reacts by explaining the message implied by Fristot and why it is considered antisemitic. With this comment, user B counters the idea of an alleged JEWISH POWER (Becker 2024).

A different tendency emerged in the other two datasets. In the Pegasus sub-corpus, most of the comments countering antisemitic stereotypes

2 A: « et alors ? C'est être antisémite ? »

B: « citer des juifs pour leur mettre à dos tout ce que d'autres ont foiré en période de corona oui c'est de l'antisémitisme »

were posted in reaction to the article rather than in response to other users' comments. In the Arab-Israeli conflict sub-corpus, almost half of the counter speech comments (42 out of 100) were posted in reaction to non-antisemitic statements that nevertheless presented a critique of Israel (see example 2).

(2) A: " Hamas couldn't stand idly by when the situation was heating up for 1 week [or] 10 days, and leave the initiative to protest to NGOs!"

B: " Hamas couldn't stand idly by? Explain to me on what issue? Hamas, which comes from the Muslim Brotherhood, have been attacking Israel for 70 years. Hamas's only wish is to destroy and annihilate the State of Israel, and do you believe that the State of Israel would stand idly by waiting to be annihilated by Hamas?" (LIBER-FB[20210512])³

Since user A explicitly refers to the escalation phase only, this comment cannot be understood to present Israel as the cause and the only guilty actor in the conflict. Therefore, this comment was considered within the definition of this study to be a legitimate critique of Israel's actions and not an antisemitic statement. However, user B seems to perceive it as the latter.

3.2 The link between antisemitic concepts and counter speech comments

In order to examine the link between the concepts expressed in the antisemitic comments and those countered in the counter speech, attention was paid to the comments directly countering antisemitic statements. The Pegasus sub-corpus presents only two comments reacting to antisemitic statements, that is, 15% of the counter speech comments which, as already mentioned, represent 1% of the whole

3 A: « Le Hamas ne pouvait pas continuer a rester les bras croises devant un situation qui montait depuis 1 semaine 10 jours, et laisser l'iniative de la contestation a des ONG ! »

B: « Le Hamas ne pouvait pas rester les bras croisés ? à quel sujet expliquez moi ? Ça fait 70 ans que le Hamas Qui est une émanation des Frères musulmans ne l'oubliez pas agresse l'État d'Israël. la seule volonté du Hamas est de détruire l'état Israël de l'anéantir et croyez vous que l'État d'Israël allait rester les bras croisés à attendre Que le Hamas l'anéantisse ? »

sub-corpus. This is in sharp contrast to the Fristot corpus, wherein 54% of the counter speech comments were posted in reaction to comments expressing antisemitic ideas. The analysis conducted on the Fristot dataset showed that all of them countered the concept expressed in the respective antisemitic comment such as the DENIAL OF ANTISEMITISM (see example 3) and the TABOO OF CRITICISM (Chapelan 2024).

(3) A: “So, indicating a list of actors in the health crisis whose actions or positions are disapproved is punishable because some of them (7/12 I think) are Jewish? The FN-style ladies aren’t my cup of tea but isn’t there a problem here?”

B: “Please show us the role of Soros and Rotschild in the health crisis. Let’s see” (MONDE-TW[20210810])⁴

In this comment, user A questions the accusation of antisemitism for having listed the actors in the health crisis context because only some of them are Jewish. Furthermore, by stipulating that “the FN-style⁵ ladies aren’t [their] cup of tea”, the user seems to argue that the DENIAL OF ANTISEMITISM evident in their comment is not influenced by their political ideas. User B then reacts by addressing user A directly. By asking user A to explain the role of Soros and Rothschild [two names that appear on the placard] in the health crisis, user B indirectly debunks user A’s argument that Fristot listed these names without consideration of their [Jewish] identity.

As far as the Arab-Israeli sub-corpus is concerned, only 34% of the counter speech comments were posted in reaction to antisemitic statements (see example 4).

(4) A: “The problem in your story is that the aggressor and the occupying power is Israel”

4 A: « Donc indiquer une liste d’acteurs de la crise sanitaire dont on désapprouve l’action ou les positions est punissable car certains d’entre eux (7/12 je crois) sont juifs ? Les nénettes style FN c’est pas ma tasse hein mais il n’y aurait pas un soucis là ? »

B: « Indiquez nous le rôle de Soros et de Rotschild dans la crise sanitaire s’il vous plaît. Pour voir. »

5 The speaker refers to the fact that Cassandre Fristot is a right-wing activist having voted Front National, Marine Le Pen’s party.

B: “The problem in your story is that Israel is a sovereign and legitimate nation, over the whole Jerusalem and, in the long run, from the sea to the Jordan” (MONDE-FB[20210512])⁶

User A reacts to a comment where Israel was described as the victim by questioning the other user’s point of view (“The problem in your story”) and presenting Israel as an *EVIL* (Bolton 2024) entity that is acting against the Palestinian population, which implicitly refers to *ISRAEL’S SOLE GUILT IN THE CONFLICT* (Vincent 2024). However, instead of countering this stereotype, user B counters the *DENIAL OF ISRAEL’S RIGHT TO EXIST* (Vincent 2024), namely by describing Israel as “a sovereign and legitimate nation”. Even though the *EVIL* and the *DENIAL OF ISRAEL’S RIGHT TO EXIST* are two distinct concepts, user B might have understood “occupying power” as a more indirect way to say that Israel is illegally occupying territories outside the Israeli borders. Furthermore, to turn the argument around, user B repeats user A’s opening expression.

In eight further counter speech comments from the Arab-Israeli sub-corpus, the users countered only one of the several concepts evoked in the antisemitic comments. One example:

(5) A: “Gaza is an open-air prison [...] But at the same time, in terms of Israel’s state terrorism, I know they’re the vice-champions of the world, they have surpassed the segregationist regime of South Africa, well, the next step is to surpass the title holder, that is the Nazi regime”

B: “The terrorism is the use of terror for ideological, political or religious reasons. That’s the definition of Hamas, of the Muslim Brotherhood etc, not of Israel, which is just defending itself”. (LEPOI-FB[20210512])⁷

6 A: « Le problème dans ton histoire c’est que l’agresseur et la puissance occupante est Israël »

B: « Le problème dans ton histoire est qu’Israël est une nation souveraine et légitime, sur la totalité de Jérusalem, et à terme, de la mer au Jourdain »

7 A: « Gaza est une prison à ciel ouvert [...] mais en même temps en matière de terrorisme d’état de la part d’Israël, je sais qu’ils sont les vice champion du monde, ils ont dépassé régime ségrégationniste d’Afrique du sud, bah la prochaine étape c’est de dépasser le détenteur du titre à savoir le régime nazis »

B: « Le terrorisme est l’emploi de la terreur à des fins idéologiques, politiques ou religieuses. C est la définition du hamas, des frères musulmans etc, pas d Israël, qui ne fait que se défendre »

In (5), three antisemitic concepts are expressed by user A. Having presented Israel as a **TERRORIST STATE**, the user cynically compares it to both the South African apartheid system (**APARTHEID ANALOGY**) and the Nazi regime (**NAZI ANALOGY**). However, user B counters only the first antisemitic concept: by explaining the definition of terrorism, the user says that Israel does not resort to “the use of terror for ideological, political or religious reasons”. Rather, Israel “is just defending itself”.

This example suggests that when the antisemitic comments present more than one antisemitic concept, the counter speech comments seem to focus on the first concept only. Yet, the **EVIL** stereotype is the only one to be countered even when it appears at the end of a comment.

3.3 The link between the discourse event and counter speech comments

In both the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Fristot sub-corpora, the counter speech comments reacting to the articles constitute only a small portion (24% and 20%, respectively), whereas, in the Pegasus corpus, they reach 61%.

- (6) “That’s obvious that for someone who’s close, very close, to Islam Israel can only be guilty all that’s bad... 🤢 Besides it’s hot here at the moment, I think Israel has something to do with that, just like with the floods... 😊” (VALEU-FB[20210721])⁸

In this comment, taken from the Pegasus sub-corpus, the user reacts to the article itself and, in particular, to the French politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s accusations against Israel mentioned in it. The user disparages Mélenchon by stating that the politician’s anti-Israeli stance is affected by his interest in Islam and not by a justifiable reason. Furthermore, with the statement “Besides it’s hot here at the moment, I think Israel has something to do with that, just like with the floods”, the user derides Mélenchon and all those who blame Israel for any negative event in the world. Using irony in this way, the user implicitly counters the idea that Israel is an **EVIL** entity responsible for any calamity.

8 « Evidemment que pour ce proche , très proche , de l’islam Israël ne peut qu’être coupable de tous les maux ... 🤢 D’ailleurs chez nous en ce moment il fait chaud, je pense qu’Israël y est pour quelque chose de même que pour les inondations... 😊 »

In the following example, extracted from the Arab-Israeli sub-corpus, the commenter makes an explicit reference to the news article and even the outlet:

- (7) “But hahahaha we talk about deadly attacks on Gaza!????? Do we talk of 300 rockets launched on Israel tonight???? No no... we talk only of 2/3 rockets launched on Gaza in reaction...Thanks Le Figaro for this publication inciting to hatred against Israel 🙄” (LEFIG-FB[20210510])⁹

This user explicitly reacts to the article by accusing *Le Figaro* of “inciting to hatred against Israel”. According to the user, the claim is justified by the fact that the article discusses Israel’s “deadly attacks on gaza” without mentioning the “300 rockets launched on Israel tonight”. In other words, the user counters the idea that Israel is solely responsible for this conflict (ISRAEL’S GUILT).

4. The impact of counter speech comments

4.1 The argumentative strategies adopted in counter speech comments

In order to counter antisemitic statements, web users often formulate their counter speech comments in a convincing and persuasive way. They need to create an authoritative *ethos* (Amossy 2010) that allows them to present both themselves and their comments as legitimate and, therefore, incontestable. To achieve this, users resort to different argumentative strategies. Here, I will examine the main strategies identified in the three sub-corpora. The counter speech comments posted in reaction to the Pegasus affair include statements presented as incontrovertible facts rather than opinions, as the following example shows:

- (8) “NSO is a private company, but like with any defence material they have to obtain their government’s approval to sell, That’s where

9 « Mais mmmddddd on parle de frappes meurtrière sur gaza !????? On parle de 300roquettes tires cette nuit sur Israël ???? Nan nan... on parle juste de 2/3 roquettes tirés sur gaza en riposte ...Merci Le Figaro pour cette publication incitant à la haine contre Israël 🙄 »

the responsibilities of NSO and the Israeli government end, only the software's users are responsible. Nobody would condemn the USA and Microsoft if one Windows user made illegal use of it. What do you think? This intrigue is to exonerate Morocco from its responsibilities and like LFI and accuse the bad Israelis" (VALEU-FB[20211123])¹⁰

The user implicitly rejects the accusations against Israel and NSO¹¹, the Israeli company who developed Pegasus, by asserting that the process followed in the case of this spyware is the same as that adopted in the approval and selling of "any defence material". In order to give weight to their argument, the user poses the hypothetical example of the USA and Microsoft, claiming that nobody would condemn them if Windows was used illegally by one user. The parallel emphasises that Israel is often judged in a more severe way than other nations, drawing attention to and countering the *DOUBLE STANDARD* (Vincent 2024) applied to Israel.

One argumentative strategy that was identified in all three sub-corpora is the appeal to authority (Ducrot 1984). Users refer to legitimate and authoritative sources in order to make themselves appear to be a reliable source, too:

- (9) " Hamas launches hundreds of rockets against civilians in Israel, then Hamas puts children near the rocket launchers because they know that the Israeli army will destroy these launchers. [...]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V14VaMq3tWc>" (LIBER-FB[20210512])¹²

In redirecting readers to a video, this user strives to show that their statement is not simply an opinion or an assumption. Rather, the strategy allows the user to present their comment as based on evidence. Even though the author of the video is not an authoritative source such

10 « La société NSO est une société de droit privé, mais comme tout matériel de défense, il doit obtenir l'aval de son gouvernement pour la vente, là s'arrête les responsabilités de la société NSO du gouvernement israélien, seuls sont responsables les utilisateurs de ce logiciel. Il ne viendrait à l'idée de personne de condamner les USA et Microsoft si un utilisateur de Windows en faisait un usage illicite. Qu'en pensez vous? Tout ce micmac pour exonérer le Maroc de ses responsabilités à l'instar de LFI et accuser les méchants israéliens »

11 NSO stands for Niv, Shalev and Omri, the names of the company's founders.

12 « Le hamas tire des centaines de roquettes contre des civils en Israël puis le hamas met des enfants près des lanceurs de roquettes car ils savent que l'armée Israélienne va détruire ces lanceurs. [...] : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V14VaMq3tWc> »

as a TV channel, the title of the video, “How HAMAS creates its human shield”, suggests that what it shows is a piece of evidence. More precisely, in providing a link to a video that refers to “how” Hamas creates a human shield, the commenter takes for granted that Hamas does use such a defence and then makes this presupposition incontestable. In this indirect way, the user rejects or counters the antisemitic concept of CHILD MURDER (Placzynta 2024).

A different kind of appeal to authority was identified in (10), where the user refers to the law to give weight to their position.

(10) “The law, nothing but the law” (MONDE-TW[20210808])¹³

This comment was posted in one of the threads responding to Fristot’s arrest. The user implicitly supports the arrest by referring to the law. Specifically, instead of presenting this support as their own opinion, the user presents it as a general statement—one legitimised by the fact that the arrest is an application of the law. In other words, the user relieves themselves from any responsibility and justifies Fristot’s arrest as an enforcement of the law.

Some users counter their interlocutors by involving them in the argumentation. The following example was posted in reaction to an article dealing with the escalation phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict:

(11) “What would you all do if Belgium bombed Paris with more than one thousand missiles and the north of France [bombed] Parisian civilians for 7 days a week 24 hours a day? What would France do in this case? Would it let the Belgian terrorists do it, or would they defend themselves to stop this harassment” (20MIN-FB[20210512])¹⁴

Here, the user addresses their interlocutors in the argumentation by asking what they would do in a situation similar to the one faced by Israelis. This strategy, which invites identification with the nation, is an effort to legitimise Israel’s actions—presented here as defence—and, thereby, to counter the idea that Israel is an EVIL entity.

13 « La loi. Rien que la loi »

14 « Que feriez-vous tous si la Belgique bombarde avec plus de Mille missiles sur Paris, et le Nord de la France pendant 7 jours sur 7 les 24 heures sur 24 sur les civils parisiens ? Que ferait la France dans ce cas-là ? Lesser faire les terroristes Belges, ou bien se défendre pour cela cesse ce harcèlement »

4.2 Reactions elicited by counter speech comments

So far, we have examined counter speech comments and whether they were posted in reaction to antisemitic or neutral comments, or to the article. In this section, I investigate the reactions triggered by counter speech comments in order to determine to what extent users succeed in countering antisemitic concepts.

In the Pegasus sub-corpus, eight counter speech comments did not receive any reaction while five comments elicited neutral statements. Different tendencies were observed in the sub-corpora related to the Fristot placard and escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. As far as the former is concerned, 43% of the counter speech comments did not receive any reaction, while 33% triggered neutral statements. Some of these responses did not agree with the counter speech comments but did not express any antisemitism. Moreover, 21% of the counter speech comments received antisemitic reactions (including example 12, below), whereas only three comments (2%) received affirming counter speech reactions.

(12) A: “Justice is finally waking up. Even if her sanction is insufficient, especially when it comes to antisemitic placards proudly shown in public”.

B: “Explain where you see antisemitism...” (LEFIG-FB[20211020])¹⁵

In this extract, taken from one of the threads constituting the Fristot sub-corpus, user A acknowledges the placard’s antisemitic character and supports the accusation against Fristot. User B, however, not considering the placard to be antisemitic, asks user A to explain why it would be. The use of ellipsis instead of a question mark suggests that what may appear as a genuine question is actually an expression of DENIAL OF ANTISEMITISM, which proved to be one of the most frequent antisemitic reactions in this corpus.

Similar percentages were identified in the sub-corpus dealing with the Arab-Israeli escalation phase. Most of the counter speech comments received either a neutral reaction (39%) or did not elicit any reaction at

15 A: « Enfin la justice se réveille. Et encore sa sanction est insuffisante surtout quand il s’agit de pancartes antisémites brandies avec fièremment en public »

B: « expliquez où vous voyez l antisémitisme.... »

all. However, as in the Fristot sub-corpus, some of the counter speech comments prompted antisemitic reactions (21%):

- (13) A: "The problem in your story is that Israel is a sovereign and legitimate nation, over the whole Jerusalem and, in the long run, from the sea to the Jordan"
 B: "According to the international law Israel has no right over Jerusalem. It has been recognised by the whole humanity that its occupation is illegitimate, according to history this state was created in 1948 and was named after a biblical kingdom to spread confusion..." (MONDE-FB[20210512])¹⁶

In (13), user A's comment countering the DENIAL OF ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST was rejected by user B, who reaffirms this antisemitic concept. To legitimate their statement, user B resorts to the appeal to authority, namely by evoking the international law as well as history. In this example, one counter speech comment led another user to react and counter with an antisemitic concept.

Furthermore, each sub-corpus presents two counter speech comments that elicited neutral statements in which the users expressed hateful yet non-antisemitic content. User B's statement in example 14, below, demonstrates the verbal violence exhibited in a limited number of responses to counter speech comments:

- (14) A: "You seem to insinuate that the 9 million people are so superior that they dominate 2 billion people? You have a very dirty opinion of your co-religionists and yourself"
 B: "you're not only stupid, you're stubborn" (MONDE-FB[20220405])¹⁷

16 A : « Le problème dans ton histoire est qu'Israël est une nation souveraine et légitime, sur la totalité de Jérusalem, et à terme, de la mer au Jourdain »
 B : « Selon le droit international Israël n'a aucun droit sur Jérusalem. Son occupation est reconnue comme illégitime par l'ensemble de l'humanité dite selon l'histoire cet état qui a été créé en 1948 et qui a pris le nom d'un royaume biblique pour semer la confusion... »

17 A : « Tu sembles insinuer que les 9 millions de personnes sont tellement supérieurs qu'ils dominent 2 milliards de personnes? Tu as une bien sale opinion de tes coreligionnaires et de toi-même »
 B : « en plus d'être bête t'es têtue dis donc »

Here, user A rejects the idea that Jews (“9 million people”) would have the power to dominate Muslims (“2 billion people”). User B does not reject user A’s comment. Rather, they diminish user A through the insult “you’re not only stupid, you’re stubborn”. By delegitimising user A, user B delegitimises user A’s statement too.

This analysis has shown that the comments countering antisemitic statements tend to elicit either no reaction or neutral comments. However, antisemitic reactions to counter speech comments occur in the corpora dealing with the Arab-Israeli escalation phase and the antisemitic placard. Likewise, in six cases only, counter speech comments elicited non-antisemitic but nevertheless hateful content.

4.3 The Overlap of Counter Speech and Hate Speech

Not only can counter speech comments trigger antisemitic reactions, but they can also present other forms of hate speech themselves. In the three corpora under investigation, these comments attack and diminish either Islam or Muslims. Not surprisingly, these forms of hate speech are more frequent in the sub-corpus dealing with the escalation phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Here, four comments countering antisemitic concepts presented expressions of anti-Muslim racism.

(15) “two states?????Never! No country in the world would share its land and even less with some terrorists!” (LEXPR-FB[20210510])¹⁸

This comment explicitly presents all Palestinians as terrorists. This generalisation, the goal of which is to diminish the Palestinian population, is combined with a more extreme form of hate speech. By rejecting the possibility of Israel and Palestine’s coexistence, the user denies Palestinians’ existence and justifies this position by stating that any country would act in the same way as Israel.

In the sub-corpus dealing with the Pegasus case, two counter speech comments present other forms of hate speech. The following is one such example:

18 « deux états ?????Jamais !Aucun pays au monde ne partagerai sa terre et encore moins avec des terroristes ! »

- (16) “Go and spit your FLNist antisemitism somewhere else. Zionists are 10 million inhabitants, and a GDP that could nourish your shitty country for 50 centuries. Israelis don’t throw themselves in the water to reach your old biological mother, France 😊” (MONDE-TW[20210720])¹⁹

In the Pegasus corpus, the focus is on Morocco’s use of the spyware. Therefore, the comments presenting these forms of hate speech tend to attack Morocco itself. In this comment, the user valorises Israel by diminishing the Other: in addition to explicitly insulting Morocco, the user implies that this country would be nothing without France and states that Moroccans even risk their life in order to leave their country.

This last section has shown that even though counter speech comments aim at deconstructing antisemitic concepts, they can also elicit new and stronger antisemitic reactions or, in a few cases, present other forms of hate speech.

5. Conclusion

This study has revealed that the number of comments countering antisemitism in *Facebook* and *Twitter* comment sections is proportionally smaller than the number of antisemitic comments. Moreover, the fact that users produce counter speech not only in reaction to antisemitic comments proves that counter speech is related to the context and, more precisely, to the topic dealt with by the articles. This analysis has also shown that, by putting forward and defending their society’s dominant values, the counter speech comments presented in this chapter cannot be considered a “peripheral discourse” within the discursive system (Angenot 1989: 22). As to the efficiency of the comments countering antisemitism online, analysis here has shown that these comments may lead those to whom they are addressed to react and, in some cases, to reaffirm their antisemitic positions. This suggests that, even though online counter speech is needed to prevent one-sided discourse, this form of spontaneous counter speech may paradoxically fuel the

19 « Ton antisémitisme FLNiste va le cracher autre part. Les sionistes c’est 10 millions d’habitant, et un PIB qui peut nourrir ton pays de merde pendant 50 siècles. Cest pas les israéliens qui se jettent en mer pour rejoindre votre ancienne maman génitrice la France 😊 »

emergence of antisemitic comments. Furthermore, the last section has shown that some comments counter antisemitic stereotypes and valorise Israel by diminishing another out-group, as if their goal was to find another scapegoat. These results open the way to more complex questions: is users' spontaneous counter speech efficient enough? Are the positive counter speech effects jeopardised by the negative ones (e.g. the fuelling of hate speech)? Can counter speech be classified as such if it also conveys hate? These questions require further analyses, which would help identify ways of countering hate speech in a more efficient way.

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Cassandra Fristot

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