IMAGERY OF HATE ONLINE

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1. Introduction

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In any given society, there are a variety of different propositions that are held to be true at any given time and that guide the actions of the society. These propositions are not constant, but usually present themselves in the form of epistemic competition for claims to validity. Likewise, social actions do not necessarily take place in a consensual manner, as is quickly apparent from the number of divergent views held by a wide range of actors. Only the heterogeneity of social structures forms the basis of our democracy, because only "where heterogeneous use of semiotic acts between competing [...] groups is recognisable, [...] there is a debate and no dictatorial continuation of views of reality, patterns of interpretation and truths" (Niehr 2014: 47). But it is precisely in this everyday competition for claims to validity that the enormous explosiveness of sign actions is revealed: they can polarise, radicalise, and ultimately, they can kill. The Holocaust did not begin with the Nuremberg laws and the construction of crematoria; rather, it was rooted in centuries of persistent use and society-wide normalisation of certain semiotic acts, preserved within the collective reservoir of shared ideas for centuries (Schwarz-Friesel and Reinharz 2017). Today, the visual stereotypes of Jews from the Middle Ages persist, for instance, in the Happy Merchant meme, while accusations of blood libel and conspiracy myths have evolved into distorted representations of Israel as the Jewish state (for the distinction between criticism of Israel and Israel-related antisemitism, see below). Similarly, other hate ideologies—such as racism or misogyny—, reiterated in public communication in often

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elaborate ways, gain increased persuasiveness through renewed visual or multimodal patterns that carry related hateful ideas, surpassing their tabooed predecessors.

This volume is dedicated to digital spaces and the unique forms of communication within them, as it is precisely in these contexts that age-old hateful and exclusionary ideas—and their associated communication patterns—are proliferating at an alarming rate in new ways. The communicative reach and influence of individuals who endorse certain hate ideologies (or uncritically propagate them), are expanding like never before. In the early phase of digital communication, known as Web 1.0, only a limited number of users had the ability to create and share media content. With the advent of Web 2.0, however, digital technologies now enable almost anyone to produce and distribute their own (hateful) content.

These developments are particularly problematic, as the erosion of boundaries in digital communication through network connectivity significantly amplifies the spread—and thus normalisation—of hateful discourse in society (Troschke and Becker 2019): network connections allow hateful ideas to gain global validation and be strategically embedded in moderate areas of the digital public sphere (Ebner 2023). In these spaces, repeated exposure to such ideas in familiar contexts gradually imparts a sense of normalcy, leading to their acceptance even within environments previously regarded as moderate.

Moreover, digital communication increasingly relies on visual content, with meanings often conveyed more directly through images than words (Sachs-Hombach 2003, Engelkamp 2004, Nöth 2016). This trend is particularly relevant for hate communication, as hatred and other forms of resentment as well as exclusionary attitudes can be encoded in visual artefacts that make these ideas seem tangible and validated. Such images appear to affirm prejudiced beliefs by invoking traditional stereotypes. For instance, an image that portrays people of colour in a racist manner may, to a racist viewer, seem like an "authentic" depiction of reality, reinforcing their biased perspectives.

Despite their relevance in contemporary digital communication, approaches to the analysis of hate imagery are primarily undertaken from a historical perspective (Hauser and Janáčová 2020, Königseder 2020 and 2022). When examining hate ideologies in digital communication spaces, the focus is usually on verbal forms of communication (for antisemitism studies see Grimm and Kahmann 2018, Schwarz-Friesel 2020, Becker 2021, Becker et al. 2024; for racism studies see HateWatch (Southern Poverty Law Center); for social media studies with regard to various forms of hate communication, see HateLab; for extremism studies, see Hammer, Gerster, and Schwieter 2023 (ISD); for gender hostility, see KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018). This focus is particularly striking, as the pictorial dimension within digital communication—especially on social media platforms—plays a pivotal role in the spread of hateful content (Nagle 2017, Hübscher and von Mering 2022, Ebner 2023, see also Siever 2015). The use of images in everyday online hate communication has become commonplace, as the interplay between pictorial and verbal sign modalities in a concrete language-image relationship evokes its own communicative dynamics: memes, for example, represent a form of communication that constructs a shared sphere of cultural knowledge (Breitenbach 2015) and, as such, function as a communicative template for online social interaction, which is then adapted to advance various hate ideologies.

The interplay of pictorial and verbal signs is not a novelty of digital communication, but rather a natural feature of human communicative action. This phenomenon can be conceptualised through the lens of *multimodality*. On the one hand, multimodality describes the observation that all actions and communicative artefacts (such as antisemitic memes) draw on different sign modalities, interweaving them both productively and receptively in formal, discourse-semantic, and argumentative terms (Stöckl 2019: 50). On the other hand, multimodality refers to the methodological approaches used to analyse the interaction between different sign systems—such as language, image, or even music.

> Understood as an approach to the simultaneous analysis of all semiotic resources in an artefact, multimodality is seen […] as one of the most influential concepts for semiotization of diverse forms of communications, providing a range of frameworks for the detailed analysis of meaning construction within and across several modes (Wildfeuer 2015: 14).

Multimodality thus aims to analyse the mutual integration of different sign potentials of verbal and non-verbal sign modalities. For as soon as sign modalities are interwoven, their specific qualities are also merged. This integration gives rise to an emergent meaning that is not inherent in the sign modalities involved or that can be derived from them alone. In other words: multimodality seeks to grasp and explain the fact that within multimodal sign actions the "sum of all components [...] cannot be determined by the simple addition of all the separate components—text, image, layout, etc.—as they often do not acquire an independent meaning of their own" (Wetzchewald 2012: 129; for a discussion on the principle of emergence in the context of understanding metaphors, see Skirl 2009); however, this only emerges from the dialectical interaction of the sign potentials involved in the sense of an overarching (communicative-semiotic) action structure. With regard to the mutual integration of verbal and pictorial sign modalities in the context of digital hate communication, the specific communicative and semiotic contributions that images and language make to a specific hate artefact are therefore of particular interest. Through the strategic placement of hateful, multimodal content, previously "niche positions can be carried from the margins into the public digital sphere, where they not only appear highly salient through mass distribution, but also function successfully as mobilising agents" (Schulze et al. 2022: 42). Research on contemporary visual and multimodal expressions of hate in digital communication is therefore urgently needed in order to understand the phenomena and their underlying dynamics and to counter them effectively. However, a multimodal approach to hate communication—like any other empirical work involving both online and offline datasets—should not be understood as an instrument for (morally) evaluating individual statements against a supposed standard of

acceptable communication, as such standards are shaped by the epistemes of a given time and are therefore variable. Instead, the analytical value of a multimodal approach lies in identifying the semiotic contexts within (the specifics of) digital communication that both constitute and reinforce hateful content in all its forms.[1]

In addition to these structural communication-related specifics, it is crucial to offer a precise definition of the underlying conceptual layer when examining hate ideologies. This becomes especially challenging in the case of antisemitism, as the classifications used reveal how expressions related to Israel, as well as anti-capitalist statements and anti-elitist remarks, are framed. The latter two often emerge during online debates about figures like George Soros, Jewish celebrities in Hollywood, or during the COVID-19 pandemic, when anti-Jewish rhetoric was widespread. Antisemitism is a hate ideology that is often surrounded by grey areas. The same applies to anti-Muslim racism, where questions often arise about its relationship to criticism of political Islam, Islamism, Jihadism, and, in extreme cases, religiously legitimised terrorist organisations such as Hamas, al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hezbollah.

The authors of this introduction, together with the Decoding Antisemitism team, emphasise that legitimate criticism of Israel is not synonymous with antisemitism. In defining antisemitic concepts—whether related to Israel or other contexts—it is crucial to assess claims based on contextual knowledge and to determine the extent of essentialisation and generalisation attributed to a particular characteristic or practice. As outlined once more in our recently published *Lexicon* (Becker et al., 2024)—a comprehensive guide informed by the operationalization of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition (2016)—clear distinctions exist between criticism of Israel and Israel-related

1 In terms of scientific ethics, we, in agreement with Pippa Norris (2017) and Martha C. Nussbaum (2010), regard science as indispensable for upholding democratic values and promoting public discourse, objective and analytical. However, we acknowledge that scientific findings—although they should neither serve as the basis for nor bear responsibility for moral judgments and solutions—do influence moral and political decisions. The responsibility for these matters should instead be entrusted to democratic institutions and public debate.

antisemitism, as well as the other related phenomena mentioned above. Criticism of right-wing populism in the Knesset, structural racism in Israeli society, injustice, loss of life, and destruction in the Gaza strip is legitimate, provided it remains grounded in genuine critique and does not devolve into stereotypical, reality-distorting, one-sided statements that reflect a double standard, which have been a constant feature of many international narratives surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1948.

We do not wish to suggest that there are no grey areas—indeed, there are. However, our argument is that, for decades, discursive rituals have sought to convince us that the field of Israel-related antisemitism is an impenetrable minefield, beyond any form of analysis. We believe that many of the frequently cited "grey areas" were already thoroughly discussed and academically classified years, if not decades, ago. The current Gaza war does not alter this reality. Rather, some of the discursive responses we observe today in traditional and social media continue to reflect familiar patterns of bias and/or demonisation of Israel that have long been embedded in the antisemitic repertoire, such as in the former Soviet Union or among both left-leaning and conservative circles in Germany, France, Spain, and the UK. Thus, the same classificatory frameworks can still be applied to identify patterns that are immediately recognisable to the informed reader of historical sources (for claims of genocide and apartheid, see Bolton et al. 2023, Bolton 2024; for claims of Nazism and colonialism, see Becker 2021). What remains lacking, however, is broader recognition of these classifications by other sectors of the academic community, politics, the media, and civil society.

As previously mentioned, definitional precision is equally crucial when critiquing Muslim or Islamist individuals and organisations (and here it is important to clarify that we do not equate these entities with the Israeli government, as these are fundamentally different entities). Such statements cross the boundary of legitimate discourse when the inherent patterns reflect derogatory, racist attitudes toward all Muslims (see Henzell-Thomas 2001, Pintak et al. 2021, and Aguilera-Carnerero et al. in chapter 5 of this volume). This kind of distorted demonisation of all Muslims lacks any basis

in truth and compels those targeted by such rhetoric to answer for terrorist attacks like those of October 7 or September 11, or for other acts committed in the name of Islamism.

Any research project on hate speech, or more broadly on hate communication, whether in online or offline contexts, must clearly define the conceptual characteristics of the phenomenon being studied. Based on empirical data, these definitions should be expanded with inductive categories, enabling the systematic and consistent classification of the multimodal communication strategies employed by hateful actors, as demonstrated in this book. Our edited volume also seeks to operationalise the contexts in which hate manifests by offering a multidisciplinary overview of the range of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of visual and multimodal hate communication. The aim is to gain insights and provide an overview of established research practices and the challenges they face. As part of the analysis of multimodal dimensions, several contributions will further illuminate how the findings from these case studies relate to broader public discourse.

In chapter 2, Uffa Jensen explores the affective dimension of the use of images and attributes independent agency to images. He illustrates this affective dimension by analysing the "visual markers" of the "Happy Merchant" meme.

Lev Topor in chapter 3 outlines how antisemitic users employ a variety of memes, drawing on established antisemitic patterns to spread antisemitism. The chapter provides insight into why antisemitic, or more generally radical and hateful, content becomes normalised within digital communication, drawing on the knowledge of an insider community.

Chapter 4 by Eemeli Hakokõngäs and Otto Halmesvaara provides an overview of qualitative rhetorical analysis of internet memes created and disseminated by various extremist groups. They show that memes possess strategic potential for right-wing extremist actors, which they are aware of and therefore actively use for their communicative purposes.

Carmen Aguilera-Carnerero, Matthias J. Becker, and Marcus Scheiber in chapter 5 explore how the same mechanisms that enable the spread of hate speech can be repurposed to promote

counter-speech, specifically focusing on memes combating Islamophobia.

Chapter 6 by Mohamed Salhi and Yasmine Goldhorn presents a fine-grained analysis of antisemitic communication in coded form on all semiotic levels, showing how multimodal resources are used in different ways and how they differ in their use to convey an antisemitic meaning.

Inari Sakki's chapter 7 presents a fine-grained analysis of right-wing populist communication strategies within TikTok, drawing on multimodal critical discursive psychology analysis to show how populist groups use multimodal communication to propagate hate and hostility.

In their study in chapter 8, Lisa Bogerts, Wyn Brodersen, Maik Fielitz, and Pablo Jost analyse the visual propaganda of far-right and conspiratorial actors using computational and interpretive methods. They reveal significant differences in how these actors target specific groups or audiences, focusing on polarising issues in current public debates in ways that amplify divisions.

Chapter 9 by Dimitris Serafis and Janina Wildfeuer outlines an integration of approaches from multimodality studies and argumentation theory to provide a systematic approach to the analysis of online forms of soft hate speech that is also generally applicable to other forms of (online) communication.

Marcus Scheiber in chapter 10 outlines the epistemic danger of antisemitic deepfakes and presents a qualitative approach that promises to complement existing quantitative AI-based approaches to deepfake identification with a discourse-semiotic perspective.

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