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Democratic Culture and Digital Ecosystems: Women's Political Participation in Latin America

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Abstract: *This article investigated the increase of online hate speech practices in Latin America against women social leaders and political candidates during electoral campaigns and social rights activism. A qualitative approach was used to study this research problem (case study and secondary data analysis) to demonstrate that the growth of online hate speech limits the sociopolitical participation and enjoyment of fundamental rights of Latin American women social leaders and political candidates. The main results of the case study demonstrated that critical digital media education represents a possibility of intervention to counterbalance these discriminatory online practices. In this sense, the conclusions proposed Latin American educomunicación as a methodology for constructing ethical, social, and political alternatives because it promotes the development of critical collective consciousness and strengthens the effectiveness of normative actions.*

Keywords: *Digital Ecosystems; Platformization; Globalized Society; Freedom; Hate Speech; Women; Latin America*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary globalized societies, the issue of the effects of digital technologies and ecosystems on democratic processes, communication, and respect for individual and collective digital rights and freedoms leads to essential debates and considerations. A flexible logic, immediate virality, the possibility of anonymity, and the creation of fake or fictitious accounts have all amplified the risks of restricting individual freedoms and rights. This is because they have exacerbated - in the online world - practices that date back to antiquity, such as censorship, ostracism, and dissemination of disinformation and fake news. In online reality, social relations create forms of sociality characterized by mercified, anesthetized interactions denying any otherness. The communicative process, understood as dialogue and confrontation, is emptied. Subjectivities become "public", atomized into polarised blocs, shaped and unified by a dominant social narrative diverting attention from the relevant issues. Contemporary globalized societies are undergoing unprecedented challenges. If, on the one hand, digital ecosystems and new technologies can promote democratization and socio-cultural and institutional progress, the widespread dissemination of digital content requires critical analyses of the circulation of illegal or false publications. This also leads to the need for a balance between platforms/Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the guarantee of protection of human dignity and freedoms. The proliferation of disinformation through fake news, digital violence, hate speech, and practices of cancellation and censorship foster social polarization and fragmentation (Picarella 2024).

Consequently, this creates complex interactions that weaken democratic processes and institutions. In this context, online hate speech and information disorder are not only interrelated but also create a new disinformation status quo that obeys neoliberal logic and practices (De Blasio and Sorice 2023). Even if the birth of the hate speech phenomenon originates in the offline world, in actual digitalized societies, domination-aggression relations are built, viralized, and permanently established in digital ecosystems. According to Donato, Eslen-Ziya, and Mangone (2022), it is a mistake to think that expressions of hate in virtual reality do not produce effects since they are mere "online". On the contrary, online hate has tangible effects, even if hidden behind a virtual society's multifaceted world. The exponential growth of the online hate speech phenomenon, linked to global trends due to long-term mutations concerning culture, common meanings and identities, communication processes, and new dominant technological elites, generates concerns and considerations on the need for joint efforts at multiple levels to deal with these dynamics. It is a trend that seems uncontrollable due to the controversies it raises about the regulatory framework between combating hate speech and guaranteeing freedom of expression. There is also the difficulty of controlling the effects that the rapid reproduction and amplification of online hate speech generate on emotions and significations of identity and otherness, as well as on the tension between democratizing the public sphere and restricting individual and collective freedoms. In Latin America, the geographical area I present as a case study, despite the intentions of normative regulation, which adds to the opposition between the regulation/freedom of expression, the problems of the impossibility of a common regional framework due to the differences between countries in terms of requirements and minimum standards of definition and the demand for a causal link between the speech and the violent act (Díaz Hernández 2023), there is a strong wave of misogynist and sexist online hate speech, especially during popular elections or rights demands such as the decriminalization of voluntary abortion.

This trend increases the polarization of relevant social achievements. It pushes towards a significant limitation of women's participation and individual freedoms, thus creating a worrying cyber-violence scenario through the extremization of online hate speech. This article aims to evaluate the possibilities in the Latin American context of complementing the efforts of a legal and regulatory discipline with the construction of a socio-cultural process capable of producing counter-narratives that allow for a crossroads between offline and online realities through critical media education as a possible solution to the better understanding and use of technologies. The aim is also to counterbalance the current dynamics that destroy democratic dialogue and reduce the spaces of democratization.

METHODOLOGY

This article employed a qualitative approach based on the case study and a secondary data analysis to demonstrate that the growth of online hate speech limits the sociopolitical participation and enjoyment of fundamental rights of Latin American women social leaders and political candidates. The case-study approach, supported by secondary data, focuses on a detailed examination of events that occurred during popular election campaigns characterized by misogyny, sexism, and online hate speech. The qualitative approach is appropriate for testing or developing theories because it allows for conceptual validity, facilitates the exploration of

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causal mechanisms in individual cases with fine detail, aids in deriving new hypotheses, and accommodates complex causal relationships (George and Bennett 2004). The use of case-study methods in national and international relations is a valuable methodology for various reasons.

Bennett and Elman (2007) note that the importance of qualitative methods lies in the fact that "case study methods, especially the combination of process tracing and typological theorizing, have considerable advantages... these methods' advantages [are] in studying complex, relatively unstructured, and infrequent phenomena that lie at the heart of the subfield (p. 171). The prominence of case studies is well justified in the context of this article, as they help identify interactions between variables while establishing a chronological sequence of events. The choice of Latin America as an interesting case study stems from its demonstration of how online hate speech, particularly toward female social or political leaders and activists, intensifies, especially during electoral campaigns or moments of social rights activism. This case provides a clear example of how discrimination and violations of women's rights can occur across various states and highlights the need to develop strategies to reduce or eliminate these effects.

STATE OF THE ART: DEMOCRATIC CULTURE, (DIGITAL) LIBERTIES AND HATE SPEECH

The extremism that arises in digital ecosystems through the uncritical imposition of linguistic and behavioral codes (defined as "politically correct"), the dynamics of cancellation and deletion of messages and accounts considered not in line with what is considered "correct", along with disqualification campaigns fuelled by online hate speech is transferred from the virtual reality to the real world, with it causing not only the public destruction of the person affected but also the erosion of the democratic pillars of respect, confrontation, and dialogue. The United Nations (2024) defines hate speech as "any expression that incites discrimination, hostility or violence towards a person or group of persons on the basis of their ethnic, national, religious or linguistic origin, gender, sexual orientation or disability". The European Union's Recommendation CM/Rec (2022) considers hate speech as "all types of expression that incite, promote, disseminate or justify violence, hate or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrate them, by reason of their real or perceived personal characteristics or status, such as race, colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation". Similarly, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2023), hate speech is defined as "any written or verbal manifestation that incites, promotes, propagates or justifies discrimination, harassment, contempt or violence against a person or group of persons based on their membership in a social group protected by international human rights instruments". Therefore, the trademarks of hate speech are generalization, discrimination, and intolerance. The resulting stigmatization and exclusion influence the construction of specific identities and social and political representations (van Dijk 1993) that, based on the binary logic of inclusion/exclusion, generate attitudes and manifestations of fear, rejection, and hostility in public opinion (Bauman 2000). The communicative dynamic that characterizes hate speech is distorted and limited to the polarised "bubble" built on the person or group. This significantly reduces - to the point of inhibiting - a conscious and critical public debate. The shift from the offline to the online world has imposed a complex "restructuring" of the concept of the public sphere. Ever since the theorizations of the Frankfurt School, the critical, authentic, and liberating potential offered by the presence of a

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democratic public sphere has been emphasized. The public sphere is the space of the "collective intelligence" (Dewey 1946, 219), i.e., the place where, through a bottom-up dynamic, a reflective and critical bond is established between the members of the community utilizing dialogical forms of social communication that favor the correct practice of public deliberation, a greater argumentative consciousness, a differentiation of perspectives that allows better solutions. Along these lines, the famous vision of the public sphere as the social space of critical active citizenship capable of opposing forms of domination through communicative relations that can establish counter-power (Habermas 1991). The restructuring that causes the transition from the public sphere to the digital public sphere (Bruns and Highfield 2016) makes considerations on the impact on culture and democratic freedoms even more pressing. Digital ecosystems can stimulate the emergence of online forms of activism and participation, but the dark side of social networks and platforms cannot be ignored. For example, controversial censorship and cancellation practices significantly reduce the democratization of public space, while platformization increases depoliticization, saturates public discourse, and facilitates the overlap between techno-populism and direct e-democracy (De Blasio and Sorice 2018). Furthermore, in digital spaces, information, and communication often overlap (Solito and Sorrentino 2019) with the frequent replacement of professionals with influencers and the resulting fake news and disinformation. There is also a downgrading from citizen to consumer, which is functional to the "techno-enlightenment/economic liberalism" mix (Boccia Artieri 2012).

The issue of hate speech fits into this complex scenario since it represents a clear manifestation, invisible but invasive, of the spread of social hate that, while destroying social relations and critical consciousness, lubricates "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019). This is even more evident in the case of online hate speech, where the destructive power of real language content is compounded by the (as yet virtually unknown) power of micro-narratives, classifications, and legitimizations generated by anonymous accounts and statistical algorithms. Who creates discriminatory or hate hashtags? The phenomenon of hate speech online leads to reflecting on the dilemma of assumptions between those who consider these dynamics as spontaneous products of users and those who consider them strategies of distraction by elites and dominant forces (or aspiring to be) to decide and check the agenda. This dilemma leads to the analytical spiral between the supporters of the so-called "platform society" (van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018), who, with optimism, see in digital ecosystems new possibilities of democracy, and those who analyze the numerous and varied "conspiracy theories" from various perspectives, along with their narratives and speeches of hate and discrimination to evaluate how they affect the rhythm of socio-political and socio-cultural trends (Gualda Caballero 2024). It is therefore understood that the debate on online hate speech goes far beyond the problem of using an offensive term but requires an analysis "on the context in which discriminatory symbolic actions get meaning (...) actions carried out by statements" (Sponholz 2022, 131). Online hate speech influences social relations and civic commitment modalities and forms. If narratives can produce a social transformation because they influence the individual and collective decisions of the present and, thus, change future perspectives (Mangone 2022), what is spread and read in the online world merely reflects how we relate to each other. This must be changed through a conscious and critical understanding of how net-reality functions and developing a social counter-narrative and a counter-alternative discourse.

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HATE SPEECH AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LATIN AMERICA

In line with what Crosas Remón and Medina-Bravo (2019) have pointed out on the global increase in forms of anti-feminist cyber-violence manifested through social platforms utilizing insults, sexual objectification, sarcasm, threats and hate, various studies in Latin America have shown how online hate language in particular towards women social or political leaders and activists takes on a high intensity, especially during electoral campaigns or during moments of social rights claims. This makes Latin America an interesting case study to analyze, with the support of examples drawn from the social reality of societies within this geographical area.

The problem of online hate speech is much more silent and damaging than people think. In socio-cultural contexts such as Latin America, strongly polarised, ideologized, and characterized by acute expressions of gender-based violence, hate speech promotes extreme socio-cultural behavior patterns and severe limitations on individual freedom that need to be urgently addressed. Through Resolution 73/183 of 2019, the UN General Assembly sought to create an international framework of specific measures to counter hate speech on digital platforms through the #NoToHate campaign. 18 June has been established as the International Day Against Hate Speech to raise consciousness of the causes and impact that hate speech can have on people. Given the international framework, many Latin American countries have created or strengthened national laws with penal and civil sanctions to combat offline and online hate speech (Alkiviadou, Mchangama, Mendiratta 2020). However, several important questions remain unanswered since most countries in the region either lack a solid corpus of jurisprudence or are just now moving forward to make it more effective. However, a sanctions-only approach to solving the problem seems rather sterile since the complexity of offline/online interactions and ecosystems and platforms - and especially their speed of development and updating - evades and advances much faster than any attempts to control and manage it. What needs to be focused on is not stigmatizing differences of opinion but rather the urgency of promoting a fundamental cultural change. This will create a process in the society of not only recognizing and understanding the differences and freedom of expression but also a critical knowledge of digital ecosystems and platforms, along with an awareness of the impact of certain manifestations, such as hate speech and online censorship, on people's rights, which would make regulatory provisions more effective by building informed citizenship capable of challenging any form of discrimination and hatred. Returning to Latin America and, thus, to the case study, Gómez Berniga and Quintana Pavlicich (2023) highlighted, for example, that cyber threats and online hate speech against women candidates in Paraguay not only violate people's privacy because not only do they increasingly include doxing and dissemination of personal images without consent but they have an even stronger impact on women because they discourage and limit women's social and political participation and expose women to greater risks to their physical integrity. According to the authors' analysis, in the first trimester of 2023, 50% of women candidates were victims of doxing, 31% of hate speech, and 18% of harassment. Overall, 98% of women politicians were subjected to some form of digital threat. The report by the Mexican organization *Luchadoras* (2018) shows particularly alarming patterns of digital aggression against women candidates, referred to as a "chain of attacks", that typically begins with doxing, followed by the manipulation of information and dissemination online coupled with discriminatory hashtags, reputational biases, and hate speech. Thus, the candidate is exposed to

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public attacks (insults that often extend to family members and co-workers). Similarly, Herrera, Arias, and García's (2010) analysis of female candidates and authorities at the municipal level in El Salvador and Ordoñez, Espinoza, and Vizuete's (2023) study for Ecuador show that the main hate messages against women involved in politics at various levels are directed at ridiculing, discriminating, sexually objectifying and censoring them. This creates a climate of hostility that normalizes a structurally violent culture. Undoubtedly, gender-based online hate speech manifests itself in various ways. In the Latin American context, political elections have turned into an important area of hate speech against women, to the point of transforming it into a significant form of gender-based political violence because it does not limit itself to isolated messages but, given its structural and systemic characteristics, "it influences both public opinion and women's political careers, representing a symbolic obstacle to the full exercise of their rights" (Macías and Valdespino 2019, 8). Along with elections, another area of interesting online hate speech against women has been the expansion of the *Marea Verde* in Latin America, i.e., the strong claims for legal abortion by feminist movements in the region, especially in the last decade. The studies by Zuban and Rabbia (2021) in Argentina, by Knipp Silva (2021) in Chile and Argentina, and by Proaño and Aguayo Zurita (2022) in Ecuador all show how online hate speech occurred during the fiery moments of the *Marea,* mainly through X (ex-Twitter). Based on these studies, it is possible to construct a categorization of the forms of manifestation of online hate speech in the analyzed countries, directed primarily at the delegitimization and infantilization of claims through the hashtags: *#caprichosas* (capricious); *#desquiciadas* (unbalanced); *#psicópatas* (psychopathic); *#retrasadas* (retarded); *#femilocas* (union of feminist + crazy). Criminalization, secondly, characterizes the hate language with the hashtags: *#asesinas* (murderesses) and *#feminazi* (from the union of feminists + nazis). Whereas stigmatization and insults are issued with the hashtags *#putas* (prostitutes); *#desenfrenadas* (unbridled); *#rataenferma* (diseased rat); *#marimacho* (lesbians). In many cases, the messages were reinforced by sarcastic digital content (memes) or photo-fakes that emphasized the analogy between abortion and murder.

EVIDENCE FROM THE CASE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

These examples demonstrate the issue's complexity since they contrast to freedom of expression/privacy, freedom of expression/respect for personal reputation, and freedom of expression/right not to be discriminated against for gender or membership of a minority or community. In the current globalized and platformed societies, it is crucial to consider the different possibilities of harmonization between democratization, freedom of expression, respect for differences, and otherness, which is essential to protect democratic values and culture. Alongside legal and institutional measures, the civic and socio-cultural aspects may represent a relevant possibility of intervention.

The boundary dividing the real from the virtual world is becoming increasingly intangible and blurred. Online reality is a powerful megaphone that amplifies stereotypes and prejudices. It leaves indelible marks since the multiplying action with which, with little or no consciousness, videos, photographs, or messages are retweeted or reposted has profound consequences on people's lives and freedom. Platforms and social networks reflect reality, so we need to operate in real society to structurally eradicate the symptoms of the trends and dynamics reflected on social networks. Taguieff (2001) argues that instead of merely banning or censoring hate speech,

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it is necessary to address the roots of the problem through education and public conscientization. The radicalization of the models and practices of neoliberalism and capitalism has emptied the public sphere and democratic institutions of their capacity to produce common meanings and subjectivities. This is even more relevant in the view of the operating logic of the platform society, where algorithms shape personal and social relations. Latin America, between models of progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2017) or of the more current woke capitalism, and structural issues that severely limit the institutionalization of the state and social justice could play an important role in constructing critical cultural and educational counter-discourses. The region has historically based its claims for rights and social freedoms on Freirean practices of critical education/pedagogy, i.e., oriented towards the liberation and conscientization of the oppressed, excluded, and marginalized (Freire 2005). Applying these visions to digital ecosystems, the reflection transcends the level of communication and is based on the socio-cultural and socio-political aspects. It is also set in a context of strong inequalities, material precariousness, and structural gaps in the opportunities for access to digital media. In the light of digitalized scenarios, the Latin American critical reflection on *educomunicación* (Aparici 2010) may represent a relevant practice aimed at building participatory communicative ecosystems where critical conscientization is strengthened to form aware citizens because the action of producing (digital) content is not synonymous of active and democratic participation. Latin American critical media education emphasizes the understanding of the hegemonic forms of production and dissemination of messages, information, and content, the interconnections between power, communication, the market, digital ecosystems, and platforms, the confusion between social relations and connectivity, and the effects that the simple actions of blocking, canceling, and stigmatizing through hate messages produce on an individual and collective level in terms of limiting the full expression of the concept of culture and democratic freedom. By emphasizing the importance of fully observing these dynamics in a critical and conscientious sense, the vision of Latin American critical *educomunicación* could suggest a meaningful praxis of educational counter-discourse and liberalization against instrumental narratives, thus able to counter the subjugation to the dark dynamics of globalized social platformization.

CONCLUSION

The case study described in this article showed the violent use of online hate speech against Latin American women, social leaders, and political candidates during election campaigns and in social rights activism. The rise of this practice in the Latin American scenario is a form of restriction on women's freedom of social and political participation, generally framed in the general category of gender-based violence. This study has indeed shown that online hate speech against women or political leaders during some social protests occurring throughout the region, such as the *Marea Verde,* or during some political second-order elections, takes heterogeneous forms. The tweets given as examples allowed a basic categorization of the forms of manifestation of online hate speech in the analyzed countries (stigmatization, delegitimization, sarcasm, criminalization) and also allowed a more extensive view of the worrying viralization of the expression of (cyber)violence through online hate speech because in many cases the different categories intertwine and complement each other, reinforcing the hate message. The logic and functioning of digital platforms and digital ecosystems contribute

(mainly due to anonymity, the possibility of creating fake accounts, the rapid transmission of the flow of information, etc.) to constructing an expressive and emotional "space" that influences subjectivity and collectivity.

Effectively, it is a fragmented and polarising virtual space that blurs the boundaries between freedom of expression and non-discrimination on racial or gender basis. The implications of this analysis are more extensive than individual case studies and enable us to introduce initial reflections for future debates and research on this issue. In this sense, the analyzed case study highlights the importance of developing regional and national research on the conscious use of digital platforms and digital ecosystems through multidisciplinary approaches. In particular, greater attention to the spread in social networks of hate speech against women social or political leaders (and more generally against any other minority) could favor in Latin American countries a strengthening of the normativity and institutional actions to address the problem more effectively and would allow a better understanding of the new dynamics and practices that arise in the virtual space but have a strong influence in the real world because they challenge conventionally established rights and freedoms. Undoubtedly, online hate speech results from the anesthetizing articulation typical of the communicative processes in social networks, which offer the possibility of transforming subjects into digital objects detached from their individuality.

Underestimating this problem distances us from the possibility of achieving greater levels of democratization and social responsibility. In this sense, as a basis for observation of this problem, Latin American *educomunicación* is proposed as a methodology for the construction of ethical, social, and political alternatives because it provides the possibility of recovering dialogue and responsible and conscious confrontation, of building together practices directed towards self-respect and respect for others, of constructing a horizontal and critical exercise in the use of digital media that, in collaboration with institutional and legal strategies, could offer proposals for solutions transcending geographical limits.

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