

The Dark Side of the Internet*

La parte oscura di internet

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Abstract

The relation of anti-semitism to the media has always been intense. This theme has always been pervaded by an “ontological” virality. With the rise of the web – viral by definition – the post-WWII democratic taboo against anti-semitism has been weakened due to its entering a no man’s land free of all controls and restrictions. The antisemitic galaxy on the web exhibits the traits of a closed self-referential, sectarian group. The code words, the commonplaces and usual clichés of anti-semitic prejudice, however, make deep inroads within the web and contribute to re-legitimize those themes beyond sectarian audiences. What was once considered an abhorrent prejudice can now be easily found in the guise of one opinion alongside others. After a rapid birdseye view of the far-right in Europe, this paper examines a number of diverse websites which share the same anti-semitic prejudice disguised in various ways.

Key words: *web; anti-semitism 2.0; negationism*

Riassunto

La relazione tra media e antisemitismo è sempre stata molto forte e caratterizzata da un’intrinseca virilità. Con la nascita del web, virale per definizione, i tabù democratici contro l’antisemitismo si sono allentati in questa terra senza controllo e restrizioni. La galassia antisemita sul web assume i tratti di un mondo chiuso e autoreferenziale di gruppi settari. Ma le parole chiave, i luoghi comuni e i soliti cliché del pregiudizio antisemita stanno creando un ambiente dove possono essere potenzialmente rilegittimati e normalizzati al di là delle audience settarie e chiuse. Tutto ciò che una volta era considerato un orrendo pregiudizio viene oggi riconsiderato come una delle tante idee, un’opinione come un’altra. Dopo una panoramica sull’estrema destra europea, l’articolo esamina una serie di differenti siti web che condividono però lo stesso pregiudizio anti-semita declinato in vari modi.

Parole chiave: *web; anti-semitismo 2.0; negazionismo*

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While on the one hand the web has opened up new possibilities for rethinking democracy, on the other hand it has also exerted a gravitational pull towards anti-semitic, xenophobic and neo-nazi movements. The relation of anti-semitism and the media is nothing new, if only one thinks of the late 19th century pamphlets and of the massive use of radio and cinema in fascist and nazi propaganda. After WWII, however, violent anti-semitic themes and code words have been ostracized insofar as a moral stigma and a democratic condemnation have come to prevail.

This predicament has come to change dramatically when the rise of the Web has attracted the xenophobic galaxy. Where taboo and problems of access used to block the way, now an unpatrolled and unpatrollable open-ended territory opened up. Before addressing this crucial seachange, an example of this virality worth considering is provided by an episode of 2008.

In 2008 a blacklist appeared on a website, with a list of many Italian university professors. These professors were Jewish, Catholic, Waldensian, Muslim, believers and non-believers. But the Internet site where our names had all ended up defined us all as Jewish and belonging to a powerful and obscure lobby which wanted to dominate the world.

The lobby originated from the university, preying on young minds and there was the added danger that this lobby could even go as far as defending a foreign state against the interests of the Italian state.

This case ended up on the front pages of the national newspapers and in the news headlines on television. The site was then reported to the police and it was blocked. At this point my colleagues and I tried to figure out where this list had come from and we noticed that the names they had published were the same names as a group of professors who had met a few times over a couple of years and who had appealed against the diffusion of Holocaust denial within university courses. The list disappeared thanks to the work of

the Internet police, but actually even now, every month or so, it reappears in a different form and on a different site. From 2008 until today, the same list appeared on many different sites and in many different places. For example, in 2014 the list appeared in a multilingual website by the name radioislam.org.¹

The first name on the list is that of an Italian Muslim born in Tunisia, and there is also the name of the director of a project and a journal open to dialogue with the Muslim world. So, even though the list was cancelled from the first neo-Nazi site, we find it again today on another completely different site. It has spread without control, in a viral way and many of the once listed distinguished colleagues remained on the blacklist.

On the site one can read: “this Site is owned by a group of freedom fighters from different countries in support of Ahmed Rami’s global struggle. Radio Islam is working to promote better relations between the West and the Muslim World. Radio Islam is against racism of all forms, against all kinds of discrimination of people based on their colour of skin, faith or ethnic background”.

This little story exemplifies in a very clear way the pervasive, far-reaching nature and the virality of the web.

The positive aspects of this pervasiveness and virality are often emphasized in the debate. However, it is also important to look at the darker side of the question.

The European picture: xenophobic parties and the European elections of 2014

Before examining the first results of this research on anti-semitism 2.0, a brief overview of the situation in Europe after the last European elections in May 2014 is in order. These elections highlighted the institutionalisation, throughout the EU, of right-wing

¹ See <http://www.radioislam.org/islam/italiano/potere/lista-ebraice.htm>, accessed on 10 October 2014.

movements and parties with nationalist, anti-semitic, racist, populist and anti-European tendencies. A real dark wave, which owes its success to the austerity policies that Europe has adopted in order to confront the economic and employment crisis (Caiani & Parenti, 2013). These movements addressed the big issues of the real economy, immigration and the safeguarding of local traditions and captured over 20% of the vote, with over seven hundred representatives elected to the EU Parliament in Brussels: a rather disturbing success, which could result in these extreme-right parties holding the balance of democracy. The issues, which seem to have made the greatest impression with the electorate, are those related to immigration policies. It is clear that these parties chose the easy route of populism, blaming the crisis on the many diverse people who live in our countries: Muslims, Jews, Roma people, blacks and immigrants from Eastern Europe. Despite the common denominator of xenophobic hatred, this wave has far more different nuances than can be covered here. Within this wide range of parties we find the National Front of Marine Le Pen, which won 25% of the vote in France, placing no fewer than 24 deputies in the Strasbourg Parliament, thus becoming the biggest of the Euro-sceptic parties thanks to a mixture of nationalism, conservatism, and an anti-semitism of sorts, apparently “re-furbished” and given a modern language.

Furthermore, we find the Ukip, the Party for Independence in the UK, led by Nigel Farage, which won the European elections with 31% of the vote beating both the Labour and Conservative parties, which promotes an economic programme mid-way between liberalism and nationalism, and calls for the exit of the UK from the EU. Even though it does not declare itself as anti-semitic, this party has a social programme clearly inspired by xenophobia and homophobia.

In the context of Scandinavian countries, noteworthy are also the Dansk Folkeparti (DF), the conservative and anti-European Danish people’s party, which won the elections with 26.6% of the vote; the Sd, the Democratic party of Sweden, which is na-

tionalist, populist and xenophobic and has declared itself to be against the Euro; and the Finnish party of the “Real Finns”, strongly nationalist, anti-communist, pro-Israel and Euro-sceptic but which has never expressed any anti-semitic positions.

As far the Benelux countries are concerned, in the Netherlands, the Dutch Pvv, the anti-Europe and xenophobic Freedom party, guided by Geert Wilders, has made its fight against Islamic fundamentalism its symbol; the Belgium Vlaams Belang, “Flemish Interest” party, is an ethno-nationalist party which calls for the independence of Flanders and the strict control and regulation of immigration.

Furthermore, Tshe Npd, the German National Democratic Party led by Udo Voigt, openly advocates racism, Nazism, nationalism and economic protectionism and unleashes a new strategy of terror above all thanks to aggressive propaganda aimed at young people; the Fpo, the Austrian party of freedom, propounds policies in line with those of Le Pen both regarding its aversion to the Euro and its profound nationalism and highly restrictive policies on migration.

The two cases which have raised most concern among democratic publics are the Hungarian Jobbik and the Greek party Golden Dawn. The former, inspired by fascism and ultra-nationalist, often accused of homophobia, xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism, has often incited violence against the Roma people and accused Jews of attempting to buy Hungary. The latter exemplifies one of the most dangerous kinds of euro-sceptic parties, with neo-Nazi ascendance. It advocates violence against immigrants, denies the Holocaust and supports the paradoxical theory of the Zionist plot. It has as its symbol a kind of swastika and adopts a Nazi-style salute. In a Greece badly hit by the economic crisis it obtained a surprising 9.3% of the vote, winning 3 seats in the European parliament.

In Italy the Northern League shares with Le Pen a strong aversion towards the European Union and fights against immigration, mani-

festing a racist and xenophobic nature. Furthermore, even though it cannot be counted amongst these other extreme-right parties, the 5 Star Movement founded by Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio, has a very rigid position on immigration and with its anti-Europe position gained a surprising 21% of the vote. In the wake of the constitutional referendum of 4 December 2016, they have announced that they intend to promote another referendum, on continuing adhesion to the euro.

In the heart of European civil society, which saw the trauma of the Holocaust, today remembered through public rituals but at the same time not fully metabolized, (Berger, 2013, pp.1-27) these movements grow and succeed. Of course, it can be objected that they are a minority. They are few and present no danger. But when xenophobic and at times also anti-semitic movements gain electoral representation within political institutions such as Parliaments, above all within the European Parliament, a slow process of normalisation of their themes and rallying-cries gets underway.

On-line anti-semitism

When speaking of anti-Semitism 2.0, at issue is the normalisation, the indifference, the trivialisation, the return of rhetorical figures and clichés that come from a past that seems dramatically, if only latently, present (Ardeniz, 2009, pp.35-46).

A recent survey run by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights demonstrates, in fact, that where the forces of the extreme right are gaining ground, forms of anti-semitism are on the rise thanks to the ever-increasing spread of technologies and global communications networks and in forms that still remain to be fully deciphered.

The EU remains helpless for the moment, unable to distinguish between the different levels of discourse, whilst these new terrains of communication risk generating clashes of civilisation and violence between communities.

The opening up of a world of new possibilities of information sources for a better informed citizenship and of increasing participation for a fuller democracy through the web has been widely studied in both its positive and negative aspects.

Ideologies of the cyber-democracy establish a very strong cause-effect relationship between new digital technologies and a superior quality of democracy. But even though the Internet is definitely a tool for giving freedom to individuals, it is also, at the same time, a tool to control. Just as it is a tool for information, it is also one of disinformation and for the spreading of prejudices and simplistic ways of thinking. From the dream of the *agorà*, to the nightmare of Orwell and the information-overload.

This issue has also been discussed at a Parliamentary level in Italy. An information gathering survey on anti-semitism conducted by a Joint Parliamentary Committee showed a significant increase in racist sites: from 836 in 2008 the figure reached 1,172 in 2009, an increase of 40%. As for the “sites devoted to hatred against Jews” the number went from 50 in 2010 to over 100 in 2012. These figures do not include the thousands of forums, profiles, pages and posts of an anti-semitic nature published and shared via social networks.

Analysing the on-line anti-semitic contents, a difference between traditional anti-semitism and that of the contemporary age is immediately evident. Whereas in the past there was an attempt to convert people to anti-semitism through slogans, speeches, discussions, cartoons, historical and scientific theses, today Internet sites, forums and blogs attempt to make anti-semitism “socially acceptable” to the online public, eliminating the equation that anti-semitism equals racism.

What can here be observed is a form of social “normalisation” by which online users are persuaded to see the anti-semitic content as a point of view on which they can either agree or disagree, but not as content whose diffusion should be opposed. Thus, the web is legitimising anti-semitism.

Whereas in a mainstream newspaper it would always be taboo to publish an anti-semitic headline, on the web there is no such “sacred” respect.

The repercussion on the real world, above all for the categories of people who are less culturally informed and for young people, is frightening. One survey carried out by the IARD, the Political and Economic Research Institute based in Italy, showed that 22% of young people between 18 and 29 years of age expressed a dislike of Jews. 80% of these young people have no direct knowledge of the Jewish world.

Rather than, or in addition to, enforcement by the postal police, this anti-semitic behaviour could be contained and contrasted with on-line counter-information operations, focussed school projects and educational initiatives.

In light of the effect that the anti-semitic sites have on the normalisation of hatred, it would be natural to think that following the reporting of a site or forum as anti-semitic, the site should be immediately taken down. But there are many problems in containing this phenomenon: often anti-semitic sites are reported and not shut down.

Because even though it is clear that these on-line conduct can be punished by law in the same way as traditional communication abuse, it is not so simple to react in a world where anonymity and the uncertain location of a site work as an insurmountable wall both due to obsolete laws and to the technical difficulties for those who enforce the law.

Italian anti-semitic websites

There are various types of anti-semitic internet sites in Italy.

Stefano Gatti, in an unpublished research report, distinguishes five types of anti-semitic websites: neo-Nazi, Catholic fundamentalist, anti-Zionist, negationist, and conspiracy-activist sites (Gatti, 2013).

Neo-Nazi and Catholic fundamentalist sites

On these neo-Nazi and/or Catholic fundamentalist sites many and very extreme types of anti-semitic material can be found: cartoon strips, classic texts of anti-semitic polemic, documents that accuse the Jews of practising ritual murder, Nazi-rock songs, quotes and catalogues of anti-semitic and negationist films and documentaries.

As for the Catholic fundamentalist sites, all the anti-semitic themes of the Pre-conciliar Catholic Church can be found, i.e., conspiracy theories, allegations of immorality and perversion directed at Jews. The sites of this kind often produce proscription lists, which detail the collaborators and the “servants” of Israel in every walk of life, from politics to journalism, to education. These sites aim to infect as many people as possible with their anti-semitism, to transmit misleading, false or manipulated information through the web. Often taken down and at the center of various court battles, they are quite easy to identify through their aggressive and crude language. The best known amongst them are Holy War, Stormfront and ElleDiEffe.

Holywar.org was one of the most active in the anti-semitic campaigns. It was taken down, but it survives and still exerts a great impact through some Facebook groups which are continuing their legal battle to allow it to reopen. Their blacklists, on which the names of people accused of being “accomplices” of Israel appear, have attracted a lot of media attention, a factor which contributed to the reason why the site was blocked so quickly.

Stormfront was a forum which was active between 2011 and 2012 and was closed after a lawsuit which culminated in the conviction of the four founders. It was based on the national socialist ideology of the extreme right and worked by posting up ideas about the superiority of the white race and about racial hatred, inciting people to commit acts of discrimination and violence. Both the moderators and the users gave vent to their anger towards immigrants, Jews and gypsies.

Just like Holywar, Stormfront also drew up blacklists of “Italian criminals”, guilty of be-

ing Jewish or of supporting the Jewish community. After being reported daily to the postal police, Stormfront ended up under the scrutiny of the prosecutors after having posted up the organisation of acts of violence against Roma camps and immigrants in Italy. It is therefore clear how venting these and similar feelings can instigate violent demonstrations. Over and beyond being naturalised and legitimised, online anti-semitism creates networks that go beyond barriers and enable powerful and threatening organisations to operate, if left undisturbed, over an extremely wide territory.

The most important anti-Jewish site active at the moment in Italy is EffeDiEffe, a daily news site of the publisher EffeDiEffe, edited by the journalist Maurizio Blondet. From a clearly Catholic fundamentalist perspective, every day it posts up articles with conspiracy-activist and historical revisionist focus. Underlying these articles is the suggestion that behind the biggest historical events operates the “long hand” of the Zionist masons and the State of Israel. This outlook reflects the anti-semitism of the Pre-Conciliar Catholic Church and often attacks the current Pope.

The communication technique of EffeDiEffe is diametrically opposed to that of Holy War and Stormfront: to an un-informed user it can look like a respectable site, where even the images which appear together with the articles are mainly neutral and informative. Only every now and then do the editors of EffeDiEffe post up photos and drawings inspired by anti-Jewish feeling.

Anti-Zionist sites

In this category we have sites linked with the radical rejection of the State of Israel and Zionism, which produce stereotypical and negative images to support their ideas (Mehgnagi, 2010, pp. 57-66).

This particular form of anti-semitism is the most comprehensive and legitimised form of anti-semitism. Amongst the sites are the

press agency InfoPal.it, Arcipelago, the communist Aginform Foglio di Corrispondenza, Arabcomint, Bocche Scucite, the blog of Claudio Moffa, and the Writing of Israel Shamir. The majority of these sites refer to ideologies of the extreme left, which support the Palestinian cause, or are of Islamic influence. These sites usually start out with complex and articulate arguments but end up by repeating the clichés typical of traditional anti-semitism.

Negationist sites

These are the sites which promote a negationist or strongly reductionist interpretation of the Holocaust which often uses aggressive and vulgar language. Amongst the most important are: the Blog of Andrea Caracini, the blog of Antonio Caracciolo, Olodogma, Studies by Carlo Mattogno, Aaargh e Codoh.

All these sites exalt freedom of expression and the right to criticise and revise the testimonies of the Holocaust, which in their opinion are partial, subjective and exaggerated (Vercelli, 2016, pp.44-49).

Without providing any evidence in their favour based on historical fact, they quote papers of authors both from Italy and abroad. Their claims about the scientific basis for their information aims to discredit traditional historiography as ideological and politicised. However, it is important to understand that we do not have in front of us a simple interpretation or manipulation of information for ideological purposes: in these cases, history is denied through the deliberate use of lies, and these lies are all the more serious given the enormity of the Holocaust and the evidence of its reality.

The communication strategy and rhetoric of the deniers aims in fact to destroy the collective perception of the Holocaust, the human heritage of solidarity towards the victims: a form of action that deeply undermines the democratic fabric of our civilization.

Civium libertas is one of the blogs of Antonio Caracciolo (he boasts of having 33), a re-

searcher in the Philosophy of Law at the Sapienza University of Rome. Caracciolo declares that he wants to defend the rights of Holocaust deniers to express their own ideas without ending up in prison and also that he never understood the meaning of the word “anti-semitism”.

On his online pages we find repeated insults to the memories of Jews who died in the concentration camps. Taking advantage of a sober and academic style, Caracciolo distances himself from the blogs managed by neo-nazis. But the violence of the negationist theories is entirely present in all the stances that trivialise and chip away at the memory of the Shoah.

Many groups from the extreme right base their violent actions on Caracciolo’s negationist ideologies.

The blog Aaargh adopts a completely different tone, with ungrammatical, vulgar, street language. Here we are faced with a mix of the entire gamut of Italian negationist positions and aggression against those who publicly oppose these positions.

If Google is the search engine which has the greatest number of clicks in the world, olodogma.com is the equivalent in the world of negationism: it is not a blog or an information site but an archive divided into categories which provides links to everything present on the web on this topic.

It is updated thanks to user feedback directly via email to the managers of the site, who then enter the content.

Ultimately, it would seem that negationism on the web can fall even below the already low level of the one spread through traditional communication channels.

Conspiracy-activist sites

The peculiarity of these sites consists of their reading the major historical events and news through the lens of the “great Jewish conspiracy” – pursued by an “Israeli lobby” or a Jewish Freemasonry – subtly influencing the

economic-political institutions of the West and aimed at the domination of the world.

In this category we have: *Disinformazione - Oltre la verità ufficiale* (Disinformation - Beyond the Official Truth) the site of the San Giorgio Cultural Centre, *ComeDonChisciotte, Nuovo Ordine Mondiale* (new World Order).

The site *Disinformazione.it* is a sort of huge archive of current news articles, divided into macro-categories: from health conspiracies hatched by the pharmaceutical companies to those linked with the international Freemasonry lobby, up until news articles re-read through the interpretation of the “Israel lobby”, marked with the flag of the Israeli state. A current example is the article by Maurizio Blondet of 6 September 2014 entitled “The atrocities of Califfo Al-Mossad: be careful of lies”, where the great media attention towards ISIS and the Iraqi-based Califate’s extermination of the Christians and local people is interpreted as a favour to blot out Israeli wickedness.

The official site of the San Giorgio cultural centre (www.centrosangiorgio.com), a Catholic association formed by lay people in Ferrara in 1990, aims to bring to light politically incorrect topics or topics which are too “hot” and are therefore hidden by the media. It deals with the occult and satanism and has one section dedicated to “mondialism” (globalism), meaning global conspiracies. In this context, the editors of the website advocate re-interpretations of 9/11 in the light of conspiracy theories which maintain that the CIA and Mossad were accomplices in the attacks, with the goal of justifying a war against Islamic terrorism. In essence, this site tries to “unmask” the plots of enemies of the Church such as the freemasons, the Jews, communists, satanists, and Jehovah’s witnesses.

The same is true for the sites *New World Order* www.nwo.it and www.comedonchisciotte.org

The same rudimental graphics, the same way of presenting the news through the lens of a conspiracy, posting up articles which appear

here and there on the web or which are occasionally rewritten specifically for these sites.

There is no danger of these virtual spaces reaching the wider public as they cater for a niche public who already tends towards the conspiracy theories.

The conspiracy is a *topos* typical of many forms of anti-semitism (Wistrich, 2012 pp.195-200). Even though it is true that not all conspiracy-activist versions of history are anti-semitic, we can however state that anti-Semitism is conspiracy-activist. Anti-semitism in this way becomes a comprehensive conception of the world, a real ideological system which allows believers to explain the whole of history as the fruit of a dark plan of the Jews, as well as to find a simple explanation for everything (Germinario, 2007).

It is not by chance that in all the various contemporary forms of anti-Semitism, from the socialist-leaning ones to those of the Catholic fundamentalists, to the biological Hitlerians, the conspiracy activist vision plays a crucial role. History is not governed by class struggle or by the unfolding of Spirit, but by the Jewish plan to conquer the world and enslave the people - the true power is always hidden. The Jews are therefore a deceitful race.

Conclusion

Combatting online anti-semitism, as we have seen, is very difficult. Despite the fact that the postal police in Italy are amongst the most efficient in the world, in the Italian legal system there is no ad hoc law targeting online anti-semitism. Very often the sites are closed down with the formal accusation of racism and not of anti-semitism.

The law relevant in this case is the Mancino law of 1993 which regulates crimes of discrimination and hate or violence for racial, ethnic, national or religious reasons.

This statute can also be applied to internet, but the inherent ambiguity of many websites

makes their violation of the anti-discriminatory clauses difficult to prove and therefore difficult to close them down on the basis of the law. The path indicated by the Parliamentary Commission in 2011 was similar to that which led to enacting a law to combat online paedophilia. This anti-paedophilia statute allows the Italian police to interact directly with the service provider to call their attention to criminal sites and close them down. The only law which can help the police in their work given this particular gap in the regulations is the "Budapest Convention" of 2001 on IT crimes, adopted by the Council of Europe, which was signed and ratified by Italy in 2008 and which came into full force in 2011, when the Government ratified the additional Protocol to the Budapest convention for crimes of racism and xenophobia committed through the internet. By ratifying the Protocol, Italy also made a commitment to adopt the laws for the repression of negationism towards all genocides.

In addition to the numerous sites on the internet, another dangerous channel for the dissemination of anti-semitic ideas is constituted by the social networks Facebook, Youtube and Twitter. The web 2.0 has exploded in the last few years with the number of users reaching staggering figures. In Europe the estimated number of active users is 293 million, of which 26 million are Italian. About 40% of the Italian population actively uses a social network and spends an average of 2 hours a day connected. In 2009 the total number of readers of the 10 best-selling newspapers in America was less than 2% of the audience of YouTube and Facebook. These impressive figures cast light on an important phenomenon: an all-pervasive virtual space has emerged in society and has become for many the main means of communication and information, a cyberspace where opinions of professionals and everyday users are mixed up in a vast sea where everything can be considered at the same level. This virtual space is anything but free of the phenomenon of anti-semitism. Once again, the most vulnerable are young people who, over

and beyond spending more time on the social networks, are less well-informed about the Jewish question.

The difficulties encountered to contain this widespread phenomenon strengthen online groups which (ab)use the web convinced of being above the law. The road to the effective prevention of anti-semitism 2.0 is long

and requires adequate agreements between States on a common and unambiguous policy, but the most urgent need is now for us to move in this direction using appropriate means in order to prevent devastating social effects.

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