Hate speech and identity politics.
An intercultural communication perspective

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Abstract
Hate speech has become a key element of contemporary political discourse. It has also changed the very structure of communication. With the access to public sphere provided by social media, hate speech engages people in connective action, which allows it to construct and deconstruct collective identity. By doing this, hate speech undermines the idea of multicultural society. In order to succeed, such a society needs to engage its members in inclusive intercultural dialogue while hate speech strongly excludes all dissident voices, deepening political polarisation. This article presents an extensive analysis of hate speech from the perspective of intercultural communication. Drawing from available research and literature, the author puts forward the thesis that hate speech is a communicative phenomenon that not only disrupts intercultural dialogue, but also leads to the disintegration of multicultural society.

Keywords: hate speech, media, intercultural communication, identity politics, intercultural dialogue, political polarisation

Mowa nienawiści i polityka tożsamości. Perspektywa komunikowania międzykulturowego

Streszczenie
According to a number of analyses, hate speech has become one of the key elements of contemporary political discourse (Drożdż 2016: p. 28). It has proliferated from strong political polarisation that can be observed in almost every democratic country in Europe and elsewhere. What once existed only as the margin of public debate, e.g. dehumanisation of political enemies and defamatory language, has now reached and affected the mainstream thought. Unsurprisingly, hate speech has become an important aspect of political science research, symbolised by the founding of the International Network for Hate Studies in 2013, followed by the establishment of the “Journal of Hate Studies”. It must be remembered, however, that hate speech has not only brutalised political discourse. It has affected the very structure of communication as well. Together with the rapid ascent of social media and their growing role in day-to-day communication, hate speech has become a plausible tool in the hands of populists. Politicians and activists alike have realised the great potential of hate speech to construct and deconstruct collective identities, often by excluding others, – however, they would be defined. From the perspective of intercultural communication it means a serious threat not only for intercultural dialogue but for the very idea of the multicultural society.

Thus, the aim of this article is to analyse hate speech and its role in identity politics from the perspective of intercultural communication. Defining intercultural communication as a communication between members of various ethnic, cultural, sexual, and political groups that together form one society, I put forward the thesis that hate speech should be regarded as one of the main obstacles to intercultural dialogue and, consequently, multicultural society. What is more, since intercultural communication takes place via mass media, thus, the multifaceted developments in media systems have enhanced the potential of hate speech while downgrading the ability of intercultural dialogue to engage people. Although, in this study I concentrate on Poland, I also include numerous examples from the other countries, mainly the United States. As the following analysis is largely theoretical in scope, I draw my conclusions from the already published research and literature, applying to this material analytical methods.

**Intercultural communication and Hate speech**

Intercultural communication is traditionally defined as communication between members of different national and ethnic groups (Ratajczak 2012: p. 16). Still some scholars distinguish between intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication, which involves various groups that comprise one society – or one national culture. However, here I would like to follow those researchers who define intercultural communication broadly, including in its definition not only ethnic groups, but also cultural, sexual, and even political groups that together form one public sphere – or a space where various ideas meet and compete with one another. There is no doubt that such intercul-
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Intercultural communication would be severely limited – if not impossible – without the mass media. Naturally, it is easy to imagine a two-person intercultural conversation without the involvement of the media. Still, most of the information that both strangers would have about each other – especially if they represent different ethnicities – would come from the media. It must be noted that media may facilitate understanding among members of various groups, but they may also strengthen stereotypes, reinforcing mutual distrust or even hatred (Keshishian 2004: p. 230). While with the mass media’s positive input, intercultural communication takes the form of dialogue, with their negative influence, intercultural communication becomes defined by conflict. Consequently, when separate groups focus on one another’s differences instead of similarities, multicultural society is at risk of disintegration. As multiculturalism characterizes most European countries, hate speech should be considered as one of the main threats to the stability of Western societies.

From this perspective hate speech is the most radical form of intercultural conflict. When hate speech becomes part of identity politics, separate groups start defining each other through the opposition to others. According to the Council of Europe, hate speech “covers all forms of expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance” (Zubčevič et al. 2018: p. 10). As such, hate speech constitutes a threat to peaceful coexistence within one society. In other words, when hate speech dominates public debate (public sphere), multicultural society is not as much undermined, as it is put into question en masse. It must be remembered that although conflict is nothing unusual in intercultural communication – even more, to some extent it is necessary and often precedes dialogue – hate speech takes conflict to the extreme, refusing political opponents the right to participate in public sphere. By consequence, “traditional” public sphere, where intercultural communication could develop, fades and is substituted by numerous “emotional” public spheres, that is “the emotional substrate of democratic politics, the domain of public emotion in which the activities of the political public sphere are always and inevitably embedded” (Richards 2018: p. 2041). Hate speech proliferates in contemporary political discourse and identity politics due to a number of factors, most notably the widespread access to the internet and the growing position of social media in every modern media system. At the same time, the very same factors seem to impede intercultural communication. On the other hand, it must be remembered that both hate speech and intercultural communication depend also on other factors, including those of non-media origin.

Non-media factors

Before I move to the analysis of how media influence intercultural communication, I would like to focus on non-media factors. Among them, a given country’s ethnic structure takes priority. Available studies show significant correlation between society's ethnic homogeneity and the ability of its members to engage in intercultural communication (Neuliep, McCroskey 1997: p. 389). It is true that such a situation, where one group remains...
dominant over others, facilitates the formation of a group identity. However, at the same
time it impedes not only the external dialogue, but also communication within the group.
The French sociologist Alain Touraine observes in his book *Can we live together? Equality and difference*, that "intercultural communication is possible only if the subject has already succeeded in escaping from its community. The other can be recognised as such only if it is understood, accepted and loved as a subject, or as an attempt to reconcile, within the unity of a life and a life project, an instrumental action and a cultural identity that must always be released from historically determined forms of social organization." (Touraine 2000: p. 169). In other words, the more homogenous a society is, the less it is likely to succeed is intercultural communication.

Poland is ranked as one of the most monoethnic countries in Europe (Adamczyk, Kaźmierczak 2015: p. 9–26). Although, the *Bill on national and ethnic minorities and regional language*, passed in 2005, officially distinguishes nine national and four ethnic minorities, their overall numbers in the country remain relatively low (Ustawa 2005/141). According to the *Polish Census of 2011*, almost 95 percent of the country’s entire population of 38.5 million identified their ethnicity as exclusively Polish. (*Narodowy Spis Powszechny* 2011: p. 29). What is more, out of 2.26 percent who declared double ethnic identification, 2.05 picked Polish identity as their first, whereas only 0.22 percent as the second. In total, only 1.55 percent of the population (some 596,300) declared exclusively non-Polish ethnic identification. Also the recent labor immigration to Poland, especially from Ukraine and other post-Soviet republics, has not reached such a level that could significantly change the ethnic structure of the country.

Together with ethnic homogeneity the lack of religious diversity comes. The *Polish Census of 2011* indicates that some 87.6 percent of the population declares themselves Roman Catholics, which makes 98.56 percent of all who answered the question about their religious denomination (*Narodowy Spis Powszechny* 2011: p. 93). Other Christian and non-Christian churches remain marginal. According to the census, the second-largest is the Orthodox Church with some 156,300 faithful – 0.41 percent of the entire Polish population. With 137,300 members (0.36 percent), the Jehovah’s Witnesses secure the third position. The visible predominance of Roman Catholics, as well as the unique role of the Catholic Church in Poland’s distant and recent past, has merged religious identity with ethnic identity. Although, according to one opinion poll from 2012, only nine percent believe that being Catholic was a necessary feature to consider oneself a Pole, the role of the Catholic Church in both politics and social relations in Poland cannot be underestimated (*Nie trzeba…* 2012). Moreover, as the Pew Research Center has found out, there is a considerable difference between Catholics in Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. As the former appear to be more tolerant and more accepting of other religions (e.g. Islam) than members of other Christian churches, the latter remain conservative and largely distrustful of others (Starr 2018). Polish Catholics are also less open to such topics as homosexuality or abortion. Such a conservative form of Catholicism may additionally impede the ability to engage in intercultural communication. In one of her books, Jane Jackson writes that although "membership in a religious group can offer believers
a sense of community and provide inner fulfilment”, strong religious identity “can serve as a barrier to intercultural communication” (Jackson 2014: p. 149).

The above features have direct impact on Poland’s identity politics (Zarycki et al. 2017). Much as it is the case in other modern countries, also here strong political polarization can be observed. What is interesting here, however, is the fact that political polarization takes place in a largely monoethnic and monoreligious society, which foretells an important change. Scholars indicate that until recently political polarization most often was taking place in ethnically and religiously divided societies (Westlake 2016). Indeed, it is still the case; yet recent trends indicate that it is political sympathies that – even more than ethnic divisions – are becoming the major factor of polarization in western societies. In its analysis of American politics, the Pew Research Center concludes that “the overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21%. And ideological thinking is now much more closely aligned with partisanship than in the past. As a result, ideological overlap between the two parties has diminished” (Political Polarization 2014).

Despite all the differences between the U.S. and Poland, many political trends in the first mentioned country can also be observed in the second mentioned one. Party identification seems to have become one of the main characteristics through which the Poles judge and evaluate one another. Although Poland does not have the two party system like in the U.S., there is a strong division into sympathisers of the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) and the liberal and left-wing opposition. To what extent political polarisation radicalizes discourse in Poland exposed the assassination of Paweł Adamowicz, the mayor of Gdansk, on January 13, 2018. In reaction to this, “New York Times” observed that the politician’s murder “revealed absolutely horrifying political polarization” (Editorial Board 2019). In fact, the thesis offered by the paper’s editorial board finds support in recent research. According to Paulina Górska (2019: p. 2), who conducted studies on political divisions, “the Polish society can be considered as divided”. Moreover, those who support the liberal opposition perceive their political opponents in a more negative light than groups that are traditionally regarded by Poles as “others”, such as Jews, Muslims, refugees, homosexuals, and transgender. Similarly, sympathizers of the right-wing ruling party (PiS) consider their political opponents as negatively as Jews, Muslims, and others. Keeping in mind that political ideology – together with ethnicity and religion – is the key element in the construction of culture, such strong political polarization impacts the ability of the Polish society to engage in intercultural communication – both within the society and outside it.

**Media factors**

Contemporary intercultural communication cannot take place without the involvement of mass media (Rider 1994). Until 1989 the Polish media were directly controlled by the communist party apparatus and served first and foremost as a tool to disseminate official propaganda (Goban-Klas 2004). With the transformation of the political and eco-
The media underwent an in-depth reform. While some scholars argue, that “Poland represents a mixture of Polarised Pluralist and the Liberal model” of the media (Hallin, Mancini 2011: p. 318), according to others, since the early 1990s the Polish media system has experienced the rapid process of “Italianization” (Dobek-Ostrowska 2012; Curry 1990). Just like in Italy and other Southern European countries (e.g. Spain, Greece), also in Poland (and other Central European countries) media are dominated by four factors: state control over the public media; close but often indirect relationship between political parties and media outlets; integration between media and political elites; and ethical divisions among journalists and media personnel (Mancini 1991: p. 139).

In addition to political influences, the media content in Poland is determined by economic factors. Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska and her team (Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2013: p. 20), who conducted qualitative research among Polish journalists, point out that “increasingly often it is not the political factors which decide the future of a profession and the way it is practiced but the business ones.” Naturally, their research concerned only professional journalists, working for established media outlets.

It must be remembered that at least since the early 2000s, more and more content has been produced by the so-called new media, including social media, which are often run and produced by amateurs. Such outlets usually demonstrate strong political affiliation, with economic gains being rather a by-product than the main strategic goal. There is no doubt that the growing role of the social media in public sphere has a direct impact on intercultural communication. Whereas until the late 1990s, public sphere (in the Habermas’ understanding) was strongly controlled by the mainstream media (where radical views from both left and right were marginalised or even silenced), since the “internet explosion” at the onset of the 21st century, the traditional public sphere has been divided into multiple “emotional” public spheres. Even more importantly, these public spheres – regardless how marginal or radical voices they carry – enjoy the same chance to reach general public as the “traditional” public sphere dominated by the mainstream, centrist media. Social media not only make space for radical views; they also foster divisions within the society. With the formation of “information bubbles”, which keep people apart from those of different political views, social media make polarization even stronger, as “greater interaction between like-minded individuals results in polarisation” (Kerric 2014: p. 109).

Both the 2015 Polish parliamentary elections and 2016 US presidential elections proved that the ability of the mainstream media to set agenda and establish media frames among users had weakened (Wasilewski 2017). Some extensive research has been made in the case of the latter, which shows that while liberals still prefer traditional media outlets, such as the “New York Times” or CNN, people with conservative views largely rely on their own media, that is social media profiles of their candidates and marginal, often radical, websites. As Yochai Benkler and others point out, media polarisation online in 2016 “was asymmetric. Pro-Clinton audiences were highly attentive to traditional media outlets across the public sphere, alongside more left-oriented online sites. But pro-Trump audiences paid the majority of their attention to polarised outlets that have developed recently, many of them only since the 2008 election season” (Benkler et al.
2017). Among others, it reinforces the thesis that instead of one public sphere, where all political sites could discuss and exchange their views, two and more public spheres have appeared, all of which independent from one another. Unsurprisingly, it has led to the creation of “an internally coherent, relatively insulated knowledge community, reinforcing the shared worldview of readers and shielding them from journalism that challenged it” (Benkler et al. 2017). Such a homogenous environment not only has allowed for the spread of fake news, but it has also significantly impeded intercultural communication within the American society. The same can be said of Poland, where the way people use media largely depends on their political affiliations.

Another media factor that impedes intercultural communication in Poland is the weak position of the minority media. It must be observed that despite the growing importance of online media, minority media still inhabit a marginal place in the public sphere. Although the majority of those national and ethnic minorities which are recognised by the Polish authorities publish their own press titles – often with the financial support of the government – their scope is rather limited (Mieczkowski 2012). Such is the case with the press magazines published by the Roma people or the Polish Tatars (Wasilewski 2013). Moreover, their content focuses on history and tradition, refraining from taking active part in contemporary public discussion (Wasilewski 2018). Other minorities, including sexual minorities, must solely rely on social media to communicate their ideas to general public. With such visible disparities, the chance of a fair intercultural communication to occur remains questionable.

Hate speech and the construction of identity

The above mentioned list of media factors is not exhaustive and includes only the most basic ones. Still, they allow to indicate, how media can reinforce or impede intercultural communication. With the public debate moving from “traditional” media, such as radio, press and television, to the “new media”, such as the internet, there is little doubt that also the success or failure of intercultural communication is decided in realm of the world wide web. On the one hand, the widespread access to the internet and the relative ease of establishing one’s presence there have allowed for the democratization of public sphere. What was once reserved for the elites, now is available for the masses (Avritzer 2002: p. 29). On the other hand, the internet, most notably social media, has defragmented public sphere and, consequently, has deepened political polarisation. This, as it has already been mentioned, can be regarded as one of the main obstacles to intercultural communication. As Christopher S. Josey (2010: p. 37) points out, “the internet in general represents one of the few spaces of extremely divergent opinions on race, politics and society. As a decentralised media, controlled by the end user, it has allowed a resurgence in the solidarity and power building of hate-based groups.”

There is little doubt that in an atmosphere of strong political polarisation, it is extremely difficult for intercultural communication to occur, let alone in the form of intercultural dialogue. According to the definition provided by the Council of Europe, intercultural
dialogue is “a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of interaction between individuals, groups, organizations with different cultural backgrounds or world-views” (Council of Europe 2008: p. 10). Such a dialogue is possible only in a balanced media environment where all groups (political, ethnic, minority etc.) have equal status and equal access to. With media users living in information bubbles and the appearance of defragmented, “emotional” public spheres, intercultural dialogue easily gives way to hate speech. As a result, the possibility of building a collective identity on the idea of multiculturalism is put into question. Instead, separate groups within the society use their own media to establish and promote their own identities while downgrading the others.

Whereas intercultural dialogue draws from the logic of collective action, hate speech relies on connective action (Bennett, Segerberg 2012). In their studies, Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg remind us that “when people express views online, they do not need to be part of a formal organisation. By sharing links or posting comments, they are already engaging in political activity”. This thesis takes from the fact that hate speech has a high uniting potential, since the victimization of one’s own group and dehumanization of others answer one’s basic needs and feelings. As Matous Hrdina (2016: p. 39) argues, “many different frustrations and grievances can be answered by hate speech against a chosen scapegoat, without further identification with other hate speech producers. Furthermore, hate speech could be perceived as a specific form of civic activism”.

The very nature of social media allows individual users – whether a professional journalist or an amateur – to publish their own opinions, even the very radical ones. Such posts often attract attention from other like-minded users and, by consequence, form a certain collective identity. In other words, hate speech feeds on the “network society”. Manuel Castells who coined that term, observes that “mobile phone networks become trust networks, and the content transmitted through them gives rise to empathy in the mental processing of the message. From mobile phone networks and networks of trust emerge networks of resistance prompting mobilization against an identified target” (Castells 2013: p. 348). Remembering that, it is thus hardly surprising that hate speech is often used in identity discourses. In addition to this, the rise of social media and their anonymity – or rather immunity to critique – have reinforced the role of hate speech in the construction of group identity. As Julie Seaman (2008: p. 121) suggests, since “the identification with a social group tends to foster attitudes and behaviors consonant with the norms of the particular group”, then “attitudes, behaviors, and group identification can be primed by features in the social and physical environment.”

**Hate speech as an element of identity politics**

The majority of studies on defamatory language and the formation of collective identity focus on radical right discourses. Although hate speech is not limited to only one side of the political spectrum, it is various nationalist, anti-Semitic and racist groups that most often build their identity in opposition to others. However, the contemporary history abounds in examples of how state authorities attempted to build national unity
through dissemination of hate speech. Nazi Germany (1933–1945) is only the most striking one. As Yared Legesse Mengistu (2012: p. 360) reminds us, in Hitler's Germany, hate speech “led to the disfranchisement, imprisonment, and genocide of Jews”. There is little doubt that one of the leading role in inflaming anti-Semitic passions in 1930s Germany was played by the Nazi press and radio, which constructed radically negative picture of Jews among the German society. The similar method was adopted by the state RTLM Rwanda radio in 1994. In their paper on the RTLM radio broadcasts, Brittnea Roozen and Hillary C. Shulman (2014) pointed out that “the language used to describe the Tutsis was increasingly dehumanising, and that Hutus were often posited as the victims. Broadcasts that were originally targeted at the Tutsi-led RPF were extended to all Tutsis in Rwanda as the genocide escalated.” In response to the RTLM broadcasts, the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda recognised hate speech as a crime against humanity (Biju-Duval 2007: p. 348). One of the latest examples of how media can use hate speech to build a group identity took place in August 2018. It was then that the Myanmar state authorities orchestrated a hate campaign in social media against the country’s Muslim minority – Rohingya. According to Reuters, “more than 1,000 examples of posts, comments and pornographic images attacking the Rohingya and other Muslims on Facebook” were recorded in a matter of few days (Stecklow 2018). The acts of violence, which erupted after the online campaign, forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee Myanmar (Mozur 2018).

What the aforementioned examples have in common is the vast engagement of media to construct group identity through conflict rather than dialogue. People were mobilised by hate speech, which allowed media to quickly identify the enemy and establish the core characteristics of own group. Without a doubt such a strategy succeeded in developing collective identity, since both in Nazi Germany, 1994 Rwanda and 2018 Myanmar, ethnic majorities – encouraged by the media – attacked minorities. It must be remembered that although at first media hate campaigns aimed at ethnic minorities, later they excluded from the group identity other minorities as well, including political and sexual ones. As some researchers point out, political elites are most prone to use media to disseminate hate speech in the times of crises. By dehumanising minorities, politicians – especially populists – manage to veer people’s attention e.g. from economic issues to ethnic issues. Bernard Rorke, for example, writes that common features of populism include “authentic anger, unrestrained hatred of the elites, cultural conservatism, euro skepticism, declared nationalism, and undeclared xenophobia” (Rorke 2015: p. 240).

In such a dense atmosphere of political polarization, it is very difficult for intercultural dialogue to prosper. On the contrary, while the idea of multiculturalism broadly and inclusively defines identity, demanding that people at least tolerate one another, hate speech focuses on ethnic and cultural exclusivity. In other words, in the times when people need simple answers, hate speech seems to offer them. As Teresa Koide (2017: p. 166) puts it simple, “when you observe behavior that you find unsettling, something deep-rooted inside of you reacts”. This brings us back to the already introduced thought of Alain Touraine, who underlines that in order to engage in intercultural communication
one needs to reach out of one’s group. His thought is further developed by Iris Marion Young who claims that “a theory of democratic inclusion requires and expanded conception of political communication if participants in political discussion are to achieve understanding, to resolve problems and ultimately to make proposals that shape new agendas” (Young 2000: p. 56). Hate speech, on the other hand, discourages people from leaving their own group by presenting those outside as the “dangerous others”.

It must be remembered that constructing collective identity through hate speech may take less direct forms that in Nazi Germany or contemporary Myanmar. State authorities may pretend to fight with hate speech in public discourse in order to curb dissident voices from various minorities. In her paper on identity politics in Germany, Ann Goldberg writes about Prussia’s 1794 law code that “banned expression of incitement against the state and against certain religious groups, as well as speech that dishonored individuals” (Goldberg 2015: p. 483). Interestingly at around the same time, similar laws were introduced in the United States (Wasilewski 2017). In Goldberg’s opinion, “anti-hate speech” laws were part of class politics and at first restrained popular resentment against the monarchy and state authorities. Later, however, a shift from class to ethnicity could be observed. State authorities began to use special laws to control ethnic minorities, since every attempt to publicly voice their discontent was labelled as hate speech. As it turns out, “anti-hate speech” laws impeded intercultural dialogue as much as hate speech itself. Even more, they served the same purpose, as forbidding minorities from accessing public sphere not only excluded them from public discussion but also allowed state authorities to build an exclusive identity based on ethnicity and race.

Conclusions

The widespread access to the internet has allowed for new ways of communication to develop. Whereas until the “internet explosion” there was a clear division into the author of a message and its receiver, now the very structure of online media has blurred the traditional communication triangle. As messages published online can be endlessly edited, commented on, shared etc., the author becomes the receiver and vice versa (Jensen 2010: p. 117). Among others, this fundamental change of how modern media function has also affected intercultural communication. With multiplied public spheres and information bubbles, it is more and more difficult to engage individual members of a society in intercultural dialogue. By consequence, the very model of the multicultural society is threatened, as it cannot exist without a strong public sphere where different ideas are discussed and modified in order to reach compromise. Instead, the new media have deepened political polarization in which hate speech has proliferated. The development of social media and their growing position in the entire media system allows various groups to build their separate identities, often in contradiction to other identities. Hate speech, disseminated by media, thus performs a number of functions: it strengthens the group identity, attracts new members, and defines and indicates enemies (often by dehumanising them). It feeds on political polarization and the exclusivity of social
The proliferation of hate speech in identity politics is possible due to the fact that it engages people in connective action, whereas intercultural communication requires a more demanding collective action. From this perspective, hate speech is both a by-product of political polarisation and the one of its causes. By consequence it poses a serious challenge to intercultural communication, which can occur only in the stable environment of inclusive politics, and multicultural society as well.

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