



Power relations in digitally-mediated communication: Exploring inequalities, discrimination, and new forms of injustice¹

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1 Theoretical premise

In contemporary times, changes are happening faster than ever before in human history. The acceleration provided by technological advancement has led to rapidly evolving societies where all human activities and relationships are increasingly uncertain, and deeply unstable. Consequently, *inequality*, *discrimination* and *injustice* emerge as pervasive frameworks in interpersonal relations, demanding diligent scrutiny and proactive efforts to challenge them and formulate solutions that can effectively minimise their impact. It has been noted that “[i]n the world’s richest countries, injustice is [...] maintained by widespread beliefs that propagate injustice and waste. And although these beliefs are often presented as natural and long-standing, in fact, they are mostly modern creations” (Dorling, 2015, pp. 1-2). In the field of social sciences, five tenets of injustice have been identified by Dorling (2015); among them, *exclusion is necessary*, *prejudice is natural*, and *despair is inevitable* are relevant propositions to the present edited collection, as we shall soon illustrate. Inequality and injustice may emerge from and be perpetuated by discrimination and hate, particularly due to the inherent proclivity of human beings towards such tendencies. In his famous book of essays *On the Pleasure of Hating* (1998 [1826], pp. 102-103), William Hazlitt argued that the absence of something to hate would result in the loss of the fundamental motivation for both thought and action.

In the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC), the highly plastic nature of the digital medium – an intangible, immaterial arena where human relations unfold – seems to offer a perfect context for the development and perpetration of injustice patterns. On the one hand, the construction of power relations has become subtler and smarter on this medium (KhosraviNik, 2017). This is also due to the democratising effect of shared communication mechanisms – as opposed to traditional top-down models such as those sustained by television, radio, or newspapers – which have allowed the participation of larger groups of people in the creation and dissemination of knowledge and information. On the other hand,

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communication on this medium has proven permeable to both old and new instances of hate and injustice. Imbalances between dominant and dominated groups persist on the digital channel, and new modes of perpetuating injustice, for example through medium-specific forms of discrimination and hate speech, have emerged (Balirano & Hughes, 2020). To mention but a few, cyberbullying (Burnap & Williams, 2015), trolling – “the posting of incendiary comments with the intent of provoking others to conflict” (Hardaker, 2010, p. 224) –, or flaming – characterised by “profanity, insults, negative affect” (Jane, 2015, p. 66) – are among the most frequent forms of discrimination in online environments. Drawing from these and other theorisations, contemporary studies in digitally-mediated communication seem to agree that “the advent of new technologies has not simply enabled discriminatory practices to move *tout court* into a new environment, it has honed the very nature of hate speech through specific forms of harassment [...], each of which possesses its own set of ever-evolving rules and codes” (Balirano & Hughes, 2020, p. v).

The question of how (imbalanced) interactions take place in computer-mediated communication – intended as “the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked or mobile computers” (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 127) – is directly linked to issues of identity construction and performance. It has been observed that the digital medium “lowers barriers to communication, facilitates the display of identity information, and enables like-minded individuals to easily discern their common ground” (Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 11), hence performing a useful social function. It should be noted that “[s]elf-representation in social media sites is distinctive because of the ways in which individuals can present their relationships with others”, as “identities are negotiated through interactions with others, and [...] created on personal, collective, and social levels” (Page et al., 2022, p. 15). This notion suggests the possibility of shaping and presenting one’s identity differently than in face-to-face interactions. Moreover, merely being present on social network sites can indicate how a member considers themselves and their relationships, as these platforms enable the showcasing of networked connections, and can be exploited to signal one’s status and authority (boyd & Ellison, 2007). At the same time, however, the traditional distinction between online and offline identities (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016) has been surpassed, and “it is more and more difficult to trace the boundaries between not only individual personalities and identities on-and-off technological devices, but also communicative styles of physical and behind-the-screen persons” (Niceforo, 2022, p. 73). In addition, it appears that communication and discourse as realised in digital environments are not necessarily affected or determined by the practicalities of the medium (see also Herring, 2013). As a result, contemporary research in computer-mediated communication is more focussed on “how people use technology to communicate rather than in the systems which underpin the platforms” (Page et al., 2022, p. 13).

Both in online and offline communication, injustice themes are typically varied, including social, political and environmental injustice, as well as forms of discrimination related, to mention but a few topics, to ethnicity, age, gender, religion, and wealth. Among the foci of computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), the study of *social behaviour* (one of the four main levels of language, together with *structure*, *meaning*, and *interaction*) is particularly relevant, since it explores the reasons for and the forms of discriminatory language and hateful discourse. Specifically, discourse studies focussing on social behaviour consider the “linguistic expressions of play, conflict, power, and group membership over multiple exchanges”, as well as significant “participation patterns” (Herring, 2004, p. 341) also in hate speech instances. However, it should be underlined that the very notion of group membership – as applicable to in-group/out-group identity construction (van Dijk, 2001) – remains slippery in digital contexts. Indeed, isolating online groups and communities remains a methodologically complex task and a research operation that is often unproductive for both critical and analytical purposes. This possibly invalidates previous understandings of both sociorhetoric discourse communities (see Swales, 1990) and sociolinguistic speech communities (see Gumperz, 2009), where both concepts implied the possibility of

establishing community members and boundaries with a certain level of precision. In a recent reflection on the concept of discourse community, Swales acknowledged that these notions are today inevitably affected by the profound evolution of global societies which has made people and interpersonal relations, jobs, and most types of human activities fluid and unstable (Swales, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, new theoretical frameworks and approaches to analyse individual and group behaviour in digital communication have necessarily emerged in recent years.

With reference to research dealing with forms of injustice, hate, and discrimination in language and discourse online, concepts such as those of ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2012), echo chambers (KhosraviNik, 2017), and communities of practice (Wenger et al., 2002) have proven particularly valuable, as some of the contributions gathered in this Special Issue show. As a matter of fact, the types and forms of discrimination and injustice perpetrated in digital contexts can be so nuanced and peculiar that even identifying and categorising them are complex methodological operations. For instance, detecting discrimination in AI-generated discourse, including on search engines, presents researchers with new methodological challenges, as both verbal and non-verbal discourse elements can be investigated. User comments, images, and memes are further examples of digital texts frequently scrutinised in critical discourse studies (CDS).

In conclusion, contemporary research in digitally-mediated communication benefits from fruitful contaminations from neighbouring disciplines (e.g. social and political sciences), thus expanding the scope of critical discourse studies beyond the investigation of language. Considering hate speech and discrimination, CDS are rather focussed on analysing the tangible manifestations of discriminatory language by providing critical evidence for them through the analysis of context-specific discourse. Regarding this latter point, reference is made to the notion of *context* as devised by Reisigl and Wodak (2016, pp. 30-31) in relation to the discourse-historical approach. Specifically, “the social variables and institutional frames of a specific ‘context of situation’” and “the broader sociopolitical and historical context” are emphasised. In light of these considerations, the abovementioned propositions by Dorling (2015) – *exclusion is necessary, prejudice is natural, and despair is inevitable* – can be assumed as useful ideological and methodological principles. As ideological tenets, these propositions account for the prejudices fostering hate speech; as methodological reference points, they can be used as the basis for taxonomies and classifications of discriminatory practices and discourse.

2 Practical and ethical challenges

Conducting research on the Internet is grounded in foundational assumptions that demand careful consideration, starting from the very definition of Web 2.0. This can be seen as an overarching label denoting “web-based platforms that emerged as popular in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and that incorporate user-generated content and social interaction, often alongside or in response to structures or (multimedia) content provided by the sites themselves” (Herring, 2013, p. 4); however, there is “very little consensus about what exactly constitutes the ‘2’ in ‘2.0’” (Thurlow, 2013, p. 229). This ambiguity reflects a broader set of debates surrounding the evolution of the Internet, in which shifts in technological infrastructure and user practices often undermine clear distinctions between successive phases of development. There is considerable agreement, however, that Web 2.0 introduced significant changes in the nature of online spaces and in the participation of users, from monologues – one-to-many – to dialogues – many-to-many – and from passive consumers of content to active producers. Instead, they are active creators of content, utilizing any variety of signifying modes to navigate within a “nonlinear model where nearly everyone can communicate with each other” (C. Hoffmann et al., 2016 p. 156). As a matter of fact, a

distinguishing trait of Web 2.0 is found in user-generated content (UGC); indeed, in an embryonic phase of the phenomenon, T. O'Reilly (2005: [online]) discussed the features of Web 2.0 as compared to Web 1.0, and amongst these were “control over unique, hard-to-recreate data sources that get richer as more people use them”, “trusting users as co-developers”, and “harnessing collective intelligence” which somewhat include and anticipate the overarching notion of UGC. The significance of UGC is such that it competes with formal texts and concurs to generating a “general ethos of ‘crowdsourcing’ in terms of what can become more important or attract attention” (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2015, p. 213). This has turned the way information is produced and consumed upside down, and many observers view UGC as a kind of democratised content creation. Simultaneously, there are issues about quality control and false information dissemination (Maci et al. 2023), whereby ordinary people turn into participative-journalists (Wall 2015) therefore blurring the concept of information source (Tandoc et al. 2017). Another preliminary observation involves acknowledging that, unlike offline studies where communication is situated within specific contexts, the Internet introduces a phenomenon where the context is inherently elusive because of the convergence of people, information, and norms from various settings into a unified context (boyd, 2008). This might lead to a crisis in self-presentation and require negotiating it to accommodate various audiences simultaneously (Ellison et al., 2011), causing a clash between what may work for a familiar audience and potential conflicts with broader, unfamiliar audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2011). The difficulties that may arise from context collapse are further exacerbated by the fact that this can occur for various reasons. Davis and Jurgenson (2014) distinguish between context collusion and context collision, where the former involves individuals intentionally collapsing, blurring, and flattening contexts, and the latter occurring when “different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly come crashing into each other” (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014, p. 480). In addition to the contextual dimension, other communicative aspects must be taken into account, such as the synchronous/asynchronous mode, the possibility of anonymity, and the idea that “cyberspaces are intrinsically different from real interactions” (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018, p. 47). Also, the popularity of a particular social media platform during a specific historical period is a factor, as is the diversity in the predominance of semiotic modes between different platforms and the range of “message formats” (Herring, 2007) accessible to users. In these contexts, visually heavy social networking sites like TikTok and Instagram would be on one end of the spectrum, and sites like Reddit and Twitter, purely textual or a hybrid of many forms, would lie on the other, with different methodologies being utilised. Finally, the researcher’s proficiency in acquainting themselves with the context in which the research is a crucial factor. Beyond the differentiation between digital natives and digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001), a potentially more noteworthy consideration lies in the distinction between digital residents and digital visitors (White & Le Cornu, 2011). This distinction underscores the level of familiarity with the context and our comfort in establishing a bona fide social presence or utilising the Internet in a utilitarian manner (e.g. seeking answers to queries). The researcher’s decisions, stemming from both ethical considerations and methodological principles, will undeniably and considerably be contingent on this factor. Consequently, Internet research is, to a certain extent, constrained by the researcher’s adeptness in navigating the web.

Another primary challenge is found in the range of units under scrutiny – which has notably broadened – particularly with the introduction of innovative non-verbal expressions such as emoticons, emojis, and diverse multimodal communication formats like memes. Also, when collecting data from social media platforms, for instance, an API (Application Programming Interface) key might be required, or content may not be archived, therefore rendering it ephemeral and posing challenges for accountability; in addition, users could delete posts, altering the digital trail of their interactions. In this respect, considerations also arise surrounding the challenges related to the downloadability, utilisation, and storage of copyrighted material, posing additional dilemmas in the realm of digital content management. Such data processing is often an added burden to the task at hand, as in most cases large datasets include personal or copyrighted

material that raises ethical and legal questions about their storage and management. This brings up to the ethical dimension of Internet research, in particular social media. Communication on social media is characterised by a self-disclosure component, where users voluntarily agree to submit and display personal information about themselves. Researchers, therefore, bear ethical responsibilities to participants, audiences, and regulatory bodies (e.g. the Research Ethics Committee, the EU GDPR, the Institutional Review Board IRB, etc.) throughout the research process, guided by the overarching principle of avoiding harm. However, while there might be straightforward unethical practices – e.g. data fabrication –, defining ethical boundaries in social media can be challenging; for instance, “determining where a social media text falls within the public-private continuum can be difficult, and relying wholly on the technical privacy settings is not a failsafe solution” (Aiston, 2023, p. 24). For this reason, researchers are supposed to consider how they would want to be treated as participants, aligning personal judgments with regulatory constraints while making intricate choices to protect participants’ rights (Page et al., 2022).

Given these premises, it becomes evident that methodological challenges may emerge across all stages of Internet research, spanning from data extraction to data analysis. Starting from the assumption there are not universal methods and that, instead, methods can be adjusted to various theories and approaches, Page et al. (2022, p. 123) claim that “[a]ll existing pre-Internet research methods are enduring and carry over to the online world, but at the same time, they are transformed by social media and the existence of the Internet and associated technologies”. Beyond quantitative and qualitative approaches – and, preferably, multi-method approaches (see Page et al., 2022) – digital ethnography emerges as a potent tool, proving its efficacy in capturing the intricacies of online language dynamics and in fact “seems an indispensable part of both quantitative and nonquantitative approaches” (Androutopoulos, 2006, p. 423). The articles in this volume exemplify a diverse range of approaches, underscoring the Internet’s fertile ground for communication that, while demanding careful attention, opens up new horizons for research.

3 Brief presentation of the contributions

Ilaria Iori explores Sinophobic discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic in a corpus of editorials and reader comments extracted from the Australian *Daily Telegraph*. By focusing on the reproduction of metaphorical frames, the analysis reveals significant negative evaluations which assign cultural superiority to Western societies. Given that the advancement of technologies has contributed to the birth of new forms of discrimination, in her work **C. Serena Santonocito** investigates Google images referring to samesex couples from a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis perspective. A comparative analysis of UK- and Italy-based IP addresses allowed to identify various discriminatory patterns underling the threat of AI-based search engines. Different forms of hate speech towards people with disabilities (PWDs) are also very common in the digital space contributing to reinforcing prejudices and stereotypes on disability. Following a Social Media Critical Discourse Analysis (SM-CDA) approach, **Annalisa Raffone** focuses on digital disability discourse to investigate how ableism is propagated on social media and to what extent PWDs discursively try to resist and challenge this phenomenon. Online narrative on migration is also embedded with clichés and prejudices, both negative and positive. In Western societies migrants are usually represented negatively and media tend to strengthen this negative representation by dehumanising them and representing them as a threat. Narratives of migrants tend to be considered as a valid instrument to counterbalance negative dominant construction of migrants, but in some cases migrants’ stories can potentially reinforce discrimination. For this reason, **Virginia Zorzi** has decided to draw attention on positive stereotypes of “good”/“legitimate” migration by exploring twenty-nine video/audio stories extracted from three different online sources focusing on Appraisal, and in particular on the Attitude

system. Several stereotypical features emerge from the analysis even if they are never used in a discriminatory way to distinguish between “good” and “bad” migrants and they are often reframed through stereotype-divergent features. **Chiara Polli** points out that even though recent studies on AI technologies have started to address online hateful practices by developing automatic detection of hate speech, the interpretation and classification of digital texts pose various criticalities. By adopting the socio-semiotic strand of Multimodal Analysis, the author explores the challenges of automatic detection of harmful contents in a sample of Internet racist memes, and, specifically, racist forms of dehumanization via Simianization. This study argues that a multidisciplinary approach is more and more necessary to improve AI-driven systems and prevent the spread of online discrimination and create more inclusive digital spaces.

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