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Religion-Based User Generated Content in Online Newspapers Covering the *Colectiv* Nightclub Fire

Abstract

The high degree of interactivity of the Internet, combined with the almost ubiquitous presence of forums on online media publications, has offered everybody the possibility to express their opinions and beliefs on websites. This paper uses content analysis to examine the religion-based comments that were posted on 8 Romanian mainstream news websites in reply to articles regarding a fire that broke out during a rock concert in Bucharest, killing over 50 people and injuring more than 100. The analysis also included the answers to these comments. Among the findings, we have discovered that the highest percentage of religion-based comments made some type of reference to Satanism and that very few of them expressed compassion towards the victims. On the other hand, counter-speech strategies managed to halt hate speech in almost half of the cases where they were employed. However, personal attacks against religion-based commentators were the most commonly used form of counter-speech, contributing to an unfriendly climate on the forums.

Keywords: hate speech; user-generated content; religion; counter speech; content analysis.

Introduction: Hate Speech as a Form of Expression on the Internet

The fact that the Internet is a place where people can easily express their beliefs anonymously in an environment with a high degree of interactivity has transformed it into one of the most important tools for spreading out positive messages, but also hateful ones (Erjavec & Kovacic, 2012). Journalists have been one of the most important beneficiaries of the interactivity of the Internet. Their publications could reach out to their readers more easily by providing them with the possibility to post comments right next to the articles they read. This has led to readers taking a more active "watchdog" role, by being able to provide information to the journalists, but also to signal ethical slips in journalists' activity (Bowman & Willis, 2003). The economic model that most of the press relies on, i.e. revenues coming from advertisers that are interested in the size of the audience of the publication (Pavlik, 2001), has made comments even more important, as they show the engagement of the readers. However, more interactivity opens up more frequent possibilities for hate speech to be used online on mainstream websites (Erjavec & Kovacic, 2012).

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When it comes to hate speech, it is worth mentioning that there is no standard definition of the term (Slagle, 2009). The Council of Europe defines it as follows: “the term “hate speech” shall be understood as covering all forms of expression that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin” (Weber, 2009). A more relaxed definition is given by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: “hate speech is hereby understood to be inflammatory language, often insulting and derisive, that targets an individual or group, and that may or may not include a call to violence” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2009). Regardless of the type of definition used, a discourse can be considered a form of hate speech when its targets are selected by certain characteristics, when it stigmatizes the victims by associating them to traits that are usually seen as profoundly unwanted and when it casts the social group outside the normal boundaries of social relationships (Parekh, 2012).

Hate speech is a subtype of harmful speech (Leets, 2002), which is broadly defined as speech that is either intended by the producers or it is perceived by the receivers to cause damage (Leets & Giles, 1999). Even though there is legislation against hate speech, it is worth mentioning that not any form of hate speech can and should be retaliated against by means of law enforcement (Reed, 2009). Indeed, when analyzing hate speech, and, by extension, when determining its magnitude, there are at least four elements that need to be taken into consideration: the content, the producers, the receivers and the context (Angi & Badescu 2014).

Religious groups, such as the radical and dogmatic Catholic Movement have been noticed to use the internet as a tool for delivering their messages (Cammaerts, 2009). Even though very few studies have been conducted on hate speech propagated by religious groups in Romania, it would appear that atheists can be included among the targets of hate speech (Angi & Badescu, 2014). A recent practice shows that religious groups, regardless of their denomination, have started to develop and to disseminate hateful messages targeting representatives of the secular trend (Angi & Badescu, 2014). If atheists are a target of religion-based hate speech, the question arises on how producers of hateful speech communicate about people associated with the rock subculture, a culture that sometimes challenges conventional religious beliefs and that is, therefore, perceived to be against them (Abraham, 2014). This paper aims to examine the religion-based comments posted on news website forums in response to articles covering an accident that involved participants at a rock concert in Bucharest.

The Context of the Study

On October 30th, 2015 a fire broke out at a club in Bucharest during the concert of metal-core band Goodbye to Gravity. The incident was caused by fireworks used by the concert organizers during the show, but preliminary reports made clear that the venue itself did not comply with fire safety regulations, using flammable materials for soundproofing and lacking the required number of exits or fire protection equipments. 27 people were pronounced dead at the scene, while more than 100 other were taken to hospitals, many of whom required hospitalization in intensive care units. The nightclub fire became the main topic in the Romanian media. By November 1st, the site of the fire drew thousands of people that came to

mourn the victims, including several ambassadors and local political figures. Also, 8000 people participated in a memorial march in the center of the city.

The proximity of the event to the Halloween holiday (a non-traditional, albeit ‘borrowed’ holiday in Romania) led some people to speculate on the Facebook page of the event about mystical connections between the accident and the holiday, viewed by some Romanian ultra-traditionalist priests as an unholy and dangerous cultural import. Discussions about Halloween had made their way into the public sphere the week previous to the event, as some schools decided to ban the celebration. After the event, several religious public figures, including the Head of the Romanian Orthodox Church, made controversial remarks claiming that the victims were responsible in a certain way for the accident because of the kind of activity they were involved in, i.e. celebrating Halloween and going to rock concerts instead of going to church. Other public figures associated with Orthodoxism went even further and claimed that the participants or the music they were listening to (rock music) were Satanists.

As the focus of the media coverage changed from reports of the medical condition of the victims and the particularities of the event to mentions of allegations of widespread corruption that made it possible for the club to function despite complying to fire safety regulations, people started to protest against the government and the local administration of Bucharest (protests were directed at the mayor and the administration of capital’s District 4, where the club is located). On the evening of November 3, 2015, 4 days after the event, more than 15,000 people marched through Bucharest asking for the resignation of Romania’s Prime Minister, the Minister of Interior Affairs and the Mayor of District 4. The participants also passed by the headquarters of the Romanian Orthodox Church, in sign of protest against the attitude of Patriarch Daniel towards the victims. The following day, the Prime Minister resigned, but protesters continued to gather in even larger numbers in Bucharest, as well as in other cities, prompting the President of Romania to summon representatives of the parliamentary parties and civil society representatives to consultations over the formation of a new Cabinet. As such, the topic became politicized and the focus of the media shifted almost entirely towards the political crisis that followed the event.

Content Analysis of *Colectiv* – related Religious Comments Published Online. A Note on Methodology

In order to find a pattern for the religion-based commentators on the forums of online newspapers, we have chosen to use content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006), with the unit of analysis represented by the article. However, a corpus comprising all the websites that have covered the accident would have been impossible to gather and even counter-productive: there is no database that would list all news websites published in the Romanian language, but their number is estimated to be larger than 550. Taking into consideration that the fire at the *Colectiv* club has virtually been the only topic in the news for 4 days, one can estimate that the number of articles generated would be very high, tens of thousands, as would be the number of comments, too. This means that a way of narrowing down the research was imperative. As such, we have chosen to examine only national tabloids as well as publications that include general news. We have chosen to eliminate from the study publications that are specialized on certain topics such as sport, finance, home and decoration, etc. Religious publications have also been avoided, since they are marginal publications and it would be expect-

ed that their public is biased. In order to further narrow down the number of analyzed articles to around 500, we have chosen to analyze the first two general news online publications associated with Romanian televisions (www.romaniatv.net, www.stirileprotv.ro), the first three tabloids (www.libertatea.ro, spynews.ro and www.cancan.ro) and the first three general news online publications not associated with televisions (www.gandul.info, adevarul.ro and www.mediafax.ro), all ranked according to the audience they registered by the Audience and Internet Traffic Study done by the Romanian Trans-media Audit Bureau. We have also chosen to restrict the publication date of the articles analyzed to the first four days after the event, based on the fact that after this period of time the attention of the general public turned towards political issues, marked by fall of the Government.

The Google search engine was used to select the articles that were analyzed: the search was restricted to one site at a time, the time frame to the period between October 31st and November 3rd and the search word was “Colectiv”, the name of the club where the fire took place. For each search on the nine websites, only the first 150 hits were taken into consideration. Out of these, articles that did not concern the incident, its outcome or the victims, as well as articles that did not have any comments associated to them, were filtered out.

The coding form used to analyze the comments and included references to the number of religion-based comments, the type of articles that were more likely to attract this kind of comments, the percentage of visitors that left such comments, what were the main themes of the comments, with focus on the ones involving hate speech targeting people perceived to be bad Christians, whether people responded to them and how and if the responses determined hate speech to stop.

In order to be considered religion-based, a comment had to contain certain identifiers: keywords associated with the Christian religion such as “God”, “Jesus”, “Satan”, “devil”, “hell”, “Christianity”, “faith” or references to questions of Christian spirituality. Comments containing key words similar to the aforementioned, but as part of common expressions such as “Go to Hell” or “God forbid” were not considered religion-based unless there were other identifiers present in the text. A special case was that of comments containing the keyword Halloween or other indirect references to the holiday. All comments that hinted towards the fact that the incident that took place during the Halloween was not just a simple coincidence were considered religion-based, since the celebration does not imply rituals that pose physical harm to partakers.

Next, the categories used to classify the articles, the comments and the answers to the comments had to be identified. As such, frame analysis (Entman, 1993) was applied to a sample consisting of 30 articles and their related comments. As a result, 10 main themes were identified for the articles: information about the accident, portrait of the victims, portrait of the saviors – neighbors and employees of public authorities, portrait of the saviors – partakers to the event, articles concerning the owners of the club, articles concerning victims – musicians, articles about the involvement of the authorities, messages and declarations, messages and declarations – religious content, religious figures and public figures associated with Orthodoxy and a catch-all category – other. The religion-based comments fell into three large themes: anti-church, including comments against various religious figures, comments that were compassionate towards the victims and comments condemning certain behaviors, attitudes or subcultures that are considered harmful by the Orthodox Church. This last theme, consisting in comments that can be considered hate speech based on the three main characteristics of this type of discourse (Parekh, 2012), was further divided into anti-Halloween, as-

sociation of Halloween with Satanism, anti-rock, association of rock with Satanism and association of the participants to the event with Satanism. Another catch-all theme, “other” was taken into consideration, which would count the number of comments that would not fall into any of the aforementioned categories, such as comments that would be considered preaching or messages of support towards certain churches or anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic religious comments. The answers to hateful religion-based comments fell into 4 main categories: sarcasm, personal attacks towards the commentator, including insults, hate speech towards Christians and other non hate speech responses. For each of these categories, another marker was inserted that would say whether the type of counter speech employed has or has not stopped the hateful comments on the article. Two other markers were assessed at the end of the analysis of the responses to hateful comments: the first would assess whether it is possible or not to determine what kind of response would stop hate speech, the other would assess whether hate speech was stopped or not.

The coding form was also built so that a pattern of the behavior of the religious commentator could be shown. For each of the articles that were analyzed, the publication date was introduced in the coding form. Thus, by correlating the frequency of religion-based comments to the publication date, we could see if the commentators were more interested in the articles written just after the event, or they followed the event up to the end of the timeframe set for the research. Also, we were interested to see if the religion-based comments, as well as the answers to them, were grouped in clusters, or spread throughout the comments section.

Findings

Overall, 500 articles, which generated 7897 comments were analyzed. However, only 289 articles, that is a little over half of them, generated religion-based comments, which amounted to 1517, or 19,21% of the total number of comments posted. Looking at what type of articles that generated the largest amount of religion-based comments, the top position was occupied, unsurprisingly, by the messages and declarations that had a religious content or were given by religious figures and figures associated with Orthodoxy. These articles gathered 535 religious comments, about 32,7% of the total amount of comments that were registered for this category. High volumes of religion-based user-generated content was registered for articles that presented portraits of the victims (162 comments, or 27%), portraits of the saviors that were also partakers to the event (20,5%, but only 32 comments), portraits of other kind of saviors (16%, 11 comments) and information about the event (290 comments representing almost 14,9%). Articles that concerned the musicians victims gathered only 16 religion-based comments, but these comments represented almost 20,8% of the total number of comments posted to these articles. To the opposite pole, only about 3,8% of the comments posted to articles about the involvement of the authorities were religion-based, and articles about the owners of the club gathered 21 comments (7% of the total number), while messages and declarations not connected to religion in any way gathered 82 comments (almost 9%). Articles that fell in the “other” category had a percentage of religion-based comments of almost 21%, their number amounting to 348.

Articles published on October 31, the first day after the event, attracted 281 religion-based comments which represented 17% of the total amount of comments posted on day one. The percentage of religion-based comments published on November 1 and November 2 repre-

sented 19,4% and 21,3 %, respectively, of the total number of comments. However the sheer volume was considerably larger than on the first day: 452 religious comments posted to the articles published on November 1 and 465 to those that appeared on November 2. On the last day of the timeframe selected for the research, the number of religion-based comments dropped to 319, which represented 18.4% of the entire comments published that day.

Focusing only on the religion-based comments, 162 of them, or about 10,7% represented compassionate comments; 400 comments (about 26,4%) were against the Orthodox Church, priests or practicing Orthodox Christians; 27 comments, or about 1,8% were against Halloween, while another 29 (almost 2%) associated Halloween with Satanism; anti-rock beliefs were expressed in just 18 comments (1,2%), but the number of comments associating rock fans music or culture with Satanism amounted to 206, or about 13,5% of the religion-based comments, and 362 comments (23,86%) associated the participants at the concert with Satanism. The catch-all “other” category gathered 316, or 20,83% of all the religion-based comments. It is interesting to notice that Satanism was a theme present in about 39% of the religion-based comments and that comments that can be considered to represent hate speech against people viewed as not adhering to the Christian way of life amounted to about 42% of the total number. Turning to the articles where religion-based comments were posted, about 10 % of them had these comments grouped in clusters and almost 41 of the articles had religion-based comments spread out among others. 49% of the articles included in this category gathered only one religion-based comment.

As far as the comments that responded to hateful remarks are concerned, they appeared in 117 articles (or 40,48% of the number of articles where religion-based hate speech was present), and amounted to 538 comments. However, it is worth mentioning that in 56 out of the total of 538, meaning almost half of situations where counter-speech was employed, comments posted in response to hate speech actually managed to stop the propagation of hate speech. The most widely used strategies to counter religion-based hate speech were using personal attacks (245 cases or 45,5%), which were determined to be the winning strategy to stop hateful comments in 20 articles, and non-hate speech remarks (176 cases, or 32,7%), being successful in 14 articles. Sarcasm was employed 26 times (about 4,8% of all answers to hateful comments) and managed to stop religious hate speech in 3 articles, while hate speech towards people associated with religious hateful comments was employed 91 times (about 16,9%), but managed to stop hate speech in only 4 articles. Regarding the remaining 15 articles where religious hate speech was stopped, combinations of the strategies described above were used, so it was not possible to determine which one was more effective than others.

We have also observed that the percentage of the religion-based comments that were posted through Facebook was slightly lower than of those posted directly through the websites that were analyzed: 15,32% compared to 19,70%. A huge difference between these two kinds of comments was visible in the percentage of religion-based comments posted to articles that offered information about the event: 4,13% in case of comments posted through Facebook and 15,65% in the case of comments posted directly to the newspaper website. Messages and declarations without any religious content gathered 1,15% religious comments posted through Facebook, while comments for this articles posted directly on the websites themselves had 9,62 religious comments. Big differences were also seen in what concerns the percentages of religious comments posted to articles that depicted portraits of the victims – only 8,57% in case of Facebook posted comments, but 28,3% in the case of the comments posted on websites. It is also worth mentioning that the highest percentages of religion-based comments

were posted during the second and the third day of the timeframe of the research (15,67% and 22,22%, respectively), while articles posted during the first and last day gathered around 7.,% religion-based comments.

Among the religion-based comments posted through Facebook, 34,8% of them were directed against the Church, priests or practicing Christians (as opposed to 25,54%, as was the case of comments posted through the websites themselves). Also, the comments associating rock with Satanism made up only 2,22% of the comments posted using a Facebook account, as opposed to 14,7% in the case of the ones posted directly through the website. The comments associating the participants with Satanism were less common when users posted them through Facebook accounts: 16,3%, as opposed to 24,60%, when posted directly through forms on the websites. The percentages of comments falling in the "Other" category were, however, higher when posted through Facebook accounts, namely 34,8%, compared to 19,46%, as was the case with the comments posted directly.

Interestingly, among the articles that had religion-based comments posted through Facebook accounts only 15,8% also included replies to these type of comments. The most common strategy to answer hateful comments continued to be the use of personal attacks and of non-hate speech remarks, 52,1% and 36,6%, respectively, while the use of sarcasm and of hate speech directed towards practicing Orthodoxists were the strategies that were employed in the fewest of the cases, 2,8% and 8,4%, respectively.

Some differences were also observed when comparing the results obtained for the three types of publications that were analyzed: websites associated with televisions, online tabloids and general news websites. We have noticed that religion-based comments on tabloids tended to be grouped in clusters more often than in the case of the other types of publications: 22,6% compared to 4,4 % for general news websites and 7,35% for websites associated with televisions. Tabloids also had the highest percentage of religion-based articles – 27,66% (the percentage for all three types of publications, altogether was 19,2%). The articles that talked about victims that were musicians gathered the highest percentage of religion-based comments on tabloids (29,27%, compared to 1,45% for general news websites and 5,8 % for television websites). The portraits of the victims also gathered the highest percentage of religious comments on tabloids (34,25%).

The percentage of compassionate comments was highest on websites associated with televisions (about 18 %). Anti-church comments had the highest percentage among articles posted on general news websites, while the comments that associated rock with Satanism were more common on tabloid websites – 28,31%. The number of religion-based comments that fell in the "Other" category was lowest among those published on tabloid articles (10,4%). Interestingly, personal attacks used to react to religion-based hate speech was the most common response strategy among comments on articles published on general news portals, and made up about 51% of the replies.

It is also interesting to note some particularities about the findings related to some of the websites that we have selected for our research. First of all, the only newspaper website that has a working policy of not approving certain comments (among which are the ones that take the form of hate speech) was *Adevărul*. We have noticed that the 46 articles that we have analyzed from this website generated 88 unapproved comments, or about the same value as the religion-based comments, which amounted to 86. Taken together, the comments published on *Adevărul* that associated Halloween, the participants or the rock subculture with Satanism made up almost 20% of all comments, which represents a high percentage, but still half of

the median value for this sort of comments for all publications (about 40%). Also, on *Adevărul*, the comments that associated the participants with Satanism were found in a proportion of 4,65%, extremely low if compared to the median value of 23,86% of total comments of this kind found in all articles analyzed. It is therefore reasonable to say that some of the comments that were removed were religion-based and extremist in nature, but their exact number can only be speculated upon.

Another interesting phenomenon was observed on the website of the newspaper *Gândul*. The website had an automated filter for censoring obscene or defamatory words within the comments, but users were able to bypass it extremely easily by purposely misspelling such words, or entering punctuation marks among them. Also, obscene drawings made out of non-alphanumeric characters were posted by certain users. However, they were mostly directed towards political figures. Another particular thing that was noticed when analyzing articles from *Gândul* was that certain users engaged in preaching in the comments section. The most common way to do so was represented by posting several large comments, strictly containing quotes from the Bible, one after the other during a short period of time. These sort of comments were included in the category labeled "Other".

Particular behavior was also observed on the website of the tabloid *Cancan*. Here, the same several comments, usually associating rock with Satanism or saying that the participants were Satanists, were posted under different user names to a great number of articles. The fact that the comments were usually found one next to the other might suggest that one single person posted them under several aliases.

Discussion

Our research has focused on two directions. One of them was to try to determine the discursive behavior of the people that posted religion-based comments to article covering an event that involved people belonging to a certain subculture that is not considered by them to share the same values as Christian Orthodoxists. The other direction was to show how people posting online comments might fight religion-based hate speech and whether or not it is possible to stop this kind of speech.

As far as the first aim of the research is concerned, we did not expect to see such a great number of religion-based comments to articles on this topic: in the end, almost one in five comments brought into discussion matters of religion or spirituality, showing the importance of this topic for the people that are commenting on the forums of news websites. When comments posted were analyzed, we have observed that, although a considerable number of them were directed against the Orthodox Church, its priests or practicing believers, the greatest percentage of the religion-based comments was represented by several forms of hate speech directed towards people not seen as good Christians. The majority of these comments contained some type of reference to Satanism. This shows that people posting religion-based comments tend to have extremist views towards members of the society whose values they see as clashing with their own. This is in great contrast with what happened in the "offline" world, where, during the four days that represented the timeframe for the analysis, people tended to show solidarity towards the victims, with the number of blood donors reaching huge numbers and thousands of people coming to pay their respects to the victims at the site of the accident.

As expected, the articles that presented messages and declarations that had a religious component or that came from religious figures or from figures associated with Orthodoxy generated the highest percentages of religion-based comments. However the comments posted to articles that did not bring religious matter into discussion showed the judgmental behavior of people commenting online using religion-based arguments, or, at least, the fact that many people engaging in posting online comments tend to appeal to religion to explain tragic events. The majority of religion-based comments were found to articles that either presented the events or depicted the portraits of victims and saviors. When being presented with speculations about who might have been guilty of the accident or when were presented with conclusions about the investigation, readers tended not to post that many religious comments.

Another interesting thing that was noticed was that less than a quarter of all the articles that were analyzed hosted almost all of the religion-based comments. This shows that people posting such comments tend to do so if they see that others have engaged in the same kind of behavior as themselves. In other words, reaching a certain critical mass of religion-based comments to an article determines more users to post the same kind of comments to that particular article. These comments tended to be spread out throughout the comments section, a possible indicator of the fact that people posting them feel the need to "contribute" their religious ideas to the conversation, even if the focus in the comments section has changed in the meantime.

Another interesting fact is that the percentage of the religion-based comments has stayed pretty much the same throughout the 4 days that were analyzed, even though we have noticed that the volume of comments was greater during days 2 and 3 of the selected period. This could be an indicator that the attention span of religious commentators to a certain topic in the media is the same as that of the regular commentator.

When it comes to the second aim of the research, represented by how and to what extent people fight successfully religion-based hate speech, the most interesting conclusion was that counter-speech (i.e. using speech to combat hate speech) was surprisingly effective, having a success rate of almost 48% in the cases where it was employed.

However, people that have engaged in answering religion-based hate speech have most frequently posted personal attacks against the religious commentators, contributing to an unfriendly climate in the comments sections. This strategy was also the one that brought hate speech to a stop in 20 out of the 56 cases registered by this study. The second most widely used strategy was to post peaceful and informative answers, which had a positive impact in 14 out of the 56 cases. The worst results were obtained by the strategy that used hate speech in order to fight hate speech. Sarcasm seemed to be the strategy with the best success rate, comparing its results to how many times it was used. It is also interesting to note that people engaging in answering hate speech-filled comments also tended to group their posts to a small number of articles.

Furthermore, the lack of anonymity seems to favor less extremist behaviors: the readers that posted comments using a Facebook profile (where people usually use their own name and, thus, information about them is easier to access) have tended to express less extremist thoughts than people who posted under the protection of anonymity (the comments posted directly through the website allow users to select an alias in order to post comments). However, the number of anti-church comments was higher in the case of Facebook and the users that engaged in answering religion-based hate speech comments tended to use personal at-

tacks more frequently. Extremism is also well countered by having in place mechanisms to censor inappropriate messages, as was the case of the newspaper *Adevărul*.

Conclusions

This paper sought to examine the behavior of people posting religion-based comments in terms of what topics they touched upon, how extremist were the views they shared, whether they had a "pack" behavior or not (did they tend to comment to the same articles or not) and how much religion-based content could be generated by them in relation to an event that had at its center people they considered not to share the same values as themselves.

However, the way these people have built their arguments is not investigated here. It would be interesting to see whether they prefer to post longer or shorter comments, what kind of figures of speech they use in particular, whether or not they try to use logical arguments or just emotional ones, whether they tend to use the same archaic language that is found during Orthodox sermons or not and whether or not their behavior could be considered "trolling" (posting comments not out of personal convictions, but as means to annoy other readers). These are all future avenues for research that could be exploited in order to gain more insightful knowledge into the discursive specificities of online comments.

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