

Digital hate speech in Switzerland. A multi-method study on the subjective and objective confrontation with hate speech in the everyday lives of Swiss internet users

Summary

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This study uses a representative survey in German- and French-speaking Switzerland (N = 2000) and an online diary study (N = 150) to examine how often Swiss people perceive hate speech when using media, which statements they classify as 'hate speech' and what role social group membership plays in this.

The survey shows the subjective perception of hate speech: 69% of Swiss people have perceived hate speech at some point, 24.2% are confronted with hate speech (several times) daily or several times per week. 7.7% of Swiss people have been personally threatened by hate speech, 10% defamed and 11% insulted. Contact with hate speech occurs across many media channels, particularly on social media. Threats are most often categorised as 'hate speech' by respondents, while rudeness is least likely to be categorised as such. In general, statements are more likely to be categorised as hate speech if they affect minorities. In the case of threats, respondents clearly believe that such statements should be deleted and the authors reported to the police. This is not the case for insults, defamation and rudeness. Insulting and rude statements are more likely to be categorised as 'hate speech' if they affect a group to which the respondents themselves belong. This bias is also reflected in the demand for deletion and punishment. This shows that the perception and judgement of hate speech is partly subjective.

The online diary study also provides insights into the objective exposure to hate speech among those participants who stated in the survey that they were exposed to it several times a week or more often: the majority of these participants actually appear to be exposed to hate speech several times a week. At the same time, some overestimated how often they encountered hate speech online in the survey. The diary study confirms the findings of the survey that hate speech occurs particularly frequently on social media, and that insults are perceived most often, followed by defamation, while threats are less common. More often than hate speech, the examples uploaded in the diary study contain rudeness. This suggests that the participants sometimes also perceive 'rude' statements as hate speech. Similar to the survey, however, the diary study also shows that the statements identified as hate speech are perceived as significantly more serious than statements with 'only' impoliteness. Finally, members of marginalised groups uploaded examples more frequently that referred to their own social group affiliation.