Book Review: Viral Hate: Containing Its Spread on the Internet

by Blog Admin   July 2, 2013

Every day, individuals and organizations use the power of the Internet to spread vicious attacks against people based on their race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation. In **Viral Hate***,* **Abraham H. Foxman and Christopher Wolf** *examine the epidemic of Internet hate and provide examples of the real harm online hate does to people and to society.* **Ana Polo Alonso** *recommends this read to anyone interested in debates around freedom of expression and extending our laws to the Internet.*

Viral Hate: Containing Its Spread on the Internet. Abraham H. Foxman and Christopher Wolf. Palgrave Macmillan. July 2013.

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In July 2012, a 14-minute low-budget online movie trailer produced in Southern California was released on YouTube, featuring a derogatory portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad. "Innocence of Muslims" drew scarce attention until months later, when controversial US Pastor Terry Jones – who had published a book called *Islam is of the Devil* and who one year before had heralded his intentions to host an "International Burn a Koran Day"— promoted it. Shortly after, the trailer was translated into Arabic and shared on blogs. It was only then that it attracted a huge audience and went on to spawn a flurry of outrage among many Muslims, leading to violent riots in Egypt and Yemen against US outposts. In Libya it was one of the major forces behind the attack on the US Embassy that caused the death of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three American staff members.
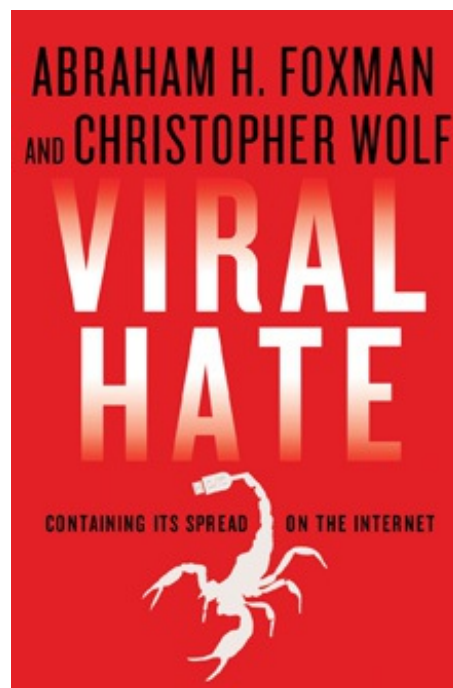
Religious considerations aside, this heinous story showcases that the Internet is a double-edged sword – for it is mostly portrayed as a revolutionary pulpit from which to propagate inspirational thoughts, and to rally people on to achieve honourable purposes, but also, if used perniciously as this case proves, it can also become a platform to spread hatred and to incite violence. This example also poses a tricky question: what can be done in order to vanquish bigotry and hate-mongering without attempting against a fundamental right as freedom of expression, which is one of the indisputable bedrocks of democracy?

Attempting to solve this conundrum, Abraham H. Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, and Christopher Wolf, one of the leading American practitioners in the field of privacy and data security law, have written *Viral Hate: Containing Its Spread on the Internet,* published today. Written by two of the major experts in the field, this thought-provoking book illustrates with a plethora of examples what hate speech is and how it operates in the Internet, and more importantly the book offers some interesting solutions to tackle the problem. Although focused on the United States, the initiatives *Viral Hate* suggests to tackle this problem can also be applied in other countries, making the book more than suitable for those looking for ways to refrain the spreading of vilifying comments on the Internet.

This book is a must read for several reasons. First of all, it offers a staunch defence of the need to thwart hate speech because, as the authors posit, "it can literally be a matter of life and death… hate doesn't just hurt, it kills"(p.33). In this regard, the book starts by debunking many misconceptions. For example, many people would argue that not paying attention to insults and offences is the best way to combat them – as if hate-mongers, extremists, racists, and bigots were just craving for publicity, and thus denying it to them would solve the problem. At the same time, there is the trend in believing that the simple act of "Liking" a Facebook page that promotes racists views or tweeting offensive remarks about a religious group does not entail a potential harm – for those acts seem "irrelevant".

Yet, the truth is that those acts are intended to do harm, and they are indeed relevant and can ultimately lead to despicable consequences. Extremist groups, for instance, can recruit people thanks to these "apparently irrelevant" acts, and bigots can find like-minded persons and persuade them to commit criminal actions that go beyond a simply "apparently trivial" tweet.

A further reason to read this book is that the authors respond to a very critical question: What can we do to curb this appalling situation? As Foxman and Wolf comment, the quick and easy answer would be to support the enactment of laws forbidding hate speech, and even more concretely, hate speech on the Internet. Other scholars have also argued this angle (most notably Jeremy Waldron in his 2012 book *The Harm in Hate Speech*), and countries such as Denmark and the UK have already adopted legal dispositions to condemn abusive or insulting words and behaviours.

Yet, for the particular case of the United States, the authors are categorical: "Laws addressed at Internet hate are perhaps the *least* effective way to deal with the problem" (p. 60). Foxman and Wolf are adamant in their defence that freedom of expression must be guaranteed even in the case when one abhors what is being expressed. Also, as they expose in detail, there are already laws prohibiting criminal behaviours and harassment practices that can be used. One must additionally have in mind practical concerns when dealing with the Internet: this medium has no boundaries and hate speech can originate in countries where national legal dispositions do not apply. Besides, hate-mongers, bigots, and racists tend to operate on the Internet under the cover of anonymity, and it is quite difficult to track and discover the real identities behind a Twitter username or even an e-mail address. The authors even go further when they attest that "hate speech statutes may have unintended consequences, including the creation of "martyrs" around whom hate-mongers can rally when their ideas are legally stifled" (p. 81).

Then, what? Should we just stand feeling impotent? The answer is no. Foxman and Wolf advocate for a pro-active attitude and argue that education, digital literacy, and above all, "counter-speech" ("the dissemination of messages that challenge, rebut, and disavow messages of bigotry and hatred") are the best tools to fight against hate speech. In the authors' view, all citizens and also corporations have the obligation to actively contribute to addressing this problem.

This may seem a paltry solution given the dimension of the endeavour. Yet, if we consider this issue carefully, we could conclude that this is the only plausible and effective way to deal with such a huge challenge, for it necessarily takes a whole society to protect the values for which it stands. Or, as the authors sum up, if we all want freedom of expression then we all must fight hate speech.

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Ana Polo Alonso is a speechwriter and political adviser. She holds a BSc in Political Science from the Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona), and a MA in Public Administration from Pompeu Fabra-ESADE. She also studied Marketing and Branding at the New York University, Project Management at Stanford, and specialized in Digital Marketing at Instituto de la Empresa (IE) Business School. Ana served as Responsible for Communications at the Women's World Forum, and has collaborated with International Organizations to develop advocacy strategies. She was also Lecturer of Marketing at ESERP Business School, and taught Branding at the International MBA held at Staffordshire University-ESERP in Barcelona. She is currently finishing her first book, focused on the history of US Presidential campaigns.Read more reviews by Ana.