Different countries, but the same? The polarisation of communication on migratory flows in Columbia and Italy

Francesca Cubeddu[1] **& Lucia Picarella**[2]

[1] IRPPS-CNR of Rome, Via Palestro, 32, Rome, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0002-7475-6084, Email: francesca.cubeddu@irpps.cnr.it

[2] Catholic University of Colombia, Avenida Caracas, n. 47-72, Bogota D.C., Colombia. ORCID: 0000-0001-5275-1111, Email: lpicarella@ucatolica.edu.co

ABSTRACT: The overall objective of the article is to demonstrate how the polarisation of communication observed in today's fragmented society on certain issues is not due to the similarity of the sociocultural and historical contexts of different countries but rather to the social problem being communicated. To do so, the subject of this article is communication referring to migration flows—a universal phenomenon and hot topic in international public debate—that generates, more often than not, polarisation oriented toward hostility toward migrants. To achieve this objective, with the support of the analysis of multiple cases of media communication (analysis of language and forms of communication), we will observe what happens in two countries (Italy and Colombia) is entirely different. Despite its limitations due to the impossibility of generalising the findings to all social phenomena, the article highlights how the two diametrically different countries can polarise communication towards migrants with similar hate speech within social networks and digital platforms. This leads to the specific objective: to open a critical debate around the dynamics that polarise communication, mainly if it takes on negative valences.

KEYWORDS: migration, hate speech, communication, social representations, narrative in the media, social networks

REPRESENTATIONS AND THE MUTUAL SHAPING
EFFECT OF HATE SPEECH

Migration is a hot topic in international public debate, as it is a phenomenon of global interest (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2019), both from a social, economic and political point of view. Nonetheless, migration is a universal and recognised phenomenon in the current social system. It continues to be experienced as something "unfamiliar" that puts individuals on high alert (Mangone & Marsico, 2011), leading them to mistrust, hostility and, in some cases, violence. These feelings stem from a sense of insecurity caused by fear and rejection of migrants who are constantly placed in the space of "otherness" through language. Landowski (2007) points out how the 'one' and 'other' construct regulates and reconstructs who they are through various social practices in different spaces in which not only are actions performed, but ideas are formed that, through different means, reach the public space (Habermas, 1974). Globalisation has modified the public space, moving it from the physical world to the digital one, in which different forms and modes of violence are observed, creating a mutual connection between offline and online realities anchored in the metabolisation of socio-cultural perceptions, principles and rules (Donato et al., 2022). In the media, especially social media, it is possible to observe the narratives used, defined by their social context and ability to break with the same context (Butler, 1997). It is in social representation, which is constructed through media narratives (Baranowski, 2024), where it is possible to observe how the "we" and "other" encounter finds its expression since it also reveals power relations between groups or individuals (Van Dijk, 2000). According to Foucault (1988), two terms bind together in power relations: the other who is the one over whom power is exercised, and we who exercise power. These power relations influence the social context since they create a social representation based on the host country's culture of the foreigner who is generally identified as a migrant. The dissemination of negative social representations leads to the rapid circulation of 'devastating' ideas (United Against Racism, 2008) as well as fast-growing dynamics that are so difficult to control, such as hate speech, that any supportive and welcoming elements that seek to foster the integration of migrants are pushed into the background or even obscured within the social system.

The phenomenon of hate speech[1] is undoubtedly an evolving trend whose somewhat blurred boundaries make a static definition difficult because it is enriched by new components daily. It would, therefore, be more appropriate to consider hate speech a form of social narration—rather than an honest discourse—based on stereotypes and prejudices

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[1] According to Recommendation CM/Rec (2022) 16 of the Committee of the Council of Ministers of Europe «Hate speech is understood as all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as "race", colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation».

that narrate hatred by attacking ethnic, religious and minority groups in a transversal manner. It is mainly located on social media networks (supported by the mainstream media and often triggered by populist political slogans). It is dangerously fuelled by the mix of fake news, which is its background for building consensus in public opinion. In recent years, the practice of hate speech has moved out of the physical world and into the world of digital platforms, implementing what is known as "mutual and social shaping" (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999), i.e., that mutual shaping between culture and technology that takes place as technologies are socially situated and part, with society and culture, of the same processes.

The phenomenon of hate speech also produces a significant mutual shaping effect (Quan-Haase, 2013; Ben Allouch, de Graaf & Šabanović, 2020), demonstrating how technology and society influence and shape each other. In the case of migration, this is highlighted by the representations and narratives of hostility that it constructs and entrenches in public opinion. Social media and technology show the social and cultural factors influencing our construction of values and social perception (Ben Allouch, de Graaf, & Šabanović, 2020). According to De Blasio and Sorice (2023), one of the main components of hate language is "information disorder", which is found in digital ecosystems not the only but certainly among the main allies for the strengthening and consolidation of these practices.

In the following paragraphs, a comparative analysis of the representation and narration of migrants in two different countries on social media will be observed: Colombia and Italy. However, two very different countries socially, politically, culturally and economically present the same issue, namely, strong migration flows. In its continuation, this article will show that although the migration flows of these two countries have different characteristics (Italy, unlike Colombia, which knows only one type of migration from Venezuela, has a migration history itself), communication around this phenomenon is polarised. In the Colombian case, the narrative in social media will be examined concerning the Venezuelan migrant. In contrast, in the Italian case, the analysis of the narrative cannot focus on a single nationality because the migrants arriving in Italy are from different countries (mainly from Africa or the Middle East) and, therefore, the media's treatment of them does not distinguish them by nationality but refers exclusively to the migrant "category." The choice of comparing two contexts so different from a socio-political and socio-cultural point of view was intentional. In reference to the problem of migration and despite the structural and systemic differentiations between the two countries, the analysis aims to demonstrate how the extermination and polarisation of online communication creates an essential meeting point in the radicalisation of a language of widespread and generalised hatred against migrants that is based on typical dynamics. The analysis of the perceptions of migrant people in the two countries will focus on the observation of hate speech in social media. In both countries, it is more widespread through social networks and digital platforms since, due to their very nature, they lead

to the dissemination and amplification of stereotypes, fuelling a negative social representation of migrants. Moreover, for both Colombia and Italy, there is a continuous ambivalence in the vision of migrants, ranging from "poor" to "someone who steals work" from "victim" to "enemy". Hate speech towards migrants, therefore, contributes to generating forms of prejudice in both cases by relegating them to a position of inferiority (Gelber & Stone, 2007; Bianchi, 2018).

THE VENEZUELAN MIGRANT IN COLOMBIA: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS AND NARRATIVES

Venezuela's political and socio-economic crisis has forced 2.3 million people to emigrate to other Latin American countries, particularly Chile, Peru and Colombia[2]. According to data provided by Migración Colombia and the Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela (R4V), the country has taken in up to 40% of Venezuelan migrants, which in net figures updated to November 2023 translates into approximately 2,875,743 regular migrants, to which more than 503,682 illegal migrants must be added. Venezuelan migrants represent 93% of the foreigners in the Colombian territory, reaching a peak of entries into the country between 2017 and 2019 (in 2017, there was a +651% increase in entries compared to 2016)[3]. The high flow of Venezuelan migration has exploded over the last decade and resulted not only in a worrying situation of vulnerability but also in an expansion of discriminatory tendencies based on a stereotypical and racist social representation of the Venezuelan migrant. This social representation is significantly reproduced through the phenomenon of hate speech. The interconnectivity provided by social media and the impact of large-scale migratory movements concentrated in a short period of time cause a greater intensity and frequency of this phenomenon. Compared to the offline world, in the current online reality, a proportionality between the number of migrants welcomed and the increase in hate speech seems to have been established. In the Colombian case, a more pronounced trend of hate speech can be observed in this sense than in other Latin American countries that have received a smaller flow of Venezuelan immigrants. The media, both printed and online, have been decisive actors in constructing social representations of Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia. The widespread narrative has constructed an imagination that has fostered stigmatisation and racism. It has also triggered a mechanism characterised

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[2] Given the historical and structural characteristics of the Colombian context, characterised by a long internal armed conflict and high levels of social and cultural violence, large immigration flows into the country can be defined as an emerging phenomenon, which explain - in comparison with Europe and other Latin American countries - a significant gap present in the literature on the subject. For specific insights on the Venezuelan case, see Castro Franco (2019); Moreno and Pelacani (2023); Gandini et al. (2019); Mejía Ochoa (2012); Flores (2004); Koechlin and Eguren (2018); Valero Martínez (2018), among others.

[3] Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela (R4V), https://www.r4v.info/es/refugiadosymigrantes.

by a continuous circularity of information shown through social networks' widespread dissemination of these representations, often fake news legitimised by periodicals and news broadcasts. It is frequently confirmed at various times by political and electoral discourses that have further strengthened these representations and reactivated the communicative spiral. The most common social representations correspond to the vision of the Venezuelan migrant as a delinquent, as a threat to the economy and as a social usurper. At the beginning of the Venezuelan exodus to Colombia, the solidarity media portrayal of migrants as victims was probably the prevailing version, supported by the denunciations of humanitarian organisations that highlighted their high vulnerability. National news programmes focused on the portrayal of migrants as the main victims of crime, particularly in border areas, as well as on the abuse and discrimination suffered by women[4].

The increase in the migratory flow in recent years provoked a change in the collective imagination in the narrative of Venezuelan migrants. The massive entry into Colombian territory coincided with the beginning of social protests (2019-2021)[5]. During this period, a feeling of criminalisation spreads among public opinion through the viralisation of fake content on social networks. The circulation of photos and videos showing the participation of Venezuelan migrants in acts of vandalism, looting, theft, murder, and as members recruited by criminal organisations and armed groups (BBC, 2019) was also reinforced by the leading national media, often without verifying their veracity[6]. Viralisation and the 'shield' of anonymity or fake accounts encourage multiplication and repetition at different times and moments in these videos, photos, or news items, thus creating the illusion of a multiplicity of crimes committed by immigrants. From viralisation to the explosion, especially on Twitter (now X), cyber hate and hate speech were almost immediate. The published tweets undoubtedly demonstrate the presence of hate speech against Venezuelan migrants.

The dominant characteristics of the tweets can be summarised in the presence of precise hashtags: #venecos[7], #venezolanos, #migrantes, #venecosdelincuentes, accompanied by words such as delinquents, rats, vermin, and cancer as well as audio-visual material, hyperlinks and links. Considering only the first half of 2020, 74.7% of the posts published on social networks contained messages of hatred and racism, with peaks especially on Twitter (60.1% of the total posts) after the dissemination of news related to the deportation of 80 Venezuelan migrants accused of being part of a plan to loot businesses in the

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[4] On the issue of Venezuelan migrant women, see Picarella and Mangone (2022).

[5] For more on this, see Picarella (2020).

[6] A report by the Fundación Ideas para la Paz (Castillo et al. 2019) points out that while it is true that in 2018 the percentage of arrests of Venezuelan citizens exceeds that of Colombian citizens, nevertheless in 20% of the cases they are arrests due to the occupation of public land (street vendors, begging, etc.).

[7] The term *veneco* is used in a totally derogatory way in Colombia (and in general throughout Latin America) to defame and insult the dignity of Venezuelan migrants, placing them on a lower hierarchical level.

north-western part of the country, or associated with the expulsion of some Venezuelan migrants caught repeatedly for theft, or accused of murder (Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 2020).

Through a language of hatred, a dichotomous us/them relationship has been constructed based on the direct association between the individual migrant and criminality, which has fostered the creation of a narrative of the *veneco* as the enemy. This image then indiscriminately extended to the entire Venezuelan community.

According to data published by the *Proyecto Migración Venezuela* (2020) Observatory, between January and December 2019, 61,400 social network posts related to the Venezuelan migratory flow were recorded, with an average of 5,116 posts per month. Between January and August 2020, there were 41,664 registered posts, about 5,208 monthly posts. This peak recorded in the flow of online communication is linked to the situation of social crisis in the Colombian context, already on the verge of collapse, to which the consequences of the COVID-19 lockdowns were added. This temporally coincides with the approval in June 2021 by the Colombian government of the *Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos* (ETPV). This measure can be considered an example of good practice in the Latin American region, given its objective of guaranteeing dignity and respect for human rights to Venezuelan migrants[8]. In addition to criminalisation, two other categories of the narratives and social representations of Venezuelan migrants begin to predominate in public opinion at this stage: that of being a burden/social exploiter and that of being a competitor in the labour and salary markets.

These representations immediately rebound on social networks. According to the Observatory's analysis, the most significant flow of hate speech related to social and health issues (64.5%) and economic issues (64.2%) is recorded on Twitter. During the first half of 2020, some spikes in xenophobic messages were observed, triggered by the publication of a report by the Contraloría of Bogotá that highlighted the increase in the number of Venezuelan migrants undergoing treatment for HIV (+ 1,167 cases in 2019 compared to 2018, see Informe Calidad de Vida 2020). This trend merges with the economic crisis. At the same time, a report by the Asociación Nacional de Instituciones Financieras (ANIF, 2020) was released that linked the rise in unemployment rates with the pressure Venezuelan immigration was exerting on the labour market. Tweets and posts, in this case, return to the national vs foreign opposition, accused of increasing poverty and taking away jobs because they are willing to accept any wage and working conditions. The announcement of the imminent approval of temporary protection status for Venezuelan migrants triggered new peaks of racist posts during the first three months of 2021. This is followed by other peaks recorded in July of the same year, with a 261% increase

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[8] This is a legal mechanism complementary to international provisions that aims to protect Venezuelan refugees and migrants through a form of special regularisation valid for ten years, which allows access to labour and socio-welfare rights. Decreto 216 de 2021, Función Pública, https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=159606.

in xenophobic messages related to insults against the Venezuelan referee's team at the Copa America semifinal between Colombia and Argentina. In August 2021, there was an increase of + 610% after the media announcement of the murder of a policeman allegedly by a "foreigner". It seems that the most excellent catalyst for xenophobia was the spread of fake news at crucial moments, such as social protests and the Covid-19 pandemic (Barómetro de Xenofobia, 2021), which fuelled aporophobia towards Venezuelan migrants and is reflected in the 71.7% of hostile tweets recorded between May and June 2020 (Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 2020).

Platforms and social networks can transform the perception of a phenomenon since fake news, filters, and propaganda can easily influence uncritical and uninformed users who, given the very characteristics of digital ecosystems, are unlikely to check the veracity of any information. Content published on the Web does not follow purely logical lines but moves based on palpable emotional factors (Tomkins, 1962). In the case of Venezuelan immigration to Colombia, most of the narratives and social representations of the migrants were constructed and disseminated through social networks and digital platforms, and, in particular, through Twitter/X accounts (96.5% according to Proyecto Migración Venezuela, 2020). This highlights the relevance of the online world in the construction of narratives and hate language, along with stigmatising and discriminatory imagery that was fully expressed by hurling uncertainty and fear at a "symbolic target" (Mangone & Pece, 2017, p. 344).

THE MEDITERRANEAN MIGRANT: REPRESENTATIONS AND NARRATIVES IN THE ITALIAN MEDIA

Italy, a country in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, is a destination for migratory flows that follow different routes. The Mediterranean Sea represents a meeting place for migrants to find salvation (Hadhri & Mangone, 2016; Mangone, 2016) and an immense obstacle that often leads them to death (Mangone et al., 2018). The migration phenomenon is a constant theme in the public and media debate (Boccia Artieri & Bentivegna, 2019) in Italy. With both the increase in migration flows in 2023 as well as the centre-right government, migrants have once again become the focus of the public sphere for political polemics, criticism and expressions of hatred spread by the media, primarily through social media.

In 2023, according to Ministry of the Interior[9] data, 157.652 migrants landed in Italy. This number had not been reached since 2016 when there was a gradual reduction in migratory flows due to both restrictive Italian and international policies (due to government changes and the increase in terrorist attacks) as well as the Covid-19 health emergency in 2020. However, there has been a new and gradual increase in migratory

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[9] Ministry of the Interior data from the *Daily Statistical Dashboard* available on the Ministry of the Interior website. The data refer to a period from 01 January to 31 December 2023.

flows (coming mainly from sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, transiting Tunisia and Libya) since 2021.

This renewed presence of migrants with the increase in the number of landings on Italian shores has led to the emergence in our social system of mechanisms for expressing hatred generated by a social perception of insecurity, which is also fuelled by forms of prejudice (Allport, 1954; Amerio, 2004) and reinforced by the narrative that has developed over time (Mangone, 2024). The host population's perception of the migrant is the effect of what the media (old and new, to use an outdated terminology but one that makes it clear that different media are involved in these dynamics) disseminate. Perception also gives rise to attitudes and behaviours (Wieviorka, 1998; 2001) that can be either positive or negative and are reinforced by the migrant's imagery. It is no coincidence that the video for Checco Zalone's song *Immigrato*—the soundtrack of the 2020 film *Tolo Tolo*—received 4 million views on social media in just four days. The song depicts the migrant as an individual from an African country who is seen as the main culprit of Italy's economic problems, unemployment and integration. The migrant is everywhere and constantly shows up in the lives of Italians: "at the supermarket exit; at the petrol station; at the traffic light on our windscreens". It leads to the real fear of seeing his bank account "drained" by the migrant and their constant presence in the neighbourhood, especially at home with his wife.

Violence and hate towards migrants in the Italian social context have undergone a *mutual shaping* effect, propagating from physical to digital environments (Mangone & Donato, 2024; Donato et al., 2022; Bentivegna & Rega, 2020). This has led to a greater spread of stigma and prejudice towards foreigners (Bentivegna & Rega, 2020; Ziccardi, 2016), which the numerous fake news stories have also favoured spread on and by social media.

According to reports from Lunaria[10], there has been an increase in verbal violence in recent years caused by both the COVID-19 health emergency as well as the change of government with the implementation of new legislation on the subject (Lunaria, 2023). In 2022, a total of 366 cases of discrimination with verbal violence, physical violence and harassment of a xenophobic or racist nature were documented through either direct reports made by other associations or by monitoring the offline and online press (239 verbal violence, of which 107 are threats, insults and 90 are political propaganda, 64 physical violence, 13 harassments and 55 cases of discrimination; 42 are racist public demonstrations).

An analysis of the vocabulary used in comments on social media and articles dealing with immigration shows that the terms most commonly used to refer to migrants are colour (black), race, religion, nationality, and sexual orientation (Cohen-Almagor, 2011). This

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[10] Lunaria is a non-profit, secular, independent and party-autonomous social promotion association founded in 1992. It promotes peace, social and economic justice, equality and the guarantee of citizenship rights, democracy and participation from below, social inclusion and intercultural dialogue.

refers to specific targeting of more disadvantaged people (Moran, 2016) and marginalised groups (Marwick & Miller, 2014), as well as expressions of political recognition against migrants (Lunaria, 2023) and racialisation (Siebert, 2003, 2012). During the lockdown and the Covid-19 health emergency, migrants were often used as targets and considered disease spreaders (Amnesty International Italia, 2021; Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2022).

Social networks are a "virtual venting place" (Amnesty International Italy, 2022) and highlight most Italians' social opinions: 56.9% of the users' comments express negative opinions, criticism, polemics, and hate language. Only 43.1% of the content has a neutral or positive meaning. On the social networks analysed (Facebook and Twitter, now X), 8 out of 10 comments treat immigration negatively. Amnesty International (Pandemic Intolerance, 2021) notes that there has been an increase in discriminatory and/or offensive comments since the COVID-19 health emergency. Analysing the comments (Amnesty International Italy, 2022), it is possible to see how immigration and migrant people are often treated with negative and hateful expressions. Considering the data, immigration and religious minorities cover 42.3% and 36%, respectively.

It is worth noting how hate and discriminatory posts generate more likes and shares than neutral or positive ones. The most frequently discussed topics are citizenship, immigration synonymous with crime, insecurity, the migrant as a disease spreader, different and enemy. Considering the Covid-19 health emergency in which the number of landings was significantly reduced, leading to the near absence of the migration emergency in the immediately preceding years, there is still a narrative of hatred towards migrants (for example, the use of the hashtags, #immigrant and #clandestine). The hate posts that received the most interactions were those of politicians from right-wing parties (Amnesty International Italy, 2021, pp. 21-23). Among the posts, at least five summarise the expressions used to refer to migrants during the health emergency: 1. "*No more landings, they are infecting us all, don't you understand*??"; 2. "*There is a risk of another epidemic. Naval blockade*"; "*Stop importing illegal immigrants who are sick with Covid and something else*"; 3. "*The day I see them succumb I will be the happiest woman in the world. I want to see them in jail. Because they are criminals. I don't know if they realise that all these sick niggers should no longer be let in. But what's behind this harassment?*"; 4. "*Please check carefully if they are Italians, if they are clandestine and possibly infected, turn the other way and let them escape*"; 5. "*Infected clandestine, illiterate, terrorists, inept, go back to your filthy country!*".

These comments exemplify how, during the COVID-19 health emergency, the scapegoat became the migrants (particularly of Chinese and Oriental origin). They were no longer considered to be the ones who were stealing jobs but also as disease spreaders, the bearers of the problem and a general social unease.

Vox's 2023 research[11], on the other hand, examines the face of Italy after the health emer-

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[11] VOX is the Italian Observatory on Rights. For more information on the research see Intolerance Map 7

gency, showing how the new increase in migratory flows has consequently led to the growth of negative comments on Twitter (now X) concerning migrants.

Analysing the upswing in migration flows in the Mediterranean, it can be observed how among the 629,151 tweets extracted from January to October 2022, the majority are negative—583,067 negative (about 93% *vs* 7% positive)—and the same is true for 2021 where of the 797,326 tweets extracted 550,277 are negative (about 69% vs 31% positive). This highlights a direct dependency between increasing migration flows and negative perceptions of foreigners. This had already been observed in the 2019 survey with a sort of "*roar of hate*" (from the Vox website) with a dramatic increase also promoted by the international political context towards Muslims (for example, in the 855 tweets referring to the Islamic world, the following hashtags of intolerance can be counted: #Taleban, #dirty, #magrebin, #terrorists, #criminals).

Regarding migrants in general, the most popular #hashtags are #black, #gypsy, #kebba-bar, #bangla (to name a few). To migrants, the same #hashtags return over the years.

This narrative highlights the phenomenon of hate speech on social media, which aims to spread and foment the most diverse forms of hatred based on intolerance, discrimination and hostility towards migrants (Council of Europe, 2014).

DIFFERENT COUNTRIES BUT THE SAME...

The strong diffusion and pervasiveness of social networks and digital platforms encourage and accelerate the polarisation, fragmentation and extremisation of communicative processes typical of today's societies. Through communicative forms and emotional, irrational and unargued messages, these elements create clearly distorted narratives that can take root in and radicalise the social structure.

This generates a social representation of migrants determined by social networks. They reproduce old stereotypes inflated by hatred (towards foreigners) and increased by the multidimensional socio-political and socio-cultural crises triggered by the SARS-CoV-2 health emergency. Discriminatory and stereotyped representations and narratives highlight the prejudices (Allport, 1954) that the community has towards migrants and, at the same time, reproduce their own dissemination and reinforcement of opposing views. The stereotype tool emerges when subjects are in relation to members of a social category to which they do not belong. Many of these stereotypes are shared within the cultural system. They constitute the social representations that are learnt transmitted (Blum, 2004) and, simultaneously change through language and its transformation into first communication and then narration (Mangone, 2022a). Thus, social representations orient the gaze on the other and define its social recognition and acceptance. It is important to highlight how, in the continuous flow of events in the social system, individuals

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on the VOX rights website. For further information on the research see Map 7 and Map 4 (2019).

do not always have the opportunity to have a direct and immediate experience of events which is provided to them by the media.

The media can represent a reality that individuals have no direct knowledge of (Mc-Combs & Shaw, 1972). The media are a vehicle for the internalisation of learned knowledge as well as a reconstruction of the lived social situation and the dissemination of hate speech (Cubeddu & Scocco, 2024). The role of the media is central in the symbolic and social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1984; Baranowski, 2024), in the dissemination of information and making people aware of a certain phenomenon (Luhmann, 1966), in the creation and propagation of social representations that determine the perception of the other and thus determine their acceptance and inclusion. Representations and narratives of hostility and intolerance are transformed into messages of hatred towards the migrant, which is increasingly widespread thanks to social networks and their mode of interaction (Hietanen & Eddebo, 2022). Tweets, for example, highlight hate narratives stemming from a condition of social insecurity and fear of the other.

Forms of online hate can lead not only to isolation and social exclusion but also to the social spread of a form of hate culture (MacKinnon, 1996; Brown, 2015) that is discriminatory and racial in nature. Unbridled online hostility narratives, therefore, generate significant risks to democracy and its values. This is where the fight against hate speech becomes a complex and evolving issue, with challenges related to defining, moderating and balancing the freedom of expression and the protection of people's rights (Picarella, 2024).

This analysis tried to show, by comparing two very different socio-cultural realities, the presence in both countries of a negative polarisation of communication and specifically of hate speech against migrants, despite the significant structural differences between the two contexts. Suppose Italy is a country that has historically been both a country of emigration and immigration, and its location in the Mediterranean makes it a destination of transit and "first landing" in Colombia, on the other hand. In that case, the situation is markedly different because it is an emerging phenomenon that has only exploded over the last decade, with the flow coming from Venezuela due to the country's socio-economic collapse. However, in both countries, the culture of hatred has significantly spread through digital ecosystems, with the figure of the migrant being attributed to a negative representation. This has been aggravated and determined not only by the non-acceptance of the other but also by the fear of worsening the situation since the COVID-19 health emergency, which has fostered, in both cases, a strong social vulnerability and a growing internal inequality.

In this scenario, it is possible to note how, in both Colombia and Italy, there is a narrative on social networks that represents the migrant as an "enemy-delinquent", as an expropriator of social rights and jobs, as the one who is extraneous to the system, a person who cannot be trusted due to the non-sharing of culture (Hadhri & Mangone, 2016; Giaccar-

di, 2005). There is also a "non-communicability" determined by the migrant's culture of origin, which is perceived as an obstacle by the host countries, with even the language being a barrier limiting the encounter.

The situations that emerged in the two countries, taken as examples, make it possible to observe how there is the same social narrative and representation in two such different contexts. It is, therefore, likely to state that the language of hatred and discrimination based on the categories of other/nemesis/usurper is fostered and developed through the forms of digital communication, which generate expressions of hatred capable of influencing the formation of public opinion (and, in particular, for the Italian case without distinction of origin or nationality). The comments in the tweets of both countries show the opposition between natives and foreigners. What emerges is the "harmful" role of migrants who embody those who steal work, subtract rights and, finally, usurp. This is regardless of the presence of greater or lesser migratory flows. Online representations and narrations show how migrants are a problem for both Italians and Colombians.

Secondly, in both countries, migrants are the scapegoat of the crisis and internal problems, aggravated by the health emergency and its socio-economic consequences.

Finally, the construction of hostility narratives and hate speech towards migrants highlight the criticality of the two host countries, with the foreigner becoming a mirror of the community's fears, crisis, difficulties and politics (Mangone, Masullo, Gallego, 2018). Massive flows of migrant people create moral panic that affects community attitudes and social perceptions of them (Reddy & Thiollet, 2023).

The language of online hatred towards migrants observed in Colombia and Italy also makes it possible to highlight how the social representations and narratives developed in the public opinion of both countries differ from what is promoted by the *UN Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015). The Agenda foresees the construction of a social representation based on the construction of inclusive societies in which each individual, each with rights and responsibilities, plays an active role. It also sees migration as a possible condition for improving local communities' economic and social conditions. The Agenda, moreover, proposes a plan to protect and empower the development of migrant populations as well as host communities. According to its objectives, the basis for creating a real (non-stereotyped) social representation of migrants is to promote social welfare actions for all subjects.

Actions that, by counteracting difficulties, lead to the growth of solidarity and inclusive actions (Giampaolo & Ianni, 2020), and thus to abandoning the perception of "otherness" and embracing that of "brotherhood" and mutual collaboration for the creation of cohesion and social justice. From this perspective, it is interesting to note how, especially in Italy, some associations are trying to raise awareness about the language used. They are promoting a change in the terms used towards migrants, which also applies to commu-

nication professionals. An example is the *Associazione Carta di Roma*[12] which is trying to get journalists to adopt legally appropriate terms to avoid disseminating inaccurate or distorted information that could generate an erroneous perception of phenomena related to migrants and migration.

In Colombia, however, an initial attempt to combat hate speech was the discussion in Congress of Bill No. 017 of 2014, through which prison sentences (12-24 months in prison) were established for anyone using digital media to incite intolerance through hate speech. The bill also authorised the Ministry of Information Technology to keep a register of websites and social network accounts that promoted hate speech[13]. The bill was shelved due to the end of the parliamentary term. Still, it was undoubtedly an attempt to respond to the phenomenon of hate speech with punitive and supervisory approaches. In addition, actions are being promoted by associations that offer support to Venezuelan migrants to encourage their possible cultural and labour integration, legal and social assistance, but also to guarantee respect for their human rights (Venoticias, Migración en Positivo (M+), Fundación Juntos se puede, among others).

Measures to combat hate speech allow online social hatred to be regulated through various strategies, including a cultural change aimed at the correct use of online platforms. This includes the promotion of caring for the good and the spoken word, using terms with a united approach (Mortari, 2023). Despite the advancements and suggestions made in this area, the analysis reveals that much work remains, particularly when considering the issue from a socio-cultural perspective (which is impacted by the emotional dimension). Additionally, the process of promoting a culture of hatred in the digital ecosystem is creating a vicious cycle that amplifies and disseminates marginalisation and hatred, which then gets channelled into outbursts of rage and animosity, which has a significant negative impact on social interactions and democracy.

In conclusion, aware that we have made a small contribution to the field of communication bias studies, this article (which demonstrates the communication polarisation of totally different countries on the phenomenon of migration) should push social researchers to be more sensitive in their future research to the models and forms of communication (especially for that which takes place in social media and platforms) that are proposed daily (and often linked to words and images that stereotypically represent objects and individuals), and that cannot be constrained only of the political-cultural context of ref-

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[12] The Charter of Rome Association (https://www.cartadiroma.org/) was established in 2011 to implement the deontological protocol for correct information on immigration issues, signed by the National Council of the Order of Journalists (CNOG) and the National Federation of the Italian Press (FNSI) in June 2008.

[13] Proyecto de Ley 017 de 2014, "Por medio del cual se prohíbe la apología al odio, el discurso de odio y otras manifestaciones de intolerancia en Colombia", 20 de julio de 2014, Comisión Primera Constitucional Permanente, Cámara de Representantes, https://www.camara.gov.co/manifestaciones-de-intolerancia.

erence but also to the object (phenomenon/social problem) of communication.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Francesca Cubeddu is PhD in Educational and Social Theory and Research at the University of Roma Tre. She is a research fellow at the Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies (IRPPS) of the National Research Council (CNR) and previously at the University of Roma Tre. Adjunct lecturer at the University of Salerno. She won Pareto Prize for Sociology 2020 (University of Perugia, Italy). She collaborates with universities, trade unions, research organisations and third sector organisations.

Lucia Picarella is Ph.D. in Theory and History of Comparative Political Institutions (University of Salerno, Italy), post-doctoral fellow and political scientist (University of Salerno, Italy). She was Professor at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Salerno. Since 2013, she is Senior Researcher and Full Professor at the Law Faculty of the Universidad Católica de Colombia. Lecturer at national and international events, she is the author of several research articles and monographs. She is editor in chief of the journal Cultura Latinoamericana, researcher in European and Latin American research groups, and winner of awards for excellence in research and for social and academic work.

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