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INVITED ESSAY

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In 2011 and 2012, the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center released three reports as part of a multi-year pilot study on hate speech on talk radio. Our goal was to explore the use of quantitative methodologies in order to examine hate speech that targets vulnerable groups—ethnic, racial, religious, and/or sexual minorities.

The backdrop for this study is the 1993 National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Report to Congress, which addressed the role of telecommunications in the commission of hate crimes. The NTIA advises the president on telecommunications and information policy and manages the federal government's use of the radio frequency spectrum. Mindful of First Amendment protections as well as related federal legislation and policy, the 1993 NTIA report established a definition of hate speech drawn from the Hate Crimes Statistics Act (1990). Now, over two decades later, the NTIA report continues to provide a viable definition for hate speech, but it no longer reflects significant recent changes in federal policy, telecommunications platforms, and programming formats and content. Furthermore, the original study relied on data that were, by the NTIA's own account, "scattered and largely anecdotal," and it therefore failed to provide a scientific basis for data assessment, let alone a methodology or baseline for future study. In developing this pilot study, we undertook three related studies using qualitative content analysis, social network analysis, and biological markers, respectively.

The qualitative content analysis revealed a significant incidence of speech that incorporates targeted statements, unsubstantiated claims, divisive language, and indexical terms related to political nativism. Our analysis yielded no instances of the kind of hate speech that is defined in the 1993 NTIA report as calling for

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“immediate unlawful action.” Whether such speech exists on talk radio would require a broader study. Based on the evidence we uncovered, the programs reveal a distinct and recurring rhetorical pattern for targeting specific vulnerable groups that relies on the systematic use of a combination of unsubstantiated claims, divisive language, and indexical terms. Through this rhetorical pattern, vulnerable groups were defined as antithetical to core American values, which were attributed by the hosts to themselves, their audience, and the nation. A significant and recurring indexical construct was that of (Latino) immigrants as criminals and, by extension, as an imminent threat to the American public. Latino immigrants were also linked to social institutions that were presented as complicit with them. In effect, target groups were characterized as both powerful and a direct threat to the listeners’ way of life (in some measure because they were seen as having captured major social institutions such as the media). What we find most troubling in our findings is the extent to which this pattern relies on unsubstantiated claims (37 percent of all fact-based claims) while the talk radio programs situate themselves within the journalistic context of “news” and “opinion” directed at public policy debate.

The social network analysis examined how new media infrastructures that form around traditional broadcast media can promote ideologies of hate and exclusion. These infrastructures are analyzed as social networks that are determined and sustained by ideological alignment between the hosts of commercial talk radio shows and their on-air guests. The data demonstrate the mutual referencing among a relatively small cluster of nodes that include hosts, guests, and other affiliated individuals and groups. These individuals and groups were connected by certain ideological sentiments targeting vulnerable groups. What emerges is a discourse that remains insular rather than open and that finds alignment, repetition, and amplification through social media. Interestingly this insularity is dominated by political figures and media personalities, and less so by issue-driven organizations, advocacy groups, and experts. Political figures account for 27 percent of all guests identified in the study, and among them there is an almost complete overlap between Republican Party membership (93 percent) and Tea Party affiliation (89 percent). Among guests appearing two or more times, political figures (19 percent) and media personalities (57 percent) account for 76 percent of the total. There is also overlap between these two categories, with a number of former elected officials and candidates working as media commentators. While we focused on program hosts as the central nodes in this social network, Fox News plays a notable role with regard to the centrality of program hosts and guests. The data showed that Fox News accounted for 24 percent of the talk radio appearances by guests representing an organization. Further study can expand on the role of Fox News and other organizations with regard to the catalytic role of commercial talk radio in the development of social networks.

The third study employed biological markers in order to measure the physiological and psychological effects of hate speech. The findings show a statistically significant correlation between changes in clinical anxiety and the production of salivary cortisol in listeners who were exposed to hate speech content on commercial talk radio. The research reveals that hate speech could potentially have a deleterious

impact on the health of listeners. Lack of significant statistical correlations between the demographic characteristics of the studied population and the experimental variables examined suggests that the correlations and trends that were observed in the data may represent a general effect that is not specific to race/ethnicity, nativity, or ideological alignment with talk radio programs. If further study confirms these findings, the implications are significant insofar as the physiological impact of hate speech would have an effect on both vulnerable groups and those targeting them.

The goal of this pilot study is to develop a sound, replicable methodology that can be used to establish the nature and extent of hate speech in the media. The study does not attempt to determine a causal relationship between hate speech in the media and the commission of hate crimes, and we do not aim to make more-general claims about the media or these programs, which would follow from a full-scale study. Instead, we hope that the study helps establish data-driven categories and approaches for content analysis, social networks between broadcast and social media, and physiological and psychological impact on listeners.

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