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## Hate Spin: The Twin Political Strategies of Religious Incitement and Offence-Taking

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### Abstract

Religious intolerance manifests itself periodically in ways that test democracies' commitment to freedom of expression. Responding to this challenge requires a conceptual clarity that is often lacking. This article proposes a corrective lens in the form of a new concept, hate spin. Hate spin absorbs the familiar concept of hate speech, or incitement, and combines it with the less understood strategy of offence-taking or manufactured indignation. The 2 sides of hate spin—incitement and offence-taking—are used by political entrepreneurs to mobilise supporters and coerce targeted groups. Incitement may warrant legal intervention, but censorship is a counter-productive response to offence. The article explicates the concept of hate spin, identifies its key characteristics, and suggests directions for further research.

*Keywords:* freedom of expression, religion, hate speech, incitement, offence

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## **Hate Spin: The Twin Political Strategies of Religious Incitement and Offence-Taking**

One of today's most difficult communication problems is how to deal with expression that offends religion. Many closed societies punish religious offence severely, sometimes resulting in brutal violations of speakers' human rights. In contrast, since the Enlightenment, the Western prescription has been to deny religion and other powerful institutions any immunity from insult. But there are still many democracies that do not extend free speech protections to expression that may destabilise interreligious relations. For example, India, which grants its citizens a great degree of political freedom, has always treated religious and other identity-related offence as a special category of speech that should be subject to censorship and punishment.

Recently, even Western liberal democracies' devotion to free speech has been tested. It was easier to dismiss offended feelings as the price to be paid for liberty when that price was not exacted in murderous violence. Liberal convictions began to waver after the 1988 publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which drew death threats from groups that viewed the novel as an inexcusable attack on Islam (Cohen, 2012). The 21st century has witnessed a series of such controversies, including the murder of *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists in France in January 2015. Perhaps, some now say, types of speech that may provoke a violent backlash should be restricted on public order and security grounds. The European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation, chaired by former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, has proposed a new model law banning malicious attempts to vilify a group, such as calling all Muslims terrorists (ECRT, 2015). Such "group libel" legislation would amount to a significant moderation of liberal norms (Erasmus, 2015).

Cohen-Almagor (2016) argues compellingly that—given what liberal societies now know will be the likely reaction to religious offence—speakers must exercise their freedoms

with more responsibility. After an incident like the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, pleading ignorance of the cost of unrestrained free speech is no longer an option. “We should learn from these affairs, take offence seriously, acknowledge the fallacy of universalism and the reality of globalisation where speech in a liberal part of the world may provoke negative and violent reaction worldwide,” he says, adding that the victims include bystanders and police who are being killed for expression that was not even their own.

I fully endorse such calls to promote more responsible exercise of free speech. We should also ponder whether forthright criticism of Islam or other identities—or telling it like it is, as fans of U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump might call it—is rooted in anything other than xenophobic prejudice, as Cox (2015) argues. Open societies may indeed need to recalibrate the legal, political, and social limits for free speech. In any such exercise, though, we have to be careful not to misapprehend the problems we are trying to fix. In this article, I address two particularly unhelpful ways of thinking. One is the tendency to conflate incitement with offence, by looking at cases like the Prophet Mohammed cartoon controversies through the inappropriate lens of “hate speech.” The second is the habit of framing cases of violent outrage against insult as spontaneous, automatic reactions conditioned by a group’s religious beliefs.

I offer the concept of “hate spin” as a new way to grasp the linked problems of hate speech and politically motivated offence-taking. Grounded in political sociology’s theories of contentious collective action, hate spin is defined as a twin political strategy of incitement and manufactured indignation, exploiting group identities to mobilise supporters and coerce opponents. Like hate speech, the broader strategy of hate spin can ride not only on religion but also race, nationality, sexual identity, and so on. Here, however, I focus on religious hate spin. I will argue that the failure to understand this phenomenon leads to serious misinterpretations of current events. This, in turn, can compromise policy responses to

religious intolerance. In this article, I will explicate the concept of hate spin, identify its key characteristics, and suggest implications for research.

### **From hate speech to hate spin**

My starting point is the concept of hate speech, a type of extreme expression that has been studied for decades. The term remains contentious, to the extent that some have urged sidestepping it entirely. This is mainly because it has proven difficult to define hate speech with the legal precision required to distinguish between what must be restricted by law from what is extremely unpleasant but should nonetheless remain permissible (Benesch, 2012). Putting law aside, though, there is broad agreement within communication scholarship and associated fields about hate speech as a social phenomenon. The term refers to the communication of extremely negative ideas about a group—as defined by identity markers such as race, religion, and sexual orientation—with the intent of instigating harms against that group (Waltman & Haas, 2011). Hate speech is distinguished from angry or impetuous outbursts or what American jurisprudence calls fighting words. It is a form of propaganda calculated to encourage harms against a targeted group (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 2004). Tsesis (2002, p. 1) calls it “misinformation that is disseminated with the express purpose of persecuting targeted minorities.” The Council of Europe (as cited in Weber, 2009, p. 3) has defined hate speech as covering messages 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 origins.”

Hate speech has been used to prepare the way for systematic assaults on defenceless communities, including full-scale genocides. Scholars have analysed the process by which

the communication of hate leads reasonable people to inflict horrific harms on others (Davison, 2006; Hamelink, 2011; Lanning, 2012). Hate propagandists seize on a community's anxieties about economic decline or changing social mores, for example, and build them up into irrational fears. They often contrast the present with some supposed golden age in the past. The community's collective identity is constructed in opposition to an out-group, which is scapegoated as a root cause of the community's fears. The out-group is described in such dehumanising terms—sometimes likening it to animals—that it is eventually seen as unworthy of empathy or moral obligation. Finally, the in-group is persuaded that members of the out-group are the real aggressors, such that oppressing them would be an act of self-defence.

Flagrant hate speech remains a distressingly common feature of modern politics. In the run-up to India's 2014 general election, for example, activists of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) used anti-Muslim hate propaganda to unite Hindus across caste divisions. In one particularly ugly episode in Muzaffarnagar, a systematic campaign of fear-mongering against the Muslim minority led to riots that killed more than 50 villagers and put more than 50,000 in relief camps (Rao, Mishra, Singh, & Bajpai, 2013). In Europe, a rise in anti-Semitic rhetoric by the extreme right and Muslim radicals has reportedly led to increased emigration to Israel (Goldberg, 2015). Myanmar's democratisation process has been tainted by attacks on the Rohingya community and other Muslims, egged on by radical Buddhist clerics' bigoted statements—including one that monks should react to Muslims as they would to human excrement (Hodge, 2015). Even when authority figures do not make explicit calls to attack a vilified group, their hate speech can result in an increase in uncoordinated hate crimes (Awan, 2015).

The moral and legal question emerging from such cases is how to balance the speakers' right to express unsavoury views with the rights of their potential victims. Freedom

of expression is required specifically to protect speech that some deem worthless, shocking or offensive. After all, if nobody objects to a particular viewpoint, nobody would stand in its way, making one's right to express it redundant. The default liberal position on extreme viewpoints is that they must be granted a public airing in the marketplace of ideas, where they can be openly challenged and superseded by better ideas. Without rejecting the wisdom of this general principle, the concept of hate speech asks that we recognise particular situations in which the marketplace fails. In most societies, there are some groups that are historically disadvantaged or oppressed. Members of these groups find themselves seriously handicapped when they try to counter misinformation about their communities in wide-open debate. This market failure creates an opening for aggressors to abuse of free speech in ways that rob targeted communities of their status as equal citizens, thus eroding one of the foundational pillars of democratic life. Therefore, hate speech may warrant state intervention, the right to free expression notwithstanding.

Accordingly, international human rights norms, even as they protect the right to offend, require states to restrict incitement to actual harms. In the words of Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), states must prohibit by law “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.” The European Court of Human Rights, interpreting the 47-member Council of Europe's Convention on Human Rights, applies a similar standard, as do many Western democracies in their domestic laws. The United States is something of an exception, imposing a much a higher threshold for state intervention. The only hate speech that would fall outside U.S. First Amendment protection of public discourse is incitement to imminent violence—and not to mere discrimination. In the global scheme of things, however, the U.S. and European approaches to hate speech are more similar than different. Both defend freedom of expression as the default mode for public discourse. In keeping with

Enlightenment values, neither accepts offended religious feelings as sufficient justification for restricting speech. Hate speech should trigger legal intervention only if it amounts to a call to action that would clearly cause objective harms to the targeted group (George, 2015).

Some conceptual confusion can arise when people contemplate the real harms that follow the publication of offensive cartoons and similar events. In such episodes, we see the same elements that characterise classic hate speech: deep intolerance of difference; vilification of group identities; appeals to an in-group; and mob action oppressing a target group. Critically, though, these elements are not configured in the same way as in hate speech. With hate speech, the ultimate harms—exclusion or violence—are inflicted on the same group that was targeted by the vilifying expression. In contrast, when artists and journalists are attacked because their work is deemed offensive, the tables are turned. The self-declared victims of insult retaliate with a force greater than any measurable harm instigated by the original expression. Words go one way; sticks and stones fly in the reverse direction. If we think of conventional hate speech as strategic offence-giving, this other phenomenon entails offence-taking. The former overtly victimises a target community, while the latter involves playing the provoked victim.

We lack the theoretical vocabulary to deal with this double-sided use of offence—given and/or taken—by the forces of intolerance. I call it *hate spin*. I define hate spin as the use of either incitement or manufactured indignation as a political strategy that exploits group identities to mobilise supporters and coerce opponents. Many hate propagandists deploy both hate speech and offence-taking, often in parallel. I have chosen the word “spin” partly to evoke this freewheeling quality of their hate campaigns. I also want to draw on the contemporary and colloquial meaning of spin as a form of salesmanship. Hate spin involves sophisticated but ultimately deceptive propaganda.



The two sides of hate spin, incitement and offence, are sometimes mistakenly conflated. For instance, Ahluwalia and Miller (2012), commenting on the violence that followed the YouTube video *Innocence of Muslims*, said that “public interest demands that, when so many innocent people are killed across the world, governments act with rapidity to remove materials that incite hatred and violence” (p. 628). Similarly, cartoonist Gary Trudeau (2015) has said that *Charlie Hebdo* met the definition of hate speech as that which “directly incites violence,” since it published millions of copies after the Paris attacks, “triggering violent protests.” In both commentaries, offensive content was mischaracterised as incitement. Although the hate spin concept straddles incitement and offence as twin strategies that are interchangeable and related, it also treats them as distinct, each with its own dynamics and regulatory implications.

There is, of course, good reason for societies to treat both incitement and offence as potential threats. The question is whether both should be regulated through law. Many societies are convinced that they should nip religious conflict in the bud by prohibiting offence. The problem is that offence is subjective and asymmetric, in the sense that offence can be taken regardless of whether any insult was intended. Offence is thus different in kind, and not just degree, from incitement. By definition, incitement is always intentional, with harms that independent courts can attempt to assess objectively. In the case of offence, however, secular states find it difficult to judge whether a religious community’s indignation is theologically justified. A state that wants to regulate offence has little choice but to apply a proxy measure: the visible expression of outrage by those who claim to have been offended. This gives communities the incentive to profess their righteous indignation as loudly as possible, even violently. Therefore, legal prohibition of offence is a problem not just because, from a liberal democratic perspective, it overregulates speech. Even from a communitarian normative position that prizes “harmony”, insult laws would have to be deemed problematic.

They backfire by rewarding intolerant groups that engage in disruptive displays of indignation.

### **Hate spin as contentious politics**

I embed the concept of hate spin in Tarrow's (1998) theory of contentious collective action.

Tarrow's ideas, combined with those of likeminded political sociologists, have greatly influenced the study of social movements (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001). Most of the empirical studies inspired by their framework have focused on movements dedicated to progressive, prosocial, and prodemocratic causes, such as civil rights and the environment.

As explicated by Tarrow, however, contentious collective action is defined not in normative but in structural terms—the actors' position in relation to a society's dominant interests and institutions, and the unruly methods they use. It refers to forms of political activity engaged in by groups “who lack regular access to institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities” (Tarrow, 1998, p.3). This definition is broad enough to include, for example, religious nationalist movements that have challenged the dominant secular-liberal constitutional order in the United States, India and other democracies (Hibbard, 2010), and that are among the most active users of hate spin.

Scholars studying the dynamics of contentious politics see actors responding to opportunities and threats in their political environment, and mobilising resources from their immediate networks and allies. But what makes their framework particularly useful for my project here is the central role they give to communication. Leaders of contentious movements have to produce solidarities despite not having the strong command-and-control structures available to the state, and often lacking the material resources that market-based organisations can muster. This makes them heavily reliant on symbolic “*frames* that justify,

dignify, and animate collective action” (Tarrow, 1998: 21). Movements engage in two main kinds of framing work, which are mutually reinforcing: demarcating “us” and “them,” and stitching various grievances together in a unitary narrative that resonates with in-groups and their allies (Gamson, 1990; Benford & Snow, 2000).

Deep-rooted identities such as nationalism, ethnicity and religion are reliable resources for this sort of framing work, because they come with preinstalled symbols—flags, songs, heroes—that movement leaders can exploit. However, social movement scholars stress that these identities are never the primordial givens that their leaders make them out to be. They always entail large doses of selectivity and myth-making. Gamson (2013) has argued that socially constructed “injustice frames” can be particularly effective for mobilising supporters. Injustice frames are usually anchored on powerful memories of historic grievances, and refreshed with more salient recent events. The Guantanamo Bay detention center, for instance, has been exploited as an injustice symbol by radical Muslim groups, which is a key reason why President Barack Obama was keen to shut it down (Olesen, 2011). Such symbols help to concentrate the in-group’s mind on powerful outsiders that are threatening its interests and values.

Communication is also central to the techniques of contentious politics. Since they often start from a position of weakness, protest leaders tend to pick tactics that grab the attention of media, bystander publics, and elites. Indeed, the medium may often be the message. More important than the stated goal of a protest, the act of protesting can itself pay dividends in the forming of identities and the strengthening of solidarities. One key insight from social movement studies is that these movements draw from “repertoires” of contention comprising modular tactics—sit-ins, hunger strikes, and so on—that diffuse across geographic and issue boundaries (Benford & Snow, 2000). Activists

are able to draw on a range of protest methods that are already part of the culture, while also innovating at the margins.

Hate spin is best understood as a strategy of contentious collective action. The main lesson that analysts can draw from studies of contentious politics is to look for agency before dismissing unconventional collective action as nothing more than irrational mob behaviour. Studies of protest were once the domain of abnormal psychology—it did not occur to social scientists that unruly politics, outside the fold of established institutions like parties and lobby groups, could be anything more sophisticated. Protest movements became intelligible only when social scientists began to recognise them as innovative forms of collective action. My hate spin concept calls for a similar perspectival shift. We miss something when we treat eruptions of righteous indignation and incitement as nothing more than the hysteria of mad mullahs and enraged mobs, or as existential struggles in a “clash of civilizations.” The best explanation for their behaviour is not to be found in divine imperatives or historic forces but in political calculations that are subject to systematic analysis.

News reports typically refer to provocative materials’ power to “spark,” “ignite,” or “trigger” riots, as if mere exposure to offence causes angry outbursts with the certainty of a chemical reaction or a law of physics (George, 2014). The fury expressed by hot-headed men at the frontline of protests against books, films, and places of worship may not be completely inauthentic or insincere. But, in most cases, their behaviour is orchestrated by hate spin agents—spin doctors, if you like. These are usually elites—leaders of political or religious groups, and sometimes even government officials—who cloak their political motives in the guise of popular outpourings of religious sentiment. They specialise in the use of identity politics to mobilise people around a constructed enemy. The central role played by these agitators in conventional hate speech campaigns is relatively well understood. Analyses of hate speech correctly focus on the manufacturers of hatred, more than those who are

consumed by it. In contrast, campaigns of righteous indignation tend not to look for the agency and coordination behind the angry mobs. The political entrepreneurs who select causes to rally against and who whip up a community's emotions are often allowed to remain in the shadows. Treating offence-taking as a form of contentious collective action drags the perpetrators out into the light, for close scrutiny of their motives and methods.

When we mischaracterise religious outrage as spontaneous combustion sparked by offence, this gets in the way of a reasoned response to religious intolerance. First, it unfairly essentialises religious communities as predisposed to violent outrage. In fact, only a very small portion of believers adopts extreme methods or supports those who do. Second, the “spark” frame paints states into a regulatory corner. If indeed religious conservatives cannot help but explode when exposed to provocative content, the only policy options would be to suppress those groups, or censor materials that offend them. Neither is a particularly attractive prospect for an open society. Third, when we treat such reactions as somehow natural and authentic, we unwittingly bestow the leaders of such agitation with the undeserved status of being legitimate spokesmen of ground voices in the community—an assessment that can become self-fulfilling. Their mirror-image opponents gain as well, because exaggerating the clout of extremists helps to justify their own hard-line intolerance.

Two examples from South Asia illustrate how the “spark” frame can be politically exploited. One is the tragic case of Pakistani social activist Sabeen Mahmud, who was shot dead in April 2015. Police said she had been targeted by religious extremists (Ali, 2015). Authorities produced a suspect who said he killed her in retaliation for her campaign mocking the government's ban on celebrating Valentine's Day, a decision taken under pressure from religious conservatives. Mahmud had also organised a “Hugs for YouTube” social media campaign, protesting the ban that the authorities had imposed after the release of

the anti-Islam video *Innocence of Muslims* (Desmukh, 2014; Parshley, 2013). Her killing seemed to fit neatly into the global narrative of religious terror. However, closer watchers of Pakistani politics know that the real reason why Mahmud was killed was because she had, earlier that day, hosted a human rights forum on Balochistan, where the Pakistani military is engaged in counterinsurgency operations that have involved rampant human rights abuses (Rumi, 2015; Shah, 2015). Indeed, even Pakistan's YouTube ban—ostensibly introduced to appease religious conservatives—was more likely to have been related to video exposés of abuses in Balochistan and other political scandals. The blasphemous *Innocence of Muslims* video was merely a convenient excuse for the authorities to ban a platform that had grown too politically inconvenient.

Around the same time as Mahmud's murder, "atheist" bloggers were being hacked to death in a series of attacks in Bangladesh (Hammadi, 2015). These, too, looked like clear-cut cases of religious extremists provoked by offensive expression. But according to journalists and human rights defenders, the bloggers had become targets not for their religious views as such, but because of their influential role in a protest movement demanding the death penalty for an Islamist leader convicted in Bangladesh's divisive war crimes trials. The bloggers were helpless victims of the contestation between the governing Awami League and Islamist groups that the government is trying simultaneously to appease and neutralise (Mustafa, 2015; Shunyastan, 2015). Whether in Pakistan or Bangladesh, the "secularists vs. extremists" narrative favoured by most accounts obscures more than it reveals. This makes the myth of the irrational religious mob a convenient compelling cover story for political actors with stakes in the game. They can hide behind the clash of civilizations idea, which makes any manifestation of religious intolerance—censorship, riots, murders—appear to be just another illustration of colliding values. Such a framing also allows them to invoke the people's name,

not just God's. They can take advantage of rising populism, which rewards political actors who are seen to represent large and raucous crowds.

### **Flexible, distributed and symbolic**

Applying the theoretical framework of contentious collective action, I have studied several hate spin episodes in various contexts. These include the major international controversies surrounding the Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, the *Jylland Posten* Prophet Mohammed cartoons, and the *Innocence of Muslims* YouTube video. Behind each, one finds identifiable political interests that gained from displays of righteous indignation. For example, the Hosni Mubarak government in Egypt played a decisive role in converting the domestic dispute over the Danish cartoons into an international cause, mainly to burnish its Islamic credentials in the run-up to a crucial electoral battle against candidates linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Illuminating case studies at the domestic level include the efforts of the American Islamophobia network (Lean, 2012). This tight network of misinformation experts and hate propagandists have protested against mosque building and campaigned for state laws against the nonexistent threat of encroaching Islamic law or sharia. In India, Narendra Modi's successful election campaign involved the systematic use of hate spin, on a scale and intensity probably greater than in any other democracy. This is not the place to recite the empirical findings from such case studies. Instead, I will try to thicken the concept of hate spin by discussing three key attributes that my studies reveal.

#### *Tactical flexibility*

Hate spin is a tactically flexible, "multiform phenomenon," as Tarrow says of social movements (1998, p. 104). Common tactics include agitating for the revision of textbooks, protesting against the building of places of worship, and demanding censorship of films and

drama productions. Different methods serve different objectives. For example, hyperlocal tactics can mobilise and energise followers at the grassroots, tapping and reinforcing solidarities. In the United States, this may be one reason why book challenges have been a staple of the Religious Right. Public schools are administered locally, so campaigns to remove books from their curricula or their libraries—although often orchestrated by national-level organisations—are an effective way to get local volunteers involved.

Such efforts, however, rarely make national headlines. Publicity goals are better served by more outrageous statements and spectacular methods. Examples include the 2010 “Burn a Koran Day” declaration by Florida pastor Terry Jones (Stacy, 2010). Another way to achieve high visibility is to target popular cultural products, such as when Hindu nationalists called for a ban of the comedic film *PK*—which nonetheless went on to become the highest-grossing Bollywood movie of all time (Hoad, 2015). The companies behind such products invest enormous sums in launch publicity, on which a protest can ride (Mazzrella & Kaur, 2013).

Another goal of hate spin agents is to gain recognition from governing elites, and thus influence the public agenda. For this purpose, legislative and judicial forums provide ideal hate spin arenas. Conservatives in Indonesia’s new democracy understood this when they pushed for a sweeping antipornography law that was passed in 2008, after years of heated debate. The repressive bill sought to regulate not only pornography but also women’s dress and public behaviour. The effect of the law on the ground was probably less important than the opportunity to force political parties and their leaders to declare where they stood on public morality and values, thus entrenching in Indonesian politics what Americans have called “culture wars.” Similarly, in the United States, a series of antisharia bills has allowed the Islamophobia network to insert its bigoted rhetoric into elite political spheres. Debates in



state senates may not be as lively as a street protest or as widely diffused as book challenges, but they can get elected representatives to echo hate spin agents' key messages.

Tactics are adapted to different legal environments. Some countries' governments are more engaged than others in the policing of religious offence. They have laws providing redress for wounded communal feelings, and state censorship of films, books, and the Internet. When states make a habit of intervening to protect groups' feelings from offence, community leaders are more likely to orchestrate performances of indignation that keep censors busy. In India, the resulting "culture of offendedness," as Salman Rushdie has called it, is now a resource of which any group can partake.

Tactics constantly shift due to the dynamic interactions between movements, authorities, and other groups. In addition, Tarrow talks of the possibility of longer-term, paradigmatic change in the repertoires of contention. The history of contentious collective action shows a shift from violence to nonviolence, which is now almost a trademark of modern social movements. The use of violence has a high risk of backfire, Tarrow points out, since it can provoke stronger opponents to use force as well, and put off potential allies and recruits. Within the hate spin repertoire, we may be seeing an equivalent shift away from speech that incites violence, toward offence-taking as the dominant mode. In many societies, hate speech that openly supports violent action against other communities has become socially unacceptable, even if legally permissible. Hate spin's other side, manufactured indignation, allows the propagandist to play the victim and not the aggressor.

### *Distributed efforts*

Hate spin work is distributed across a movement and involves a division of labor. This makes hate speech extremely difficult to regulate. Even if there is a strong consensus within a society that incitement must be legally prohibited, the law would have to be narrowly tailored

to avoid encroaching excessively into people's freedom of expression. Hate speech laws in democracies tend to be triggered only where the content of the speech amounts to intentional incitement, the language or symbolism use is obviously extreme and violates social norms of civility, and the speaker is influential enough to provoke the audience into immediate action (Post, 2009).

The most pernicious hate speech campaigns, however, are not packaged for the convenience of regulators. It is a distributed activity perpetrated by a loosely connected syndicate. Hateful meanings emerge in the audience's mind out of layered messages conveyed by seemingly uncoordinated actors. The most influential speakers know better than to utter self-contained calls to violence. They employ more moderate language and may even borrow the trappings of academia, organising conferences with seemingly expert speakers and publishing articles replete with citations (Sorial, 2014). They also use code words whose implication is clear to their audience, but that permit plausible deniability when legal intervention threatens. To fill the blanks in their messages, they rely not only on other speakers around them, but also on shared memories of old ideas and symbols. Hate spin agents can thus engage in what is commonly referred to as dog whistling, conveying meanings that are too elusive for the law to deal with, but heard loud and clear by the intended audience. The most extreme language is usually confined to radical groups on the fringes of the network, as well as nameless individuals trolling the Internet.

India's Hindu nationalist movement, the Sangh Parivar, provides many examples of distributed hate speech. Narendra Modi rode this movement into power, becoming prime minister in 2014. But he did not need to indulge personally in self-incriminating hate speech. It was enough for Modi to make subtle references to key narrative themes that the Sangh Parivar has peddled over decades—such as placing India's Muslims in the same category as foreign invaders, Pakistanis, and terrorists. For instance, in one of his first Parliamentary

speeches as prime minister, Modi referred briefly to the need to shed “1,200 years of slave mentality” (Ghose, 2014). The effect of this seemingly innocuous statement is to label as illegitimate not only two centuries of British colonialism, but also the preceding millennium when Muslim rulers were prominent. Such declarations are rooted in the Sangh Parivar’s rejection of India’s secular nationalism, and the primacy it gives to Hindu identity. At the sharp end of the campaign is a rising intolerance of diversity and even open incitement to murder, such as the scandalous lynching of a Muslim man for eating beef (Vatsa, 2015). Modi’s statements (and silences) are a part of an ecosystem of rising intolerance. The connections between him and sectarian violence may be beyond reasonable social scientific doubt—but are unlikely to meet the stricter threshold of legal liability.

A similar dilemma confronted Americans alarmed by the rhetoric of Donald Trump in his campaign for the Republican nomination for the presidency. National politicians such as Trump and his more ideologically committed opponent for the Republican ticket, Ted Cruz, were in 2016 the most prominent nodes in a network that has been actively promoting Islamophobia since around 2010 (Ali et. al, 2011). A small cluster of core ideologues forms the hub of this network, generating the extreme misinformation with the kind of faux expertise that Sorial (2014) calls “manufactured authority.” Their views are endorsed by various validators, such as retired generals and commentators of Arab extraction who are anti-Islam. Single-issue organisations such as ACT! for America and Stop Islamization of America provide the manpower for demonstrations and other events, together with sympathetic Religious Right organisations, such as Eagle Forum. Influential leaders of the Religious Right, such as Franklin Graham and Pat Robertson, help to amplify Islamophobia rhetoric. Mass media, such as Fox News and conservative talk radio, ensure a ready platform for these views.

The biggest success of the Islamophobia network, though, is getting its messages echoed by national politicians. In 2012, the Republican National Convention incorporated opposition to sharia law into the party's platform. Ted Cruz internalised Islamophobic rhetoric before he announced himself as a presidential hopeful (Duss, Taeb, Gude, & Sofer, 2015). Donald Trump adopted talking points from the network. When he called for a ban on Muslims entering the United States, he referred to a survey showing that Muslim Americans were sympathetic to terrorists. The debunked poll was the product of the hate groups at the core of the Islamophobia network (Carroll & Jacobson, 2015). Trump's statements about Mexicans and Muslims were plainly bigoted, but he could still hide behind plausible deniability when critics blamed him for a spike in hate crimes.

### *Symbolic contention*

Hate spin often manifests a paradoxical combination of uncompromisingly absolutist claims and half-hearted, haphazard implementation. In their rhetoric, hate spin propagandists speak of intolerable impurities that must be totally expunged from society. In societies where grievances are habitually expressed through violence, the opposition to an offending film or an unpopular minority's practices may even be underlined in blood. Yet, there is usually no automatic or deterministic connection between provocative expression and offence-taking. Identical provocations can be met with violence one year and ignored the next; or greeted with riots in one village and silence in another (Brass, 1997). The onset of mass protests rarely coincides with the appearance of the offending object. There is invariably a time lag. An extreme example involved one of India's most celebrated artists, the late Maqbool Fida Husain. His sketch of a nude Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, appeared in the mid-1970s. But it was only 2 decades later, in 1996, that Hindu chauvinists found it useful to condemn the work as a symbol of the supposed dangers of secularism, attacking galleries and

instigating police investigations, leading to his self-imposed exile (Tripathi, 2009).

Furthermore, protests often die down irrespective of whether the offending object has been removed. Agitators choose to look the other way when the object of offence has exhausted its potential. For example, few novels have received such absolute condemnation from Muslim conservatives as *The Satanic Verses*, but although it remains banned in India and Pakistan, it can be purchased online in either country via Amazon.com.

These paradoxes are explained by the fact that the orchestrators of righteous indignation have goals that are more symbolic than literal. Whether or not a campaign succeeds in suppressing an offending cultural product or practice is less important than the very performance of that protest. Hate spin is an opportunity to exercise agency, declare prized values, rally supporters, corner governing elites, and put opponents on the defensive. The strategic goals behind hate spin also explain why protesters are insensitive to the so-called Streisand Effect—through which attempts to censor something only succeed in creating more interest in it (Jansen & Martin, 2015). Hate spin agents do not mind creating more publicity for the offending ideas that they claim they want to bury, if their deeper, symbolic goals are understood.

Similarly, when a hate group tries to push its agenda through the courts or legislative bodies, the final verdict or vote may be inconsequential. Courts and parliaments offer prominent public forums for fear-mongering and for maligning minorities. The U.S. Islamophobia industry has been exceptionally skilled at exploiting such institutional opportunities through what one of its leaders calls “lawfare”—turning legal processes into opportunities for political attack (CAIR, 2013). In one episode, it tried to block plans to erect a mosque in Middle Tennessee. The courts eventually ruled in favour of the mosque project, but the Muslims suffered collateral damage. The mosque’s opponents used the hearings to argue that Muslims do not qualify for religious freedom because Islam is not really a religion

but a political ideology that nurtures terrorists (Ali, Clifton, Duss, Fang, Keyes & Shakir, 2011). Such statements would not have been dignified with mainstream media coverage but for the fact that they were made in a court battle that had gained national attention.

The Islamophobia network has also managed to introduce new legislation in several states, ostensibly to block any push for sharia (CAIR, 2013). Since there have been no calls for sharia and the Constitution already contains protections against the erosion of fundamental rights, such laws are completely redundant (Pedrioli, 2012; Schmitz, 2012). However, the debates over these bills are an opportunity to insert bigotry and fear into mainstream discourse (Lemons & Chambers-Letson, 2014). “A shift in cultural consciousness and discourse is as much a goal of the Islamophobia movement as its legislative gains,” notes Yazdiha (2014, p. 273).

### **Implications for research**

The foregoing discussion is meant to stimulate more studies that can feed into policy making. Allow me to suggest four potential strands of research.

#### *Hate speech regulation: Comparative law and policy*

Comparative studies can illuminate how legal, political, and civic interventions interact to either widen or narrow the opportunities for hate spin. The issues of religious intolerance and hate speech are firmly on the policy agenda in many countries and in international organisations. However, surprisingly little research has been done on the actual outcomes of hate speech laws in jurisdictions that already have them. The effects may be much less positive than assumed (Callamard, 2015).

The distributed and symbolic quality of hate speech campaigns, described above, is one reason why laws against incitement are not as effective as they need to be. The United States guarantees more legal space than any country to hate

speech in public discourse, yet anecdotal evidence suggests that hate speech is far more prevalent and extreme in the national politics of India, despite strong prohibitions there in both criminal law and election regulations. More systematic international comparisons may confirm that legal measures to promote equality and combat discrimination yield more dividends than restrictions on expression. They may also show that social norms, cultivated over decades through civic education and moral leadership, provide the most effective prophylactic against hate spin.

*Thick description of offence-taking*

Detailed case studies of offence-taking are needed to expose hate spin agents' political interests. Although the outrage may be expressed in the language of religious imperatives, the analyst should treat that rhetoric as part of the framing work that all contentious collective action requires. This perspective recommended here conforms with the views of most mainstream scholars of religion, that no religion has a single, deterministic effect on its believers; that all religions are multivocal; and that uncompromisingly absolutist strands represent only one possible interpretation of sacred texts (Schweiker, 2014).

An analyst of intolerance should bear in mind the symbolic intent of most offence-taking campaigns, and not take the demands of protesters too literally. While they call for censorship of some provocative expression, they may be harnessing it as an injustice symbol around which to mobilise. This explains why hate spin agents tend to go out of their way to find or fabricate indignation, even to the extent of recirculating and amplifying the supposedly intolerable content.

The analyst should also pay attention to the legal and political milieu in which the contentious activity takes place. Movement leaders decide the time and shape of their actions in response to perceived opportunities and threats. Leaders also adapt to how the state deals

with offence. The impressionistic observation that the regulation of insult has encouraged a culture of offendedness can be tested through further research.

#### Ecosystem approach to hate studies

Hate spin research needs to embrace the entire ecosystem of hate propagation. Unfortunately, this is not the model for most of today's hate speech research, which tends to focus on particular speakers, messages, or platforms. Studies of online hate have been on the rise, partly because it is a newer phenomenon, but perhaps ultimately for no better reason than that it is easier for researchers to surveil hate speech on the internet than in election rallies, places of worship, and door-to-door grassroots campaigns—all of which may in fact be more impactful. In any case, the most pernicious promotion of discrimination and oppression is not conveyed in one discrete package from a single source or in a single venue. Empirical studies need to be based on a conceptual model that treats hate campaigns as distributed, multimodal and layered phenomena.

Online expression should certainly be studied as one indicator of hate trends. One study has shown how Donald Trump's speeches and tweets resulted in dramatic spikes in Google searches for terms associated with hate groups, such as "black on white crime" and "Mexican rapists". He also seems to have singlehandedly caused an eightfold increase in searches for the Center for Security Policy, a key Islamophobia propagator (Piggott, 2016).

Ecosystems of intolerance can be global. Transnational connections have already been well documented in studies of terrorism, of course, but the cross-border diffusion of offence-taking repertoires is ripe for research. Consider the book challenge, which American Evangelical groups have used for decades to express opposition to the teaching of evolution and other supposedly un-Christian ideas (PFAW, 2014). One repeat target is the 2005 children's book *And Tango Makes Three*, based on the true story of two adult male zoo



penguins that adopted a penguin chick. The book was accused of promoting a homosexual agenda (Machlin, 2013). The American Library Association's annual list of most-challenged books placed *And Tango Makes Three* among the top 5 titles seven times between 2006 and 2014. By 2014, Christian conservatives half a world away in Singapore got the message, objecting to the book's presence on public library shelves there. Lacking the free speech instincts of American librarians, Singapore's national library system responded by destroying its copies of *And Tango Makes Three*.

### *Measuring harms*

The prevention of violence and genocide is the most obvious and least disputed reason to prohibit hate speech. No free speech advocacy group objected to the prosecution of the media that helped incite and organise the 1994 Rwandan genocide, for instance. The case for intervention becomes more contentious the less the harms from hate propaganda can be counted in physical corpses. In endorsing the ICCPR's distinction between incitement and offence, I have pointed out that the latter has an inherent asymmetry and subjectivity that is exploited by hate spin agents in their campaigns of manufactured indignation. This does not mean, though, that all protests against perceived offence should be categorised as hate spin, or that societies should only intervene when harms are tangible.

An important part of the hate spin research agenda is to interrogate the idea of harm. At present, the harms in hate propaganda may be too narrowly defined. Although morality favours a more expansive definition of harm, the law prefers precision. And since much of the debate over religious offence has centred on free speech law, the tendency in liberal discourse has been to reiterate the right to offend. Speech laws, however, are only one form of societal intervention in relations between diverse communities. Others include antidiscrimination laws, the state's own speech, and civil society responses. These could be

designed to respond to a far broader range of harms. Scholars working in this area have suggested that we look at how hate propaganda subjects minorities to “moral injury” (Veninga, 2016, p. 28), and undermines their “human security” (Onbasi, 2016) and their right to participate as equal citizens (Fiss, 1998; Waldron, 2012).

We should expect religious hate spin to remain a fixture in competitive politics. Religion, we know, has great value for the framing work that all collective action requires. “Because it is so reliable a source of emotion, religion is a recurring source of social movement framing,” notes Tarrow (1998, p. 5). “Religion provides ready-made symbols, rituals, and solidarities that can be accessed and appropriated by movement leaders.” The use of religion is not necessarily antidemocratic. Take, for example, the use of Christian frames by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in advancing civil liberties in the United States and South Africa.

However, religion can also be used as part to promote more intolerant forms of identity politics. In response to the dislocation and disruption caused by globalisation, many people crave the stability promised by simple ideas. Hate spin serves that need by manufacturing closely knit communities united against a common enemy. People’s understandable anxieties are converted by hate spin agents into a paranoid attack mode, surfacing as incitement against minorities and manufactured indignation over injustice symbols, or both. These tendencies are likely to heighten in an age of slower world economic growth. Leaders who know they would struggle to deliver material promises can turn to the politics of identity as a recession-proof alternative. If legal and social barriers deter them from using conventional hate speech, they can still rely on the other side of the hate spin formula, manufactured indignation. Once invoked, offendedness is difficult for others to neutralise. If opponents try to challenge a community’s justification for its outrage, this will probably deepen its sense of being under siege. Righteous indignation is an extremely elastic

political resource. It can be manufactured virtually out of thin air, and sustained through acts of imagination. Thus, for unscrupulous political entrepreneurs, the temptation to tap the power of hate spin may prove irresistible.

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