

Hate Speech in Armenian Media and Society: Prevalence and Consumption Patterns

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Abstract

This article discusses the differences between hate speech and freedom of expression and risks of blurring the line between these phenomena. The article presents the quantitative data collected through telephone survey conducted in Armenia in November 2022. It analyzes the causes and consequences of hate speech spreading and the patterns of hate speech consumption. The correlations derived from the survey data identify the social groups of Armenian society that are more likely to consume different manifestations of hate speech. However, it argues that some people consume hate speech consciously, clearly identifying it as a hate speech and naming the reasons for its consumption: lack of information, cumulated aggression and anger, need to recharge. As the effective measures to address the hate speech on media platforms institutional approach, awareness raising, appropriate sanctions and raising media literacy were identified.

Keywords: hate speech, freedom of expression, hate speech consumption, information sources, media platforms, communication, telephone survey

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Introduction

Modern society is often called communicative, since the role of information is continuously growing and the innovative technologies create new forms of interaction between people. Nowadays communication technologies not only transform the social, political, economic, and cultural structures of the society, but also change the communication content and style.¹ The strengthened influence of mass media, the development and diversification of online platforms resulted in the increased accessibility of information resources for the population. People become not only consumers but also producers of online content. The latter is becoming shorter and superficial, but simultaneously more targeted and catchier. As any innovation the new communication models also bring new inequalities and stereotyping and increase the possibilities of using manipulative techniques. The online platforms are associated with the freedom of expression for everyone. Furthermore, such social practices and attitudes like information terrorism, Internet sabotage and crimes, fake news and disinformation, and the spread of hate speech are also reflected on the Internet. These phenomena are not happening due to the Internet, but get new vital force within the internet platforms and create new dilemmas between freedom of expression and hate speech, blurring the differences and creating new challenges, which have specific manifestations in different cultures.

Defining Hate Speech

In contemporary public discussions, there is an abundance of speech that defames and encourages hatred or violence against marginalized social groups.² This widespread occurrence has led to various reactions from liberal democracies. One response is counter-speech, which seeks to combat such negative speech by promoting "more speech".³ However, many liberal democracies have gone beyond counter-speech and implemented legal measures as well. For instance, the UK's Public Order Act of 1986 prohibits the use of "threatening," "abusive," or "insulting" language that intends to incite racial hatred or is likely to do so.⁴

To pick out these problematic communicative acts and, by extension, to characterize attempted responses to them, the term hate speech has gained widespread usage.⁵ It originally emerged in the 1980s among legal theorists who investigated the deployment of legal measures

¹ **Melkonyan, N.** The Types and Functions of Feedback in Dialogical Political Communications, *Journal of Sociology: Bulletin of Yerevan University, YSU*, 2 (23), 2017, p. 29-36.

² **Futtner, N. and Brusco, N.** "Hate speech is on the rise." *Geneva International Centre for Justice* (2021).

³ **Howard, J. W.** "Terror, hate and the demands of counter-speech." *British Journal of Political Science* 51.3 (2021): 924-939.

⁴ "Public Order Act 1986." *Legislation.gov.uk*, The National Archives, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/64.

⁵ **Lepoutre, M. et al.** "What is Hate Speech? The Case for a Corpus Approach." *Criminal Law and Philosophy*, vol. 40 1, no. 3, 2023

to counter harmful racist utterances. Yet, as the legal philosopher Lepoutre has noted, the term hate speech is no longer confined to legal circles.⁶ Instead, it has gained currency in everyday talk, and features prominently, for instance, in news articles, on social media (e.g., Twitter's #hatespeech), and in popular culture. Thus, Brown suggests, the term hate speech does not simply have a legal meaning: it also has an ordinary meaning which, though it initially grew out of legal scholarship, has since taken on "a life of its own".

People generally have an innate understanding of hate speech and can recognize when they are crossing the line, although their assessment may vary. The effectiveness of combating and prosecuting hate speech depends on its precise definition. As Brown states, if there is no consensus on what constitutes hate speech, efforts to detect and address it may be ineffective, leaving targeted groups feeling unprotected. The challenge lies in accurately detecting hate speech due to its multidimensional and complex nature.⁷

As the UN states, in everyday language, hate speech refers to offensive language or expressions that target a group or an individual based on certain inherent characteristics, such as race, religion, or gender, and may pose a threat to social harmony.⁸ According to the Committee of Ministers of the Council 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".⁹ This definition extends the understanding of hate speech. To establish a comprehensive framework for addressing the issue globally, the United Nations (UN) has defined hate speech in its Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech. According to this definition, hate speech encompasses any form of communication, whether spoken, written, or behavioral, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language to attack or denigrate a person or group based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender, or other identity factors.¹⁰

Although the provided definitions are not legally binding and extend beyond the narrower concept of "incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence," which is prohibited by international human rights law, they incorporate three essential characteristics:

⁶ Ibid, pp. 1-34.

⁷ Brown, Ar. "What is hate speech? Part 1: The myth of hate." *Law and Philosophy* 36 (2017): 419-468.

⁸ "Understanding Hate Speech - What is Hate Speech?" United Nations, www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech.

⁹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on combating hate speech (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 20 May 2022 at the 132nd Session of the Committee of Ministers).

¹⁰ United Nations. "UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech." 18 June. 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>.

1. Hate speech can be expressed through various mediums, including images, cartoons, memes, objects, gestures, and symbols, and can be disseminated both offline and online.
2. Hate speech is discriminatory, displaying bias, bigotry, or intolerance towards an individual or a group.
3. Hate speech targets real or perceived "identity factors" of individuals or groups, including religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, and gender, as well as other characteristics such as language, socioeconomic background, disability, health status, or sexual orientation, among others.¹¹

Hate Speech vs. Freedom of Expression

Due to the similarity in the act of expressing thoughts and sentiments, some individuals mistakenly conflate hate speech and freedom speech. However, it is important to distinguish between the two. For example, hate speech is not prohibited under US law in order to protect freedom of expression. While freedom of speech allows people to openly share their beliefs and ideas, it also has limitations. Hate speech incites harm and violence, disregarding boundaries. It promotes discriminatory activities and creates divisions within society, leading to its degradation. Freedom of speech, on the other hand, is associated with societal progress and encourages healthy debates. Hate speech discriminates against minorities through hurtful remarks, whereas free speech protects minorities by fostering tolerance and valuing diversity. When free speech is practiced within a defined framework, it prevents marginalization of individuals.¹²

According to scholars, such as Meiklejohn (1948, 1960), Sunstein (1993), and Post (1991, 2011), freedom of speech is crucial for engaging in self-government and maintaining a democratic society. They argue that citizens should be allowed to discuss any perspective they see fit, or else democracy itself would be compromised. Brettschneider supports a similar viewpoint, emphasizing that the ability of citizens to adopt egalitarian concepts and policies is vital for the legitimacy of democracy.¹³

Howard argues that the moral right to freedom of expression must be considered when discussing the criminalization of hate speech. If the values underlying free speech also justify protecting hate speech, it can be seen as "morally protected." However, if the principles supporting free speech do not extend to hate speech, there may be grounds for its criminalization

¹¹ "Understanding Hate Speech - What is Hate Speech?" United Nations, www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech.

¹² Tanvir, Sakin. "Hate Speech vs Free Speech: The Ongoing Debate and Challenges in the Globalized World." Available at SSRN 3997924 (2021).

¹³ Brettschneider, Corey. "Value Democracy as the Basis for Viewpoint Neutrality: A Theory of Free Speech and Its Implications for the State Speech and Limited Public Forum Doctrines." *Nw. UL Rev.* 107 (2012): 603.

or regulation.¹⁴ Freedom of expression is often abused as an excuse to cover unacceptable and offensive behavior. It is worth noting that the lack of ethical protection for hate speech does not automatically warrant criminalization.¹⁵

Hate Speech in Armenia

Armenian society was also not spared from the spread of hate speech. Hate speech with its many expressions - insult, slander, calls for violence, etc. - has been introduced and rooted in public relations. All these are serious threats to the security and solidarity of the society and the fight against them is currently on the agenda.¹⁶

Having been through 70 years of censorship back in the 20th century, in the 90s Armenia faced freedom of speech and other democracy attributes without being aware of what it could be and how to behave in the new conditions. During the Soviet era censorship was performed in two main directions: 1) censoring of all publications and broadcasting for state secrets and 2) censorship in accordance with the official ideology and politics of the Communist Party. This exposed in unlimited and uncontrolled expression of any ideas and attitudes towards old Soviet State, new government and different groups of the society, often resulting in hate speech, which was seen as a freedom of expression.

Research background and methodology

Institute of Liberal Politics with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the Republic of Armenia within frames of the project “Combating hate speech for the sake of pluralism and tolerance” initiated comprehensive research, including monitoring of Armenian media, telephone survey of mass opinion and qualitative interviews and focus groups. The goal of the research was to identify which medias spread hate speech, what factors influence its spread, which events trigger the escalation of the hate speech, which are the main theses that the hate speech uses, who is consuming hate speech in Armenian society and how, and if the Armenian citizens are aware of what hate speech is.

The mass telephone survey was conducted by SPRING PR Company. 1060 respondents were reached out for telephone interviews. The objectives of the telephone survey were:

- To describe the perceptions of hate speech by different social groups.
- To reveal the respondents' experience of facing hate speech.

¹⁴ Howard, Jeffrey W. "Free speech and hate speech." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 93-109.

¹⁵ Rawls J. 2005. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.

¹⁶ "Perceptions of 'Hate Speech' of RA Residents, Their Attitude Towards 'Hate Speech' Manifestations in News Sources and in Speech of Public Figures." Sociological Research Report, Liberal Institute, 2023, https://liberalinstitute.am/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Survey_hate_speech-merged.pdf?fbclid=IwAR06bLK7WWBuzVwmYWwImjLAiJW8tuQekrgJQUNueXMg1ReXOPL781xHMHk.

- To identify the main platforms spreading hate speech in Armenia.
- To identify the attitude of residents of Armenia towards platforms spreading hate speech.
- To identify the impact of hate speech on respondents and other target audiences.
- To uncover the main motivations for consuming hate speech.
- To describe the socio-demographic profile of citizens who use different platforms and different types of information spreading hate speech.
- To research the attitude and opinion of different groups of the population towards hate speech and insults voiced by information platforms and opinion leaders.
- To highlight what topics, phenomena, groups and persons are mainly addressed by the hate speech voiced by individual information platforms and opinion leaders.
- To find out which methods are acceptable/preferred from the point of view of respondents to combat hate speech.

Hate Speech in Armenian Media and its perception by Residents of Armenia

During media monitoring of 6 top online media hate speech was found in 69.4% of the 542 monitored materials and 6844 comments. In the studied platforms, misinformation, wrong or false information and gossip were found.

The survey results show that respondents have an idea about the goal, content and risks of hate speech. In order to reveal the perception of Armenian residents about hate speech they were asked to describe the concept of hate speech in a few words. Initially, the respondents were not given any explanation and no answer options were offered. The answers to this open-ended question distributed as follows: in 37.7% of cases, the respondents' answers contained certain elements, parts and phrases that are present in the definitions of hate speech by UN and EU presented above: *"An expression of discriminatory attitude, public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence towards a person or group."* In 24.2% of cases, hate speech is perceived as the expulsion of negative energy, 8.5% - the spread of false information, 4% - as a result of the events of recent years, in 3% of cases hate speech is associated with the name of Nikol Pashinyan - this group of respondents mentioned the name "Nikol" without any further comments, while talking about hate speech. It should be noted that the residents of Yerevan (7.8%) voiced this answer significantly more often, compared to other cities (0.5%) and villages (1.4%) of RA. The other answer options were heard less frequently. Such a distribution of answers indicates a certain level of awareness of the concept of hate speech among RA residents. Only 9.8% of respondents found it difficult to describe the concept of hate speech (*See Table 1.*).

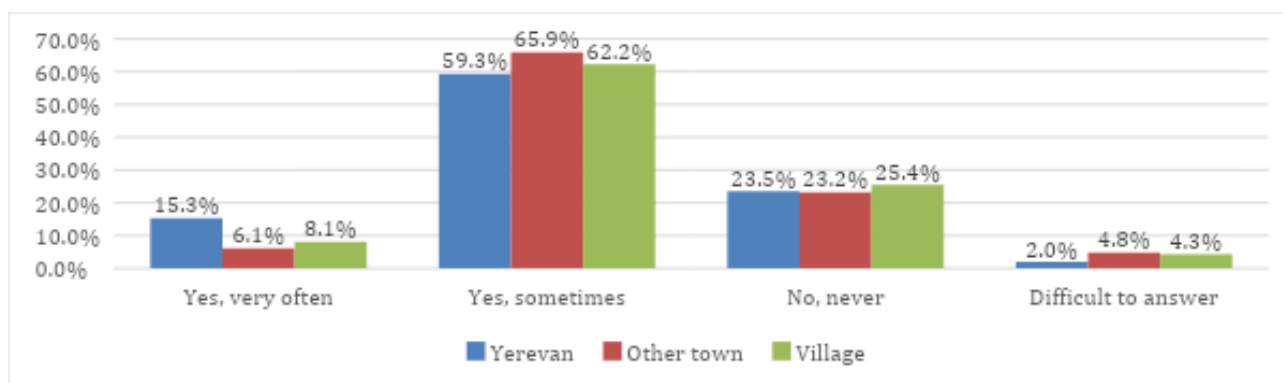
Table 1. Tell me, please, what is hate speech in your opinion? Try to describe the concept of hate speech in a few words.

Response	Percentage of all responses
Responses close to the definition: "A form of public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence towards a person or group."	37.7%
Expulsion of negative energy: malice, envy, anger	24.2%
Spreading false information	8.5%
A consequence of the events of recent years	4.0%
Nikol	3.5%
Our feelings towards Azerbaijanis	2.3%
Manifestation of ignorance	2.1%
Behavior of a person who lacks self-confidence	2.1%
An evil and a tool to rule the modern world	2.1%
Poverty	1.5%
Revenge	1.1%
When the lies are revealed	1.1%
I find it difficult to answer	9.8%
Total	100.0%

Experience of facing hate speech

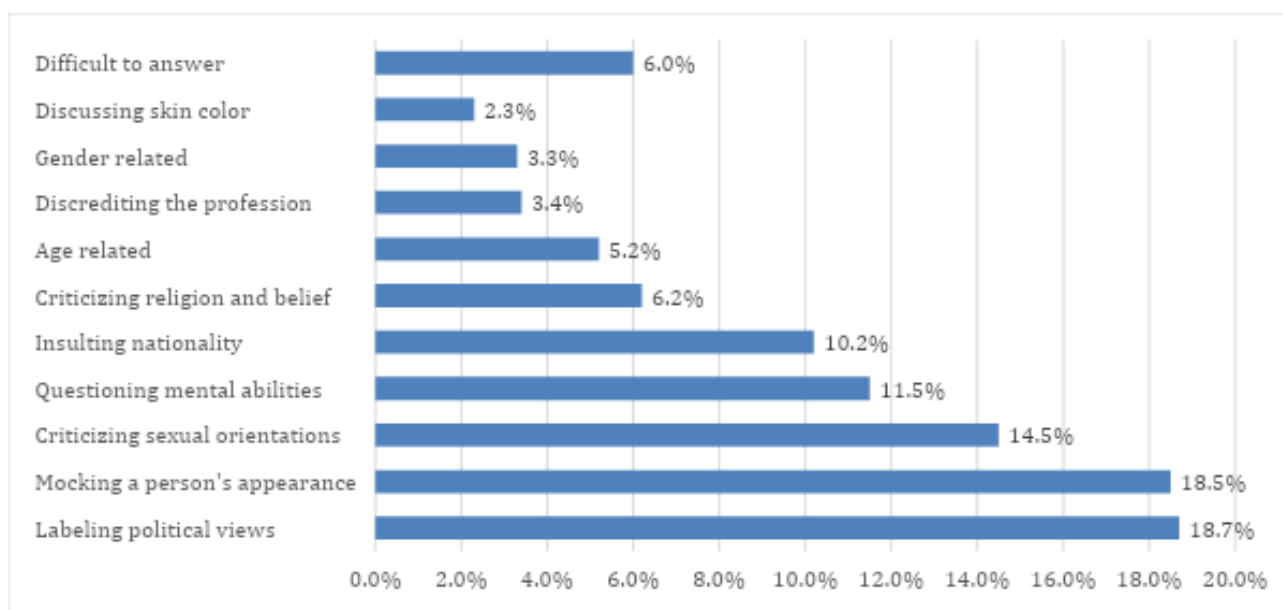
Only 23.7% of the respondents stated that they have never personally encountered hate speech. 62.7% sometimes encounter hate speech, and 9.9% encounter it very often, 3.7% found it difficult to answer this question. It is interesting that a relatively higher percentage of Yerevan residents stated that they often encounter hate speech (15.3%) compared to residents of other RA cities (6.1%) and villages (8.1%) (*See Chart 1.*).

Chart 1. Tell me, please, have you personally ever encountered hate speech?



According to the respondents, people in our country most often encounter the following manifestations of hate speech: labeling political views (18.7%) and mocking a person's appearance (18.5%), less often criticizing sexual orientations (14.5%), questioning mental abilities (11.5%), and insulting ethnicity (10.2%). Other answer options were mentioned less frequently. And 6% of respondents found it difficult to answer this question (*See Chart 2.*).

Chart 2. What manifestations of hate speech do people most often face in our country?

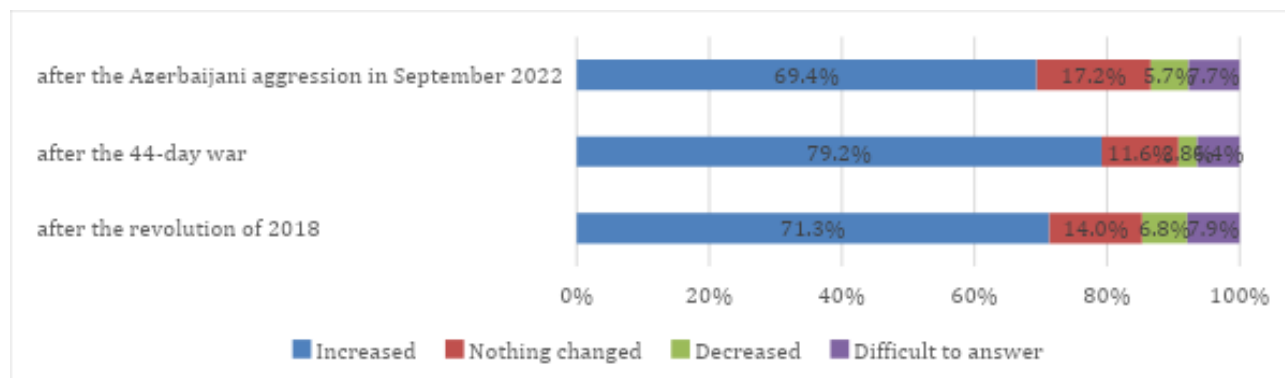


Interesting correlations can be observed when comparing the responses of people living in Yerevan and other cities and villages of Armenia. Residents of Yerevan capital city more often notice manifestations of hate speech related to age, skin color, gender, and profession, while residents of other cities and villages of Armenia mention political claims, mocking a person's appearance, and criticizing sexual orientations. There is also gender difference; while men more often notice hate speech labeling political views, women notice mocking a person's appearance. Hate speech related to age and profession is more often mentioned by men, and mocking a person's appearance - by women.

Hate Speech in the Context of Political Events in Armenia

The majority of the respondents consider that hate speech has increased equally in 2018, after the revolution; in 2020, after the 44-day Artsakh war; in 2022, after the Azerbaijani aggression, which took place in September: 71.3%, 79.2%, 69.4% respectively (See Chart 3.).

Chart 3. In your opinion, has hate speech increased or decreased?

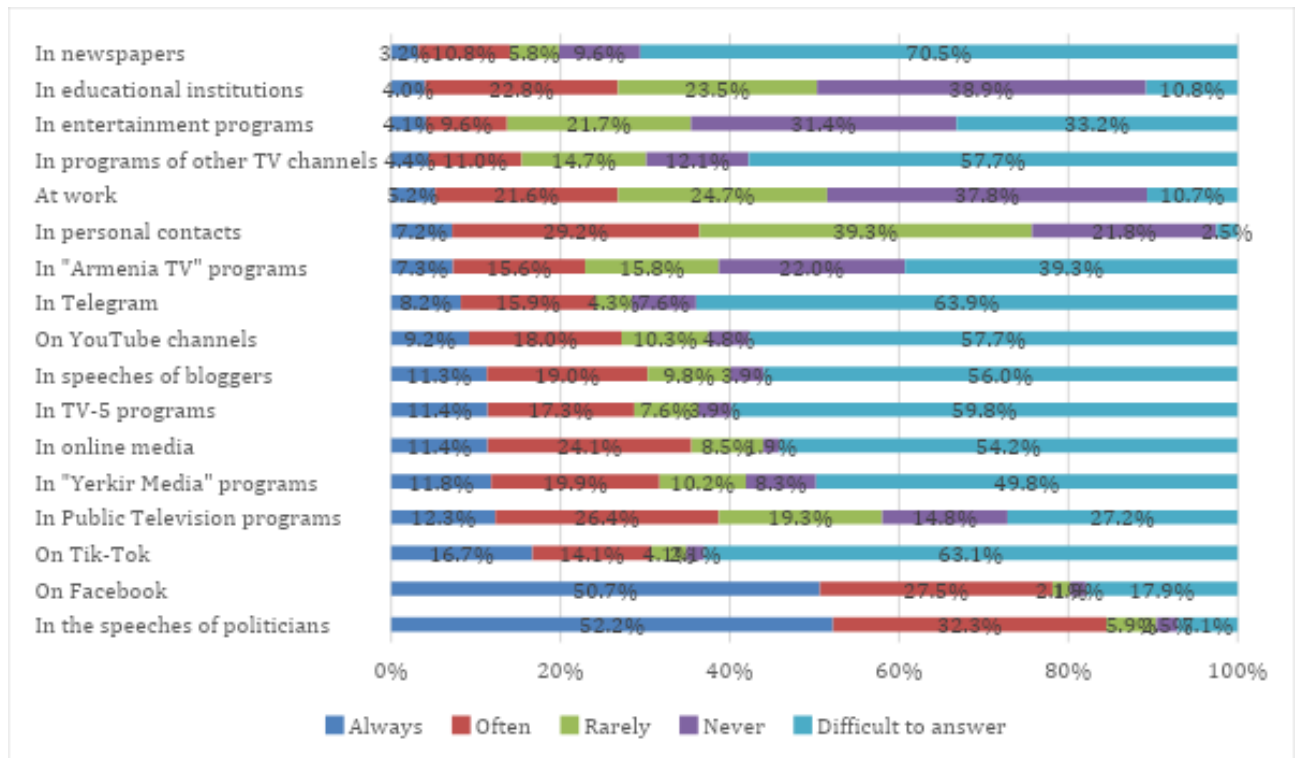


Although the representatives of all groups consider that hate speech has increased after the above-mentioned events, there is a clear correlation between the negative assessments of the activities of the RA Prime Minister, the Government and the National Assembly, as well as the political opposition and the answers indicating the increase of hate speech (after the revolution of 2018, after the 44-day war of 2020, and after the Azerbaijani aggression in 2022). Respondents who negatively assess the activities of the mentioned structures also more often state that hate speech increased after the mentioned events. Different scholars (Collard M., Bayer J., Bard P. Clarke A.) report the dehumanization and manifestation of hate speech during any crisis such as Covid-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, elections etc.

Hate speech on various platforms

According to the respondents, hate speech occurs most often in the speeches of politicians: 52.2% answered "always", and another 32.3% answered "often". The next is Facebook: regarding the appearance of hate speech on this platform, 50.7% of respondents said "always", "often" - another 27.5%. On the rest of the platforms, hate speech is significantly less common, according to the respondents. Among those platforms, Tik-Tok was mentioned relatively more often. Among the TV channels, Public Television was mentioned most often, the oppositional TV channels were mentioned relatively rarely - "Yerkir Media", Channel 5, Armenia TV Company (See Chart 4.).

Chart 4. How often do you think hate speech occurs on the following platforms?



Among the programs of **"Armenia" TV Company**, series and sitcoms (18.6%) were most often mentioned as a platform for hate speech, humor programs (4.2%), "Sharp Corner" program (2.4%), interviews and programs on political topics (1.3%) were also mentioned. TV series and sitcoms were mentioned relatively more often by middle-aged respondents (40-49 years old) - 28.6% and residents of marzes - 20.3% (See Charts 5. and 6.). These correlations clearly indicate the target groups consuming the hate speech.

Chart 5. The distribution of the respondents who mentioned "Armenia" TV series and sitcoms as a platform for hate speech by age groups (*the percentages are calculated from the total number of respondents of the given age group*).

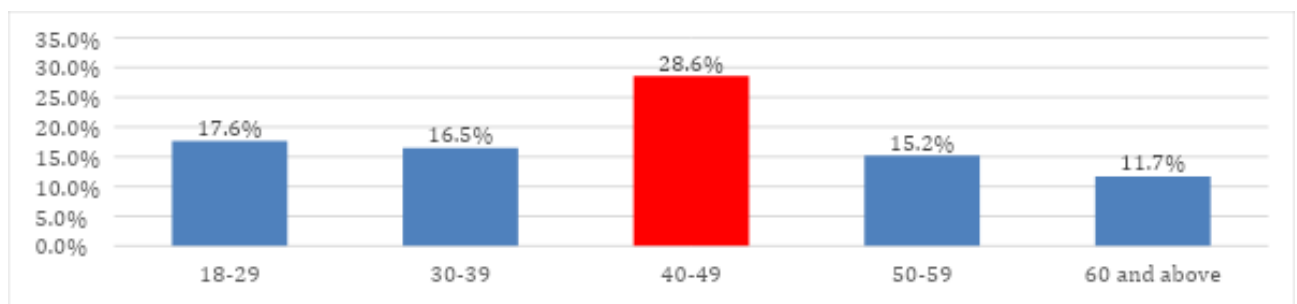
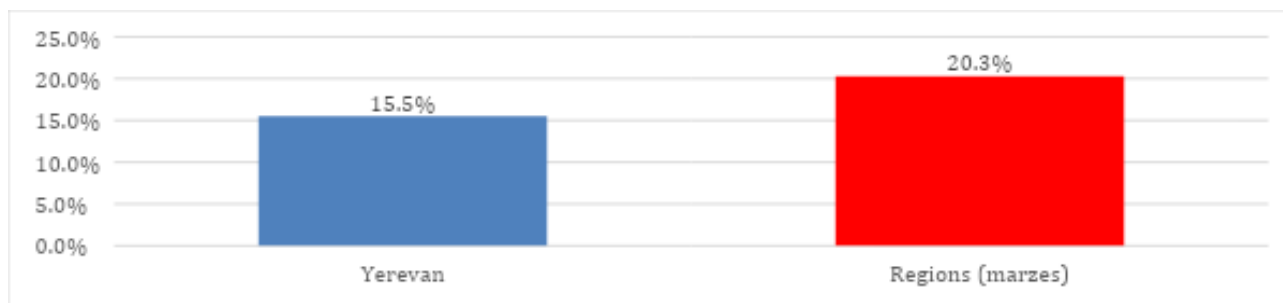
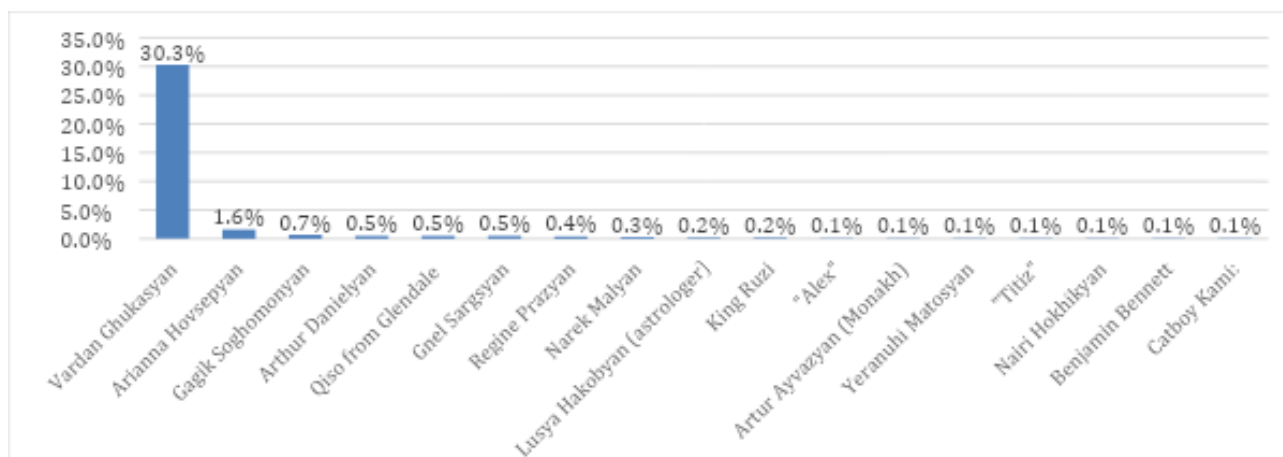


Chart 6. The distribution of the respondents who mentioned "Armenia" TV series and sitcoms as a platform for hate speech by settlements (*the percentages are calculated from the total number of respondents in the given settlement*).



Summarizing the data on different media the bloggers spreading hate speech were identified. It can be confidently stated that the blogger spreading hate speech with the widest audience is Vardan Ghukasyan, his name was mentioned on one or more platforms by 30.3% of the respondents. The blogger mentioned as the second one was mentioned only by 1.6% of the respondents. Other names were mentioned even less (*See Chart 7.*).

Chart 7. Bloggers spreading hate speech on different platforms, mentioned by the respondents.



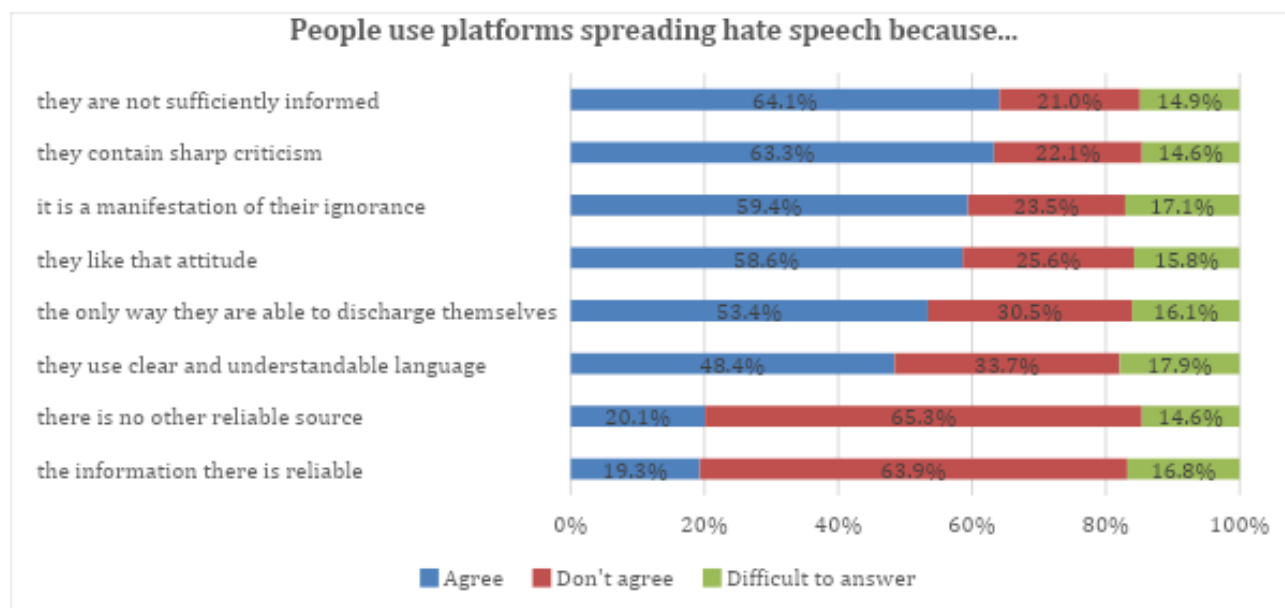
The analysis of the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, who mentioned Vardan Ghukasyan, shows that people aged 40-49, respondents with secondary education, respondents from Ararat and Aragatsotn regions, especially those living in rural communities, are mentioning him more often. These correlations clearly indicate the target groups consuming his airings. It is interesting that correlation with respondents' income level and sex is not significant, which means that all income groups, as well as men and women are targeted almost equally.

Reasons for hate speech consumption

According to the majority of respondents, people use platforms that spread hate speech because they are not sufficiently informed (64.1%), these platforms contain sharp criticism (63.3%), it is a manifestation of their ignorance (59.4%), they like this attitude (58.6%), they are only able to discharge in this way (53.4%), those platforms use simple and understandable

language (48.4%). A significantly lower percentage of respondents agreed with the other two judgments: "there is no other reliable source" (20.1%), "the information there is reliable" (19.3%) (*See Chart 8.*).

Chart 8. Do you agree with the following statements?



In case of the open-ended question the respondents most often mentioned the following two reasons for the consumption of hate speech: "people started to hate each other" - 22.2% and "they are incited by certain political forces" - 15.9%. The rest of the answer options were mentioned less often.

The impact of hate speech

The majority of respondents consider that hate speech has a negative impact on them personally (72.1%), on their family members (73.1%), on children (67.5%), and on society as a whole (67.6 %), and on the target of hate speech (67.4%).

Only 32.1% of respondents consider the impact on the person spreading hate speech to be negative, and 36.8% consider that hate speech has a positive effect on them.

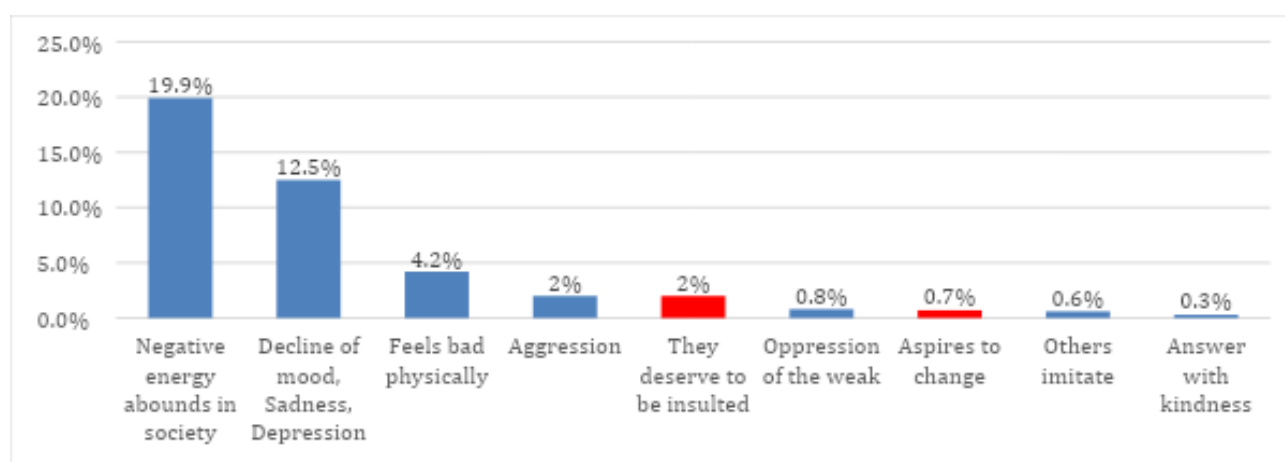
Some respondents indicated that hate speech has a positive effect on the target of hate speech - 4.7% (50 respondents). It is interesting that most of those who chose such an answer option, 76% are residents of Yerevan. Among those who chose such an answer option, male representatives also dominate, 68%.

Trying to comment on the negative impact of hate speech on the society in general and its various elements, the respondents mostly stated that hate speech brings down the mood when it comes to the respondents personally and their family members. Aggression as a consequence of hate speech was mentioned more often by the respondents, discussing the impact of hate speech on children and society in general. In terms of impact on society, the respondents most often

stated that negative energy increases in society because of hate speech - 33.6%. In terms of impact on children, a small percentage of respondents indicated that hate speech is considered an oppression of the weak and children imitate it. The respondents' comments regarding the positive impact of hate speech mainly refer to the formation of a desire to change due to hate speech.

When talking about the impact of hate speech on the target, most of the respondents mentioned that negative energy increases - 19.9%, 12.5% talked about a decline of mood, 4.2% mentioned that the targeted persons feel physically bad, 2% mentioned aggression. It is interesting that 2% of respondents consider that the target of hate speech deserves it, and 0.7% think that the person targeted by hate speech seeks to change (See Chart 9.).

Chart 9. The effect of hate speech on the target.



As for the effect of hate speech on the person spreading hate speech, the 22.9% of the respondents noted that the person spreading hate speech feels good and is relieved in this way.

Possibilities to protect from the hate speech

As an effective way to protect citizens from hate speech, the respondents most often mentioned "Banning of mass media/channels/pages/blogs spreading hate speech" - 23.9%. "Punishing those who spread hate speech" was chosen by 18.9% of respondents. A slightly smaller percentage chose awareness-raising - 18.1%. 16.3% of respondents emphasized the importance of providing true and proper information through official channels, and 16.2% believe that it is necessary to demand the removal of publications containing hate speech. 4.1% of the respondents consider that it is not necessary to take any measure, because it contradicts the freedom of speech.

Conclusion

The research shows that the residents of Armenia have some idea about hate speech and their answers contain certain elements of its definition by the UN and Council of Europe. Most of the respondents have personally encountered hate speech sometimes or very often. Residents of Yerevan face hate speech more often than residents of other cities and villages of RA. People in our country most often encounter the following manifestations of hate speech: labeling political views and mocking a person's appearance. Criticizing sexual orientations, questioning mental abilities and insulting ethnicities are less represented. Residents of Yerevan more often notice manifestations of hate speech related to age, skin color, gender, and profession, while residents of other cities and villages of Armenia notice labeling of political views, mocking a person's appearance, and criticism towards sexual orientations. Men are more likely to notice hate speech labeling political views, age and profession. Women are more likely to notice hate speech that mock a person's appearance and refer to gender.

Survey results show that some people use platforms that spread hate speech and consume hate speech even in case if they identify it as a hate speech. But they are not sufficiently informed on the difference between hate speech and freedom of expression. Missing the relevant information people consume the hate speech, because it contains sharp criticism and/or coincide with their opinion, emotions and attitude. They consume the hate speech as an acceptable way to discharge.

As an effective way to protect citizens from hate speech, the respondents consider banning of mass media/channels/pages/blogs spreading hate speech and punishing those who spread hate speech. A slightly smaller percentage proposes to raise the influencers' awareness, emphasize the importance of providing true and proper information through official channels, and removal of publications containing hate speech. 4.1% of the respondents consider that it is not necessary to take any measures against the spread of hate speech, because it contradicts the freedom of speech. Nevertheless, institutional approach, availability and diversification of information sources, clear policies of reporting and addressing hate speech online and offline, as well as media literacy will reduce the violent impact of hate speech and confusion between hate speech and freedom of expression.

Freedom of speech is meant to reveal the truth through civilized discussion and should not be used as an umbrella to justify discrimination and disorder, which can lead to crimes and chaos in the country. In order to find a way out of the emerged situation, it is first necessary to clearly formulate hate speech as a challenge for democracy, to clearly define it in domestic legislation and international regulations, to clarify the boundary that makes it clear for every

person where the borderline between freedom of speech and hate speech is. It is not possible to solve the problems related to hate speech quickly, but it is very important to remember that it is no longer a domestic or individual problem. It has become a universal challenge. It is necessary to educate the public, politicians, media representatives, adopt proper policies and legislation and be guided by a simple formula: my rights end where the rights of others begin¹⁷.

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¹⁷ "Perceptions of 'Hate Speech' of RA Residents, Their Attitude Towards 'Hate Speech' Manifestations in News Sources and in Speech of Public Figures." Sociological Research Report, Liberal Institute, 2023, https://liberalinstitute.am/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Survey_hate_speech-merged.pdf?fbclid=IwAR06bLK7WWBuzVwmYWimjLAiJW8tuQekrgJQUNueXMg1ReXOPL781xHMHk