

# HATE SPEECH: NOT ALL VICTIMS ARE SURVIVORS

Viviana Gullo

On July 29, 2022, the Austrian doctor Lisa-Maria Kellermayr committed suicide after being harassed and threatened, mostly online, by no-vax, conspiracy theorists and violent right-wing extremists. She was advocating for vaccinations and preventing the spread of Covid-19.

Doctor Kellermayr shared the threats she received online on her Twitter account, and it was also possible to find many other hate texts or comments through an OSINT analysis.

With the proper tools, tracking down the hate phenomena online is not necessarily a complex endeavour.

Hate speech and hate crime as the concretisation of serious and violent discriminatory and intolerant behaviours are not new phenomena, yet the increasing relevance taken by the digital environment catalyzed them, giving them more visibility, especially through social media.

Therefore, the issue that arose is how to address these phenomena: how to prevent offline hate crime by tackling online hate speech?

## Introduction

The nowadays increased relevance of the online environment broadens the occurrence of hate speech and hate crimes embodying serious and violent discriminatory and intolerant behaviours, whose spreading is now more visible, especially through social media[1].

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown a wide escalation of hate phenomena[2], affecting a broader range of targets, as the case of the Austrian doctor Lisa-Maria Kellermayr[3] demonstrated.

By presenting the case of Doctor Kellermays, the attempt of this paper will be to first distinguish the essential elements defining the hate phenomena, particularly in the light of the online environment's features, to provide the conceptual tools to understand and properly address them.

Finally, a public-private cooperative investigative model will be presented as a possible solution to prevent the escalation from online hate speech into physical hate crime.

An: ordination@dr-kellermayr.at >

### Ich werde dich hinrichten

Hallo du dummes Stück Scheisse!

Du kannst ja gerne mit Anwälten drohen aber kriegen werdet ihr mich sowieso nicht. Stattdessen habe ich nun beschlossen dich zu kriegen. Wenn ich schon einmal dabei bin werde ich aber selbstverständlich alle anderen Mitarbeiter deiner Praxis auch abschlagen. Ich bin bewaffnet und habe eine Schrotflinte. Damit werde ich dir aber nicht die Rübe wegpusten, das wäre ja viel zu leicht und zu einfach. Nein, ich werde als Patient kommen und wenn wir alleine im Besprechungszimmer sind werde ich dich niederschlagen und an deinen Arztstuhl fesseln. Dann darfst du zuerst zusehen wie ich einem deiner Mitarbeiter die Kehle durchschneide. Ich

### "I am going to execute you

Hello, you stupid piece of shit!

You're welcome to threaten with lawyers, but you won't get me anyway. Instead, I've now decided to get you. Of course, while I'm at it, I'll slaughter all the other employees in your practice as well. I am armed and have a shotgun. But I'm not going to blow your head off with that, that would be much too easy and too simple. No, I will come as a patient and when we are alone in the meeting room I will knock you down and tie you to your doctor's chair. Then you may first watch as I cut the throat of one of your employees. I will

An: ordination@dr-kellermayr.at >

### Ihr werdet mich niemals finden

Moin Lisa.

Ich habe diesen sehr interessanten Beitrag im österreichischen Fernsehen über dich gesehen und mit großem Interesse verfolgt. Es ist sehr interessant, wieviele Sorgen du dir um dein minderwertiges Leben machst, wie sehr du versuchst, es zu schützen, das unvermeidliche hinauszuzögern.

Es ist tatsächlich sehr schade, dass ich von meinem ursprünglichen Plan jetzt vermutlich abrücken und mich zugleich in Geduld üben muss. Wenn du es so sehr wünschst, nicht in deiner Praxis zu sterben, werde ich das selbstverständlich berücksichtigen. Ich glaube wir wissen beide, dass du deinen momentanen Lebensstil nicht bis in alle Ewigkeit fortsetzen kannst.

### "You will never find me

Hi Lisa.

I saw this very interesting article about you on Austrian television and followed it with great interest. It's very interesting how much you worry about your inferior life, and how much you try to protect it, and delay the inevitable.

It's a shame that I'll probably have to deviate from my original plan now and at the same time have to be patient. Of course, if you wish so much not to die in your practice, I will accommodate that. I think we both know that you can't continue your current lifestyle forever."

## The Austrian case

Lisa-Maria Kellermayr was found dead on July 29, 2022, after committing suicide. She was harassed and threatened, mostly online, by no-vax, conspiracy theorists and violent right-wing extremists.

The 36-years-old doctor, working in Seewalchen am Atterseehead (Austria), had reported countless threats and hate speech incidents: on June 27, she claimed on Twitter to have received for seven months death threats, that she had to "secure" the clinic from possible violent incidents until she was forced to close her medical practice because of the lack of support.

In November 2021, she had received the first death threat, a

painstakingly detailed email by a neo-Nazi based in Berlin - with the subject line "I am going to execute you" - on how she and her staff would be slaughtered[4]. She then received other attacks on social media, threatening letters and harassment in her clinic during working time[5]. Following several life threats, the Austrian doctor isolated herself until she took her life.

After her death, Munich police disclosed the investigation by a specialist hate speech unit[6] toward an Upper Bavarian man harassing Doctor Kellermayr, threatening her "conviction and execution" by a "tribunal of the people".

The online harassment was also spread through Telegram groups with hateful messages, which continued after the victim's death, celebrating it and encouraging others to harass other "prominent women". Anti-vax and COVID-19 deniers' threats have significantly increased against German doctors actively promoting vaccines[7] in the last year, forcing several centres to close – similarly to Doctor Kellermayr's case – because of the concretisation of the threats.

The consequences of hate speech, online incidents and harassment do not need physical aggression in offline reality to be considered a crime and can cause the death of a person.

As for the Austrian doctor, the online hate speech escalated, severely affecting her mental health, resulting in self-isolation and suicide.



"But Dr Lisa-Maria Kellermayr was a weak, psychotic woman who projected her own failures onto the police. That's how you reinterpret everything to fit your own world view."

## Hate speech and hate crimes: shallow borders

The inextricable link between the hate phenomena complicates their delimitation: both originate from hateful socio-cultural conduct based on a discriminatory foundation, marginalizing and harming – either physically or verbally – the targets. The victims are recognised and perceived as *others*, different for specific characteristics – mostly visible and distinctive.

However, it is important to distinguish them in a prevention and contrast perspective.

In hate crime, the criminal and punishable component is more evident compared to hate speech because, by definition, hate crime requires "a *criminal offence committed with a bias motivation*" in order to be defined as such[8]. Thus, acts such as threats, property damage, assault, and murder (commonly recognised as crimes per se) towards individuals who are members of a protected category committed specifically because of biased motivation may be classified as hate crimes.

Hate speech, on the other hand, is not commonly defined as a crime per se in many countries[9]. It has been indicated as those conducts aiming at publicly inciting violence or hate with a biased motivation[10], or even "a *menace to democratic values, social stability and peace*", as it can escalate into a more dangerous occurrence[11].

It is commonly acceptable and noticeable that, above all, hate speech creates a malicious and intolerant environment, "fostering discrimination and hostility, and in severe cases facilitating violent acts"[12] towards the victims. Therefore, while the seriousness of such behaviours is recognised, nonetheless, the reference is to a low-intensity incident because it represents one of the first conducts in a hate pyramid, escalating in the hate crime which is expressed through an actual and recognised crime.

This explains why hate speech is often underrated as a "boyish prank", and "socially accepted" because it is considered harmless and not leading to a real threat to individuals' life, remaining in the verbal sphere – both in the online and offline environments.

However, as the case of Doctor Kellermayr demonstrated, online hate speech incidents can escalate into offline hate crimes, in her case suicide instigation.



"Evidence is neutral and objective and determined as such. Personal feelings are not evidence.

You can send e-mails to yourself. You can also reply to yourself on Twitter, for example.

Has there ever been a concrete threat?"

## Online reality and hate speech

The online environment as a parallel reality is a relatively new concept. In other words, the idea that online spaces are not real just because of the lack of a sort of physical element is outdated.

And yet, the manifestation of hate phenomena, and more precisely hate speech, in the digital and physical domains is very peculiar.

Determined features of the online world seem to catalyze the phenomena. Indeed, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, through an OSINT analysis it is possible to detect several examples of hate speech online. One shall not be surprised by the significant amount of online information gathered related to Doctor Kellermayr's case.

Hate is amplified in the online space because of five elements featuring it in the view of the perpetrators: anonymity, invisibility, instantaneousness, community, and harm[13]. While those elements are also part of the physical environment, it is prominent to notice that they assume a distinctive value online, catalysing certain behaviours.



"Covid-19: Austrian doctor ends her life after being harassed by antivaxers

CHAMPAGNE FOR THE CONSPI' CAMP!  
 A GREAT VICTORY TO CELEBRATE ALL TOGETHER!

An intense wave of harassment had forced her to close her consulting room. This Big Pharma employee even had to hire bodyguards because the Austrian conspiracy theorists were so determined to explain the concept of Freedom to her face to face.

The entire system (including French journalists) is crying and taking offence at the current situation. "See how far harassment can go! Bouhouhou..." But we answer: Who started the harassment? Who harassed whom? Who ostracized those who refused vaxxx for themselves and their children? Who imposed the coercion, the fine, the censorship, the dismissal, the ostracisation, the denunciation, the submission, the humiliation during 2 years of covidical rule? Who entered the cinemas during screenings to check the sanitary passes of 10 year olds?

Who radicalised us? YOU.

May Lisa-Marie Kellermayr and all the dogs serving the oligarchic tyranny burn in hell."

Considering the first two elements together, the perpetrator tends to believe that, without the *physical face-to-face* interaction, their identity will remain hidden, masked, invisible, and anonymous behind a screen, allowing them to claim whatever they think without the fear of others' reactions or judgment, critics or public shame, ignoring the common social rules serving as a filter or self-censure[14]. The effect, the shield that the screen creates for the perpetrators provides for them to be at the same time one, none and one hundred thousand: as they present themselves, as they believe they are, and as the representations they create of themselves online. This feeling of being protected behind a screen encourages people to behave in a way that does not foresee consequences, of any type, in the offline world, which includes also a de-sensibilisation towards the victim(s) who becomes merely the "random" target of the perpetrator's aggressive conduct or hate.



"The Austrian doctor impersonator Lisa-Maria Kellermayr will hopefully become the shining example for her colleagues who still inject healthy people to death/disability, and they will follow her example as soon as possible in large numbers. These killers in white coats should enjoy their blood money as much as the proverbial Judas did with his equally proverbial thirty pieces of silver. May they never have a quiet night without nightmares again until they top themselves"

In the offline scenario, calling names or harassing someone may lead to an immediate reaction by the victim or witnesses, which can also be as violent and aggressive as the action was, including a certain degree of risk for the perpetrator. This does not mean that the reactions online do not count – comments on posts, replies, etc. – but it is understandable how the effect of an online reaction is different compared to an offline one.

To continue with the following elements the immediacy provided in online reality is well-known: a post or a comment can reach numerous people faster than starting yelling on the road, and, notably, breaking down geographical borders. The structure that social media possesses, not simply accelerates the means of communicating and reacting, but even triggers the need for fast replies, and instant reactions and, in the case of hate speech, this is translated into "*gut reactions, unconsidered judgments, off-the-cuff remarks, unfiltered commentary, and first thoughts*"[15], that – usually – are prevented, avoided, and self-censored in the offline scene.

This idea of being able to self-censure aggressive behaviour seems to derive also from a sense of community. In such a limitless environment, the group of peers sharing the same thoughts, values and points of view strengthens the will of expressing themselves and gives a sort of empowerment in doing so. In the worst scenario, they act accordingly, threatening and concretising the words into violent actions, exceeding into a hate crime.

For instance, the use of online spaces for recruitment, trafficking, and organization of extremist attacks is well known[16], in line with the meaning of the previous elements mentioned. Thus, one shall not be surprised by the application of the same logic for hate (speech) groups. In this sense, building a network of peers becomes relatively easier, introducing a double meaning for the element of community in online hate speech: this element requires two targets, first the victims, but also “like-minded people” in the attempt to create a social structure or research for consensus, including peers and individuals who share the same perspective[17].

This is remarkably noticeable during precise dates, events, and occasions (i.e., commemorative anniversaries, the Holocaust memorial, the LGBTQI+ pride waves in summer) or even during a time of crisis, such as the Covid-19 situation. Notably, the latter showed the potential of the online gathering of like-minded people and how this convergence of ideologies, intolerance and mistrust led to a general escalation of hate sentiments and behaviours.

In this case, the intended allies are the “*disruptive libertarians*” undermining and threatening the target victims (namely doctors or professional experts or even people promoting the use of masks, vaccines, and vaccination campaigns)[18] accordingly, not based on one of the common protected categories, but because of their opinion, broadening the scope of hate speech and underlining the versatility of the phenomenon.

Therefore, the element of harm remains towards a precise collective through specific subjects (medical experts), yet it could be argued that the harm caused in the online environment is less severe compared to the harm in the offline space – mainly because it is not direct physical harm. Intolerance, discrimination and hate affect primarily individuals’ dignity, as the aim is to dehumanize and denigrate the target. Moreover, the combination of undemocratic sentiments and behaviours undermines people feeling of safety because of public exposure online, which may lead to social exclusion or self-isolation, inhibiting the willingness to participate in regular collective life, and it inevitably has serious effects on individuals’ mental health[19].

Indeed, hate speech and stigma experiences may severely affect individuals’ mental health, causing anxiety, psychological distress and depression[20], although it must be highlighted how each person may be affected by discriminatory acts in a different manner and react in

different ways[21].

However, precisely the online effect of higher resonance happens to significantly impact the victims, because it is immediately visible to a wider public, because the hate message last longer[22] than a slur yelled on the street, and because, most of the time, it seems there is no way to stop it, together with the shame and the fear that it brings.



“You still haven’t provided any evidence for alleged death threats!  
 Tip: this does not destroy your professional or social existence.  
 Kellermayr has destroyed herself. And that already with her behaviour and statements towards the unvaccinated.”

## What could have been done?

The harm caused by hate speech incidents may lead to a deep and constant fear of being hurt. Without the proper support from competent actors, that fear leaves no survivors, as happened last July to Doctor Kellermayr, who committed suicide after being harassed online.

The Austrian case showed how an entire system failed to support a target who became a victim. As anticipated, Austrian authorities claimed that they could not track down the anonymous online perpetrators and they had done what they could to protect the doctor.

However, the anonymity of the perpetrators online should not be an insurmountable obstacle: police analysts can use warrants to receive information directly from the social network where the hateful comments or messages were posted.

Even though hate speech perpetrators online tend to stay anonymous, simple data pieces such as usernames, profile pictures, bios or descriptions, can be used to find more virtual accounts of the same person.

Therefore, looking at the multiple accounts and general social media presence of a suspected individual (or group) can produce more unique leads such as phone numbers, real names, locations and emails. Public authorities can use those identifiers to further investigate the suspect – and potentially prevent the escalation, in this case, a suicide. This strategy results particularly effective from the perspective of public-private cooperation, whereby the investigative cycle includes the use of advanced intelligence techniques (namely, OSINT, HUMINT and SIGINT) to tackle

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and prevent the hate phenomena, starting from the online reality.

Indeed, hate speech online can be investigated in several ways, but establishing a cooperative framework between private entities and public authorities provides easier, faster, and more effective results.

The foreseen model begins precisely by gathering data through OSINT means, following a denouncement or complaint by a potential victim or a report by a specialised private entity. Subsequently, the data collected are analysed, allowing a more precise recognition and distinction of the hate phenomena specificities, through HUMINT means. This phase is fundamental for the investigative process, which could continue through SIGINT (data obtained via telecommunication), allowing to adopt the most appropriate measure depending on the specific case.

Both the investigative process and the actions done on the basis of its conclusions need to be done in a shared workspace with real-time communication between all relevant parties. Data persistence is also key here - the information gathered in one case, such as problematic users, keywords, and groups, might be pertinent in another case in the future. Visualization tools – such as link analysis graphs, timelines, and maps - not only help to address the current issue, but also to learn and improve in the future, making victim support easier and quicker each time.

The OSINT solution enables researchers to gather in a fast, efficient manner any data from the web and social media concerning the issue. An investigation can begin with a list of hateful keywords, finding online accounts who mention and promote them, identifying the targets and victims of those, and continuing to monitor in real-time the most relevant content.

Therefore, in the Austrian case, the anonymous perpetrators could have been tracked down, ensuring a sense of safety for doctor Kellermayr, who felt alone and in danger and obliged to self-isolation because of fear. If hate speech online was treated as a serious menace that have a significant impact on victims, the escalation to her suicide could have been prevented.

## Conclusions

Doctor Kellermayr's case demonstrated the urgency of joint actions to address the seriousness of online hate speech, which is not always easy to define, commonly underestimated and considered a boyish prank. The escalation is one of the specificities of the hate phenomena, in this case, expressed through suicide; it could also be damaging property, a battery against an individual of a minority by a group, or even murder. Hate speech and hate crimes target individuals with specific characteristics, and when the feature of the phenomena is to legitimate violence

towards them, not always there are survivors.

The increasing occurrence of hate phenomena both in online and offline environments requires a thoughtful knowledge of their specificities, the risks, and the proper measures to adopt in order to tackle and prevent them.

In this sense, a cooperative framework between the public and private sectors could be the answer in an attempt to address discriminatory behaviours and hate incidents.

The meaning of a cooperative framework, together with the use of advanced intelligence techniques, is to provide a complementary effort by different specialised actors, from tracking the hate speech online to supporting the victim and preventing the escalation, which otherwise could lead to a more severe crime in the offline reality.

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