Media of Contempt: Social Media Consumption Predicts Normative Acceptance of Anti-Muslim Hate Speech and Islamoprejudice

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The new era of information technology brings new opportunities but also poses new threats. In our paper, we examine whether a shift from traditional print and broadcasting to new online media results in the increased normalization of hate speech towards minorities, and whether this change can subsequently increase prejudice towards minorities. Our research uses data from a representative two-wave longitudinal survey of Polish adults. In wave 1 ($N = 1060$), data on respondents' primary sources of information about the world (TV, newspapers, radio, online, social media, blogs) was collected. Wave 2 ($N = 628$), conducted six months later, included measures of perceived normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech and Islamophobia. We found that respondents who were frequent social media users expressed higher levels of Islamoprejudice and perceived higher normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech than the respondents who got their news from traditional mass media. We also found that an increase in perceived normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech can act as one of the mechanisms through which use of social media is linked to higher Islamoprejudice.

Robert Bowers, who shot and killed eleven worshippers in a synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018 was a frequent user of social media site Gab. This was his primary source of information about the world and a space where he could distribute his own anti-Semitic theories (Grygiel 2018). Cesar Altieri Sayoc Jr., who mailed explosives to several leaders of the Democrat Party in October 2018, was a frequent user of Facebook and Twitter, where he shared extremist content and posted conspiracy theories (Roose 2018). Brenton Tarrant, who massacred fifty Muslims in the Christchurch Mosque in New Zealand in 2019, frequented fringe social media platforms and livestreamed his attack on Facebook (Hendrix and Miller 2019).

In all these instances of xenophobic, extremist and racist terrorism, social media seemed to play a crucial role – as a source of conspiracy theories about world events, as a catalyzer of radicalization, and as a transmitter allowing the extremist to publicize his violent actions. In this contribution, we investigate whether individuals immersed in social and electronic media are in fact more prejudiced than those who still prefer to use traditional media as a primary source of knowledge about the contemporary world. We suggest that

the use of new media in the political domain leads to a normalization of violent language about minorities, immigrants and other vulnerable outgroups, and that this, in turn, results in prejudice becoming more socially acceptable.

1 Hate Speech as a Problem of Modern Digital Media

Hate speech is a form of verbal violence directed against ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, women, and other groups that suffer from everyday oppression in contemporary societies. Hate speech has been demonstrated to have numerous harmful effects. For instance, a seminal study by Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) found that contact with hate speech negatively affects perceptions of ethnic minorities. Participants in this study observed a discussion between a black and a white debater. Those participants who overheard racist comments about the black debater became more critical in their evaluation of him as compared to those who were not exposed to such comments. Further studies showed that being exposed to hate speech leads to physical distancing from minority groups (Soral, Bilewicz, and Winiewski 2018), increased dehumanization (Fasoli et al. 2016), and unfair distribution of resources (Fasoli, Maass, and Carnaghi 2015). Moreover, studies of archival data spanning a 150-year period of American history found that exposure to hate speech was associated with the exclusion of immigrants from the host society (Mullen and Rice 2003) and increased suicide rates among immigrant communities targeted by hate speech (Mullen and Smyth 2004).

Being exposed to hate speech has obvious detrimental consequences for intergroup relations, and modern electronic media seem to play a fundamental role in this process. To give an example, a study of anti-Semitic hate speech found that during one year (2017) more than four million entries on Twitter included anti-Semitic content (Anti-Defamation League 2018). This number seems to relate to the number of people using social media as their primary sources of information and outlet for political expression. For instance, at the beginning of 2018, Vigo Social Intelligence Institute (World Jewish Congress 2018) observed a 30 percent increase in anti-Semitic content,

including neo-Nazi references, hateful and dehumanizing messages, and Holocaust denial, as compared to 2016. A study of 723 Finnish Facebook users (Oksanen et al. 2014) found that 67 percent of them reported being exposed to hateful content, which predominantly focused on sexual orientation, physical appearance, ethnicity, and religion. A large-scale survey study conducted in Poland demonstrated that social media have become a primary source of hate speech, particularly among young media users (Winiewski et al. 2017). The study found that 85 percent of Polish adolescents witnessed homophobic hate speech on the internet in 2016 (as compared to 77 percent in 2014), whereas only about 45 percent saw such content on television, and 12 percent in newspaper articles. Although an increase in online hate speech was observed in relation to all target minorities, the most striking increase was observed in the case of Islamophobia – in 2014, 27 percent of adults and 55 percent of adolescents reported being exposed to such content in digital media, whereas two years later 41 percent of adults and 80 percent of adolescents reported such exposure. Overall, in 2016, 95 percent of adolescents witnessed hate speech (directed against any minority group) on the internet, while 66 percent encountered such statements on TV, 75 percent in everyday conversations, and 24 percent in radio broadcasts. In other words, this study showed that it is on the internet where most contemporary adolescents are confronted with derogatory language about minorities. More importantly, the study also highlighted an increase in the proportion of young people witnessing hate speech online.

Studies looking at the effects of online hate speech found that frequent exposure degrades people's sense of trust (Näsi et al. 2014) and impairs intergroup relations (Soral, Bilewicz, and Winiewski 2018). Those who are exposed to anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant hate speech develop more prejudiced attitudes, declare stronger support for violent anti-immigrant policies, and report greater social distance from Muslims (Soral, Bilewicz, and Winiewski 2018). Most of the studies looking at the effects of hate speech exposure either focus on online hate speech or do not differentiate at all between different media in which hate speech is observed (treating any exposure to hate

speech in the same way). In order to understand how moving from traditional media to digital media consumption may affect people's views and opinions, it seems crucial to differentiate and compare the effects. That is one of the main aims of this article. Specifically, we seek to explain how digital media exposure (as compared to exposure to other types of media) affects negative attitudes towards Muslim people and identify the mechanism underlying this effect.

2 The Role of Media in Eliciting Anti-Immigrant and Islamophobic Attitudes

In 2015 European media coverage was dominated by the issue of immigration to Europe from Arab countries and sub-Saharan regions of Africa. A Council of Europe report (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017) showed that the mass media framed this issue as a "crisis" for Europe and that some accounts included hate speech and encouraged hostility towards asylum seekers. This was particularly true in eastern European countries, such as Poland and Hungary. Empirical studies assessing the impact of media exposure on Islamophobic tendencies are relatively rare, but their results suggest that different forms of media exposure might have divergent effects on attitudes towards the Muslims. A study of anti-Muslim attitudes in the United States found that people paying closer attention to news coverage of the conflict around an Islamic community center in New York expressed more negative views on Muslims (Ogan et al. 2014). A longitudinal German study assessing media effects on attitudes against Muslim immigrants found that exposure to private television stations increased Islamophobia, whereas exposure to public broadcasters did not (Eyssel, Geschke, and Frindte 2015). This is possibly because public television provides a less emotional and more nuanced view on the immigration issue. Canadian studies found that specific discursive elements can negatively influence attitudes toward immigrants and refugees (Esses, Medianu, and Lawson 2013). Concretely, media portrayals of refugees that suggest they are involved in terrorism or question their status as refugees by implying economic motives lead to higher levels of implicit dehumanization of refugees, as compared to neutral portrayals. Similarly, media-transmitted suggestions that immigrants could

carry diseases lead not only to dehumanization but also to contempt and more negative attitudes. In a similar vein, recent studies on American samples by Saleem et al. (2017) showed that exposure to news portraying Muslims as terrorists increased support for harsh restrictions on the civil liberties of Muslim Americans, and increased support for military action in Muslim countries (see also Saleem and Anderson 2013).

Most of these studies were conducted in the realm of traditional media, such as television, newspaper coverage, or radio broadcasts. But our literature review suggests that digital media have become the most prevalent transmitter of an anti-refugee and anti-Muslim discourse. The theme of "fake refugees" and fears of illnesses and contamination – known as key antecedents of Islamophobic dehumanization (Esses, Medianu, and Lawson 2013) – were present in many online communities, social media sites, and right-wing news websites. Therefore, it is highly plausible that people who receive most of their news and information from digital media would express higher levels of Islamophobia, as compared to traditional media users.

3 Differentiating Islamophobia

When discussing the media coverage of Muslim immigrants in Europe, it is essential to distinguish two forms of criticism directed at radicalized members of Muslim communities. Imhoff and Recker (2012) distinguish Islamoprejudice (a prejudiced view of Islam) from secular criticism of Islam. Islamoprejudice is a generalized perception of Islam as an archaic religion that does not fit European values. Secular criticism offers a more nuanced view of Islam and focuses on the problem of radicalization, treating progressive Muslims as potential allies in a confrontation with their radical co-worshipers. Islamoprejudice is linked to negative implicit attitudes, as well as subtle prejudice against Muslims, while secular criticism of Islam is not. A Polish study conducted in 2015 found that intensity of media consumption correlated significantly positively with Islamoprejudice, and this was particularly true for digital media. Secular criticism of Islam was most prevalent among those exposed to both public and private news providers (Stefaniak

2015). Exposure to news from digital media elicited Islamoprejudice to a greater extent than exposure to traditional news providers. In order to explain this, one needs to carefully examine the differences between the two types of mass media and their users. The mechanism behind this difference is worth exploring empirically.

4 Normalizing Effects of Hate Speech

Social norms are core influences on attitudes and behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). The presence of hate speech in one's environment can produce a sense of a social norm by suggesting that using such language about immigrants or minority groups is common rather than exceptional. This is what Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren (1990) and Prentice (2007) termed a descriptive norm – a piece of information about what constitutes a common behavior in a particular environment. At the same time, frequent exposure to hate speech could also lead to a change in prescriptive (Brauer and Chaurand 2010) or injunctive norms (Göckeritz et al. 2010) – judgments whether certain behavior is desirable or delinquent. In the first case, norms inform about the frequency/rarity of a given behavior, in the second case about its desirability/deviancy.

Most studies show that it is prescriptive and injunctive (rather than descriptive) norms that determine reactions to norm violators and shape attitudes (Brauer and Chaurand 2010; Prentice 2007). We believe, however, that the prevalent hateful framing of the topic of migration in digital media can create a sense that such hateful content is socially acceptable, and therefore normal rather than deviant. This is because many normative constraints against hate speech (including obscenity) which are present in other forms of mass media remain absent in the lowbrow context and relatively unregulated communications environment of digital mass media (August and Liu 2015). Those immersed in digital media can therefore develop a sense that no injunctive norm protecting immigrant and minority groups from hate speech exists, and that derogation of immigrants has become a new descriptive norm. Such a process of normalization can make hate speech more influential: those who treat hate speech as normative are more easily persuaded by its content

and would become more homophobic, Islamophobic or anti-Semitic after being exposed to hateful statements.

The existing studies of hate speech proliferation have not addressed the problem of social norms from this angle. When looking at how hate speech exposure affects attitudes and behaviors, researchers tested the role of anomie, in the sense of the absence of social norms (Soral, Bilewicz, and Winiewski 2018). Here we suggest that the omnipresence of hate speech does not negate existing social norms, but instead establishes a new social norm that defines hate speech as a legitimate opinion rather than a delinquent behavior. This, in turn, is likely to change public views about the minority groups and immigrants.

5 The Current Research

Most of the current theorizing and research on hate speech focuses on the effects of derogatory language on listeners (Fasoli, Maass, and Carnaghi 2015; Greenberg and Pyszczynski 1985; Soral, Bilewicz, and Winiewski 2018), without specifying the medium. We suggest that digital media users are more influenced by hateful comments than traditional media users. We hypothesize that the key mechanism is of normative character: people immersed in social media tend to normatively accept hate speech, and this in turn increases the strength of their Islamophobic attitudes (without affecting their general susceptibility to radicalization).

To test this hypothesis, we conducted a study examining whether individuals with different levels of exposure to social media differ in their perception of hate speech against Muslim immigrants and refugees (seeing it as normal vs. deviant). We suggest that potential "normalization" of hate speech would make contemptuous prejudice against Muslim people (Islamoprejudice, but not necessarily secular criticism of Islam) more frequent. During the period of data collection, "refugee crisis" and Muslim immigration to Europe were among the most common topics covered by the media – both traditional and digital. However, already mentioned, the ways in which traditional and digital media cover the same topic may differ widely. Thus, our overarching goal was to examine the potential harm associated with the way in which contem-

porary digital media transmit information about the world.

6 Method

6.1 Sample and Design

Our research examined the data from a two-wave, nation-wide online longitudinal survey of adult Poles (wave 1: N = 1,060; wave 2: N = 628; dropout rate = 41%). The sample consisted of 477 men, 561 women, and 22 individuals who did not disclose their gender. Their ages ranged from 18 to 75 years (M_{age} = 41.96, SD_{age} = 14.51). In wave 1, data on respondents' primary sources of information about the world was collected. Wave 2, conducted six months later, included measures of Islamophobia and perceived normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech.[1] The data were gathered in September 2015 (wave 1) and March 2016 (wave 2) by the Nielsen online polling company. Stratified quota sampling techniques were used to create a final sample whose demographics closely matched those reported by official census agencies.

Poland is a highly homogeneous state. Almost 99 percent of the respondents indicated their ethnicity as "White or Caucasian", and almost 97 percent reported being born in Poland with no migration background. Seventy-nine percent said they were religious, almost all of whom were Christian (78 percent). None of the respondents indicated Islam as their religion. Furthermore, 78 percent of the respondents reported growing up in urban areas, whereas 20 percent reported growing up in rural areas (19 respondents refused to answer this question). Almost 47 percent of the respondents had only school education whereas 51 percent held a university degree. Participants were also asked to rate their socio-economic status (SES) on a 10-point scale, with 10 referring to "people who are the most well off in society." Most of the respondents saw themselves in the middle of the scale (M_{SES} = 4.71, SD_{SES} = 1.66).

A dropout analysis examined whether participation in wave 2 was associated with any of the demographic variables: gender, age, education, religiosity,

origin (rural vs. urban), and SES. An analysis of Bayesian contingency tables provided no evidence for associations between dropping out and gender, $BF_{non-indep.}$ = 0.54, education, $BF_{non-indep.}$ = 0.19, religiosity, $BF_{non-indep.}$ = 0.09, or origin, $BF_{non-indep.}$ = 0.09.[2] Likewise, a Bayesian t-test provided no evidence for an association between dropping out and SES, $BF_{diff.}$ = 0.11. However, it did provide evidence for an association between dropping out and age, $BF_{diff.}$ = 1164951. Those participants who took part in both waves of the study were on average older (M_{age} = 44.09, SD_{age} = 14.19) than those who took part only in wave 1 (M_{age} = 38.84, SD_{age} = 14.43).

6.2 Measures

6.2.1 Media Usage

We collected data on primary sources of information about the world by providing participants with a list of media sources and asking how often they get news from each. Respondents rated each source on a scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Always*). The list consisted of seven potential news sources: television (M = 5.35, SD = 1.55), printed newspapers (M = 4.28, SD = 1.56), online news websites (M = 5.72, SD = 1.16), radio (M = 4.79, SD = 1.53), social media (M = 4.50, SD = 1.71), citizen journalism sites (M = 3.39, SD = 1.66), and word of mouth (M = 4.64, SD = 1.40).

6.2.2 Islamophobia

To measure attitudes towards Muslims, we used a shortened version of the Islamophobia Scale developed by Imhoff and Recker (2012), which distinguishes prejudiced views of Islam (Islamoprejudice) from secular criticism of Islam. The Islamoprejudice subscale consisted of three items (α = .85, M = 3.59, SD = 1.02), such as "Compared to West Europeans Muslims are rather irrational." The Secular Critique of Islam subscale also consisted of three items (α = .70, M = 3.96, SD = 0.80), such as "It is a scandal that in some countries noncompliance with religious rules of Islam results in earthly punishment." For each subscale, re-

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[1] Our research was a part of a broader cross-national research program aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding of antecedents and consequences of media usage. The questionnaires distributed to participants included a number of other scales not relevant to the current project.

[2] BF = Bayes Factor, magnitude of support for alternative hypothesis over the null, or vice versa. For example, BF = 2 means that the alternative hypothesis is twice as likely as the null hypothesis. BF higher than 3 – or lower than 0.3 – is usually interpreted as a substantial evidence for – or against – a hypothesis. All Bayes Factors were computed using BayesFactor package in R, with default priors.

spondents rated their opinions on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Definitely disagree*) to 5 (*Definitely agree*). The two subscales were weakly but reliably positively correlated, $r = .18$, $BF_{alt} = 1624.48$.

6.2.3 Normativity of Hate Speech

We measured normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech by asking our participants to read three hateful comments (see Bilewicz et al. 2017): "Every Muslim is freaked out, no exceptions", "Muslims are mean cowards – they only murder women, children and innocent people", and "Acid attacks are an old form of settling accounts between Muslims". Following research on taboo trade-offs (Tetlock et al. 2000) we measured normative acceptance by asking whether expression of each statement should be banned or permitted. Participants indicated, on a scale ranging from 1 (*Definitely not*) to 5 (*Definitely yes*), whether each comment should be prohibited. After reverse coding and averaging items, we obtained a single index of normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.18$).

6.3 Statistical Procedures

A latent profile analysis was used to examine data on media usage collected in wave 1, and to find patterns that would identify media use types. Specifically, this analysis was used to identify respondents who indicated digital media (social media and/or citizen journalism sites) as their main source of information. A latent transition analysis was used to verify whether the patterns of media usage were stable across the two waves of the study. Bayesian regression analyses were used to examine how the media use profile of each participant (categorical variable with theoretically driven contrast coding) predicts perceived normativity of hate speech and Islamophobia (both outcomes measured in wave 2). The choice of the Bayesian approach was motivated by its flexibility (possibility to account for various types of distribution of outcome variables), and simplicity in testing almost any hypothesis (Gelman et al. 2014; McElreath 2018). Bayesian models allow inclusion of prior knowledge (such as data collected in previous studies) and examination of how the newly acquired data update knowledge. Importantly, in this study all models were fitted

with non-informative priors (agnostic priors that affect results minimally). This means that the results reported in the study would not differ substantially if refitted with classical (frequentist) procedures.

The choice of Bayesian regression modelling meant it was not possible to conduct a three-step approach for analyzing associations between latent profile membership and external variables (see Bakk, Tekle, and Vermunt 2013). Because such an approach would correct for the downward bias in associations between profiles and external variables (Vermunt 2010), the strength of the associations presented in our study is in the worst case attenuated.

7 Results

7.1 Typology of Media Users

In the first step, we used a latent profile analysis to identify media user profiles (in wave 1). Prior to model fitting, we standardized all variables in order to maximize differences between profiles and increase interpretability. Log-likelihood ratio test, information criteria (BIC and AIC), and measures of entropy suggested a four-profile solution as having the best fit (see Table 1). However, coefficients within the four-profile model were hard to interpret and contradictory to previous analyses conducted on large cross-national samples (Liu et al. 2019).[3] Because our aim was to obtain the most meaningful solution with respect to our hypotheses, we decided on a three-profile solution with the most interpretable coefficients (as recommended by Geiser 2012).

The first profile encompassed people who get their news from all of the listed sources ("highly engaged", 41 percent of the wave 1 sample). Respondents in this profile did not differentiate between the sources; all the sources were rated similarly 0.5 SD above the sample mean (see Figure 1). The second profile encompassed traditional media users ("traditional", 25 percent of the wave 1 sample). The "traditional" users reported high usage of TV (around 0.5 SD above the sample mean), average usage of print newspapers and radio (around the sample mean), but also very low us-

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[3] Previous analyses by Liu et al (2019) pointed to the existence of four profiles: the three presented in this article and one additional consisting of "low engaged" users, who reported low use of all media sources. However, the analysis of the four-profile solution did not reveal a similar structure.

age of social media and citizen journalism sites (-1 SD below the sample mean). They also relied relatively little on word of mouth and online news websites (around -0.5 SD below the sample mean). Finally, the third profile encompassed users of digital media ("digitally immersed", 33 percent of the wave 1 sample). Individuals with this profile indicated average use of online news websites, social media, and citizen journalism sites as their source of information (around the sample mean). Their usage of traditional media (TV, print newspapers, and radio) was relatively low (ranging from -1 to -0.5 SD below the sample mean).

After obtaining an interpretable fit, based on estimated posterior probabilities, we assigned each respondent to one of the three profiles. The proportion of respondents in each profile was largely unchanged in wave 2 (six months later): 28 percent of the respondents were "digitally immersed", 27 percent "traditional", and 46 percent "highly engaged" users. A latent transition analysis showed that 79 percent of "digitally immersed" users, 90 percent of "traditional" users, and 91 percent of "highly engaged" users remained within the same profile in wave 2.

Additional analysis compared the proportion who dropped out of the study (not taking part in wave 2) between the three profiles. A Bayesian analysis of contingency tables provided support for the hypothesis of non-independence of the two variables, $BF_{\text{non-indep}}$ = 4.40. The analysis revealed that the "digitally immersed" users were less likely to take part in wave 2 (52 percent) than the "highly engaged" (63 percent) or "traditional" users (62 percent).

Table 1: Fit measures of three different solutions of the latent profile analysis

Solution	Log likelihood	Df	χ^2	Entropy R^2	AIC	BIC
2 profiles	-9837.043	29		.75	19732.09	19874.93
3 profiles	-9634.834	44	404.417	.74	19357.67	19574.39
4 profiles	-9434.356	59	400.956	.77	18986.71	19277.32

Figure 1: Frequency of usage of sources of information across three latent profiles
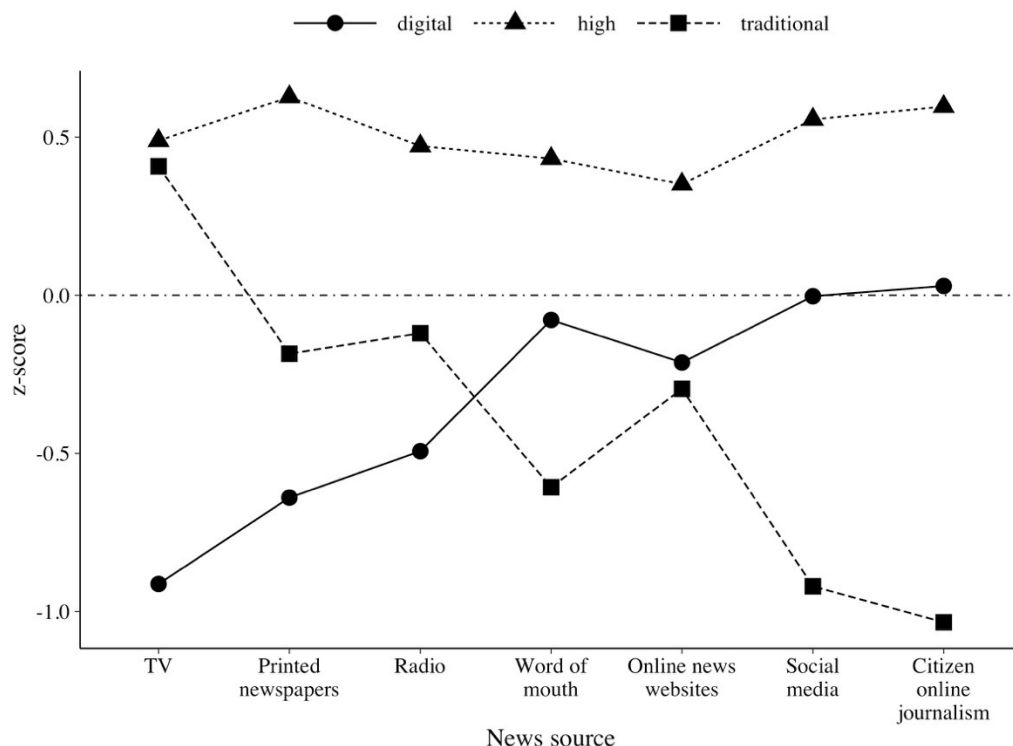
Note: Values are presented at z-standardized scale.

7.2 Prejudice and Normativity of Hate Speech across Media Users

In the next step, we compared attitudes towards Muslims and Islam and perceived normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech across respondents with different media usage profiles. To investigate whether the respondents with high vs. low usage of digital media have different attitudes towards Muslims and Islam, we compared the attitudes of respondents with "highly engaged" and "digitally immersed" profiles (high use of digital media) to those with the "traditional" profile (low use of digital media). We also wanted to examine whether the respondents with high usage of digital media, but different levels of traditional media usage differed in their attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. Therefore, we compared the attitudes of respondents with the "highly engaged" profile (high use of traditional media) to those with the "digitally immersed" profile (low use of traditional media).

Based on our theoretical considerations, we decided to model differences in normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech as resulting from the differences in media usage (between the three profiles: highly engaged, digitally immersed, and traditional media use). We also simultaneously regressed both Islamoprejudice and secular critique of Islam on normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech and the media usage profiles (see Figure 3 for the path diagram).[4] The model was fitted with R package brms (Bürkner 2017) designed for Bayesian regression modeling. A total of 4,000 post-warmup posterior samples was obtained. $\hat{R}$-values were below 1.001 and the effective sample sizes were higher than 8,160 (indicating no convergence issues and a relatively high precision of the estimated statistics). Figure 2 displays estimated means of the variables in the model with 95 percent credible intervals. We observed that the "high" and "digital" users had credibly higher levels of Islamoprejudice than the "traditional" users, difference of means = 0.23, 95% CI [0.05, 0.41], d = 0.22; however, the difference between

the "high" and "digital" users was very small and not credibly different from 0, difference of means = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.08], d = -0.02.

Analogous analyses for the secular critique of Islam (SCI) revealed a different pattern. The "high" and "digital" users did not credibly differ in SCI from the "traditional" users, difference of means = -0.09, 95% CI [-0.23, 0.06], d = -0.11. However, we observed that the "digital" users had slightly higher levels of SCI than the "high" users, difference of means = 0.08, 95% CI [0.00, 0.16], d = 0.10.

Furthermore, we observed that the "high" and "digital" users accepted anti-Muslim hate speech to a greater extent than the "traditional" users, difference of means = 0.44, 95% CI [0.22, 0.66], d = 0.38. Moreover, the "digital" users accepted such hate speech to a greater extent than the "high" users, but this difference was very small, difference of means = 0.15, 95% CI [0.04, 0.26], d = 0.13.

7.3 Hate Speech Normativity as Mediating Variable

Concluding our analyses, we assessed the extent to which normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech can explain the effects of the varying media usage profiles on Islamoprejudice and secular critique of Islam. As already noted, the "high" and "digital" media users had credibly more positive attitudes towards anti-Muslim hate speech than the "traditional" media users (see also Figure 3).

Furthermore, as shown on the path diagram, the level of Islamoprejudice was credibly and positively predicted by acceptance of anti-Muslim hate speech. However, we did not observe a similar credible relationship between SCI and acceptance of anti-Muslim hate speech. After accounting for the effects of normativity of hate speech, the direct effect of comparing the "high" and "digital" vs. "traditional" media users on Islamoprejudice decreased (compared with the total effect described in the previous section). The magnitude of the direct effect on SCI was similar to the magnitude of the total effect.

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[4] To check for potential confounders, we also examined models with covariates: age, gender, religiosity, socio-economic status, education, and origin (rural vs. urban). This model revealed almost identical conclusions to those from the model without covariates. Thus, we report only the latter model.

Figure 2: Estimated means of prejudiced attitudes across different types of media users
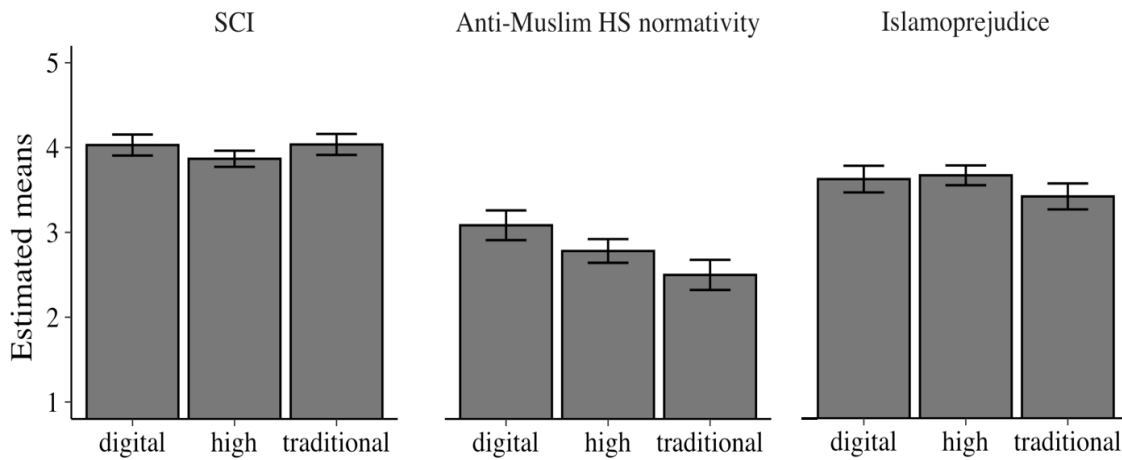
Error bars represent 95% credible intervals.
SCI = secular critique of Islam. HS = hate speech.

Figure 3: Effects of media usage profile on Islamoprejudice and secular critique of Islam, mediated by normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech
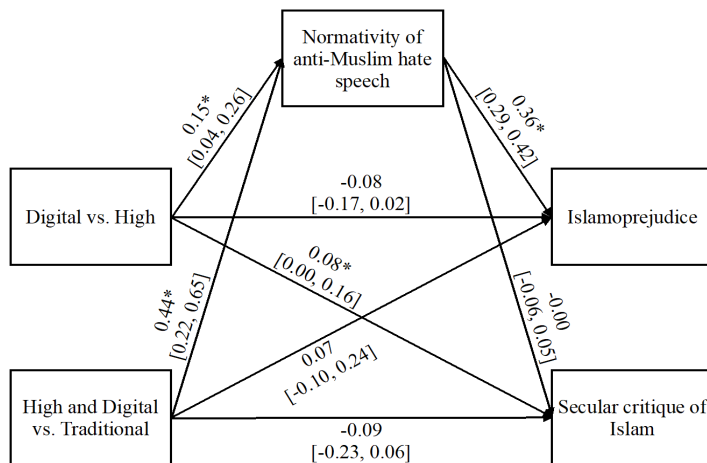
Note: Values in square brackets denote 95% credible intervals. Contrasts were coded as: Digital vs. High = "digital" (0.5) vs. "high" (-0.5) users; High and Digital vs. Traditional = "high" (0.5) and "digital" (0.5) vs. "traditional" (-1) users.
*95% credible interval does not contain 0

Table 2: Indirect effects of type of media use on Islamoprejudice and secular critique of Islam mediated by normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech

	Islamoprejudice	Secular critique of Islam
"high"/"digital" users vs. "traditional" users	0.15 [0.08, 0.24]	-0.00 [-0.03, 0.03]
"digital" users vs. "high" users	0.05 [0.01, 0.10]	-0.00 [-0.01, 0.01]

Note: Values in square brackets are 95% credible intervals.

The analyses presented in Table 2 demonstrate that we can indeed observe positive and credible indirect effects of being a "high" or "digital" (vs. "traditional") media user on Islamoprejudice through normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech. Moreover, we did not observe credible indirect effects on SCI through normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech.

When comparing the "high" and "digital" media users, we observed a credible effect on normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech. After accounting for the effect of normativity of hate speech, the total effect of comparing the "high" and "digital" media users on Islamoprejudice credibly decreased (as indicated by the magnitude of indirect effect presented in Table 1), but still remained close to 0. Finally, the indirect effect of comparing the "high" and "digital" users on SCI was not credibly different from 0.

8 Discussion

Our investigation sought to understand whether digital media consumption can affect attitudes towards anti-minority hate speech, and subsequently shift attitudes towards minorities. We were particularly interested in attitudes towards Muslims and anti-Muslim hate speech, as they can be regarded as a contemporary example of contemptuous prejudice, in the sense of believing that minorities are less civilized and to some extent less human. We found that social media users (both solely digital users and those who seek information from all available sources) did indeed express higher levels of Islamoprejudice and were more likely to perceive normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech than people who acquire their information from traditional mass media. Moreover, we found that the increase in perceived normativity of anti-Muslim hate speech can act as one of the mechanisms through which the use of social media leads to increased Islamoprejudice. Importantly, we did not find any evidence for such a mechanism in the case of the secular critique of Islam.

The results of this study show that digital media consumption (as opposed to traditional media consumption) is related to higher Islamoprejudice and that this relationship is mostly driven by greater perceived normativity of hate speech among those immersed in digital media. Therefore, it is plausible that

– as hypothesized – digital media create an environment in which hate speech becomes a descriptive norm (Prentice 2007). The normalization of hate speech in digital media also affects the way in which minority groups are perceived. For example, the problem of Islamist radicalization is viewed in a discriminatory way that blames the whole religious group rather than the extremists within that community. Digital media users and those who mostly use traditional media do not differ in the extent of their secular critique of Muslim radicalization. This supports the view that digital media does not make people more informed about Islamist radicalization or politics in general. The only clear effect that we observed is that digital media consumption is associated with greater acceptance of hate speech, and that this normalization process is associated with greater Islamoprejudice among those whose knowledge about politics is mostly derived from social media, citizen journalism sites and other online media.

8.1 Theoretical Advancement

In the present study we found that people immersed in digital media – due to the weak legal regulation of such media – develop a different sense of norms in which hate speech is no longer a delinquent behavior. Obscenity and insults are observed to be normative in race talk online, especially in situations where influential figures are seen to support racism online (August and Liu 2015). Thus, the injunctive norm protecting minorities and immigrants from hate speech is replaced by a descriptive norm that defines any hate speech as common. Due to the unregulated character of digital media, hate speech becomes normatively accepted and its content has much larger influence on media consumers.

Our research also contributes to the theoretical distinction between Islamoprejudice and secular criticism of Islam (Imhoff and Recker 2012). Not only have we shown that these two forms of negativity directed towards Muslim radicalization are separable, but also that their antecedents are different. People exposed to digital media normalizing hateful statements about Muslims may develop Islamoprejudice as their dominant interpretative framework of current political issues (for example, the "refugee crisis" in Europe).

However, exposure to such statements is not related to secular criticism of Islam, which seems to confirm that such a form of criticism is not necessarily a part of hateful discourse about immigration.

Hate speech spreads in society like an epidemic. People exposed to hate speech become less sensitive to such language, and this, in turn, makes them more prejudiced (Soral, Bilewicz, and Winiewski 2018). In this contribution we aimed to explore this process from a different angle: looking at the hate speech normalization process that possibly co-occurs with the process of hate speech desensitization. Further studies should determine whether these two processes do co-occur and explore the relationship between the two.

8.2 Limitations and Future Directions

There are several reasons to exercise caution in drawing conclusions from our study. First and foremost, our analyses are based on correlations and thus the possibility of inferring causal relations and establishing full mediation is limited. In particular, we measured acceptance of hate speech and Islamophobia at the same point in time. Thus, the direction of the relationship between them is unclear. However, measurements of media usage and prejudice were separated by a six months interval. The fact that we observe credible correlations between the two may represent a hint as to the direction of the relationship. However, there is still a possibility of a confounding variable affecting both the type of media usage and prejudice. This problem could be resolved with the use of cross-lagged models. Unfortunately, our measures of prejudice were included only in wave 2 of the study, and thus in our models we cannot control the level of prejudice at wave 1. Future studies should resolve this issue by measuring the full set of variables at several time points (at least two).

Second, in this study, we used data from the Polish sample. Although our data comes from a cross-national study, measurements of prejudice and attitudes towards hate speech were included only in the Polish version of the questionnaires. It must be noted that Poland is quite a specific example in this context. It is an ethnically homogeneous country, with more than 90 percent of the population identifying as Catholic. Most Polish citizens have never had contact with or even seen a person of Muslim origin, even during the "refugee crisis" (the Polish government has refused to accept individuals from Muslim countries). At the same time, the "refugee crisis" attracted great media attention and was covered both in traditional and digital media. All this suggests a need for cross-country and cross-cultural replication of our findings. Future studies should also rely more on behavioral, instead of self-descriptive measurements. These could include discriminatory allocation of resources, the use of hate speech, reactions to hate speech, or behavioral measures of (verbal) aggression towards minorities.

8.3 Conclusions

In this contribution we sought to investigate a social change that is taking place alongside the advance of information technology. People are increasingly changing the ways they obtain their information about world events. Initially, they may use the internet tools – social media or online citizen blogs – to gather more knowledge about news they have heard on TV or on the radio, and to form a more informed opinion. Later, they may decide to abandon TV, radio, and newspapers in favor of solely digital media. From the individual perspective, the benefits of switching to social media are numerous. One can obtain news tailored to one's needs, at any time of the day, almost anywhere on earth. Moreover, one can express one's opinions, through online forums or blogs, and be an active participant in information exchange. Overall, digital media provide a lot more freedom than traditional media. However, this individual freedom involves also societal risks. Digital media, with their lack of constraints, create an alternative reality with altered social norms, which can be harmful for individuals, groups, or social categories. The particular problem of digital media, which was the focus of our paper, is the spread and normalization of hate speech. We argue that with the normalization of hate speech, such utterances can become a powerful method of exerting social influence and motivate prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup violence, also in non-digital reality.

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