

Mitigating the frame SEXUAL THREAT in anti-migration discourse online

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Abstract

Studies of online comments focused on migration have mainly revealed the negative stereotyping of migrants – a stereotyping that involves different discourse strategies. One such strategy is the use of cognitive shortcuts called frames; the THREAT metaphor was identified as the most frequent frame for migrants (Stephan et al. 1999, Musolff 2015, Baider and Kopytowska 2017). This article examines the strategies used to construct migrants as a threat, specifically, as perpetrators of sexual violence and abuse, and the strategies used to counter this discursive construction. Our theoretical framework is interdisciplinary, we make use of frame analysis (Fillmore 1982), theories of sexual violence (Yuval-Davis 1997) as well as counter-narrative concepts (Braddock and Horgan 2016). Our data comprises online posts and articles shared *before* the Cologne New Year's Eve attacks in 2015 and therefore could not be attributed to those events. The data was collected within the scope of an EU-cofounded program, C.O.N.T.A.C.T., which focused on hate speech. From our analysis we conclude that to make an impact on social attitudes, interventions relying on counter-narratives must be well organized and well thought through because a spontaneous strategy does not seem to be the answer, but can even be counterproductive.

Keywords: hate speech, migration, sexual assault, frame analysis, counter-narrative

INTRODUCTION

Research focused on migration discourse in the press, by politicians, or in online comments has emphasized the negative stereotyping of migrants as involving different discourse strategies. One strategy uses cognitive shortcuts called frames (Fillmore 1982), and the most common frame related to migration is the THREAT metaphor (Stephan et al. 1999, Musolff 2015, Baider and Kopytowska 2017). This paper examines the argumentation strategies used in anti-migration comments that construct Muslims as sexual predators, and discusses how such a frame can be mitigated with counter-arguments. Migrants as sexual violence offenders is not a topic confined to online comments, since the President of the United States declared in January 2019 that, “thousands of illegal immigrants are in Texas jailed for child sex crime”.¹ This statement was made, according to the newspaper reporting it, in order to gather support for the wall the president wanted to be built between Mexico and the US to curb or prevent migration from the Central and South American countries. Even though such arguments in anti-migration discourse are unsupported by the facts, few studies have investigated the argumentation strategies used either to construct or debunk the sexual threat frame, and thus this paper aims at addressing this issue. Our data was retrieved online in December 2015, before the 2015 attacks in Köln and in other German cities; they were collected within an EU-cofounded program, C.O.N.T.A.C.T.,² focused on hate speech. They consist of comments posted under a Greek Cypriot article focused on specific incidents of sexual assaults perpetrated by migrants in Sweden, among which we concentrate more specifically on comments from the most extensive thread. We first contextualize the data specifying the macro, meso and micro levels (Fairclough 1995) of the topic of migration perceived as a security and sexual threat, specifically in European countries including Cyprus. Our second section presents and analyses the data in order to assess how successful counter-arguments to deconstruct some of the racist claims are. In our third section we propose /suggest strategies to improve counterattacks. Our theoretical framework focuses on frame analysis (Fillmore 1982) as well as theories of sexual violence (Yuval-Davis 1997).

1 FRAMING MIGRATION AS A SECURITY ISSUE

In this first part of our paper we review the THREAT frame associated with migration; in general, this frame constructs migrants as potential criminals, while more specifically it constructs them as sexual predators.

1 The *Sunday Times*, 13th January 2019 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/trump-claims-thousands-of-migrants-are-child-sex-offenders-zx5cdw051>

2 <http://reportinghate.eu/en/about-us/>

1.1 Framing migrants as a criminal threat

That migration is perceived as a security issue has long been a concern among specialists working in the field of migration studies; moreover, this view has intensified since the end of the 1980s, according to some researchers:

International migration is probably one of the most cited (...) of the so called new security agenda[s], which emerged at the end of the Cold War, and resulted in a broadening and deepening of our understanding of what constitutes a security threat or challenge. (Wohlfeld 2014, 63)

Numerous polls and surveys have recorded that migration is seen as a potential threat to both “national sovereignty and human security” (Thompson 2013).³ However, distorted beliefs and exaggerated overestimated numbers have caused an overblown perception of the migrant threat. In fact, according to a EURO-STAT report in 2013, only 4% of the residents of EU countries are non-EU nationals, while an Ipsos Mori opinion poll (Wohlfeld 2014, 63) revealed a significant overestimation of the number of migrants by Italians, who believed they represented 30% of the population while the official figure was only 7%. Such distorted perceptions have been explained by the ways in which the media report on migration, in narratives as well as images and how these reports are discussed online. Indeed, the media role in construing the public imaginary cannot be underestimated: they greatly shape public perceptions, opinions, and the ‘collective consciousness’ (Lippmann 1922). The media sets an agenda, frames a debate, interprets an issue—in terms of migration usually through negative framings, such as the proximation of fear⁴ (Cap 2017) and biased contextualization (Bauder 2011). For example, because the choice of words will have a psychological impact, references to migrants, refugees or asylum seekers as ‘illegal migrants’, which is the case in far-right articles, but also in some mainstream press, feed into negative feelings associated with illegal / clandestine migration, which is considered as a high security risk (Wohlfeld 2014). Even the use of the EU-preferred term ‘irregular migration’ in the mainstream news (van Dijk 1995) intensifies anxiety among the public. Moreover, research has found that racial considerations play an important role in attitudes towards migrants, non-white people seen as a greater threat; indeed news stories that provide ethnic details of a foreign offender, while withholding this information

³ This dual perception of the threat is important, as it will become clear when we examine the sexual violence topos.

⁴ *Proximation* is defined by Cap as a “systematic rhetorical arrangement” by which the speaker aims to “picture the occurring events and their actors as directly affecting the addressee” (Cap 2008, 29). For example when proximating spatially, the threatening entities are depicted as encroaching *physically* the other entities (Cap 2017, 2). With temporal proximation the conflict is represented not only as imminent but also “as momentous, historic and thus of central significance to the discourse addressee, as well as to the speaker” (Cap 2010, 70). Both the temporal and spatial proximation are used in anti-migration discourse. Therefore it requires an immediate preventive or neutralizing action. We used that concept to analyse anti immigration discursive strategies in far right discourse (Baider and Constantinou 2017).

for a local miscreant, legitimate and intensify these biases (cf. section 5.2 and the Cypriot press).

Considering the Greek situation,⁵ Karydis (2004) explains that Greece has “a repressive legal framework regarding migrants” (2004, 352) because of migration’s association with social and economic problems, where the expression ‘social problems’ is understood as ‘serious criminality’. However, yet again the ‘facts and data belie them’ (ibid). Earlier surveys in Greece (Voulgaris et al. 1995) indicated that between 1989 and 1992 the perception of migrants changed drastically: these surveys recorded an annual 29% increase in feelings against migration and by 1995, a record 69% thought there were too many foreigners. In fact, the number of migrants had remained more or less stable during that period. The authors argued that this perception was due to the changed imaginary, in which the migrant was seen as a threat to public order, an idea fed primarily by the mass media.

While a number of studies have shown that the legal and social imaginary link migrants with crime in Europe, the sexual violence phenomenon that is also part of this imaginary is an understudied phenomenon.

1.2 Framing migrants as a sexual threat

In her study on public discourse and sexual/gendered violence, Keskinen (2011, 107) concluded that race or ethnicity often frame such violence; once again, the media plays a central role in this perception, especially with its focus on the forced marriage, honour killing and rape that occurs in some communities. Gendered and sexual violence become associated with (if not described as a characteristic of) the newly arrived population or with a specific religious / cultural community, accentuating differences between the host population and newcomers. This focus conforms to what is called the ‘ideological square’, which is defined by the opposition of *us* (right values, good behaviours and correct beliefs) against *them* (wrong values, bad behaviours and distorted beliefs). Van Dijk (1995) described such a square as being the basis for racism; Langton (2017) suggested it to be the basis of hate speech, and we suggest it is also the basis for what we have called “alienating speech” whereby negative feelings such as contempt gradually develop to the point of becoming hate speech (Baider 2020).

Even though unlawful actions and (sexual) violence are also inflicted on migrants of both sexes and all ages, both during their journey to Europe and upon their

⁵ Although the present article focuses on Cyprus, the Cypriot press and the Greek press run many of the same articles, and comments are posted by mainland Greek speakers as well (Baider and Constantinou 2017).

arrival in the host countries (Women's Refugee Commission report), this (sexual) violence does not make the news.⁶

In short, the crime of a migrant is more likely to make front-page news than a crime against a migrant.⁷ The Cypriot press is no exception in this.

1.3 Framing migration in Cypriot public discourse

Like other Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, Spain and Italy, Cyprus has experienced major changes in patterns of inward migration over the last few decades. Migration flows reversed in the last third of the twentieth century from emigration to immigration, resulting in a major increase in immigration levels, beginning in 2004 when Cyprus joined the EU. In 2012, migrants made up 30% of the total population; the number went down with the 2013 economic crisis and stagnated at 16% in 2018, a percentage still far higher than the global or US rates.⁸ Refugees represent only a small part of these migrants, a mere 10% (of 16%); others are contract workers who until recently⁹ were required to return home once their permit expired (usually after five years) or was revoked.

Foreigners are rarely part of the news on any media--they are not usually interviewed, for example. However, when they do appear in the news it is in relation to negative events, and how they bring problems and no benefits (Baider and Kariolemou 2014, Demetriou 2014). Examples given by the ECRI report (2016) include the use of the derogatory term "illegal immigrant" for any and all migrants (cf. our previous section) and therefore implying a link between unlawfulness and migration; making reference to the citizenship of only suspected *foreign* perpetrators of crime; disproportionate reporting of unlawful actions committed by foreigners (e.g., abuse of refugee allowances, thus stereotyping them as scroungers). Cypriot politicians also promote and legitimize anti-foreigner sentiment in a number of ways:

Prior to the presidential elections in early 2013 (...), some politicians and public figures blamed migrants for unemployment and portrayed them as receiving higher state benefits than Cypriots, while Chinese and Vietnamese migrant women were stereotyped as prostitutes. (Demetriou 2014)

6 <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/15920/study-sexual-violence-against-migrant-men-and-boys-on-the-way-to-italy-widespread>

7 <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/aug/01/media-framed-migrant-crisis-disaster-reporting>

8 <https://in-cyprus.com/cyprus-has-higher-percentage-of-migrants-in-population-than-the-u-s/>

9 The EU put pressure on Cyprus to change the law.

Such practices “racialise crime and convey messages about the threat posed by migrants to the country’s security, health, welfare and culture” (ECRI 2016), and are likely to trigger anxiety and anger towards foreigners – which can then result in violence. At the same time, we have noted a positive self-representation, which facilitates exclusionary behaviour towards migrants as well as foreigners. Regarding discourse analysis, there have been several studies focused on Cypriot online comments and migration that identified a similar correlation between words relating to foreigners and words expressing fear (fear about crime, fear about job losses, fear of erosion of cultural and religious identity) (Baider 2013, 2017, Baider and Constantinou 2017). Because of the specific political context and the division of the island that has resulted in a Turkish presence in the northern region, Muslim migrants are especially targeted. The discursive frame of violence includes the words *barbarians* or *jihadists* (Baider 2019). This language choice creates cognitive associations between *any* migrant or *any* Muslim with terrorism and violence, i.e. the threat metaphor can be associated with all migrants. The aim of the present article is to examine the argumentation that is built to create the *sexual* threat as part of the anti-migration rhetoric and what counter-argumentation is used to debunk such a claim.

To do so our present study explores a set of Greek Cypriot online comments that were posted under an article describing two rapes in Sweden committed by immigrants.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, METHODOLOGY AND DATA

2.1 Framing hate speech

In our analysis we make use of the concept of frame as defined by Fillmore (1982):

*any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text or into a conversation all of the others are automatically made available.*¹⁰ (1982, 11, our italics)

The notion of “frame” is grounded in our cognitive and epistemological knowledge, which itself has been formed by our previous (linguistic and non-linguistic) experiences (Fillmore 1982, 112, Barsalou 1992). Frames can be used to

¹⁰ This concept can be also defined, as mentioned by Fillmore himself (1982, 11), with the words *schema*, *script*, *scenario* or *cognitive model*. However we prefer to use the word *frame* itself because of the rigidity and square-ness it evokes, which captures the constraints imposed on the bodies and behaviors.

understand complex issues on the basis of what can be called “common ground” (Kecskes 2013), i.e., well-known cultural references and values specific to the socio-cultural context that tend to elicit strong emotions. For example, migration framed as an invasion could implicitly evoke Cypriot history, i.e., the division of the island after the 1974 Turkish invasion (Baider 2017), would target the way Cypriots have experienced the 1974 events—e.g., losses human and material, painful memories, intense feelings of threat. Thus, if migrants are depicted in the press as invaders, the reaction is likely to be fear and a demand to control their “invasion”. Such linguistic choices impact social relations (cf. van Dijk 1998), since feeling afraid and threatened could be an incitement to violence in self-defence (Allport 1954, Stephan et al. 1999).

Understanding the ways such frames are constructed can help determine the most appropriate counter-argumentation, counter-narratives or alternative narratives (Gemmerli 2016, Braddock and Horgan 2016, Speckhard et al. 2018): “By gaining an increased understanding of user behaviour on Facebook and other social media platforms we target online, we are able to more carefully create and target our counter-narrative content” (Speckhard et al. 2018).

2.2 Data and general comments

Our data comprises a set of migration-related comments posted on Facebook collected by a Greek Cypriot team (Millar et al. 2017). The methodology – initially employed for a 2015 EU project – has been described in detail in recent publications (Baider et al. 2017, Assimakopoulos and Baider 2019).¹¹ We identified keywords related to migration (e.g., *migrant*, *refugee*, *foreigner*, etc.) and collected all local news stories containing these that were published online over two three-month periods (April to June 2015 and December 2015 to February 2016) so as to avoid the 2015 summer period when the focus was on the influx of migrants. Even though Cyprus was not affected by the refugee crisis at that time, the Greek Cypriot press offered broad coverage of this phenomenon because of the situation in Greece (Baider and Constantinou 2018, 201). Our data found very few comments posted online for Cypriot articles compared to other countries in the consortium. Only one article received many comments (15 pages of comments, 150 comments, 8,463 words), and the discussion was focused on sexual violence and murder. Forty different people participated in the discussion. They appear to be mostly young people, with pseudonyms referring to some universities, for example.

¹¹ This dataset is from studies conducted as part of a European project on hate speech (reportinghate.eu). All data are under the EU research program C.O.N.T.A.C.T. copyright. Comments were collected and annotated by the University of Cyprus for the Cypriot data; please refer to the website reportinghate.eu.

The article was posted on numerous news sites, including websites of far-right political parties like the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn; a Google search produces almost 4,000 hits.¹² It was still circulating as news in 2016,¹³ although the story initially ran on 11 December 2015. The title of the article reads: Νεαρή γυναίκα βιάστηκε μέχρι θανάτου από μουσουλμάνο λαθρομετανάστη¹⁴ (Young woman raped to death by Muslim illegal immigrant).

Both the photo, which can still be seen in the link (footnotes 9 and 10), and the article are quite graphic. The photo shows a woman screaming (we see only the head and shoulders), with dark hands circling her throat; the article vividly describes two brutal rapes committed by foreigners. One migrant is said to be from Pakistan and the other to be “Muslim”, both are described as being illegal migrants. In fact, the caption for the article uses the word *illegal* twice, thereby emphasizing a security threat (cf. the high anxiety about illegal immigration described in 1.2):

SHOCK IN SWEDEN. Young woman raped to death by Muslim illegal immigrant. Shock in Sweden reveals that a 34-year-old Swedish illegal immigrant raped a young girl in a luxury hotel garage when she went to pick up her car. (Our italics)

The article later asserts that a “huge rape crisis” perpetrated by Muslims has hit Sweden and Norway, and that there had been 1,000 rapes in the first seven months of 2015. While “studies” showed that Muslim were the perpetrators, there are no specific references or details provided for these. The conclusion incriminates a “they” who do not take action, live in a state of denial, and implicitly expose the population to danger:

(1) Those numbers are shocking but no one reacts. They continue to believe that illegal immigrants are all refugees seeking a better future. Here are the results.

The pronoun *they* is recurrent in the anti-immigration comments in our data, but there is never any clarification of who these *they* are: the Swedish population, the Swedish authorities, the people who accept migrants? The article elicited a widespread and very strong anti-migrant and anti-Muslim reaction, for the most part extremely virulent, including illegal hate speech against Muslims.¹⁵ Very few individuals responded with “civic monitoring” (Hatakka 2009, 10) – meaning rarely did anyone post contradictory evidence or condemn these racists posts. These few individuals include the author of one of the very first comments, strongly

¹² https://xryshaygh.blogspot.com/2015/12/blog-post_52.html

¹³ <http://www.iokh.gr/2016/01/biasmos-mexri-thanatou-sth-souhdia.html>

¹⁴ livenews Friday, December 11, 2015 10:24:00 AM CET [en] [other]

¹⁵ Some of the comments were actually chosen in a perceptual experiment to test perception of hate speech among the young Greek Cypriot population (Assimakopoulos and Baider 2019).

condemning the newspaper and accusing it of purposefully republishing old news to incite fear and fan the fire of hatred:

(2) this (newspaper) has become porn news. DESPICABLE. This news dates back to 2013. (...) you post it to terrorize the world and so that the haters can spit their bile. (...)¹⁶

Indeed, the news is false: the rapes and murder did not happen in 2015. Those who posted the article were though “spitting their bile and hatred”, and encouraging others to become outraged too. Eighty-five per cent of the participants engaged in aggressive speech, whether in xenophobic speech or anti leftist statements. The comment quoted above, condemning the news story, is an example of a counter-argument, a concept which we explore below.

2.3 Countering hate speech online: creating a counter-narrative

The word *counter-narrative* is used to refer to any narrative (text, video, images, etc.) that aims to respond to the discourse deployed by extremists or malicious groups against certain targets. We cannot know the reasons why participants decide to write counter-narratives, and whether they have an explicit agenda when doing so or why they have the courage to do so. They can be activists or regular commenters, or both or none of these. In any case, they are among the few people trying to counter hate speech. However, counter-argumentation does not often lead to a thread, with counter narrators giving up quickly, most of the time because of ad hominem insults and strongly negative comments addressed to them. In the present thread only two people dared to provide counter arguments to the anti-migrant narrative.

Counter-narratives have been defined in several ways. Direct counter-narratives “deconstruct, discredit or demystify violent extremist messaging through ideology, logic, fact, or humour” (Warrington 2017). Their aim is

to ‘win the argument’ by deconstructing and delegitimising extremist propaganda (...) making fun of, challenging and falsifying the extremist ideology’s claims or demonstrating the contradiction between extremist utopias and their brutal realities. (Gemmerli 2015, 4)

¹⁶ Since the examples in the article have been translated, it is impossible to retrace the originals and this is in accordance with the GDPR rules. We cannot know the reasons why participants are embarking on writing counter-narratives, whether they have an explicit agenda when doing so and why they have the courage to do so. They can be activists or regular commenters or both or none of these categories. In any case they are few people trying to counter hate speech and the counter-argumentation does not often lead to a thread, counter narrators giving up quickly, most of the time because of direct insults and strong negative comments towards them. In that thread only two people dared to provide counter arguments.

Gemmerli (2015) qualifies such narratives as a short-term solution: “This approach *attempts to affect the behaviour* of those who sympathise with or take part in violent extremism *in the short term*” (our italics). They also encourage the passive reader to condemn hateful comments, while they also help to trigger positive feelings (such as empathy) for victims of hate speech. Some counter-tactics – unfortunately – include using discourteous means to oppose online racism; for example, sharing links with memes and parodies / use of ridicule (Hatakka 2019, 10).

Strategies called *alternative narratives* focus more on acknowledging the grievances and suggesting peaceful solutions; or they focus on the victims of hate speech and the consequences they suffer, rather than presenting direct counter-argumentation *per se* (Speckhard et al. 2018). They specifically aim to offer a (positive) alternative to the stereotyping contained in the messages, and try to listen to the ill-will and grievances that motivate such comments. Some studies claim these initiatives have improved the situation (Braddock and Horgan 2016, Warrington 2017, Speckhard et al. 2018). For instance, Speckhard et al. (2018) were able to observe that people reached by counter-narratives in Iraq, “have both thoughtfully engaged with the content of our videos and initiated online debates on ISIS and other contentious socio-political issues that often influence and drive violent extremism”. This impact was measured by analysing Facebook reactions generated by four Facebook campaigns in Iraq. Braddock and Dillard (2016) performed a series of meta-analyses related to narratives and persuasion over a 30-year period, and concluded that “exposure to a narrative is *positively* related to the adoption of narrative-consistent viewpoints” (our italics). They argue that narratives have the potential to persuade, independent of context. However, many have expressed doubt about the efficiency of such counter strategies (de Graaf 2009, Gemmerli 2015, 2016, Woron 2018).

In any case, we will adopt the hypothesis that such narratives work, even if only in the short term, since even limited effectiveness is important as it can help prevent an *escalation* of violence (Baider 2020), thus working in the opposite way to radicalization, which has been shown to cause an escalation in violent actions such as revenge, retaliation, etc. (Roy 2008). A major value of counter-narratives is, therefore, their ability to prevent such developments in less radical commenters. The above-mentioned studies concluded that, overall, to be effective such narratives should target the underlying motivations that lead to violence, taking into account the argumentation, grievances and emotions that fuel hate speech. For this reason we believe that analysing data collected from websites may be a way to fulfil these aims and present more constructive counter-narratives.

In our data we examined the few exchanges in which there were both a racist argument and a counter-argument in order to see the kinds of strategies used

to heighten as well as to defuse the emotions described above (fear, anger and hatred).

Only five people engaged in counter argumentation, three very briefly with one or 2 exchanges, while two responded 10 times to other participants. One of those two engaged in exchanging poetry with another commenter during most of his or her exchanges, and the thread stopped very quickly after those messages. It is difficult to know whether they did this on purpose to stop the thread or whether it happened by chance. The second counter-narrator based his or her argumentation on facts (quoting Sharia law or referring to history).

4 ANALYSIS OF THE FRAMES USED IN HATE SPEECH AND COUNTER SPEECH

As mentioned earlier, most participants expressed anger in their statements, but only five people made more than six comments, with two being especially prolific (25 statements), and one of them sharing multiple videos about sexual violence and migrants.

The xenophobic exchanges were of the following kind:

- angry hate speech directed at Muslims with racist slurs and calls “to wipe out this race from this planet”;
- reframing the assault as a class, political or religious issue;
- highlighting links to frightening videos, photographs, articles, etc., many of which were other old or fake news, spreading fear, anger and hatred.

4.1 Reframing as a cultural-religious issue

The sexual threat is most often framed as a cultural-religious issue, as in (3) below, or in reference to Sharia law as in (4). The first argument is that in “their” cultures it is acceptable to mistreat women since they consider women second-class citizens and mere objects. Therefore, as objects, they have no rights, rape is little more than “business as usual” so to speak, as explained in (3):

- (3) For them this is not anything special, they have learned to be this way in their countries, to rape (.....) women are for them objects;

In the thread below, Sharia law, renamed Islamic law and falsely mentioned as being in the Koran (as hinted at in [2]: *All of this from the Koran*) is cited as the

reason that Muslim civilization is misogynist; it is used to argue that rape is not only normal given the lesser value of women, but it is also *demande*d by that law and by their God (*they think they obey ALLAH*). Such comments encouraged other participants to denounce *all* believers in Allah as monsters as in the subsequent comments:

- (4) (in English in the original) “Under Islamic law, rape can only be proven if the rapist confesses or if there are four male witnesses. Women who allege rape without the benefit of the act having been witnessed by four men who subsequently develop a conscience are actually confessing to having sex. If they or the accused happens to be married, then it is considered to be adultery” – WHEN Islamists rape, IF THERE are four pals to confirm the rape, the girl is accused of adultery!! *All of this from the Koran!!!* Afterwards we SPEAK of HUMAN RIGHTS for these animals (...) *they think they obey ALLAH.....* (our italics).

And while Sharia law is indeed unfair to women, it contains precepts that can be seen as unfair to all Muslims; in fact, Sharia has been denounced as violating the human rights of many sections of society and not only the rights of women.¹⁷ Moreover, only a minority of Muslims believe in Sharia law, which is controversial within the community: more Muslim countries do not apply this law (or are opposed to its application) than those that do.¹⁸ Further, the conclusion that rape is *demande*d by the religious text, i.e., Muslims not only rape women freely but they also have to do this to be a good “Muslim” and in the name of Allah, is a distortion of the quoted text. A graphic parallel made between words in capitals such as HUMAN RIGHTS and ALLAH supports this conclusion and implies a broad cognitive parallel between the lack of human rights and those who follow Allah in general.

Other comments conclude not only that “they” cannot be allowed in Europe, but that “they” have to be annihilated since they pose such a serious threat to women. The identity behind the pronoun *they* becomes blurred in these comments, since the word *Muslims* is also used (e.g., [10]) in links to videos or posts describing Muslims as rapists, thus confusing fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists, discrediting the whole Muslim population.

17 There is a lively debate in Europe regarding the issue of human rights and Sharia law, not only regarding women’s rights, including marriage with under-age girls: “It does not contain a right to freedom of religion, does not confirm the equality before the law of all men regardless of their religion” (cf. <https://eclj.org/religious-freedom/pace/la-charia-est-elle-compatible-avec-les-droits-de-lhomme->).

18 See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/five-myths-about-sharia>, as well as a 2017 Pew research study showing that “in Eastern Europe and Central Asia – including Turkey (12%), Kazakhstan (10%) and Azerbaijan (8%) – relatively few favor the implementation of Sharia law” (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>).

The thread following (4) – counter-arguments and support of the comment – is given below:

- (5) Response to (4): Are we sure however that the “Islamic law” represents the Koran? Because in the Middle Ages we had “Christian laws” (i.e., forbidding a woman to have premarital relations, etc.) but *this does not mean that they represented the teachings of Jesus*.
- (6) Response to (5): SORRY BUT WE DO NOT wage WAR for the holy VIRGIN and we do not burn people who have premarital relations.
- (7) Response to (6): The Christians have committed horrific crimes. I refer not to the Crusaders 500 years ago, I say this for today. This has nothing to do with religion but with complete illiteracy and lack of education. Wars never, never (NEVER) happen because of religion. Religion is simply the excuse given to the masses.
- (8) Response to (7): OK it happened with the banner and the cross CENTURIES ago, it is a disgrace, but we are talking about 2015!
- (9) Response to (6): And us? Do we not have bizarre prophets?? “30 million Turks will die”, etc ..; And if we do not practice what he [the bizarre prophet] said, it is because we cannot put his teachings into practice (we are a weak country).

The first (counter) argument in (5) hints at the fact that Sharia law does not reflect the way Muslims live, in the same way that Christian laws did not reflect how Christians lived. This argument was quickly refuted in (6) and (8), citing a false comparison between a recent event (a rape) and historical religious wars. Moreover, the explanation in (5) suggests that Muslims are dragging the West back to the Middle Ages, a common argument in anti-migration posts.

In (7) the counter-argumentation diverts the discussion to wars resulting from a lack of education, implying the same for sexual assaults (έλλειψη παιδείας και εκπαίδευσης); such a dubious link raises serious questions: does this post imply that educated people would be less violent? That education would stop violence? What kind of education would achieve this? The post is very vague.

Finally in (9) the participant refers to the Cypriot situation to perhaps foster self-criticism, quoting a local religious leader’s call for violence and murder (*Do we not have bizarre prophets?? “30 million Turks will die”*). And although self-reflection can foster critical thinking (see section 5), this argument does not deny or question the generalization that Islam is by definition a violent religion, and that all Muslims are therefore dangerous.

These exchanges reveal that, first, counter-arguments engage on the terrain of the haters, disputing/explaining each point hoping to encourage self-reflection. They

do not use alternative narratives that would focus the debate on another dimension of the issue. None of the counter-attacks noted the generalizations and false reasoning used in the original post.

The second broad observation is that they work on logic and downplay any grievance. They do not acknowledge the misogyny of Sharia law, which might help to discredit the argument.

In sum, these examples reflect the general lines of argumentations on both sides:

- the anti-migration argumentation accentuates the difference, deepens the distance and thus fosters contempt /fear/ anger against “them”;
- the counter-attackers emphasize similarities to foster understanding;
- neither side seems to convince the other; neither side is able to even raise doubts among those holding the opposite view.

4.3 Cultural reframing for political gains

Some comments reframe the issue of sexual violence by suggesting that Muslims have a political agenda. In (10) Muslims or/ and their leaders are described as having purposefully targeted the West:

(10) I do not want to engage in interminable discussions on these issues, but we should at least agree that the Muslims, *or if you prefer*, their leaders (...) had targeted, have targeted and will target the Western countries either from barbarism or jealousy (...) So let’s imagine about what they think, for example, of women, of Christians, of the values that have defined the Greeks and therefore European culture, *and then the image will speak for itself*. Thanks.

- 1) You should shop in small GREEK-run shops
- 2) Those LISTENING TO NEWS FROM THE CHANNELS are causing serious harm to their health
- 3) ALL JOURNALISTS BELONG to a PARTY
- 4) DO NOT INVEST ONE EURO IN GERMAN PRODUCTS! (INVESTIEREN SIE NICHT 1 EYRO IN DEUTCHE PRODUKTE!) (our italics, capitals are used in the original quote)

The motives for targeting the West are described as “barbarism” (categorizing Muslims as dangerous) and jealousy (categorizing the Self as being in an enviable, favourable position). These attributed motives reveal the ideological square *us vs them*, demonizing Muslims and beatifying Christians (or Cypriots), while ignoring the reasons for the alleged “targeting” of the West, such as political turmoil or economic crisis, reasons possibly brought about by the West itself. “Their”

treatment of women and Christians, as well as ‘their’ opinion of the defining values of Greek culture and therefore European culture should be sufficient to end any such discussion, both now and in the future. The pronoun *they* is initially, and tentatively, applied to just the Muslim leaders, but seems to encompass all Muslims at the end of the quote, defining the entire population as incompatible with European culture and values, as mentioned earlier in our analysis.

Interestingly, the comment ends with some practical advice that *at first* seems to have little to do with the issue, a call to boycott German products. This is ironically written in German, and likely aims to punish Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor at the time, for her responsibility in encouraging the massive influx of migrants to the EU in 2015. It is also a reminder of the boycotts of Jewish-owned shops during the second world war in Germany. It is not only racist (against the Germans) but also at the same time nationalistic (buy in small Greek-owned shops) and xenophobic, with the call to boycott *all foreign-owned shops*. Thus the argument has expanded from a wish to exclude the misogynist Muslims from Cyprus to a desire to exclude all foreigners, a shift we found in an earlier work on extreme-right political discourse in Cyprus (Baider 2017). Another argument attacks the media, using another well-known theme in far-right discourse: all journalists defend the establishment agenda, i.e., the New World Order.

Therefore under the cover of protecting women’s rights and denouncing misogyny we read a far-right agenda.

Other comments, more rarely, reframe sexual violence as a class issue, but the shift to hate speech, conspiracy theory included, seems almost unavoidable. In (11), it is stated that only the unimportant people will be affected by migrants’ arrivals, not the ruling class who favours this influx of cheap labour:

- (11) I would like to see what you would say *if they rape the daughter, the son of someone in the government*
- (12) This not going to happen for two reasons (to the rulers, and to the propagandist monsters). First, because their children are guarded by 1200 cops each. And second, because the illegal reptiles have been ordered by their Imam not to harass them....
- (13) There is only one solution ... to burn every Muslim. To eliminate them, not one should be left alive.

Immediately in (12) a conspiracy theory is implied, i.e., that immigration (and the ensuing violence) is organized on both sides-- the establishment, the pro-migration people called *propagandists*, and the Muslim countries. The extreme expression “propagandist monsters” (προπαγανδνιστικά εκτρωματα) to refer to liberal minded people and the metaphor “reptiles” (ερπετοειδης) to refer to migrants are in themselves hate speech. Such extremist language triggers or

encourages illegal hate speech in (13), where there is an explicit call for violence, and a virulent hatred expressed against a specific community (according to the Council of Europe 2008 definition of hate speech).

This thread illustrates how misinformation brings about the escalation of words and calls to punitive and even violent actions. The counter-argumentation that resisted and challenged misinformation from the radical right was unable to delegitimize the opposing commenters. In the next section we will offer suggestions for testing other means of counter-argumentation and organizing civic monitoring.

5 COUNTERING FRAMING MIGRANTS AS (SEXUALLY) VIOLENT

5.1 Creating counter-narratives

There are numerous reasons for the violent reactions read in comments (12) and (13), and we must understand them if we want to respond effectively.¹⁹ Specialists in hate have tried to define hate speech by its motivations. Fischer et al. (2018), in an overview of the topic, summarised the variety of ways that hate speech can be motivated: by a kind of generalized anger (Frijda 1986); a generalized evaluation (Ben-Ze'ev 2000); a normative judgment (McDevitt and Levin 1993); a will to devalue others or to hurt the other person (Rempel and Burris 2005); a wish to take revenge or to be avenged (Baider 2013, 2014). It is unclear whether researchers / activists in counter-narratives and extremism have considered those possible motivators of hate speech to create more appropriate strategies.

As a matter of fact, specialists in counter-narrative argue that the most effective messages do not lecture the audience; rather, they offer something to think about and reflect on. They focus on argumentation strategies, recommending the following precepts for the content of counter-narratives (given in Tuck and Silverman 2016):²⁰

- Be thought-provoking;
- Quote facts from credible sources to deconstruct, discredit and demystify haters' messages;
- Use emotional appeals to highlight the impact of hate speech;
- Use satire and humour to undermine the claims made online by haters;
- Spread positive stories and messages from people the audience admires.

¹⁹ We endorse the hypothesis that hate speech is indeed *discursive hatred*, although other researchers such as Brown (2015) dispute that position.

²⁰ But see Gemmerli (2015, 2016), who disagrees with some of these recommendations.

These suggestions are *aimed at the audience* rather than the haters, and recommendations for writing alternative narratives are very similar.

Furthermore the option of alternative narratives has also been put forward by researchers such as Briggs and Feve (2013, 6). They argue that *alternative narratives* primarily comprise a “positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy” – arguments that once again seem to target the audience and not the haters. As such, these narratives should take the form of a dialogue that will foster conversation online:

Comments – and in particular, sustained engagements or conversations – provide a better indication for researchers about how individual users and target audiences overall may be reacting to the messages in counter-narrative videos. (Silverman et al. 2016)

The aim is to manage engagement, i.e., interactions, whether positive or negative, while also providing insight into reactions to a narrative. For instance, *Average Mohamed*²¹ videos have inspired young Muslims to debate the role of gender in Islam and to deal with the struggle of having multiple identities. Fostering conversations online means facilitating exposure to alternative viewpoints, which can potentially foster critical thinking or plant a seed of doubt that later matures into a change in attitudes and behaviours (Gemmerli 2015, Silverman et al. 2016, 14):

The effective narrative must, as a kind of Trojan Horse, sow a seed of doubt, which may be allowed to grow and break down the defence mechanisms from within. (Gemmerli 2015)

Our proposal is to build counter-frames with argumentation based as much on reasoning as on emotion. This will enable us to address the motivators of hate speech on both the cognitive and the affective levels.

5.2 Being prepared, knowing the facts to foster engagement

We have seen in section 4 that the counter-argumentation used by participants addresses neither the haters’ grievances nor their “facts”. Indeed only one commentator in our data, on the counter-argumentation side, acknowledges the situation in Sweden. Not knowing those facts and treating as propaganda the figures given by the haters without checking them will only feed distrust on their part and on the part of passive readers. For example, in (14) one participant attacks another because the source of the statistics (the Swedish government) he supplied is not acknowledged.

²¹ <https://averagemohamed.com>

- (14) *What specific event are you talking???* Because I sent you specific events and Swedish government statistics !!!!! Or did you not read [my statistics] because in reality you are only interested in reading only your own opinion and propaganda !!!

Maybe a lack of knowledge explains the above lack of engagement with the “facts” given to reflect on; the haters interpret this as a lack of openness to dialogue (correctly, but also paradoxically). We would thus recommend knowing such facts that can be easily found in reports from GOs and NGOs. Some of them have indeed shown, for example, that males from cultures where male dominance and a macho attitude are accepted/expected are more likely to commit domestic or sexual violence. In Germany a government-sponsored study reported a rise in violent crime since 2015, and found that most (sexual) crimes are committed by a certain category of migrants, migrants from specific countries, or migrants with no hope of being allowed to stay:

Afghans and Syrians were less likely to commit crimes than migrants from North Africa, who stand little chance of receiving permission to stay in Germany.²²

Although it is only a small number of migrants responsible for such sexual assaults, generalizations are quick and feed into the local fear against all migrants. There are several criteria that could be used to build a counter-argumentation in this context:

- young males in general, *whether migrants or nationals*, are generally more likely to commit crimes, and more likely to become victims of violence;
- young males in specific categories within the local population, such as drug users, are also more likely to commit violent crimes than any other segment of the population;
- people are also more likely “to report crimes if they are committed by people who are different from them, causing some distortion in the crime statistics”;²³
- the media, as we have mentioned before, are more likely to report and give greater coverage to a crime committed by a foreigner.

Therefore knowing the data and how to contextualise the facts are important to foster critical thinking.

5.2 Strategies used to counter-frame the ideological square

As mentioned before, good counter or alternative narratives must foster critical thinking and spark reactions. We also noted earlier (section 4) several strategies

22 <https://www.apnews.com/b5f9a0c0848b430c9cf6493d1d310c7b>

23 <https://nypost.com/2018/01/03/young-male-migrants-fuel-rise-in-violence-in-germany-study-says/>

that the participants used included critical thinking and elaborate alternative/counter- narratives. We will now examine these strategies and suggest ways to make them more effective.

5.2.1 Diverting the debate onto the self: misogyny at home

To respond to accusations that foreign cultures, i.e., those of many migrants, are misogynistic, a consideration of Cypriot attitudes towards women can offer food for thought. Cypriot women are often denied justice due to an imbalanced legal system (in terms of gender): until very recently, in fact, sexism was enshrined in the island's laws. For example, until the year 2000, children born of a *Cypriot mother* would not be recognized as Cypriot, while children with a Cypriot father were automatically awarded Cypriot citizenship. Children (of Cypriots) born abroad have the right to Cypriot citizenship upon application, submitted by one of the parents. However, prior to the 2000 amendment, the children of a Cypriot woman did not have this right, and could acquire citizenship *only with the approval of the Minister of Interior and provided that they fulfilled certain strict criteria*²⁴ (our italics).

Children of *women* with internally displaced status (i.e., who were from the northern part of the island which is now under Turkish Cypriot rule) have also been denied the status and benefits awarded to children of internally displaced *men* (until 2013 and sometimes later):²⁵

A member of the House of Parliament lodged a complaint in respect of the non-entitlement of persons whose mother, but not father, is a refugee, to acquire refugee status as opposed to persons who acquire refugee status because their father is a refugee and consequently become eligible for state benefits. It was propounded that this fact constitutes an adverse discrimination based on gender between the two categories of persons in breach of the principle of equality.²⁶

Such unequal treatment on the basis of sex is also part of everyday life in Cyprus. A 2013 United Nations report²⁷ regretted “the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women

24 [http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/mfa2016.nsf/5FC67546633D12DEC2257F95002BE630/\\$file/National%20Report%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Cyprus%20on%20the%20Implementation%20of%20the%20conclusions.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/mfa2016.nsf/5FC67546633D12DEC2257F95002BE630/$file/National%20Report%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Cyprus%20on%20the%20Implementation%20of%20the%20conclusions.pdf)

25 <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/country%20report/asia/cyprus/cyprus%20cedaw%20co.pdf?vs=3841>

26 https://www.theioi.org/downloads/78t34/Europe_Cyprus_Commissioner%20for%20Administration_ANNUAL%20REPORT%202006%20Equality%20Authority%20EN.pdf

27 https://www.theioi.org/downloads/78t34/Europe_Cyprus_Commissioner%20for%20Administration_ANNUAL%20REPORT%202006%20Equality%20Authority%20EN.pdf

and men in the family, in the workplace, in political and public life and in society at large. In particular, the Committee notes with concern that the prevalence of such stereotypes contributes to women's disadvantaged position in the State party". Such a disparity in power and rights can manifest itself as sexual violence, reporting of which is often discouraged, if not downright forbidden/taboo. If it is reported then the victim becomes the guilty party.

When referring to sexual assault, the First Pancyprrian Survey examining the interpersonal behaviour of the youth, entitled *Violent Behaviour in Interpersonal Relationships of Young Adults in Cyprus for people aged 18 – 25* (2012), reported that in Cyprus there is a widespread tendency to "blame the victim" in rape cases, as well as a widespread acceptance of this attitude:

70% of the participants... had opinions and attitudes that are conducive to violence such as 'victim blaming', and the belief that violence in relationships is a 'private' matter'.²⁸

In fact, while the EU average for victim-blaming views in cases of rape is 22%, the percentage in Cyprus is 44%,²⁹ the highest in the EU. This figure means that almost half the respondents hold the view that "violence against women is often provoked by the victim".

The social situation described above could restrain commenters from taking the moral high ground in a debate over misogyny.

5.2.2 Diverting the debate onto the self: sexual violence at home

As noted earlier (section 4) some participants tried to counter the idea of Islam being a religion of violence by recalling earlier times (Crusades, wars) when the West was terrorizing the world and the very countries of today's migrants. One tried to diffuse the ideological square *us* (good) and *them* (bad) by recalling that Cyprus's history is not immune to calls to violence, e.g., made by "prophets" or politicians against "others". However, one need not recall the Middle Ages nor limit violence to politicians or priests; these attitudes are prevalent today. One could have focused the debate on the local situation of violence rather than the violence of others. It was an opportunity to publicize the statistics on sexual violence in Cyprus, e.g., widespread and unreported child abuse, with studies showing that one in four girls and one in six boys have been victims of some

28 2017 EIGE report: https://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/system/files/post-files/eshte_data_review_eige.pdf

29 https://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/system/files/post-files/eshte_data_review_eige.pdf

kind of sexual abuse at some stage of their lives – most perpetrated by someone they knew. The real problem is thus sexual violence locally; shifting this to the migrants only ignores the problem in Cyprus, where actions could be taken and be effective if the concern about sexual violence is genuine.³⁰

Furthermore, an EU-wide survey carried out in 2015, at the time of the comments, revealed that 15% of women aged 18–74 years have experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime.³¹ In the same year, 83.5 % of calls received by the national domestic violence helpline were from women and girls. International reports point out that Cyprus as a State reports very few investigations, prosecutions and/or convictions in cases of domestic violence, despite the high number of cases reported, including the mistreatment of domestic workers.³² Reports on Cyprus, which were known at the time of the discussion, describe trafficking in human beings being rampant, owing to the shameful practice of offering young women (often minors) “artists’ visas” (abolished in 2014, ten years after Cyprus’s EU accession in 2004)³³ only to exploit them as prostitutes in the country. What do the outraged commentators say about this situation in Cyprus? This could be seen as a convenient “forgetfulness”.

As a matter of fact, one might wonder, given the facts set out above (and in section 5.2.2), whether the online outrage regarding the sexual violence described in the article would have been the same, or even present, if both victim and perpetrator had been Swedish? If both had been migrants? If the woman had been a migrant and the man Swedish? The *fact that the man was a migrant* and violated a “white woman” seems at the heart of the outrage, not the violence *per se*, nor the act *per se*.

The rage seems more about race than about gender, morality or women’s rights. At the outset of this article (section 1.1) we argued that migration is framed as a threat to both “national sovereignty and human security”. The (sexual) violence perpetrated by migrants is an opportunity to build the threat on both fronts: the security of the nation and of individuals.

30 <https://cyprus-mail.com/2018/11/18/one-in-four-children-experience-some-form-of-sexual-abuse-in-cyprus/>

31 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014. Violence against Women: An EU-wide Survey. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

32 The prevalence of sexual violence and harassment experienced by women is very difficult to ascertain, since no administrative body follows the minimum standards as outlined in the Council of Europe guidance, (2016). When five foreign women and their two daughters disappeared between 2016 and 2018, and were found assassinated in 2019, the police were accused of gross negligence, not to mention racism, and the Minister of the Interior and the Chief of Police were forced to resign in 2019 because of public outrage at the lack of actions on the part of the authorities when they were warned at the time of their disappearance.

33 <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/country%20report/asia/cyprus/cyprus%20upr%20wg%20report.pdf?vs=3906>

5.3 Nationalism, border and gender violence

Research into the semantic frames used in hate speech directed at migrants, within the context of Greek Cypriot online discussions (Baider 2018), confirms the Foucauldian approach to Othering: any discussion of the Other will take place *within* networks of power and *for* the benefit of those who enjoy their economic, political, social and symbolic powers; in the same way that frames work within networks of powers, the system of concepts they employ is primarily created by the media and the public discourse in general.

Framing sexual violence within these power relations in counter-arguments could trigger a debate beyond sexual violence, a debate that considers the structure of social relationships based on violence in economic (exploitation) or political systems. Mardorossian (2002) explained that any analysis of sexual violence should not focus on individual actors but engage with the *social and structural theories* of sexual violence. Some feminist critics have claimed that rape is a way “to inscribe subordinate status on to an intimately known ‘Other’” (Moffett 2006) and to maintain “patriarchal order”, while Keskinen (2011), along with other analysts (Gingrich 2006), has noted the instrumentalization of gender and sexuality by right-wing parties. In fact, as we have witnessed in the analysis of the comments, several instances of sexual assaults have been used to push a far-right agenda and call for stronger borders within the EU. The most blatant example was the front cover of the Polish magazine *wSieci* (“The Network”), a mass-market politically conservative magazine, which published a highly inflammatory article after the 2015 sexual assaults in Germany. The cover showed a white-skinned, blond-haired woman draped in the European flag, screaming, while three pairs of dark-skinned male hands were groping her body. The headline read “The Islamic rape of Europe”. It triggered outraged responses on social media and some Twitter users compared the image to Nazi propaganda. Inside the magazine, the article refers to the rape and sexual assault of hundreds of women in the German city of Cologne on New Year’s Eve. “After the events of New Year’s Eve in Cologne, the people of old Europe painfully realized the problems arising from the massive influx of immigrants,” wrote the report’s author, Aleksandra Rybińsk (*wSieci.pl.*, 13 February 2016). Allowing migration into the EU has been metaphorized as allowing the rape and assault of European women.

Indeed, the idea of nation-building as intrinsically gendered and sexualized is not new. In nationalist discourse women appear as central figures in the reproduction of national collectivities and nation states (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, Yuval-Davis 1997, Demetriou and Hadjipavlou 2018). This discourse also implies state control over marriage and reproduction, since the transfer of customs, language, traditions and religion is done usually through the family.

In this way, the woman is perceived as the best channel for nation-building; as a result women's bodies can symbolically and materially become battlefields on which group struggles are played out (Hadjipavlou 2010). Indeed, after analysing the exchanges which are the topic of this study, we concluded that the rage expressed was not so much about a rape, but about a non-European taking control of a European woman.

6 CONCLUSION

The mass media, whose cultural authority constructs or contributes to our understanding of the world, shapes the range of possibilities for understanding the story of migration (Newton 2008). Moreover, the media generally encourages punitive immigration policies and even violence against certain groups, such as those presented as perpetrators of sexual violence. Irregular migration is on the increase (Wohlfeld 2014, 67); consequently feelings of insecurity are also on the rise, feeding populist and far-right activism in EU countries, including Cyprus (Baider and Constantinou 2017). In this article we have analysed how online discussions escalate verbal violence, as they feed on and perpetuate this feeling of insecurity and threat, thus reinforcing stereotyping while we also examined the attempts to mitigate this escalation, which sadly were not very effective. Counter-strategies included among others: 1. debunking some statistics; despite the fact that these statistics were correct, to make an impact they should have been contextualized; 2. making historical comparisons with violence in the West – an argument that not only backfired but served to reinforce the cliché of Muslims being a backward civilization. Our data and analysis indicate a major difference in argumentative power of the two sides: the counter-attackers have neither the means nor the knowledge to make an impact, not even on their own audience (since sometimes facts they disputed were actually true). The analysis showed that arguing with haters or trolls online is very difficult; it requires training and preparation. Responders must have sufficient and appropriate knowledge (about statistics, laws, etc.) to clearly and effectively counter the arguments, while they must also be equipped with certain skills to guide the debate. We suggested an “inward looking” strategy would be effective to point out inconsistencies in behaviour and reasoning regarding the phenomenon of sexual violence, which is instrumentalized for political gains. Such training would require, according to Johnson et al. (2019), “good psychology, social psychology, and know[ing] some history that could actually engage”, as well as working as a team.³⁴ Understanding the argumentation of hate speech narratives and devising effective counter-narratives

³⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/aug/22/online-hate-extremism-physics-science>

are the first steps. There must be testing and evaluation of a range of counter-narratives in order to understand the impact of such tactics in the specific socio-cultural context under scrutiny.³⁵ Last, but not least, there must be some sort of constructive *measurement* of the impact – for example, a measurable change in behaviour. Identification of the factors that are responsible for an effective counter-narrative is the final aim, while recognizing that such counter-strategy must always be ready to adapt to new strategies of the other side (Braddock and Dillard 2016). For more long-term actions, it is important to educate the public and help them develop critical thinking to decipher malicious content; sensitizing young people is also key (Dilmaç and Kocadal 2019).³⁶ Indeed authors such as Ender (2019) envision counter-narratives being used as a pedagogical tool, especially in the communities targeted by hate speech, and a subject that could be included in the field of media literacy. This suggestions finds us in agreement and we would advocate to collaborate and build alliances with local NGOs that deal with migrants' issues so as to ensure an impact within the community the most affected by such hate speech.

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³⁵Impact-of-Counter-Narratives_ONLINE_1 (1) Tanya Silverman Christopher J. Stewart Insights from a year-long cross-platform pilot study of counter-narrative curation, targeting, evaluation and impact www.againstviolentextremism.org Jonathan Birdwell Zahed Amanullah.

³⁶ The authors propose two levels of intervention: a primary level which focuses on media literacy and prevention; a secondary level which focuses on reducing the damage done by cyber-humiliation.

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