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Bodrunova, Svetlana S.; Litvinenko, Anna; Blekanov, Ivan

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Multiple roles of aggressive speech in comments on Russian YouTube

Bodrunova, Svetlana S.
St. Petersburg State University
St. Petersburg, Russia
s.bodrunova@spbu.ru

Litvinenko, Anna
Freie Universitaet Berlin
Berlin, Germany
anna.litvinenko@fu-berlin.de

Blekanov, Ivan
St. Petersburg State University
St. Petersburg, Russia
i.blekanov@spbu.ru

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Today, uncivil verbal behavior is generally perceived as a threat to democratic quality of public discourse (Vollhardt et al., 2007; Miller & Vaccari, 2020), including integrity and rationality of online discussions (Badjatiya et al., 2017). Some research shows that these effects are moderate. Thus, harsh commenting can trigger an increase in readers' hostile cognitive reactions but does not help incivility grow in the recipients' commenting behavior (Rösner, Winter & Krämer, 2016), even if the acceptance of flaming as decent behavior and intention to flame is higher for verbally aggressive YouTube users (Cicchirillo, Hmielowski & Hutchens, 2015). But the claim that aggressive content is, in general, destructive for online discussions is not contested.

Several rare works, though, have dragged attention to controversial relations between free expression and hate speech (Dorsett, 1996; Cammaerts, 2009), as well as to specific functions of aggressive content, for community building and cultural delineation/(de)alignment. Thus, possible use of uncivil language in positive sense was discussed for communication of discriminated communities like LGBTQ (Davidson et al., 2017) or African Americans, especially in the rap lyrics (Spears, 1998; Schneider, 2010). Also, it has been shown that harsh language 'is not solely a product of an individual speech habit but also a spreadable social practice' (Kwon & Gruzd, 2017, p 1).

In various periods of the Russian political history, certain types of uncivil language (like obscene speech) have gained political relevance, if not prominence. It has not only been a sign of political transformation (see the classic work of Seliscev (1928)) but also a rhetorical tool, including for the politicians in Russia and Ukraine in the 2000s (Gasparov, 2006). Today's detabooization of obscene lexicon ('*mat*') and widening the boundaries of *mat*-based communicative behavior in the Russian everyday discourse, as well as in media, political speeches, and youth communication, is seen as a reaction to over-officialized Soviet public rhetoric (Ablamskaya, 2011). The use of 'unofficial' language is seen as a form of social protest, emotional détente, and assignment of phrasal emphasis; as well, *mat* words are used as connective particles to condense speech. Over 60% of people who detaboo harsh talk are 14 to 30 years old (Ablamskaya, 2011). Another part of harsh speech – that is, radical and extremist one – has also been widespread on Runet, the Russian-speaking segment of the internet (Salimovsky & Ermakova 2011). These processes of detabooization and radicalization of discourses change the status of uncivil speech itself: in opinion of several scholars, it no longer strongly marks particular social groups and is used more situationally, as a tool for inter-group adaptation.

Given this, aggressive speech may gain new roles online, including the abovementioned spurring of flaming, marking new user groupings or influencers, or facilitating inter-group user 'migration'. Normatively, these roles may be also positive, not just negative. This might be especially true for restrictive political and legal environments like Russia of today where obscene lexicon is prohibited by law in registered media and the political environment does not give much space for voicing discontent. As Russian Youtube has since the 2000s become an 'alternative television' (Litvinenko, 2021) politically polarized (Ushkin, 2014) and dominated by voices of liberal opposition (Etling et al., 2010) but also containing pro-state voices who often imitate user-generated content, we have chosen it for our investigation.

Building upon the concept of communicative aggression (Sidorov, 2018) and today's works on multi-class detection of toxic speech (Badjatiya et al., 2017; Park & Fung, 2017), we explore the roles of two under-researched types of communicative aggression—obscene speech and politically motivated hate speech—within the publics of video commenters. We do so by addressing the following research questions: (RQ1) Does communicative aggression affect discussion dynamics? (RQ2) What roles do various types of communicative aggression play in political discussions online?

Taking Russian YouTube as an example, we use the case of the Moscow protests of 2019 against non-admission of independent and oppositional candidates to run for the Moscow city parliament. The sample of over 77,000 comments for 13 videos of more than 100,000 views has undergone pre-processing and vocabulary-based detection of communicative aggression. To assess the impact of uncivil speech upon the dynamics of the discussions, we have used Granger tests and assessment of discussion histograms; we have also assessed the selected groups of posts in an exploratory manner. Our findings demonstrate that communicative aggression fuels discussion under commentaries by political activists, while under commentaries by foreign news media both effects appear in weak to medium state, and, under news pieces, the effects are clearly much less sound. In smaller discussions, obscene language might be provocative and bring on politically harsh speech, while, in bigger discussions, this effect is overcome.

Anti-state hate speech is certainly destructive to potential consensus between political antagonists, however is might become a constructive means of counter-public consolidation. Among other things, communicative aggression helps to express immediate support and solidarity. In the Russian case, communicative aggression is linked to giving voice to political opposition, which is overwise excluded from the mainstream discourse, and may foster counter-publics and offline action. This function of aggressive speech is in line with the strand of research on agonistic public spheres that emphasizes the importance of political conflict and political voices 'from the margins' for public deliberation (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 128). If, as in Russia, obscene language is officially banned in the media, using this kind of uncivil language per se might become a way to challenge the hegemonic official discourses.

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