

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing:  
Combatting Online Hate Speech and Disinformation Targeting Religious Communities

Statement of Susan Benesch, Founding Director, Dangerous Speech Project

Chairpersons, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer you some ideas, alongside my wonderful fellow panelists. I will speak briefly about the particular types of hate speech and disinformation that are aimed at religious groups, and then about ways to counter them.

A decade ago I noticed strong, striking similarities in the rhetoric that malevolent leaders use to turn one group of people violently against another group. This kind of rhetoric, which I named “dangerous speech” for its capacity to inspire violence, has been used all too effectively in a great variety of countries and languages, against myriad groups. It is language that may express hatred, but it is defined at least as much by fear: it is designed to generate violent fear of other people.

This language is all too common around the world at present, and it often targets religious communities. We have noticed the following trends in it.

In some cases, the rhetoric suggests that something is inherently wrong with a religion (most often Islam, as you know) and therefore with its followers. This familiar language has spiked just in the past few days, in the aftermath of the appalling murder and decapitation last Friday of a French high school teacher, Samuel Paty.

We have also seen a related tendency to conflate criticism of a religion, and disinformation about it, with criticizing or dehumanizing its followers. Content ostensibly describing a religion serves as a dog-whistle for attacks on the relevant religious community. This type of content tends to surge in the aftermath of news events like the murder of M. Paty or the Christchurch massacre, when gruesome images of killings also proliferate online, so that social media companies are occupied with trying to remove that. This often means that they do not focus sufficiently on hateful and false content that targets religious communities, even when that content is rife.

Another important trend is that rhetoric against religious communities often overlaps with xenophobia and the language of invasion. Such language is a major hallmark of dangerous speech and it is powerful, since it suggests – often convincingly with the help of disinformation – that another group of people pose an existential threat.

I would be remiss not to mention that hatred and disinformation are also sometimes directed at religious communities from within, by their own leaders. We have seen examples of this related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and other countries, when clerics encouraged their followers to attend large public gatherings, telling them that devout people were immune to the virus, and that those who warned them to be careful were insufficiently devout or even atheist.

All of these types of content circulate online, of course. I'll now offer some ideas for countering them effectively.

The first is to work with social media companies to explain which content is dangerous, since this is often highly context-dependent, and not at all obvious. Companies need to make quick decisions, so they must have access to high-quality information in real time. Second, it is important to choose the right means of responding to harmful content. Removing it is not always the best solution. Alternatives include what is called demotion or downranking, or responding to the content. For the latter, it is often vital to find speakers who are influential within the relevant community.

Two more steps are essential, in my view, and currently missing from content regulation by tech companies. One is oversight of which content they choose to remove or otherwise regulate. The second is robust study of the effects of various interventions, so that they can be chosen on the basis of data.

I'll be glad to go into more detail in response to your questions.