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Historical Trauma and the Ethical Justification of Hostile Expression Online

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ABSTRACT :

People often judge historical angry remarks based on the hostile tone expressed on the Internet, which will obscure the connection between the injustice behind the speech. This conceptual paper discusses whether historical trauma can provide a legitimate ethical basis for the expression usually regarded as hate speech. This article distinguishes between moral anger, resentment and refusal to forgive, and personal attacks based on nationality and ethnic group. Drawing on Brudholm's defense of resentment, Cherry's discussion of constructive anger, and Waldron's concern about the equality and dignity of personality, this article constructs a conditional argument: when hostile expressions aim to retain real memories, refute historical denials, and point to responsible subjects, such expressions are defensible. However, historical suffering does not mean that intergenerational guilt or discrimination is morally acceptable. This article puts forward four ethical criteria for judging: adequate evidence, target of speech, human dignity, and risk of communication. Conclusion of this article: Cyber ethics should protect the powerful historical memory expression, and at the same time identify the circumstances under which hostile speech will evolve into collective blame without legitimate reasons.

Keywords: hate speech; cyber ethics; historical trauma; resentment; collective memory

1 Introduction

Communities that have experienced invasion and mass violence may regard public remembrance as a responsibility. When they express grief, they may be accompanied by anger, resentment, and refusal to forgive. In cyberspace, this kind of response raises a difficult problem: can historical injustice make hostile expression ethically legitimate? Judging only by emotional tone may suppress legitimate protests. But if all expressions derived from suffering are accepted, contemporary innocent individuals will be blamed for the crimes they have not committed.

The Nanjing Massacre can explain the importance of remembering history, but it is not an empirical case in this article. The UNESCO collection contains Nanjing Massacre-related documents, investigation records and follow-up trial files (UNESCO, n.d.). This article discusses broader ethical issues common to different histories of collective violence. This article proposes that historical trauma can support specific forms of hostile expression, but this legitimacy depends on the target of speech, the basis of facts, and the relationship between speech and human dignity. This article does not analyze social media comments, nor does it believe that an ethnic community has a single attitude.

2 Research ideas

This article adopts selective concept discussion and normative ethics analysis, and dialogues the relevant discussion on resentment and anger with the research on the harm of hate speech. The selection of references is based on the relevance of the topic, not a systematic literature review. This article does not conduct interviews, questionnaires, and does not collect platform data. The judgment criteria put forward in the article are inferential suggestions, not empirical conclusions.

The United Nations (n.d.) defines hate speech as: attacking others or using discriminatory language based on ethnicity, nationality and other identity characteristics. This working definition helps to distinguish between identity-based attacks and strong criticism of evil deeds. The distinction is crucial: anger is an emotional reaction, while hate speech is about the way people are treated and described. Speakers can express strong anger without belittling a certain identity group; conversely, peaceful words can also promote discriminatory exclusion. Therefore, in this article, hostile expression is a broader concept than hate speech; defending the former is not the same as automatically supporting the latter.

3 Ethical basis for hostile expression

Brudholm (2008) questioned the inherent assumption that forgiveness must be morally superior to resentment. His discussion of the response to Jean Améry and the collective violence suggested that resentment can be a form of moral protest. This view provides a limited justification for hostile expression in the historical context: rejecting emotional reconciliation is conveying the attitude of "atrocities are unacceptable". When the outside world

asks the victim to "look forward" but ignores the harm itself, this request is ethically problematic. Resentment and anger can make the demand for justice continue to be seen, even if outsiders will feel uncomfortable with this emotion.

In the digital communication scenario, this set of arguments provides a basis for protecting the firm behavior of remembering history. When a person angrily condemns well-founded atrocities and resists the glorification of atrocities, he is making a moral judgment on evil deeds. This kind of anger may arise from respect for the victims, not the desire to hurt others. Extending Brudholm's views to online expression does not mean that Brudholm himself approves of specific social media behaviors. This ethical value comes from the injustice protested by resentment, not the hostility itself.

Cherry (2021) also suggested that part of anger can help resist injustice. Her discourse on Lordean rage describes an inclusive anti-racist anger with the goal of promoting change. This can be compared here: negative emotions are not necessarily irrational, nor are they morally worthless. Anger from historical trauma can promote the popularization of history, preserve evidence, and resist historical denial. But the goal of inclusiveness emphasized by Cherry also delineates the boundaries of this defense: if anger evolves into discrimination against an entire ethnic group, the excuse of resisting oppression can no longer be used to justify it.

Another level of argument is about the authority of forgiveness. This article proposes that outsiders cannot take forgiveness as an exchange for the reasonableness of the victim's testimony. Descendant generations can keep memories and refuse to excuse atrocities, although their relationship with injury is different from that of direct survivors. The responsibility they remember is not the same as monopolizing the will of all the victims. Victims and future generations may have different views on reconciliation issues; neither forgiveness nor refusal to forgive should be forced as a test of loyalty.

Brudholm, Cherry and Waldron set different standards for judging hostile expressions. Brudholm's defense of resentment draws people's attention to the moral protests contained in the rejection of forgiveness (Brudholm, 2008). Cherry's discourse leads us to think about how anger can help fight injustice (Cherry, 2021). Waldron, on the other hand, focuses on the dignity and social status of the object of verbal attack (Waldron, 2012). Overall, the above perspective shows that the problem cannot be judged by the suffering of the speaker alone, nor by the discomfort of the audience alone. Historical suffering provides an important context for expression, but we still need to examine the objects targeted by such expressions and their impact.

Therefore, this article proposes that a distinction should be made between legitimate grievances and legitimate expressions. A community may have good reason to condemn atrocities, but a specific statement that carries this condemnation may unfairly accuse irrelevant individuals. Similarly, a speech can be uncomfortable and sharp, but it does not deny anyone's equal human dignity. Ethical judgment needs to examine how the expression relates its historical pain appeal to the current object of criticism.

4 Limitations and counter-arguments

Historical suffering can explain the source of hostility, but it does not mean that it can provide complete moral legitimacy. Ethical judgment also needs to examine whether the current target of speech criticism is responsible. Condemning the perpetrator, or condemning a present institution's documented denial of historical atrocities, is completely different from accusing someone simply because he shares the same nationality as the perpetrator. We also need to distinguish between the continued responsibilities of institutions (such as retaining files and admitting crimes) and inherited personal guilt. This distinction can maintain historical accountability while avoiding using bloodline as the basis for judging personal faults.

Waldron (2012) focuses on the damage of hate speech to human equality, dignity and social belonging. This constitutes a strong rebuttal to the unrestricted expression of historical hostility. If speech permanently characterizes a group as guilty and unworthy of respect, it will threaten the personal safety and social status of contemporary members of the group. The identity of the historical victim cannot dispel this rebuttal. Respecting the victims of the past requires us to always oppose dehumanized speech, even if the speech is only aimed at groups whose identities are related to the former perpetrators.

A stronger argument to defend identity-based hostile expressions: the national community has benefited from past evil deeds and therefore needs to share responsibility. This argument is worth discussing, but "benefit", "political responsibility" and "personal guilt" are three different concepts. An institution may need to apologize or remedy, which does not mean that every citizen is the perpetrator. If contemporary individuals take the initiative to deny and glorify violence, then criticism can target the behavior. If the only basis is nationality, then the discussion will slide from accountability to collective blame.

There is also an objection: this article only reclassifies legitimate remarks as anger, and does not solve the issue of the legitimacy of hate speech itself. This point is partially valid, and it also points out the core limitations of this article. The argument in this article only supports some expressions that are often labeled as "hate", especially firm condemnation and refusal to forgive; it does not give people universal moral permission to demean identity groups. If hate speech is narrowly defined as identity-based degradation, then historical trauma may explain and partially alleviate the fault of the speaker, but it cannot make the speech itself correct. The right to express views, the moral recognition of views, and the decision to delete posts on the platform must be evaluated separately.

There is an objection to defending the hostile expression in the historical context: remembering history is not the same as harbouring hatred. People can keep documents, commemorate victims, and hold atrocities accountable without showing hostility to others. The opposing view proves that hatred is not a necessary element for responsible historical memory. But this does not prove that anger or resentment will make this kind of memory morally flawed. Even if there is a more peaceful way of responding, it does not mean that people are obliged to choose this way. When a serious evil act is denied or even glorified, a person's continuous anger is reasonable in itself. At the same time, human emotional characteristics cannot justify unlimited hostile expression. A certain emotion may be understood, but the behavior driven by this emotion may still be wrong. This article believes that future generations can inherit reasons to remember history and refute historical denial, but nationality alone cannot make another person guilty. A defensible

position should allow emotional expression, neither requiring forgiveness as an obligation nor requiring permanent hostility. This view also protects members of the harmed community who choose to look at the past differently.

5 Responsibilities under the scenario of digital communication

There is another problem in online interpretation: when readers see a sentence, they may lack the context that can judge the target of criticism. When a country is mentioned, it may refer to the old regime, the current government, or all the people. The speaker should clarify the subject and behavior he condemns. At the same time, historical statements and quotations need to be verified. Remembering that history itself is heavy, the speaker is responsible for ensuring accuracy; an accusation that is persuasive but lacks evidence will weaken the position it wanted to defend.

Platform audit can't just rely on keywords or emotional tone. Yin and Zubiaga (2021) sorted out the difficulty of generalizing the automatic hate speech recognition model, which supports the view that we should be cautious about the automatic judgment results of the machine. Based on the above ethical analysis, this article puts forward four judgment questions: 1. Does the historical claim have sufficient evidence? 2. Is this hostility aimed at the behavior that should be held accountable, or simply at the identity? 3. Does speech maintain the equal personality status of others? 4. What foreseeable harm will the wording and dissemination bring? This is a reference standard for ethical judgment, not a legal threshold or a tested audit tool.

Imagine two hypothetical situations. In the first situation, a user shares verified historical information and angrily condemns a public figure who openly glorifies the atrocities. The statement is aimed at clearly definable behavior and demands accountability. Its harsh tone itself does not constitute an attack on others based on nationality. In the second situation, a user cites the same history and seeks to exclude unrelated people of a certain nationality from regular community activities. Although the historical pain itself is very heavy, this argument is aimed at identity, not proven responsibility.

The above examples show that evidence alone is not enough. Accurate historical information may also lead to an unjust present-day conclusion. The content moderator must also consider the target of the speech, the treatment being advocated, and the foreseeable consequences of circulation. The context should be used to clarify the above relationships, not as a general excuse. When the meaning is ambiguous, it may be more appropriate to request clarification than to directly characterize historical remarks as hate speech. These examples are analytical illustrations, not observation records of real users.

The platform disposal plan should be based on the answers to these four questions. The well-founded condemnation of atrocities cannot lose protection merely because of anger. Collective expressions with vague semantics can require additional explanations or attach background information. The content that threatens others and incites discriminatory exclusion requires stronger intervention, because such content will cause people to face substantial harm. The platform shall publicize the reasons for the disposal and provide channels for complaint. Users can rely on evidence, personal testimony, and refute historical denial to protect their memories, while resisting the harassment of irrelevant individuals in the name of memory.

6 Conclusion

When hostile online expressions are used to retain memories and protest against evil deeds, historical trauma can provide it with limited ethical legitimacy. Resentment and refusal to forgive are not necessarily moral defects; cyber ethics should accommodate this intractable moral anger and judge the direction of anger. This article provides a conceptual basis for this kind of judgment; follow-up research can explore how users and reviewers can apply this set of distinguishing criteria in different languages and historical contexts.

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