

# Is humour effective in combating hate speech? Maybe not so clearly

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## Abstract

*This article presents the main findings of a study focusing on two elements concerning the fight against the circulation of hate speech on the Web: 1) the challenge posed by the need to conceptualize the notion of counter-discourse 2) the experimentation of humour as a strategic tool to combat the circulation of hate speech on the Internet and its negative effects on online social attitudes. As a first step, we conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with six academic researchers and five experts in the field, in order to understand how the common aspects of the counter-discourse concept found in the literature can be interpreted and mobilized in practice. In doing so, we analyzed their responses in order to identify the types of counter-discourse we felt were most effective in combating hate speech, and to determine whether humour was a relevant strategy. Secondly, we conducted an online experiment with two short videos, one conveying counter-speech in a humorous form, the other in a more serious manner. In some respects, the results of the experiment went in the opposite direction to that expected. Indeed, the data show that a message conveyed in a humorous way may be less effective than one presented in a more serious manner. In addition, it seems that variables such as age and perception of the limits of freedom of expression play a significant role in the appreciation and willingness to share this type of material online.*

*Keywords: hate speech, counter-discourse, humour, social media, alternative narrative.*

## **1. Introduction**

What is the difference, practically speaking, between a counter-discourse and an alternative narrative? Which of the two proves most effective in combating the circulation and effects of hate speech? Can humour play a role in developing discursive strategies to counter hateful discourse? These are the three questions, at once general and specific, that will be examined here. Our study draws on two data collection methods, combining qualitative and quantitative research.

Qualitatively, we gathered the views of a dozen individuals specializing in hate speech issues, from practice settings and/or academia. There are essentially two objectives to this approach. The first is to obtain the points of view of individuals whose work and interventions specifically concern hate speech issues. The second objective is to cover a broader spectrum of theoretical and practical perspectives on the circulation of hate speech. In short, bringing together these experts will enable us to pool our different points of view in order to better understand the phenomenon of hate speech shared online, and to identify more precisely what still needs to be done in this area.

In terms of text structure, this article first presents some contextual elements surrounding the definitions of the concept of hate speech. It then raises the distinctions and sometimes confusing aspects of the notions of counter-discourse and alternative narratives. We then focus on the links between humour and counter-discourse. After a few methodological clarifications, the results of the study will be presented through qualitative and quantitative analyses. On the qualitative side, the responses of the experts interviewed tend to demonstrate the advantage of alternative narrative over counter-discourse in terms of positive influence on people's online behaviour. In quantitative terms, we sought to measure the effects of a humorous alternative narrative on the attitudes of Internet users, and more specifically individuals on social media. The findings of this research bring some perspective to the often-positive virtues attributed to humour.

## **2. Hate speech: context and definitions**

With the increasing spread of hate speech in the public arena, several international organizations have proposed definitions aimed at defining the notion of hate speech. Despite the plurality of these definitions, the one adopted by the Council of Europe is frequently used in scientific work. It is the essential conceptual prerequisite for studying the issues involved. According to the Council of Europe, hate speech:

[covers] all forms of expression which propagate, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed in the form of aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility towards minorities, immigrants and people of immigrant background.

(Weber, 2008, p.3, translated freely)

Lorenzi Bailly and Moïse (2021), commenting on this definition, specify that hate speech could thus relate to ethnic hatred (racism and anti-Semitism), religious hatred, racial hatred, gender hatred (mainly directed against women), terrorism, negationism, revisionism, apology for war crimes, as well as threats to the democratic order.

That said, for a number of years now, the issues surrounding the circulation of hate speech, particularly on social media, have been ubiquitous in the public space. Although they do not constitute time markers per se, certain events in the political and social news suggest an intensification of online hate speech, or at the very least, the profusion of such discourse.

First, in this respect, the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency stands as a key reference in contextual analysis of the circulation of online hate speech. Countless reports and articles have drawn links between the former occupant of the White House and speech of this nature. The combination of the keywords “Donald Trump” and “hate speech” on Google turns up nearly 11 million results. The same operation performed on the Eureka database yields over 7,000. Among others, we can mention Nicquel Terry Ellis's text (Ellis, 2020) in the *USA Today*, which considers that Trump's presidency from 2016 to 2020 has been marked by racist rhetoric, or Fabiola Cineas's article in *Vox*, which qualifies Trump's presidency as a gas pedal for the assault on Capitol Hill in Washington in January 2021 (Cineas, 2021). Trump thus represents one of the many drivers of hate speech in the public space, in the United States and elsewhere, as Amnesty International pointed out in a 2016-2017 report.

Hateful, divisive and dehumanizing rhetoric has unleashed human beings' darkest instincts. By blaming economic and social problems on certain groups in society—often ethnic or religious minorities—those in power have given free rein to discrimination and hate crimes, particularly in Europe and the United States.

(Amnesty International, 2017, p.12)

It's worth noting in passing that this excerpt contains a number of elements that, as mentioned above, define what is considered as hate speech. The references to “divisive and dehumanizing” discourse are in line with the perspectives found in numerous studies, especially regarding the polarizing dimension of such discourse (Poole & al. 2019; Monnier & al., 2021; Borrelli & al., 2022). Additionally, the preferred targets of individuals using such speech, namely people belonging to minority, minoritized or marginalized groups, are, in a manner of speaking, a constant in the conceptualization of hate speech (Calvert, 1997; Cohen-Almagor, 2011; Brown, 2017; Baider & Constantinou, 2019; Council of Europe, 2023).

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic that has been raging since late 2019 is not to be overlooked when it comes to hate speech. In 2020, the team of the UNESCO Chair in the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism stated that the “world is facing a historic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While solidarity initiatives and actions are multiplying, we are also witnessing a proliferation of messages of hatred and intolerance” (UNESCO, 2020, translated freely). Similarly, in 2021, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue titled its report linking the pandemic context to the explosion of online hate speech as

follows: “The COVID-19 pandemic: fertile ground for online hatred” (ISD, 2021). This title also highlights the third contextual factor legitimizing the present study on counter-discourse: the proliferation of hate speech on the Internet, particularly via social media sites. Poole & al. (2019) effectively highlight the political role that social media can play in these circumstances:

Social media, from this perspective, are not something to be valorized but are nonetheless understood as having an important political role, as part of broader media ecologies where they work alongside and interact with a range of other media: from pamphlets and email lists to mainstream media outlets (Treré, 2012; Treré & Mattoni, 2016). This understanding of social media’s role offers an informative background for grasping the tensions that surround the role of specific platforms, such as Twitter, in articulating a collective voice, identity or counter-narrative.

(Poole & al. 2019, p. 7-8)

In light of this quotation, one could infer that if social media have a responsibility with respect to the circulation of hate speech, they may also be called upon to play a more positive role in this regard. It is these lines of inquiry that we intend to explore in greater depth and observe empirically in the present research. In particular, our objective is to determine the role of social media in the circulation of hate speech, and ways to counter it.

### **3. Counter-discourse and alternative narrative: possible definitions**

The aim of this literature review is to identify shared conceptual underpinnings, as well as aspects that appear more nebulous, in defining the concepts, role and effects of counter-discourse and alternative narrative. It should be pointed out that, even if some studies make distinctions between counter-discourse and counter-narrative (De Latour & al. 2017; Baider et Constantinou, 2019), the difference between the two is not always obvious. This is why, for the purposes of synthesis and clarification, certain definitional aspects of counter-discourse can also be applied to counter-narrative. No distinction is made between the two notions in this text.

#### **3.1 Counter-discourse**

The definitions of counter-discourse found in the literature are generally in agreement about the “oppositional” character of the concept. First and foremost, this is speech about other speech (“speech vs. speech,” to quote Cohen-Alamgor, 2011). It is also described as “foot to foot or body to body” (Baider & Constantinou, 2019, p.13), illustrating the confrontational aspect of counter-discourse. These definitions underscore the importance of responding directly and without too many reservations to comments deemed defamatory, discriminatory, humiliating or downright hateful. “The strategy here is to occupy the debate space by contradicting hate speech, in order to raise awareness among the silent majority of the issues involved in fighting online hate.” (Badouard, 2020, p.168, translated freely). This is also the aim of fact-checkers, i.e., “activists [who] engage in collective counter-discourse actions or naming and shaming” (Badouard, 2020, p.161, translated freely).

However, there are certain limitations to the use of counter-discourse, particularly in terms of the reactions it can provoke. It is even feared that, to a certain extent, counter-discourse also constitutes a form of hate speech, due to its more radical and potentially stigmatizing nature. Despite its directness and “sharp” positions, counter-discourse remains an effective tool for firmly opposing a statement or attitude deemed unacceptable. “Counter-discourse must signal that online hate cannot be tolerated and does not represent the dominant opinion” (Stahel, 2020, p.48, translated freely). It also aims to sow doubt, frankly and directly, in the mind of someone hatefully expressing categorical positions (Renaut & Ascone, 2019). Like all discursive processes aiming to reconcile differences, counter-discourse aims to bring the conversation back into the realm of civility. Indeed, “dissensus” and, above all, the possibility of freely expressing disagreement in the public space remains a foundational and indispensable component of living together (Amossy, 2014). In sum, counter-discourse in its more “absolute” form can be said to be addressed to individuals or groups whose statements concern a specific event or situation. It is a response to a position that was invoked in a radical and hateful way.

In view of the preventive dimension of the experiment conducted in this research (further details of which will be provided in the methodology section), this form of counter-discourse will not be the subject of this text. Instead, we will examine the more nuanced strategy of alternative narrative.

### **3.2 Alternative narrative**

As its name suggests, an alternative narrative is not intended as a swift, direct and contrasting reaction to hate speech, but rather seeks to raise questions about a behaviour or attitude deemed to be at risk of being hateful in character. With an alternative narrative, a story or a certain way of conceiving and reacting to a situation is opposed with another story suggesting a more moderate response. Note, however, that the intent is not to put forward false information or to fabricate a story out of thin air. For example, there are no “alternative facts,” to quote Kellyanne Conway, adviser to former US President Donald Trump, in 2017 (Cummings, 2018). Notably, as the Council of Europe (2017) pointed out, the notion of alternative narrative is sometimes confused with that of counter-narrative, given that “every counter-narrative presupposes or implicitly relates to an alternative narrative” (Council of Europe 2017, p. 79, translated freely). It is in its more persuasive and reflective dimension that an alternative narrative sets itself apart from counter-narrative or counter-discourse.

[W]e can propose an alternative, in a spirit of complicity and empathy [...] in order to persuade, to change a view, to offer something up for reflection, to delegitimize what is presented as self-evident, to encourage an alternative stance (Rabatel 2015); these are the objectives and means of an alternative discourse. These alternative manifestations can propose and encourage new or competing images of the world or the self (Carbou 2015) without formally opposing what the other person is saying.

(Baider & Constantinou, 2019, p. 13)

This is undoubtedly one of the main advantages of an alternative narrative. While it appears to be limited in terms of instant positive impacts, it seems more effective in prompting deeper changes in individual and collective attitudes. These effects, let's say more gradual

and part of a process of cultural change, are thus distinguished from the desired impacts through the mobilization of counter-discourses or counter-narratives. In this sense, and to summarize the distinctions between the different processes explained above, counter-discourses or counter-narratives, which are considered synonyms here, are intended to be more direct responses to hateful or misleading statements. The aim is to bring about an immediate change in attitude, by using shocking or more forceful formulas. While, to paraphrase Braddock (2015, 38)<sup>1</sup>, citing multiple authors, an alternative narrative affects emotional states, belief systems and behavioural habits.

The following two examples illustrate more concretely what can be considered in the category of counter-discourse (or counter-narratives) and that of alternative narratives. Firstly, fact-checking, is undoubtedly one of the best-known counter-speech or counter-narrative strategies. This technique, also frequently referred to as "debunking", consists in pointing out falsehoods and simply correcting the facts. This is what the American website *factcheck.org* does, frequently pointing out false statements in Donald Trump's speeches. The aim here is not necessarily to change people's habits in depth, but rather to "set the record straight". Secondly, when it comes to alternative narratives, the online platform *ProjetSomeone.ca* "that works to build awareness, create spaces for pluralistic dialogues, and combat discrimination and online hate", is a prime example. Here, you can view a range of videos that mobilize more holistic, creative and educational approaches to influencing behaviour. In this way, we are part of a deeper dynamic that aims to gradually and positively nurture changes in attitudes, particularly with regard to cultural and religious diversity.

It is primarily for its "less radical" character and its more educational approach that we will opt for alternative narrative as a discursive strategy in the experimental stage of this study. This seems all the more relevant in a context where the intent is not to respond directly to hate speech connected to a specific event or phenomenon. It can furthermore be posited that humour can be used as part of alternative narrative to achieve positive effects on individuals.

#### **4. Humour and counter-discourse**

Analyzing the role of humour and measuring its effects on the social and political attitudes of individuals are known to represent complex operations whose results must be interpreted with caution. Positive effects have been observed, such as the possibility of forging ties between communities (Begag, 2001; Jérôme, 2010; Charaudeau, 2013) or contributing to easing social and cultural tensions or even engaging in political advocacy (Vivero García, 2013; Choquette, 2016). Others believe that humorous discourse, making use of mockery or derision, for example, can have perverse effects, including accentuating differences, fuelling negative stereotyping and stigmatizing certain groups or individuals (Boskin, 1990; Weaver, 2011; Quemener, 2017). Some theoretical research raises the possibility that humour can

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<sup>1</sup> The exact original quote is as follows: "Narratives have been with us throughout the course of human history. They affect our emotional states (Hogan, 2003), belief systems (Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997), behavioural patterns (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007), and responses to the world around us (Bruner, 1986; Strange, 2002)" (Braddock, 2015, p. 38).

entail the two relatively opposite dimensions of uniting and dividing the social fabric (Meyer, 2000).

Regarding the use of humour as a device in counter-discourse or alternative narrative, the few studies on the topic offer similarly mixed results. There are studies suggesting that, in some respects, humour possesses a concealed hatred, since “laughing at the Other” can engender humiliation, a rejection of difference and non-recognition of identities (Baider, 2019; Chovanec, 2021). Other researchers, however, believe that humour can play a positive political and social role with communities, but that contextual factors need to be taken into account in order to assess the meaning and interpretation to be given to humorous remarks (Ordén, 2018). Once again, it is important to consider the two possible impacts of humour.

Humour, for example, can be a double-edged sword. It risks a defiant response in those who are already radicalised and pushes them further towards violent groups by affirming extremist narratives of humiliation and victimization. However, humour can positively delegitimise extremist narratives among potential “supporting” communities and provides a starting point for dialogue among and with young people as it makes “terrorism” and “violent extremism” safe topics.

(Rand, 2019, p. 523)

Consequently, there are a number of factors that need to be taken into account when devising a humorous message to combat hate speech. The type or category of humour, to quote Charaudeau (2006), can have a more or less positive impact on individuals’ reception. For example, Eslén-Ziya (2022) demonstrate how sarcasm leads to more polarization than togetherness on social media. Moreover, we need to consider the types of people or groups targeted, as well as those affected by humorous discourse. Directly targeting individuals on the basis of certain characteristics can have the opposite effect of what was intended, fuelling stigmatization and even rejection of the Other (Rand, 2019).

This literature review suggests three areas for further study. First, some confusion persists between what is considered counter-discourse or alternative narrative. Second, efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies, particularly in empirical terms, remain scarce, especially in the French-language literature. Theoretical approaches appear to dominate. Third, evaluation and concrete measurement of the effects of humorous processes are virtually absent from studies on counter-discourse. To these three shortcomings, we could add the need for dialogue, or at the very least, a pooling of perspectives of individuals originating from academia and from practice settings. As mentioned above, we seek to obtain the views of people who are experts in the field because of their knowledge and competence in strategies to combat hate speech. The approach also aims to cross theoretical and practical perspectives on the subject. We therefore seek to compare and contrast the answers of individuals from these two communities, through the following three questions: 1- What is counter-discourse? 2- Which discursive strategies, particularly on social media, seem most effective in combating hate speech? 3- What role can humour play in these strategies?

This last question can be answered in two ways: first, by examining the answers given by various interviewees from academia and from practice settings, and second, by developing experimental online research. As will be explained in the next section, for the

communication strategy involving humour, we opted for a short, one-minute video of the alternative narrative type. In this sense, the message is intended to be more “benevolent,” avoiding the use of shocking or moralizing language. It may also be thought that, by its less direct form, the alternative narrative can have an effect on a wider audience, so as not to “preach to the converted”. But despite this caution, the possibility cannot be ruled out. We have deliberately avoided the notion of “target audience”, considering that it is through the reactions observed that we will undoubtedly be in a better position to appreciate differences in this respect, particularly with regard to the age of the participants. We therefore address a public of all ages.

## **5. Methodological clarifications and research design**

To answer the above questions, the present research was carried out in two stages. The first involved a dozen semi-structured interviews with experts whose work or research in the field concerns hate speech issues and the development of counter-discourse or alternative narrative. The second stage entailed verifying and measuring, with appropriate caution and reserve, the effects on individuals of exposure to one of two educational videos, including one with a more humorous angle, put online for the purposes of the experiment. We have therefore opted for a mixed qualitative and quantitative research methodology.

### **5.1 Methodology and interview processing**

To begin with, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with specialists on ways to combat the circulation and effects of online hate speech. Given the pandemic context at the time, most of these interviews took place remotely via the Zoom app between December 2021 and February 2022. The recourse to experts was relevant, given the influence and credibility they generally possess within their communities and in public space (Dexter, 2006).

Table 1. Numbering and categories of the interviewees

<b>Interview no.</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Community</b>
P1	Fighting disinformation in Europe	Practice
RP2	Canadian public service	Research/Practice
RP3	Prevention/awareness	Research/Practice
R4	Prevention/awareness/intervention	Research
R5	Prevention/awareness/intervention	Research
P6	Strategic communication	Practice
P7	Strategic communication	Practice
P8	Strategic communication	Practice
P9	Strategic communication	Practice
R10	Prevention/awareness	Research
R11	Prevention/awareness	Research
P12	Prevention/awareness/intervention	Practice

Table 1 shows the interviewees' backgrounds and type of role. An academic research specialist (R) is defined as someone who conducts academic research on hate speech. A practical expert (P) is an individual whose expertise enables them to propose concrete, on-the-ground solutions to combat hate speech. The practitioners referred to in this study work in organizations whose mission, in whole or in part, is to combat hate speech. Finally, some individuals fall into both categories, i.e., they operate in both academic and practice settings (RP).

After the interviews were transcribed, the answers were categorized according to the three specific questions previously presented. In other words, these three questions, linked to the three areas of the research questionnaire, make up our analysis grid. We adopt the methodological position of Marland and Esselment (2018), which seeks to avoid over-interpreting the answers obtained. Finally, to ensure anonymity, participants have been identified by numerical codes.

## 5.2 Methodology and data processing

To help observe and measure the potential effects of alternative narrative using a more educational approach, and to verify whether the use of humour can make a difference, an online viewing experiment was carried out. We drew inspiration from other research that has used the experimental method to empirically measure the effects of exposure to video content on social and political attitudes (Mutz & Reeve, 2005; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010;

Choquette, 2022). The roughly 80 participants—43 adult women and 37 adult men—were recruited between May and December 2022 and divided into two groups. The first was exposed to a brief video just over one minute long, inspired by a non-moralistic educational conception of alternative narrative, whose purpose was to raise awareness of the importance of not being triggered to anger in response to posts on social media.<sup>2</sup> The second group was exposed to a similar video, also delivered from a non-moralistic educational perspective, but in a humorous form.<sup>3</sup> The message was conveyed by the same person<sup>4</sup> (the study's principal investigator), in an identical setting, and was deliberately kept general, given that the participants were likely to be of all ages and backgrounds. The survey questionnaire (see Appendix) was designed to account for potentially significant differences according to age group, among other things.

It should also be noted that those who took part in the experiment had the chance to win one of ten CAD\$100 prizes in a draw. The hope was to increase the level of participation; the same procedure was used in a previous experiment (Choquette, 2022). In fact, we noticed that offering the possibility of being rewarded, in this case by the chance to win a prize, aroused more people's interest in participating. Everyone who participated in the research agreed to take part in the prize draw. In addition, most of the individuals were recruited online, via invitations sent out on Facebook and Twitter, as well as by email through Université de Sherbrooke institutional accounts (Communication and Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences).

Before being exposed to the video, each participant in one or other of the groups was asked to answer a questionnaire whose content was designed to consider certain factors that might act as moderating variables (Borau & al. 2015). After watching the video, the participants were directly asked about certain attitudes associated with online reactions and the circulation of hate speech. Questions were also asked about the roles and effects of humour in this context. The 30-question questionnaire, including the video, was made available online on Google Forms via a unique link sent to each participant by email, or via private messaging on certain social media (Messenger, Twitter and LinkedIn). We wished to find out to what extent the opinions expressed by these individuals might be affected by preconditions (moderating variables) such as age, gender, news consumption on social media or interest in humour, humorous online videos or concerns about freedom of expression. We also wanted to check whether there were any significant differences between the two groups, particularly according to the presence of humour. Based on this literature review, and considering the complexity of the impact of humour, we hypothesize that significant differences will be observed between the two groups, in favour of those exposed to humour. However, these differences are likely to be modest. The construction of the questionnaire and variables was again inspired by a previous experiment on the effect of humour in fuelling cultural and religious stereotypes (Choquette, 2022). All the data obtained at the end of this experiment were processed using R statistical regression software.

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<sup>2</sup> The video (in French with a Quebec accent) can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SuGva5AhyX8>

<sup>3</sup> The video (in French with a Quebec accent) can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mY3WYFVx11Y>

<sup>4</sup> Given that the experiment was held in French in the Canadian province of Quebec, the Quebecois accent is an obvious part of what was said.

Of course, as with any method, there are limitations to the use of interviews and the experiment. For example, in the case of the interviews, the limited number of interviewees reduces the strength of external validity or the generalizability of the answers. The same is true of the experiment, the results of which essentially concern the people who took part therein. Shortcomings of this kind are common to empirical studies. However, these limitations are compensated by the possibility of gaining a better grasp of the points of view expressed during the various interviews, and of observing and concretely measuring the potential effects of a counter-discourse or alternative narrative on a specific group of individuals.

## **6. Specialist views**

From the outset, almost all our interviewees explicitly or implicitly clarified what distinguishes a counter-discourse from an alternative narrative. Only one research specialist argued that counter-discourse does not really exist in any meaningful way. From their perspective, there is only discourse: “A counter discourse simply remains a discourse. It is a discourse. It’s a discourse in response to what you are expressing within a political landscape, right?”<sup>55</sup> (R4). Still from a strictly academic and research point of view, R11 also strongly opined that counter-discourses “are discourses that get into controversy and even more into polemics. [T]hese are discourses that can be said to be almost radical, in other words, ideologies against opposing ideologies [...]” (R11). This point of view clearly overlaps with those identified in the literature.

Beyond these two “stricter” perspectives surrounding the conceptualization of counter-discourse, several individuals expressed more nuanced opinions, mentioning differences in relation to alternative narrative. For example, R5 stressed the importance of “reinvesting complex communications” while also admitting the existence of divergences between counter-discourse and alternative narrative. “[You’re] going to prove something to people, so this is a cognitive approach [...] where you’re wrong for X or Y reasons. Or alternatively, we’ll offer you another narrative that’s much more appealing and much less hateful, in the hope that it will charm you.” (R5) This perspective on alternative narrative, more focused on subtlety and a “gentler” approach than counter-discourse, was favoured by most of the individuals we met with. As the following excerpts demonstrate, what is invoked is the awareness-raising, rallying and educational virtues of alternative narrative, especially online.

- These are alternative discourses seen as offering an alternative, i.e., that do not primarily seek to answer but rather to use more educational discourse. (R10)
- Where equality is promoted, where you know people are viewed as being equal as a fundamental starting point, then that’s the most effective counter discourse to it. (RP2)
- [O]ur general content is essentially general education on what a hateful act is and how to prevent it in general. [...] It’s about education, rallying people, awareness. That’s really what we do. (P6)
- [It’s] part of our education and digital citizenship program to strengthen resilience. [...] What

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<sup>5</sup> Responses obtained in French during certain interviews have been translated into English.

- are not only the behaviours to avoid, but the good behaviours of a digital citizen? (P8)
- Learning to discuss, learning to exchange views, in everyday life. In families [...] learning to listen, learning to speak to each other, learning to be wrong. [...] [O]ne must also learn to [...] doubt one's own beliefs and say yes, I was wrong. (R11)

Clearly, these handful of quotations testify to the importance of pedagogy and even civic education in the development of alternative narrative, both in research and in practice. It seems that counter-discourse, in its more radical form, has more limited effects.

### **6.1 The strategies' effectiveness**

Several of our interviewees had reservations about counter-discourse. These limitations may be explained by the very "entrenched" ideas or lack of openness of targeted individuals. In such cases, little can be done, as demonstrated by the following views expressed by two specialists with backgrounds in both research and practice.

- People who hate do not care about facts. [...] So if you bring facts to the emotional argument, it's like saying, you know, just to use a completely different context. (RP2)
- If you have a firm belief. You know, presenting counterarguments usually just entrenches you in your belief. So, I'm not too sure it's going to work. [...] You almost need an intervention, but you can only intervene on people who want to change. (RP3)

Moreover, for other people we met with, counter-discourse not only has limited effects, but generates opposing reactions and can even fuel tensions. According to P6, "[I]t just creates resistance and heightens the conflict," while in the view of R10, "we're [then] using exactly the same strategies of demonizing, excluding, verbal violence and so on." This being said, some acknowledged that in certain situations, it is necessary use counter-discourse in order to respond promptly, directly and firmly.

- I think that, [...] if someone's already embedded in a hate group, you have to treat them sort of like they're a part of a cult. It has to be a very direct talk. [...] I don't believe that you're doing any extra harm if you say, you're a complete freaking idiot for being a part of a hate group. If you say that to someone, nothing, nothing, nothing any worse than what's already happening is going to happen. (RP2)
- So in certain contexts counter discourses can effectively shut down a conversation. [...] So I think that in those particular cases you can find counter discourse that is normative (R4)

It should be pointed out that such "strong" points of view, to say the least, were not dominant in the analyzed responses. However, there does seem to be some consensus around the polarizing nature of counter-discourse. As such, its usefulness in combating hate speech appears limited, especially in terms of prevention and awareness-raising. Alternative narrative would therefore seem to be more effective, according to many of the specialists interviewed. The virtues of "testimony" (R11), "reflection" (P6, P9) and "empathy" (P7) were underscored. Alternative narrative becomes more effective because of the need for patience and listening, as these answers demonstrate:

- Unravelling the complexity of discourse from the inside, suspending our deep-seated irritation and our tendency to moralize, and trying to see through the discourse that is irritating us [...]. You have to validate the emotions underneath that are true [...] the feeling that they don't have a voice and are not being listened to. And it's true that they don't have a voice, and it's true that they're not being listened to. (R5)
- [Trying] to understand why people react the way they do, rather than pointing fingers. [...] . (P1)
- [M]aybe trying to also communicate markers of understanding. [S]o acknowledging the person's feelings and emotions, and then trying to ease the tension a little, and trying to introduce a discourse that doesn't hit the person like a punch in the face, but that is less direct, so that's what I mean by trying to be considerate. (R10)

In many respects, these answers about the effectiveness of alternative narrative come down to general perception. Individuals are expressing what they believe to be effective. The fact is, as RP2, P8 and R10 point out, it remains complex to assess the effectiveness of a strategy to combat hate speech, and probably even more so to measure its effects in concrete terms. These points of view, strongly rooted in impressions, also emerge from the answers regarding the roles and impacts of humour.

## **6.2 The effectiveness of humour**

As with the differences between counter-discourse and alternative narrative, several of the individuals interviewed drew distinctions between the effectiveness of what might be called more “radical” humour and more “considerate” humour. Interestingly, the humorous approaches that seem to work best are closer to alternative narrative.

For example, for R10, humour that “doesn't necessarily aim for a direct retort, but uses other mechanisms, for example testimony,” proves more effective. Thus, what the interviewees refer to, often indirectly, are some of the roles attributable to the benefits of humour and laughter. Humour helps to lay down bridges between communities, lower stress and social tension, and spark reflection, as the following excerpt show:

- A joke will help break the tension and pave the way for a discussion [that will] perhaps later [...] be a little more fruitful. (P7)
- [T]here are humorous devices that [...] don't fall into vexatious humour, where it's more good-natured humour [...] if you will. And yes, it can work [...]. (P1)
- So I think that humor especially allows you to break so many taboos. [...] [A]llows you to take everything that you feel is sacred and just literally rip it to shreds. [...] [T]he humor that makes me the most reflexive is the one that is the most uncomfortable. (R4)
- [There's] a term in ethics for it, social consciousness, where it's not necessarily about one person leading a change, but rather, little by little [people are led] to realize there's a problem, and that leads to popular change. (P7)
- I'm convinced that laughter [...] is extremely protective in the face of adversity and difficulty. [Just because] you laugh doesn't mean something is funny. In fact, we laugh at a lot at things that aren't funny at all [...] So, of course, laughter can be a way of ridiculing, of berating, of insulting [...]. I think it's above all a softer and not overly narcissistic look at oneself. (R5)

This last excerpt also highlights the risks that humour can bring into play. P7 notes the

possibility of having the opposite effect of what one intended, i.e., to defuse a situation and encourage closer ties: “the problem is that if it’s done in a way that’s offensive to the person, it can reinforce that person’s desire to defend themselves” (P7). Clearly, like counter-discourse, sharp and impulsive humour has limited effects, according to a number of experts. These mixed effects are also underlined by the fact that individuals often “preach to the choir” (R10). Along these lines, R11 states, “[I] think humour works with people who are already sensitive.”

As pointed out earlier, in several ways, these statements come down to perceptions. To put these assertions into perspective and, above all, to evaluate the effects of humour in concrete terms, we conducted an experiment.

## **7. Results of the online viewing experience**

The main objective of this experiment was to test whether online behaviours or attitudes, on social media in particular, may be influenced by exposure to alternative narrative in the form of a humorous video. The comparisons of means presented in Table 2 partly confirm the hypothesis that there are significant differences between the two groups. However, this picture also has certain surprises.

The first surprising element is the number of significant results in this first table. Notably, Table 2 shows very few statistically significant differences. Without drawing hasty or “generalizing” conclusions, these data raise questions about the immediate impact of humour. People exposed to humorous alternative narrative appear not to have particularly different reactions compared to those confronted with the more serious video. Of course, there are a number of potential explanations for this, including that the humorous approach proved less effective than anticipated, or that the number of participants was insufficient. However, at the very least, these comparisons of means put certain presuppositions into perspective. Might humour be less effective than is often believed? This possibility is all the more conceivable given that these results are similar in several respects to those obtained in a previous study (Choquette, 2022). However, other elements may also play a role in the effects of humour on attitudes associated with online behaviours and reactions.

Table 2. Comparison of means by variable (N=81)

Variables	Serious	Humour	Diff.	p
Assessment <sup>1</sup>	2.34	2.40	.7	0.72
Interest in sharing <sup>2</sup>	1.15	1.03	.12	0.59
Concern about hate speech <sup>3</sup>	4.03	3.77	.26	0.30
Overly sensitive on social media <sup>4</sup>	3.78	3.75	.03	0.92
Stricter rules are needed for social media <sup>4</sup>	3.83	3.75	.08	0.70
No limit to freedom of expression <sup>4</sup>	1.68	2.08	-.40	0.06
<b>Fast reactions are required on social media<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>1.80</b>	<b>2.35</b>	<b>.55</b>	<b>0.02*</b>
All one needs to do is refrain from reading offensive content <sup>4</sup>	2.26	2.43	-.17	0.44
Social media are conducive to hate <sup>4</sup>	4.18	3.93	-.25	0.22

<sup>1</sup> 0 = I didn't like this video at all. 3 = I really enjoyed this video.

<sup>2</sup> 0 = I wouldn't share this video on social media. 3 = I would share this video on social media. <sup>3</sup> 1 = This doesn't reflect me at all. 5 = This totally reflects me. <sup>4</sup> 1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree. Significance: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Along these lines, the second surprise concerns the only clearly significant difference between the two groups. It appears that individuals exposed to the humorous alternative narrative feel more inclined to promptly respond to a hate message on social media than individuals exposed to more serious content. While not particularly robust, the difference is more than half a point on a scale of 1 to 5. All in all, this is an appreciable gap, and the results are the complete opposite of what we expected. One explanation may lie in the nearly 95% significant difference concerning freedom of expression. Once again, Table 2 shows that, at over 90% significance, people exposed to the humorous message more strongly agree with the idea that there should be no limit to freedom of expression. One might think that a higher number of participants would make this result more meaningful. Interestingly, the correlations presented in Table 3 support this explanation.

This table contains a number of interesting elements that lend some support to the hypothesis of the significant effects of humour. Three results in Table 3 are statistically significant. First, as observed for the comparisons of means, a correlation is confirmed between the desire to react quickly on social media and the group. This means that people exposed to the humorous alternative narrative are significantly in greater agreement with the statement about responding quickly on social media. Second, we find that individuals who believe that “a message delivered with humour is more effective in influencing behaviour than if it is presented in a strictly serious manner” are also more likely to agree

with the idea of reacting quickly on social media. In light of the last two statements, it is therefore possible that an alternative narrative delivered with humour fuels the need to react more swiftly to online comments. Once more, these results come as something of a surprise.

Table 3. Quick reactions are needed on social media<sup>1</sup> according to group<sup>2</sup>, age<sup>3</sup> and agreement that humour is more effective<sup>1</sup>

Variable	Results
Group	0.600*** (0.216)
Age	-0.153* (0.085)
Humour is more effective in changing behaviour	0.253* (0.130)
Constant	1.145* (0.598)
R2: 0.164 N: 80	

<sup>1</sup> 1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree

<sup>2</sup> 0 = Serious 1 = Humorous

<sup>3</sup> 1 = 18 to 24 years - 6 = 65 years and over

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Finally, the correlation is reversed for age. The younger the individual, the more they agree with the statement that one should react quickly on social media. Unlike the two previous observations, this result is unsurprising, considering that young people use social media in higher numbers.

## 8. Conclusion

In light of the results of the interviews and the experiment, it seems possible to draw certain conclusions and raise a few additional questions. These may also be taken up in future research into counter-discourse and alternative narrative.

Based on the answers obtained during the specialist interviews, the respondents from practice settings and those exclusively from research backgrounds both appeared to believe in the greater effectiveness of alternative narratives. This standpoint is also shared by individuals who report coming from both academic and practice settings. This finding is not particularly surprising, given that the experts surrounding the fight against hate speech are aiming for more in-depth changes in the malicious behavioral habits of certain individuals. However, this preference seems to be linked to the deeper impacts of alternative narrative, which is thought, to some extent, to yield a change in culture. While there is agreement that counter-discourse is called for in certain circumstances, such as when needing to shock or rattle someone engaging in hate speech, it is believed that alternative

narrative may be more effective at sparking reflection. Indeed, alternative narrative may have stronger persuasive and awareness-raising powers than counter-discourse. Consequently, again in the opinion of the specialists, while it may be tempting to respond promptly to hate speech and mobilize a counter-discourse, it may be preferable to be patient and opt for an alternative narrative. In many respects, however, the opinions shared by the interviewees are based more on impressions than on concrete observations or empirical studies. However, in the eyes of some of those we interviewed, this finding appears rather normal, given the complexity of analyzing and measuring the effects of counter-discourses and alternative narratives on individuals. The same applies to the use of humour. While there is general agreement on the positive contribution of humour, there seems to be little empirical data to support this assertion.

Finally, while the experimental stage of this research did not allow us to draw any major conclusions in terms of measuring the effects of humorous alternative narratives, it does put certain assertions into perspective. Even if different results may be obtained based on a greater number of participants or the types of documents presented, the fact remains that significant effects emerge from our study. Notably, the idea that humour can heighten the impression of needing to react quickly on social media comes as something of a surprise. In addition, the fact that individuals who share the view that humour is more effective in influencing behaviour also agree with the need to react quickly on the Internet supports previous findings. Therefore, while our experiment results to some extent confirm that humour can play a role, it also shows that this role is not necessarily positive. We may, however, put these results into perspective, given that, at least from the point of view of a majority of the specialists interviewed, alternative narrative has observable effects in the longer term. Clearly, further investigation is warranted.

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## Appendix. Questionnaire

### Section A – Questions générales

QA1. Quel est votre groupe d'âge ? Cochez la réponse qui correspond à votre groupe.

- 18 à 24 ans
- 25 à 34 ans
- 35 à 44 ans
- 45 à 54 ans

- 55 à 64 ans
- 65 ans et plus
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA2. Vous identifiez-vous à un genre en particulier?

- Homme
- Femme
- Autre
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA3. Quel est votre revenu personnel annuel brut ?

- Moins de 15 000 \$
- De 15 000 \$ à 24 999 \$
- De 25 000 \$ à 34 999 \$
- De 35 000 \$ à 44 999 \$
- De 45 000 \$ à 54 999 \$
- De 55 000 \$ à 74 999 \$
- De 75 000 \$ à 99 999 \$
- De 100 000 \$ et plus
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA4. De quelle communauté parmi les suivantes faites-vous partie ?

- Blanc
- Autochtone
- Asiatique
- Noir
- Latino-Américain
- Arabe
- Métis
- Autre
- Je ne sais pas / Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA5. Quelle est votre langue maternelle ?

- Français
- Anglais
- Autre
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA6. Quel est le plus haut diplôme, certificat ou grade que vous avez obtenu ?

- Primaire (7 ans ou moins)
- Secondaire (formation générale ou professionnelle (8 à 12 ans)
- Collégial (formation préuniversitaire, formation technique, certificats, attestations ou diplômes de perfectionnement)
- Universitaire certificats et diplômes
- Universitaire 1er cycle Baccalauréat (incluant cours classique)
- Universitaire 2e cycle Maîtrise
- Universitaire 3e cycle Doctorat
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA7. Quelle est votre religion (même si vous ne la pratiquez pas) ?

- Aucune appartenance religieuse
- Bouddhiste
- Chrétienne (catholique, protestants, orthodoxes)
- Hindoue
- Juive
- Musulmane
- Sikhe
- Spiritualité autochtone traditionnelle
- Autre
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA8. En excluant les mariages et les funérailles, à quelle fréquence participez-vous actuellement à des services religieux ?

- Une fois par semaine ou plus
- Une ou deux fois par mois
- Quelques fois par année
- Une fois par année ou moins
- Jamais ou presque jamais
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA9. Il m'arrive de m'exprimer sous le coup de la colère sur les médias sociaux. Indiquez la réponse qui s'applique le mieux à votre personne.

- Cela ne correspond pas du tout à ma personne
- Cela correspond un peu à ma personne
- Cela me correspond moyennement à ma personne
- Cela me correspond plutôt bien à ma personne
- Cela correspond totalement à ma personne
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA10. Certains propos devraient être interdits sur les médias sociaux lorsque l'on juge qu'ils dépassent les limites. Choisissez la réponse qui correspond le mieux à votre opinion.

- Fortement d'accord
- Plutôt d'accord
- Ni en accord ni en désaccord
- Plutôt en désaccord
- Fortement en désaccord
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA11. Un message livré avec humour est plus efficace pour influencer les comportements que s'il est présenté de manière strictement sérieuse. Choisissez la réponse qui correspond le mieux à votre opinion.

- Fortement d'accord
- Plutôt d'accord
- Ni en accord ni en désaccord
- Plutôt en désaccord
- Fortement en désaccord
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA12. Sur une échelle de 1 à 10 (1 étant "aucun intérêt" et 10 étant "beaucoup d'intérêt"), quel est votre niveau d'intérêt pour l'actualité politique ?

QA13. Les médias sociaux (ex. : Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter) constituent ma source principale pour m'informer sur l'actualité. Indiquez la réponse qui s'applique le mieux à votre personne.

- Cela ne correspond pas du tout à ma personne
- Cela correspond un peu à ma personne
- Cela correspond moyennement à ma personne
- Cela correspond plutôt bien à ma personne
- Cela correspond totalement à ma personne
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA14. Les médias traditionnels (journaux, radio, télévision) constituent ma source principale d'informations. Indiquez la réponse qui s'applique le mieux à votre réalité :

- Cela ne correspond pas du tout à ma réalité
- Cela correspond un peu à ma réalité
- Cela correspond moyennement à ma réalité
- Cela correspond plutôt bien à ma réalité
- Cela correspond totalement à ma réalité
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QA15. Je regarde souvent des capsules humoristiques en ligne. Indiquez la réponse qui s'applique le mieux à votre réalité :

- Cela ne correspond pas du tout à ma réalité
- Cela correspond un peu à ma réalité
- Cela correspond moyennement à ma réalité
- Cela correspond plutôt bien à ma réalité
- Cela correspond totalement à ma réalité
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

### **Section B - Visionnement**

Regardez la vidéo suivante au complet et répondez aux questions par la suite.  
(Insertion de la vidéo)

QB1. Quelle description parmi les suivantes correspond le mieux à votre expérience d'écoute des vidéos précédentes ?

- J'ai regardé l'ensemble de la vidéo
- J'ai regardé une grande partie de la vidéo
- J'ai n'ai regardé qu'une petite partie de la vidéo
- Je n'ai pas regardé la vidéo

QB2. Quel énoncé parmi les suivants convient le mieux à votre opinion ?

- J'ai beaucoup apprécié cette vidéo.
- J'ai un peu apprécié cette vidéo
- Je n'ai pas beaucoup apprécié cette vidéo
- Je n'ai pas du tout apprécié cette vidéo
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QB3. Quelle description parmi les suivantes correspond le mieux à votre expérience d'écoute des vidéos précédentes ?

- Je partagerais certainement cette vidéo sur les médias sociaux
- Je partagerais probablement cette vidéo sur les médias sociaux
- Je ne partagerais probablement pas cette vidéo sur les médias sociaux
- Je ne partagerais pas cette vidéo sur les médias sociaux
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QB4. Avez-vous déjà vu cette vidéo auparavant ?

- Oui
- Non
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QB5. Je suis préoccupé par la circulation des discours haineux sur Internet. Indiquez la réponse qui s'applique le mieux à votre réalité :

- Cela ne correspond pas du tout à ma réalité
- Cela correspond un peu à ma réalité
- Cela correspond moyennement à ma réalité
- Cela correspond plutôt bien à ma réalité
- Cela correspond totalement à ma réalité
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

### **Section C – Questions d'opinions**

Pour chacun des énoncés suivants, indiquez si vous êtes :

- Fortement d'accord
- Plutôt d'accord
- Ni en accord ni en désaccord
- Plutôt en désaccord
- Fortement en désaccord
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

QC1. Certaines personnes sont tout simplement trop susceptibles sur les médias sociaux.

QC2. On doit être plus strict dans l'encadrement de ce que l'on publie sur les médias sociaux.

QC3. On peut tout dire en ligne, il n'y a pas de limite à la liberté d'expression.

QC4. Il faut réagir et commenter rapidement les publications sur Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. C'est comme cela que cela fonctionne.

QC5. Si des propos nous blessent sur les médias sociaux, il suffit tout simplement de ne pas les lire.

Merci de votre participation !