

Defying Anti-Semitic Speech through a Social Media Campaign

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Introduction

Social media can be a very effective tool to counteract hateful speech against minority groups. In many countries around the world, social media has been a catalyst for political, social, economic and cultural changes. In the last few years, we have seen rising use of social media to promote democracy and human rights. In fact, in countries like Libya and Egypt that were usurped by the revolutions that demanded an end to autocracy (revolutions popularly known as Arab Spring), social media played a very important part in their successes. Many young people who have experiences using social media came out on the streets to protest and to demand a more functional government. While the importance of social media in creating social change cannot be underestimated, we cannot forgo the fact that revolutions happen because people move. Without people going down to the streets and physically moving, policies might not change. In that sense, the role social media plays is highly effective in bringing a certain issue to the forefront, and in creating social awareness about a problem, but we can not rely solely on social media to create social change.

Based on this idea that social media campaigns are effective tools for promotion of a certain issue to public sphere, the group of three of us: Joanna Socha, Kasia Gerula, and Sudip Bhandari tried to combat hate speech against Jews in Poland. Research shows that there is persistent anti-Semitic attitude among a significant population in Poland. A 2013 study by Warsaw University's Center for Research on Prejudice revealed persistent anti-Semitic attitudes in the Polish population, especially among youth¹. Reports by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights corroborate these findings². However, since the topic of hate speech is so broad and so complex, we tried to narrow it down to one setting: hate speech in football stadiums. In Poland, hate speech against Jews is manifested in many ways, one of them is among football fans who chant slogans like "Jews to gas chamber", and "Jews to Israel". Our campaign, given the resources and scope, focused specifically on among the bystanders and passive

supporters of hate speech. Through the use of social media websites like Facebook and YouTube, we created social awareness towards the issue, and encouraged people to take action.

Innovative Strategies of Counteracting Hate Speech in Various Countries and Settings

Social media has been very successful in encouraging social change in many settings around the world. In the United States, non-governmental organizations that counteract racism has used social media platforms to provide an impetus for people to end racist behaviors. In the US college and university settings majority of the students are connected to each other via social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, it is much easier to communicate about a rally against hate crime. US also saw an interesting phenomenon where a lot of young activists got together to fight for a cause beyond their national boundary. The campaign called Kony 2012, which brought many students and activists together to name and shame Kony, an infamous war leader was very successful in creating a buzz. While it is not a direct example of a campaign that counteracted hate speech, it definitely counts as a successful social media campaign that used an innovative approach of using video, pictures, memes, etc. to develop a theme to act. Because they were so successful in creating an effective campaign, many people changed their profile picture to the image of the profile of their documentary, and Obama sent a group of a few US army to find Kony in Africa. Even though there were no amazing revolutions because of Kony 2012, some were encouraged to take action. And that is exactly what social media campaigns are supposed to do.

The Problem of anti-Semitism in Polish Football Fans

In January of 2014, in Poznan, a city in Poland, hundreds of football fans chanted slogans like “Move on Jews”, “Your Home is Auschwitz”, and “We’re sending you the gas chamber”. This happened during a football match. Many Jewish organizations that found out about this incident reacted vehemently, and pressured the responsible authorities to take action. However, the prosecutors ruled that such instances of free expression cannot be deemed hate speech.

There are two problems in this story. The first one is the fact that stereotyping and scape-goating against the Jews is still prevalent in the Polish society. Another issue is that policymakers might be less likely to take action on these matters. Below we present an excerpt from a newspaper that gives a brief synopsis of the issue of anti-Semitism among Polish football

fans.



EJC: Anti-Semitism an acceptable prejudice in soccer

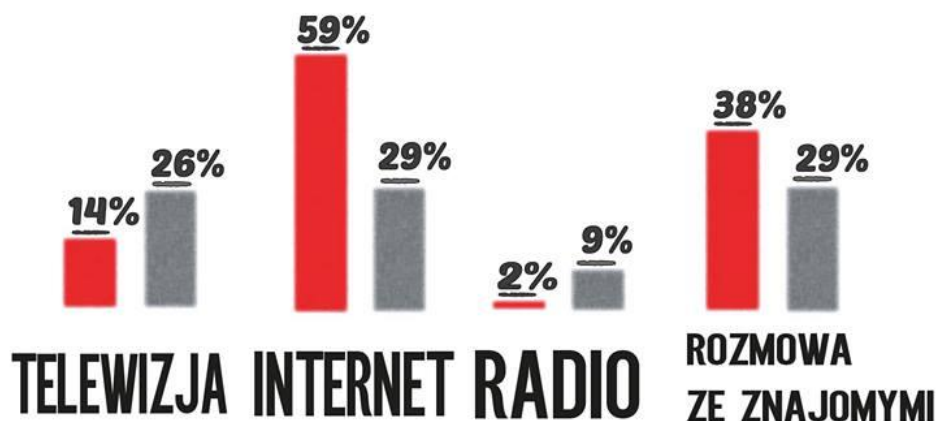
Jewish groups slam Polish authorities after a municipal prosecutor in city of Poznan concludes that chants by soccer fans which made reference to Jews going to Auschwitz gas chambers were not anti-Semitic

Nobody is born a hater. Anne Frank once said “Despite everything, I believe that people are truly good in heart”. Assuming good intentions, the football supporters who are actively taking part in defamation of the Jewish communities in Poland were probably introduced to the idea of hating the Jews at some point in their childhood. It is 60% likely that a young person received information about hate speech from sources from the Internet. Around 30% of the adults get acquainted with hate speech through the internet. We received this information from a research report based on Polish prejudice conducted by the Center for Research on Prejudice in 2013.

KONTAKT Z MOWĄ NIENAWIŚCI WOBEC ŻYDÓW

MŁODZIEŻ / DOROŚLI

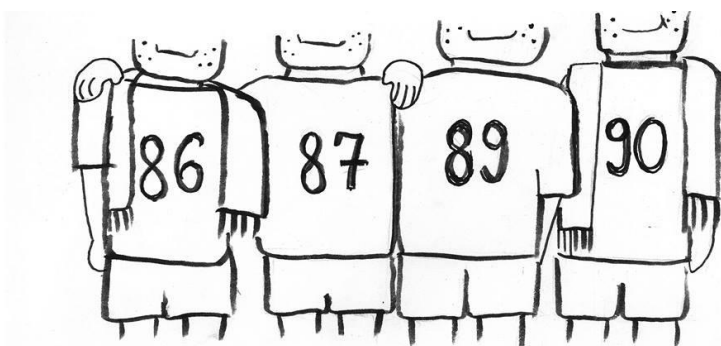
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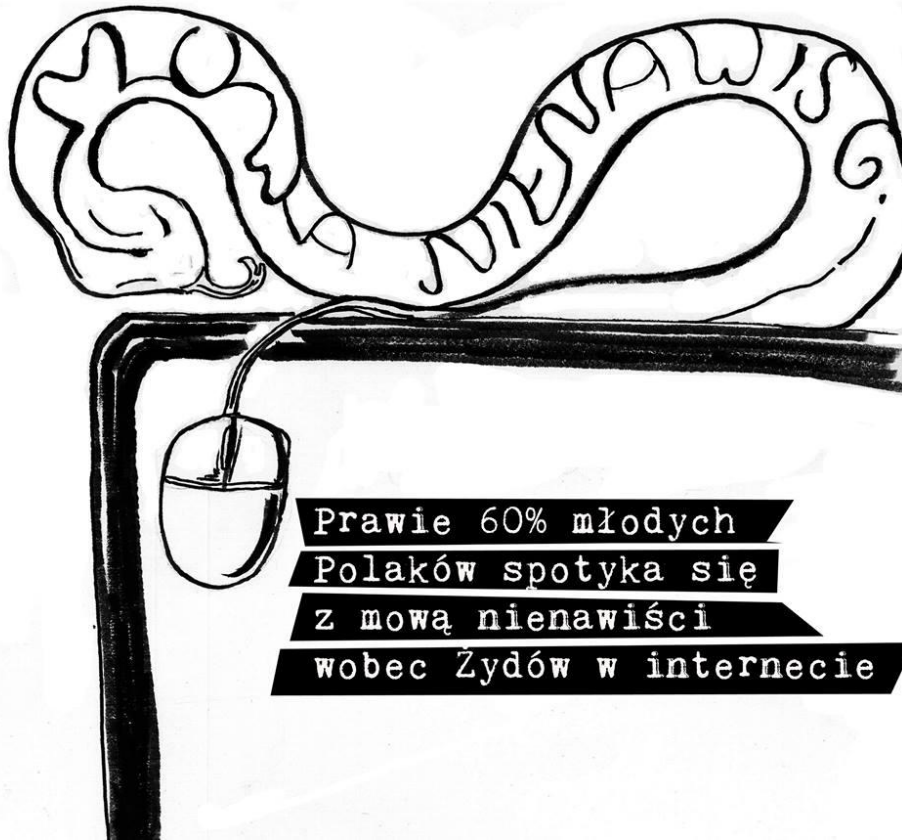
What We Did And What We Found

In order to combat hate speech online, we created a social media campaign which included creating a video and also a Facebook page with pictures and other information. Since our target group was neutral and passive group of supporters of hate speech against the Jews, we tried to add Facebook groups that were linked with a football club or football fan club. The video is about a group of four football fans who are shown to be hooligans. On their way to the bus stop they see a Jew, which who is recognized as a Jew because of the kippa he is wearing. The hooligans approach the Jews to beat him just because he is a Jew, but when they find out that he is actually their friend, they hug and greet each other. The message is simple – we can all be friends. That despite our religious, ethnic and sports background and orientation, we can still respect each other and tolerate each other for who they are. We received a lot of positive feedback on the video even after the end of the fellowship verbally through our peer. We also received a lot of views on our page even in months following the fellowship.

Our Facebook page included pictures and memes that are directed in the message of fostering tolerance among young people. We decided to use the following self-sketched images because we wanted them to be unique and creative so as to provide meaningful messages. One of the memes included shows a snake on top of the computer, which on its screen shows the statistics regarding the source of hate speech. There are other pictures that demonstrate the source of hate speech and importances of combatting hate speech.



The above image does not include a football t-shirt with number 88. 88 represents alphabets in English language – HH, which is what some people translate as “Heil Hitler”.

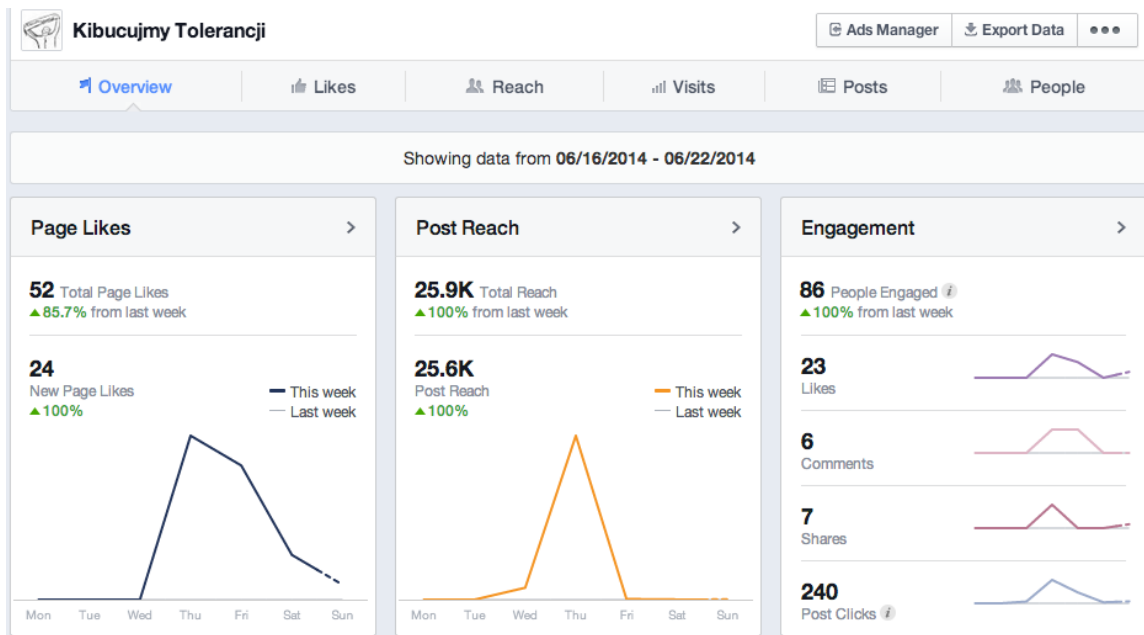


The above image shows a statistics around anti-Semitic prevalence in the Internet.



This figure shows a football fan showing a scarf that has the name of our project, Kibucujmy tolerancji. We created this image to encourage football fans to use scarfs that promote tolerance.

Our results have been very interesting. Our metric for the success was the number of views from people on our webpages. The following statistics gives us a basic idea about the success of our project. So far, the Facebook page has reached almost 26 thousand viewers. The Facebook page was promoted with the funds available through Humanity in Action Poland. We believe that if we had not used the funds, we could have still gotten enough visibility but it might have taken a little longer. And given the limited time we were working in, we believed that using the funds would be beneficial. We also received tens of likes for the page. The project was successful in reaching a large mass of people, and we believe we can utilize this visibility to encourage them in promoting tolerance. The comments we have received from people have been largely positive. On the one hand such comments are great, but on the other hand, we are looking for ways to constantly improve through constructive feedback, which is currently lacking. There is also no way of measuring how much impact this social campaign, or any social campaign has to encourage people to stand on the side of fighting against hate speech against Jews. Our target group for this program was young soccer fans, which are either neutral or passive supporters of hate speech against Jews. The number of views of this page might or might not include people of the group we intended to reach out to. We have however contacted and collaborated with non-governmental organizations that are helping us reach the right audience.



We also received some very positive responses from people who liked our page. This is a good indication that our page is visible. Through this exercise, we have learned that if we make an effort in the social media platforms to create awareness and collaborate with different organizations that already have presence in social media like Facebook, then people will take notice of our work.

Suggestions for Combating Hate Speech Against the Jews in the Future

For the future, it is very important to create a social campaign focused specifically for a certain section of the population. Such focused campaign might generate enough impetus for people to act and take notice of the problem. The issue of online hate speech is also a problem, and more campaigns that will help make hate speech not a norm will help. There has been a national dialogue regarding the role that schools, parents, government; police, Internet service providers, etc. play in combatting hate speech. Such national dialogue should elaborate on the roles and responsibilities of each of the stakeholders. While more academic research is good, we also need concrete action.

Conclusion

Hate speech against Jews in Poland is still present, especially among young population. In order to combat anti-Semitism in football stadiums, multi-prong approach is necessary where young people are provided with an opportunity to learn about the issues and understand the complexity of the problem. They should be encouraged to act based on rationality and justice. The best way to reach out to youth is through their peers. So, peer-mentoring programs could also be helpful. A bottom up approach could eventually help us as a society get rid of the evilness of hate speech against the Jewish communities in Poland.

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