

Little Evidence That Hate Speech Causes Real World Harm

A review of the literature

By John Morrison

Advocates of hate speech laws believe that because speech is a precursor to action, this in itself is proof of the relationship of cause and effect between hate speech and violence. More specifically, hate speech is perceived to cause harm in two notable ways: incitement to violence and the physical or emotional suffering of people subjected to hate speech.

Many examples can be given as evidence for this assertion. The perpetrator of the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shootings engaged with and espoused anti-Jewish conspiracies on social media. The perpetrator of the 2019 Christchurch mosque touted his belief in white genocide and the great replacement theory. While the violence of Indian lynch mobs, Sri Lankan vigilantes, and genocidal regimes in Rwanda and Myanmar have all similarly been explained by the espousal of or engagement with hate speech.

But some commentators go further than stating speech causes violence. The Wikipedia entry for hate speech writes that ‘hate speech is generally accepted to be one of the prerequisites for mass atrocities such as genocide.’ This is an important distinction, it means that atrocities like genocide would not even occur were it for not hate speech.

However, social scientists have discovered little evidence that hate speech contributes to psychic or emotional harm. This is not a surprise. It was long feared that violent video games inspired children to commit violence, but the Supreme Court struck down a California law restricting the sale of violent video games to children. This is because, as Nadine Strossen notes, ‘not a single study showed that exposure to violent video games caused minors to act aggressively.’

Among the violence blamed on hate speech is genocide, most notably in Rwanda and Nazi Germany. But political scientist Scott Strauss found that only five to ten percent of Rwandans had a radio and there was no correlation between the initial violence and broadcast coverage. Meanwhile, Jacob Mchangama highlights that Nazi antisemitism did not work in many parts of Germany. Instead, it took hold in areas

where antisemitism was already prevalent and propaganda worked better on young people who were more impressionable and had less experience of living in a free society of ideas.

This relates to one of the most notable features of authoritarian regimes: censorship. These genocidal regimes are not examples of countries where free speech got out of hand. Instead, they were societies that controlled speech, including counterspeech which may have helped combat their evil ideas.

Words are not intrinsically dangerous and there are many variables regarding what constitutes a harmful message, including the reaction of the reader or listener, body language, tone of voice, and perceived intent. Indeed, research has shown that how we perceive or interpret hateful speech can change our psychological and physiological reactions.

This is why a free society should trust its citizenry to engage with hate speech. Nadine Strossen again notes that the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute's annual national survey of incoming first-year college students found that students' overriding reaction to widely reported incidents of hate speech was not suffering, but engagement and activism. Meanwhile, a study by Laura Leets of the Stanford University Communication Department found that students subjected to hate speech and slurs reported 'no effects upon them in either the short run or the long run'. This is especially notable given that students are considered, including by themselves, to be especially vulnerable to the harms of hate speech.

But many societies do not trust their citizens to engage with hate speech and so have enforced restrictions on what can be said in public and even private life. However, if hate speech leads to violence then these countries which have enforced restrictions on hate speech should experience a reduction in hate crime. Instead, the opposite is often true. A 2017 study concluded that in Western Europe, violent far-right extremism was accelerated by 'extensive public repression of radical right actors and opinions.' Greg Lukianoff similarly notes that 'France passed its Gayssot Act outlawing Holocaust denial in 1990, yet as recently as 2019 it held a 17% antisemitism index score'.

Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes stated in a 1925 dissent that "every idea is an incitement." Religious texts for example may incite some to a life of violence and another to a life of peace. Ultimately, the responsibility for the outcome of engaging with speech lies with the individual who decides on a course of action, not with the speech.

Table of Contents

How hate speech supposedly leads to violence	4
Hate speech is perceived to cause physical harm in two ways: words can incite people to inflict harm on others and the result of listening to hateful words can cause physical and mental suffering	4
The UN, the EU, think tanks, universities, and mainstream media are in near total agreement that hate speech is a precursor to violence.	4
The Wikipedia entry for Hate speech states that ‘hate speech is generally accepted to be one of the prerequisites for mass atrocities such as genocide.’ The genocides of the twentieth century	5
The Council for Foreign Relations lists many local examples of online hate speech leading to violence. This includes the great replacement theory and its role in the 2018 Pittsburgh shooting and the 2019 Christchurch shootings, Facebook posts and attacks on refugees in Germany as well as the Rohingya and Tamil Muslims, and white supremacist content in America	6
Studies and research disputing the notion that hate speech leads to hate crimes and harm	7
Social scientists note that there is little good research evidence that hate speech contributes to psychic or emotional harm. There are many variables regarding what constitutes a hurtful message, including reactions, body language, tone of voice, and perceived intent	7
A study by Laura Leets of the Stanford University Communication Department found that students subjected to hate speech and slurs reported no effects upon them in either the short run or the long run	7
The UCLA Higher Education Research Institute’s annual national survey of incoming first-year college students has found that students’ overriding reaction to the widely reported recent incidents of “hate speech” and bias crimes has not been depression and withdrawal, but active engagement	8
Research has shown that how we perceive or interpret hateful speech can substantially alter our psychological and physiological reactions. This further undermines the notion that words on their own are intrinsically harmful	8
The Supreme Court struck down a California law restricting the sale of violent video games to children which was based on fears that children who viewed such videos would be influenced to act violently.	9
Not a single study showed that exposure to violent video games caused minors to act aggressively	9
A study from the Netherlands found that only terrorist attacks had a (modest) impact on violent hate crimes. While non-violent hate crime is boosted by news, immigration, and terrorism. Free speech is more likely to serve as a safety valve than a lightning rod for extremist violence and people are more likely to view violence as justified when governments repress free expression	9
Counterpoints to the notion that hate speech leads to hate crimes	10
American courts have consistently held that antisocial acts, including violence, cannot be attributed to the actor’s exposure to expression. Where one person may be driven to violence by speech, for example religious text, someone else may be inspired to feats of excellence	10
Julian Adorney, writing for the Foundation for Economic Education, argues that the idea that speech causes harm is the result of confusion over the terms. Hate speech causes distress but it does not cause harm which is a rights violation	10
Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff point out that many actions cause distress, like gossiping or	

homework, but that doesn't make them violent or cause violence. The central distinction is one between vices that cannot be restricted in a free society and crimes that can be made illegal	11
Hate crime data is flawed but if it is to be believed then many countries with more restrictive hate speech laws record higher levels of hate crime than those that don't	11
Studies suggest that freedom of expression is associated with less rather than more violent extremism, terrorism, and social conflict in democracies across Europe	11
Speech laws have done nothing to stop the spread of discriminatory attitudes across Europe	12
In 2017, Germany adopted measures to counter hate speech, but it still warns that right-wing extremism constituted the "greatest threat to security in our country"	12
Far-right extremists and white supremacists often migrate to smaller alternative platforms or messaging services when banned from mainstream platforms. This makes them harder to monitor and hinders targeted counterspeech	12
Suzanne Nossel argues in the Washington Post that 'the way to preserve our freedom of expression is to insist that speech, no matter how offensive, cannot justify violent reprisal.' Otherwise, we risk becoming like an autocracy	13
Counterpoints to the notion that hate speech leads to genocide	13
Adorney says that pointing to genocide as an example of speech leading to genocide, as the UN does, is wrong. The Third Reich and Hutu militias in Rwanda used state-sponsored propaganda, that's not the same as hate speech in a free society. Authoritarian regimes limit free speech and promote propaganda, they're not examples of societies that let free speech get out of hand	13
Jacob Mchangama points out that Nazi antisemitism did not work in many parts of Germany, which disproves the social contagion theory of violence. Instead, it took hold in areas where antisemitism was already prevalent and worked better on young people who were more impressionable and had less experience of living in a free society	14
Eric Heinze argues that not all democracies are alike and that we should not think that because Weimar Germany became Nazi Germany, this will inevitably happen elsewhere. What's more, these regimes also suppress free speech which could equally justify the abolition of censorship	14
Nadine Strossen points out that free speech principles already permit harmful speech to be punished. By contrast, allowing speculative instances of violent speech to be punished predictably leads to governments using these discretionary powers against opponents and disempowered groups	15
Political scientist Scott Strauss found that only 5-10 percent of Rwandans had a radio and no correlation existed between the initial violence and broadcast coverage. Richard Carver of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch concluded that the violence would have taken place without the radio coverage	15
Speech doesn't lead to violence because we already have laws to counter the kinds of things being said on the radio in Rwanda. Meanwhile, murder was illegal in Rwanda but that didn't stop it from taking place - the problem is what the state sanctions, not what the individual says	16
State propaganda is not as effective as many people think at inciting violence, as Aldous Huxley says instead it gives force to the direction of popular feelings without creating them.	16

How hate speech supposedly leads to violence

Hate speech is perceived to cause physical harm in two ways: words can incite people to inflict harm on others and the result of listening to hateful words can cause physical and mental suffering

- Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic [summarize](#) the harm hate speech can cause the victim in a 2014 journal published in the Wake Forest Law Review.
 1. "Although some courts and commentators describe the injury of hate speech as mere offense, the harm associated with the face-to-face kind, at least, is often far greater than that and includes flinching, tightening of muscles, adrenaline rushes, and inability to sleep."
 2. "Some victims may suffer psychosocial harms, including depression, repressed anger, diminished self-concept, and impairment of work or school performance. Some may take refuge in drugs, alcohol, or other forms of addiction, compounding their misery."
- In a New York Times op-ed titled "[When is speech violence?](#)", clinical psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett [makes](#) a similar argument:
 - "If words can cause stress, and if prolonged stress can cause physical harm, then it seems that speech—at least certain types of speech—can be a form of violence."

The UN, the EU, think tanks, universities, and mainstream media are in near total agreement that hate speech is a precursor to violence.

- A Google search asking '[Does hate speech lead to violence](#)' produces results that are almost unanimous in declaring that the historical evidence proves hate speech is a precursor to violence. Some examples include:
 1. The UN [declares](#) that as history continues to show, hate speech coupled with disinformation can lead to stigmatization, discrimination, and large-scale violence.
 2. The EU [says](#) hate speech poses grave dangers for the cohesion of a democratic society, the protection of human rights, and the rule of law. If left unaddressed, it can lead to acts of violence and conflict on a wider scale. In this sense hate speech is an extreme form of intolerance that contributes to hate crime.
 3. The Brookings Institute [published](#) a piece titled 'How hateful rhetoric connects to real-world violence' in which it stated that as extremism magnifies, the likelihood of violence increases.
 4. Many mainstream media outlets have published articles arguing the case, including the [Guardian](#), the [Washington Post](#), and the [New York Times](#).

The Wikipedia entry for Hate speech states that 'hate speech is generally accepted to be one of the prerequisites for mass atrocities such as genocide.' The genocides of the twentieth century

- The paper Wikipedia [referenced](#) for its claim states that the radio transmissions in Rwanda merely represent the twentieth century's coda of genocidal discourse.
 1. About eighty years previously, the Ottoman propaganda weekly Harb Mecmuasi, "to justify [the Armenian genocide]," thoroughly prepared "the requisite propaganda material" in Istanbul.

- Such propaganda contributed toward the murder of 1.5 million Armenian citizens by, among other things, convincing the Turkish people of “the need to ‘rid ourselves of these Armenian parasites’ ” and identifying Armenians with “traditionally unclean animals such as rats, dogs, and pigs.”
2. Two decades later, Nazi media organs, in particular *Der Stürmer*, helped mobilize the extermination of six million Jews in the Holocaust by labeling them “as germs and pests, not human beings, evil-doers, as disseminators of diseases who must be destroyed in the interest of mankind.”
 3. The twenty-first century has seen a perpetuation of this extermination rhetoric with Sudan’s regime. In Darfur, South Kordofan, and the Blue Nile, atrocities have been “fueled by hate speech”—with the government using it to dehumanize blacks and spur the Janjaweed militia’s genocidal violence against them.
 4. Janjaweed have marched into liquidation operations chanting language such as the following:
 - “Dog, son of dogs, we came to kill you and your kids.” “Kill the black donkeys! Kill the black dogs! Kill the black monkeys!” “You blacks are not human. We can do anything we want to you.” “We kill our cows when they have black calves. We will kill you too.” “You make this area dirty; we are here to clean the area.” “You blacks are like monkeys. You are not human.”

The Council for Foreign Relations lists many local examples of online hate speech leading to violence. This includes the great replacement theory and its role in the 2018 Pittsburgh shooting and the 2019 Christchurch shootings, Facebook posts and attacks on refugees in Germany as well as the Rohingya and Tamil Muslims, and white supremacist content in America

- In Germany, a correlation was [found](#) between anti-refugee Facebook posts by the far-right Alternative for Germany party and attacks on refugees.
 - Scholars Karsten Muller and Carlo Schwarz observed that upticks in attacks, such as arson and assault, followed spikes in hate-mongering posts.
- In the United States, perpetrators of recent white supremacist attacks have [circulated](#) among racist communities online and also embraced social media to publicize their acts.
 - Prosecutors said the Charleston church shooter, who killed nine black clergy and worshippers in June 2015, engaged in a “self-learning process” online that led him to believe that the goal of white supremacy required violent action.
- The 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooter was a participant in the social media network Gab, whose lax rules have [attracted](#) extremists banned by larger platforms.
 1. There, he espoused the conspiracy that Jews sought to bring immigrants into the United States and render whites a minority, before killing eleven worshippers at a refugee-themed Shabbat service.
 2. This “great replacement” trope, which was heard at the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, a year prior and originates with the French far right, expresses demographic anxieties about nonwhite immigration and birth rates.

- The great replacement trope was in turn [espoused](#) by the perpetrator of the 2019 New Zealand mosque shootings, who killed forty-nine Muslims at prayer and sought to broadcast the attack on YouTube.
- In Myanmar, military leaders and Buddhist nationalists [used](#) social media to slur and demonize the Rohingya Muslim minority ahead of and during a campaign of ethnic cleansing.
 - Though Rohingya comprised perhaps 2 percent of the population, ethno-nationalists claimed that Rohingya would soon supplant the Buddhist majority. The UN fact-finding mission said:
 - “Facebook has been a useful instrument for those seeking to spread hate, in a context where, for most users, Facebook is the Internet [PDF].”
- In India, lynch mobs and other types of communal violence, in many cases [originating](#) with rumors on WhatsApp groups, have been on the rise since the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014.
- Sri Lanka has similarly [seen](#) vigilantism inspired by rumors spread online, targeting the Tamil Muslim minority.
 - During a spate of violence in March 2018, the government blocked access to Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as the messaging app Viber, for a week, saying that Facebook had not been sufficiently responsive during the emergency.

Studies and research disputing the notion that hate speech leads to hate crimes and harm

Social scientists note that there is little good research evidence that hate speech contributes to psychic or emotional harm. There are many variables regarding what constitutes a hurtful message, including reactions, body language, tone of voice, and perceived intent

Nadine Strossen HATE: Why We Should Resist it With Free Speech, Not Censorship (pg 124)

- Social scientists who specialize in communications have noted that the potential of “hate speech” to contribute to psychic or emotional harm has “not received much empirical investigation,” and that “there is little good research evidence of [such] harm.”
- These experts recognize that “there are wide individual differences regarding what constitutes a hurtful message,” and that “what speech is considered harmful depends critically on situational variables,” including:
 1. Bystanders’ reactions
 2. The message’s perceived intent
 3. The relationship between the speaker and listener
 4. The topic of discussion
 5. The location of the conversation
 6. The language used
 7. The speaker’s and the listener’s body language
 8. Tone of voice

- In addition, “a great deal of research suggests that social support and certain personality characteristics moderate the effects of stress” that could potentially result from being the target of “hate speech.” Reactions of disparaged individuals “are mediated by past experiences, psychological and physical strength, status, needs, [and] goals,” among other factors.

A study by Laura Leets of the Stanford University Communication Department found that students subjected to hate speech and slurs reported no effects upon them in either the short run or the long run

Nadine Strossen HATE: Why We Should Resist it With Free Speech, Not Censorship (pg 124-5)

- A study that started to fill the gap in empirical research on this topic was conducted by Laura Leets of the Stanford University Communication Department.
 1. She recruited Jewish and LGBT college students to read several anti-Semitic and homophobic slurs, respectively, and to answer questions about how they would have responded if they had been the targets of these hateful messages.
 2. All of the expressions were drawn from actual situations.
- Strikingly, “a common response” by the student participants was that the “hate speech” would have had “no effect” upon them in either the short run or the long run.
 1. Many of the participants in the study expressed the belief that the speaker was motivated by ignorance or insecurity, and therefore should be the object of pity, not anger.
 2. Some participants said they would have reacted by calmly responding to the speaker; some said they would have ignored the speaker; and others indicated they would have reacted angrily.
- While some participants said they would have had negative reactions, hampering their self-esteem at least immediately after the “hate speech,” these participants represented only a minority of the group.
- An especially intriguing aspect of the Leets study was that 83% of the participants viewed silence in response to “hate speech” as an empowered and empowering response, not a weak or passive one.
 - They considered a silent response, including walking away from the disparaging speaker, as taking the higher moral ground.

The UCLA Higher Education Research Institute’s annual national survey of incoming first-year college students has found that students’ overriding reaction to the widely reported recent incidents of “hate speech” and bias crimes has not been depression and withdrawal, but active engagement

Nadine Strossen HATE: Why We Should Resist it With Free Speech, Not Censorship (pg 124-5)

- The UCLA Higher Education Research Institute has conducted an annual national survey of incoming first-year college students since 1967.
- The survey of students entering college in 2015 documented an all-time high among African-American and other minority students in terms of their planned speaking-out and activism against discrimination, both on campus and in the larger community and the political system generally.

- These responses indicate that the students’ overriding reaction to the widely reported recent incidents of “hate speech” and bias crimes has not been depression and withdrawal, but active engagement.
- As the study’s authors concluded:
 - “Recent developments may have signaled to students that a collective sense of belonging and working together to raise important issues on campus and in their communities can lead to change.”

Research has shown that how we perceive or interpret hateful speech can substantially alter our psychological and physiological reactions. This further undermines the notion that words on their own are intrinsically harmful

Nadine Strossen HATE: Why We Should Resist it With Free Speech, Not Censorship (pg 124-5)

- Research studies have shown that how we perceive or interpret stressful situations, including hearing hateful speech, can substantially alter our psychological and physiological reactions.
- Therefore, some psychologists argue that the best strategy for both mental and physical health is education about the fact that such speech is not necessarily harmful, and about how to perceive such stressful situations as opportunities for positive personal development.
- As psychologist Pamela Paresky has observed:
 - “Students who believe that hearing certain words or listening to certain speakers can harm them may . . . succumb to a self-fulfilling prophecy. . . . But it is the belief that words can do harm that causes the harm, not the words themselves.”
- A New York Times article summarized the pertinent research as follows:
 - “You can view stress as something that is wreaking havoc on your body . . . or as something that is giving you the strength and energy to overcome adversity. . . . In a tough situation, stress can make you stronger.”

The Supreme Court struck down a California law restricting the sale of violent video games to children which was based on fears that children who viewed such videos would be influenced to act violently. Not a single study showed that exposure to violent video games caused minors to act aggressively

Nadine Strossen HATE: Why We Should Resist it With Free Speech, Not Censorship (pg 127)

- The Supreme Court recently had occasion to review one aspect of the social science literature on the effects—or, actually, non-effects—of violent speech.
- In a 2011 decision, the Court struck down a California law restricting the sale of violent video games to children, which was based on fears that children who viewed such videos would be influenced to act violently.
 - However, not a single study showed that exposure to violent video games caused minors to act aggressively.

A study from the Netherlands found that only terrorist attacks had a (modest) impact on violent hate crimes. While non-violent hate crime is boosted by news, immigration, and terrorism. Free speech is more likely to serve as a safety valve than a lightning rod for extremist violence and people are more likely to view violence as justified when governments repress free expression

- Registered hate crimes are on the rise in many Western societies. What [explains](#) temporal variation in the incidence of hate crimes?
- [Combining](#) insights from the grievance model and the opportunity model, the study examined the role of three types of contextual factors:
 1. Security (terrorism)
 2. Media (news about terrorism and immigration)
 3. Political factors (speech by anti-immigration actors, hate speech prosecution, and high-profile anti-immigration victories)
- The study [applies](#) time-series analysis to its original dataset of registered hate crimes in the Netherlands, 2015–2017.
 1. Findings indicate that terrorist attacks, (both print and online) news on refugees, immigration, and terrorism boost nonviolent hate crime.
 2. Similarly, news of the hate speech prosecution of Freedom Party leader Geert Wilders increases nonviolent crime as well.
 3. Tentative evidence points to a contagion effect of speech by anti-immigration actors.
- With regard to violent hate crimes, only terrorist attacks [had](#) an effect.
 - This effect was modest and only found in one of our models.
- Hence, the grievance and the opportunities model each partially [explain](#) nonviolent hate crime, although the security and media context seem most influential.
- The study's findings help to [identify](#) the contextual factors contributing to a climate for hate and suggest that perceived threats play a key role.

Counterpoints to the notion that hate speech leads to hate crimes

American courts have consistently held that antisocial acts, including violence, cannot be attributed to the actor's exposure to expression. Where one person may be driven to violence by speech, for example religious text, someone else may be inspired to feats of excellence

Nadine Strossen HATE: Why We Should Resist it With Free Speech, Not Censorship (pg 128)

- In 2002, for example, a federal appellate court upheld the lower court's dismissal of a claim that the producers of certain violent media works could be deemed even partially responsible for school shootings committed by a teenager who had watched them.
- If creators and distributors of expressive material were held liable for antisocial acts that some individuals committed after viewing the material, then no work would be safe—certainly neither the Bible nor the Qu'ran, which both have been accused of instigating countless individual and mass crimes.
- Stressing the necessarily varied reactions that individual audience members have to different messages, the court in the school shootings case explained:

- '[I]deas . . . which may drive some people to violence or ruin, may inspire others to feats of excellence or greatness. . . . Atrocities have been committed in the name of many of civilization's great religions, intellectuals, and artists, yet [we do] not hold those whose ideas inspired the crimes to answer for such acts. To do so would be to allow the . . . misfits . . . to declare what the rest of the country can and cannot read, watch and hear.'

Julian Adorney, writing for the Foundation for Economic Education, argues that the idea that speech causes harm is the result of confusion over the terms. Hate speech causes distress but it does not cause harm which is a rights violation

- The claim that we should [ban](#) hate speech because it can cause harm to its victims rests on a confusion of two terms.
- In reality, hate speech can (but doesn't always) [lead](#) to distress; it does not lead to harm. What's the difference?
 1. Harm, in the classically liberal sense, is a rights violation. Being punched in the nose causes harm.
 2. Distress is unpleasant, but a feeling of distress does not mean that your rights were violated.
- Hate speech can [lead](#) to distress, but it doesn't follow that we should ban hate speech.

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff point out that many actions cause distress, like gossiping or homework, but that doesn't make them violent or cause violence. The central distinction is one between vices that cannot be restricted in a free society and crimes that can be made illegal

- [Writing](#) in The Atlantic, Haidt and Lukianoff [acknowledge](#) that hateful speech can cause distress while rejecting the idea that we should therefore ban said speech. As they note, other behaviors that can cause distress include, "gossiping about a rival" or "giving one's students a lot of homework." They explain:
 - "Both practices can cause prolonged stress to others, but that doesn't turn them into forms of violence [i.e. harm]."
- Haidt's examples further [illustrate](#) the central distinction between vices and crimes.
 1. Banning crimes (i.e. things that cause harm) is important in a free society.
 2. A ban on vices, be it hateful speech or gossiping about a rival, would be a tyrannical restriction of people's freedom.
- Essential to the very concept of freedom is the freedom of others to do and [say](#) things that we personally do not approve of.

Hate crime data is flawed but if it is to be believed then many countries with more restrictive hate speech laws record higher levels of hate crime than those that don't

- Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom all [have](#) strong hate speech laws, while the United States does not.
 - If legal hate speech truly primed the pump for violence, then we should expect the United States to have more hate crimes than these three countries.
- In fact, we [see](#) the opposite pattern.

1. In Denmark in 2019, there were 8.08 hate crimes per 100,000 people.
 2. In Germany, the number was 10.34 per 100,000 people.
 3. In the United Kingdom, it was a staggering 157.67 per 100,000 people.
- The United States [saw](#) just 2.61 hate crimes per 100,000 people. That's still far too many, but it paints a clear picture: hate speech laws don't reduce violence against minorities, and might just create more of it.

Studies suggest that freedom of expression is associated with less rather than more violent extremism, terrorism, and social conflict in democracies across Europe

- A 2017 study [concluded](#) that in Western Europe, violent far-right extremism was accelerated by “extensive public repression of radical right actors and opinions.”
 - The study aimed to explain the variation in the extent of right-wing terrorism and violence (RTV) in 18 Western European countries between 1990 and 2015.
- The article [identifies](#) two ‘causal recipes’ that consistently distinguish countries with extensive RTV experience from those with low or moderate RTV experience.
 1. The first (North European) recipe involves the combination of high immigration, low electoral support for anti-immigration (radical right) parties, and extensive public repression of radical right actors and opinions.
 2. The second (South European) recipe involves the combination of socioeconomic hardship, authoritarian legacies, and extensive left-wing terrorism and militancy.
- Notably, both recipes [contain](#) elements of ‘grievances’ and ‘opportunities’, suggesting that these two theories, which are conventionally seen as contrasting, may be more fruitfully seen as complementary.

Speech laws have done nothing to stop the spread of discriminatory attitudes across Europe

- In 1986, the UK [passed](#) a law against “words or behaviour ... likely to stir up racial hatred”; yet, in the 1990s, racial tolerance decreased.
- Despite [having](#) hate speech laws since the 1980s, Germany is experiencing increased islamophobia and antisemitism.
- France [passed](#) its Gayssot Act outlawing Holocaust denial in 1990, yet as recently as 2019 it held a 17% antisemitism index score.

In 2017, Germany adopted measures to counter hate speech, but it still warns that right-wing extremism constituted the “greatest threat to security in our country”

- In 2019—two years after Germany [adopted](#) the Network Enforcement Act to counter the dangerous effects of hate speech—the German government [estimated](#) that the country was home to more than 30,000 far-right extremists, about 40% of whom were inclined toward violence.
- The following year, German authorities [recorded](#) the highest level of violent right-wing extremist crime in 20 years, including several murders, prompting the government to warn that right-wing extremism constituted the “greatest threat to security in our country.”

Far-right extremists and white supremacists often migrate to smaller alternative platforms or messaging services when banned from mainstream platforms. This makes them harder to monitor and hinders targeted counterspeech

- The very lightly [moderated](#) website 4Chan, and its even more ghastly cousin, 8Chan, have become landing spots for radicals who find themselves kicked off of Facebook or Twitter.
 - Similarly, Telegram is an encrypted messaging service where extremists may [reconnect](#) and network with minimal publicity.
- The withdrawal of extremists from popular platforms onto more obscure and anonymous ones not only [impedes](#) the efforts of law enforcement agencies to track down future attacks but also hinders targeted counterspeech, which some studies have shown to be effective in reducing hate speech.
 - In the words of one researcher, the evolution of far-right communities on alternative platforms “cast[s] doubt on the effectiveness of deplatforming for [curbing](#) the influence of far-right and other extremist actors.”

Suzanne Nossel argues in the Washington Post that ‘the way to preserve our freedom of expression is to insist that speech, no matter how offensive, cannot justify violent reprisal.’ Otherwise, we risk becoming like an autocracy

- Suzanne Nossel [wrote](#) in a 2017 Washington Post article that hateful speech is not the same thing as violence:
 - ‘While there is a continuum of acceptable speech, language, and violence should not be confused. The way to preserve our freedom of expression is to insist that speech, no matter how offensive, cannot justify violent reprisal.’
- Nossel [warned](#) of the dangers of this path in her 2017 article. ‘We risk becoming like China, Turkey, Iran, and other autocracies, where brutality against journalists and draconian punishments for dissenting ideas are normal.’

Counterpoints to the notion that hate speech leads to genocide

Adorney says that pointing to genocide as an example of speech leading to genocide, as the UN does, is wrong. The Third Reich and Hutu militias in Rwanda used state-sponsored propaganda, that’s not the same as hate speech in a free society. Authoritarian regimes limit free speech and promote propaganda, they’re not examples of societies that let free speech get out of hand

- The introduction to the Wikipedia [entry](#) for Hate speech closes with the following summation:
 - ‘Hate speech is generally accepted to be one of the prerequisites for mass atrocities such as genocide.’
- The source for this assertion is a [paper](#) by Gregory S. Gordon of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. As evidence, Gordon lists the propaganda efforts that helped fuel many of the genocides of the 20th century. Gordon writes:

- 'It begins with the Ottoman genocide of the Armenians during World War I. In carrying out its murderous plan, the Young Turk government created the template for the modern genocidal propaganda campaign. It used the media and the wide dissemination of photographic images to depict Armenians as an impure, alien people collaborating with Turkey's enemies and bent on its destruction.'
- But Radio stations in Rwanda that didn't [tow](#) the governmental line were banned. There was an official state radio station, and most other stations were controlled by pro-government forces.
- Lukianoff [describes](#) the importance of this distinction between state propagandists and free societies:
 - "To use the authorized media of a genocidal state as evidence of the danger posed by excessive liberty suggests a failure to understand the core concept of liberty."

Jacob Mchangama points out that Nazi antisemitism did not work in many parts of Germany, which disproves the social contagion theory of violence. Instead, it took hold in areas where antisemitism was already prevalent and worked better on young people who were more impressionable and had less experience of living in a free society

- Nazi Germany didn't just [legalize](#) anti-Semitic hate speech, they used government organs to pump out non-stop propaganda about Jews. If the "social contagion" theory was remotely true, this firehose of state-sponsored hatred should have driven anti-Semitism through the roof.
 1. Nazi propaganda got a foothold "in districts where anti-Semitism was already prevalent before the Nazi takeover."
 2. In other parts of Germany—for example, among the working class and Catholics—Nazi propaganda didn't generate the hoped-for hatred of Jewish people.
- But as Jacob Mchangama [writes](#), measures of anti-Semitism barely budged.:
 - "Studies have shown that Nazi propaganda was most effective on young Germans—more impressionable, with little experience of living in a free society and subject to institutional indoctrination in schools and Hitler Youth organizations...."
- This makes sense. If you [take](#) young people and subject them to endless propaganda from teachers and other leaders about how XYZ population is awful and must be scourged from the earth, then many of those young people will start to believe it. Schools mold minds.

Eric Heinze argues that not all democracies are alike and that we should not think that because Weimar Germany became Nazi Germany, this will inevitably happen elsewhere. What's more, these regimes also suppress free speech which could equally justify the abolition of censorship

- A common argument in defense of bans is that democracies are not [immune](#) from the excesses of hate speech.
 - The Weimar Republic, on that view, shows how hate speech in today's democracy can snowball into tomorrow's genocide.
- The problem with that claim is its 'one size fits all' assumption. Not all democracies are alike. Risks [associated](#) with a highly flawed state cannot so casually be attributed to all democracies across the board.

- Weimar was scarcely more than an on-paper democracy, boasting none of the historical, institutional, or cultural support so conspicuous among the Economist's top ten or fifteen contenders.
- One evil of the Third Reich was indeed hate speech, from which we might [deduce](#) the need for its opposite – the need for bans.
- An equal evil, however, was the suppression of free speech, of the type that might have [countered](#) Nazi excesses. From that evil, we can just as plausibly deduce a need for the abolition of censorship.

Nadine Strossen points out that free speech principles already permit harmful speech to be punished. By contrast, allowing speculative instances of violent speech to be punished predictably leads to governments using these discretionary powers against opponents and disempowered groups

- When there is a sufficiently tight and direct causal nexus between speech and specific serious imminent harm, [including](#) violence, free speech principles permit such speech to be punished.
 1. For example, the government may punish a speaker who intentionally incites violence that is likely to happen imminently.
 2. As another example, under the “fighting words” doctrine, the government may punish a direct personal insult that is intended and likely to provoke an immediate violent reaction.
- In contrast, when the government has been [allowed](#) to punish speech because of a more speculative, indirect connection between it and some potential future violence — as happened in the U.S. in the past, and still occurs in other countries — the government predictably exercises this discretionary power to punish disempowered speakers and dissenting perspectives.
 1. After all, as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes noted, “Every idea is an incitement.” More recently, ACLU Legal Director David Cole observed that “A. Mitchell Palmer, J. Edgar Hoover, and Joseph McCarthy all used the advocacy of violence as a justification to punish people who associated with Communists, socialists, or civil rights groups.”
 2. To this day, powerful critics of Black Lives Matter and other social justice activists seek to suppress and punish their expression on the ground that it allegedly constitutes or causes violence.

Political scientist Scott Strauss found that only 5-10 percent of Rwandans had a radio and no correlation existed between the initial violence and broadcast coverage. Richard Carver of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch concluded that the violence would have taken place without the radio coverage

- While some [conclude](#) that expression did play a material contributory role, others disagree and are highly critical of the ICTR's conclusions on this issue.
 - For example, on the basis of 100 interviews of convicted perpetrators, Rwandan cultural anthropologist Charles Mironko found that many ordinary villagers either did not receive genocidal radio transmissions or did not interpret them as encouraging killing.
- Political scientist Scott Strauss [performed](#) a deep analysis of radio reception and genocidal violence in Rwanda to ascertain to what effect radio messages drove the murders.

1. He found that radio broadcasts only reached 5-10 percent of the population. In 1994, only 10 percent of the population even owned a radio, and coverage was uneven.
 2. Further, the initial violence didn't correlate with areas of broadcast coverage. He concluded that radio broadcasts had "marginal and conditional" effects, but that "radio alone cannot account for either the onset of most genocidal violence or the participation of most perpetrators."
- Richard Carver, who worked with both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, [concluded](#) that:
 - "[t]he massacres would have taken place with or without the RTLM [Radio Television des Mille Collines, the primary radio station in Rwanda at the time] broadcasts."

Speech doesn't lead to violence because we already have laws to counter the kinds of things being said on the radio in Rwanda. Meanwhile, murder was illegal in Rwanda but that didn't stop it from taking place - the problem is what the state sanctions, not what the individual says

- Even if the radio messages had [come](#) from private individuals, they wouldn't qualify as protected speech in the United States.
- These messages [provided](#) the names and addresses of Tutsis along with a call to kill them.
 - That's not protected speech; that's incitement to commit murder, which is already illegal under existing United States law.
- Murder, especially indiscriminate mass murder, was illegal in Rwanda, but illegality does not [matter](#) when the government and police are controlled by those who have no regard for the law.
 - As was the case with Nazi Germany, the proximal issue was not speech, but state-sanctioned mass murder.

State propaganda is not as effective as many people think at inciting violence, as Aldous Huxley says instead it gives force to the direction of popular feelings without creating them.

- Why didn't a flood of hate speech generate widespread anti-Semitism among the German people? Aldous Huxley, author of Brave New World, [described](#) the limits of propaganda in 1936:
 - "Propaganda gives force and direction to the successive movements of popular feeling and desire; but it does not do much to create these movements. The propagandist is a man who canalizes an already existing stream. In a land where there is no water, he digs in vain."