



## School Social Workers in Human Rights Education Against Hate Speech in Poland

Piotr Toczyski , Marcin Grudzień , Maciej Sopyło 

**CONTACT:** Piotr Toczyski, PhD, The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Warsaw, Poland, E-mail: [ptoczyski@aps.edu.pl](mailto:ptoczyski@aps.edu.pl)  
Marcin Grudzień, The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Warsaw, Poland, E-mail: [mgrudzien1@aps.edu.pl](mailto:mgrudzien1@aps.edu.pl)  
Maciej Sopyło, Institute of Law Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland,  
E-mail: [m.sopylo@gmail.com](mailto:m.sopylo@gmail.com)

### Keywords:

School Social Work, Human Rights Education, Hate Speech, Media Debates, Central and Eastern Europe

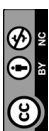
### Abstract:

Our aim is to show how digital skills training for school social workers in Poland became possible with the involvement of human rights activists, media, intellectuals and human rights trainers. School social work in Poland has become the focus of activity for trainers focused on human rights. The huge training process began in response to the need for hate speech prevention which was first expressed in Polish intellectual circles and mainstream media. It led to the school social work development programme, based on the metaphor of garden and gardening within the hate speech prevention discourse. We describe action research focused on our way of teaching school social workers to be the gardeners of the internet space.

## 1. Introduction: Polish social work and nationalistic turn

In this article we focus on a unique way in which social workers promote Human Rights education, based on the research previously discussed at the conference in Paris (Toczyski, 2019), merged with some ideas and concepts previously included in Polish pedagogy research (Toczyski, 2008; Jaczewski and Toczyski, 2015a; Jaczewski and Toczyski, 2015b, Toczyski, 2013). We familiarize the international audience with the Polish context from the social work and Human Rights perspective. As we know, social work is a human rights profession (Ife, 2012). There is “compatibility of principles, accomplishments of individual leaders and professional organizations’ actions” between them both (Healy, 2008). Hatred, a human rights problem has consequences for social work, as it “may result in myriad problems, including hate crimes, loss of employment, and heterosexist health and mental health services,” but also “self-hatred and self-destructive behaviors such as alcohol and drug abuse and suicide” (Bailey, 2012). When social workers listen to people’s stories, they may assess the degree to which human rights are violated (Lundy, 2011). Universal Declaration of Human Rights is central to social workers’ professional identity (Witkin, 1998). Less obvious, although certainly on the rise, is digitization of social work and social workers’ interest in the digital sphere of social life (Reamer, 2013), especially if it is expected that society may soon be acting in many areas predominantly digitally (Watling and Rogers, 2012). Social workers’ training in terms of experience and reflection should thus incorporate broadly understood digital skills (Goldkind and Wolf, 2015).

**Poland after 1989.** Our case in this article is Poland, part of Eastern Europe, where the era of digitisation since the mid-1990s has been correlated with the era of democratization after 1989. To avoid generalizations we do not compare Poland to other East European countries as their trajectories are often unique. In the case of Poland the period of 1989-2004 is often seen as the period of Europeanization, leading to European



Union accession and the related community of values. The anti-liberal discourse was present in the debate, but dominated by pro-European aspirations. After one year in the EU (2004-2005) the right-wing party formed government for a short time, but later another eight years of centro-liberal government followed (2007-2015). Years 2015-2020 mark the first term of right-wing party president followed since 2016 by the right-wing government. In the 2019 and 2020 elections both the right-wing majority parliament and right-wing president were elected anew. It can be thus said that after 1989, in Poland, despite the democratization of social relations, mainstreaming the tendency to equal rights and the improvement of the quality of life, similarly as in many Eastern European countries, there are problems resulting from the development of discourse-related opportunities and threats. The internet contributed to both democratizing and vulgarizing the discourse, leading to the rise in prejudices and hatred presence in the public sphere. As we know from Darja Završek and Barbara Rajgelj (2019) article on anti-refugee sentiment without refugees and human rights violations, Polish anti-democratic politicians of post-1989 era sometimes try to influence the public views with hostile statements and even sporting the Nazi salute, comparing migrant people in Europe to “excrement”, justifying lower wages for women or arguing for their abandonment of work. Polish social and political changes since ca. 2014 (preceding two election campaigns) may be characterized as polarization between the visions of open and closed societies. Aggressive anti-abortion, anti-LGBT and anti-migrant campaigns are even sometimes followed by anti-semitism and multiple references to so called national tradition.

It has been noticed that the content generated by hateful users spreads faster and reaches wider audiences than the content generated by average users (Mathew et al., 2019). Certainly a lot of online hate speech is paid. The so-called trolls hired by political actors get paid to create and distribute hate speech pretending to be spontaneous user-generated content. It is thus not the grassroots phenomenon, but top-down communication only pretending to be a bottom-up expression, often against a politically prominent person or against vulnerable social groups such as migrants or LGBT people. The trolls are paid mostly by political parties, sometimes through related civil organizations. Such attempts of influencing politics from abroad are documented by geopolitically focused think tanks. To counteract the spread of hateful content, in Poland some publishers restrict access to their online forums to subscribers.

**Social work in Poland and in Polish schools.** To briefly describe social work in general in Poland and current social work status in the country, one needs to consider Polish Social Welfare Act, according to which social work is defined as interdisciplinary professional activity aimed at helping individuals and families to strengthen or regain their ability to function in society by performing appropriate social roles and creating conditions conducive to this goal. In the Polish system, a social worker deals with the homeless, the unemployed, the lonely, those in a difficult financial situation, people dependent on all kinds of drugs, dysfunctional families, the sick and disabled, former prisoners and refugees. The most important task of a social worker is to create appropriate living conditions for people who are deprived of this and to prevent what is seen as pathologies. Social workers help in organizing material assistance, finding a job or housing and offer psychological assistance. In the case of a threat to the health or life of a child, they decide to take the child away from his or her family, in cooperation with the judicial institutions. In their activities, a social worker cooperates with the broadly understood family environment.

Specificity of social work for the educational system in Poland is expressed in school social workers acting on the grounds of several legislative documents. In the case of families with children in education, the external social worker works closely with school social workers whose status may be as an in-house educator or as a school psychologist, depending on their major qualification. Those functions are based on the educational law and its subsidiary regulations issued by the ministry of education. Their role and tasks have been formulated and described in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport (2017) on the principles of providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions. Their task is to support educational and caring activities, as well as to recognize learning difficulties of students and direct them to psychological tests. The person working in this position is in constant contact with parents and teachers, thanks to which he or she can convey all observations concerning pupils' and students' behaviour. In the case of school psychologists, they additionally provide support and psychological assistance. There is no single model of the presence of school social workers in the Polish system. Sometimes two or more functions are performed by the same person, obliged to cooperate also with the institution of external social workers if the educational or educational difficulties of students are related to the functioning



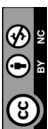
of the family. Conclusions from the 14th Congress for School Psychologists and Educators say that the weakness of the described system for years is the excessive burden of the duties determined by legal conditions, unclear criteria for evaluating work and unrealistic expectations towards it. Social work understood as action for social change and solving problems in interpersonal relations is also conducted by non-governmental organisations and commercial entities. This applies in particular to various aspects of preventive activities (e.g. determining the causes of educational failures and support in strengths; providing assistance; prevention of addictions; preventing behavioral disorders; conducting mediation and intervention activities in crisis situations; helping parents and teachers to recognize and develop individual abilities and talents).

A school social worker in Poland is a person to whom a child and his or her family are naturally exposed when they enter a school or educational institution (Piotrowska, 1999). The school psychologist, if available in the school, gives some more support and leads therapeutic activities for students. It is assumed in the literature that school social workers are a link between pupils and parents and teachers. They work on school premises, but at the same time participate in supporting students in family difficulties. Thus both school psychologists and school social workers have a lot of common tasks, but also some different and unique ones. Both of them spend most of their school-related working hours in the school.

**School social work towards offensive language online.** Since the 2010s, same as the space of social and political communication, Polish schools are the arena not only of verbal bullying, but also of politically induced hatred and online hate speech. Most social and digital spaces are such arenas as well. Schools need procedures of dealing with violent speech, and school social workers happen to be in the frontline of reacting to hate speech in educational premises or when the pupil is involved within anti-human rights behavior, be it offline or online. The need for qualified support staff and their mutual, interdisciplinary cooperation is therefore clear. Consequently, in the Polish educational system, the function of social work, understood as support activities for pupils requiring assistance in various situations related to their functioning in school, peer environment and surroundings is performed jointly by a school social worker and a school psychologist. However, when it comes to violent speech online, the IT teachers will often be asked to deal with the situation, because the online sphere intuitively belongs to them, even if they have not enough soft skills nor sociological imagination.

So far, social work in the Polish system has not taken into account the digital world, both in terms of institutions performing this work and its beneficiaries. Digital social work in Poland is the domain of non-governmental organizations, not the state or local government. The project described in this text is one of the first to include education and prevention aimed at parents, students and teachers. It developed procedures and tools necessary for social work that takes into account the school and its environment. The project concerned prevention and intervention in situations of cyberbullying, risky online behavior, access to harmful, undesirable, illegal content published on the Internet. It also covered breaches of privacy, risks to children's health from excessive use, copyright infringement and communications such as sexting. During the project, the procedures worked out within its scope were given the status of a ministerial recommendation, although still not an obligation. They provided a practical guide for school principals and school social workers in their ongoing cyber-safety activities. A plan to ensure digital safety would be established in each facility and the position would be taken by the school leader to support the school management in their systemic activities. All this takes place in the atmosphere of an ongoing debate about who should take responsibility for supporting children and young people's online presence and how to build competence in this area. For the time being, parents' and teachers' own competences are rated lower than students'.

**Hate speech at schools and its social context.** One of teams researching the social psychology of hatred among Poles noticed not only the popularity of speech expressing hatred towards Muslims or Ukrainians, but also towards feminists or non-heteronormative people. Interestingly, their research indicates that the emotion most correlated with the use of hate speech is not hatred, but contempt (Winiewski et al., 2017). The difference is in underlying emotions that stimulate verbal expression. We expect that the term "contempt speech" will one day become the mainstream description of phenomena currently named either hate speech or verbal abuse. Nevertheless, there is a connection between so-called hate speech at schools and a wider social context. Schools, despite their own cultures, clearly reflect society, and the content of bullying, verbal abuse, physical and psychological violence are fueled by social context. One of the newest works describing Poland from this viewpoint states that:



*“The symbol of the savagery of customs became the assassination of the President of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz, in January 2019. Some believed that it would become a kind of catharsis that would protect us from further escalation of hatred. The following months showed clearly that these were only pious wishes. The street riots ended with the Equality March, organized in July in Białystok – stones, bottles and firecrackers were thrown at the participants. Shortly afterwards, municipalities and districts (mainly from the south-eastern part of the country) began to adopt resolutions against the ‘LGBT ideology’, in fact stigmatizing and excluding non-heteronormative people. Just before Independence Day, a former Catholic priest, Jacek Międlar, who had already become famous for his anti-Semitic sermons, announced his manifesto on the Internet. In the manifesto he called for the organization of armed ‘squadrons’ and the final solution of the Jewish question. The radicalization of the conservative right wing causes hostility and contempt on the other side of the political scene. This creates a vicious circle of hatred, from which it is increasingly difficult to free oneself” (Kurcz and Szarota, 2020).*

In order to be fair and give a full picture, it can be added that such zones covered only a part of Poland, that they were the subject of complaints to the Ombudsman, and the courts are beginning to issue judgments annulling them. However, the counter-process does not end the macro process of institutionalizing hatred. Already in 2016 hate speech turned out to be most often targeted at refugees and LGBT people. The respondents declared relatively frequent contact with hate speech directed against Muslims, Roma and black people. Poles are confronted with hate speech mainly on the Internet (especially young people), on television (mainly adults) and in everyday conversations and on the street. As the authors of the study write:

*“Between 2014 and 2016, the percentage of people dealing with hate speech in the media and in everyday situations increased significantly. Importantly, also in traditional media, which would be expected to be much more responsible for the word, hate speech appears more often today than two years ago. While in 2014 one in five adult Poles declared that they heard drastic anti-Muslim or anti-Ukrainian statements on TV, in 2016 the most common objects of hate speech in Poland are refugees and gays. Poles encounter hate speech mainly on the Internet (especially young people), on television (mainly adults) and in everyday conversations and on the street. Today, almost half of Poles admit that they have heard offensive words about Islam on TV, and every fourth Pole has heard a hate speech against Ukrainians on TV. A clear increase in contact with Islamophobic hate speech was also observed in the case of the press: the number of young and adult Poles who are offended by Muslims in newspapers has doubled. In recent years, Islamists have become the most frequently offended group in the press – at a time when the number of Poles reading anti-Islamic articles has increased, the number of people declaring to read anti-Semitic, anti-Roma or racist articles has slightly decreased. However, the Internet remains the most frequent source of hate speech. While in 2014, about half of young Poles encountered an anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim or anti-Ukrainian speech of hatred, today 75% of young people declare to have seen anti-Semitic statements on the Internet, 80% – Islamophobic and 71% – anti-Ukrainian. Within two years, we have reached a situation in which the vast majority of young people are immersed in reality full of hateful statements about minorities. What are the consequences of this? Experimental and correlational research conducted by the Center for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw indicates the phenomenon of desensitization: the more contact with hate speech in the environment, the more people get used to it, stopping to perceive hate speech as a serious social problem. The research also shows that the more hate speech in the environment, the greater the readiness to use it. Today, half of young Poles admit to using hate speech against gays, Roma, immigrants or Muslims. 30% of young Poles confess to anti-Semitic statements against lesbians or feminists. Young Polish women use such a language almost twice as seldom as young Poles: 26% of girls admit to using anti-Roma hate speech, 27% – to homophobic (anti-gay), 30% – to Islamophobic and 17% – to anti-Semitic” (Winiewski et al., 2017).*

According to another study, young people do not know the term “hate speech” and do not know what it means. They don’t distinguish hate speech from other forms of insults on the Internet, nor is it a major problem for them when using the Internet. If they already encounter hate speech, it is mainly directed towards Jews, homosexuals or blacks. What is important is that young people do not classify all hate speech as such. That is why education of young people about the phenomenon of hate speech seems to be crucial here. More often than hate speech, they are affected by the heterogeneity and insults directed at specific people, not necessarily connected with discrimination against minorities. Such experiences are everyday for them – according to young people, offense is inseparably connected with the Internet. Therefore, in their opinion, they should not worry about it and therefore not necessarily react. However, it should be remembered that the lack of reaction may result from various factors – e.g. indifference, powerlessness, lack of knowledge about the tools to react or lack of support, so additional research on this subject would be needed. However, this attitude may be



problematic when designing educational activities and campaigns to encourage young people to react to hate speech on the Internet. As it has been concluded:

*“In such a social environment, the issues of heterogeneity and hate speech are present in school reality. The wide availability of the Internet among children and young people in Poland is associated with many threats for young people, including contact with verbal aggression and hate speech. The prevalence of such materials and statements on the Internet may reduce the sensitivity of young people to the problem. Some people are indifferent to them and even find them attractive and funny. They approve of them, share them. Young people also create such content by commenting on current events, targeting public figures, their peers or other friends or strangers online” (Włodarczyk 2014).*

## 2. School social workers as the gardeners of online space

The philosophy of training for school social workers was to adopt a soft and caring, gardening attitude in their activities against hate speech. They need to nurture the language and foster language care by students, teachers and, last but not least, parents. This is an activity that fosters the reproduction of the human rights culture and the culture of dialogue. They are not lawyers, but within the framework of the project they were trained in differentiating prosecuted hate speech from verbal violence. Due to the fact that hate speech phenomena are strongly dependent on the context, it is difficult to define it legally. In a larger context, it consists of attributing negative traits, and often calling for taking discriminatory actions against such social groups, to which membership is perceived as “natural” (top-down), and not the result of free choice (Bychawska-Siniarska, 2013).

**Hejt vs. hate speech and their legal frameworks.** The most popular term in Poland for a language that insults, challenges or humiliates others is the word “hejt”. The word was borrowed from English and adjusted to Polish slang: from “hate” understood as “to hate” and “hate” understood as “hatred”. At first, the word was used only in reference to the Internet space – as an “Internet hejt”. Over time, however, it has also spread to situations outside the Web – an insult in the school corridor or on the street is confirmed by the addressee with the statement “you hejted me” [“shejtowałeś mnie” or shejtowałaś mnie”]. “Hejt” is not a legal term. Socially defined as all kinds of verbal and other violence (memes, pictures, gestures, behaviors), which is aimed at offending the addressee. The legal definition of this term does not exist, however; it is in vain to look for it in Polish codes. Persons who feel offended by someone’s statement may seek justice in court pursuant to Article 212 of the Penal Code (defamation), Article 216 of the Penal Code (insult) or pursuant to Articles 23 and 24 of the Civil Code (violation of personal rights). The initiative of prosecution belongs to the injured person – he or she acts as a private prosecutor. The role of law enforcement authorities is limited to the possible securing of evidence and sending it to the appropriate court (if they have received a complaint). In private-complaints cases, the prosecutor may initiate proceedings or join an already initiated one only if he or she considers that it is in the public interest (according to article 60 paragraph 1 of the Polish Code of Criminal Procedure).

The term “hejt”, which functions in Polish as a derivative of its English original “hate”, goes far beyond the definition of “hate speech” adopted by the international community. According to Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers (Recommendation No. (97) 20): “the term ‘hate speech’ shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin.” The concept (but not term) is also known to the Polish legal order – it is referred to in Articles 256 and 257 of the Penal Code. It indicates the reasons for prosecuting incitement to hatred: ethnic or national origin, religion, creed or non-denominationalism. The Articles 256 and 257 of the Penal Code crimes are prosecuted by the office – submission or failure to submit a report by the wronged person should not influence the behaviour of law enforcement agencies. They should take up the case regardless of how they became aware of it. Although criminal law clearly defines the prerequisites for the prosecution of hate speech, the social definition of hate speech is at the same time broader than legal and more ambiguous. The distinction of hate speech and hejt refers to the Anglicized semi-peripheral context of Polish culture and society. The differentiation is the result of English language expansion in the Slavic society located between European East and West.



**Media space, public debates and underlying philosophies of gardening.** The examples of hate speech in the Polish media space and public debates focus on social issues that are related to social work, such as gender, feminism, heteronormativity, homophobia, racism. These examples very often result in heated debates focused on language and media freedom. They are often initiated by open letters or prominent journalistic articles. The first such article was published in the widely circulating Polish quality daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*. A prominent journalist Jacek Żakowski (2009) discussed the resignation of a female volleyball player from a career after the wave of hateful online comments, based on underlying gender stereotypes and anti-women contempt. He suggested that large corporations owning the largest Polish portals should agree to radically change the situation. In response, a perspective of the Internet editors from the same publishing house was published, stating that blocking hateful comments would be censorship. Three years later, in 2012, the freely distributed major cities newspaper published by the same publishing house again conducted their own debate, consisting of several other articles criticizing hate speech. Even in the same company from the mainstream publishing industry the opinions may be seriously divided.

In the meantime public intellectuals initiated two other debates, starting with the open letters. One such initiative, named “Civic Conspiracy”, was signed by 300 intellectuals in 2011, leading to media interest. The second debate was initiated in 2012 by the editor-in-chief of prestigious weekly “*Tygodnik Powszechny*” and the president of the board of its publishing house with the words:

“We are all in this cesspool – the language of hatred is poured out with impunity from everywhere. Any topic, any forum (if it’s quite popular) and the hate starts with an indispensable anti-Semitic chorus” (cf. Bychawska-Siniarska, 2013).

Its authors appealed to the Minister of Justice and to the Prosecutor General (at that time two separate offices) for initiating the process of implementing responsibility for online hate speech to the Polish law. It was accompanied by signatures of other editors, publishers, professors and one professorial separate vote. The letter referred to French law, comparing French solutions to Polish, and initiated the wide discussion in Poland on the need to increase the penalization of hate speech, ie. the extension of art. 256 of the Penal Code.

As we mentioned, legal understanding of hate speech differs from social understanding of hate speech in Poland. The fluid boundaries of social understanding of hate speech, often confusing it with verbal violence, are clearly a factor of public debates. They result in different underlying metaphors of digital user-generated content, such as letters to the editor, Hyde Park or graffiti on a wall. Old media professionals prefer to use the letter to the editor metaphor, whereas those connected to the new media segment rely on the Hyde Park metaphor, probably referring to the Speakers’ Corner, where everyone can say what they want without any consequences. Each metaphorical attribution implies different levels of responsibility for hateful content.

Search for the metaphors most relevant for school social work may be assisted by reference to the ideas of Janusz Korczak, who was an education philosopher and practitioner, a proponent of user-generated content six decades before the Internet appeared. His work with the young editors had some proto-internet characteristics (Filiciak and Toczyski, 2012). Several decades after Korczak, in an educational milieu inspired by Korczak’s perspective, the metaphor of user-generated content as a garden appears (Bortnowska, 2008). It implies that every garden requires a gardener. It remains open for discussion who assumes the gardener’s task and what kind of media education and social work practice may favor the formation of such a gardener-like attitude. The metaphor implies assuming responsibility at one’s own initiative, but it does not attempt to attribute responsibility in the legal sense. There have been several non-governmental initiatives in Poland that seem to be founded on the metaphor of garden or imply this metaphor. However, there are no direct references to the metaphors in the official communication such as websites of the above mentioned project. We assume that some activities are just implicitly founded on Korczak’s philosophy and related ideas, because in Polish educational and social work tradition this name is treated as a guru.

**Human rights education of school social workers.** In 2015 Polish parliamentary election resulted in right-wing party victory. Shortly before the election and government change, the ministry of education officials decided on a grant competition related to cyber-safety. We describe a brief selection of educational initiatives concerning the problem of offensive language (hejt) and prosecutable discourse of hatred (hate speech), which seem to be designed and led from the perspective of garden and gardening metaphor. They were all implemented in Poland in recent years through the efforts of civil society actors, but sometimes paid by the state,



often co-funded by the European Union. Three such projects started in 2013. Certainly the most visible was the No Hate Speech Youth Campaign developed by intergovernmental organization Council of Europe (CoE). The CoE campaign was implemented in over forty countries of the world (also outside Europe), and its aim was to fight hate speech and promote human rights, contributing to the world free from racism and discrimination. In Poland it was coordinated by Young Journalists' Association Polis, and co-funded by the state. The second project was Hatred – I am Against It, the campaign led by the Center for Citizenship Education and addressed to teachers, directors, youth supervisors and librarians. The aim of the project was to involve the local community in activities against hate speech. The third campaign was named Hug the Hater, led by The Empowering Children Foundation, promoting resistance and opposition to the violent speech, but without aggression and escalation. The most recognizable element of the action was a viral video. Two overlapping projects by the Modern Poland Foundation were Cybernauts (2015-2018) and European Media Literacy Standard for Youth Workers (2017-2018). The first was aimed at raising media and digital competences, including the training of coping with violent language and hate speech for teachers, parents and students. The second was the project of the seven organizations, the main goal of which was to prepare a useful tool for developing media and digital competencies of youth workers. Additionally, since at least 2017 the Orange Foundation, a local civil society spin-off of the international telecom company, leads a campaign and e-learning for parents and teachers to improve the support of children in the network, including coping with cyberbullying.

One of the winning bids in the Ministry of Education 2015 competition was The Cities On Internet Association project for school social workers. Information, educational and advisory support was assumed to be provided directly to 2200 primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and vocational schools in Poland. Not directly referring to 165 thousand students, 220 thousand parents and 22 thousand teachers, the project was conceived as the largest undertaking of this type in Poland since the moment when the content available on the Internet and the behaviour of the Internet users began to be the subject of concern of media, legal and educational circles, including representatives of the third sector operating in the field of education. Ultimately, the number of trained school social workers and delegated teachers was 2180, which according to the organizers refer cascadelly to further 61 thousand teachers, 78 thousand parents and 348 thousand students. It should be mentioned that the Ministry of National Education competition for projects, among which the Cyfrowobezpieczni.pl Safe Digital School project was carried out in 2016-2018, was announced and decided by a democratic-liberal governing team. After the change of political power in autumn 2015, the new right-wing ministry allowed the project to be implemented without any modifications.

Among the activities addressed to school social workers were training for so-called school digital safety mentors. School social workers, school psychologists, but also many delegated teachers, acquired the structured knowledge necessary for them to coordinate actions to ensure digital safety in their home schools. The prevention of hate speech, or even violent language, was part of broadly understood digital safety training. The most important task of the mentors was to initiate the emergence in schools of procedures for the prevention of threats related to the virtual world. It was also important to develop rules for responding to situations of violation of school regulations, especially legal regulations. The procedures were to be created in cooperation with school representatives, students and parents. One of the issues covered by the procedures was to deliver solutions to the problem of hate speech and verbal violence.

### 3. Action research

The aim of work in the project was to make teachers aware of a wide range of responses to problematic situations at school and its extended digital space. As the trainers and consultants within the project we decided to treat one training exercise as the basis for action research. The analyses conducted in this article are based on the research we have carried out as tutors of the training process. They are characterized by an eclectic attitude to qualitative research, taking into account the widely understood method of action research as the foundation.

**Method.** We understand the action research method as a small-scale intervention in the functioning of a small population and observing the effects of this intervention (Cohen and Manion, 1994). In this case the intervention is a process of learning through experience using the active method. In this example, action research is at the same time a systematic collection of data aiming at long-term social changes in the education



system (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). Such research promotes self-reflection of the participants and strengthens the rationality of the undertaken actions and their better understanding (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). It serves the practical solution of problems in social situations concerning the virtual world.

The trainees played the role of decision makers on the content already present on the Internet forum. Their task was to decide whether to retain or delete the proposed entries. The records of arguments accompanying the participants' discussions constitute a set of data for analysis. From November 2016 to December 2018 a total of 70 exercises were conducted, all of which were analysed. In total, more than 1000 school social workers took part in the simulation. The participants represented primary and secondary school levels, and within the latter also vocational education. Training took place in the largest Polish cities (Warsaw, Krakow, Wroclaw, Gdansk, Poznan), to which participants were also commuting from other cities. The analysis was conducted to grasp the way of arguing the decision whether to retain (leave) or remove (delete) internet content, some of which could even be hate speech.

**The decision making exercise.** The exercise "Leave – Delete" (Chmielecka and Sopyło, 2012) is carried out among teachers and students. Its aim is to raise awareness of some of the premises that may form the basis for making decisions related to responding or not responding to qualified content as a manifestation of hejt or hate speech in public space. The task of people participating in the exercise is to play the role of the administrator of the website (social networking site, forum), which is to make a decision within a short time (up to 1 minute) to delete or leave a specific entry displayed on the projector or received in paper form. The participants make a decision individually or in small (2-3 persons) teams after a mini-discussion. The decision is announced by raising hands after questions asked by the trainer: "who removes", "who leaves" or in another version by casting a vote by means of a piece of paper glued to the flip chart board.

After the decision making process concerning the following examples presented below, a discussion takes place, moderated by the trainer, on the premises of the decisions taken, which will be the subject of the following description and further analysis. This is an attempt to weigh the arguments "for" – "against" without resolutely deciding, in some cases, whether the entry has the character of hate speech, hejt or maybe it should be classified outside these categories.

Recalling the model of David Kolb's cycle (Kolb and Kolb, 2001), known in training and other forms of educational work with the use of active methods, the exercise is an experience introducing later reflection on the presence of hate speech in public space. The difficulty of classifying such messages prepares to create a set of rules constituting the essence of distinguishing the boundaries of the space of hate speech, hejt and freedom of opinion and expression. After reflecting on the exercise, the participants receive knowledge of legal regulations (about them in the further part of this work) and practical tools (working methods) to sensitize and counteract the problem.

**Experiential training.** The following analysis provides an overview of the most important arguments and rationale behind the decisions taken by the participants. It is based on the grounds of nearly 70 times performing this exercise with a group of teachers in a nationwide educational project devoted to knowledge and skills in the field of intervention and prevention actions concerning digital safety in various types of schools. There are several entries repeated during each training. The trainees decide in small groups, pairs or individually on deleting or accepting each entry, which is followed by the discussion. The entries were copied from the real online discussions available on the Polish mainstream online media user-generated content sections.

**Online entry 1: "Europe for the White, Africa for HIV."** The racist expression tries to imply the norm of segregation ("for"), while pretending to be a description. The analysis of the "leave – removal" decision in the case of this entry shows that the participants agree that such an entry should be removed from public media space. Among the arguments used in favour of this decision is the qualification of the entry as a "racist entry". It had the character of the most far-reaching evaluation. Among the others, the terms "discrimination", "labeling" and "stereotyping" or "using stereotypes" as well as "rejection" and "insult" at the other end of the assessment were the most commonly used. In spite of a strongly critical opinion on the entry from the administrator's perspective, during the discussion, participants sometimes referred to arguments related to the analysis of the authenticity of the wording contained in the entry.

**Online entry 2: "You MUST love the Jews. You can't even be indifferent to them or even have sympathy for them. NO. You must love because otherwise you will be called an anti-Semitic."** In the case of this entry, the issue arises of whether it attempts at drawing the image of Jewishness, or whether it is rather indifferent to





any community and only has the character of a neutral statement. A discussion indeed defined the speech as hateful, but also as neutral (“rhetorical procedure”, “voice in discussion”, “ironic entry”, “sarcasm”, “an ordinary voice in opinion without exerting any pressure on anyone”). The arguments for the removal of such an entry pointed to the anti-Semitic character (“this is anti-Semitism”, “the entry insults the Jews”) through the suggestion that it is a manifestation of disapproval towards Jews, either anti-Semitic or anti-Judaic. At the same time, an important argument was the use of the notation of the word “MUST” and “NO”. The capital letters are recognition in the netiquette as a form of coercion of the recipient of the message, in this case it is about the coercion of positive feelings directed towards a specific national group, their lack is to be the basis for anti-Semitic behavior, expressing aversion to Jews.

**Online entry 3: “Speak for yourself, stupid.”** Deletion of the entry was seen as a preventive solution, just in case, in order not to unleash the spiral of mutual attacks of Internet users was also present in the above example. The entry was classified as “offensive”, “humiliating the speaker”, “offensive” and “crossing borders”. However, in this case, it is possible to say that it is difficult to clearly define whether an exemplary entry can be described as hate speech, hejt or just a “form of injury to another Internet user”, which, for example, does not fall under either of the two categories being considered in this work. At the same time, the authors pointed to the “light character” of the entry, wit, humour, polemical character, lack of power to strike at the viewer. The remarks on the margins of the discussion seem to be important, indicating that in the Internet space it is difficult to “reach someone with one’s own reasons” if one does not use words with a high power of destruction in relation to other internet users.

**Online entry 4: “I prefer to live next to a Jew rather than a Pole, because the Jew will not set the Radio Maryja to the max.”** Classifying it as a joke was an important basis for a decision. There were references to “a funny entry”, “an entry testifying to the author’s sense of humour”. On the one hand, it is perceived as an opinion expressed by the author which does not harm anyone and “does not offend anyone directly”, but expresses “generally known prejudices”. There was also the argument that these are “true opinions.” The difficulty influencing the decision concerned determination of the “truthfulness” of the entry and conviction that it does not break netiquette as known to participants. On the other hand, the argument for removing it concerns the unacceptable violation and wounding of religious feelings of the confessors of Catholicism or Judaism, or the community of numerous listeners of Catholic Radio Maryja. There was also an argument for removal of such an entry related to the author’s use of stereotypes towards different nationalities and communities. The stigmatization would concern one or two of the three above mentioned communities. A discussion around this particular entry indicates that the cultural, historical and political contexts seem important for decision. However, the participants seemed unaware of the history of anti-semitism. In the current times of nationalisms’ revival it has been already attempted to forbid by legislation addressing historical Polish passive bystanders and active collaborators, leaving space to talk only about Polish heroism during the Holocaust. While the memory of nearly 7,000 people awarded the highest Israeli civilian distinction awarded to non-Jews, the Righteous Among the Nations medal, is well received, for example, the Jedwabne pogrom with the participation of local residents or the post-war Kielce pogrom or the forcing of thousands of Polish Jews to emigrate in 1968 is still a source of controversy. They are also the subject of political disputes and disputes of historians about various political sympathies. This is also reflected in the opinions of the participants in this action research, although none of their opinions seemed to be grounded in the understanding of the above described complexity.

**Online entry 5a: “A robbery is nothing like that? Let somebody on the street attack you, I wish you, then we will talk!”**

**Online entry 5b: “Let someone rape his daughter.”** The exercise was performed in two variants – both entries were presented at the same time or separately. In both variants similar conclusions can be observed. In the case 5a, it is treated as a rhetorical procedure or ironic voice in the discussion, with a limited power of destruction towards the recipient. Neither is it “wishful”, nor does it call for violence, contrary to the argumentation concerning the second entry. However, it may offend someone or expose them to “unpleasant emotions”. In the case of the presentation of an entry 5b, the decision was influenced by the perception of the participants of both entries as part of the same discussion. In the opinion of the participants of the exercises, it is perceived as “incitement to crime”, “a wish for harm to a close person”. Attention is drawn to the fact that in the case of close contact between two Internet users, the above entry may concern a specific person and is



therefore a crime. At the same time, it happens that it is treated as nobody's harmful opinion, voice in discussion, which is only a "justified" form of "verbal reaction" of a person who may have experienced either physical or verbal harm.

The examples, decisions and discussions were followed by a joint attempt to define what the examples are. This was followed by an attempt to match abstract ideas such as hejt and hate speech, knowledge of the difference between them and an attempt to apply such knowledge fluently. In the last phase there was a return to the examples and often a symbolic tearing up of those that the groups considered hate speech or for other reasons necessary to be removed from the internet.

**The exercise implication for school social work.** The topic of speech sensitivity does not have a separate educational path. It is carried out on many different subjects and during project activities. This is an important element of the work on topics related to anti-discrimination education and digital education. The degree to which such activities are carried out is strongly influenced by directors as hosts of the school space and even by the teachers in question. The topic will not be free of political influence.

Creating and listing a catalogue of different arguments influencing the decision "leave – removal" is followed in the extended version of the exercise by participants' right to discuss with the authors of entries about their deletion or modification of entries. They consider reporting it to the administrator as well as to the police and prosecutor's office. It becomes the subject of reflection on the key dilemmas related to the presence of hate speech in public space, boundaries between hate speech, freedom of speech, human rights, respect and dignity of the individual.

Conceptual confusion and debates on the emergence of new standards have big social consequences. Hate speech is prosecuted ex officio, whereas other verbal violence may be prosecuted as private offenses. The first type of crime imposes an obligation on a public officer to report the crime to law enforcement authorities. A teacher and school social worker alike, both being treated as public officials in the Polish legal system, should therefore distinguish both notions. Further proceedings in any case depend on the correct classification of an event. In practice, the fate of a young pupil may depend on this decision undertaken by a school social worker.

Within the current Polish Ministry of National Education standard there are no clear procedures of reacting to offensive language in schools. Informal education and educational work in Poland on the subject of hejt and hate speech is centered around non-governmental initiatives, sometimes funded through governmental and European Union programmes. The material from an exercise performed during such training gives insight into the current state of participants' awareness. This type of work should result in a more empathic communication with others, minimizing messages that can be categorized as either hejt or hate speech.

#### 4. Global complexity of local school social work

Poland, an Eastern European society, is currently under internal nationalistic pressure. In terms of offensive language and hate speech online it results in a human rights challenge to be undertaken by open society proponents, including school social workers. Raising the awareness of pupils, students, teachers and parents about possible threats and risks associated with the use of the internet and modern digital tools should include sensitization through workshops, courses, lectures and various forms of experiential learning. The role of school social workers extends into teaching responsible use of digital tools.

The aim of this paper was to show how background debates on hate speech in quality media and discourse in one of Eastern European societies may shape an action research focused on real online entries categorized either as hate speech or verbal violence by school social workers. To understand the current tension between the freedom of expression and the responsibility for the online content, we performed over 70 sensitizing meetings with school social workers. Our conclusion from this action research is that the underlying metaphor of gardening may be fruitful in terms of social work sensitizing people to the language of conflict from the perspective of human rights.

Joseph Wronka (2016) mentions his own experiences in formative years as a teenager, of which he emphasizes the importance of human rights education from the grammar school to high school levels. The foundation for the current experientially rooted work with Polish school social workers in the area of verbal violence and hate speech prevention were both in media discourse and educational activities. The exercise in which



school social workers participated during the nationwide project co-funded by the European Union, certainly was a factor of their awareness. Global social work meets global ethics and global education within the process of Europeanization under the nationalistic pressure. As Wiktor Osiatyński once noticed, semi-peripheral countries such as Poland learn human rights from the global context, both in their American and European adaptations (Osiatyński, 2009). The role of the state immersed in global forces certainly affects social work (Pugh and Gould, 2000), but the case of our action research shows that social workers' awareness may be empowered with the usage of state resources even under unfavorable conditions. The training of social workers' technocratic competencies (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996) may still be enriched by the spirit of human rights philosophies.

The tension between global and local forces in social work has been noticed decades ago (Lyons, 2006), but this is still globalization which is a regulatory factor in social work organization and changing scope (Payne and Askeland, 2016). Globalization leads to both internet spread and internet inequalities, including the unequal distribution of sensitivity towards the digital language skills. The remedies with which they are addressed are also global. If the Polish ministry is unaware that they are co-funding the project ideologically opposing nationalistic forces mobilized by the currently ruling party, this is still the soft pressure from the European community of human values, the axiological Europeanization. As YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have signed a Code of Conduct on the regulation of illegal hate speech with the European Commission (Alkiviadou, 2019), maybe the next step can be to expect from those internet giants to co-fund school social work focused on their preventing interventions, promoting society awareness and human rights. Our article is aimed at enriching the intervention ways that social workers can use in promoting human rights, but we are sure that much more than that can be done through the pressure on other actors of digital society.

## REFERENCES

- Alkiviadou, N. (2019). Hate speech on social media networks: towards a regulatory framework? *Information & Communications Technology Law*, 28 (1), 19-35.
- Bailey, G. (2012). Human Rights and Sexual Orientation. In: Healy, L. M., & Link, R. J. (Eds.). (2012). *Handbook of international social work: Human rights, development, and the global profession*. Oxford University Press.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bortnowska, H. (2008). *Dalej czytam Grossa. Myślnik*, <http://halinabortnowska.blox.pl/2008/01/dalej-czytam-grossa.html>
- Bychawska-Siniarska, D. (2013). *Wstęp. Zjawisko mowy nienawiści w sieci*, In: Bychawska-Siniarska D. and Głowacka D. (eds.). *Mowa nienawiści w internecie: jak z nią walczyć? Materiały pokonferencyjne*. Warszawa: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research*. London: Falmer.
- Chmielecka, A., Sopyło, M. (2012). *O prawach człowieka globalnie*. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Warsaw, <https://xdoc.mx/documents/o-prawach-czowieka-globalnie-helsiska-fundacja-praw-czowieka-60596a2099792>
- Cohen, L., & Manion, L. (1994). *Research Methods in Education, fourth edition*. London: Routledge.
- Dominelli, L., & Hoogvelt, A. (1996). Globalization and the technocratization of social work. *Critical Social Policy*, 16 (47), 45-62.
- Filiciak, M., & Toczyski, P. (2012). Korczak. Aktualizacja, *Dwutygodnik.com*, vol. 95.
- Goldkind, L., & Wolf, L. (2015). A digital environment approach: Four technologies that will disrupt social work practice. *Social Work*, 60 (1).
- Healy, L. M. (2008). Exploring the history of social work as a human rights profession. *International Social Work*, 51 (6), 735-748.
- Healy, L. M., & Link, R. J. (Eds.). (2012). *Handbook of international social work: Human rights, development, and the global profession*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Ife, J. (2012). *Human rights and social work: Towards rights-based practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Jaczewski, A., Toczyski, P. (2015a). *Od rozumienia ciała i psychiki do mediów i nowoczesnej techniki – o przemianach kompetencji współczesnych wychowawców szkolnych i akademickich. Wybrane problemy nauczania i wychowania.* In: M. Kamińska (Ed.). *Z doświadczeń okresu transformacji.* Płock: Oficyna Wydawnicza Szkoły Wyższej im. Pawła Włodkowica Wydawnictwo Naukowe Novum. 63-76, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357395943\\_Od\\_rozumienia\\_ciala\\_i\\_psychiki\\_do\\_mediow\\_i\\_nowoczesnej\\_techniki\\_-\\_o\\_przemianach\\_kompetencji\\_wspolczesnych\\_wychowawcow\\_szkolnych\\_i\\_akademickich](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357395943_Od_rozumienia_ciala_i_psychiki_do_mediow_i_nowoczesnej_techniki_-_o_przemianach_kompetencji_wspolczesnych_wychowawcow_szkolnych_i_akademickich)
- Jaczewski, A., Toczyski, P. (2015b). Przemiany cywilizacyjne a współczesne zagrożenia wychowawcze okresu dojrzewania. *Rocznik Towarzystwa Naukowego Płockiego.* VII: 323-331, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357377123\\_Przemiany\\_cywilizacyjne\\_a\\_wspolczesne\\_zagrozenia\\_wychowawcze\\_okresu\\_dojrzewania](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357377123_Przemiany_cywilizacyjne_a_wspolczesne_zagrozenia_wychowawcze_okresu_dojrzewania)
- Kolb, A., Kolb D. A. (2001). *Experiential Learning Theory.* Boston: McBer and Co.
- Kurcz I., Szarota P. (2020). *Wstęp.* In: *Nienawiść w przestrzeni publicznej.* Jakubowska, U., Szarota, P. (Eds.). Warsaw: PWN.
- Lundy, C. (2011). *Social work, social justice & human rights: A structural approach to practice.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Lyons, K. (2006). Globalization and social work: International and local implications. *British Journal of Social Work,* 36 (3), 365-380.
- Mathew, B., Dutt, R., Goyal, P., & Mukherjee, A. (2019, June). Spread of hate speech in online social media. In: *Proceedings of the 10th ACM conference on Web science.*
- Osiatyński, W. (2009). *Human rights and their limits.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Payne, M., & Askeland, G. A. (2016). *Globalization and international social work: Postmodern change and challenge.* London: Routledge.
- Piotrowska, A. (1999). *Praca socjalna z dzieckiem w szkole; rola pedagoga szkolnego.* Leszno: ZSS.
- Polish Civil Code.* Retrieved from: [ksiegarnia.beck.pl/12980-kodeks-cywilny-the-civil-code-ewa-kucharska](http://ksiegarnia.beck.pl/12980-kodeks-cywilny-the-civil-code-ewa-kucharska).
- Polish Penal Code.* Retrieved from: [ksiegarnia.beck.pl/8425-kodeks-karny-the-criminal-code-nicholas-faulkner](http://ksiegarnia.beck.pl/8425-kodeks-karny-the-criminal-code-nicholas-faulkner).
- Pugh, R., & Gould, N. (2000). Globalization, social work, and social welfare. *European Journal of Social Work,* 3 (2), 123-138.
- Reamer, F. G. (2013). Social work in a digital age: Ethical and risk management challenges. *Social Work,* 58 (2), 163-172.
- Toczyski, P. (2008). *Jak bardzo niebezpieczny jest internet?* Warszawa: Agora. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357377451\\_Netochron\\_Jak\\_bardzo\\_niebezpieczny\\_jest\\_internet](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357377451_Netochron_Jak_bardzo_niebezpieczny_jest_internet)
- Toczyski, P. (2013). *Tak zwana „mowa nienawiści w internecie”: poszerzenie perspektywy o pominięte teksty badawcze i prasowe.* In: *Mowa nienawiści w internecie: jak z nią walczyć? Materiały pokonferencyjne.* Bychawska-Siniarska, D., Głowacka, D. (Eds.). Warszawa: Obserwatorium Wolności Mediów w Polsce. 79-85, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357376092\\_Tak\\_zwana\\_mowa\\_nienawisci\\_w\\_internecie\\_poszerzenie\\_perspektywy\\_o\\_pominiete\\_texty\\_badawcze\\_i\\_prasowe](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357376092_Tak_zwana_mowa_nienawisci_w_internecie_poszerzenie_perspektywy_o_pominiete_texty_badawcze_i_prasowe)
- Toczyski, P., Gumkowska, A. (2015). *A letter to the editor, Hyde Park, graffiti on a wall or a garden? Whose technological and semantic space is co-created by the user-generated content in the Polish Internet?* In: Sobczak, J., Skrzypczak, J. (Eds.). *Professionalism in Journalism in the Era of New Media,* Berlin: Logos.
- Toczyski, P. (2019). *Towards the metaphor of garden. Debates on hate speech from Eastern Europe* (with Marcin Grudzień and Maciej Sopyło). 2019.01.08-10. Université Paris Diderot (Paris 7), Center for Korean Studies (China, Korea, Japan / CCJ – UMR 8173 CNRS-EHESS – UPD), France, Asia Center, Seoul National University, Korea & Center for Korean Studies, Ritsumeikan University, Japan, Academy of Korean Studies. Paris, FR, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357624452\\_Towards\\_the\\_metaphor\\_of\\_garden\\_Debates\\_on\\_hate\\_speech\\_from\\_Eastern\\_Europe](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357624452_Towards_the_metaphor_of_garden_Debates_on_hate_speech_from_Eastern_Europe)
- Watling, S., Rogers, J. (2012). *Social work in a digital society.* London, Thousand Oaks, Mathura Road: Sage.
- Winiewski, M., Hansen, K., Bilewicz, M., Soral, W., Świdorska, A., Bulska, D. (2017). *Mowa nienawiści, mowa pogardy. Raport z badania przemocy werbalnej wobec grup mniejszościowych,* Warsaw: Batory Foundation.
- Witkin, S. (1998). Editorial: Human Rights and Social Work. *Social Work,* 43 (3), 197-201.
- Włodarczyk J. (2014). Mowa nienawiści w internecie w doświadczeniu polskiej młodzieży. *Dziecko krzywdzone. Teoria, badania, praktyka,* 13 (2), 122-158.



- Wronka, J. (2016). Sharing My Story: Representing Social Work at the UN and Select Local Human Rights Activism. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 1(1), 50-60.
- Zaviršek, D., Rajgelj, B. (2019). Anti-Refugee Sentiment without Refugees: Human Rights Violations and Social Work in Post-Socialist Countries of Southeastern Europe in their Social Contexts. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 4(1), 5-16.
- Żakowski, J. (2009). Chamstwo hula w internecie, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10 August 2009.

