

# THE HATE DEBATE

*Anger levels seem to be rising everywhere – on social media, in politics, in traffic jams, and even on the sidelines of kids' sports. Are we in the Age of Rage – and what can we do about it?*

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS



Whether it's online or in person, hatred seems to have become a part of our everyday life. From verbal attacks in the street to abusive comments on social media, hate is evidently all the rage – and one could be forgiven for thinking it's reached plague proportions.

Dr Andre Oboler is a lecturer at La Trobe Law School in Melbourne, and CEO of the Online Hate Prevention Institute. He says that since around 2008, there's been a rise in online hate – and an increasing acceptance of the phenomenon. This means keyboard warriors spouting hateful comments on online forums and social media have started to use their real profiles without fear of consequences, rather than simply hide behind anonymity.

"Before, if someone was making statements that were racist, homophobic [or] misogynistic, people would leave the conversation," states Oboler. "They'd walk away. They might speak up. It wouldn't be accepted as a normal part of discourse. Now, many more people are happy expressing these views under their real name with their real profile pictures."

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DR OBOLER

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The lack of accountability online means people feel free to say things they wouldn't in real life. Perpetrators can't see the impact on victims, so it's easy to dash off a nasty tirade and not stop to think of the consequences – either for themselves or others.

The acceptance of online hate has shifted offline too in the past few years. "It was partly as a result of the 2016 US presidential elections, where a whole lot of what was previously just online activities started becoming offline activities as well," says Oboler. "Physical incidents have followed from the increased willingness of people to be confrontational; to use racism."

The hate exhibited in online and offline incidents takes several forms. The first category is the targeting of a group as a whole – such as women, LGBTQI people, a religion, an ethnic group, or people with disabilities. Secondly, hate can be aimed at an individual or particular community body that belongs to one of these groups. The third form is the bullying of individuals that is totally personal; either because the perpetrators know the victim or are targeting them due to media attention they've received.

RIP ("rest in peace") trolling is an example of this last category. It involves an individual setting up a fake social media account, such as a Facebook page, to honour a person who has recently deceased, usually in response to the death being reported in the media. Once friends and family members have flocked to the account to pay their respects, the troll would update the content on the page to material attacking the late person. The troll seems to gain a sick sense of power from causing such distress.

Oboler says that both police and online platforms have been reluctant to respond to this and other forms of online hate. The limited number of staff trained in handling online crime are caught up with matters such as money laundering and drug importation. Social media platforms are improving slightly – but short of being forced into accountability by legislation, they have demonstrated little interest in monitoring their channels for hate speech.

So what can individuals do if they encounter hate directed at someone online? You can wade into the fray to defend the person – but be aware

of the risks involved. “People should speak up, but they should be aware that if they do, they may be making themselves a target,” says Oboler.

He recommends that you report the incident to the online platform where it occurred, such as Facebook or Twitter. But he warns not to hold your breath, as these matters are reviewed at lightning speed, leading to often questionable outcomes. “Report it, but don’t get discouraged. Don’t not report it next time because you got negative feedback,” he says.

Another helpful move is to also report the matter to an organisation such as the Online Hate Prevention Institute. This enables them to collate data on these incidents and hold social media companies accountable for the hate they allow to propagate in their online spaces. They accept information about many types of hate, from racism and homophobia, to vitriol aimed at ANZAC veterans and even cyclists.

Similar to the virtual world, there have been a number of incidents in real life where somebody quietly minding their own business on a bus or train suddenly becomes the target of a verbal attack from another passenger.

In these scenarios, it can be tricky to judge when we should challenge the hater’s views and when we should walk away: making the wrong call can make us a target of harassment or violence ourselves. Clinical psychologist Renee Mill says there’s safety in numbers – so try to get backup from other bystanders where possible.

“If you can do it as a group, a few of you standing up together, that would be a better idea,” she explains.

You can also provide assistance by supporting and calming the victim after the bully leaves, or you can get an authority figure involved – such as the police or a security guard. Pulling out your phone and taking a video of the incident to make the perpetrator more accountable and act as evidence later might be a good idea if you can do it discreetly, but it can also backfire and bring you into the bully’s sights.

So what actually drives those who bully, harass and exclude others in this way? What are the psychological steps that lead a hater on this path?

Harking back to our earliest moments, Mill says that according to psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s theory, babies have a love-hate relationship with their mother’s breast. When it’s providing nourishment, all is right with the world – but when the milk stops flowing, the baby responds by

feeling hate. But as the baby grows into a toddler, they realise that their mother is so much more than a food delivery system, and is a person with her own feelings and needs. The baby learns compassion.

In short, we learn to be self-sufficient and to take responsibility for our needs, so we’re not just relying on our mother. But an undeveloped personality that never got beyond a baby’s simplistic black-and-white view of the world will often respond with hate when threatened. They feel the need to bully others in an effort to raise their own self-esteem, and justify their cruelty by denying the humanity of the person they’re harming.

“Bullies want to put you down to feel better about themselves,” explains Mill. “So they find [something to pick on] – you’ve got freckles, or you’re fat, or you’re stupid, or whatever – and the inverse is therefore ‘I’m clever’ or ‘I’m attractive’. The capacity for cruelty comes from not seeing the bigger picture. There’s not a person there, it’s just an object I can attack.”

All of us have the capacity to express hatred and hurt others – particularly when we’re pushed to our limits. At this point, even calm, rational human beings might find their inner demon coming out.

“When our defences are down, through stress, hunger or lack of sleep, we will be more immature,” Mill says. “More of our primitive side comes out – whereas when we have self-care and the time to think, we’ll tend not to do that. We can all say horrible things in a moment, but if we are more adult or more developed then we’ll think about it afterwards and be able to say sorry.”

Mill says our society has veered towards individualism. Children are taught to feel entitled to be praised and get what they want, when they want it. Concepts such as sharing and looking at a situation from somebody else’s point of view seem to have fallen by the wayside. To prevent individuals going down a hateful path, Mill says that teaching kids to be emotionally intelligent is vital. This can start at home, by looking for ways to build the fundamental principles of kindness and respect into everyday activities.

“Parents can do this – get their children to be compassionate by giving to other kids, or visiting old people, or talking about feelings,” says Mill.

It’s also helpful to encourage kids to include everyone in games, and to mix with people who are different from them. This approach breaks

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## HOW TO LEARN EMPATHY

Research has shown that empathy is a skill that can actually be learned, either through formal training or self-instruction. There are generally four elements to the process. The first involves learning why empathy is useful, how to identify emotions in other people and feel them yourself, as well as how to comment appropriately on them. Next comes viewing examples of people displaying empathy, whether via live action, audio or video. The third step is practising the skill. The last stage is receiving constructive feedback on what could be done better next time.

down barriers and helps to highlight the common ground we share, instead of focusing on the dissimilarities.

At school, speaking about these types of issues might seem to pale in comparison to the need for academic learning. But it can reap significant rewards in addressing bullying.

“Schools run programs where the kids are not just learning, but every day they sit in a circle and talk about feelings, or get to know each other better,” says Mill. “That often reduces bullying more than the zero-tolerance kind of approach.”

It’s not too late once we reach adulthood, however. In fact, Mill says that adults have an advantage when learning empathy. “It gets easier as you get older,” she explains. “It’s the way the brain is wired. When you’re younger you are more impulsive.”

Of course, Mill says that there are people who are too far gone to be rehabilitated from their hateful ways. In other cases, clients might come to a first session of therapy begrudgingly at the urging of family or friends – but once they’ve attended a few sessions, they realise that something in their life needs to change. Mill says if she can see the slightest sign of that realisation or personal growth, there’s hope that the person can turn away from the hate they have been expressing and remedy the pain they’ve been causing.

In situations where you can’t drag the perpetrator to a psychologist’s office, Mill suggests you demonstrate desired behaviour and try to create a ripple effect. One example where this could be effective is where parents are being obnoxious on the sidelines of kids’ sports competitions.

“One thing you can do is to try and be a role model,” she says. “Maybe the other parents are running up and down, cursing the kids. You can stand quietly to the side. You can say, ‘I want to encourage something different!’” **MF**



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