Grasping the 'freedom of speech' argument on social media, between circulation and escalation: Cross-contributions of digital methods and social psychology

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Poster abstract

My research, within the realm of my thesis in Information and Communication Science at Sorbonne University in Paris, delves into the dynamics of the freedom of speech argument as a catalyst for conflicts.

Saturated with emotions and reactions, contentious subjects aren't easily subject to research. This holds particularly true for the debates surrounding "freedom of speech". This notion emerges across diverse fields, ranging from political and cultural debates to discussions on the regulation of digital exchanges. Moreover, due to their inherently contentious nature, discussions spurred by "freedom of speech" are marked by intense scrutiny, passionate engagement and often lead to a polarization of viewpoints. Beyond freedom of speech conceptual underpinnings, this study aims to explore its role as a catalyst and central point of contention in broader debates.

To this end, this research has a strong methodological focus and aims to develop approaches that capture the circulation of the "freedom of speech" argument in different spaces and periods, as well as to map the dynamics underlying this circulation. To achieve this, I employ digital methodologies and corpus visualization tools to analyze a broad spectrum of data drawn from a corpus of texts, images and videos from digital platforms, as well as a corpus of articles from national daily publications. My approach seeks to understand the patterns of transmedia and transplatform circulation of terms, expressions and images that shape debates on freedom of speech, as well as their effects.

I use a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. Initially, my work involved uncovering the temporal and modal patterns of this argument's emergence within the media corpus. Exploring peaks in media coverage identified through graphical representations and temporal trends, coupled with thematic analyses conducted using the open source textometry software TXM, has provided initial insights and will steer the acquisition of the digital corpus. The second part of this research will focus on examining the transmedia and transplatform circulation patterns of terms, expressions, and images that underpin debates related to freedom of speech, along with their ramifications. Finally, I seek to elucidate the dynamics fueling the intensification of exchanges and their underlying motivations.