

Abusing the unprotected ‘poor’: The prevalence of povertyist stigma and hate speech on unmoderated newspaper comment threads

Abstract

The UK-wide Equality Act 2010 forbids discrimination based on age, sex, race, religion/belief, disability, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity – yet no such protections apply to people experiencing poverty and/or class-based inequalities. This legislative ‘blind-spot’ extends to UK media regulation, with most industry ethical codes prioritizing the same ‘protected characteristics’ as the law. As a result, legacy print news outlets and their audiences can freely publish statements about people in poverty that would be defined as hate speech; ruled in breach of ethical codes; and liable for potential prosecution if directed at protected groups. This article explores the prevalence of povertyist hatred on comments published on two conservative-leaning news-sites (www.telegraph.co.uk and www.dailymail.co.uk) in response to articles about rising labour shortages and ‘economic inactivity’ rates during the post-Covid ‘cost-of-living crisis’. It exposes serious gaps in the legal and regulatory framework(s) around protected characteristics, while also posing difficult questions for editors and moderators about the (in)adequacy of their existing policies for safeguarding groups already protected by law.

Key words: hate speech, comment threads, economic inactivity, poverty, welfare

Introduction: news, hate speech and the limits of protected characteristics

Recent years have seen Britain place increasing political emphasis on the importance of safeguarding people with ‘protected characteristics’ from discrimination, prejudice and/or hate crime. Both the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and Sentencing Act 2020 recognize five types of ‘hate crime’ in England and Wales – relating to race, religion, disability, sexual orientation and transgender identity – while the Scottish equivalent, the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act, became law in April 2024. Separately, the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 bans language inciting racial or religious hatred, and the UK-wide Equality Act 2010 forbids discrimination based on age, sex, race, religion/belief, disability, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity.

Precise legal definitions of what ‘characteristics’ *are* is elusive, with even the Equality Act stopping short of explicitly defining the term – beyond listing those it seeks to protect. However, working definitions applied by most lawyers, policy-makers and practitioners broadly agree, with everyone from charities to specialists in employment law defining ‘characteristics’ as ‘aspects of a person’s identity that makes them who they are’ (e.g. Citizens Advice 2023). Definitions of ‘hate crime’ are generally clearer cut. Though the UK Law Commission adopts a rather loose definition of hate crimes as ‘acts of violence or hostility directed at people’ because of ‘who they are’ (lawcom.gov.uk 2023), both the College of Policing and Crown Prosecution Service define it clearly, as ‘any criminal offence which is perceived by the victim or any other person to be motivated by hostility or prejudice’ based on that victim’s protected characteristic(s) (cps.gov.uk 2024).

While the range of protected characteristics has increased over time, and there continue to be lively debates about whether others should be added, at least one group subject to significant levels of stigma and disdain in contemporary Britain remains squarely outside the scope of legal protections. To date, there are no legal safeguards against hate crime and discrimination faced by individuals experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. This is despite recent pleas by Olivier de Schutter, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, to outlaw ‘povertyism’: defined as ‘negative attitudes and behaviours towards people living in poverty’ (de Schutter 2022). This legislative blind-spot extends to most areas of UK media regulation, with the ethical codes of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and National Union of Journalists (NUJ) both prioritizing the protection of the same groups as the law. The Office of Communications (Ofcom), which regulates broadcast media, adds to this statutory list a prohibition on hatred based on ‘social origin’ (Ofcom 2023), but only IMPRESS (the press regulator eschewed by almost all major newspapers) bars ‘pejorative’ language aimed at people based on their ‘socio-economic status’ or the fact they are ‘receiving welfare and benefits payments’ (IMPRESS 2024). Though there has been valuable work to promote a more compassionate media vocabulary for reporting poverty – notably a set of guidelines co-produced by an advisory group comprising the NUJ, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, On Road Media (now Heard) and others (jrf.org.uk 2016) – its impact has been limited. In practice, this regulatory gap allows both news outlets and audiences to freely publish statements about people experiencing inequalities relating to income, wealth and/or social class that would be defined as hatred (at times even incitement); ruled in breach of ethical codes; and legally actionable if directed at specified individuals in protected groups.

This article combines aspects of sentiment, content and critical discourse analysis to explore the prevalence of povertyist hate speech in posts about ‘workless’ benefit recipients on comment threads published at key points during the UK’s post-pandemic ‘cost-of-living crisis’ (instituteforgovernment.org.uk 2022) on two national news-sites that have devoted extensive

space to this subject: www.telegraph.co.uk and www.dailymail.co.uk. Its primary focus is comments that would meet the legal definition of hate speech if directed at individuals with protected characteristics. The sample is drawn from threads posted beneath articles focusing on discursive and policy interventions addressing shortages in skills and labour supply in sectors of the economy impacted by Covid-19, Brexit and the Russia-Ukraine war, by problematizing the ‘economically inactive’: people ‘not in employment’, who ‘have not been seeking work within the last four weeks and/or are unable to start work within the next two weeks’ (ONS 2023), including those who have disengaged from the job market since the pandemic. The article finds that news-sites’ reactive moderation policies permit povertyist hate speech to circulate largely unchallenged – by leaving decisions about whether to report such posts up to the users of self-policing (and largely self-reinforcing) anti-welfare echo-chambers. It concludes that the presence of such material poses difficult questions for editors about the (in)adequacy of community rules and moderation policies, exposing serious gaps in the legal and regulatory framework(s) around protected groups.

From racism to gender-baiting: hate speech in the online public sphere(s)

The advent of social media has seen growing scholarly attention devoted to the problem of incivility in online debate and interaction. While the initial emphasis was on threats posed by interpersonal abuse or ‘trolling’ (Binns 2012), recent years have seen a growing interest in abusive ‘Twitter storms’ between disagreeing parties (Vasterman 2018), and invective directed at third-party social and cultural groups. Since the mid-2010s, much of this latter research strand has coalesced around debates about the extent to which social media sites (especially Twitter) permit negative and stigmatizing language – and, in some cases, threats – amounting to hatred. Of particular concern has been the growing evidence for the proliferation of both implicit and explicit online racism (e.g. Daniels 2013; Farkas & Matamoros-Fernandez 2019), including that expressed through non-lexical tools, such as emojis (Matamoros-Fernandez 2018) and GIFs (Jackson 2017). More specifically, social media platforms have been problematized for enabling the spread of Islamophobia (e.g. Awan 2014; Vidgen & Yasseri 2020), anti-Semitism (Zannettou et al 2020; Chandra et al 2021) and anti-immigrant sentiment (e.g. Ekman 2019; Nortio et al 2021). There is also growing concern about online misogyny and abuse relating to sex, gender and sexual orientation (e.g. Suzor et al, 2019; Sobieraj, 2018), including hatred towards female politicians, activists and journalists (Rego, 2018; Rhealt et al, 2019); LGBTQI+ people (reviewed in Stefanita & Buf 2021); and multidirectional abuse between gender-critical feminists and trans rights activists (Hines 2019; Pearce et al 2020).

Most studies have focused on detecting and quantifying instances of hate speech by analysing comments and conversations themselves, using automated and/or manual sampling and analytical techniques (Bresnahan et al 2018; Dias et al 2018). Some have experimented with novel methodological approaches to distinguish between ‘general profanity’ and bona fide ‘hatred’ (Mamasi & Zampieri 2017), with others applying ‘language models’ using ‘well known stereotypes’ (Warner & Hirschberg 2012). Others still have approached the issue by analysing the experiences of social media *users*. According to a 2022 quantitative survey of 1,180 young German adults, 93% had encountered online hate speech – more than eight out of 10 in the previous month (Obermaier 2022). Elsewhere, Tynes et al (2018) interviewed 302 African-American and Latinx 11 to 19-year-olds about their experiences of encountering online racial discrimination and ‘micro-aggressions’, while Unesco and the International Center for Journalists surveyed 900 female journalists from 125 countries, in Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, to expose the pervasiveness of sexist and misogynistic abuse affecting women in their profession (Posetti et al 2020).

Such research has led to growing concerns about the (in)adequacy of social media operators' community rules and moderation procedures, and the challenges online hate speech poses for the scope and enforceability of laws that notionally protect particular groups – especially given the difficulty of determining the jurisdictions in which those responsible operate, and the ease with which they can hide behind anonymity (e.g. Hardaker & McGlashan 2016). Though social media providers have latterly made significant strides to address hate speech, their inclination towards ideologies of free speech combined with the impracticality of micro-policing tens of millions of daily posts have led them to enforce their rules *reactively*. As of April 2023, Twitter's (now X's) policy on 'hateful conduct' explicitly forbids comments that 'directly attack other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, caste, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease', but relies on its users to 'report it' (twitter.com 2023). Facebook's policy refers more directly to 'hate speech', which it defines as a 'direct attack against people' with broadly the same 'protected characteristics' as in UK law - whether such attacks take the form of 'violent or dehumanising speech, harmful stereotypes, statements of inferiority, expressions of contempt, disgust or dismissal, cursing and calls for exclusion or segregation' (fb.com 2023). In terms of enforcement, however, it merely implores users: 'do not post' (ibid). Such reactive, hands-off policies reflect Burnap and Williams' concern that most online hate speech 'goes largely unpunished', whether legally and/or through censorship or removal – despite 'increasing evidence that cyber hate is on the rise, the availability of legislation to bring about prosecution', and social media companies' supposed 'desire...to reduce harm' (2016:1).

While there has been considerable scholarly focus on the problem of abuse and hatred on social media, this has largely been confined to Twitter and Facebook – leaving considerable gaps in the literature. Perhaps most glaringly, despite an early flurry of interest in the (in)effectiveness of news organizations' policies for moderating their own 'user-generated content' (e.g. Ruiz et al 2011), few studies have analysed the prevalence of hate speech on the comment threads of news websites. Hughey and Daniels made a noteworthy early attempt to question the wisdom of web pioneers who believed the Internet could be 'a utopian space free of social distinctions like race', by directly addressing racist abuse on news threads (2013: 333). More recently, Zannettou et al (2020) attempted to identify the 'elements that attract hateful comments on news sites' by conducting a sweepingly ambitious computerized analysis of 125 million posts scraped from beneath 412,000 news articles over a 19-month period. However, while several scholars have problematized the (largely reactive) moderation practices used to censor abusive comments on news and magazine sites (Binns 2012; Boberg et al 2018), there remains a conspicuous lack of in-depth studies focusing on the misuse of such threads as conduits for channelling hate speech against specific groups – protected or otherwise.

From 'scroungerphobia' to 'social disgust': a short history of povertyist hatred

Demonizing representations of 'the poor', particularly unemployed people and benefit recipients, have long garnered academic attention – particularly since the advent of neoliberalism and the New Right. Social researchers' interest in anti-welfare discourses came of age during the 1970s and early 1980s, amid popular debates about supposedly widespread 'cultures of poverty' and 'welfare dependency' unleashed by the writings of American political scientist Charles Murray and British Conservative minister Keith Joseph - widely credited as the godfather of Thatcherism. Joseph kickstarted the UK debate as early as 1972, adopting the tone of a 'moral missionary' (Morrison 2019: 84) to question decades of post-war consensus around the importance of maintaining a comprehensive Welfare State safety-set by condemning the benefits system for fostering a 'cycle of deprivation' (Welshman 2007: 31). Murray's similarly pathologizing critiques of beneficiaries of both US and UK social security

systems popularized the concept of an economically inactive, welfare-dependent ‘underclass’, which he explicitly aligned with Victorian conceptualizations of ‘the “undeserving poor”’ (Murray 1990: 3). Central to Murray’s analysis were three tropes that have since typified media and political portrayals of benefit recipients: their association with out-of-wedlock births and ‘feckless’ parents, crime/antisocial behaviour, and unemployment.

The seminal UK study of anti-welfare discourses remains Golding and Middleton’s *Images of Welfare* (1982), which applied Alan Deacon’s concept of ‘scroungerphobia’ – defined as a ‘degree of popular concern’ about ‘scrounging’ by people receiving out-of-work benefits ‘out of all proportion to its extent’ (Deacon 1978: 122) – to a triangulated analysis of public attitudes, journalists’ news values, and press portrayals of unemployment during the late 1970s. The authors demonstrated how, by consistently framing ‘workless’ people as idle, fraudulent and/or dependent on handouts funded by hardworking taxpayers (including low-paid workers), the mass media amplified public resentments towards unemployed people at a time when rising inflation, stagnant wages and industrial unrest made issues around the fairness of state tax-and-spending policies acutely salient. Indeed, one of Golding and Middleton’s key contributions was their recognition of the increased salience that distrustful and contemptuous ‘images of welfare’ hold at times (like today) of widespread socioeconomic hardship: periods ripe for ‘moral panics’ around the supposed idleness/fraudulence of ‘economically inactive’ people. In their overview of the historical evolution of povertyist narratives, the authors identified a continuum of historical economic upheavals and crises since the Middle Ages during which ‘undeserving poor’ stereotypes were promoted by elites as scapegoats for society’s ills – arguing that the ‘rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars’ invoked by Medieval rulers would ‘personify wilful poverty for decades, indeed centuries’ (ibid: 9). By activating such folk-devils, successive regimes displaced blame for the economic fallout of wars, famines, political mismanagement and longer-term structural problems onto those least able to defend themselves – in so doing building the case for supposedly necessary (but often ideologically driven) policies to correct or punish them.

Wind forward, and the correlation between periods of economic turmoil and renewed (or heightened) emphasis on the supposed ‘scrounging’ of the unemployed and ‘economically inactive’ continues. The context about which Golding and Middleton were writing was the proto-neoliberal Britain of the late 1970s – an economy primed for an outbreak of ‘scroungerphobia’, as workers reeled from cost-of-living pressures wrought by a years-long global oil crisis, spiralling inflation, and wage-limiting incomes policies. More recently, when media-political discourses stigmatizing ‘scroungers’ have resurfaced, these have also coincided with periods of economic turbulence – and the perceived policy need (or desire) for fiscal retrenchment (Morrison 2019). The early 1990s recession witnessed a moral panic about unemployed single mothers and feckless fathers exploiting the benefits system, crystallized through ministerial speeches railing against ‘the something-for-nothing society’ (Lilley 1992). But perhaps the most marked ratcheting-up of scrounger discourse was that mobilized by ministers and journalists during the post-crash austerity years, when the Conservative-led Coalition sought to construct a popular consensus in support of sustained benefit cuts, ostensibly to pay down Britain’s budget deficit (e.g. Garthwaite 2011; Morrison 2019). As a perfect storm of government rhetoric, tabloid stories and ‘poverty porn’ TV coalesced around binary distinctions pitting ‘workers’ against ‘shirkers’, ‘strivers’ versus ‘skivers’ (Williams 2013), annual British Social Attitudes surveys (e.g. Taylor-Gooby & Taylor 2015) suggested scrounger discourse had entered a new, more insidious, phase: morphing into banal, taken-for-granted ‘welfare commonsense’ (Jensen 2014) or ‘welfare disgust’ (ibid; Tyler 2013).

Scroungerphobia online: anti-welfare ‘hatred’ on social media and comment threads

Aiding and abetting the normalization and acceptance of more recent iterations of ‘the scrounger’ has been the amplification of anti-welfare discourse in online public spheres – from Facebook and Twitter to below-the-line comment threads published beneath articles on news websites (see, for example, Morrison 2019; Price et al 2020). A significant aspect of the functionality of comment threads is to open up spaces for audience-members to both *respond* to and *embellish* journalistic narratives – reinforcing an article’s framing by adding ‘evidence’ based on their own asserted knowledge/experiences (e.g. Canter 2013). So far, however, only limited attention has been paid to forms of collaborative journalist-audience co-production or ‘produsage’ (Bruns 2007) that amplifies ‘scrounger’ frames (e.g. Morrison 2018). Moreover, studies analysing anti-welfare talk on Twitter have been limited – largely focusing on debates about ‘poverty porn’ TV programmes (Baker & McEnery 2015; Van der Bom et al 2018; Morrison 2019). Beyond this, only a handful of studies have considered the wider pervasiveness of anti-welfare discourse in online social spaces – though these include at least two exploring how it is becoming so normalized that it has begun insinuating itself into publications and forums focused on other subjects entirely (Morrison 2019 and 2021).

Methodology: sampling and analysing threads

The sampled comment threads were drawn from articles published on the websites of two politically conservative national newspapers that have historically devoted disproportionate attention to the subject of ‘worklessness’ and ‘economic inactivity’ (see Golding & Middleton 1982; Morrison 2019): www.telegraph.co.uk (website of the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* broadsheets) and www.dailymail.co.uk (that of mid-market tabloids the *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*). Where more than one page of comments was published beneath an article, the first two pages were sampled, with posts re-ordered as ‘best rated’ (*Mail*) and ‘most liked’ (*Telegraph*) respectively, to give as representative as possible a reflection of the overall balance of sentiment about the news events/commentaries concerned. A total corpus of 2,149 comment posts was sampled from across 13 threads: seven published beneath articles on www.telegraph.co.uk and six on www.dailymail.co.uk. Before coding, a manual clean-up was carried out of the initial ‘raw’ threads to remove a minority of posts for which clear sentiments could not be identified. These included a handful that were purely exclamatory in nature or that commented on tangential topics (e.g. a *Mail* post complaining about Boris Johnson’s premiership). Also removed were posts in which commenters focused on insulting each other rather than discussing the subject at hand (e.g. a *Mail* comment criticizing another poster’s written English and asking why they lived in the UK).

The period covered by the sample encompassed the 19 months between September 2021 and April 2023, commencing around the start of the UK’s post-pandemic ‘cost-of-living crisis’: defined by the Institute for Government as ‘the fall in “real” disposable incomes (that is, adjusted for inflation and after taxes and benefits) that the UK has experienced since late 2021’ (instituteforgovernment.org.uk, 2023). It culminated in the month after Conservative Chancellor Jeremy Hunt’s self-styled ‘back-to-work Budget’: a fiscal event framed as an effort at ‘tackling...labour shortages’, ‘breaking down the barriers that stop people working’ and reducing ‘economic inactivity’ (Hunt quoted in Watts & Davis 2023). The threads were published beneath a mixture of news stories and opinion articles clustered around the following four key ‘discursive events’ (Wodak 2001):

- November 2021 – the publication of figures from the Recruitment and Employment Confederation showing the number of UK job vacancies at an all-time high;

- December 2022 – publication of international comparative data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ranking the rate of ‘economic inactivity’ in the UK as the highest in the world;
- February 2023 – the launch by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) of a new ‘back-to-work’ drive and ‘sick note crackdown’ targeting ‘workless’ people;
- March 2023 – Chancellor Hunt’s unveiling of his ‘back-to-work Budget’

The chosen analytical approach combined elements of sentiment, content and critical discourse analysis. High-level sentiment analysis was initially applied across the whole sample to group articles into categories reflecting their broad discursive positions (e.g. ‘negative/anti-welfare’ versus ‘positive’). This was followed, firstly, by content analysis of all anti-welfare comments, to identify and quantify examples of hate speech. Secondly, the smaller sub-sample of ‘hate’ posts was subjected to CDA, using Wodak’s discourse-historical approach (2001), to analyse users’ specific lexical choices – including those drawing on interdiscursive and intertextual associations or ‘evidence’ to support their opinions.

Although ‘hate speech’ is notionally banned by the community rules of both chosen websites, neither clearly defines this term. *Telegraph* guidelines prohibit ‘religious abuse, racism, sexism, homophobia’ as well as the vague category of ‘minority abuse’, but only ‘profanity (bad language)’ is *automatically* removed – meaning it relies on users to report other rule breaches, before deciding whether to reactively moderate (telegraph.co.uk 2023). The *Mail* applies even looser, reactively policed ‘house rules’ which make no explicit mention of hate speech. The nearest it comes to forbidding this is to urge readers not to post comments that are ‘insulting, threatening or abusive’ or ‘offensive, racist, sexist, homophobic or discriminatory against any religions or other groups’ (dailymail.co.uk 2023).

Given the inadequacy of both websites’ policies around hate speech, instead of applying *their* community standards, comments were coded as hate speech if they would have breached the community guidelines of X or Facebook. While their primary concern is to safeguard legally protected groups, both these platforms explicitly forbid ‘hateful’ and ‘dehumanising’ content - with the latter’s detailed rules banning ‘violent’ posts or comments supporting the use of violence against people, whether ‘in written or visual form’. Significantly, it bans ‘dehumanising speech or imagery’ likening people to ‘insects (including but not limited to: cockroaches, locusts), animals in general or specific types of animals that are culturally perceived as intellectually or physically inferior’, as well as ‘filth’, ‘bacteria’, ‘disease’ and ‘savages’ (fb.com 2023). Clearly in this category were a handful of comments comparing ‘workless’ people to ‘vermin’ or ‘parasites’: posts coded as ‘first-order hatred’. A second-order (‘soft hatred’) category was also identified, however, which stopped short of using the most overt forms of hate speech. These nonetheless met the UN’s definition of hate speech as ‘pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are’ by deploying commonly used stereotypes, such as ‘scrounger’, ‘shirker’, ‘sponger’ and ‘waster’ (www.un.org 2023). This stereotype-focused approach for identifying hatred has also been used in other studies (see Warner & Hirschberg 2012).

Following in-depth immersion in the dataset(s), seven final categories of post were identified through a process of ‘inductive category development’ (Mayring 2000: 3) – demonstrating a high degree of nuance in the range of sentiments expressed. These were:

- ‘first-order hate posts’ - negative comments about ‘economically inactive’ people/benefit recipients that would meet statutory/regulatory definitions of hate speech if directed at protected groups;
- ‘second-order hate posts’ - negative posts using ‘hateful’ stereotypes;
- ‘hard negative posts’ - anti-welfare comments avoiding overt hate speech;
- ‘soft negative posts’ - comments criticizing ‘undeserving’ unemployed/inactive people for milking the system but distinguishing them from a ‘deserving’ majority;
- ‘empathetic posts’ - comments expressing understanding for why people might exploit the overgenerosity of the benefits system;
- ‘soft counter-discursive posts’ - comments defending people who *choose* to become ‘economically inactive’ to escape poor wages and/or working conditions
- ‘hard counter-discursive posts’ - comments defending the benefits system and/or emphasizing the hardship faced by unemployed and ‘inactive’ people

To test for inter-coder reliability, just over 10 per cent of the sampled posts (215) were re-coded three months after initial coding was completed, producing a 97 per cent match.¹

From empathy to enmity: the spectrum of welfare discourse

The final breakdown of sentiments across the 2,149 comments is given in Figure 1, whereas Figure 2 displays the number of ‘hate speech’ posts as a proportion of the total of all 1,431 coded as negative (anti-welfare). As Figure 1 demonstrates, more than two-thirds of all comments posted that took a discursive position on the subject(s) of ‘economic inactivity’, unemployment and/or benefits reciprocity (67%) displayed clear anti-welfare sentiments. Moreover, the dominance of negative comments became even stronger - amounting to seven out of ten (70%) – when the scope of welfare-critical posts was extended to include those categorized as ‘empathetic’. These were ones professing to understand why some people took rational decisions to exploit the benefits system because it was so easy to do so: i.e. posts implicitly accepting the dominant narrative that welfare ‘scroungers’ *exist*.

Superficially, posts categorized as ‘hatred’ made up only a small minority: just 97 comments, or 4.5% of the overall total, and 7% of all 1,431 negative (anti-welfare) posts. However, as the decision had been taken to include in the ‘second-order hatred’ category only posts *directly* othering benefit recipients (i.e. those deploying pejorative labels such as ‘scrounger’ and ‘waster’), this set the bar high when determining which comments to classify as hate speech. In fact, many of those coded as merely ‘negative’ deployed other tropes/terminology that nonetheless exhibited strong levels of disdain or contempt towards people using the benefits system – albeit without assigning explicitly demonizing labels to claimants *themselves*. These ranged from posts steering close to describing benefit recipients in dehumanizing terms (‘people are paid to breed’; ‘we reward them for breeding’) to numerous comments recycling media-political mantras about people lazily opting to remain unemployed as a ‘lifestyle choice’ (see Morrison, 2019: 32).

¹ On secondary coding, seven posts were re-coded from ‘hard negative’ to ‘empathetic’ because, while framing unemployed/‘inactive’ people as ‘scroungers’, they emphasized the incentives for them to exploit the system.

Figure 1 - Breakdown of sentiments across whole sample [n=2,149]

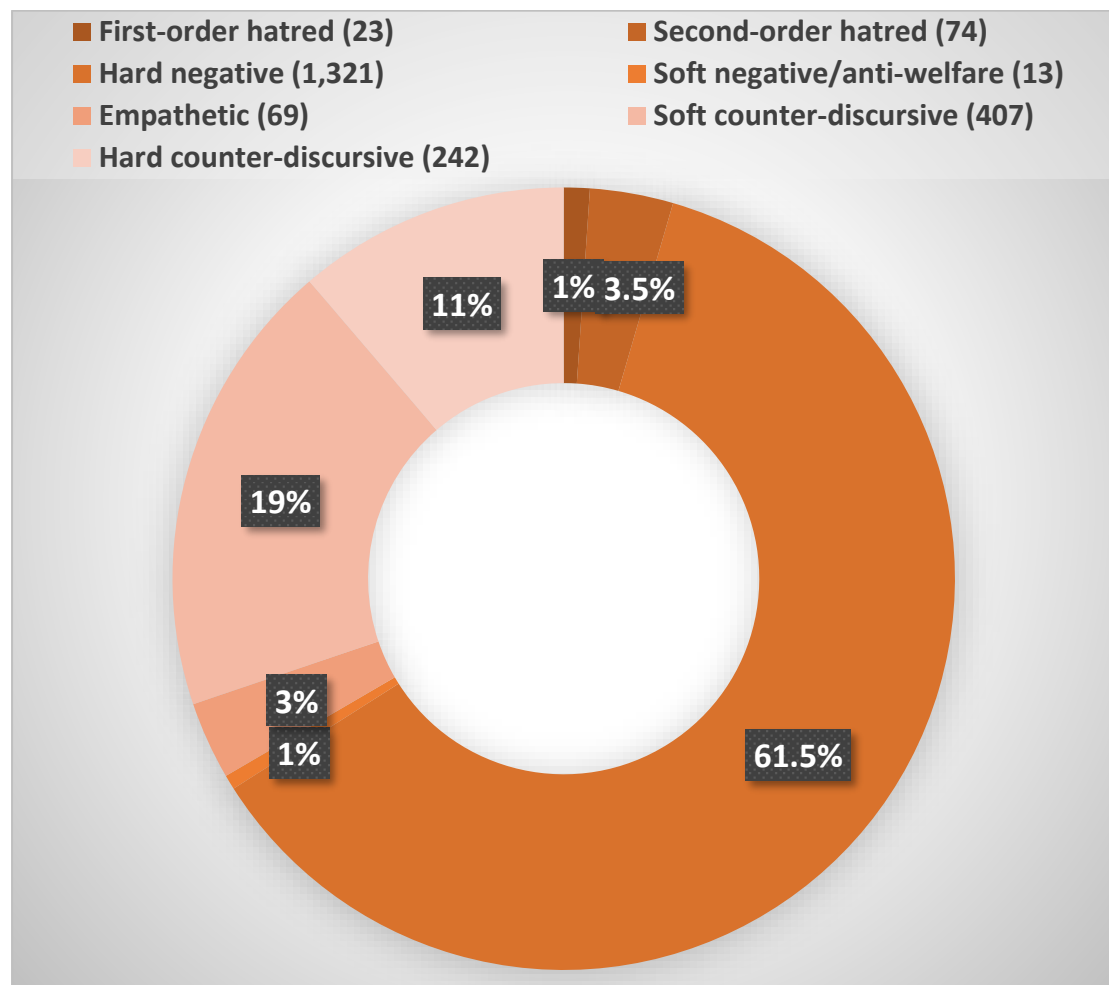
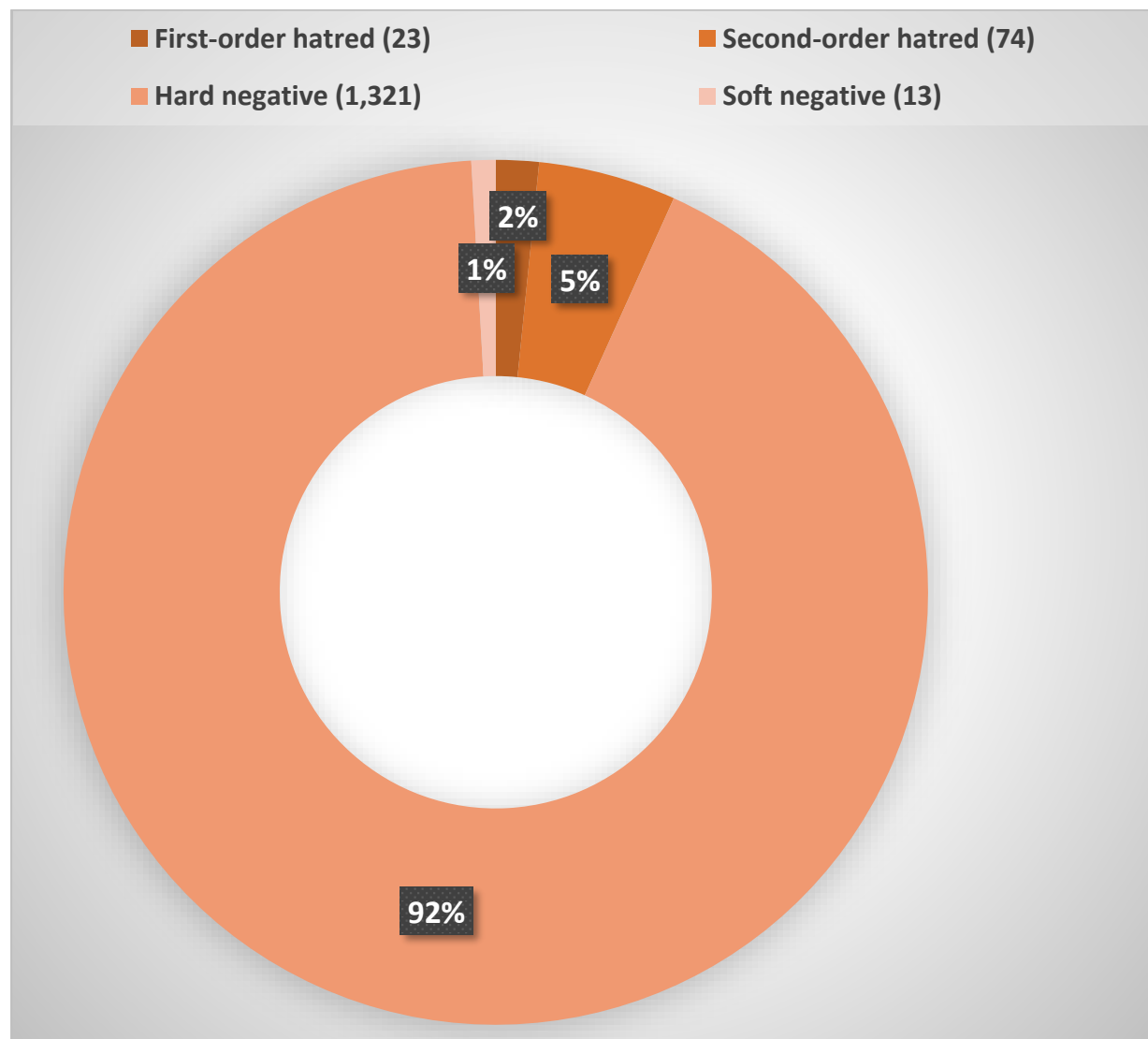


Figure 2 - Balance of hatred versus general negativity in anti-welfare posts [$n=1,431$]



Of the posts mobilizing more overt forms of hate speech, only 23 (1% of the total or 2% of all anti-welfare comments) were extreme enough to be categorized as ‘first-order’ hatred, on the basis that they employed unambiguously dehumanizing language likening people to insects or animals. The most common pejorative of this kind was the word ‘parasites’, which occurred in nine posts - including a lengthy diatribe also likening unemployed people to ‘vermin’ and ‘creatures’. A tautological rant castigated ‘Lazy sponging fiddling parasites!’ and a post steering perilously close to inciting violence against benefits recipients argued that ‘the only solution to curb the abuse of the benefit system’ was ‘a mass culling’. Another similarly aggressive comment likening unemployed people to ‘leeches’ ended by imploring politicians to ‘bring back the workhouse for lazy leech dolers’: an intertextual allusion to the signature policy of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which forced paupers to undertake unpaid work in return for basic food and shelter (as discussed in Morrison 2019: 53-4).

Parroting the past? The importance of interdiscursive invective

As indicated above, a common device among hate-posters was to support and reinforce their criticisms by drawing on intertextual and/or interdiscursive allusions to earlier iterations of the ‘undeserving poor’. Responding to an April 2023 *Telegraph* story published shortly after the

‘back-to-work Budget’ – negatively headline-framed as ‘Unemployed are “job ghosting” to claim benefits’ – one poster drew an explicit opposition between ‘the doers and the parasites’, in an invocation of binary media-political distinctions repeatedly drawn between ‘workers and shirkers’ or ‘strivers and skivers’ over the preceding decade, especially during the 2010-15 ‘shirkerphobia’ panic (see Morrison 2019: 14-15). Elsewhere, several posters referred to endlessly recycled (if disputed) claims (see Macdonald et al 2014) about cultures of ‘worklessness’ being passed between ‘generations’. These, in turn, recalled recurring debates about ‘the underclass’, ‘intergenerational unemployment’ and ‘welfare dependency’ dating back at least as far as Joseph’s 1970s ‘cycle of deprivation’ speech (Welshman 2007).

More widespread were the many posts (including in the bigger anti-welfare sample) revisiting historical imaginaries of the ‘deserving’ versus ‘undeserving poor’ by aligning specific groups of benefit recipients with one group or other. Of those framed as ‘deserving’, it was intriguing to see several anti-welfare posters coming to the defence of people with disabilities – or, at least, those they deemed *genuinely* disabled (variously described as ‘profoundly disabled or chronically ill’, ‘legitimately disabled’ or ‘genuinely disabled’). Another commonly used image with deep-seated historical associations was that of the Welfare State as a strictly temporary ‘safety-net’ for people falling on hard times, rather than (as one put it) ‘a hammock’ or (to quote 29 others) ‘a lifestyle choice’. The latter term – pointedly contrasted with the ‘safety-net’ concept in eight comments – intertextually referenced a recurring trope of recent British governments (e.g. Osborne 2013).

An intertextual phrase recurring in at least three posts was ‘swinging the lead’: an idiom ultimately derived from a nautical expression for choosing easy jobs on board ship, but commonly used to refer to people who ‘malingering’, ‘make up excuses’ or ‘pretend to be ill’ to avoid ‘going to work’ (Collins Dictionary 2023). Moreover, numerous comments evoked tabloid and poverty porn archetypes – including images of ‘lazy spongers’ lounging around watching ‘daytime TV’, driving ‘new cars’ and wearing ‘designer clothes’. In doing so, such banal, matter-of-fact discourse reflected what Jensen conceptualizes as ‘welfare commonsense’ (2014). The use of intertextual tropes to bolster quotidian anti-welfare narratives is important because, as Jensen argues, the recycling of such accepted truths both reflects and *embeds* a pervasive societal cynicism about benefit recipients – as consistently demonstrated in BSA surveys throughout the post-crash period (e.g. Taylor-Gooby & Taylor 2015). This groundswell of cynicism can, in turn, *enable* ideologically motivated politicians to claim a popular consensus in support of measures to cut benefits – whether framed as correctives to historical ‘over-generosity’ of a ‘dependency’-encouraging Welfare State or pragmatic austerity measures necessary for reducing the nation’s budget deficit.

Interrogating the hatred: the extent and limits of legally actionable commentary

Although representing a relatively modest proportion of the overall sample, the occurrence of dozens of published posts whose content would meet legal and regulatory definitions of hate speech if directed at protected groups is substantial enough to merit serious critical self-reflection by the community editors and moderators of the news-sites concerned. While there may, as yet, be no statutory protections for people experiencing poverty, let alone unemployed or ‘economically inactive’ benefit recipients, 97 of the coded comments used invective that would have created potential grounds for successful legal action if such safeguards had existed. Moreover, they would certainly have broken the much stricter community rules followed by most social media companies had they been posted on external platforms such as Facebook. In addition, many hundreds of posts – perhaps even the majority – would arguably have breached

the much lower bar of meeting the putative UN definition of ‘povertyism’ as ‘negative attitudes and behaviours towards people living in poverty’.

But beyond these hypotheticals, and in lieu of poverty becoming a protected characteristic, to what extent might *any* of the identified examples of hatred be actionable? Perhaps the most important point to emphasize initially is that hate *speech* only becomes a *crime* if it has a victim: i.e. if it is targeted at an identifiable individual (cps.gov.uk 2024). Notwithstanding this, the legally riskiest comments for the news-sites were those accusing disabled people of faking or exaggerating their conditions, given that disability is a protected characteristic. The only defence in such cases was that, in the main, posters were not vilifying ‘genuinely’ disabled people, but those ‘pretending’ to be, and nor were they generally targeting specified individuals. Nonetheless, one second-order hate post that verged on crossing this line was a www.dailymail.co.uk comment whose poster drew on personal anecdote to frame a ‘seemingly fit bloke in his 50’s [sic] known to myself’ as ‘the ultimate benefits scrounger’ because he ‘spins tales of woe’ to persuade his GP to sign him off work. Another was a lengthy intertextual post on www.telegraph.co.uk that reeled out an over-lexicalized list of archetypes, including ‘whole families from grandparent to child who have never worked and use the baby making plan of have kids very young and then get a flat or house’, and ‘kids...trained to think about how to get cash off the system in any way possible’; ‘claim money for any kind of disability’; and ‘lie...to get max cash’. A further *Telegraph* poster invoked a binary familiar from populist rhetorics pitting virtuous or ‘pure’ in-groups against deviant out-groups (see Mudde 2004: 544) to juxtapose ‘idlers and fake long term sick’ who ‘drive around to the local foodbank for some freebies’ with ‘decent people with genuine illness and disabilities’.

Another key discursive strand that, at times, verged on promoting actionable hate speech was that conflating benefit reciprocity with other exploitations of Britain’s supposed generosity – notably (im)migration. Two comments by a single *Telegraph* poster deployed the pejorative ‘gimmigrants’ for an imagined group of foreign incomers ‘who do not have to work with the blessing of the DWP’: a misspelled intertextual reference to the slang term ‘gimmigrant’, which the Urban Dictionary defines as ‘Illegal aliens that pay no taxes and believe they are entitled to free handouts from the government and taxpaying citizens’ (urbandictionary.com, 2023). Indeed, anti-immigrant invective appeared in dozens of comments, with sweeping statements about ‘illegal immigrants...getting everything for nothing’ (to quote one *Telegraph* poster) drawing interdiscursively on tropes repeatedly recycled by recent governments, including the threat of ‘benefit tourism’ and ‘something-for-nothing’ dependency (see Morrison 2019: 20). Several posts bracketed ‘immigrants and scroungers’ together, with hate-filled comments steering closest to racism being those accusing specific nationalities, or ethnic/racial groupings, of milking the system. These included a *Telegraph* post vilifying ‘Albanians’ who ‘want to join’ the ‘brand of British scrounger’ and an intersectionally abusive *Mail* comment accusing ‘most immigrants from the Middle East and particularly women’ of not working and pursuing ‘a life of benefits’.

Of all individual posts incorporating remarks conforming to legal/regulatory definitions of hate speech, however, one stood out from the rest due to the sheer ferocity of its hatred. This was a post published beneath a February 2023 *Telegraph* story headlined, ‘Sick note crackdown to get more people back into work’. In it, the poster responded to an immediately preceding comment advocating that government cut disability benefits so that ‘malingerers will return to work’. The poster’s response was peppered with anti-welfare hate speech, including dehumanizing terms such as ‘vermin’ and ‘parasites’, before ending with an image that verged on inciting

violence – in which it advocated placing ‘these creatures on a boat’ in the ‘the middle of the Antlantic [sic]’ before going on to ‘sink it’. The full post read:

That is a problem that will continue until pay packets are increased and these parasites having their pocket money taken away!

I recently heard one such scrote complaining about the fact the Employment Centre had had the cheek to offer him a job! - transpired that he was the FOURTH generation of these vermin that had never done a day's work in their lives!

I broke my back and virtually every bone in my body in a RTA in October 1986 - by August 1989 I was back walking and in 1990 I was back employed full time - because I had NO INTENTION of giving up!

I am accused of all sorts because I would place some of these creatures on a boat in the middle of the Antlantic – then sink it. EDITED

Quite apart from the hatred displayed towards benefit recipients *generally*, this post (like that before it) would have been actionable under UK law if it had been directed at a specific target, due to its accusation about people feigning ‘long term sickness’. But what further aggravated its hatred was the poster’s (conscious or unconscious) mobilization of imagery that would have been familiar from contemporaneous UK news reports about refugees (‘migrants’) crossing the English Channel in boats from mainland Europe – a story then preoccupying news platforms (when they were not covering labour shortages and the ‘cost-of-living crisis’). Indeed, had the post been directed at refugees themselves – as a cursory glance might initially have suggested – it would have presented a clear example of potentially actionable racist hate speech.

Conclusion: some lessons for moderators, regulators and policy-makers

Posts such as these raise uncomfortable questions, then, for both media regulators and lawmakers – and those who devise the community rules and moderation policies news-sites claim to impose. The fact that the particular comment quoted above ended with the word ‘EDITED’ is, concerningly, no indication that it crossed the desk of a moderator. As the *Telegraph*’s online community rules specify, while individuals may edit *their own* posts ‘within 5 minutes of posting’, moderators only review posts *reactively* – and only then if they are ‘reported’ by other users (www.telegraph.co.uk, 2023). Significantly, the rule-book states they ‘do not edit comments’: they ‘only remove them’ (ibid).

This article’s original premise was to explore the prevalence on comment threads of povertyist and/or anti-welfare hate speech. However, while a substantial volume of povertyist hate speech was identified, in-depth analysis revealed something arguably more concerning: that existing media regulations and moderation policies designed to safeguard groups that *are* legally protected are failing *on their own terms*. If it is possible for *Telegraph* and *Mail* readers to escape sanction for posting invective lambasting disabled people, ridiculing ‘malingerers on long term sick’ (as one put it) or condemning Albanian and Middle East (im)migrants as ‘scroungers’, existing community ‘rules’ are not fit for purpose. Indeed, the pervasiveness of such unmoderated posts positions the news-sites themselves as (at the very least) complicit *circulators* – if not conscious *promoters* – of such invective. While an in-depth textual analysis of the news stories attached to these comment threads is beyond the scope of this article, the use of journalistic framing as a commercial tool to promote heated on-site debates, in order to generate advertising profits, is now well established in the literature (e.g. Reich 2011; Morrison 2019). And equally well documented is the fact that the *Telegraph* and *Mail* are both conservative publications with long-established anti-welfare ideologies (Golding & Middleton 1982; Morrison 2019).

These findings merit serious and detailed consideration by regulators at industry-wide level: specifically IPSO. In keeping with its arms-length, reactive approach to handling complaints about newspaper content, the regulator's policy on comments and other 'user-generated content' is currently *laissez-faire*: its Editors' Code only covers contributions that have 'been the subject of an editorial decision-making process' (www.ipso.co.uk 2023). Specifically, the only comments for which IPSO accepts regulatory responsibility are those that have either been 'pre-moderated' before publication (an extremely rare occurrence, given the resource pressures of today's online newsrooms) or 'brought to [a] publication's attention', yet 'remain online' (ibid). While it is manifestly impossible for either news-sites or regulators to proactively police all UGC as it is posted, is there not a practical middle-ground to be had? For example, if a charity or support group representing disabled people or (im)migrants noticed such unmoderated posts, and complained to the regulator, should it not be incumbent on the latter to investigate – *irrespective* of whether the news-site has previously been alerted? The findings not only suggest that lawmakers and regulatory bodies could do more to extend the range of groups they protect from hatred, but that there is a need for both regulators and individual news platforms to urgently enhance their policies and procedures for preventing hate speech being published – and detecting and removing it whenever it is.

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