Fighting hate speech in the workplace

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About me

Co-founder Ada Initiative, a non-profit for women in open tech/culture

Taught ally skills to 2000+ people in 8 countries

Creator of the "Intolerable Speech Rule"

Software engineer for 10+ years at IBM, Intel, Red Hat, etc.

Valerie Aurora
Steps to fighting hate speech in the workplace

Learn to recognize and name hate speech
Identify your sources of power and influence
Understand the power structure of your workplace
Learn interruption and prevention techniques
Take action!
Brief review of ally concepts

**Privilege:** an unearned advantage given by society to some people but not all

**Oppression:** systemic, pervasive inequality that is present throughout society, that benefits people with more privilege and harms those with fewer privileges
Brief review of ally concepts (cont’d)

**Target:** someone who suffers from oppression (also called "a member of a marginalized group")

**Ally:** a member of a social group that enjoys some privilege that is *working to end oppression* and understand their own privilege

*Actions*
Allies should lead on fighting hate speech

Allies are less likely to be retaliated against

Allies are less likely to be accused of selfishness

Allies have more time, energy, power, and influence
What is hate speech? For this talk:

Speech that is:

1. advocating for the removal of human rights
2. from a marginalized group of people
3. based on a hard-to-change part of their identity
What is included under human rights?

Some human rights hate speech aims to remove:

- participation in government
- access to medical care
- freedom of movement
- equal treatment under the law
- freedom of expression
- life
Not hate speech:

Criticizing the dominant racial or ethnic group
Advocating to remove freedom of movement from a person based on their actions
Socially shunning white supremacists
"Kill all men" jokes
Hate speech and free speech

Common misconception: in order to protect free speech, we must allow hate speech

Reality: Protecting hate speech is *incompatible* with free speech if you care about the speech of the marginalized

The purpose of hate speech is to remove freedom of speech from marginalized groups
The Paradox of Tolerance

1. A tolerant society should be tolerant by default

2. With one exception: it should not tolerate intolerance itself

Too much tolerance leads to self-destruction
More Paradox of Tolerance for tech companies

Video: "The Intolerable Speech Rule: the Paradox of Tolerance for tech companies"

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Identifying hate speech

Many different kinds of hate speech!

Some useful categories to help you identify it:

- Blatant, obvious
- "Ironic" (real or fake)
- Subtle, implied
- Paternalistic, "for your own good"
**Identifying blatant hate speech**

"All X people should be killed" "X people shouldn't be allowed to vote"

Many people think all hate speech is like this

Relatively easy to identify as hate speech per se

Main defense is that hate speech must be tolerated in order to create a functioning society (see Paradox of Tolerance for why this is not true)
Identifying "ironic" hate speech

"Real ironic" hate speech: someone trying to make fun of hate speech by emulating real hate speech

Example: a woman on a mailing list discussing sexual violence: “Words like 'drama' are used to gaslight women who stand up for themselves.”

Male colleague, in private message: “don’t be so dramatic, jeez! 😁 how are you?”
Identifying "ironic" hate speech

"Fake ironic" hate speech: hate speech intended to hurt people, but author claims to be "just joking" to avoid being held accountable

Daily Stormer style guide: "The tone of the site should be light. [...] The undoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not."
"Real" and "fake" irony have the same effect

"[...] Low-prejudiced people perceived 'All in the Family' as a satire on bigotry and that Archie Bunker was the target of the humor. [...] In contrast, high-prejudiced people enjoyed the show for satirizing the targets of Archie’s prejudice."

https://theconversation.com/psychology-behind-the-unfunny-consequences-of-jokes-that-denigrate-63855
Identifying subtle hate speech

"We shouldn't lower the bar to hire more Black people"

Rests on an implied assumption that marginalized people are indeed less capable or less human in some way.

Two major versions:

- genuinely trying to help
- trying to hurt, disguised as trying to help
Identifying paternalistic hate speech

"Women should be prevented from serving in the military because they are so precious and vulnerable"

Comes from a position of assumed greater knowledge and power over the marginalized person, framed as "care"

Often resembles parental care for children, who are genuinely in need of help and protection
Other names for hate speech

- free speech
- healthy debate
- telling it like it is
- science
- common sense
- a joke
- being ironic
- just trying to help
- unpopular opinions
- exercising my right to protest
- "diversity of thought"
Debunking "diversity of thought"

An attempt to co-opt social justice concepts and terminology to support the powerful

No one objects to "thoughts" - we object to hate speech and oppressive actions

Paradox of Tolerance shows that some "thoughts" will, if successfully advocated for, destroy diversity
Correct names for hate speech

"You are oppressing me by preventing me from expressing my belief that women are biologically less suited to working in technology than men."

What they call it: diversity of thought, science

Correct names: sexual discrimination in the workplace, misogyny, patriarchy
Correct names for hate speech

"I'm just saying African-Americans get a lot of advantages in the U.S., more than white people."

What they call it: my opinion, saying it like it is

Correct names: racism, white supremacy, anti-Black racism
Correct names for hate speech

"If you eat any more cake, you won't be able to fit through the front door!"

What they call it: joking, helping

Correct names: body-shaming, sizeism, fatphobia
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Identify your sources of power and influence

Who listens to you?
What power do you have, hard or soft?
What relevant privileges do you have?
Who could you ally with?
What is the realistic risk to yourself?
What are you especially qualified in?
Modesty as tool of oppression

The OpEd Project trains people of color and women of all races to write and publish opinion editorials.

The first half of the class is spent on identifying your areas of expertise and building your confidence as an expert.
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Understand the power structure of your workplace

Who reports to whom?
Who listens to whom?
How are money and resources distributed?
What are executives' personal values?
What is the underlying culture?
What legal issues might you encounter?
Useful tools

"Gossip"
Observing reality
Company values
Code of conduct
Organizational charts
Public statements

CC BY Mary and Andrew https://flic.kr/p/PC7s3H
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Learn interruption and prevention techniques

Take action!
Learn interruption and prevention techniques

Start small and simple
Practice practice practice!
Incorporate learning into daily routine
Find other people to learn with
Learn the way that works best for you
Steps to fighting hate speech in the workplace

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Take action!

CC BY-SA Joshua Davis http://davis.info
Take action

Set small, achievable goals and ramp up
Tell other people about your goals
Seek out and listen to feedback
Made a mistake? Apologize, correct yourself, and move on
Move up to systemic changes once you're sure they are the right thing to do
One-off interventions vs. systemic change

One-off: interrupting a co-worker telling a racist story

Systemic change:

- adopting a code of conduct that explicitly bans racist comments and jokes
- training a group of people to enforce it
- prominently posting the code of conduct and information on how to report violations on all company communication mediums
What if my company doesn't change?

Are you:

● Building alliances?
● Starting small?
● Enlisting upper management?
● Listening to feedback?
● Turning one-off interventions into sustainable systemic change?
What if my company doesn't change?

Does your company:

● Say one thing and do another?
● Put their money where their mouth is?
● Follow equitable and just company values?
● Listen to feedback?
● Have executives who personally believe in equity?
Should I leave my company?

Could you be more influential at another company?

Would you have more energy/time/money to make positive change in another career track?

Are you actively enabling exceptional oppression?

Could you help a competitor create and advocate for a healthier workplace culture?
Summary

Identifying and naming hate speech is crucial, but harder than it seems.

The Paradox of Tolerance explains why hate speech is incompatible with free speech.

Fighting hate speech is a skill that can be learned.

Set goals, listen to feedback, and change jobs if necessary.