

## DIGITAL MEDIA AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

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### Definition

This entry examines how online platforms and social media shape public attitudes and behaviors regarding ethnic minorities. Digital media often circulate hate speech, targeting people based on race, ethnicity, or religion, as well as disinformation—false or misleading content designed to deceive. Populist actors frequently use these tools to erode trust in democratic institutions, traditional media, science, and minority groups. Together, these dynamics heighten social tensions and undermine democratic debate.

### Context

For the first time in a decade, online content generated by bots now exceeds that produced by humans.<sup>1</sup> Research indicates that bots play a significant role in spreading hateful content online (Stella et al., 2018; Albadi et al., 2019). However, online interethnic political discussions, especially on X, are associated with lower ethnocentrism, suggesting social media can promote cross-group contact (Gelovani et al. 2025; Boulianne et al. 2020). In this context, a central question arises: when digital platforms cover ethnic minorities, how do they shape public opinion?

A first meta-analysis, conducted by Simons and colleagues (2026), examines majority attitudes toward various groups classified under the umbrella term “ethnic minorities,” including racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and refugees. Drawing on 155 studies involving approximately 350,000 respondents between 2010 and 2022, the authors investigate three mechanisms: media salience, media valence, and overall media consumption.

Media salience — the visibility of minorities in the media — shows only a weak positive correlation with negative attitudes toward immigration and no significant association for other minority groups. However, the limited number of studies and scarcity of

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<sup>1</sup> Imperva, « 2025 Bad Bot Report ». URL: <https://www.imperva.com/resources/resource-library/reports/2025-bad-bot-report/> (16 January 2026).

experimental designs prevent firm causal conclusions. Valence, or the tone of media coverage, emerges as the most robust mechanism. Positive and negative portrayals influence attitudes in the corresponding direction, although effects remain modest.

A consistent asymmetry emerges: negative portrayals have roughly twice the impact of positive ones, confirming the well-established negativity bias. Among media formats, only valence from traditional media shows a significant association with attitudes, while no positive association appears between valence and intentions or behaviors, such as engagement in collective action or intergroup friendships. Lastly, media consumption itself is not linked to more negative attitudes: the few available studies even suggest a negative association with hostile intentions and behaviors. Overall, across all mechanisms, valence is the factor most strongly associated with attitudes.

A second meta-analysis, by Saleem et al. (2025), corroborates these findings. Examining 60 studies published between 2006 and 2023 across a wide range of media genres — including news, television, film, and digital platforms — the authors find that negative portrayals consistently lead to more unfavorable evaluations of minority groups, while positive portrayals lead to more favorable evaluations. No moderating variables, such as minority group type, media genre, medium, or study design, alter these effects.

Recent empirical studies extend and nuance these meta-analytic insights. Xia (2024), using data from 17 Western countries, demonstrates that frequent internet users tend to perceive less cultural threat from immigration. However, this effect emerges among individuals who regularly consume left-leaning digital media, disappears among those exposed to right-leaning media, and weakens or reverses among intensive social media users or individuals on the ideological right.

We now consider the relationship between digital media and behavior. Arcila Calderón et al. (2024) examine three years of Spanish data from X, Facebook, and police records to explore the link between online discourse and offline behavior. They find a strong correlation between online hate speech and hate crimes, with machine learning models predicting up to 64% of weekly variations in crimes against migrants. Toxic language — including threats, identity attacks, and aggression — predicts crimes better than simple mentions or sentiment. Facebook data are more accurate than Twitter's. While causality is not claimed, the results suggest that online toxicity mirrors a social climate that can foster violence.

Another crucial dimension concerns the role of political actors in shaping online engagement. Heidenreich et al. (2024) examine Facebook and Twitter posts by national politicians in five European countries. Messages about migration generate far more engagement than other topics, especially on Facebook. Security framing produces the strongest effect, while economic and social framings also increase engagement on Twitter. Engagement is highest when posts align with the negative attitudes of a party's supporters, doubling on Facebook and nearly sextupling on Twitter. Extreme attitudes, whether positive or negative, do not boost engagement.

Beyond human-generated content, emerging research also examines how AI systems represent minority groups. Breazu and Katsos (2024) analyze how ChatGPT-4 represents Eastern European Roma migrants in the context of the Brexit referendum, comparing AI outputs with headlines from the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*. Across 65 prompts, ChatGPT neutralizes sensationalist language, individualizes actions, and situates them within broader socio-economic contexts such as homelessness and poverty. It adopts a cautious tone, warns against stereotyping, and references the historical stigmatization of Roma people. The study raises critical questions about AI's capacity to reflect the full spectrum of media perspectives.

Taken together, these findings show that digital media do not uniformly amplify hostility toward ethnic minorities. Instead, the tone of coverage, the ideological orientation of users, and the broader political environment shape whether online content mitigates prejudice, reinforces it, or translates into real-world harm.

### **Related Concepts**

Algorithm; Digital divide; Digital engagement; Digital exclusion; Digital inclusion; Media and information literacy; Online disinformation; Political discourse; Political discourse; Political organization

### **References**

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