

## SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION

### BRIEF

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### Research interest:

Bianca Cepollaro is a research fellow in Philosophy of Language at the Faculty of Philosophy, Vita-Salute San Raffaele University and a member of APPLY's WG2 - Norms of Public Argument: Concepts and Methods. She works on the semantics and pragmatics of loaded and expressive language both on theoretical and experimental grounds.

### STSM Summary:

In this STSM I advanced the work I've been conducting with Robert Simpson (UCL) on counterspeech practices in the public sphere, especially on social networks. Social media users are regularly exposed to toxic speech, i.e. speech with the potential to inflict psychological or emotional harm and incite participation in prejudiced practices, encompassing various communicative devices (code words, slurs, insinuations, dogwhistles, propaganda).

How should we respond to it? My research hypothesis is that the future of the fight against toxic speech lies in counterspeech practices, as opposed to mere censorship. We can and should combat the spread of harmful content with more speech (Brandeis 1927: 377), instead of silencing people. Counterspeech practices encompass communicative strategies for responding to toxic content in ways that block or reduce the spread of negative prejudices (Langton 2018, Tirrell 2018, Lepoutre 2021). But for counterspeech to be effective, it needs to be specifically designed to defuse toxic speech and avoid possible drawbacks. If counterspeech is deployed in the wrong way, it can be dangerous or counterproductive.

(Countering a toxic provocation improperly could backfire, e.g. by feeding trolls, McGowan 2018, Saul 2021).

This is indispensable to pursue one of APPLY's main aims, namely achieving sound public policy that commands the support of both citizens and stakeholders (in this case, any social media users, as well as social media platform providers).