

# Exemplars and Influencers as Counterspeakers

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**Abstract:** Counterspeech is a form of communication aiming at counteracting the potential harms of other communication. Concerning specifically toxic speech, counterspeech is an attempt to directly respond to the toxic message, trying to undermine it, and can be exercised either by the citizens or by the state. When it comes to ordinary citizens, however, several issues arise, including social pressure, a deficit of authority, the lack of skills, and the burdensomeness of such demand. In this paper, we will discuss whether moral exemplars in Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory are particularly capable of – and required to – exercising counterspeech, avoiding some of the problems that affect other ordinary citizens. Our answer will be only partially positive; by highlighting problems in taking moral exemplars as paradigmatic counterspeakers, we will be able to identify a more promising category of counterspeakers, who share in some features of moral exemplars but seem also capable of avoiding the problems the latter pose: namely, that of what we will call moral influencers. By doing so, we aim also at extending the debate over exemplarism to issues traditionally left out of the neo-Aristotelian scholarship, and at exploring the potentialities of non-conventional exemplars.

**Keywords:** Exemplarism; Counterspeech; Moral Influencers; Toxic Speech

## Introduction

Recent years have seen a significant increase in the spread of offensive, hateful, discriminatory, and anti-democratic messages, both online and offline. This development poses serious challenges to democratic societies. All these negative phenomena can fall under the label “toxic speech”, that is, harmful forms of speech that have the potential to inflict critical harm on the targets of such speech and undermine social equality [1: 117]. Given that toxic speech is becoming more widespread and threatens the stability of liberal-democratic societies, measures are needed to tackle it and, especially, to reduce and prevent future demands for more toxic speech. What should be done in the face of this threat? How can we contain the dissemination of toxic speech? More generally, how can we tackle toxic speech in liberal-democratic societies? The literature does not provide a systematic answer to such questions, yet it proposes two main containment measures. Toxic speech can be countered with coercive or non-coercive measures. Coercive measures propose to contain toxic speech through some form of regulation, while non-coercive measures, such as counterspeech, consist in responding to toxic speech with “more speech”. In other words, while the former proposal aims to contain toxic speech legally, the latter seeks to do so verbally. This paper will focus on counterspeech, which in general can be defined as a form of communication that endeavors to counteract the potential harms of other communication [2: 2] More specifically, we will focus on who exercises counterspeech.

We will consider whether moral exemplars [3] are suitable candidates for the role of counterspeakers, avoiding some of the problems that affect other, ordinary citizens in this respect. Our answer will be only partially positive. By highlighting problems in taking moral exemplars as paradigmatic counterspeakers, we will be able to identify a more promising category of counterspeakers who, while sharing some features with moral exemplars, seem capable of avoiding the problems posed by the latter: namely, that of what we will call (following Croce, Liberti, and Vaccarezza [49]) morally conscious and moral influencers. In doing so, we also strive to extend the debate over exemplarism to issues traditionally left out of the neo-Aristotelian scholarship and explore the potentialities of non-conventional exemplars.

In section 1, we present the problems raised by standard counterspeakers identified by the literature. Then, in section 2, we discuss whether moral exemplars can be suitable candidates for the role of counterspeakers. Since our answer is only partially positive, in section 3 we introduce two new figures in the debate – morally conscious influencers (MCIs) and moral influencers (MIs) – and analyze their suitability as counterspeakers. Before concluding, we dedicate section 4 to the moral engagement condition, which seems to be the hardest condition for both categories to meet.

### **1. Standard Counterspeakers and Their Problems**

Counterspeech is a form of communication that aims to counteract the potential harms of other communication [2: 2]. Concerning specifically toxic speech, counterspeech is an attempt to directly respond to the toxic message and to undermine it. It can be exercised by either citizens or the state [4: 1021-1022]. More specifically, some scholars argue that ordinary citizens have a duty of counterspeech [5-6], or that ordinary citizens have a responsibility to engage in it [4]. Some propose non-coercive intervention on the part of the state with a view to promoting the democratic value of free and equal citizenship through democratic persuasion [7-8-9]. There are also scholars who recognize the value of persuasion in respect of both the state and ordinary citizens, arguing that both agents should engage in counterspeech [10]. Finally, it has been recently argued that corporations should participate in counterspeech [11] and that university leaders ought to do so, too [12]. In this paper, following Cepollaro and colleagues, who suggest that in some cases the most effective counterspeaker will be an agent with a “special discursive influence”, like celebrities or leaders of popular organizations [2: 7], we argue that *moral influencers* should be counterspeakers. In particular, moral influencers enjoy some advantages in exercising their counterspeech acts when compared to “standard counterspeakers”, and they can overcome the problems that ordinary citizens might face in such situations. As such, moral influencers might seem to be the perfect candidates to exercise counterspeech. We will expand on this point in the sections to follow. But before considering these problems, a clarification is in order. In this paper, we adopt a broad definition of counterspeech that includes all communicative acts, individual or collective, that aim to oppose toxic and anti-democratic messages and policies. For the sake of clarity, let us consider an example. Recently, in Italy, several ordinary citizens, activists, celebrities, and influencers have shared on social media that they have taken part in collecting signatures to petition the government for a referendum on citizenship. The proposal aims to reduce from ten to five the number of years of legal residence required to apply for Italian citizenship, which, once obtained, would be automatically transmitted

to the citizen's children. Posting a story on Instagram inviting one's followers to take part in this initiative is a communicative act that aims to counter a certain exclusionary policy. With this general understanding of counterspeech in hand, let us now consider the problems of standard counterspeakers.

Ordinary citizens as counterspeakers might face the following problems. First, due to the phenomenon of *social pressure* [13], ordinary citizens might be reluctant to engage in counterspeech. More specifically, ordinary citizens who should respond to haters may be reluctant to do so because they feel the pressure of the group and they fear being excluded and marginalized by the group [14]. Suppose, for example, a toxic speech scenario in which someone is insulting a black person, and the audience is composed of citizens who are intolerant and supportive of the hater – for example, laughing and encouraging him to continue with his actions – and of citizens who remain still even if they disapprove of what is happening. In this case, it is possible that tolerant citizens, while abhorring the hate speech, decide not to engage in counterspeech through fear of being excluded and instead opt to follow the intolerant citizens' lead so as to be accepted by them. Due to this phenomenon some individuals, despite not being racist, use such language to be accepted by others [15].

Second, ordinary citizens might lack the *authority* to exercise counterspeech successfully and, therefore, be taken seriously by haters and intolerant citizens [16-18]. Since ordinary citizens do not hold positional authority – namely, the authority that someone holds thanks to the position of power they occupy, such as being the president of an organization [19, 20] – they can only presuppose their authority. More specifically, an ordinary citizen *acts as if they had* authority, but their authority depends on the accommodation of the presupposition by the audience witnessing the speech act [21, 22]. Given that toxic speeches are successful if the audience accommodates the hater's presupposition of authority and most citizens approve of the toxic message [21], tolerant citizens are less likely to hold authority and successfully challenge the toxic message. In other words, if the audience has already granted authority to the hater presupposing it, it seems implausible that the audience will grant authority to the counterspeaker. Furthermore, it is worth noting that “not everyone enters every speech situation equally” [23]. In this regard, a recent empirical study shows that when a woman and a man present the exact same counterargument, the probability of success is 9% higher for the man [24]. Therefore, some ordinary citizens are disadvantaged in exercising counterspeech because of their social identity.

Third, ordinary citizens may lack the *skills* to properly engage in counterspeech. For example, there is a peculiar form of counterspeech, positive counterspeech, that requires specific competencies to be exercised correctly and successfully. Broadly speaking, positive counterspeech requires emphasizing correct associations of ideas that are inconsistent with the hater's statement instead of repeating the toxic statement to deny it [25: 167]. Exercising positive forms of counterspeech correctly and successfully is particularly challenging since it requires being able to identify utterances that are correct and inconsistent with the toxic utterance in order to delegitimize it, and that have an impact but at the same time are not trivial. Along the same lines, other forms of counterspeech are particularly sophisticated. These include blocking – namely, challenging and questioning the authority of the hater [26] – and bending – namely, deliberately giving an ameliorative response to turn the hateful utterance into a less harmful one [27, 28]. Moreover, some forms of toxic speech are particularly tricky to detect. These include

dogwhistles, which use coded messaging to convey a surface message to one audience and an implicit, hidden message to another audience, and figleaves, that is, utterances that partially cover something that one is not supposed to state publicly [29-31].

Finally, asking ordinary citizens to engage in counterspeech may be too *demanding* and unjustified. Given that toxic speech is becoming increasingly widespread, asking ordinary citizens to engage in counterspeech every time they encounter a toxic message, both online and offline, means asking them to exercise counterspeech constantly. This is clearly too costly.

## **2. Moral Exemplars as Counterspeakers?**

As anticipated, the purpose of this paper is to discuss whether a specific category of citizens can act as effective counterspeakers and potentially be less prone to the issues identified with respect to ordinary citizens. If we shift the focus from the classic debate over counterspeech to considerations about how the values of communities are historically shaped and modified, a class of citizens immediately appears, who might at first glance be ideal candidates for the role, i.e., those who, in the virtue ethical literature, are labeled as moral exemplars or moral role models. Over the last few years, mainly due to the seminal work of Linda Zagzebski [3], there has been a major resurgence of interest in these figures who have been re-evaluated in their role not only in defining the core concepts of a moral theory but also in exerting an extremely effective imitative drive within a given community, especially within educational settings [32-35]. Although the literature on counterspeech has not considered moral exemplars so far, one might ask: why not entrust these morally outstanding individuals with the delicate role of countering toxic speech? After all, who could do the job better than virtuous, admired agents, whom (at least part of) a community recognizes and respects as moral role models? This, one might think, could bypass if not entirely avoid some of the issues posed by entrusting ordinary citizens with the burden of counterspeech. Moral exemplars can be – and oftentimes *are* – ordinary citizens like us; however, their superior moral status makes them if not immune then at least less susceptible to the traditional problems identified in the case of citizens. Let us reconsider these problems in order to understand if and how moral exemplars can overcome them.

The first is the problem of *social pressure*: counterspeakers, even if they disapprove of the toxic statement, may be reluctant to engage in counterspeech because they feel the pressure of the group and fear being excluded and marginalized. In the case of moral exemplars, however, social pressure should not be a problem. This is so because moral exemplars are, by definition, morally outstanding individuals, at least with respect to some virtue or moral domain [36-3]. Moral exemplars do not fear being excluded or marginalized by a group for their actions or values because they are intrinsically motivated to stand for moral values. This is true, to differing degrees, of all kinds of moral exemplars. Let us consider, first, the two main categories identified in the literature: moral saints and heroes. Moral saints supposedly possess all the virtues [33], or, according to other interpretations, an exceptional degree of altruism [3]. In both cases, their outstanding levels of virtuousness or altruism ensure that they will not feel group pressure as a reason against their willingness to defend target groups from toxic speech. Moral heroes, on the other hand, are defined as displaying uncommon degrees of courage [37, 3]. This explains why they may play a crucial role as counterspeakers, because moral heroes are willing to engage in risky situations

and they hold morally worthy motivations [33:12]. An interesting example is that of so-called moral rebels: “individuals who take a principled stand against the status quo, who refuse to comply, stay silent, or simply go along when this would require that they compromise their values” [38: 76-77]. Thus, moral rebels stand for their values when they are under threat without fearing marginalization or exclusion because their values, coupled with the fact that they truly believe in such values, override the force of social pressure. In other words, these individuals are deeply motivated to defend and strive for the moral values they believe in without being afraid of the judgment of other citizens.

But even if we endorse a liberal, pluralistic account of exemplarity, such as that proposed by Croce [39], things do not seem to change significantly. In Croce’s proposal, we should grant the status of exemplars also to non-saintly or heroic individuals, namely, to “enkratic exemplars” and “injustice illuminators”. Enkratic agents, by definition, struggle to do the right thing; nonetheless, the fact that they regularly act virtuously, their internal struggle notwithstanding, is in itself a specific form of exemplarity, one that can even be more effective than full virtue in inspiring other, less morally worthy people. Injustice illuminators, on the other hand, are defined as “people who shed light on relations of oppression in a community” [39], such as “the invisibilization of certain phenomena, experiences, problems, and even entire subjectivities” [40:192]. According to Croce, injustice illuminators typically are members of oppressed groups and display what Medina calls meta-lucidity, that is, an awareness of the effects of oppression in our social structures and the limitations of dominant ways of seeing within our communities [39, 40]. It is not difficult to see why both categories of exemplars could address the social pressure objection: enkratic exemplars because, by definition, despite their struggle, they succeed in doing the right thing; injustice illuminators because the very fact that they typically belong to an oppressed group makes it implausible that the group itself can be a source of social pressure against their counterspeech.

There is another problem that all kinds of moral exemplars mentioned, contrary to ordinary citizens, do not face: the problem of *demandingness*. As we have seen, requiring ordinary citizens to engage in counterspeech might be excessively demanding since hate spreads in contemporary societies constantly in both online and offline environments, in some cases it is particularly tricky to detect and respond successfully to the toxic message, and doing so might be dangerous for one’s own safety. Yet such issues are of less concern for moral exemplars. Moral exemplars, as we have just seen, are deeply motivated by the values they endorse, and they either possess at least one virtue to the highest degree or act as if they did. Their motivation is what makes it possible to overcome the demandingness of counterspeech: their very nature, so to speak, is to take the demands of morality more seriously than ordinary agents do.

A further problem that moral exemplars do not face is the *deficit of authority*. As noted above, in order to exercise counterspeech successfully, the counterspeaker needs to have authority, and this depends on the accommodation of their presupposition of authority by the audience witnessing the toxic speech act. Moral exemplars enjoy a degree of practical authority: by definition, in order for an agent to be a moral exemplar, it is necessary that a community of individuals ascribes such status to them. In other words, when an individual meets the requirements for being a moral exemplar, they are recognized as such by a community of citizens and thus they

have authority. For this reason, when they exercise counterspeech, they are able to do so successfully with respect to the authority required.<sup>1</sup>

So far, it seems that moral exemplars are ideal candidates to exercise counterspeech. However, there is a final problem affecting ordinary citizens that even moral exemplars seem unable to overcome easily: *lacking the necessary skills* to exercise counterspeech properly. On the one hand, toxic speech can be subtle to detect, as in the case of dogwhistles and figleaves [29-31]. On the other hand, some forms of counterspeech – such as positive counterspeech, blocking, and bending – are particularly complex to exercise properly. On this point, we contend that moral exemplars may not be in a position to perform better than ordinary citizens. More specifically, even moral exemplars might lack the necessary skills and competence to engage in counterspeech. After all, what they require to be counted as exemplars is not some technical skill, but a higher moral status of some kind. Moreover, given that toxic speech (and, consequently, counterspeech) typically takes place in online environments and media, to be an effective counterspeaker an agent needs to be aware of the peculiarities of such context and the communicative dynamics thereof. Thus, they must master specific skills to navigate the digital space with sufficient expertise.

In addition to the lack of skills and competence that moral exemplars might encounter, we need to consider traditional controversies when it comes to identifying moral exemplars that carry over to their potential role in opposing toxic speech. In what follows, we will consider two main difficulties commonly identified in the literature, which are particularly pertinent to our discussion. The first is the problem of *identification*. It is far from uncontroversial whether a criterion for identifying moral exemplars exists and, if it does exist, how exactly we can make sense of real-life disagreement over who should count as an exemplar, both in the case of historical figures and that of living individuals. If the claim that, e.g., “Oskar Schindler and Mahatma Gandhi were exemplary figures” could be widely accepted, the same seems much more controversial when it comes to, say, Barack Obama or Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Not only is it obvious that, within a multicultural society, values often clash; but disagreement over values (and who should be counted as their champions) is also a feature of polarized environments like that of our current public sphere. Within such a scenario, it seems more difficult than ever to agree to confer the status of moral exemplar upon some particular living individual and therefore entrust them with the challenging role of countering toxic speech.<sup>2</sup>

A second issue, potentially even more critical to our discussion, has to do with the *impact or effectiveness* of exemplarity. This is crucial because it seems to be a feature that a counterspeaker should necessarily display: that of impacting the public discourse and countering pieces of toxic speech with at least some degree of effectiveness. Given the diverse forms of moral exemplarity outlined, we should not expect impact to be a requisite for being a

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<sup>1</sup> However, it is worth noting that not all kinds of moral exemplars avoid the problem of authority. Indeed, given that injustice illuminators typically are members of oppressed groups and, thus, can be target groups of toxic messages, they are less likely to hold or obtain practical authority in some communicative environments.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of moral saints and heroes, this is intertwined with the problem that counting as an exemplar is highly demanding, such that when it comes to saints and heroes, it is even debated whether being a moral exemplar means, by definition, being committed to performing – on an ordinary basis – supererogatory acts (therefore “normalizing” the very notion of supererogation). This leads us to a pragmatic consideration: even if we could reach an agreement as to who is a moral exemplar, such individuals will probably be rare.

moral exemplar. As several psychological studies have shown [41-43], exemplarity is intrinsically defined by the power to influence behavior by eliciting admiration and emulative action tendencies; thus, it can be a most powerful educational drive. However, a moral exemplar may also be a rather isolated individual, known by few, and inactive within the social sphere, yet without thereby ceasing to count as an exemplar. Even if being impactful looks like a crucial feature that a counterspeaker should possess, this is not a necessary requirement for moral exemplarity. Finally, in their effectiveness and impact, moral exemplars face another important objection, namely, that at least in some cases – such as that of moral saints and moral heroes – they can be challenging to imitate and might seem disconnected from our everyday lives [44-48]. Thus, while they might well be impactful and effective in exercising counterspeech (provided they possess the necessary skills), they do not necessarily display another important form of impact, one that consists in inspiring others to oppose toxic speech themselves. In other words, the very moral outstandingness that makes them exemplars in the first place can be a source of discouragement in their admirers; in addition, many typical moral exemplars are historical figures, whose distance from admirers is not solely moral, but physical and chronological. In addition, although having this second kind of impact does not seem a necessary condition for being counterspeakers, it is surely a benefit to such figures if they have it.

These considerations could lead to one abandoning the very idea of looking at morally outstanding – or outstandingly engaged – citizens as potentially effective counterspeakers, individuals capable of avoiding the problems faced by the state and ordinary citizens. However, there is no need to hurry to such a pessimistic conclusion. What we have negatively outlined are, in fact, the contours of the kind of agents we should look for, should we search for a special category of morally engaged citizens as ideal counterspeakers. After considering the problems that ordinary citizens might face and analyzing the advantages that moral exemplars might have, we can now outline more clearly four criteria that ideal counterspeakers should meet:<sup>3</sup>

- (1) *Identifiability*: they must be present-day living individuals, clearly recognized by – and authoritative over – at least a community of reference.
- (2) *Engagement*: they must display a sufficient degree of commitment to at least some department of morality, without necessarily being heroic or saintly agents capable of supererogatory acts.
- (3) *Skills*: they must be endowed with the technical and communicative skills necessary to navigate the digital environment and to engage successfully in counterspeech.
- (4) *Impact*: they must be sufficiently impactful in countering toxic speech and inspiring at least a specific audience of sufficient relevance.

The question then becomes as follows: apart from *individuals* who may by chance display these features, can we identify any *category* of people encompassing them all? If so, we should be able to identify a category at the intersection between possessing, to some degree, the requirements of moral exemplarity (deflationarily conceived) and the requirements posed by the specific conditions under which toxic speech and counterspeech occur. In what

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that even if we are seeking to identify ideal counterspeakers, this is not meant to be exclusivist; it is not to say that such figures should be the only counterspeakers as they are better equipped to do so. On the contrary, as we adopt a broad perspective of counterspeech, we intend to identify the ideal counterspeaker to support and inspire ordinary citizens in engaging in counterspeech themselves. This is a joint project in which both partake without excluding the other.

follows, we will give a positive answer and suggest that such a category exists and can be identified with what has been labeled elsewhere “morally conscious influencers” (MCIs) and “moral influencers” (MIs).

### 3. Morally Conscious and Moral Influencers

Croce, Liberti, and Vaccarezza [49] have recently claimed that moral exemplarity scholars should consider new, different categories of morally impactful people and investigate their potential harms and benefits to the moral quality of a community’s life and educational journey of the young. To start this line of investigation, the authors propose beginning with influencers, an extremely powerful emerging category that we should neither bypass nor disregard given its current social, economic, cultural, and moral impact (see Hund [50] for a thorough analysis of the phenomenon). In this section we will discuss whether such figures meet the four criteria identified above. It is worth stressing that we will not suggest that influencers are a special category of moral exemplars, but only that they share sufficient features of the latter to display what it takes to count as effective counterspeakers.

As a first attempt to shed light on the matter, a distinction has been advanced among influencers based on their different import to moral causes. To see whether any of these kinds of influencers can be of use when discussing counterspeech, we will now recall the basics of this account. Before doing so, however, a preliminary definition of an influencer is needed. According to Sudha and Sheena [51: 16], influencers are “individuals who have an influence over a specific target audience or medium”, and who take part in brand campaigns in order to promote and increase the brand’s sales. Thus, being an influencer has related requirements: first, having the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of one’s authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with one’s audience; and second, having a following in a distinct niche, with whom the influencer actively engages [52].

In contrast to traditional celebrities, who are often seen as distant and unrelatable figures, influencers are perceived by their followers as closer to ordinary people, or even ordinary people themselves [53, 54]. In particular, they encompass two features that apparently make them ideal for overcoming the problems of traditional role models: their persona is “both aspirational and ordinary” [55: 529, 56]. They (at least appear to) engage directly with their audience, respond to messages, and seem somewhat dependent on their followers. Consequently, influencers seem to possess a unique ability to shape the preferences and choices of other people, also from a moral, political, and ideological perspective. However, even though such impact is now widely recognized<sup>4</sup>, only recently has a tentative categorization of influencers, on the basis of their moral impact, been proposed<sup>5</sup>. The first attempt in this respect is a classification put forth by Croce, Liberti, and Vaccarezza [49], who distinguish between two categories of morally significant influencers. The first category is that of *morally conscious influencers* (MCIs) – individuals who initially build their following and, once they have gained the power to influence a substantial number of people, decide to support socially or morally relevant causes. For instance, Jimmy Donaldson, the

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<sup>4</sup> Arnesson, e.g., shows that some influencers “personify and/or promote issues such as sustainability, feminism, and queer activism on their platforms”, and that they can act as “ideological intermediaries” [55: 529].

<sup>5</sup> We are not proposing here a distinction between commercial and morally relevant influencers; rather, we are introducing a distinction between two kinds of morally relevant influencers who may or may not be commercial influencers as well.

American YouTuber better known as MrBeast, represents an example of this category<sup>6</sup>. MrBeast began his career on YouTube in 2012 as a videogamer. Over the years he has become the world's most-watched YouTuber, sharing entertainment videos mostly characterized by challenges. Besides entertainment videos, MrBeast has engaged in charity, most often through challenges on his channels, for example by donating money to winners. He has also done charity work by donating money, paying for medical operations, and planting trees. It can be said, therefore, that MrBeast is an influencer whose success has led to greater attempts to influence others on morally significant matters<sup>7</sup>. The second category comprises *moral influencers* (MIs) – individuals whose influencer status is mainly the result of their unwavering commitment to moral causes. This commitment is likely antecedent to their appearance on social media. While MCIs may occasionally endorse a moral cause alongside various other products, MIs owe their social recognition and the power to influence their followers' behavior entirely to the endorsed moral cause. In the case of MIs, the moral cause serves as both the source and the purpose of their influencer status. Greta Thunberg would be a typical example of a moral influencer. Thunberg's journey began when she started to influence people's choices through her environmental activism. At the outset, her "brand" was exceedingly simple—a white sign bearing the words "skolstrejik for klimatet" in black letters, a message that has been widely replicated by countless other activists. This iconic sign played a pivotal role in earning her numerous accolades, to the point of becoming an influencer proper (besides gaining other recognitions such as being named *Time's* Person of the Year in 2019)<sup>8</sup>.

Now that we have recalled the distinction between morally conscious and moral influencers, the next question is: how do these two categories fare with respect to the four criteria identified above?<sup>9</sup> To begin with *identifiability*, it seems unproblematic to claim that being identifiable is among the defining features of all influencers, be they morally engaged in some way or not. Influencers owe their status to having a niche of followers, to whom they are well-known and recognizable as holding some kind of power and authority. It is important to stress that, as we will argue below, the size of such a niche is irrelevant for our purposes: it suffices that for a specific target – no matter how large – someone is endowed with the required recognition.

The possession of *skills* is another requirement that influencers can meet. Influencers of any kind have reached their status and position precisely because they navigate online environments with competence, they know and master their internal rules, and they exploit the latter to their advantage or to that of the cause they

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<sup>6</sup> For the sake of brevity, we have chosen to discuss very few case studies per category. A longer list would have implied nuances and provisos which the space limit of this paper does not facilitate. However, Croce, Liberti, and Vaccarezza [49] offer more examples and a more fine-grained analysis of these issues.

<sup>7</sup> However, we will see more of MrBeast in section 4, when discussing the moral engagement condition more extensively.

<sup>8</sup> The category of moral influencers significantly overlaps with that of "activists". As a matter of fact, Thunberg can be legitimately labeled as both a moral influencer, since she owes her fame to the moral cause, and as an activist, since she actively calls for action on social media. However, activists need not have a significant influence on the lifestyle of their followers: that is, they may just advertise their events (e.g., XR activists), while the moral influencer has an impact on followers' choices (e.g., Thunberg avoids traveling via plane). For a recent insightful analysis on online activism, see Lee, J., & Abidin, C.2023. Introduction to the Special Issue of "TikTok and Social Movements". *Social Media + Society* 9 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157452>.

<sup>9</sup> In what follows, we will use paradigmatic examples taken from the Italian social media landscape. Although we recognize that this choice might make our examples less intelligible for non-Italian readers, we also think it is crucial that we can offer an analysis of cases whose socio-cultural context we know from personal experience. Also, we think dealing with international (especially Anglo-American) case studies would be an unnecessary (perhaps even unjust) epistemic burden.

promote. In short, someone lacking this competence would simply cease to be an influencer. However, it is important to stress that both MCIs and MIs might lack other skills that are necessary to successfully tackle toxic messages. Indeed, as we have seen in section 1, there are forms of counterspeech, such as the positive one [25], blocking [26], and bending [27, 28], that are particularly complicated because they are sophisticated and require good knowledge of the matter at stake. Along the same lines, some forms of toxic speech, such as dogwhistles and figleaves [29-31], are particularly difficult to detect. Therefore, if the influencer is not highly specialized in toxic speech and the specific kind of toxic speech at hand, it might be possible that in some cases they do not possess all the necessary skills to exercise counterspeech successfully. An example of a skilled online activist, whom we consider a MI proper, is the Italian sociolinguist Vera Gheno. Through her Instagram account (*#a\_wandering\_sociolinguist*) with 94k followers, her Facebook account with 64k followers, and her weekly podcast “Amare parole”, Gheno has been working for years now to increase public awareness of linguistic discrimination, be it racist, sexist, ableist or other. She has been among the main Italian champions of inclusive (or “wide”) language<sup>10</sup>. This has attracted frequent attacks from haters, as well as occasional shitstorms, directed at her<sup>11</sup>. Due to both her high moral commitment to the cause of non-toxic, respectful speech and online interactions, and her scientific linguistic competence, Gheno has been an excellent example of good counterspeech, exercised by using many different strategies and with very few occasional failures (more on this below). However, one might object, Gheno is an academic whose main field of expertise is precisely the study of language; it comes as little surprise, then, that she is skilled enough to be a competent counterspeaker. Even if this is true, we think other MCIs and MIs can comply with the skills requirement in that: (i) they are skillful in navigating online environments; and (iii) they master at least basic forms of counterspeech.

The fact that the skills requirement can be at least partly satisfied may lead to the conclusion that the same holds for *impact*, which amounts to complying with another of the conditions we have identified. Recall that influencers are defined mainly by the fact that they have an effect, no matter over how many followers<sup>12</sup>. Influencers are both authoritative and perceived as authentic and therefore close, similar, and relatable to their following; therefore, the impact they can have – as attested to by studies on the influencer industry – is intensified [50].

Let us draw on an example of an Italian MCI, Chiara Ferragni, to illuminate this point. Ferragni started as a fashion blogger in 2009 and, in less than a decade, became a globally recognized celebrity, even topping Forbes’ list of top influencers [51]. In 2020, Ferragni and her then-husband, the Italian rapper Fedez, initiated a fundraising campaign to aid Milan’s San Raffaele hospital during the COVID-19 outbreak. When the Ferragnez (the name they

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<sup>10</sup> She has defended using the phonetic symbol “schwa”. Adopting schwa is more inclusive for two reasons. Given that the morphology of Romance languages, such as Italian, French, and Spanish, morphologizes gender with some typically androcentric conventions, such as using the plural masculine to refer to mixed groups, adopting schwa would allow referring to all without androcentrism. Moreover, since the binarism of grammatical gender in Romance languages precludes the possibility of a marker dedicated to nonbinary persons, adopting schwa would allow for the inclusion of nonbinary persons since it functions as a marker dedicated to nonbinary people.

<sup>11</sup> The most violent shitstorm hit Gheno in October 2023, as documented in a subsequent episode of her podcast on October 22, 2023, named “Anatomy of a shitstorm”, available at: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/7uBBLOTOjDjLS2q2rnfWo?si=utVGxKfuQmS8wrAF9zKX3g>.

<sup>12</sup> Hund even suggests that micro- or nano-influencers can be more impactful than influencers with a huge following [50].

used to go by as a couple) started their San Raffaele fundraising campaign in March 2020, they were able to raise about €4.5 million in less than two months. Even more interestingly, the Ferragnez were shortly emulated by dozens of followers who created similar campaigns all over Italy, which made the whole Italian COVID-19 fundraising the largest campaign of its kind that Europe had ever seen, with more than €17 million donated during the first lockdown alone<sup>13</sup>. The fact that the Ferragnez initiated the fundraising by donating €100,000 and explicitly invited their followers to join the campaign, therefore, was able to generate unprecedented emulative effects that no other public appeal to solidarity could have had.

In light of evidence of this kind, it seems that if MCIs engage in counterspeech then not only could their acts of counterspeech effectively reach their target, but they could also inspire others to do likewise, on account of the same power they hold whenever they sponsor a brand, be it commercial, social, or moral. More specifically, they could inspire ordinary citizens to engage in counterspeech and, thus, overcome the problem of social pressure (see [13,14]): whenever MCIs or MIs engage in counterspeech publicly, ordinary citizens might follow their lead in doing so without feeling the risk of being excluded or marginalized. In addition, thanks to their work online they could teach others how to exercise counterspeech successfully. For example, they could disseminate strategies for detecting coded messages and building a coherent counterargument.

However, as Croce, Liberti, and Vaccarezza [49] note, as far as this second kind of impact is concerned, both MCIs and MIs may encounter problems that jeopardize their efficacy in inspiring others to follow in their footsteps. Two phenomena in particular are worthy of note: misdirected admiration and misplaced trust. By misdirected admiration, we refer to the phenomenon of an emulative drive that is not triggered by the morally worthy qualities of an influencer, but by other non-moral qualities that made them influential in the first place. This is a concern that certainly holds for MCIs, due to the intermittency of their involvement with moral causes. One might, e.g., admire Chiara Ferragni for her luxurious lifestyle, rather than for her engagement in defending civil or social rights. Thus, someone might be led to imitate her in aspiring to become a millionaire, rather than in standing up for noble causes. In the case of MIs, however, misdirected admiration seems much less of a problem; while they are not necessarily saints or heroes, their visibility and impact are tied to their moral engagement. Therefore, it does not seem possible that someone will emulate them in the wrong way. The second problem, however, may seem of equal significance for both categories. Misplaced trust indicates the tendency to trust someone we admire irrespective of their expertise in that field. And it may well be the case that an MI we admire takes a stance on matters they do not know well and triggers emulative drives in their followers. For example, they might decide to exercise counterspeech and to voice a position on something that does not pertain to their competencies for reasons such as virtue-signaling, cultivating consensus, or placating their followers.

#### **4. Moral Engagement**

It seems more problematic for influencers to comply with the *engagement* condition. Recall that we carved out this condition in quite undemanding terms, i.e., as the possession of a sufficient degree of commitment to morality

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<sup>13</sup> Source: *La Repubblica*, March 9, 2021. Last accessed: June 7, 2024.

[https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/03/09/news/coronavirus\\_raccolta\\_fondi\\_chiara\\_ferragni\\_fedez-291301219](https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/03/09/news/coronavirus_raccolta_fondi_chiara_ferragni_fedez-291301219)

and praiseworthiness, which need not lead to one performing heroic or saintly supererogatory acts. In this respect, let us first consider MIs. Can we grant them a sufficient commitment to morality? In our view, we can, with the proviso of granting it as far as counterspeech is concerned, and not any kind of moral choices or stances. Whenever, say, Italian academic and feminist activist Vera Gheno publicly reacts to toxic speech uttered by racist or transphobic haters, she is displaying as much morality as is required from her as an MI. If, however, once she closes her laptop, she overreacts at a departmental meeting, or over dinner with friends, this will surely be to the detriment of her overall moral status and her exemplarity, but it will not affect the engagement we take as necessary and sufficient to meet our deflationary engagement requirement. It would be an entirely different matter if an MI either publicly or privately betrayed the moral cause they are engaged with, or if they did so without apologizing. As Archer and Robb [58: 136] rightly point out, “influencers do not open their private life for public scrutiny any more than a traditional celebrity, as portrayals of their private life are carefully constructed performances”. This implies that MIs have a right to privacy, like any other celebrity, and that there are limits to the responsibility they have to act as impeccable role models.

That said, it is not always easy to determine whether and when an MI loses their status due to a clear lack of moral engagement. Two recent, quite telling cases help illustrate some of the difficulties in this respect. They both involve a very influential figure: journalist and writer Selvaggia Lucarelli (1.4 million followers on Instagram). Lucarelli has long been engaged in social battles, especially related to misconduct on social media, calling for limits to “sharenting” and, more generally, to the exposure of children on social media, and so on. She therefore seems to belong fully to the MI category<sup>14</sup>. However, signs of problematic levels of moral engagement, especially in relation to toxic speech, have recently emerged. In January 2024, an Italian woman, Giovanna Pedretti, had replied to a homophobic and ableist review of her pizzeria on Tripadvisor by inviting reviewers not to go to her pizzeria anymore, to keep it a safe space for LGBTQIA+ and disabled customers. The story became widely known and shared, especially given the heated debate over the need for an anti-homophobic law in Italy, a demand strongly opposed by the conservative Prime Minister and the Catholic Church. However, Lucarelli and her partner, the vegan chef and activist Lorenzo Biagiarelli, soon advanced the hypothesis that the offensive review was a fake and had been forged by the same Pedretti to gain popularity. Their aggressive criticisms, unsupported by sufficient evidence, were followed and taken up by many. A shitstorm immediately hit Pedretti, who, soon after these events, tragically took her own life<sup>15</sup>. Neither Lucarelli nor Biagiarelli ever felt the need to apologize: quite the contrary, they denied any responsibility.

Public opinion was shaken, but what matters most for our purposes is that such an episode illuminates a necessary condition for counting as an MI and an effective counterspeaker: that one always and unconditionally

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<sup>14</sup> Although Lucarelli was already famous and not because of moral causes (as required by the definition of an MI), we consider her an example of an MI since she has been actively engaged on social media in moral and anti-toxic speech causes in recent years. Moreover, despite her existing notoriety, Lucarelli’s current following on social media is related precisely to her journalistic investigations and daily battles against toxic speech and behavior. In addition, given her notorious bad temper and aggressive behavior, she is surely no saint; given her fierce commitment to justice, she could be considered either a “hero” or an “injustice illuminator”, despite not belonging to an oppressed category.

<sup>15</sup> Source: *ANSA*, January 15, 2024. Last accessed: June 7, 2024. [https://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2024/01/14/morta-la-ristoratrice-della-recensione-su-disabili-e-gay-ipotesi-suicidio\\_d9983b67-f1f1-4ca0-b071-de02e7a21d8b.html](https://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2024/01/14/morta-la-ristoratrice-della-recensione-su-disabili-e-gay-ipotesi-suicidio_d9983b67-f1f1-4ca0-b071-de02e7a21d8b.html)

refrains from toxicity online in the first place, or immediately and explicitly apologizes if they engage in toxic speech, which does not seem to be the case with Lucarelli, as previous and subsequent episodes confirm. In cases like these, MIs remain impactful and skillful in what they do, but they lose the status they need to be considered good counterspeakers: not only do they engage in toxic speech and lead others to do the same, but they also lack any awareness of having violated moral standards and the willingness to apologize.

What about MCIs? All in all, in our view, something similar holds for them, too. Recall that we have adopted a pluralist approach to exemplarity, one according to which even enkratic agents and injustice illuminators have the right to be considered exemplary. For the same reason, it would be nonsensical to deny sufficient compliance with the engagement requirement to people who, at least on some occasions, engage publicly with moral causes. Given that the moral cause is not MCIs' main brand, but an occasional part of their activity, it may be that while conducting their standard activity they act in ways that are incompatible with the engagement requirement, which can also mean engaging in toxic speech themselves. In December 2023, Chiara Ferragni was found guilty of unfair commercial practices related to alleged charitable donations<sup>16</sup>. The affair revolved around the sale of a designer pandoro (an Italian holiday cake similar to panettone), branded with Ferragni's name – the funds from which were promised to help an Italian hospital for sick children. Buyers of the Ferragni-branded pandoro believed the money they paid would contribute to the purchase of medical equipment for a children's hospital in Turin. However, the company producing the pandoro, Balocco, had already donated €50,000 to the hospital months before the cake was put on sale, and the extensive funds from the sale of the cakes were not given to the hospital as promised. Ferragni, in sum, had been paid €1 million from Balocco to sponsor the pandoro and had donated nothing to the hospital. This has led to Ferragni being fined €1 million by Italy's antitrust authority and a subsequent dramatic decline in Ferragni's following and commercial collaborations. Ferragni's following and the public more generally were shocked: what had appeared to be a genuine moral commitment was an (unfair) commercial operation in disguise<sup>17</sup>. Something similar happened with MrBeast, too. Recently, MrBeast's positive reputation has been tarnished by a series of scandals and allegations concerning Beast Games – a game show produced by Amazon Prime Video in which 1000 people compete for a \$5 million prize. Some participants in the game reported filming for hours in extreme and dangerous conditions, in violation of the usual safety regulations. Others complained about not receiving food and water and about the quality and quantity of the food more generally. MrBeast had already been criticized for failing to adequately protect the safety and well-being of those who take part in his videos, so these allegations are not particularly surprising. Since this paper is about counterspeech, it is worth noting that in the past MrBeast has also been called out for joking about racist and homophobic comments from the live chat. He later apologized and a spokesman also acknowledged that as a teenager MrBeast used inappropriate language to “entertain” his audience.

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<sup>16</sup> Source: *ANSA*, December 15, 2023. Last accessed: June 7, 2024. [https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2023/12/15/antitrust-fines-ferragni-and-balocco-over-pandoro-sales\\_e37cd862-cfc0-42f2-9893-90b75342b8e9.html](https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2023/12/15/antitrust-fines-ferragni-and-balocco-over-pandoro-sales_e37cd862-cfc0-42f2-9893-90b75342b8e9.html)

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the unfair practices were uncovered by Selvaggia Lucarelli, whom we mentioned as an MI a few lines ago: thus, it was an MI who exposed the (supposed) lack of moral engagement of the most famous Italian MCI.

What these examples show is that not only can MCIs incur the risk of lacking sufficient moral engagement; they can also fail morally due to thorny relations between economic interests and morally worthy causes, or to virtue signaling, i.e., a willful use of moral causes to position themselves in a particular way to their followers. In this section we have shown that moral engagement is the most problematic condition for MCIs and MIs to meet, and it is the one to which we should be most attentive if we want to entrust to them the role of counterspeakers. However, we think both categories can comply with the engagement requirement insofar as: (i) they endorse (either stably or intermittently) some moral cause; (ii) their non-moral online activity does not openly contradict their moral cause; and (iii) they do not engage in or promote toxic speech in any form, or (iv) if they fail in this respect, they openly admit it and publicly apologize in a timely and sincere manner. In short, there is no reason why we should in principle refuse to take these new, challenging figures into account as powerful actors within the public debate. Rather, we should be attentive to their actions and only entrust them with the delicate role of “detoxifying” the public debate when some minimal requirements have been met.

### **Conclusion**

We have argued that two categories – morally conscious influencers (MCIs) and moral influencers (MIs) – that share many features of moral exemplarity are likely the best candidates, among ordinary citizens, to exercise counterspeech. We have argued that individuals falling within these two categories could be better counterspeakers than ordinary citizens. Yet, despite that claim, we have argued that MCIs and MIs should not be the only counterspeakers, but rather that they should exercise counterspeech to support ordinary citizens in engaging in counterspeech themselves. In particular, we have argued that MCIs and MIs are good counterspeakers for the following reasons. They are easily identifiable, hold a position of practical authority over their followers, typically possess sufficient skills, display (or portray themselves as displaying) a high degree of moral commitment, and are impactful in countering toxic speech and inspiring at least a specific audience of sufficient relevance to do the same.

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