Chapter 67
Virtual Hate Communities in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Technological innovations in computer-mediated communication have helped hate groups to transform themselves into virtual communities. Likeminded individuals are now able to unite from all parts of the globe to promote hatred against visible minorities and other out-groups. Through their online interactions, a sense of place is often created. In this chapter, we explore the content and function of online hate communities. Since bigotry tends to be the cornerstone of virtual hate communities, we highlight the legal debate surrounding the regulation of Internet hate speech; in particular, we address the question: Does the First Amendment protect virtual community members who use the Internet to advocate hate? Next, using data collected from the largest hate website, Stormfront.org, we also investigate how Stormfront members utilize interactive media features to foster a sense of community. Finally, we direct our attention to the future of online hate communities by outlining the issues that need to be further investigated.

INTRODUCTION

Our mission is to provide information not available in the controlled news media and to build a community of White activists working for the survival of our people. - Donald Black, Founder of Stormfront.org

Since its inception, the Internet has dramatically altered how we carry out certain types of activities. From information gathering to selecting a compatible mate, the World Wide Web has made our society a much smaller, accessible place. At any given moment, a person can find information on virtually any topic. Anything we desire is seemingly just a keystroke away. Unfortunately, there is also a dark side to this technological innovation. The emergence of the Internet has been a boon for hatemongers and hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, White Nationalists, neo-Nazis, and Skinheads. The Web represents a low-cost way to distribute information about white supremacy

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to both a national and international audience. Membership to hate organizations is no longer restricted by physical distance; instead, the Internet has ostensibly transformed hate groups into aspatial communities. Although a person can live thousands of miles away from an active hate group, he or she can still be a purveyor of racial hate and intolerance via the Internet– the portal or conduit for hate in the 21st century. As noted by Mark Potok (as cited in Levin, 2002, p. 965), Director of the Intelligence Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), "Far more than hard copy publications, the Internet allows the lone wolf to remain a part of a larger movement even though he attends no meetings, puts his name on no lists, and generally tries to remain invisible." At the same time, hate websites also provide white supremacists with the opportunity to develop and nurture online friendships with similar minded individuals. Through social exchanges and interactions, a sense of community is often established, transforming hate websites into virtual hate communities.

The present chapter examines four interrelated issues surrounding virtual hate communities that specifically target racial/ethnic minorities. First, based on findings from existing studies, we discuss the evolution of hate websites into virtual communities, analyzing both the general content and function of these cyber-cities. Next, we highlight the legal debate surrounding the regulation of Internet hate speech by addressing the question: Are cyber communities that actively promote hate on the Web completely protected under the First Amendment? Accordingly, we discuss pertinent legal cases and conditions that help define the boundaries of protected speech on the Internet. Third, we present a case study on one of the oldest and largest white supremacist websites, Stormfront.org. Besides providing a descriptive portrait of the community itself, we also examine the online habits and behaviors of its members. The present article concludes with a discussion concerning the future of E-hate communities. Within this section we explore the issue surrounding online-offline relationships. For example, we address the question, will online participation lead to a more visible hate movement in the real world? Finally, since legal options to regulate virtual hate communities are limited, we also highlight other available strategies to curb the growth of online hate groups.

Hate Websites as Cyber Communities: Content and Function

Among the distractions and diversions along the information superhighway, there are potent dangers. Much of the attention has been focused on online pornography and sex predators. Less has been said of the dangers of hatred and bigotry on the Internet. But the problem has been well documented. And the multiplying of hate sites on the Internet is really just the tip of the iceberg. - Christopher Wolf, Chairman of the Anti-Defamation League's Internet Policy Committee

In 2009, approximately 670 active U.S. based hate sites on the World Wide Web were identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)–an increase of 365 websites since 1999 (The Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010). As shown in Figure 1, both the number of hate groups and hate websites have increased over the past decade.

Barnett (2007, p.18) has defined a hate website as "An Internet Web site maintained by an organized hate group residing in the United States on which hatred is expressed, through any form of textual, visual, or audio-based rhetoric, for a person or persons, or which provides information about how individuals can support the group's ideological objectives." For example, the Imperial Klans of America website (www.kkkk.net) makes available to its visitors a wide array of information concerning the white supremacy movement, including a resource library, relevant YouTube clips, leaflets for printing, and a calendar of upcoming events. This website does not however, provide