

Hate Online: A Content Analysis of Extremist Internet Sites

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Extremists, such as hate groups espousing racial supremacy or separation, have established an online presence. A content analysis of 157 extremist web sites selected through purposive sampling was conducted using two raters per site. The sample represented a variety of extremist groups and included both organized groups and sites maintained by apparently unaffiliated individuals. Among the findings were that the majority of sites contained external links to other extremist sites (including international sites), that roughly half the sites included multimedia content, and that half contained racist symbols. A third of the sites disavowed racism or hatred, yet one third contained material from supremacist literature. A small percentage of sites specifically urged violence. These and other findings suggest that the Internet may be an especially powerful tool for extremists as a means of reaching an international audience, recruiting members, linking diverse extremist groups, and allowing maximum image control.

Extremist groups were among the very early users of the electronic communication network that eventually evolved into the Internet. In 1985, for example, long before most people had heard about the Internet, Tom Metzger, the leader of the White Aryan Resistance, created a computer bulletin board (Hamm, 1993). Since then, these groups' presence online has been very active (Levin, 2002).

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Extremist groups might use the Internet for a variety of purposes. It can be used to communicate with current members, or to recruit new ones. It can be used as a forum for publishing the groups' views, or as an attempt to "educate" the general public. Some of these educational attempts can be intentionally misleading. The extremist web site Stormwatch, for instance, hosts a site about Martin Luther King (<http://www.martinlutherking.org>) that mimics the site of the King Center (<http://www.thekingcenter.org>). The Internet can also be used to sell merchandise. Resistance Records, the music-selling arm of the white supremacist National Alliance, is estimated to have had about \$1 million in sales in 2001 (ADL, 2001).

Although there exists ample literature on hate crimes and hate groups in general, and although the Internet has been used as a means to interview extremists (see, e.g., Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002), relatively little scholarly work has focused on the contents and uses of extremist web sites. This is unfortunate, given extremists' heavy use of the Internet. One online directory of hate sites lists 661 web sites, 20 mailing lists, 27 Usenet newsgroups, 45 Internet Relay Chat channels, 131 clubs and groups on Yahoo! and MSN, and 13 electronic bulletin board systems (Franklin, 2001). Another source claims that there are at least 800 hate-related Internet sites (Tsisis, 2001). The Simon Wiesenthal Center estimated that in 2000 there were approximately 2200 extremist web sites (Simon Wiesenthal Center, 2000). These sites are maintained by a variety of people and organizations, ranging from well-known groups such as the Klan and the National Alliance, to relatively obscure groups such as S.T.R.A.I.G.H.T. (an anti-gay group) and La Voz de Aztlan (an anti-Semitic Chicano separatist group), to what appear to be unaffiliated individuals.

Despite extremist groups' frequent use of the Internet, few attempts have been made to examine their web sites in a systematic manner to examine what the sites actually contain, and to determine precisely to what purposes the sites are being put. Burris, Smith, and Strahm (2000) used social network analysis to examine the links between white supremacist sites. Consistent with the expectations discussed above, they found that the movement was decentralized, but that there were no sharp divisions between the groups and that different kinds of groups frequently linked to one another. The researchers also found a number of "soft-core" supremacist sites, which they believed might serve the hard-core groups in their recruitment efforts because they could be "important ports of entry into the movement" (Burris, Smith, & Strahm, 2000, p. 232). Finally, they found evidence that the Internet does assist in the creation of an international virtual extremist community: over two thirds of the links were to international sites (Burris, Smith, & Strahm, 2000).

In another study, McDonald (1999) found that most of the 30 white supremacist sites she examined used sophisticated techniques of persuasion. This supports the hypothesis that these sites are used to recruit, and also gives some support to the claim that the Internet may assist these groups in conveying a respectable image.

To date, the most comprehensive content analysis of extremist web sites was an exploratory analysis conducted by Schafer (2002). Schafer (2002) rated 132 extremist sites. He concluded that these web sites provide a wide range of information, that many of the sites provide groups with the opportunity to sell products, and that the web sites are often used as tools to facilitate communication among members. A number of other issues, however, were not explored in this study, including the number and types of links provided, the degree to which the sites seemed to foster international communication, the images and specific messages conveyed by the sites, and the distinctions between the different types of groups.

Clearly, more research is needed in this area. The current article reports a content analysis of extremist web sites conducted in an attempt to fill this need.

Methods

As Schafer (2002) points out, conducting content analyses of web sites is problematic because it is impossible to determine the true size and nature of the population. The Internet is in constant flux, and there exists no comprehensive directory of web sites. Therefore, a purposive sampling technique must be used.

For this study, a purposive sample of 215 extremist web sites was compiled from several sources: (1) HateWatch (<http://www.hatewatch.org>), a non-profit web site devoted to monitoring extremist sites;¹ (2) the Simon Wiesenthal Center's guide to extremist sites, *Digital Hate 2000*; (3) sites listed under Yahoo's categories of White Pride and Racialism (http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Cultures_and_Groups/White_Pride_and_Racialism/); and (4) sites prominently and frequently linked to by other extremist sites. Of the 215 sites, many no longer existed or were not available, so the eventual sample consisted of 157 sites.

Although it would be impossible to include every extant extremist site in any analysis, the sample for this study did include all major players in the extremist world, as well as many minor ones. Moreover, it included a wide variety of types of groups. To the extent that the nature of the population can be determined, the sites included within the sample were representative of the population of extremist web sites.

Each site was rated on a number of variables by two independent raters (see Table 1). Because many web sites change frequently, and because the raters did not always view the sites on the same day, some inconsistencies in the ratings would be expected. Furthermore, web sites can be very large and complex, and it is quite possible that a single rater might miss a particular item of interest on a particular web site. Therefore, when there was disagreement between the raters on a particular item, the site in question was examined a third time to produce a

¹ As of this writing, HateWatch itself no longer exists.

Table 1. Variables Recorded for the Content Analysis

Type of Site (Christian Identity, Holocaust Denial, Ku Klux Klan, Militia, Neo-Nazi, Posse Comitatus, Skinhead, White Nationalist, Other)
External Links
International links
Links to other types of groups
Content Type
Non-English content
Content for children
Multimedia content
Mentions economic issues
Claims to not be racist
Advocates violence
Contains racist symbols
Includes quotes from racist “classics”
Sells merchandise
Membership
Includes membership forms
Includes other means for members to communicate (bulletin boards, listservs, etc.)

single response. Interrater reliability correlations were significant for all variables at least the .05 level.

Data were collected on 157 web sites.² Of these, 142 were apparently authored by groups or individuals from the United States; the remaining 15 were internationally based. Initial examination of the sites, as well as the literature on extremist groups, suggested that it made sense to place each site into one of ten broad categories, depending on the predominant nature of the messages conveyed: Ku Klux Klan, Militia, Skinhead, Neo-Nazi, Christian Identity, Posse Comitatus, Holocaust Denial, White Nationalist, Other, and None.³ Table Two lists the number of sites that were in each category.

The most common category, “Other,” was somewhat of a catchall. Included within it were such right-wing groups as the John Birch Society and the Council of Conservative Citizens, “umbrella” sites such as The Freedom Site and Radio White, and non-white supremacist groups such as the Nation of Islam, Radio Islam, and the Jewish Defense League.

The second most common category, White Nationalists, included a variety of groups that espouse white nationalism and separatism. Some of these, such as the American Nationalist Union, are based in the United States, while others (e.g., the British National Party) are not. The remaining categories are fairly self-explanatory and are listed in Table 2.

² A complete list of sites is available by contacting the first author at phyllisg@toto.csustan.edu.

³ Sites classified as “None” were those in which no extremist content could be found by either rater.

Table 2. Number of Rated Sites by Type of Extremism

Type	Number	Percent of Total
Other	32	20.3
White Nationalist	30	19.1
Skinhead	21	13.4
Christian Identity	21	13.4
Holocaust Denial	20	12.7
Neo-Nazi	17	10.8
Ku Klux Klan	13	8.3
Militia	2	1.3
Posse Comitatus	1	.6

Results

External Links

There were many intergroup links. Most of the sites (126, or 80.3%) contained external links. Skinhead sites were the most likely to contain external links (91.5% did), whereas Neo-Nazi sites were the least likely (58.8% did). Although most sites linked most frequently to other sites within the same category (see Table 3), cross-category links were also common. In fact, 49.7% of the sites linked to at least one site in another category (and 62% of the sites with at least one external link had at least one link to another kind of group). Skinhead sites were the most likely to link to another type (66.7% did), and Klan sites the least likely (38.5%).

Eighty of the sites (51%) contained links to international organizations. Furthermore, if the 31 sites that contained no external links at all are excluded from the analysis, 63.7% of the remaining sites had international links. Table 4 lists the percentage of each type of site that contained international links. Klan sites were among those least likely to contain international links, as were Christian Identity sites. Still, a third or more of the sites affiliated with these two groups did contain

Table 3. External Links Contained within Each Type of Site⁴

Type of Rated Site	Percentage of Sites that Contained Each Category of Links									
	None	KKK	Militia	Skin Head	Neonazi	Christian Identity	Posse	Holocaust Denial	White Nationalist	Other
Neo-Nazi	47.1	11.8	0	11.8	47.1	11.8	0	23.5	23.5	23.5
KKK	38.5	61.5	0	7.7	23.1	23.1	7.7	0	30.8	15.8
Other	32.3	19.4	9.7	22.6	32.3	29	0	29	29	38.7
White Nationalist	30	30	6.7	26.7	40	30	0	43.3	50	20
Christian Identity	23.8	14.3	14.3	9.5	23.8	66.7	4.8	33.3	14.3	19
Holocaust Denial	20	20	5	10	35	15	0	80	15	25
Skinhead	9.5	28.6	9.5	76.2	33.3	14.3	0	14.3	33.3	28.6

⁴Because very few militia sites (n = 2) or Posse sites (n = 1) were rated, they are excluded from this analysis.

Table 4. International Links by Type of Site⁴

Type of Rated Site	Percentage of Sites That Contained International Links
White Nationalist	66.7
Holocaust Denial	60.0
Skinhead	57.1
Neo-Nazi	52.9
Other	45.2
KKK	38.5
Christian Identity	33.3

links to sites in other countries. Fully two thirds of the nationalist sites contained international links.

Extremism makes for some odd bedfellows, and some of the links were a bit unexpected. The Aryan Nations web site, for example, contains links to Radio Islam and Hamas. Conversely, the Radio Islam site contains materials by, among others, David Duke and Louis Farakhan. OurHero.com (the “hero” in question being Adolf Hitler) has a link to the anti-Israeli site Mid-East Realities (<http://www.middleeast.org/>). The White Survival site links to Qana.net, a site devoted to “The ‘Israeli’ Massacres against Lebanon.” What these seemingly disparate sites have in common is anti-Jewish sentiment. On the other hand, the National Socialist Movement web site lists under its “Enemies of Humanity” the Nation of Aztlan (<http://www.aztlan.org>) site, even though the Nation of Aztlan, like the National Socialists, is primarily anti-Jewish in its message (the other “enemies” are the Anti-Defamation League and the American Communist Party).

An interesting phenomenon was that some of the extremist sites also had links to watchdog organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Frequently, the extremist sites claimed that these other groups were the *real* hate groups and that white supremacists are actually victims of this hate.

Content Type

Forty-one of the sites (26.1%) had non-English content.⁵ Holocaust denial sites were the most likely to have non-English content (45% did), and Neo-Nazi sites also frequently (41.2%) contained content in languages other than English (most often German). The sites least likely to have non-English content were those in the “other” category (12.9%) and Christian Identity sites (14.3%).

⁴Because very few militia sites (n = 2) or Posse sites (n = 1) were rated, they are excluded from this analysis.

⁵It should be noted here that all rated sites, including those based in countries other than the U.S., contained substantial content in English.

Eleven sites (7%) had some sort of “kids’ page.” These were generally intended for young children and contained such things as messages from other children, games, music, and “history” lessons. A few sites also had home-schooling curricula.

Seventy-eight of the sites (49.7%) included multimedia materials. Music downloads were particularly common, and some sites also had video downloads, games, and other audio such as sermons and speeches. Again, there was some variation among the types of sites. Nearly 62 percent of Skinhead sites had multimedia content. This may be reflective of the fact that Skinheads tend to be younger than members of other white supremacist groups. On the other hand, only one quarter of the Holocaust denial sites contained multimedia content.

Regardless of the type of site, there was much similarity in content. Seventy-nine of the sites (50.3%) mentioned economic issues, 78 (49.7%) contained racist symbols (such as swastikas or burning crosses), and 50 of the sites (31.8%) contained quotations from or the entire text of such “classics” of supremacist literature as *Mein Kampf*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, *The Turner Diaries*, or *The International Jew*.

Thirty-four of the sites (21.7%) contained language claiming that the group was not racist or did not hate anyone. For example, David Duke’s European-American Unity and Rights Organization claims to stand for equal opportunity for all and also argues that “the real hatred rests within the minority racists,” such as the NAACP. The International Third Position claims as one of its principles, “Support for the principles of racial and cultural diversity.” The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan exclaims, “We are not a hate group!”

Of course, these claims are often contradicted by other material on the same web site. The top of the Radio Islam home page states on the left hand side, “No hate. No violence. Races? Only one human race.” But on the right-hand side of the same page, it says, “Know Your Enemy! No time to waste. Act now!” The motto of the NAAWP (National Association for the Advancement of White People) is “Equal rights for all, special privileges for none.” Yet its site also contains a page entitled “The Black War On White Americans: An Overview of United States Crime.” The Imperial Klans of America, Realm of Illinois, claims, “We believe everyone has a right to be proud of their race, which means White people have a right to be proud also.” However, its web site includes a document entitled “The Truth about ‘Martin Luther King Jr.’” (which, tellingly, is located at this URL: <http://www.k-k-k.com/koon.htm>), as well as a variety of anti-Jewish material. Many of the Holocaust denial sites, which often claim to be unbigoted, have links to such overtly racist organizations as Klan and Neo-Nazi groups.

Only 26 (16.6%) of the rated sites specifically urged violence, and many sites actually contained language condemning violence or claiming that the sponsor was nonviolent. This was true even for historically vicious organizations such as the Klan (7.7% of the sites advocated violence) and the Skinheads (28.6% advocated

violence). There was a significant correlation between sites encouraging violence and those containing hate symbols ($r^2 = .20$; $p = .012$).

A few of the sites appeared to be deliberately misleading in their titles or content. As already mentioned, the site at www.mlking.org is actually hosted by Stormfront, although this is not obvious. It includes an exhortation to “Bring the Dream to life in your town” by downloading “flyers to pass out at your school.” The flyers contain a photo of King, an urging to “learn exciting new facts” about him, and the address of the web site. An example of the “exciting new facts” one can learn on the web site is the following excerpt from an essay entitled, “The Beast as Saint: The Truth about ‘Martin Luther King Jr.’” by Kevin Alfred Strom:

Well friends, he is not a legitimate reverend, he is not a bona fide PhD, and his name isn't really “Martin Luther King, Jr.” What's left? Just a sexual degenerate, an America-hating Communist, and a criminal betrayer of even the interests of his own people.⁶

Other examples of misleading sites are the American Civil Rights Review, a number of sites that hide under the guise of mainstream Christianity, and several sites that merely claim to promote freedom of expression or historical accuracy.

Merchandise Sales

Eighty-six of the total sites (54.8%) sell some kind of merchandise, such as books, CDs, videos, clothing, flags, jewelry, or patches. These items presumably help advertise the groups and spread their message, and the income is a benefit to the group as well. There was not a great deal of variation between the types of sites on this variable, but Skinhead sites were the most likely to offer items for sale (66.7% did), and sites in the “Other” category were the least likely (35.5%).

Membership Forms

Forty-eight of the sites (30.6%) included membership forms. If only those 93 sites that obviously belong to organized groups are considered, the percentage including membership forms increases to 44.1. Many sites also offered bulletin boards and electronic mail lists to which interested people could subscribe. Some sites also included photos of the groups' members at meetings, concerts, and other events. One site even featured a “white pride pets” section, with photos of dogs posed in front of racist symbols.

⁶ Even the URL at which one can find this essay is revealing: www.martinlutherking.org/thebeast.html.

Discussion and Conclusions

The sites rated in this study ranged from crude and barely literate to extremely slick and professional appearing. The content varied from a single page containing a few phrases to enormous sites with libraries' worth of information. The language extended from seemingly innocent to wildly inflammatory. The sponsors were anything from single, unaffiliated individuals to large organizations with multiple chapters. Despite this wide variation, however, there are a number of tentative conclusions that can be drawn.

There are several reasons why the Internet might be attractive to extremists. To communicate via the Internet is fast, easy, and inexpensive (Perry, 2000; Whine, 1997). These features make the Internet a much more convenient avenue of expression than more traditional methods like newsletters, flyers, or public speeches. Furthermore, on the Internet, information can be disseminated without compromising the anonymity of the authors, and interactive communication with audience members is easily accomplished. The enormous potential of the Internet as a communication tool is reflected in its increasing use in both commercial and private interactions. For this reason alone, it is not surprising to find extremist groups developing an Internet presence. The very features of the Internet that make it a democratic medium may make it a particularly appealing tool for individuals from marginalized groups to connect with each other. This content analysis suggests several specific benefits the Internet may have to extremist groups.

International Appeal

One feature of the Internet is that it is largely unsupervised and unregulated. Laws that have attempted to restrict electronic hate speech, such as the Communications Decency Act of 1996, have been struck down as unconstitutional in the U. S., or have been largely ineffectual abroad (Siegel, 1999). Moreover, the borderless nature of the Internet makes it particularly attractive to those who want to spread messages that would be banned in print in some countries (Perry, 2000; Whine, 1997). The unregulated nature of the Internet in the United States is so attractive to members of extremist groups that even groups physically based outside the United States appear to be using American-based web sites to communicate with their international audience. Al Qaeda, Hamas, and other terrorist organizations were recently found to be using web sites run from locations such as New York and San Diego (Katz & Devon, 2002). Holocaust denier Ernst Zündel was prosecuted by a Canadian court for violating the Canadian Human Rights Act, and although Zündel was a Canadian resident, the web site in question was actually located on an Internet server in New York.

Although criminal cases have been brought against those involved in spreading hate on the Internet, the prosecutions have been extremely rare and, to say the least,

problematic (ADL, 2000; Konkel, 2000; Tsesis, 2001). According to some recent reports, American extremist groups have recently strengthened their ties with their European cohorts (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2001).

We found that frequent attempts were made to appeal to an international audience. Content in languages other than English was common, and international links were present on a majority of the sites. The international approach appeared strongest for certain types of extremists, such as nationalists and Holocaust deniers, but even such seemingly “all-American” groups as the Klan frequently linked to sites outside of the United States.

Recruitment

A second feature of the Internet is that it may make a particularly effective recruiting tool. Extremist groups do rely heavily on recruitment efforts, in part because members tend to age out of the group, or drop due to other factors (Aho, 1988; Blazak, 2001). McCurrie (1998) found that, whereas traditional gang members sought gang membership for protection or to make money, most white supremacists (62.5% in McCurrie’s sample) were recruited in. Many extremist groups focus their recruitment efforts on youths (Blazak, 2001; Turpin-Petrosino, 2002), and the Internet is well suited to this. According to a recent survey, 73% of Americans ages 12 through 17 use the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2001). The Internet permits multimedia approaches that youths find especially appealing (Perry, 2000).

The efficacy of extremists’ use of the Internet in recruiting youths is unclear. In a survey of secondary and college students, Turpin-Petrosino (2002) found that only 10 of 567 respondents reported Internet contacts with white supremacist groups, and only four of them claimed to support the groups. In general, word-of-mouth and print contacts were more common and were associated with stronger support of the groups. However, it is possible that some of these students had actually visited extremist web sites without being aware that they were, in fact, extremist (Stormfront’s Martin Luther King site would be a good example of this). Leets (2001) found that students did not always recognize the nature of extremist sites. Furthermore, students who visited the sites may have been influenced by some of the groups’ dogma without actually supporting the groups in their entirety.

Extremist group web sites frequently proclaim the value of freedom of expression; in fact, some, such as the First Amendment Exercise Machine (www.faem.com) claim this as their *raison d’être*. This may be an effective recruiting tool. Cowan, Resendez, Marshall, and Quist (2002) found that when college students were primed with values of freedom of speech, they viewed hate speech as less harmful and the speaker less accountable than did students who were primed with values of equal protection.

The Internet may be particularly attractive to the type of people who are susceptible to hate group doctrines. Some evidence indicates that people who feel lonely or upset might be especially likely to surf the Internet (Sher, 2000). These are precisely the people whom hate groups target in their recruitment efforts (Blazak, 2001; Turpin-Petrosino, 2002).

We found that extremist groups seem to rely heavily on the Internet as a recruiting tool. Attempts are obviously made to appeal to youth, and although specific “kids’ pages” are rare, multimedia content is very common, as is merchandise of the type that is likely to attract a younger audience, such as music. For example, on several web sites, one can purchase a video game entitled “Ethnic Cleansing.” The promotion for this game reads: “The Race War has begun. Your skin is your uniform in this battle for the survival of your kind. The White Race depends on you to secure its existence. Your peoples [sic] enemies surround you in a sea of decay and filth that they have brought to your once clean and White nation. Not one of their numbers shall be spared” One advertisement for the game (at the National Vanguard web site) declares, “No, you can’t shoot those pesky sub-humans in real life—but you can in Ethnic Cleansing: The Game! Enter the virtual race war!”

The recruitment possibilities of the Internet are also evident in the relatively large number of sites that include membership forms. Many sites also were willing to mail information packets to interested parties, often for a small fee. Clearly, the Internet offers a convenient way for would-be extremists to get in contact with groups in which they are interested. This is especially true for isolated individuals who have no personal racist contacts to which to turn.

Linking Diverse Groups

A third advantage of the Internet is that it permits small, diverse groups to link to one another. Traditionally, there have been a wide variety of different extremist groups. For example, under the broad umbrella of white supremacism, there are several distinct subgroups. One author (Kleg, 1993) has classified them into five categories: neo-Nazis, skinheads, Klan members, Identity Church members, and members of the Posse Comitatus. To make the list more complete, militias would also have to be added (Cook & Kelly, 1999; Pitcavage, 2001), as would Holocaust revisionists (Levin, 2001). Moreover, each of the subgroups is itself composed of many even smaller groups, and there are also many groups that don’t fit neatly into any of these categories. This situation is the result of historical and geographic differences. It may also be, in part, a response to white supremacists, such as Louis Beam, who have endorsed “leaderless resistance” and “phantom cells” (Levin, 2002; Perry, 2000).

Despite the disjointed nature of extremist groups, the true distinctions between them are minor. Many of them share leadership as well as membership (see, e.g.,

Ridgeway, 1995), and most of them espouse more or less the same views (Leets, 2001). Numerous authors have noted that the distinctions between the groups are blurry at best (see, e.g., Blazak, 2001; Burris, Smith, & Strahm, 2000; Perry, 2000).

The Internet allows these groups to link to one another, both electronically and logistically. Even geographically isolated groups with only a few members can become part of a collective. Not only does this facilitate the sharing of information and other resources, but it also helps forge a stronger sense of community and purpose. It can, as Perry (2000) argues, create a collective identity. It can help convince even the most ardent extremist that he is not alone, that his views are not, in fact, extreme at all.

Our content analysis suggested that extremists appear to be using the Internet to create a collective identity. Most of the sites link to other sites, and many of them link to groups that are a different type. Indeed, as already mentioned, groups that link to one another can be very different, such as the Aryan Nations (which is affiliated with the Christian Identity movement) and the Hamas. In addition to mutual links, the sites often contained the same borrowed rhetoric, in the form of images (e.g., anti-Semitic cartoons), texts (e.g., *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*), and so on. Regardless of the sites' nominal affiliations, they frequently espoused the same views: anti-Jewish, anti-immigrant, anti-minority, anti-liberal, and often anti-gay, anti-abortion, anti-feminist, and anti-Communist. Whatever their surface differences, these groups can present a united front with their similar messages. This makes them appear more powerful and less extreme.

Moreover, because of the nature of the Internet, the actual author or sponsor of a site does not always need to be obvious. Therefore, a single individual can claim to be representing a large group, and very few visitors to the page will be the wiser. A webmaster can also bolster the apparent popularity of a site by including a hit counter, which keeps track of the number of visitors to a web page (42 of the sites, or 27%, had hit counters), and perhaps even by artificially inflating the hit count. The Fathers' Manifesto site (<http://christianparty.net>), for example, a rather obscure site, claims to have had over 12 million hits. CODOH (<http://www.codoh.com>), a Holocaust denial site, claims over 22 million hits.

Image Control

A final value of the Internet to extremist groups is that it allows them careful control over their own image. In recent years, many extremist groups have shed their white sheets and swastikas in favor of a cloak of respectability (Blazak, 2001; Perry, 2000). The Internet may help them achieve this transformation: slick, professional-looking site design and carefully chosen words can make a web site appear credible and respectable.

Many extremist web sites appear, at first glance, anyway, to reflect fairly mainstream views. The pages frequently contain assertions that the group or web site is

nonviolent and not hate-oriented. For example, Bradley R. Smith's Holocaust denial site (<http://www.codoh.com>) claims that it is meant to "encourage intellectual freedom with respect to the holocaust controversy." The web site called "I Love White Folks" (<http://www.ilovewhitefolks.com>) includes several assertions that it is not a hate site, but rather a white solidarity site. The Council of Conservative Citizens (<http://www.cofcc.org>) declares itself the "True Voice of the American Right." One Klan site (<http://www.kkkk.net>) announces: "The Imperial Klans of America Knights of the Ku Klux Klan are a legal and law abiding organization that will *NOT* tolerate illegal acts of any sort." The web site of the National Association for the Advancement of White People (a group which was founded by David Duke; <http://www.naawp.org>) states: "The NAAWP is a not for profit, non violent, civil rights educational organization, demanding equal rights for whites and special privileges for none." And the European-American Unity and Rights Organization's site (<http://www.whitecivilrights.org>)—another site affiliated with David Duke—contains this statement: "Do [we] believe in equality? No. We believe that no two individuals or races are exactly equal in their inborn talents and potentialities, but we believe that the best way to determine and reward talent is through equal opportunity and equal rights."

Among the sites included in this analysis, there was infrequent overt support of violence (even by violent groups),⁷ and fairly frequent claims that groups were unbiased, not racist, and not hate groups. Indeed, a great many sites were lacking in overt bigotry at all, especially on the home page, although this factor proved difficult to measure objectively.

Usually, the true nature of a site was evident after some exploration of the pages it contained, or of the other groups to which it linked. For example, at the M.L. King site, if one clicks on "Suggested Books," one is taken to a page that includes David Duke's *My Awakening*, and "Historical Writings" links to a page on King's purported plagiarism. Young or inexperienced visitors, however, might not recognize the underlying intent or message of these sites. In one study, most participants did not rate the N.A.A.W.P.'s page as being a hate site (Leets, 2001). One of the authors of the present article taught a freshman honors course in which almost none of the students realized that the King site was written by a white supremacist, even though they were encouraged to critically evaluate its content.

Suggestions for Further Research

These data support the assertions made by several commentators and theorists about extremist groups. They also support the conclusions reached in the few

⁷ It is unclear whether violence disclaimers are intended to improve the groups' image, to avoid legal liability, or both.

previous content analyses that have been conducted. Further research should be done, however, to answer a number of remaining important questions. For example, precisely what are the messages that are being promoted on these sites? How persuasive are these messages to various potential audiences? Do the sites, in fact, “convert” new extremists, or do they simply inform and unify existing ones? Who visits these sites and why? Many sites claimed to be unbiased yet also contained latent racist or violent messages. Does this mislead visitors (especially younger ones) and increase the attractiveness of the groups?

The international content of the sites also deserves more attention, both because it confirms the fears of some watchdog organizations that U.S. groups are strengthening their international (especially European) ties, and also because it raises interesting and difficult legal questions. How strong and how deep are these ties? What proportion of extremist web sites’ audience is, in fact, international and why? Are people using the Internet to avoid their own countries’ restrictions on extremist material? If so, does this partially account for the recent resurgence in the popularity of nationalism in several European countries?

Another issue that was suggested by the data in this study but we did not explore in depth, is the degree to which extremist rhetoric and activities are influenced by particular events. For example, many of the web sites contained references to September 11, often in support of anti-Jewish views. David Duke’s home page (<http://www.davidduke.org>), for instance, has a pop-up window linking to an article on “How Israeli Terrorism and American Treason Caused the September 11 Attacks.” Some sites claimed that the attacks were part of a Jewish and/or Israeli conspiracy and that Jews had been forewarned of the impending destruction of the World Trade Center. Other sites had petitions that visitors could sign protesting the American bombing of Afghanistan. Another example of an event that was commented on by many extremist sites was the death on July 23, 2002, of William Pierce, leader of the National Alliance and author of *The Turner Diaries*. Fond memorials to Pierce appeared almost immediately, even on sites with which he was not directly affiliated, such as the Aryan Nations.

Do events like this actually change the message the sites convey or merely serve as a new vehicle for expressing old biases? How accurate is the “news” contained in these sites? Over a year after the actual event, Duke’s (undated) article claimed almost 5000 dead on September 11, one of whom was Israeli. What sorts of events are likely to affect extremist sites? To what extent do these events serve as catalysts for extremist activities and for new membership recruitment?

Finally, this study provides support for the claims that the distinctions between most supremacist groups are tenuous and blurry. While the groups might once have had more separate existences, the Internet allows them to share materials and members with little regard for geographic, linguistic, or other barriers. Furthermore, traditional categories of extremist groups may not be inclusive enough: Nearly 40% of the sites in this study fell in the categories of “White Nationalist” or “Other,” neither of which is a traditional category.

On the other hand, this study did find some differences between the groups in web site content, such as use of multimedia and languages other than English. To what extent has the Internet altered the nature of and relationships between extremist groups? What real differences do remain in their membership, their message, or their methods?

As this study demonstrates, the Internet remains a powerful tool for extremists. Without a deeper understanding of the role that the Internet plays for extremists, researchers cannot achieve a true comprehension of the extremists themselves. Moreover, because the Internet itself is changing quickly, it is imperative that the research attempt to keep up with these changes.

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