Race Hatred and the Far Right on the Internet

Mike Sutton argues that the presence of hate groups on the Internet could present a serious risk to community safety and should be looked at in more depth.

In seeking to understand how the far right have been able to flourish since the end of the Second World War, many writers stress the decline of heavy manufacturing in the West and the subsequent disenfranchisement of men within traditional working class white communities. It is within this context that Perry provides an extremely useful and precise explanation of the reasons for many hate crimes in the West: "Hate crime then, involves acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed toward already stigmatized and marginalized groups. As such, it is a mechanism of power and oppression, intended to reaffirm the precarious hierarchies that characterize a given social order. It attempts to re-create simultaneously the threatened (real or imagined) hegemony of the perpetrator's group and the 'appropriate' subordinate identity of the victim's group. It is a means of marking both the Self and the Other in such a way as to re-establish their 'proper' relative positions, as given and reproduced by broader ideologies and patterns of social and political inequality (Perry, 2001)."

Of course, not all hate activity is criminal even though it may be as damaging. Perry (2001), for example, goes on to explain how some politicians in the USA describe gay men and lesbians as 'less than human', thus creating an enabling environment in which hate-motivated violence can flourish. Similar arguments have been made in the UK regarding Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech and to a much lesser extent, Home Secretary David Blunkett's stance on asylum seekers.

Hatred has manifested in recent violent conflict in towns in Bradford, Stoke-on-Trent, Oldham and Burnley. In these and other towns and cities in England there are areas where members of minority ethnic groups are particularly at risk from racially motivated offenders – making threats, being violent, stealing and vandalising. Where the perpetrators are white, writers have been noting for years that they frequently come from areas where many feel aggrieved enough, by their own lack of opportunities and hope, to blame clearly identified 'others' as the reason for so many of their problems. This blame stems from the competition for scarce resources for which many impoverished communities struggle. In towns and cities where the less well off white communities do not hate their Asian neighbours, but rather complain about their perceived success in obtaining scarce resources, far right groups frequently seize upon the opportunity to create an enabling environment for hate crime to flourish and they are increasingly using the Internet to get their message across in ways that have never before been possible. As a consequence this use of new technology may ultimately have serious implications for community safety.

Far right groups on the Internet

There has been a combined growth and evolution in the race hate movement in the UK and the United States in recent years and the Internet has undoubtedly encouraged their development:

In dramatic ways, hate groups threaten to extend their impact beyond the immediate membership. Their mantra of intolerance is gaining considerable legitimacy in light of the changing messengers and media that carry their message. (Perry, 2001).

The communications revolution has brought a new dimension to the hate movement. Racist web sites provide an enabling environment in which hate can flourish both on-line and off-line in our towns and cities. However, unlike those politicians whose ill considered and sometimes well meant comments provide an enabling environment, far right hate groups are proactively and strategically shaping that environment both on and off-line.

In a ground breaking paper, Back (2002) asks three main questions about the presence of far right groups on the Internet: what is drawing people into the racist world of the Net; what significance does this development have for different versions of racism in the 21st century; is the digital world changing the face of racism? In seeking answers to these important questions Back demonstrates five ways that the Net assists racist activities:

1. It enables the celebration of real instances of racial violence with photographs and dehumanising comments.
2. It enhances racial narcissism, promoting indifference towards victims by using images and cartoon caricatures.
3. It enables the merchandising of white power
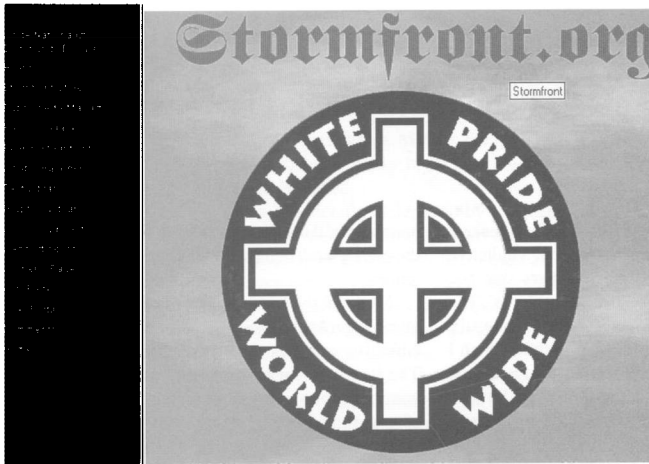
music and Nazi paraphernalia – building an economic powerbase.

4. It enables the archiving and downloading of collections of racist materials in one place – such as racist speeches and debates.

5. It enables people to experience and yet remain geographically distant from racist culture. To provide just one example, this includes indulging in simulated racism through on-line games with names such as 'Jew Rats', which may be particularly alluring to the young who could confuse the racist message with anarchic humour.

The communications revolution, fuelled by the rapid expansion of the Internet, has created a new dimension in hate crime by bringing together diverse racist groups such as the British National Party (BNP), White Aryan Resistance, Combat 18, National Alliance, Stormfront, The Identity Church Movement, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and the US based militia movement. Not only is this powerful international communications medium facilitating the development of neo-Nazi networks, but it is also providing a conduit for the sharing of ideas and ideologies (Back *et. al* 1998) rather than as a means of command and control (Whine, 2000). There is however a growing body of evidence to suggest an increase in the latter function as rumours abound that names, addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses of intended targets have been published. Of course, the 'Brick Lane Bomber' David Copeland, an active member of the BNP, took the recipes for his pipe and nail bombs from the Internet.

In addition to the use of websites by racist groups, individuals in the UK are debating their hate on mainstream politics news groups such as *Alt.politics.british* and *Soc.culture.british*. In the USA, the trend is towards setting up specialist racist news groups such as *Alt.politics.nationalism.white*, *alt.revisionism* and *alt.flameniggers* (Mann and Tuffin, 2000). Mann and Tuffin's important research used custom designed programming techniques to quantify the degree of interaction between various racist news groups and found that there was considerable disruption of racist debates by opposing anti-racists: "within the newsgroups examined we find that they have not facilitated the visible formation of cohesive, racist groups due to the presence of large scale opposition within the newsgroups." Mann and Tuffin (2000) also note that many racist groups are attempting to hide behind the mask of respectability that Perry (2001) refers to as 'rhinestone racism' or 'button-down terror'. Mann and Tuffin observe: "the moderation in some posters' tone as they attempt to engage participants in other newsgroups may be a source of concern, in terms of making racists harder to track down." They go on to write: "the actions of racists and criminals (organised or not) in the real world is far more important than their activity in cyberspace, yet it may be driven or underpinned by ideology or tactics developed online". This is arguably the main issue of concern regarding the use of the Internet by far right groups, since Bowling's (1993) research reveals that racism is dynamic and in a state of constant movement and change, rather than static and fixed.

Either directly or indirectly, the far right are deliberately seeking to dominate 'other' groups. Therefore, their activities on the Internet may directly increase the number of racial incidents at street level. Consequently, it is important for us to know more about the dynamics of on-line hate groups, particularly their strategies and tactics. More research in this area will help to inform important policy questions regarding the threat that the powerful and growing Internet presence of far right groups might pose to community safety and democracy in the information age.

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