Digital Terrorism and Hate: The First Decade and Beyond

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Every technological advance brings about unanticipated change; improving the quality of life while often also empowering the forces of evil. Beyond all its wonderful features that have enhanced our lives, the Internet Age has also spawned electronic identity theft, online sexual predators, and digital bigotry. With over 1.5 billion users, and the viral nature of Internet 2.0 led by YouTube and Facebook, the number of lives directly impacted by the Internet, for better and worse will continue to soar. Extremists of all stripes were quick to grasp the potential of this unprecedented communications and marketing tool, and its enormous potential to bypass parental and societal controls and enable direct access to impressionable young people—teens and even pre-teens. Additionally, almost from the beginning of the digital revolution crude versions of Nazi computer games began appearing online. An Internet subculture has emerged that has normalized violence, advanced it as a form of problem solving, and mock victims who are invariably members of minorities.

Introduction

Historian Bart D. Ehrman describes the invention of the printing press as having perhaps the "most revolutionary impact on the modern world"; and then hastens to add that "the advent of the personal computer… may eventually surpass it in significance." Indeed, in our time, it is difficult to remember what our world was like before the personal computer, cellphone and Internet and it is impossible to imagine our social or economic future without these magnificent tools.[1]

But as history has shown, every technological advance brings about unanticipated change; improving the quality of life while often also empowering the forces of evil. Beyond all its wonderful features that have enhanced out lives, the Internet Age has also spawned electronic identity theft, online sexual predators, and digital bigotry. With over 1.5 billion users, and the viral nature of Internet led by YouTube and Facebook, the number of lives directly impacted by the Internet, for better and worse will continue to

soar. A 2006 Pew report confirms the remarkable impact the Internet has on young people, confirming that 93% of youth are online in one fashion or another. Extremists of all stripes were quick to grasp the potential of this unprecedented communications and marketing tool, and its enormous potential to bypass parental and societal controls and enable direct access to impressionable young people—teens and even pre-teens. In addition, the combination of inexpensive, instantaneous global access -- generally unmonitored and difficult to block-- was quickly leveraged by hate and terrorist groups into an online subculture of hate.

Just how quickly has this all happened? In April 1995, there was but one website that was classified as a hate site - www.stormfront.org. In 2009, researchers at the Simon Wiesenthal Center track some 10,000 Web sites, portals, blogs, and social networking videos and postings—many targeting and recruiting the Youth. These sites—presenting in dozens of languages and over 100 countries, emanate from diverse sources: from organized groups to anonymous individuals. And everyone is a potential target; by racial, religious, ethnic, sexual or gender identity, or because of a political ideology. It is expressed in a variety of ways ranging from blatant and crude rants to sophisticated, pseudo-scholarly discourses. Yet while the technologies may be new, it is clear that the oldest hate of all-- anti-Semitism -- along with racial hatred represent by far the greatest percentage of Online Hate.

While no group has succeeded in creating an online mass movement, young impressionable online users are visiting and absorbing the messages from problematic sites. The extremists often tailor their message for a younger audience in an attractive, seemingly unassailable format. One study indicated that as much as 25% of US teens admit to have seen sites with information about hate groups, 14% have seen sites that teach how to build bombs, and 12% have seen sites discussing how or where to buy guns.[2]

American Roots of CyberHate

From the outset of the era of cyberspace, there were extremists who championed the potential of the new technology. George Dietz, a West Virginia neo-Nazi was already using the original BBS systems in 1983. Dietz's postings served as a model for later Web sites. They consisted of his own articles, as well as a library of writings by those affiliated with the movement. Dietz was followed in 1984 by the influential Louis Beam, who was responsible for getting the Aryan Liberty Net (based on the Aryan Nations ideology) online. A key figure of the racist movement, Beam emerged from the Texas KKK, was an 'Ambassador at Large" for the Aryan Nations, as well as one of the founders of the Militia movement tied to fears of the new Millennium. Thus his early online activism introduced the importance of this new medium to the extremist movement as a whole. Beam was soon to be followed by long-time anti-immigrant neo-Nazi activists like Tom Metzger, who understood quite early in the digital revolution that Internet could not only facilitate communications and marketing, but might also link and empower existing members and new sympathizers. In 1984, The New York Times reported that some money stolen by The Order, the violent neo-Nazi revolutionary spin

off from the Aryan Nations, was used "to purchase a state-of-the-art computer system to give The Order access to the Internet."[3]

As the digital applications increased, the number of users mushroomed. IRCs (Internet Relay Chats) fostered direct communication, while Newsgroups, grouped by topic, allowed larger numbers of online visitors to feed off each other. Postings quickly went beyond mere propaganda to instructions on bomb making, chemical weapons and detailed instructions for violence and mayhem. Holocaust denier propagandists, always trying to put a scholarly spin on their anti-Semitism, began to flock to the safety of Web sites that allowed no room for honest discourse and helped evade anti-hate laws in Germany and elsewhere.

Throughout the late 1980's and the 1990's the Militia movement was the most visible extremist manifestation in the US. It tapped into the insecurities and anti-government sentiment fueled by events at Waco and Ruby Ridge, fear of what was labeled the internationalist New World Order and the looming new Millennium. Ironically, despite rejection of much of modern life and the feared cataclysmic technology crash expected on January 1, 2000, they actually embraced the new technology. Their vociferous presence online spread anti-government propaganda and promoted survivalist manuals for the looming millennial catastrophe.

Their anti-government rhetoric was to resonate with new groups like Christian Identity (anti-Semitic and racist pseudo-Christianity). While established groups, such as the KKK, used the Internet to portray themselves as the patriots defending authentic America values, newer extremists, beginning with The Order, openly spoke of rebellion. Robert Mathews, founder of The Order published a "Declaration of Independence," breaking any bonds with the US government, and a "Declaration of War" that said, "We from this day forward declare that we will no longer consider the regime in Washington to be a lawful representative of all Aryans… We hereby declare ourselves to be a free and sovereign people."[4] Their enemies list expanded from Jews, minorities and gays to include federal and state government figures. This represented a sea change. The government was now the enemy, with domestic extremists justifying violent "resistance" to any perceived institutional or personal enemy. Suddenly, postal workers were targeted for murder because they wore the uniform of federal employees. All this hate was increasingly packaged and delivered online…

Hate Games

Almost from the beginning of the digital revolution crude versions of Nazi computer games began appearing online. Aryan Test, Clean Germany, Anti-Turk test and KZ (German for Concentration Camp) Manager appeared in both US and European Web sites. They are designed to mock victims of genocide and racism and clearly aimed at younger users, hate games dehumanized the enemy, while entertaining and recruiting youngsters. An Internet subculture has emerged that normalized violence, advanced it as a form of problem solving, and mocked victims who were invariably members of minorities. Such online games continue to proliferate often morphing old hatreds to fit

new enemies. For example, KZ Manager uses allusions to the Nazi gassing of Jews, and applies it to a contemporary minority target in Germany—the Turkish minority. The deploying of such games enormously expand the potential reach of bigots on both sides of the Atlantic.

Who's Who of American Racists Supercharged Online Hate

The Internet revolution was paralleled by the increased violent radicalization and online activity of the USradical right wing. William Pierce's, The Turner Diaries, originally published in 1978, became easily accessible online. The hate novel describes a genocidal race war that ends with the murder of all Jews and people of color in the US. The racist novel was a major influence on Timothy McVeigh. McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, in April of 1995, America's worst domestic terror attack, closely followed the fictional bombing of FBI Headquarters in Washington DC described in Pierce's book. The Oklahoma City bombing marked a new phase in the extremist's war against the US government. It also marked the start of the digital age of extremism, with Don Black's [Stormfront](#) Web site generally considered as the first extremist site online. A veteran of the KKK, where he was a colleague of David Duke, Black served three years in Federal prison for being part of an armed attempt to take over the island of Dominica. While in jail he honed his computer skills, and in 1995 began Stormfront. It quickly emerged as the most important and largest white nationalist site online. Using the Celtic cross as its logo, Stormfront.org has a large library, an active forum, an Internet radio program and is currently available in ten languages. As of May 2008, Stormfront's Forum claimed over 131,000 members.

Black was quickly followed by other veteran white nationalists and neo-Nazis. Tom Metzger, a Californian who left the KKK because it was too moderate, had pioneering the use of cable television by racists. Metzger formed White Aryan Resistance (WAR) in 1983, and his son John, helped forge racist skinheads into a movement. Metzger and his son suffered a setback when they lost a 12.5 million dollar wrongful death judgment in a case involving an Ethiopian immigrant who was murdered in Portland by a skinhead who had been in close contact with them. Physicist Dr. William Pierce, the founder of the National Alliance, also sought to leverage the recruiting, organizing and fundraising power of the Internet. His group was based in a compound in Hillsboro, West Virginia until his death in 2002. Pierce ran a tightly controlled organization that stressed neat and sober appearances. Eventually he emerged as the elder statesman of the movement, and developed links to German and Muslim Holocaust deniers and anti-Semites. In, 1999, in a radical break with his disdain for skinheads, Pierce bought the largest skinhead music distributor, Resistance Records, for $250,000. This money-making machine and magnet for impressionable young music lovers gave Pierce instant access to organize youthful skinheads into a true movement. Next, he hired an ex-Special Forces officer to recruit in the military. His military expert, Steven Barry published a article "Planning a Skinhead Infantry" in Resistance's magazine urging skinheads to join the armed forces to acquire skills that later could be used on behalf of the movement.

Christian Identity is a religion of hate whose followers believe they are inheritors of God's Biblical promises, while Jews are the spawn of the union of Satan and Eve. Their religious vision describes a cosmic battle between White Aryans and Jews and "Mud people" (people of color), providing a theological justification not only for racism, but a violent race war. This belief system has strong ties to extremist groups, such as the Aryan Nations and some militia groups.

Variations of Christian Identity and other extremist 'religions' flourished online, relying on the Internet for communication and recruitment. These included the Phineas Priesthood, a shadowy religion based on the Biblical story of Phineas (Num: 25) who took the law into his own hands and killed someone who mocked and violated G-d's laws. Followers of this religion have been linked to violent crimes, including Buford Furrow, who murdered a Filipino postal worker and shot young campers and counselors at a California Jewish Community Center in 1999.

While there is no direct evidence linking Furrow to online extremism, extremists used the Internet to encourage violence. One young racist, Alex Curtis, used his Web site to distribute an article calling for a "Lone Wolf" strategy which asserted that 'true believers' could best achieve their goals by being invisible to the authorities. The most notorious example of a "lone wolf" was Timothy McVeigh, who was unknown until his arrest after the murderous Oklahoma City bombing. Curtis also posted a "point system", targeting judges, civil rights leaders, and others. Curtis was later convicted of hate crimes charges.

Another group that built its influence and constituency online was the World Church of the Creator or the Creativity Movement. Led by Matt Hale, a young law school graduate, the group pioneered online recruitment of youngsters and women. Children's pages used primary colors, balloon letters, coloring pages and other methods to attract young people. This innovation was quickly adopted by other extremists. Hale's followers included Benjamin Smith, who murdered two and wounded nine (targeting African Americans, Asians and Jews) during a Midwest 1999 shooting spree in suburban Chicago. Hale himself was convicted and sentenced to 40 years for solicitation of murder and obstruction of justice.

Following the death of Pierce (and Richard Butler, the longtime Aryan Nations leader) and the arrest of Hale, David Duke, the veteran neo- Nazi, moved quickly to fill the leadership vacuum in the movement. Upon release from prison in 2003, Duke called together the remaining leaders to sign the New Orleans Protocol seeking to unify racists and anti-Semites. Duke is now active in Russia and the Arab world (spending time in Syria, Iran and the Gulf States) where his conspiratorial Anti-American and anti-Semitic worldview spread online won him new admirers and supporters. Duke's Web sites currently include ecological and antiwar themes and even suggestions that he was the source of some of Iranian President Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial activities. For David Duke the Internet is a godsend, as can be seen in the advice he gave his followers: " Develop computer and other technical skills. The computer and Internet revolution give us untold possibilities to awaken our people all over the world and to

build our Movement."[5] [6]

Another veteran of the hate movement is Gerhard (Gary) Lauck. Lauck was arrested in Denmark and extradited to Germany to serve a 4½ year prison sentence for distribution of hate material. Upon his release he returned to Nebraska where he uses cyberspace to promote his Nazi NSDAP/AO hate site along with attempting to register domain names close to official German sites (known as cybersquatting) to promote Nazism.

Common Themes in the Virtual Neighborhood of Hate

While groups try to stress their uniqueness, some hate themes consistently appear online, including the canard of Jewish conspiracy aimed at dominating the world, embodied in the classic anti-Jew screed, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion Invoked by anti-Semites to justify violence and genocide for over 100 years. Today it is promoted online by neo-Nazis and Islamist extremists via scores of Web sites and languages.

While anti-Semitism is a prevalent theme among online extremists, no group is immune from attack or is immune from online extremists of their own. Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, homosexuals, women, immigrants are some of the most targeted groups. Such sites combine age-old theological extremism, stereotyping, and rely on historical distortions. Others manipulate, rewrite or deny history. These include Holocaust deniers, those who deny or minimize genocide in Armenia or Nanjing, or those attempting to justify slavery and the repression of minorities.

While much of the hate is old, the new technological delivery systems are unencumbered by fact-checking, editorial control and often, especially in the US, are free from government censorship. All this, combined with the Internet's ability to eliminate borders, local laws and traditions, makes the Internet the marketing weapon of choice for extremists of all stripes. The bigots' success in creating their own virtual neighborhood of hate constitutes a direct challenge to parents, teachers community and human rights activists.

Terrorism and The internet

Until the cataclysmic events of Sept. 11, 2001, most observers viewed the Internet as essentially a new, unprecedented marketing tool with great economic and social potential. While it is true that some terror-related material found its way online, few expressed concerns over the appearance of Web sites promoting hate groups let alone its potential use by terrorist groups. But September 11th changed the digital world forever. Researchers found that planning and preparation for the 9/11 attacks were indeed facilitated by the Internet. Operatives engaged in the attack used it to communicate. Flight schools were researched through it, as were targets. [Auth: I deleted closing quotes here after not finding opening quotes] And, since those attacks, Islamist and other terrorist groups use of the Internet has surged. Indeed, the availability of Internet technologies contributed to the unexpected proliferation of jihadist entities after 9/11. In many ways, terrorists and their supporters turned to the Internet for the

same reasons that brought domestic extremists online. It includes the ease of use, the unprecedented reach of the technology, the difficulty to monitor, censor, or control online communications, as well as its vast potential to empower the disenfranchised and the ability to belittle real and imagined enemies. Internet technologies also could easily be adapted to provide command and control for terrorist activities.

Al Qaeda's Electronic Jihad

The most notorious terrorist group is Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda, responsible for the 9/11 attacks and a continuing source of inspiration for "true believers." Al Qaeda was among the first groups to tap into Internet technology to help identify supporters and create new cadre of jihadists. It further revealed just how profoundly it grasped the Internet's ability to forge a sense of community while taking the war of ideas to the enemy. So central was the Internet to Al-Qaeda that among its list of 39 Principles of Jihad[7], number 34 is the following:
Performing electronic Jihad:

Al-Salem attributes paramount importance to the Internet as a component for Jihad. He calls believers to join the Jihad by participating in Internet forums to defend the Islam and Mujahideen, to preach Jihad and to encourage Muslims to learn more about this sacred duty. The Internet provides an opportunity to reach vast, target audiences and respond swiftly to false allegations. Computer experts are asked to use their skills and experience in destroying American, Jewish and secular Web sites as well as morally corrupt web sites.

Today, Al Qaeda is no longer the only group that approaches the Internet as a key battlefield. Other sites such as Cyberwars, which describes how to disable sites that are viewed as "hostile to Islam", have now also joined the digital battle.

Amongst the various components of electronic jihad are sites that specialize in raising money online from donors around the world that can then be funneled to various front-line extremist groups. The US government has frozen the assets of some charities suspected of funneling funds to terrorist organizations. Other sites offer religious justifications for jihad, including posting Fatwas (religious rulings) permitting women to be suicide bombers, which represents a dramatic departure from Islamic traditions that banned such actions.

Other sites, including some in Iran overtly recruit "martyrs" for jihadist suicide terror. The aura of religious authority that validates such acts often finds their most receptive audiences online. Of deep concern is that the attraction to this religiously-validated culture of death has been especially powerful amongst some young Western Muslims, often alienated both from the majority culture in which they live and the traditional culture of their parents' native lands. Such sites often helped facilitate and reinforce a process of radicalization and a sense of community for young people seeking a pure and uncompromising version of Islam.

As with other forms of extremist Internet use, utilizing the latest technology that appeals to younger users is also part of the radical Jihadist strategic agenda. Terrorist groups like Hamas turned to the Internet as a way of reaching out directly and targeting a young and impressionable audience. Not only do they see it as providing for recruits for the future, but it also serves as a source for current terrorists. In their recruitment drives, these sites will even resort to games and other attractions to sell their agenda, along with the words of support of religious leaders and other authority figures. And the sheer numbers of such sites that justify jihad have proven to be a powerful stimulus for new recruits and reinforcement for those already committed.

The online impact goes beyond Web sites. Command and control and online virtual training, including detailed manuals have also proliferated. And media portals open up into discussion groups, blogs, videos and podcasts.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper is the associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and its Museum of Tolerance, a leading Jewish human rights organization with over 400,000 family members. He has been a longtime activist for Jewish and human rights causes on five continents. For three decades, Rabbi Cooper has overseen the Wiesenthal Center's international social action agenda. from worldwide antisemitism and extremist groups, to Interfaith Relations and the struggle to thwart campaigns to de-legitimize Israel, to the worldwide promotion of tolerance education. In this connection, he regularly meets with world leaders, including Pope Benedict XVI, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, presidents, prime ministers and diplomats. He is widely recognized as a pioneer and authority on issues related to digital hate and the Internet and has traveled extensively in Asia and the Muslim World, including Iraq, Indonesia and Sudan.

Mark Weitzman is the Director of the Task Force against Hate and Terrorism and the Associate Director of Education for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the chief representative of the Center to the United Nations in New York, and was also the Founding Director of the SWC's New York Tolerance Center. He is a member of the official US delegation to the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, and a board member and former Vice-President of the Association of Holocaust Organizations. He is also a member of the advisory panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), as well as a member of the official Jewish-Catholic Dialogue Group of New York. Weitzman is also a member of the advisory boards of the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy at Yale University and the Aegis Trust, an international genocide prevention initiative based in London.

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