

Reference: O'Donnell, Susan (1999) "Fear and loathing in cyberspace," The Irish Times June 14, 8.

Fear and loathing in cyberspace

It is trite but true - electronic communities are as diverse as their offline counterparts. The Internet can help to build communities of people who believe in democratic values, but it can just as easily help to bring together groups of those who hate Jews, or black people, or Irish people, or homosexuals, or . . .

Such groups are a small minority of Internet users, but the technology provides new opportunities for them to reach out, connect and organise. Those whose views are unacceptable to the mainstream media can use the Internet to build communities of hate in a globalised, deregulated world.

In the US, researchers believe the Internet is a major reason the current militia movement has expanded faster than any previous such movement. More than 800 patriot groups and 400 militias are scattered all over the US, with no organised centre, but militia members in even the most remote locations can be online - using the Internet to build a cohesive world vision and to identify a common enemy.

Neo-nazi websites began to appear in the US in the mid-1990s, allowing anyone with an Internet connection to have access to neo-nazi organisations and publications. It is estimated that the number of hate sites on the Web grew by 60 per cent in 1998 and of more than 500 racist groups in the US, nearly half have websites.

In western Europe, almost every extremist organisation has a website, including the prominent National Democratic Party (Germany), the British National Party, the Front National (France), the Alleanza Nazionale (Italy) and the Vlaams Blok (Belgium), as well as less well-known organisations.

Neo-nazi websites are central to the growing communities of hate on the Internet. The familiar symbols and words used on the sites encourage a sense of community and belonging among people who believe they are marginalised and misunderstood.

The National Alliance, the largest and most active neo-nazi organisation in the US, has a highly sophisticated site. It features audio files of broadcasts from its weekly radio programme, online versions of its newsletter and magazine, a searchable catalogue of National Vanguard Books ("a valuable resource for Aryans"), and leaflets which can be downloaded and then distributed "wherever receptive Whites may be". Links allow the material to be displayed in several European languages.

Many contributors to the Letters from Browsers page of the National Alliance (NA) site describe feeling isolated because their racist views are not widely shared. A young woman writes that she joined the NA: "because I want my children to grow up in a clean, healthy White world, where they won't be a minority". She writes that NA members, "realise the importance of the moral reinforcement which comes from working together

with many others who share their values, especially since they often must work in an environment of hostility and ignorance".

Unsurprisingly, such organisations campaign for free speech on the Internet. The BNP site carries the symbol for the Free Speech Online Blue Ribbon Campaign and contains a prominent link to the Campaign Against Censorship of the Internet in Britain.

These webpages are only the tip of the iceberg, as most of these groups network online through email and newsgroups. Usenet newsgroups such as alt.politics.white-power offer an opportunity to recruit new members. Postings from newcomers can be followed up with contact by direct email to encourage the newcomers to feel part of the racist community.

Of course Usenet newsgroups are open to all Internet users - and many of them challenge fascist and racist views. In fact, racist newsgroups can resemble battle zones rather than discussion groups, with flames from both sides landing furiously on any given day.

However, neo-nazis visiting a newsgroup need not engage in the conflict; they can just post messages asking for sympathisers to contact them directly by email. One day recently, for example, "Jason" was "looking for recruits for a skinhead group" and "Azathoth" asked for help producing a new website "that deals with different forms of entertainment (books, music, videos, etc.) that would be of interest to racialsists".

Using email, they are out of the limelight and safe from sanction by other Internet users. A number of voluntary organisations, such as Hatewatch, the Simon Wiesenthal Centre and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), monitor and document hate activities on the Internet. The ADL recently introduced ADL Hate Filter software for computers used by children.

Communities of hate will flourish on the Internet as long as people who hate thrive in the offline world. The challenge is to ensure that the Internet remains of more use to people who believe in tolerant and inclusive societies than to the small minority who foster hate.

Related links:

Hatewatch: www.hatewatch.org

Simon Wiesenthal Centre: www.wiesenthal.com

Anti-Defamation League: www.adl.org

Searchlight Online Exhibition: *(not available)*