Application-Oriented Research

FACES OF HATE

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ABSTRACT

Anti-Semitic hate groups using the Internet have grown dramatically since the mid-1990s. During that time they have developed three main approaches in getting out their message, “in your face,” “false information,” and “soft sell. This study explores which of the three approaches is most easily detected by individuals, who use the web on a regular basis.

Hate groups have traditionally communicated their messages to current and prospective members predominantly through print, in the form of flyers, posters, leaflets, pamphlets, and books. As a result of the “information explosion,” they have found that newer technologies, including the Internet, radio, music, videos, and cable television, provide access to a larger audience and opportunities for more regular communication among members and their associates. The Internet is now one of their most valuable resources.

Hate has been online since the early 1980s. In 1999, the Anti Defamation League, a New York based group that fights anti-Semitism and bigotry, reported that between 300 and 1,000 of the 8 million sites on the World Wide Web were hate sites (“Downloading Hate,” 1999). Conlin and Prasso (2002) reported that after the September 11 destruction of the World Trade Center the number of hate sites doubled to about 2000. Much of this increase is accounted for by the proliferation of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sites. Although the numbers are relatively small, hate groups consider the operations of such sites to be critical to their growth and solidarity. Don Black, a former Klansman and creator of Stromfront.org, the first extremist hate site on the web, is quoted by Schneider (1995) to this effect:

All of this [Internet] has had a pretty profound effect on a movement whose resources are limited...With the phenomenal growth of the Internet, tens
of millions of people have access to our message. The access is anonymous and there is unlimited ability to communicate with others of a like mind.

INTERNET HATE GROUPS AND THEIR STRATEGIES

Becker, Byers, and Jipson (2000) report that hate groups utilize a variety of media to facilitate communication with like-minded people. Among these are usenet newsgroups, listserv lists, bulletin boards, and web pages. Whereas Usenet newsgroups can be accessed by anyone, only subscribers can access listserv and bulletin boards. As a consequence, discussions on Usenet newsgroups often reflect divisions, as in heated debates between racialists and non-racialists. In contrast, discussions on listservs and bulletin boards tend to occur among racialists as a sounding board for ideas. Web pages are especially advantageous to hate groups because they can serve as archives of hate in which text based and video based information can be stored and then accessed by anyone simply by downloading it.

Given the omnipresence of the Internet and the ease with which information can be posted and accessed, it is no wonder that minorities, civil libertarians, and watchdog groups have become concerned with its use for recruitment by such well known hate groups as the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, and Neo-Nazi skinheads. However, research has shown that recruitment is only one function the net provides for such groups. For instance, Borgeson’s (2002) review of neo-Nazi skinhead sites found that only seven percent use the net for recruitment, whereas fourteen percent use it to promote violence against minority groups.

Recruiting on the Net

The number of hate sites aimed at recruitment may be small, but the focus on the recruitment of young people is of special concern. In August, 1999, Corrections Today reported that many hate groups post Web sites geared toward children and adolescents (“Poisoning the Web,” 1999). Sites established by the World Church of the Creator, Posse Comitatus, and the National Socialist Hitler Youth Legion feature bigotry-laced music, cartoons, video games, and discussion groups. For example Stormfront.org includes a “Kids Page” containing a history of the white race, an online coloring book, and a “white power” version of “Doom” (“Downloading Hate,” 1999).

Because of their limited knowledge and inability to make judgments about the information posted, children and adolescents are vulnerable to the propaganda on these sites. Such material, coupled with the salient activities and
games, can foster in children a belief that prejudice is acceptable, and it can establish a norm of disrespect toward the targets of hate. The sites encourage and reward children for engaging in hate-based activities and may facilitate the creation of a climate that promotes more serious forms of hostility. In 1985, the Anti-Defamation League, in a report entitled *Computerized Networks of Hate*, reported five ways in which white supremacists were using the bulletin board “Aryan Nation Liberty Net” to promote hate (“Poisoning the Web,” 1999). As expressed in the following observation, one of the purposes was to appeal to children. According to the report, the bulletin board

served the white supremacist movement ....First...to draw young people to the hate movement with appealing propaganda. Second, the network helped stir up hatred against the “enemies” of white supremacy. Third, the bulletin board was a means to make money. Fourth, the system offered the potential for circulating secret, coded messages among extremists, and finally, it bypassed embargoes that nations outside of the United States placed on hate literature (“Poisoning the Web,” 1999).

Hate groups have been able to establish an electronic community of hate through the web, taking advantage of the ease of communication and the possibility of communicating directly, instantaneously, and inexpensively. Among of the primary goals of hate groups are to develop a public for their views, to get those views into the mainstream, and, perhaps thereby, to make them more acceptable. For example, those who promote hate want to inform users about what they believe to be the goals of Jews and other minority groups in America, and they use the Internet more as a resource for getting the word out than for recruitment. Experts are increasingly concerned that the rise of hate in cyberspace and on the airwaves will cause people to become more tolerant and accepting of messages that were once considered unacceptable and extreme (Marquand, 1998). As one member of Aryan Nation explains:

I know we (Aryan Nation) will never have a lot of people. It’s attractive to only a select few: those that have opened their eyes to the real purpose of the Jew. I use the Internet because the Jew hasn’t regulated it. I can get the word out to the public about what they are doing to destroy this Christian nation of ours: and hopefully those that are blind to their true identity will open their eyes and see that the Jew controls everything (Authors' personal notes).

Three Strategies

In designing Web pages, hate groups use various strategies to attract audiences. This article describes these strategies according to their most immediately visible attributes (rather than with reference to a formal typology).
That is, the differences among the strategies are visible virtually on inspection. One such strategy is an "in-your-face" approach. Web pages using this approach make it immediately clear to the user that the source of the message is a hate group. Such an approach makes it simple for users to identify the source of the message as biased and intolerant, and to decide easily whether or not they want to continue viewing the site. It also allows them to contextualize the information according to the obvious purpose of the source.

It is likely that the in-your-face approach has a very limited appeal for two reasons. First, research suggests that overt endorsements of stereotypes and prejudice in the public sphere have decreased over the past eighty years (Leslie, Constantine, and Fiske, 2003; as cited in Fiske, 2004), and that, overall, whites have become more tolerant and understanding of racial issues. For example, according to Bobo (2001), in 1940, 68 percent of white respondents reported that they were in favor of school segregation. In 1995, that figure had dropped significantly to only 4 percent. Considering the evident decline in prejudice, in conjunction with an overall increase in tolerance, the blatant hatred presented by the in-your-face approach is likely to be rejected by those with even a minimal awareness of the aims of hate groups. The classical research reported by Sherif and Hovland (1961) suggests that a person’s own attitudes serve as a frame of reference when judging information.

According to social judgment theory, people evaluate new information along a continuum with three ranges, the individual’s latitude of acceptance, latitude of non-commitment, and latitude of rejection. Information that falls within an individual’s latitude of acceptance is assimilated and the new information is seen as being more similar to the person’s own attitude than it really is. Within the latitude of acceptance, the discrepancy is underestimated. When new information falls within an individual’s latitude of rejection, the new information is viewed as discrepant and the discrepancy between one’s own attitude and that information is overestimated. Information that falls within an individual’s latitude of rejection is negatively evaluated, which inhibits attitude change.

The strength of one’s own attitude also impacts the width of the latitudes of acceptance, rejection, and non-commitment. The more important an attitude is to a person the narrower the latitude of acceptance and the broader the latitude of rejection. Based on this model, people who are less accepting of prejudice are more likely to reject the information presented by the in-your-face approach. The model also suggests that the more discrepant the information is from its recipient's initial attitude, the more likely it is that the new information will not result in the desired attitude change. Rather, it will actually strengthen...
the existing attitude, e.g., to be more tolerant and less prejudicial. Based on this, it is likely that the information presented by the in-your-face approach will be rejected by the vast majority of people and may even result in more tolerant and less prejudicial attitudes, assuming that the content is reasonably clear.

Despite the increase in whites' reported tolerance and decrease in overt prejudice, research using more subtle and unobtrusive measures suggests that prejudice still exists. People become less tolerant and accepting when racial matters get personal. As noted, 96 percent of whites favor integrated schools. However, when asked about their own children attending a school in which more than half the children are black, 50 percent reported that they would object (Bobo, 2001). Web pages that portray prejudice and hatred in terms of the personal concerns of recipients may have greater appeal even when their strategy is in your face.

Hate-oriented web pages frequently use fear appeals in an attempt to persuade. However, the history of communications research suggests that fear appeals have limited success (Janis and Feshbach, 1953; Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Witte and Allen, 2000). For a fear appeal to be successful it must first create a moderate amount of fear and, second, it must convince viewers that attending to the message will teach them how to reduce the fear (Rogers, 1983; Petty, 1995). If the fear is too strong, people will ignore the message because they will feel so threatened by it that they will be unable to think rationally about it. They will become defensive and deny the importance of the threat (Janis and Feshbach 1953; Jepson and Chaiken, 1990; Baron, Inman, Kao, and Logan, 1992;). If the fear created is too weak, people will also ignore the message (Leventhal, Watts, and Pagano, 1967). Therefore, a fear appeal must create a moderate amount of fear, enough to motivate people to attend to the message. Once the correct amount is created, the message must contain instructions on how to reduce the perceived threat.

It is very difficult to establish the "correct" amount of fear. To do this would require tailoring each message to a specific audience. It is unlikely that web pages that target mass audiences would be successful at establishing the correct level of fear for the majority of their viewers. Most would ignore the message. Viewers, for whom the fear is at an appropriate level, would then need to be provided with further information on how to reduce the perceived threat.

A second strategy used by hate groups is to create a webpage that presents false information to the user as if it were factual. The presentation of the information appears to have a rational and newsworthy tone. An example
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would be a site identified as a "news report" that claims the Holocaust did not occur. In that case it may not be immediately apparent to the user that the source of the message is a hate group or that the information is unequivocally false. Consequently, users may spend some time viewing the website before discerning its true nature and only then be able to factor this information into their evaluation of the site. Is it possible that people may come to believe the false information is factual solely on the basis of how it is represented?

Although research on "the sleeper effect" is not a direct test of this, it does suggest that people may, over time, dissociate the information presented from the source of the information (Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield, 1949). The sleeper effect is evident when attitude change that is measured immediately after exposure to a message is smaller than the change measured at a later time. A message may be rejected initially because its source is not credible. The sleeper effect suggests that memories about the message may become dissociated from memories about the source of the communication. Over time, the recipient may forget the source of the message and their reasons for rejecting it but still remember the message. The message, if otherwise persuasive, may then be accepted. With regard to hate sites with misleading "news" sources, the user may be exposed to a great deal of reasonable sounding information before realizing that the source is a hate group. If the sleeper effect occurs, the user will dissociate the source from the message and, over time, increased attitude change may occur as a result.

The third strategy, the "soft sell" approach, falls between the in-your-face and the false information approaches. It is a more subtle strategy in which the source and the bias of the source are ambiguous, neither clearly a hate group nor clearly -- but misleadingly -- a news source. Often times, the rhetoric and information presented by this strategy are more toned down than those of the in-your-face approach. There are two obvious reasons. Because overt prejudice and racism are no longer acceptable, today's hate groups realize that the type of defamatory rhetoric used in the 1950's. 1960's and 1970's is no longer attractive. This is primarily the result of the influence of social movements in stigmatizing public expressions of such hatred. Hate groups have come to realize that their recruitment efforts will fail unless they change the way they operate publicly. For example, the Klan, needing to fill its fledgling ranks has changed its overtly patriarchal stance. The result, as reported by sociologist Kathleen Blee (2002), is that more women have become active members in the KKK.

A second reason is that hate groups are increasingly aware that not everything expressed on the Internet and in flyers is covered under the
entitlement of free speech, and that they can be liable for influencing individuals to commit hate crimes. This is mainly the result of the successes of recent lawsuits by the Southern Poverty Law Center against Tom Metzger of White Aryan Resistance and Richard Butler of the Aryan Nations.

From a social psychological perspective, the toned down approaches may be a more effective means for these hate groups to deliver their message. Unlike the in-your-face approach, the soft sell approach is more likely to fall within either the recipient’s latitude of acceptance or latitude of non-commitment. If the message falls within the latitude of people’s acceptance, it is likely to be incorporated into their attitude structure. If it falls within their latitude of non-commitment but closer to acceptance than rejection, people will view the opinion expressed as more compatible with their attitude structure than it really is. They are thus more likely to process the communication as if it is not exceptional. Additionally, the soft sell approach benefits from presenting an information source that appears reasonable. If the source of the message is viewed as within the range of the main stream, there is a better chance the message will be attended to and accepted.
TESTING THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion posits two routes to persuasion, the “central route” and the “peripheral route” (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Individuals who have the motivation and ability to attend to a given message tend to follow the central route to persuasion. Such an individual will carefully scrutinize and process the information and will be more easily persuaded by strong than weak messages. Individuals lacking the motivation or ability to attend to the message may follow the peripheral route. An individual following the peripheral route will not carefully consider the arguments presented, but will rely on peripheral cues or surface characteristics such as message length or the attractiveness of the source. People following the peripheral route are more likely to agree with a message if the source is viewed as reasonably credible or trustworthy.

For many people, “surfing the web” is a pastime in which they engage in little effort. For a hate group with a website whose source is ambiguous and whose message is toned down, the information they present may be persuasive to people following the peripheral route.

The study reported below was intended to examine the impact of source cues on web users’ acceptance of hate messages. A web site based on anti-Semitism was chosen for the study. Information on the website remained constant for all subjects. However, the source of the message varied among the subjects to portray typical in-your-face, false information, and soft sell approaches. The researchers focused on the impact of source differences on recipients’ ability to recognize the bias of the information presented.

Methodology

One hundred sixteen undergraduates in sociology and psychology classes participated in a study examining their ability to recognize anti-Semitism online. It was hypothesized that participants would readily identify the intolerance of the blatantly anti-Semitic website (Jews Are Taking Over the World), but would have greater difficulty in identifying the intolerance of the pages whose titles were either more ambiguous in the nature of their hate (Jew Watch) or were misleading (News Watch).

Participants were randomly assigned to view one of three web pages. The three were identical except for titles, which reflected the various strategies discussed above: Jew Watch (soft sell approach), News Watch (false information approach) and Jews Are Taking Over the World (in-your-face approach). The content used for the three pages was taken from a real web page titled “Jew Watch.”
After viewing the web page, participants rated the page and the information it contained on five, 5-point semantic differential scales (educational-uneducational, true-untrue, balanced argument-unbalanced argument, open minded-closed minded, tolerant of others-intolerant of others). Participants’ responses to these five highly correlated scales (alpha = 0.82) were totaled and used as an indication of participant’s ability to recognize intolerance. Higher scores indicate a greater ability than low scores to recognize intolerance and hate.

Results
A 3x2, two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine the effects of website-type (Jews are Taking Over the World, Jew Watch, or News Watch) and gender (Male vs. Female) on the dependent measure of intolerance recognition. Planned contrasts were conducted where appropriate. As shown in Figure 1, a significant main effect for website emerged, $F(2, 110) = 5.69, p < .01$, Participants rated the Jews are Taking Over the World as significantly more intolerant ($x = 19.31, s = 4.22$) than either Jew Watch ($x = 15.80, s = 4.49$), $t(80) = 3.65, p < .01$, or News Watch ($x = 16.03, s = 4.12$), $t(74) = 3.41, p < .01$. Participants did not distinguish between the intolerance of Jew Watch and News Watch, $t(72) = 0.23, p > .05$.

There was also a significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 110) = 4.99, p < .05$. Males rated the web pages as being more intolerant ($x = 18.39, s = 4.63$) than females ($x = 16.40, s = 4.38$).

These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, $F(2, 110) = 4.14, p < .05$. All cell sizes, means, and standard deviations are reported in Table 1. Interestingly, males rated each of the web pages as equally intolerant. However, females rated Jews Taking Over the World as significantly more intolerant than either Jew Watch, $t(df=48) = 4.82, p < .01$, or News Watch, $t(df=44) = 4.18, p < .01$, but did not differ in their ratings of these latter two web pages, $t(df=48) = 0.81, p > .05$. Males rated Jew Watch as significantly more intolerant than females, $t(df=38) = 3.02, p < .01$. However, males and females did not differ in their ratings of Jews Take Over the World, $t(df=40) = 0.87, p > .05$ or News Watch, $t(df=32) = 1.61, p > .05$. 

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DISCUSSION

These results show that some individuals were unable to determine a hate site once the defamatory rhetoric of its title was obscured. Our main hypothesis was supported in the case of the scores generated for Jews Are Taking Over the World, but differences were small for the other sites. This may, in part, reflect the subjects' lack of familiarity with Judaism. When asked about their ratings
for *Jew Watch*, some respondents reported that they assumed that it was a Jewish advocacy page because of the title, regardless of actual page content. When asked why they rated the site positively, most stated that they assumed it was an educational site because it stated at the top of the home page that the site is “a not-for-profit library for private study, scholarship, or research.” The results are consistent with the understanding that people are generally more sensitive today than in the past to defamatory statements, even when the information refers to subjects of which they are otherwise ignorant. The hate message is recast along more conventional lines, as David Duke did in his campaign for a seat in the Louisiana House of Representatives. Thus, it is easier for individuals to believe that the rhetoric has intellectual or moral merit.

This study has examined only one specific source cue, the title page of websites, to determine its impact on individuals’ ability to detect anti-Semitism on the web. Subsequent studies need to be conducted to examine the determinants of the impact of web pages on attitudes that derive from the form of the message -- beyond its content. This research was intended only to make a prima facie case for the effects of rhetorical style, or what we termed "strategies," on the ability of people to perceive disguised intentions. Further research is needed, including research on the various cultural and political contexts that influence the interpretation of messages. In addition, there is a need to bring together the vast literature on communications for clues about what makes the spread of hate possible.

**NOTE**

1. Other cyber-research has looked at misrepresentation of information on the Internet as well (most notably *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub*, by Lori Kendall and *Virtual Culture* by Steve Jones). Although this research is relevant to the field, it tends to narrowly focus on forms of solidarity, or re-construction of identities. The purpose of this research is not to look at imitations of culture, or identity; but whether or not students using the Internet can detect anti-Semitism. The Internet has become a source of information for today’s generation. Since the Internet allows a certain distance between the person, and source, there is always going to be a question of how seriously someone evaluates sites they visit. The very nature of the Internet allows individuals to scan several cues of information simultaneously. Our research is intended to slow that process down, holding constant anti-Semitic source cues for evaluation.
REFERENCES


