

Social hate networks

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Hate spreads well on the net. The global audience, the schematic many of our conversations, the reiteration of prejudice and preconceived ideas, the viral nature of the net, a certain individual passivity to the rhetorical violence of some online fanaticism, the strength and the organisation of numerous extremist networks ... all of this makes for an excellent medium in which the virus of social, political or cultural hate can thrive. On the net, the most radical voices are also sometimes the strongest.

Social networks are nevertheless an excellent opportunity for transformational and rejuvenating politics, as well as an instrument for non-democratic powers and interests. There are several ways to use them: resistance (such as the resistance to power, for example in Iran); censorship (used by governments to censor what is said on social networks); aggression (as a means of organising against something or someone); denouncement (as a citizen's point of contact to denounce something); war (the use of networks as propaganda); communication (to publicise the politics of parties and candidates); organisation (the creation of party networks and networks for supporters); as a means of providing news and informing people about political

actions; and participation (as a source of citizen organisation to provide ideas and support for certain political proposals).

In recent months we have witnessed a disturbing boom in particular of what used to be called “aggression”, which I would like to redefine as “social hate networks” because they not only attempt verbal assaults, but actually generate hate towards things or people that are different, against those who don’t think like us, or have a different religion, ideology or skin colour. And, although it’s not easy to compare or contrast them, there are data that alert us to their growing presence.

On Facebook – which has more than 200 million users – you only have to look around a bit to see that many groups with hundreds or even thousands of members are there for the sole purpose of targeting hate either towards a specific person or an ethnic or ideological group.

In May, a [report from the Simon Wiesenthal Center](#) based on more than 10,000 web pages, websites, blogs, chats, videos and games showed that the number of “problematic” groups in online social networks had increased by 25% in the last year.

According to the report, the groups that are attacked the most on the internet are Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, homosexuals, women and immigrants. But especially since Obama's rise to power, the president has generated controversy in ultraconservative and white supremacist groups that have made him the target of their criticism, mockery, attacks and, in short, of their hate.

An example of this are the 30,000 members of skinhead groups, the National Socialist Movement and those that continue to admire the Ku Klux Klan. They are growing in number and strength under the protection of the First Amendment and the use of the internet, especially through social networks and online relationships. Several white supremacist websites saw their servers collapse the night Obama won the election for US President in November. Stormfront.org, whose founder is 56-year-old Don Black, an ex-KKK member, gained 2,800 new members as soon as the victory was confirmed. And he says that the site received 50,000 visits on that day alone. In the United States another example is the extremist network "New Saxon", described "a social networking site for people of European descent".

On the 12th of September, the ultra-conservative American right protested against the "socialism" of Obama and his policies, and especially against health care reform. The

march was organised by a coalition of organisations including FreedomWorks, Tea Party Patriots and ResistNet. The first group, FreedomWorks, has 700,000 affiliates, 400,000 of whom are online members. Tea Party Patriots has its own social network in Ning, and ResisNet was created specifically as a network against Obama's policies. They communicate through the net and that is what gives them power, because the internet gives them a huge capacity for promoting their ideas.

The same thing is happening in Europe, as we saw in the recent European elections in which the ultra-conservative parties of the extreme right acquitted themselves well and achieved a strong presence not only in terms of media visibility but in votes and seats as well.

According to the organisation jugendschutz.net, at the end of 2007 there were more than 1,600 sites with ultra-right content, and at that point social networks had not reached their peak in the old world. In Germany, ultra-right musical bands use YouTube to post their songs (they get eliminated, but they appear again with new names or on several sites on the net). Even just last month in Berlin there was an international conference on how to slow the Neo-Nazi advance on the net.

On another front, right-wing [Slovakian extremists](#) are in open war against the Romany and state support of minorities. One of these Facebook groups has more than 40,000 members.

In the United Kingdom the Facebook group created by the British citizen Richard Hattenborough called "I Fuck Islam" has got 500,000 members and hundreds of thousands of messages insulting Muslims as well as 125,000 messages threatening the creator of the group (some of them death threats). At the same time, on the other side, numerous groups have been created in favour of Islam which insult westerners and propose ways to get rid of the Facebook group. The largest of these still in existence has 229,000 members. Because of all this, Facebook has added a means of notifying them about groups or content which are insulting so that they can be eliminated.

But these are only a few examples within the vastness of the net. As the President of the International Network Against Cyberhate ([INACH](#)), Christopher Wolf, said at the 2008 International Conference on Xenophobia on the Web "in today's Web 2.0 world with user-generated content, social network sites like Facebook and MySpace, mobile computing and always-on connectivity every aspect of the internet is being used by extremists of every ilk to repackage old hatreds and to recruit new haters [...] The

emergence of new Internet technologies and their adoption by online haters is far more pernicious than the static website that most of us have been focusing on over the years. [...] While the problem of hate-filled websites certainly exists, much more problematic is the sudden and rapidly increasing deployment of Web 2.0 technologies that spread not only written messages of hate but now audio messages and increasingly video messages."

The democratic battle on the net is critical. No one can resign from their civic duty and duty as an activist in the name of passive tolerance. The trenches of hate threaten to tear the social fabric and the idea of community, which is indispensable and intrinsic to the nature of the net and the new global citizenry.

From a political point of view, it doesn't matter if hate comes from a drunk in a bar or from a conversation in a public place, from football fans in a stadium or from a social network on the internet. The tools that we use to communicate are as public as any other communication "space", as public as a bar, a stadium or the streets of our cities. And although the requirements, personalisation and public identity of social networks like Facebook might dissuade anonymous activists, the net certainly allows strong identity ties and that's what's dangerous – what happens on the net can be read, heard and seen many

more times than a conversation in a bar or chants in a stadium. That is the threat and that is what we need to democratically and civically put a stop to.