

INTERNET HATE: *Exploring the Limits of Free Speech* By Dr Henk Huijser

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The internet is often described as a democratic medium, and indeed as the last bastion of free speech, because of its inherently unstructured nature and its relatively low threshold in terms of access. While 'older' media like print, television and film are characterised by several layers of editorial control, the internet allows essentially anyone to express his or her views in whatever way they wish. And importantly, it allows for the instant distribution of those views to a potentially global readership. While this is one of its major strengths, it is arguably also one of its main weaknesses. For although the internet provides an unprecedented opportunity for forging political links and connecting like-minded people, it provides this opportunity *indiscriminately*. From its inception, the internet has therefore also seen a proliferation of 'hate sites'. Because racist groups have limited access to the regular mass media, the internet provides them with many attractive opportunities.

Internet hate can be described as the production and distribution of racist, and other hateful material on the web by racists and extremists. This is not a new practice; there is a long history of the printing of such material in the form of books, pamphlets, posters, and even graffiti. However, the exponential growth of the internet has enabled the distribution and dissemination of bigoted and sometimes violent messages on a much wider scale. The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) estimates on its website that there were approximately 25 Australian-created racist websites on the internet in 2002. The global estimate ranges from 600 to more than 2000, from those of well-known hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan to more obscure groups, but they are all more or less engaged in the spread of hate material in the form of racism, anti-semitism, holocaust denial, homophobia and so on.

HREOC provides a number of examples of racial vilification on

Australian hate sites, one of which runs like this: *"If we do not stand now and perform our god given duty to keep OUR country clean of all the Blacks, Jews and Yellow scum from Asia, WE are just as bad as the enemy, if not worse. We are trading our race for an inferior form of trash"*. (www.hreoc.gov.au). This is not an uncommon example of the explicit promulgation of racism and vilification against culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Examples like these cause offense, humiliation, fear, and social division, so it comes as no surprise that the last few years have seen a growing anxiety about the use of the internet for anti-social purposes. However, internet hate is not just confined to websites, but also extends to other forms of internet use.

Hate sites are relatively static; they contain racist ideology and point to additional racist resources. Other forms of racist activity on the internet include email, chat rooms, discussion groups, and games. These are more interactive, and thereby better equipped to create a sense of community among users, which could potentially lead to membership recruitment to racist groups and incitement to racist violence. They are also more difficult to monitor and regulate.

What is the impact of internet hate? Apart from the direct offense and fear it causes for large sections of society, there are a number of other concerns. Firstly, the internet is a medium which is fast becoming ubiquitous, especially among young people. Furthermore, many hate groups specifically target young people for recruitment purposes. Some hate sites use 'stolen' domain names to confuse web surfers. IndyMedia, on its website, cites an example where a child typed in 'why people hate', which led her to a piece about immigration with a clear racist agenda. Secondly, the internet provides hate groups not only with the means to communicate, but also to organise. This has been a major factor in an increasing number of racist attacks, especially in Europe. So while hate

groups are often considered to be a fringe phenomenon, their ability to instill fear and the threat they pose to racial harmony should not be underestimated. However, neither should it be overestimated. Fortunately, there is relatively little interest in hate sites compared with other sites. For example, the Nizkor Project website, which educates about the facts of the Holocaust, receives 6,000 to 8,000 hits daily, while Ernst Zundel's notorious Holocaust denial site only gets about 100 hits a day. That is still 100 too many, but it does provide some perspective. Ken McVay, director and founder of the Nizkor Project, argues that if there is hate on the net, it is a reflection of our society. (www.nizkor.org).

Given the impact of internet hate and its dangers, what can be done about it? The opinions on how to combat internet hate are as varied as the potential measures, but we can discern some fundamental themes in this debate. On one side are those who are strongly in favour of censorship and the criminal prosecution of those who peddle hate on the internet. This group argues that the internet should be treated in the same manner as any other medium. In other words, if racist movies are banned in Australia, why should racist websites not be banned as well? On the other side are those who feel that this is not only impossible in a practical sense, but also highly undesirable as it impinges too much on the internet as a forum for free speech. This group treats the internet as fundamentally different from other media forms, and hence not in need of protection from stringent regulation of any kind.

The basic obstacle to effectively regulating the internet is the fact that it is a *global* medium, rather than a *national* medium. While hate sites are illegal in most nations, there are many ways to evade controls. European hate sites for example can move to the United States where they are covered by the right to free speech under the First Amendment to the US

constitution. This right to free speech has broad support in Australia as well. The main question here is whether governments should be trusted with deciding which ideas are desirable or not. Electronic Frontiers Australia (www.eia.org.au) argues, for example, that governments should be prohibited from prohibiting the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.

Another obstacle to effective regulation, and particularly to enforcing such regulation, relates to practical issues. For example, even if Internet Service Providers (ISPs) were forced to carry the burden of responsibility for filtering out all hateful material, would they have the necessary resources to do so? What we have seen in recent years is the increased availability of filtering software, which shifts the responsibility onto individual consumers and citizens, and particularly parents. One example is the Anti-Defamation League's Hate Filter, a software program that blocks access to websites which, according to the ADL, contain bigoted or hateful



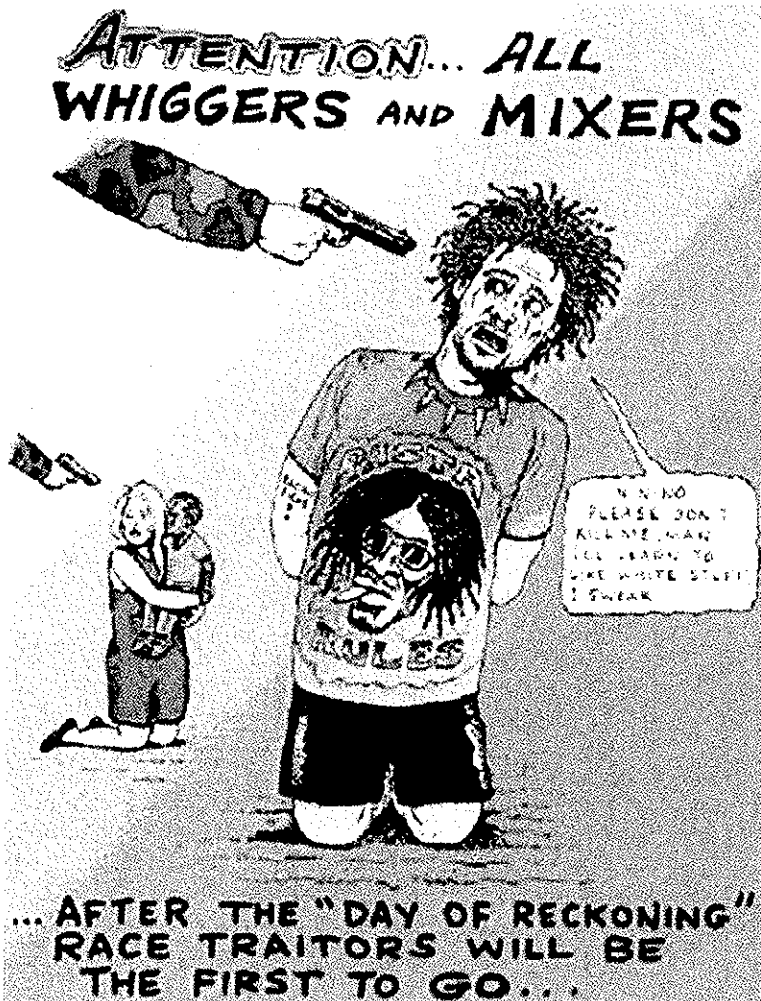
speech. However, there are problems with hate filters as well; they often inadvertently block out legitimate content.

Given these constraints, there are a number of things we can do on an individual level to combat internet hate. There are many private as well as government websites that counter hate sites by educating their readers. One example is the Nizkor Project. Australian research scientist Dr David Maddison posts well-researched replies

to anti-semitic content on USENET and on his own website. Another possibility is the so-called 'flaming out' of the senders of hate messages by other users, by bombarding their machines

with thousands of messages, although this is only effective in the short term. Finally, there are three avenues of complaint that can be pursued: complain to the site itself (some sites may not be aware that they contain hateful material); complain to the ISP (they have departments to handle misuse of their sites); complain to the Human Rights Commission.

None of these measures are ideal, but they are based on the principle that the best remedy against racist or hateful speech is more and better informed speech, rather than enforced silence. And while it is tempting to try to rid the internet of all hate through enforced regulation and even censorship, it appears pragmatically impossible and ideologically undesirable if the by-product is the restriction of the internet as a powerful and democratic discussion forum.



Pictures this page are examples of material from Hate Sites.