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Wiesenthal digital hate report out in French

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MONTREAL - The Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) decried a 20 per cent rise in hate and terror-promotion websites at last week's Montreal release of the 2006 edition of Digital Terrorism and Hate.

It marked the first time that the annual CD, now in its eighth edition, was released in Montreal, because its content, also for the first time, is being narrated in French as well as in Spanish.

The 2006 reports puts the number of hate and terrorism sites, as well as blogs, newsgroups, chat rooms, portals and the like, at more than 6,000 worldwide.

"The bad news is that those who peddle hate are determined in their efforts to pollute the world," SWC national affairs director Leo Adler told reporters at a Montreal news conference.

But Adler told The CJN that there are "only a handful" of Canadian-based sites that he would consider problematic, a tiny number compared to other countries. He said this is because of Canada's strong anti-hate laws, as well as the co-operation of the Canadian Association of Internet Providers and the power of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, which can send Internet transgressors to court, where they could face jail time.

Adler cited the example of two Internet hate sites on Montreal-based servers, including one that was pro-Hezbollah, that were successfully shut down this past May.

"We would like to see some kind of regulation," Adler told The CJN. "Every other form of media requires some form of licensing. If it can be done for satellites and cable, it can be done for the Internet."

In a statement, Adler said that "looking beyond the numbers, online activities have undergone a qualitative shift that present existential threats to society.

"The Internet has become a 'virtual university' for terrorists and manuals from

how to build a 'dirty bomb' and make poisons, to tutorials on how to use global positioning devices to attack a motorcade."

In Montreal, reporters were shown several examples of what extremists are posting online, including how-to videos on making a suicide bomb belt and instructions on how to turn an ordinary cellphone into a bomb.

"The Internet has really become the medium to inspire, recruit, and communicate among extremists and terrorists," Adler told The CJN.

He said the SWC uses researchers all over the world who do nothing but scour websites, viewing an estimated 25,000 per month.

"When we say there are over 6,000 [hate and terror] sites, it is really just a sampling," Adler said.

He agreed that the increase in sites found does not necessarily reflect a rise in the number of people supporting such sites, but "the number is not the most important issue," he said.

"You can have hard-core militants, active proponents, all the way down to passive sympathizers, like rings in the water that get less intense from the centre after you throw a rock in," Adler said.

"The real issue is the lack of accountability and the impossibility to govern it."

One of the problems lies in the fact that hate can be posted virtually unchecked by authorities, because extremist groups can use more than one server in more than one country. In the United States, servers are virtually untouchable because of free speech laws there.

Although the nature of the Internet makes it virtually impossible to find all the extremist sites out there or shut them all down, Adler said tools do indeed exist to shut down as many as possible if, similar to Canada, nations implemented more stringent guidelines for Internet servers and providers.

"I really think it can be done," he said.

Richard Marceau, a former Bloc Québécois MP who is Jewish and a consultant for the Friends of the SWC, told reporters that "it is not a question of censorship, but responsibility." He also noted that young people are especially vulnerable because sometimes hate sites are disguised as innocuous sites for youth.

"Teachers should know that sites that might appear legitimate are not," he said.

Marceau said that "Canadian authorities certainly have shown awareness of Internet hate activities. But the increasing promotion of weapons of mass destruction requires a more robust strategy, greater resources and more timely awareness of a rapidly changing and growing threat to Canada and the world."

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