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This week...



Hate control

>> **A new report on the Internet's racism and terror stirs debate about online freedom**

by **PATRICK LEJTENYI**

You don't need to spend a lot of time or energy to find vile stuff on the Internet. Whether you hate Americans, Jews, blacks, Muslims, homosexuals, abortionists, meat-eaters, capitalists or any combination thereof, there's a Web site out there for you. If you want to go one step further and find a site that tells you how to plan a suicide attack or fire a rocket-propelled grenade at an American tank, or watch the beheading of Westerners, you can find that too. It's all available on the wild World Wide Web, a few mouseclicks and keystrokes away.



MONITORED: Nazi, jihad and anti-abortion sites

Last week, the Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, the Toronto-based Canadian branch of the international Jewish human rights group, released their eighth annual Digital Terrorism and Hate report at a Montreal press conference. The CD-ROM, which they want to distribute to teachers, law enforcement and the media, contains a long, though hardly exhaustive, list of sites, videos, flyers and games that promote hatred, race war and violence.

For people who don't know much about these things, it can be an eye-opener. Most of the sites are either white supremacist or jihadi, and the common denominator among most of them is an implacable hatred of the Jews.

A question of standards

Leo Adler, the Friends' director of national affairs, thinks the time has come to rein in this particularly repugnant side of the Internet. Because of the Internet's anarchic nature and disregard for international borders, what he and his organization are urging is an international registry of Web sites to make purveyors of hate or violence accountable to complaints—or more.

"The Internet is a form of broadcasting and communication," he says. "Just as other forms are regulated to ensure accountability and responsibility, I don't see why the Internet should be exempt."



He acknowledges that regulating all the sites that advocate hate and terror—he pegs it at around 6,000, and often run by one person with a very limited audience—would be difficult. But he doesn't think that would constitute censorship, as standards for defining what constitutes hate would be based on existing ones. "When our researchers look at a particular site, they apply Canadian standards" to determine whether it contains hate material.



The idea of any kind of registry, of course, is controversial. Not only for the massive logistical headache this would constitute, or getting countries to agree what constitutes hate, but because the very idea of placing additional limits on the Internet is wrong in the first place, and probably useless. So says Damien Fox, the coordinator of Electronic Freedom Canada (EFC), a civil liberties group that focuses on the Internet.

"Registration, centralizing media, banning books—those are all things done by a totalitarian regime," he says. "Should we really be setting up mechanisms that would enable us to do that?"

Not that it would work anyway, he says. "They can make a registry, but so what? The best case scenario would be, they'd shut a couple of sites down and throw a couple of people in jail. But that would just create a persecution complex [among those people] that the Jews are out to get them."

Authority already in place

Among the many sites found in the Friends' report, few URLs are listed. An Internet search for some of them turns up nothing, most likely because they can change the name of their site and addresses overnight, which makes tracking them very difficult.

Some have already been shut down. The police, some experts say, already have the powers they need to keep tabs on dangerous cyberspace goings-on. "Remember, [in June] the Toronto police caught the 17 suspected terrorists by monitoring a chat room," says EFC's president David Jones.

Furthermore, says Philippa Lawson, the executive director of the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic at the University of Ottawa, there already is a process in place to track down authors of hateful or defamatory material online. "A registry is like a no-fly or terror watch list," she says. "If you start going down that route, it can be very dangerous."

It's unlikely a registry like the one advocated by the Friends will be created any time soon, if ever. It's a fact Adler acknowledges. "When you have 190 countries, some with very different ideas about freedom, you'll have tremendous variation," he says. But he's still hopeful that "one day, something will be done."

Others are more skeptical. "To go further than where we are now—I don't see a) the purpose, or b) the value," says Lawson.

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