

## **Introduction**

The internet has served as a major tool for political organizing. Any number of activists from Democratic and Republican party employees to third party candidates have used the internet as a resource for galvanizing support for their ideas. It has been an extremely significant resource for activists who operate outside the political mainstream. For the left, the internet has served as a method of communication between activists, a source of news and information, as well as a means of recruiting new members to work in favor of issues of social justice (Froehling, 1999; Levin, 2002). This has been most evident in the large numbers of activists who have rallied at meetings of political and business leaders working toward economic globalization. Conversely, the internet has also served as a major force the resurgence of the radical right in America. The number of internet websites has been steadily increasing since the mid-1990s; however, the white supremacist movement has had an electronic presence for at least a decade before its debut on the net (ADL, 1999; SPLC, 2000; Levin, 2002).

The history of the white supremacist movement online is critical to understanding the development of key players in the movement today. Organizations with a clear presence on the net have also become nationally recognized in both the movement and mainstream discourse as they have developed the resources to continue with their work. There has, of course, been resistance to the white supremacist presence on the web. A variety of groups and individuals have taken steps to try to counter the presence of organized hate groups on the internet. This paper will present a history of racist activity online by relying on analysis of previous research as well as some of the most popular white supremacist websites, as well as discuss three different approaches used to counter the activities of right-wing extremists on the internet.

## **History of the White Supremacist Movement Online**

The racist right has long relied on communication technologies in order to spread its message to the general public. One of the earliest attempts to use media as a means to recruit new members by the white supremacist movement was the linking of the film, *Birth of a Nation* to a revival of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1915, William J. Simmons “bussed 15 men from Atlanta to Stone Mountain for the formal Klan revival ceremony, complete with ritual cross lighting. The day of the [film’s] Atlanta premiere, Simmons carefully placed his revival announcement in the local newspaper right next to the advertisement for [*Birth of a Nation*]” (Levin, 2002: 960). The film’s success coincided with a rise in Klan membership activity. Many have attributed this popularity of the group to the positive image portrayed on the screen. The successful use of the film as a propaganda device by the Klan allowed it to become a formidable presence in American society for years to come.

The far right has been even more successful in its use of radio as a means of communication with the public. Hate on the radio dates back to the earliest days of regularly scheduled programs. The first publicly recognized hate radio show was that of Father Charles E. Coughlin in the 1930s on CBS. This show served as a forum for Coughlin to express his perverse, bigoted opinions. “He railed against Jews, against labor unions, against immigrants, against racial minorities, stirring and reinforcing resentment and hate against these competitors for

jobs and social status in pre-war Depression-ridden America....he supported Mussolini and Hitler and blamed the Jews for the world's ills" (Hilliard & Keith, 1999: 19). Coughlin was probably one of the most popular men in America at the time and was considered one of the nation's first media stars. "He received an average of 80,000 letters a week, more than did the president of the United States, and in a 1933 national poll Coughlin was voted the 'most useful citizen of the United States'" (Hilliard & Keith, 1999: 19). World War II and America's opposition to fascism led to the gradual end of Coughlin's career as he became an embarrassment to his own conservative supporters. After the war, the far right returned to the airwaves with a new approach. "As the 1950s and 1960s progressed, many right-wing talk show programs and hosts became more subtle, using twisted logic rather than blatant vituperation to persuade their audiences" (Hilliard & Keith, 1999: 25). This pattern of right-wing extremism on the airwaves continued through the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The modern white supremacist movement has become marginalized to short wave radio broadcasts and the rare low power radio stations (Hilliard & Keith, 1999). However, the internet has managed to close the gap on the public's access to white supremacist propaganda.

The white supremacist involvement with the world of computers began in the early 1980s with the formation of bulletin board systems (BBS) by prominent leaders and organizers in the movement. The first extreme right BBS was founded by George Dietz in 1983 under the name of Liberty Bell Net or Info. International Network (the names were used interchangeably). Aryan Nations followed suit in 1984 by establishing a BBS of its own to promote its ideology. The white supremacist movement linked into a network which would be a precursor to the modern internet by forming the Aryan Nations Liberty net which "consisted of a variety of dial-up bulletin boards connected to telephone numbers in the states of Texas, Idaho, and North Carolina" (Levin, 2002: 962). Not to be outdone, Tom Metzger joined the racist movement online by starting a BBS for his White Aryan Resistance in 1986 (WAR) (ADL, 1999; Levin, 2002). These groups stood at the forefront of the white supremacist movement in part due to their ability to organize followers in remote locations through new communication technologies.

The activities of the BBS networks are outlined in the following sections of the Aryan Nations Liberty Net: "The first and predominant area was 'hate propaganda,' which consisted of new and reprinted material as well as member contributions. The second section was a fee-based listing of racist and antigovernment organizations. Another section identified groups and individuals designated as enemies and traitors of the Aryan cause" (Levin, 2002: 962). These activities serve to create what the Anti-Defamation League has referred to as "creating [an] electronic community of hate" by "inspiring/guiding criminal activity, coordinating extremist events, and making money" (2001a). The ability to meet these three goals would increase exponentially as the movement transitioned from BBSes onto the internet.

The first major white supremacist website, Stormfront.org was started by former Klansman Don Black in 1995 (ADL, 1998; ADL, 1999; Levin, 2002). Until then, the racist right's presence on the internet was limited to email lists, newsgroups, and chats (ADL, 1999). While all of these forms of communication are still important factors in maintaining the hardcore of the movement, the ability to reach a broad audience through a presence on the world wide web (www or web). Much like the BBS movement of a decade before, Black's success on the web was followed by the launch of websites by other major white supremacist organizations. The National Alliance <[www.natall.com](http://www.natall.com)>, World Church of the Creator (WCOTC) <[www.creator.org](http://www.creator.org)>, WAR <[www.resist.com](http://www.resist.com)>, and even organized skinheads in the form of the

Hammerskins <[www.hammerskins.com](http://www.hammerskins.com)> (no longer available – to be discussed later) staked out a presence in cyberspace (ADL, 1998; ADL, 1999; Levin, 2002). The major organizations were joined by minor groups and individual white supremacists. According Brian Levin (2002), organizations which track white supremacist activity online have found approximately 300-400 websites run by organized hate groups. In addition, “[t]he Simon Wiesenthal Center (2000) estimated that there are more than 3,000 Web sites containing hate, racism, terrorist agendas, and bomb-making instructions today” (Lee & Leets, 2002). Compared to the relatively small numbers of BBSes across the country, the white supremacist presence on the web has been astonishing and has worked to further the goals of organizing online.

### *Inspiring/Guiding Criminal Activity*

The first goal of white supremacist presence on the web has been “inspiring/guiding criminal activity” (ADL, 2001a). Because it would be patently illegal to order individuals to engage in criminal activities, the racist right has learned to project subtle messages to guide its adherents and developed a strategy which minimizes liability on the part of the leadership. White supremacist websites rely on what Lee and Leets refer to as persuasive storytelling, “the use of narrative to persuade or convince” (2002: 929). The typical website will feature news or announcements designed to convince the visitor of the group’s perspective and bring him/her into the movement. To underscore its message the WAR site features a section which combines rap lyrics with tales of violence against whites committed by African-Americans (WAR, 2002). The National Alliance features links to racist books and an article entitled “Who Rules America?” which claims that the media and government are controlled by Jews (National Alliance, 2002). While the WCOTC relies on personal testimony from “Reverends” of the church and editorials (WCOTC, 2002). These varying approaches were defined as high and low narrative, as well as explicit and implicit (Lee & Leets, 2002). Clearly, it was found that people who already agree with the message were most likely to be persuaded by the message regardless of their level of narrative or explicitness. Respondents who self-identified as neutral in initial agreement often found hate sites almost as persuasive as those who agree at the outset (Lee & Leets, 2002). It is likely that because we live in a society predicated on institutionalized white supremacy, these arguments resonate among “neutral” respondents because they already accept the arguments as part of public discourse. Although Lee and Leets found that persuasiveness decreases over time when the individual is not exposed to the material, they did not test for daily exposure. It may be argued that daily exposure increases the level of persuasiveness and activity within a white supremacist movement.

A person who visits white supremacist websites becomes further entrenched in a world of hate activity not unlike the street level recruitment of the skinheads (Blazak, 2001). The websites provide an opportunity for people to join email lists and chats which will further bring an individual into the movement (ADL, 1998; ADL, 1999; SPLC, 2001). However, the most dangerous element of the websites is their ability to teach young adherents how to commit hate crimes. Extreme right-wing websites provide resources for bomb making, instructions on weapons use, and hitlists of “enemies” (ADL, 2001a). Combined with a strategy of “leaderless resistance”, these websites are a deadly combination for the perpetration of hate crimes.

As the racist right faced attacks from both the state and private interests in the form of prosecutions and successful civil rights lawsuits on the part of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the movement began to take on a new strategy known as “leaderless resistance.” The

idea behind the strategy is that individual actions could not be traced to specific organization or individual. Hate crimes and other acts of racist terror would be committed by lone individuals not associated with a particular group. This strategy was designed to both encourage activity and increase the visibility of the movement as a whole. Its success would rely on a critical mass of racist activity that would lead to the beginning of a white supremacist revolution (Levin, 2002). In regard to the internet, the strategy plays itself out in the aforementioned tactics of providing instructions on the use of weapons and explosives along with public “hitlists” of targets. The internet facilitates this type of activity by projecting what Lee and Leets (2002) refer to as implicit storytelling. Information is given to the viewer of a web page which is left to his or her interpretation, but the implicit message is often one of violence.

### *Coordinating Extremist Events*

The communications possibilities of the internet have been very useful in allowing for white supremacists to come together in events which help to strengthen the movement. These events can be categorized into three distinct types: cultural events, political events, and training events. Cultural events are gatherings of white supremacists focused around music or other exchanges of cultural products. These are typified by white supremacist concerts staged by either organized hate groups or skinheads. Political events may be defined as rallies or conferences. Rallies are public events staged to draw attention to the group, while conferences are often private affairs which are designed to further indoctrinate members in the ideology of the movement and establish a sense of solidarity among the often factional racist right. Finally, training events are designed to teach individuals tactics in fighting the race war or committing individual hate crimes. The internet serves as an important source of information on these events.

The white supremacist movement is as much a subculture as it is a political movement. In order to sustain itself, it often relies on a youth culture to bring in new members and to indoctrinate them. Since the late 1970s, the movement has been able to align itself with the skinhead subculture to such a degree that it is common to associate the term, skinhead, with Nazism (despite the protestations of the majority of skinheads of varying political tendencies). The subculture is often associated with a white supremacist strain of Oi! music (although, most Oi! may be identified as either non-political or left-wing) (CNC, 2001). The most successful white supremacist movements have built links between the skinheads, using them as a recruiting ground. Specifically, the WCOTC has been a prominent recruiting ground for young racists. The association between the World Church and neo-Nazi skinheads dates back to the mid-1990s when the racist rock band, RAHOWA (Racial Holy War), from Canada took to the fore of the racist skinhead subculture with its record label, Resistance Records (SPLC, 1999; CNC, 2001). The band was instrumental in the development of the white supremacist presence online with the launch of its own website <[www.resistance.com](http://www.resistance.com)> in 1995. The relationship would serve to bolster the WCOTC by bringing new skinheads into the organization. The World Church, Resistance Records, and Hammerskins web pages also served to advertise the neo-Nazi skinhead concerts which would be organized as events to bring the movement together (ADL, 2001a; ADL 2001b; CNC, 2001). By advertising online instead of through word-of-mouth networks and small circulation fanzines, the attendance at white supremacist concerts often mushroomed as skinheads from across the United States and Canada would often travel for days to attend these events. The internet serves as a way to galvanize members of the movement through culture.

Racist political events are as rare a phenomenon as rock concerts, but when they do occur, they are often a significant achievement for the movement. The internet provides a source of communication which, much like for rock concerts, can be seen by many individuals both inside and outside the movement. This is extremely important for the white supremacist movement because it seeks confrontation as a means of bolstering its membership (Ezekiel, 1995). A rally will often be announced through email lists and web pages in order to garner the most attention possible. Committed members of the movement will then organize to attend such rallies. More importantly, because anti-racist activists are also viewing these messages (an issue to be discussed later), the organizers are sure to receive the negative response and attention that they seek. By using the internet, attendance by both supporters and opponents of the racist right at political rallies is guaranteed.

As a political movement, the extreme right must have some form of political development and solidarity. In order to achieve this, they, like many other movements, hold conventions and conferences at which members will learn of developments both in the world and in the movement. These conferences offer workshops on issues of importance to the white supremacist movement and discussions of political ideology ranging from Christian Identity to traditional nazism, to the quasi-theology of the WCOTC. Most importantly, they serve as a way of creating solidarity between the various factions in attendance because members discover that they have more in common in their racism than in the petty political arguments which divide them (Ezekiel, 1995; Ridgeway, 1995). The internet serves as a major source of information on such gatherings because they are announced on websites and email lists much like other forms of public activity. Therefore, both committed and new members are able to attend these events in order to cement themselves within the movement.

The final type of event is far more clandestine than the others; and therefore, has a very unique relationship to the internet. Training events are often organized by the most committed members of an organization in order to help them prepare for the violence that they must undertake as racist activists. Often the trainings occur at remote compounds or similar locations where individuals may learn to become proficient in the use of firearms or explosives, as well as guerrilla tactics such as camouflage. The internet's less public elements such as email and chats allow for such events to occur within movements whose membership is often isolated by providing a secure means of communication. Despite the fact that email may easily be read by anyone, many of the hardcore activists on the right have turned to encryption technologies to secure their communication (ADL, 1999). By creating a fast, secure means of communication, the internet helps to facilitate the ability of the radical right to train its members for an upcoming race war or for the commission of hate crimes.

We see that by allowing members of the racist right to communicate with one another in a timely manner, the internet facilitates their ability to come together at cultural, political, and training events. Because people may view websites or email from remote locations, they are able to plan to attend such events. It is also possible to garner public attention to the movement because it is under surveillance by both anti-racists and the state through public websites and email lists which draws opponents to such events. Finally, the ability to communicate in a secure manner through encryption allows for the movement to train individuals for illegal activities.

*Making Money*

Just like any other movement operating in the United States today, the white supremacists must rely on money in order to finance their activities. Although, a rash of bank robberies by the Order in the 1980s significantly aided the finances of the movement, it must rely on a constant flow of money to operate (ADL, 2001c; CNC, 2001). In order to do this, it has turned to two important sources of fund-raising: selling merchandise and calling for donations.

The association between the white supremacist movement and the skinhead subculture has been a financial goldmine for the movement. While concerts by racist bands are extremely rare and often result in violence and a loss of money (SPLC, 1999), the record business is booming. Because of its extremely public image, Resistance Records is expected to sell 70,000 CDs worldwide. This should generate a profit for its current owners, the National Alliance, of \$700,000 (CNC, 2001). With demand for white supremacist music remaining steady for years to come, it is unlikely that this source of funds will dry up. In fact, it is more likely to increase as the movement expands to other genres of music and through aggressive marketing on the internet (ADL, 2001a; CNC, 2001). The white supremacist movements' use of the web allows for people to circumvent laws in their own nations to obtain music (Deirmenjian, 2000), as well as for youth to find music which may not be available at the music store in the mall (CNC, 2001). By creating websites that appeal to listeners of other genres of music such as Black Metal, Industrial/Noise, or Goth; the white supremacist movement is able to bring their message of racial hate into these already nihilistic youth subcultures (CNC, 2001). Unsuspecting youth who may be drawn to the extremes of the music may find themselves viewing websites created by hate groups and may be giving their money to organizations which call for the extermination of minorities.

The web also serves as a means of selling more traditional forms of propaganda by the racist right. The National Alliance website, for example, features a section where one may purchase the novels of William Pierce such as *The Turner Diaries* in addition to overtly racist publications and recordings of Pierce's radio program (National Alliance, 2002). The Stormwatch.org website offers publications and items such as jewelry depicting symbols of white supremacy for sale on its site (Stormwatch, 2002). These organizations and individual use the internet a source of revenue by selling materials to help promote both their movement and to give people a visible identity as members of the racist right. Because of these activities, they pose a dual threat. Not only do the websites allow for individuals to express their racism overtly through the consumption of books, jewelry, and t-shirts; but they create a source of revenue for the movement.

Finally, nearly every organization on the right solicits donations from its members and supporters. The internet allows these groups to solicit to a much wider audience via its websites and email lists. The groups may even create "legal defense funds" for their comrades who are facing legal charges due to their racist activities. It is not uncommon to see a solicitation for a donation on behalf of a defense fund for a racist facing hate crime charges. Other groups have attempted to raise money for organizations facing civil suits by the Southern Poverty Law Center such as the Aryan Nations. Lastly, there may be solicitations for donations to funds for the families of racists who have been incarcerated or killed (ADL, 2001a). By creating an advertising space for their movement online, the internet facilitates the ability of the white supremacist movement to solicit donations from a much wider audience than before by widening the reach of their communication network.

The internet facilitates communication between the major players in the white supremacist movement and its members and supporters. It allows new people to enter the movement by

exposing them to its politics in a safe space via the web. Once a person has become committed to the movement, the net serves to further increase the danger of the racist right by inspiring/guiding criminal activity, coordinating events, and making money. These activities have helped to create a resurgence in the white supremacist movement in the mid to late 1990s. The following section will focus on responses by organizations and individuals to the white supremacist presence on the internet.

### **Responses to Cyberhate**

Whenever racism rears its ugly head, there will always be a response of some sort. The form of that response often varies based on a number of criteria. There are a number of groups who would choose to simply educate the general public about the hate groups who are active in the world today. Others may choose to use the legal system to attempt to restrict the ability of hate groups to operate. While a third response may be to directly confront the racists in a manner that limits their ability to organize by stopping their activities. Just as these tactics are used in the “real world” so they are also found on the internet.

The first and most pervasive approach to confronting racism is to bring the hate groups’ activities out into the open for all the world to see allowing individuals to choose to repudiate the movement. This is the approach of some of the most well known groups such as the Anti-Defamation League, the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Intelligence Project of the SPLC. Each organization produces publications with incredibly detailed information on the activities of white supremacist groups and individuals. These organizations also have internet based newsletters which reprint the articles available in their general reports. They serve as important archives of information for anti-racist educators and organizers. The Anti-Defamation League has also developed a software based on its research which can filter web content for hate based sites, blocking the content from the users computer (1999). There are also a number of websites dedicated to exposing the racist right’s presence on the internet by listing websites, email lists, Usenet newsgroups, and IRC chats. For years, the most prominent of these sights has been Hatewatch.org which provided a detailed list of white supremacist sites indexed by their political and or subcultural affiliation (neo-nazi, third positionist, skinhead, etc.). The site has expanded to include resources for anti-racist organizing under the name Stop-the-Hate.org (2002). In addition, there is a thorough directory available under the name of the hate directory which lists every possible hate resource on the internet (Franklin, 2002). These organizations and websites serve to instruct individuals on the presence of white supremacists on the internet in order to warn the public of their presence.

The second form of resistance to white supremacist organizing online comes in the form of legal challenges to their ability to maintain websites. The most prominent form of hate crime occurring on the internet has been the use of threatening email. In the case of *US v. Machado*, Richard Machado was prosecuted for sending out emails signed “Asian hater” which stated, “I personally will make it my [life’s work] to find and kill everyone of you personally. OK. That’s how I determined I am. Do you hear me?” (Quoted in Deirmenjian, 2000: 1020). The case was settled after a second trial with Machado receiving a fine of \$1000 for inappropriately using a university’s computer system. This case is typical of hate speech cases in the United States where the first amendment protects inflammatory speech even if it qualifies as “fighting words” (Levin, 2002). Recent court decisions have established that the internet cannot be regulated because it

may be defined as a public space. Attempts to regulate content provided by internet service providers (ISPs) have also failed because the legal system has viewed ISPs as not being responsible for content on their systems (Levin, 2002). ISPs are more akin to telephone companies which provide the framework for information to be distributed, but are not responsible for the type of information which is distributed. However, lawsuits in Europe and Canada have been successful in ending white supremacist activity on the internet. In one case, the computers of thirteen people were seized as part of a raid against neo-Nazis in France and England (Deirmenjian, 2000). The British government has even gone so far as to created an "Internet Watch Foundation in 1996 to filter postings on Web sites, an outgrowth of the government's previous requirement that internet providers censor "illegal" materials transmitted by so-called news sources" (Hilliard & Keith, 1999: 29). Unfortunately, these legal actions are not binding in the U.S. where the first amendment has been used to protect even the most repugnant of speech.

There are some activists who have chosen to move beyond mere education campaigns and legal actions to directly stop white supremacist activities. The internet has seen its fair share of such activities. Some internet activists have worked to fill white supremacist chats on internet relay chat (IRC) with anti-racists and restricted access to the chats by blocking access to individuals who were unknown to the activists and were assumed to be racists. An activist from Israel was successful in placing a bot, a computer file which acts as a user, onto the #Nazi and #Klan chats which took control of the channels and blocked access to its previous users. This virtual sit-in restricted access to these chats for years.

Other activists have worked to remove white supremacist sites from the internet through a variety of measures. The website for the skinhead network known as the Hammerskins was taken offline for months when anti-racist activists took control of the server hosting the site and made it unavailable to the general public. Other activists have sought to purchase domain names from the consortium which controls access to names thus restricting the ability of white supremacists to obtain the names. Currently, the Hammerskin website is a search engine for such non-threatening issues such as Small Business, Finance, and Marketing; complete with pop-up windows (Hammerskins, 2002). A similar method for negating the white supremacist presence online is to buy domain names which are similar to established names. One such effort was the purchase of the domain name [www.natall.org](http://www.natall.org) which resembles the National Alliance site's name of [www.natall.com](http://www.natall.com) by the owners of the Stop-the-Hate.org site. Any user who searches for the National Alliance site at [www.natall.org](http://www.natall.org) will find a site dedicated to ending racism and bigotry (Stop-the-Hate, 2002). Finally, other activists have attempted a variation on the legal approach by appealing to the terms of service (TOS) agreements of ISPs to take down white supremacist websites because they are a violation of said agreements. Racist sites on the geocities network have been removed based on this principle. These activities have served to limit the presence of white supremacists on the internet, but have not succeeded in eliminating it.

## **Conclusion**

The internet has been a potent force for political organizing. It has especially been a valuable tool for groups which are politically and socially marginal. The white supremacist movement has had much success in using computer technology as a means for recruitment and solidification of its membership. It has been involved in computer communication since the 1980s with The Aryan Nations establishing one of the first white supremacist BBSes in 1985. They

would soon expand these BBSes into a national network which would bring them significant notoriety. By the mid-1990s the racist right had made its way onto the internet by establishing websites, email lists, usenet newsgroups, and IRC chats. The internet presence of major racist organizations has allowed them to recruit new members, inspire/guide criminal activity, organize extremist events, and establish a means for earning money. These activities have helped the racist right to remain prominent in mainstream American discourse.

There has been a concerted response to the presence of white supremacists on the internet by a variety of activists using a number of approaches. The first, and most common approach has been to present information on the movement's activities in order to provide people with the means to combat racism by teaching others of the right's activities or to ignore these issues when they arise. Others have chosen to pursue legal remedies against the proliferation of hate online. Unfortunately, legal action has not been effective in the United States because of the courts' commitment to protecting free speech regardless of how offensive it is. The final method for battling bigotry online has been a concerted effort to simply block the white supremacist internet presence through electronic force by hacking websites and IRC chats, as well as restricting access by pointing out violations of TOS agreements on ISPs which provide service to white supremacists. These concerted efforts by anti-racists have ultimately been ineffective because the white supremacist movement still flourishes online.

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