Book Reviews

Hate on the Net - Extremist Sites, Neo-fascism On-line, Electronic Jihad

Antonio Roversi
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Hate on the Net - Extremist Sites, Neo-fascism On-line, Electronic Jihad by Antonio Roversi (decd) formerly of the University of Bologna, Italy (translated by Lawrence Smith) continues Ashgate Publishing Ltd's cutting edge series, Advances in Criminology.

This book is a confronting analysis of the use of hate on the internet by extremists to engender radicalism and violence. Roversi warns that the journey along the road to a global village via the increasingly dominant internet will not be free of obstacles. There exist along the electronic highway websites populated with virulent, contemptuous and menacing views in support of extremism in its various forms.

The author analyses three categories of extremist sites. They are websites of Ultra Italian football supporters, those of neo-Nazi/fascists and lastly websites for Jihadists. Using little more than widely available Internet search engines and inductive/deductive approaches to delve into the dark crevices of the Internet, Roversi shows how extremist websites share similar characteristics such as their graphics, logos, photographs and videos.

Audience-specific iconography is present on each site. Emblems are reflective of the group's social and political loyalties. These include team colours, Nazi swastikas and Palestinian flags. Audio and video material is used to punctuate victories over perceived enemies and to commemorate fallen 'heroes'. The Ultras illustrate their greatest turnouts to matches and clashes with police and opposing fans. Neo-Nazi/fascists celebrate the life and speeches of key fascist dictators (Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini). Jihadist sites show the devastation caused the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on New York and Washington DC. They also commemorate the 'martyrdom' of suicide bombers.

Each website seeks to make an immediate impact on visitors through its 'wall' via the pastiche of images, logos, banners that act to draw visitors deeper into the content. The sites are well-structured and the content is

readily accessible. Surprisingly, extremist merchandise is often available for purchase.

Extremist sites reveal themselves as an admixture of historical revisionism (particularly the denial of the holocaust) and shockingly gratuitous users of violence (particularly the beheading murders of western hostages). Far graver is the almost universal condemnation by extremist sites of people of the Jewish faith for every purported ill inflicted on society. Material on one site is often recycled on other sites and numerous links are made between sites.

Roversi notes that extremist content has the ability to rise from the ashes. Although a particular site may cease to exist, it will frequently reappear elsewhere on the Internet in its entirety or its content will be salvaged to be incorporated on other extremist sites. The persistent re-emergence of extremist views on the Internet is a sharp reminder that traditional paradigms of censorship, regulation and policing may well prove inadequate to combat this scourge.

The author argues that 'we must honestly face up to the fact that behind these sites there are real movements and groups whose raison d'être derives from their separateness and their opposition to, and rejection of, civil processes of problem resolution' instead of either censoring or tolerating extremist Internet sites. Vigilance and action by the wider global village will be required if there is to be an avoidance of the 'tranquilising drug of gradualism' that Martin Luther King Junior warned of. This threat is no more apparent than in the xenophobia directed against the Jewish peoples.

Scrutiny of the three categories of extremist sites by Roversi indicates that much of the content of extremist websites is stale and frequently reused. In one light this may indicate a diminution of those willing to maintain and update such sites. In another light, such content may be intentionally left on the Internet by one cadre of extremists in the hope of inspiring a future cadre into action. Roversi notes that extremist sites provide a vehicle for maintaining cohesion among the diaspora of various groups and provide a ready means of communication of extremist views across national boundaries. This element of the author's analysis most likely is and will continue to shape the responses of law makers, regulators, and those responsible for policing society. The openness of the Internet cuts both ways and so provides law enforcement agencies with an opportunity to identify members of society that entertain extremist views.

In this way the extremist sites operate like a honey pot drawing out otherwise potentially anonymous extremists.

Hate on the Net - Extremist Sites, Neo-fascism On-line, Electronic Jihad is immediately accessible to a wide range of readers but does contain frank language and distressing content. Roversi writes in an engaging and personal manner. As a stimulus for emerging legal practitioners who have an interest in legal issues concerning the Internet, modern issues in censorship, and responses to extremism, this is a welcome translation of an important analysis. The chapters are laid out in a straightforward manner covering the evolution of Web Communication, Ultra Websites, Fascist and Neo-Nazi Websites, and the Use of the Web in the Middle East Conflict. To assist in further research David Nelken, the translator, has reconfirmed, to the extent feasible, each of the Internet websites referred to by Antonio Roversi. Furthermore, each chapter is accompanied by editorial notes pointing to additional readings.

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