

**OSCE Meeting on the Relationship Between Racist, Xenophobic and anti-Semitic Propaganda on the Internet and Hate Crimes
Paris, 16 – 17 June 2004**

Swiss Delegation

Internet Streetworking, an Instrument for Psychosocial Short-Term Intervention

What is Internet Streetworking?

My name is Samuel Althof, and I am a speaker for *Aktion Kinder des Holocaust, akdh*.

Akdh is an international community of descendents of survivors of the Holocaust and antifascist resistance, and their relatives and friends.

About four years ago, we developed the project *Internet-Streetworking*. We work with adolescent Internet users, who openly profess extremist opinions and a tendency to violence, or who break the law.

I would like to present this project to you with a few examples of how we approach right-wing extremist adolescents. Our approach to left-wing extremists differs at certain points from that towards right-wing extremists.

Internet-Streetworking is an instrument for psychosocial short-term intervention, by which we approach these people. Our methods are eclectic, using psychodrama, gestalt psychology and discussion therapy.

Aktion Kinder des Holocaust, akdh, searches the Internet for contents which are extremist, hostile to foreigners or suggest violence. Currently we monitor approx. 200 German-language Internet sites and forums. These recordings are one of the foundations for the work of the *Internet Streetworking Team*.

Our first step in a planned *Internet Streetworking Intervention* is to make a profile of the author of a right-wing extremist website or participant in a forum. We try to understand their contents and to identify the person behind them.

(I will be using the male form throughout this presentation, as we deal mainly – but not exclusively - with male adolescents).

What does "understanding their contents" mean?

The author of a website speaks through texts, images, animations and music, the way he presents them and his technical know-how.

With this he leaves a message of how he defines himself as a right-wing extremist and the way he sees the world. This can give us important clues to where he feels uncertain or threatened.

This means:

We determine whether the adolescent is a symptomatic or a programmed right-wing extremist.

A symptomatic right-wing extremist uses provocative and perverted means to obtain attention, to differentiate himself, or to compensate weaknesses, but also – and this is very important – to communicate.

(A programmed right-wing extremist is firmly embedded in his ideology and not susceptible to such an intervention).

What criteria do we focus on?

- In a first step we determine how a right-wing extremist Internet user expresses himself generally
- We monitor whom he is in contact with and what kind of contents he exchanges.
- We then try to identify him
- If possible we also monitor his personal environment and try to find out if he expresses violence in any way.
- It is also very important not to neglect the fact that psychiatric problems which need to be dealt with by a professional psychiatrist may also influence the persons behaviour. Whether or not the person is a danger to himself or to others needs to be determined as accurately as possible.

There are several ways of proceeding if we come to the conclusion that we are dealing with a *symptomatic* adolescent, using what I would describe as a "perverted means of establishing contact through right-wing extremist provocation"

Basically we look for a suitable form of **communication**

We contact the author – who believes himself to be anonymous – using a pseudonym, to remain anonymous as well, to obtain further information for our profile.

We also use anonymous communication as an independent means of communication: this tactic can lead to very expressive and important confrontations, which I will explain later on.

Depending on the situation, it may also be wise to prosecute an author or threaten prosecution.

It also happens that someone from the author's personal environment contacts us. This gives us the possibility to communicate with him through others.

The first step: anonymous contact

Once we have identified an author and our profile indicates that an Internet Streetworking Intervention is possible and may be successful – for example if the person shows an interest in a dialogue to discuss his point of view – if he is a minor, we always inform the parents. For security reasons, this usually happens anonymously.

If a first intervention leads to serious conflicts for an adolescent, we give him a telephone number under which he can reach an Internet Streetworker 24 hours a day, where he will receive professional help and guidance. Depending on the case this may be a non-identifiable number.

The aim of this first step is to enter into a dialogue with the author and to confront him critically with his contents. We focus on questions about motivation and causality which have led him to right-wing extremism. We try to show him that other points of view are also valid and to build up a small basis of trust.

An important factor in this kind of dialogue is that we know who the author is, while we ourselves remain anonymous. This "secret" often leads to great interest on the part of the author.

This can become an important configuration for the success of the intervention: we give the adolescent the prospect of finding out at a later stage whom he is communicating with in a personal encounter! With this, we offer our client the option of moving away from cyberspace back into reality and towards himself.

The second step: a personal encounter

With a personal encounter the adolescent takes a very important step,

- He moves out of anonymity

However, there is more to it than that:

- He meets an Internet Streetworker, someone from *Aktion Kinder des Holocaust, akdh*. This means that he meets a Jewish person, or someone whom he perceives as being Jewish.

With this, he goes beyond his right-wing extremist views and moves back into normality. This is precisely what makes our method so successful. I drink coffee with a client, talk about the latest PC games, about football, music and generally about daily life.

However, we do not speak of politics, and I do not ask questions about the author's points of view. The meeting should take place somewhere free of ideology, where the client is not confronted with his points of view. We simply meet as normal people. And these meetings show results.

Important for these meetings

- I never confront a symptomatic right-wing extremist with ideology. By making ideology an issue, I would be pushing him into defensive actions, giving him the opportunity to build up his symptoms again. Instead, I meet him on neutral ground and show interest in him as a person. He may then, for example, tell me about his absent father or his mother who has a new partner, that is, the real problems of his daily life. This is the most important phase of our work with these adolescents.
- Our meetings with these people are always free of judgement. Even if a conversation turns ugly, we always try to see our client as a valuable person.

Aims of the second step

- The problem of symptomatic right-wing extremism in the Internet has to be translated back into reality. The conflict must be understood, analysed and dealt with in real life. That is basically what we do, and which is why we always seek personal contact with our clients. Almost all the clients of Internet Streetworking are known to us personally. This does show the limits of anonymous dialogue on the Internet: There is no point to an intervention if it remains in cyberspace and the symptom is not translated into real life to be dealt with where it has its roots.

The Decisive Element: If we do not succeed in establishing a contact in real life to the person behind the provocation, the intervention is not successful. Interpersonal communication in real life is the central point of Internet Streetworking. The Internet is only a means to achieve this.

What do we see as a success?

Basically we have to be realistic. We see it as a success if an adolescent refrains from using provocative means to establish contact: that is, if we see a reduction or disappearance of the symptom "perverted means of establishing contact by right-wing extremist provocation". This gives us the possibility of concentrating on the questions which really occupy our client.

Further success is achieved where someone begins to reflect critically on his own opinions and distances himself from the symptoms.

Of course we are also confronted with relapses and failures. That is part of our work.

I would also like to say a few words about our collaboration with advice centres, Internet providers and research institutes.

Collaboration with advice centres

It is part of our concept – as soon as we have identified a client – to try to establish contact with local authorities and youth organisations. Sometimes one of these organisations can take over part of the intervention, but not always.

In some cases psychiatric help is necessary. Getting someone to the point of realising this is often a painful process, and the client has to be willing to participate in this form of therapy and build up a relationship with a new person of trust.

Collaboration with Internet providers

Over time, we have established good contacts with various Internet providers in Switzerland and abroad. If we see that someone is transgressing the general terms of compliance of a provider, we may inform the provider accordingly and ask that the hate site be deleted.

It is said that dealing with American providers is difficult because they have different points of view concerning the right to express one's opinion freely. However, this is prejudice. If a racist site is on a server in America, but the content is directed at Swiss users, the provider will generally submit to local, i.e. Swiss, law if he is not explicitly a neo-nazi provider.

Collaboration with research institutes

The results of our work are used in a number of research projects:

- Project VIOLENCE "Youth and Violence related to Socioecological Structures" run by the University of Basel
- Swiss National Research Project NFP40+, which researches the influence of family and peer groups on the motivations of such adolescents.

Every young extremist who finds himself understood before becoming a programmed right-wing extremist experiences an improvement of his quality of life, be it emotionally or in very practical ways, i.e he is able to start an apprenticeship, move into his own flat etc.

We see it as a success if an extremist adolescent who is prone to violence learns to respect the basic worths of a democratic society. Every single one is worth working with. Authorities have confirmed that right-wing extremism has been reduced by one third in Switzerland over the last year, and there are now hardly any right-wing extremist Websites run by Swiss authors. I believe that our work has played a great part in achieving this.

Links

Internet-Streetworking report site:

<http://homepage.swissonline.ch/flexscan/>

Internet-Streetworking case studies:

<http://www.trafo.de.vu/>

Aktion Kinder des Holocaust

<http://www.akdh.ch>

© Internet-Streetworking ist a registered trademark
Nr. 50111/2003 -- 509488