

Confronting Hate Speech Online

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- In both public dispute and law enforcement best effort should be made not to overrate hatemongers. There are many ways to evaluate real audience and influence of hate sites (using web counters, traffic data, websearch results, assessing forum activities), and it's pretty obvious, that drawing attention of millions to a website with a dozen users worldwide is highly counterproductive. There should be an understanding, that some hate sites are just too small and insignificant for serious chase and prosecution. They belong to oblivion, and that's where they actually reside, despite theoretical accessibility to general audience. Indulging in polemics with such websites, as well as dragging them into news headlines by formal prosecution, will inevitably bolster their visibility and influence, instead of really reducing their efficiency.
- Most serious attention should be paid to the AUP and TOS of various service providers. Despite their reluctance to take responsibility for censorship, most big ISPs do provide a clause in their policy statements, that allows them to discontinue service to publishers of offensive content. Knowing the details of such policies allows individual users to shut down many hate sites, simply by taking time to complain to abuse teams.
- It should be noted, that bringing down hate sites does not necessarily mean pulling the plug at their main web hoster's premises. Websites do not reach out to audience through their hoster. They do it through catalogs, ratings, search engines, redirection services, banner exchange, mailing list servers. Any one of this units can be approached separately, with complaints about their hatemongering client, and they might be more willing to deal with complaints, than the principal web hoster is.
- Internet service/presence providers are naturally reluctant to bear any corporate responsibility for the content they're hosting. They might hate the guts of bigots and racists, but economically they are in no position to enforce full-fledged censorship, setting up an abuse team looking into free speech vs. hate speech issues 24/7. In general terms this means, that ISPs should not be criticised for "aiding those Nazis out of greed", but rather assisted with both legal advice and manpower to cope with offenders. Legal advice is crucial in many countries with raw telecom legislations, simply to formulate, what are the rights and responsibilities of an ISP vs. a client it chooses to purge for offensive content.
- Since Internet is a high-tech environment, many battles here can be won by technical superiority of advanced users over less computer-literate ones, racists and bigots usually falling into the latter category. One good example is amending web search engine results, applying SEO techniques to institute control over sensible keywords, as was demonstrated in Paris OSCE conference in June. As a matter of fact, anti-racists using these techniques have a natural advantage over hate site owners. The latter, if they try to use same techniques, would be inevitably compelled to use lowly instruments like spamdexing, cloaking, doorways, linkfarms etc, and these are regarded as offending practice by search engines' tech management teams - leading to purges of sites from web search index.

- Monitoring hate sites is an activity, that could use assistance of a semi-professional public body, with both part-time experts and full-time research teams on board. Russia's experience shows, that this is not immediately clear and obvious, who could found and support such institutions on a long term basis. Public initiatives and alliances between commercial bodies, religious groups and human rights' activists against hate sites, tend to take a form of one-time effort, gradually dying out after a short period of initial success, for lack of further motivation from original founders. Obviously, there just isn't enough work for such a body to perform on a regular basis. A public body, that has to create a job for itself (increasing general attention to hate sites, that are otherwise barely visible, or broadening their criteria to include "legitimate" nationalist, historical and religious websites), is not a good and useful tool. It might even adversely affect the credibility of the overall anti-racist effort. Therefore it's much better for such a body to dissolve for lack of serious tasks at their hands, than to fake activity through headlines.
- While free speech boundaries are quite an arguable and controversial topic, with serious differences in national legislations on the subject, there is often a way to punish aggressive hatemongers for personal offence and libel. In many countries personal accusations in public speech are more clearly outlawed, than general smearing of ethnic and religious groups. In some legislations (including Russia) it is more realistic and viable to press personal libel charges in court, than use law enforcement to discuss general issues of history and conspirology. Since both ISPs and their clients are well aware of this division, this legal tactic, when applied, causes radical websites to mind their language, to avoid being explicit, to choose cryptic expressions over clearly cut ones. And this, in term, naturally reduces both the efficiency of hate speech, and the scale of its audience: in Russian language those using cryptic racist slang inevitably find themselves preaching to the converted, unable to reach broader audiences because of the language barrier.