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# Online Hate and Harmful Content

## Cross-national perspectives

Teo Keipi, Matti Näsi, Atte Oksanen and Pekka Räsänen

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# Online Hate and Harmful Content

> In times of ever-increasing changes in technology and online socio-cultural trends, there is a constant and pressing need for updated knowledge. This book provides the most up-to-date study of online hate speech and harms associated with the Internet. By presenting ground-breaking comparative research and introducing new concepts such as Identity Bubble Reinforcement, it breaks new ground both empirically and theoretically.
>
> Sveinung Sandberg, *Professor, University of Oslo*

Over the past few decades, various types of hate material have caused increasing concern. Today, the scope of hate is wider than ever, as easy and often-anonymous access to an enormous amount of online content has opened the Internet up to both use and abuse. By providing possibilities for inexpensive and instantaneous access without ties to geographic location or a user identification system, the Internet has permitted hate groups and individuals espousing hate to transmit their ideas to a worldwide audience.

*Online Hate and Harmful Content* focuses on the role of potentially harmful online content, particularly among young people. This focus is explored through two approaches: first, the commonality of online hate through cross-national survey statistics. This includes a discussion of the various implications of online hate for young people in terms of, for example, subjective wellbeing, trust, self-image and social relationships. Second, the book examines theoretical frameworks from the fields of sociology, social psychology and criminology that are useful for understanding online behaviour and online victimisation. Limitations of past theory are assessed and complemented with a novel theoretical model linking past work to the online environment as it exists today.

An important and timely volume in this ever-changing digital age, this book is suitable for graduates and undergraduates interested in the fields of Internet and new media studies, social psychology and criminology. The analyses and findings of the book are also particularly relevant to practitioners and policy-makers working in the areas of Internet regulation, crime prevention, child protection and social work/youth work.

**Teo Keipi** is a post-doctoral researcher in Economic Sociology at the University of Turku, Finland.

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# 1 Evolving social media

## 1.1 Introduction

"Can you kill yourself already?"
"Fuckin ugly ass hoe."
"Nobody even cares about you."

On 9 December 2012 16-year-old Jessica Laney was found hanged in her home in Hudson, Florida. For months prior to her suicide, Jessica had been the target of extensive cyberbullying through the popular online social media site ASKfm. Her story is devastating on its own, yet even more unnerving is that the experiences of Jessica Laney are not unlike those of Amanda Todd, Ryan Halligan, David Molak and many others. Each of these young people was bullied extensively on the Internet, eventually taking extreme measures to finally escape their tormentors. The Internet continues to foster countless similarly vile interactions and outcomes, be it through social media platforms, online discussion forums, comment sections of local news sites, or even personal email. Hate has taken up residence in the online space on a global scale.

Although the general consensus tends to stress the benefits of the Internet in the sense of its provision of a platform for free expression of opinions and convenient interaction, recent years have increasingly brought into view the darker aspects of the online world. These include various forms of negative behaviour involving cyberbullying, harassment, stalking, slander, manipulation of personal information and fraud. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have helped terrorists and other criminal actors communicate and reinforce their activities while also manipulating sentiments with increasing effectiveness. Often, even extreme threats are communicated via mainstream channels such as Facebook or YouTube. In addition, the Internet is home to potentially disturbing and harmful content such as torture or snuff videos showing the actual deaths of people. It is also clear that certain material can be more harmful for some users and less so for others. In the discussion of potential harm, the primary focus of concern is, understandably, on children, teenagers and young adults.

This book consequently focuses on the darker aspects of the Internet through the lens of youth and young adults in particular. It does so by paying particular

attention to the core force of harm in today's online society, namely the communication of hate. Online hate (i.e. cyberhate), as a global phenomenon, specifically targets either individuals or groups of people. Notably, it is not a specific exception to the rules of interaction but rather is rooted in mainstream experience. Vile and hateful online interaction is seemingly becoming the new norm even in the most socio-economically advanced Western societies. It takes many forms, often masking itself as rational opinion or justified expression. Hate, as it exists today, is of course nothing new. What is new, however, is the extent to which online tools allow global dissemination of content and ease of access to targets, and make it difficult to mitigate or prevent negative experience among users which spend a great deal of time navigating in that environment.

The modern tools afforded by these technological developments have become central to the ways in which we communicate, explore and connect to the world. Immediate access to global news, friends, interests, new contacts and modes of expression has become an assumed part of life for owners of enabling mobile phones. It could be argued that being online has become a mundane aspect of life in most Western societies, where constant connectivity is the norm. We tend not to be awestruck by the incredible capabilities afforded to us by technology in the way that someone new to this array of enhancing tools would be. Today, information, communication and entertainment are all activities that can be found in a single device not much bigger than the palm of your hand. Smartphones are, however, only a small element of a larger entity of different ICTs. Computers, laptops, mobile phones and tablet computers have all been developed to provide easy access to the online space. Furthermore, the online space itself has taken a constantly growing role in the daily life of most Western societies, even to the extent that these are referred to as a homogenous body of information societies.

Although the expanding role of the different ICTs seems relatively rapid, large-scale evolution of the new information societies began in the aftermath of their transformation into post-industrial societies (Bell, 1973). This transition took an even steeper turn roughly two decades ago, and today almost half of the world's population is able to "log in". This technologisation of Western society has introduced great changes in all aspects of everyday life. For many, working is no longer tied to a specific time or location, as one's office can be set up almost anywhere. Furthermore, leisure is increasingly spent in front of a screen, whether to read the news, watch a movie, or connect with friends. Due to the impact that different ICTs have had on both work and leisure, they have become central management tools for many of the components of everyday life. However, and to put things into a bit more perspective, computers and mobile devices are not the first, or even the biggest, wave of technological change that has hit Western homes and working life. Television, and particularly the various other electronic home appliances that were introduced to the mass market in the 1940s and 1950s, revolutionised much of society and how it would be operationalised from then onwards (Bittman, Rice & Wajcman, 2004; Cowan, 1976). However, what the Internet as a connecting mechanism has done is redraw the

boundaries of communication, information and entertainment in a global context, a change unlike any other thus far.

Early computers and the predecessors of the Internet, such as ARPANET, were constructed for the purpose of helping to process and distribute information among the scientific community. Like many things originally intended for limited use, computers and the Internet eventually became an integral part of the modern-day household. The significance of these technologies at the societal level is linked to the development of a new way of conceptualising context, namely through the information society framework (e.g. Castells & Himanen, 2002) or network society (van Dijk, 2012). The information, or network, society is a concept introduced for the purposes of better understanding the growing role of new technologies within the societal context, and is a multifaceted phenomenon which has inspired a number of books. For the sake of a more focused approach, we will not delve into the theoretical discussion of the specifics of what constitutes an information society. Rather, we will focus on a few of the central elements that are associated with these societies. In particular, we are concerned with the dynamics of the darker aspects of the online society here.

In Chapters 2 and 3 we address some key theoretical tools and integrate both criminological and social psychological theories on computer-mediated behaviour. Criminologists have shown factors associated with criminal victimisation involving risk environments (e.g. Pratt, Holtfreter & Reisig, 2010; Reyns, 2013), and social psychologists have underlined the significant overlap between identity group behaviour and conditions favouring anonymity of some kind (e.g. Spears, Postmes, Lea & Wolbert, 2002). These perspectives help us to understand the behaviours of content creators and consumers, and the social dynamics at play in the online environment in terms of risk and victimisation. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 focus on the rising presence of online hate in the cross-cultural context and show empirical findings regarding exposure and impacts of online hate and harmful content among young people. In Chapter 7 we go beyond empirical observations by introducing what we call the Identity Bubble Reinforcement model, or IBR model, in order to more fully understand risky behaviour and reinforcing phenomena. Finally, in Chapter 8 we link the book's main themes together and assess implications for the future.

In order to provide a better understanding of some of the main aims of this book, we endeavour to answer the following key questions:

- What is online hate, what forms does it take, and what are the implications of exposure?
- How prevalent is exposure to hate material among young people cross-nationally and does exposure vary by nation?
- Which components of past theory can be leveraged to improve understanding of hate in the current online environment?
- How do risk factors, social identity dynamics and the mechanisms of the modern online environment relate to exposure to hate?
- How might the risk of online exposure to hate shape the future of Internet use?

The following chapters therefore aim to provide answers to these question by utilising past theoretical frameworks and recent research literature while also offering empirical interpretations based on unique cross-national survey data collected in the UK, the US, Germany and Finland. The interpretations based on our findings provide us with new possibilities for understanding the changing computer-mediated landscape in which young people of today spend an increasing proportion of daily life. We can, through our data, detect the current characteristics of exposure to hate within countries, while also mapping out common denominators in terms of hate material cross-nationally. However, before delving into the dark side of the Internet, this chapter takes a few steps back to better contextualise how we, as modern Western societies immersed in new technology, arrived where we are today. Through this, we hope to clarify some of the core elements of the present-day information society and what they were built on. In particular, we provide a brief overview of the evolving roles of social media in the rising culture of risk.

## 1.2 From new media to social media

"New media" is perhaps the most common and popular term associated with the distinction between old and traditional media that has resulted from the emergence of new electronic technologies. According to Livingstone (1999), the term "new media" was first coined in reference to advances in home entertainment, such as video cassette recorders (VCRs), computer games or satellite television. However, today, the common understanding of what constitutes new media has taken a slightly more evolved form. New media not only relates to the digitalisation of traditional media, such as newspapers and television (Lawson-Borders, 2003; Lievrouw, 2004), but also includes various aspects of digitised interaction, thus combining the central elements that make up the present-day technological landscape (see also van Dijk, 2012).

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of new media is their interactive nature. These interactive functions are usually referred to as *social media*. Here, we treat social media as a distinct extension of the new media phenomenon, as they have developed to the point of being a global environment combining both technology and interaction on a new scale. So what do we mean by social media? Our definition requires a bit of background on the evolution of the Internet. We argue that social media are largely an end result of the transformation from what is referred to as the Web 1.0 society into the Web 2.0 society. From a practical perspective, this was really a transformation of behaviour. That is, users were previously far more passive consumers of all aspects of online content. This was in large part due to the fact that only relatively few individuals had the capability, tools and therefore means to produce content online. These few individuals were commonly known as webmasters. As a result, much online interaction operated like a one-way street, with a unidirectional flow of information to the consumer.

With the transformation to a Web 2.0 society, a new highway was constructed. Here, content began travelling in both directions, as formerly passive

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