

Great Plains Sociologist
Volume 16, No. I, Summer 2004

**Extremist Groups of the Midwest:
A Content Analysis of Internet Websites**

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Abstract

This study involved the examination and analysis of Internet websites maintained by four hate groups and 16 militia groups located in South Dakota and the surrounding contiguous states. Websites were examined in order to gain a better understanding about these groups, their perspectives, and their stated agendas. The websites of militia groups were also compared and contrasted with those of hate groups. Information on the groups was gathered directly from the web pages maintained by these hate groups and militias. One of the research questions in this study asked if militia groups can be categorized as hate groups. This study identified the stated goals/purposes of the groups, important issues to the groups, analysis by the groups of important issues, and groups' strategies for dealing with what they perceive to be "the problem." On the basis of these four criteria, the hate groups and militias were compared and contrasted. In terms of stated goals/purposes, hate groups and militias were determined not to be similar to each other. The hate groups in this study focused on race and/or citizenship, while the militias concentrated on strict interpretation of the Constitution, fundamentalist religious beliefs, protection of and from the government, and/or personal freedoms.

Introduction

In June 1998, a 49 year-old black man in Jasper, Texas, was the victim of what authorities deemed a racially motivated murder. He was dragged to his death by a chain that was attached to the back of a pickup truck. The only known criteria for selecting the victim was the color of his skin. One of the perpetrators of this offense, a 24 year-old white man, had links to white supremacist groups

(Leung, 1998). The perpetrator was subsequently convicted of murder and sentenced to death by lethal injection (Associated Press, 1999).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigated this offense as a hate crime. A hate crime has been committed when an offender has intentionally selected a victim or property as the target of an offense because of the actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation of a person (Ladle, 1999). Many hate crimes, or bias crimes, as they are also known, fall into the categories of simple assaults, vandalism, and harassment (Adler, et. al., 1998). Since these offenses are less serious, they may receive little attention or not even be recognized as hate crimes. They can, however, have a major impact on the community by increasing the level of fear and hostility between groups (Adler, et. al., 1998). The hate crimes that constitute aggravated assault and murder, although few in number, receive much more notoriety.

Ladle (1999) reported on a study by the United States Sentencing Commission that examined defendants sentenced in 1996 and 1997 who: 1) were convicted under a civil rights statute; 2) were sentenced under a civil rights statute; or 3) received an enhancement at sentencing for the commission of a hate crime. Presentence reports were also reviewed to identify the nature of the crime and any evidence of hate crime motivation. In fiscal year 1996, 50 offenders committing 21 hate crime offenses were successfully prosecuted by the Department of Justice (Ladle, 1999). This same study found that in 1997, 54 offenders were arrested for committing 28 offenses.

Racial hatred was cited as the leading motivation behind the majority of the offenses studied by the United States Sentencing Commission, as race was cited in 46 offenses involving 100 offenders (Ladle, 1999). In addition, the majority of offenses were directed at African Americans (44 offenses), while one was aimed at a Jewish victim for religious hatred, and two other offenses were directed at abortion clinics. The United States Sentencing Commission's study of

hate crimes in 1996 and 1997 found that the hate crimes were comprised of the following: 20 cross burnings, 12 arsons, nine intimidations/threats, six assaults, one murder, and one cemetery desecration. Czajkoski (1992) found that race was the motivation behind hate crimes 68 percent of the time, while religion and ethnicity constituted 21 percent and 11 percent, respectively.

Typically, hate crimes involve the victimization of a minority group member by a member of another group, frequently the majority. African Americans have historically endured the greatest brunt of hate crime incidents. Nearly four out of every 10 hate crime incidents in 1994 were classified as “anti-black” (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997). Hate crimes can also involve members of a minority group perpetrating violence against members of the majority group. The U.S. Department of Justice (1997) reported that a group of young African American males in Wisconsin were recounting a scene in the movie “Mississippi Burning” in which white men beat a black youth who was praying. At some point, Todd Mitchell, one of the individuals present at the discussion, asked the others if they were prepared to perpetrate violence on some white people. Later, a white male youth approached the group from across the street, and at Mitchell’s prompting; the group attacked the white boy. The case was prosecuted as a hate crime and Mitchell received a sentence of four years imprisonment. Although less frequent, this scenario serves to illustrate that non-Hispanic whites can also be the victims of hate crimes.

The murder in Jasper, Texas, is but one example of a hate crime committed by a member of a hate group. Essentially, a hate group shares an ideology that targets a particular person or group and justifies property crimes, physical assaults, and even murder through the hate group’s belief system (Adler, et. al., 1998). Examples of commonly-known hate groups are the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Neo-Nazis, and Black Separatists. Members of these groups are motivated by a hatred and distrust of other groups. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, a human rights group based in Montgomery,

Alabama, the number of organized hate groups in the United States in 1997 increased to 474, a 20 percent increase from the previous year (Leung, 1998).

A militia, which may or may not be considered a type of hate group, is typically comprised of white, Christian, working class and middle class Americans whose fundamental belief is that their constitutional right to bear arms is threatened (Adler, et. al., 1998). Essentially, they fear government restrictions of their Second Amendment rights to own firearms. Some militia groups are non-violent, while others advocate violence toward other individuals, groups, and the federal government. Members share a survivalist philosophy and typically participate in paramilitary actions, which include dressing in military clothing and participating in mock skirmishes. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are 441 paramilitary groups and they can be found in all 50 states (Adler, et. al., 1998).

Hate groups and militias dispense information about their groups in a number of different ways. Traditionally, printed materials were the primary vehicle for spreading information. Today, computer technology has also reached the purveyors of hate and extremism. One of the newest means of getting a message out to the public is via websites on the Internet. The Internet provides international connections and virtual anonymity for its participants and audience, thereby becoming a valuable tool in the hate group and militia arsenal (Ferber, 1998). The Anti-Defamation League (1999) found that over 147 million people worldwide now use the Internet, with 79 million of those users living in the United States. Both computers and access to the Internet are becoming more prevalent and less costly. Unlimited access to the Internet can now be purchased for under \$20 per month (Anti-Defamation League, 1999).

Information and messages can be displayed for the public on these Internet websites, or hate sites, as they are also called. Secret messages may also be displayed on the hate sites. In order to access these confidential messages, one must know a specific code word. The use of the secret messages serves to keep

outsiders from accessing all of the hate site information. In addition, the secure sites provide a safe haven for members of the hate group or militia, in which information can be shared freely (Ferber, 1998).

The Internet provides advantages for both those maintaining websites and those accessing them. Groups can develop websites and spread their messages with little cost. Thus, spreading the group's word through a website has the effect of reaching a worldwide audience at less costly means. Accessing hate sites allows individuals to gain access to hate and extremist information without ever leaving the privacy of their homes. Individuals with racist or extremist attitudes may not attend rallies or subscribe to pertinent literature, yet they may be inclined to browse websites maintained by these types of groups.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, hate sites on the Internet grew by nearly 60 percent, from 163 in 1997 to 254 at the end of 1998 (Preston, 1999). In addition, nearly half of the more than 500 racist groups operating across the United States are using Internet sites spread their message (Preston, 1999). Ferber (1998) also found that there at least 250 hate sites on the Internet. Thus, creating and maintaining websites has become a viable means for hate groups and militias to disseminate information about themselves and their causes. Websites maintained by various hate groups and militias may contain a variety of information, including but not limited to: the purpose of the organization, the organizational structure, federal laws supporting their position, equipment needed, membership recruitment, upcoming events, and links to other sites.

Purpose of the Study

Limited scholarship has focused on Internet sites maintained by militias and hate groups because the trend is fairly recent. Research suggests, however, that the creation of websites by hate groups and militias is becoming more and more prevalent. The overall purpose of this study is to examine the websites maintained by militias and hate groups, comparing the content of the sites to each other and those of similar groups.

Research Problem

This study is particularly concerned with Internet websites devised and maintained by hate groups and militias located in the Midwest. Thus the specific problem addressed the following:

To what extent are Internet websites maintained by militia groups located in South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska, Montana, and Wyoming similar or different in content to websites maintained by more traditional hate groups in terms of: (1) stated goals/purposes of the group; (2) important issues for the group; (3) analysis of important issues by the group; and (4) groups' proposed strategies for dealing with important issues?

Research Questions

In this study, several questions related to the research problem are addressed. These questions are primarily concerned with emergent meanings and content comparisons of the various websites studied. Some of the additional questions to be addressed include the following:

1. To what extent do the groups in this study share definitions of the problem(s) which the groups address?
2. To what extent do these groups draw upon the same sources and one another in framing their definitions of the problem(s)?
3. To what extent do these groups share definitions of "appropriate" or "needed" action to be taken in response to the problem(s)?
4. Militia groups sometimes deny that they should be categorized with hate groups. Does their framing of issues and concerns support or refute this?

Theoretical Framework

In studying militias, hate groups, and extremist groups, it is necessary to understand how these groups, and the members that comprise the groups, make decisions and form opinions. It is not enough to simply acknowledge that a particular group espouses anti-government sentiment or hatred against minorities. In order to truly understand the groups and their members, researchers must gain an insight into the process by which their views take shape.

The theory most relevant to this area of study is symbolic interaction. Herbert Blumer coined the term symbolic interaction in an article written in *Man and Society* (Blumer, 1969). He used the term when he clarified how social psychologists differed in their views of human nature (Wallace & Wolf, 1995).

Human beings differ from all other living creatures in that they are capable of symbolic behavior. According to White (1949), humans are able to grasp and interpret the world through symbols. When one thinks of a symbol, an object such as the American flag comes to mind. Flags, coats of arms, and the Star of David are all examples of common symbols. Although symbols can be tangible objects, they also can be intangible, such as a spoken language or physical gestures. Ritzer (1996) concludes that language is a vast system of symbols, in that words are symbols because they are used to stand for things.

There is a distinct difference between signs and symbols. A sign stands for itself, whereas a symbol represents "whatever people agree it shall represent" (Charon, 1995, p. 39). An example of a symbol is the statue of liberty. To someone who did not know the history and symbolism behind this national landmark, it would appear to be just a statue. The statue of liberty, however, signifies many things, including American pride. Extremist groups also use symbolism. When one thinks of the Ku Klux Klan, a white hooded robe or a burning cross may come to mind. The symbols used by extremist groups are not always this

obvious. Written and spoken words used at meetings or to recruit new members may be symbols which hold commonly agreed-upon meanings. Thus, the use of symbols is present in nearly all aspects of daily life.

One important theoretical contribution to symbolic interaction is W.I. Thomas' notion of definition of the situation. Thomas (1923) thought that individuals could ignore a stimulus to which they had previously responded. According to Thomas (1923, p. 41):

...preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call the definition of the situation.

W.I. Thomas also held that accounts of human behavior must include both the subjective and objective facts of human experience. According to Stryker (1981), the objective facts are constituted by situations, circumstances calling for some "adjustive response" on the part of the persons or groups. Definitions of the situation, however, lie between situations and adjustive responses.

Because significant symbols are used to anticipate future behavior, they suggest plans of action, that is, they organize behavior with reference to what they symbolize (Stryker, 1992). The situation must be symbolized, defined, and interpreted. The products of this symbolization process, then, are definitions of the situation (Stryker, 1992). According to Stryker (1992), definitions of the situation focus attention on what is pertinent (to...resolving problems) in an interactive setting and permit a preliminary organization of actions appropriate to the setting.

This study is primarily concerned with how militias and hate groups interpret their situation and how they act upon that interpretation. According to W.I. Thomas (1928, p. 572):

It is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct – if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.

According to Stryker (1992), the most important aspects of a situation requiring definition are, from the point of view of the actors, who or what they are in the situation and who or what others with whom they interact are. Defining the others in the situation can be achieved by locating those others as members of some socially recognized category of actors (Stryker, 1992). By placing others in categories, cues or predictors are provided to the behavior of those others and serve as a base of reference for future categorizations. Ferber (1998) concludes that it is very possible for people to see the same act, yet perceive very different things. Therefore, militias and hate groups act based upon their perceptions of their realities. To give a pertinent example, what may seem like an innocuous piece of legislation to most individuals may incite members of a militia group to take action against the government.

It is important to note that definition of the situation is based on more than just past experience. Realities, as well as definitions of things and situations, are socially constructed through interaction. This has implications for those who access the web pages of hate groups and militias and for hate groups and militias themselves. Those who access these websites may come to share their meanings and definitions of reality. The more interaction there is on the web pages, via links and references to other similar sites, then it is reasonable to expect greater similarity between the groups. Conversely, evidence of little or no interaction would suggest dissimilar meanings and definitions between the groups. Therefore, if there are many references and links between militias and hate groups, then it is expected that there are shared definitions of meanings and reality. With few or no references and/or links between the two types of groups one would expect little similarity in definitions of meanings and reality.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, reality is a social construct. That is, what we know about the world and ourselves is shaped by our culture and social interaction (Ferber 1998). When one makes a decision on how to act in a given situation those actions are largely based in our culture and in previous

social interactions. Therefore, an individual who identifies with extremist groups may have a propensity to act as they have in previous similar situations. This is not only true of extremist group members, but humans in general. Our tendency is to make sense of situations and things by giving them meanings. Importantly, these meanings are developed in interaction and collaboration with others. The exchange of ideas in websites today is a new dimension in such exchanges through which meanings are constructed.

Definitions of the situation have behavioral consequences (Wallace & Wolf, 1995). If a militia or hate group defines the government as untrustworthy and persecutory, then the group may act toward the government based upon this definition. W.I. Thomas argued that unless researchers pay attention to subjective meanings or definitions of the situation, they cannot understand human activity (Wallace & Wolf, 1995). If researchers fail to recognize or understand the definitions given by militias and hate groups to different situations, then the militias and hate groups themselves cannot fully be understood. Thus, in this study, attention is directed to the signifying and meaning-giving process as observed in the websites of hate and militia groups.

Methodology

The population under study is the body of websites maintained on the Internet by various militia groups and hate groups. A sample was drawn in February of 2000 from those groups located in the Midwest; i.e., South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Wyoming, and Montana.

Content analysis was used to examine the artifacts of social communication, i.e., Internet websites. Content analysis has been defined as a technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of the message (Berg, 1998). According to Starosta (Berg, 1998), content analysis translated the frequency of occurrence of certain symbols into summary judgments and comparisons of content of the discourse...whatever "means" will presumably take up space and/or time;

hence the greater that space and/or time, the greater the meaning's significance. In implementing objective content analysis, the criterion of selection was established before the analysis of data. The goal of the criteria of selection was to be sufficiently exhaustive to account for each variation of message content. The criteria were rigidly and consistently applied so that other researchers looking at the same message would obtain comparable results.

The initial coding frames for this study were: 1) goal or purpose of the group; 2) important issues; 3) analysis of issues; and 4) strategies for dealing with issues. These initial coding frames were used to define objectives and positions stated on the websites of hate groups and militia groups. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Initial Coding Frames

Coding Category	Indicators
Goal or Purpose of the Group	Statement of goal, purpose, or mission on group's web page. Key terms used in framing goal or purpose.
Important Issues	Issues of concern identified by group in its website. Key terms used in framing these issues.
Analysis of Issues	Attributions of responsibility for the issues made by the group in its website. Identification of "causes" of problems made in website. Key terms in framing "causes" and responsibility.
Strategies for Dealing with Issues	Proposed action advocated by group in its website. Proposed responses advocated by group in its web pages. Key terms used in framing responses and action.

The specific thematic frames included: 1) definition of the problem; 2) analysis of the problem; and 3) strategies proposed/advocated. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Specific Thematic Frames

Coding Category	Specific Themes in Framing
Definition of the Problem	Social injustice Moral issue Biblical or religious issue Racial or ethnic problem Government problem Constitutional issue Others
Analysis of the Problem	Loss of power/control Immorality Deviation from biblical/religious precepts Consequences of increasing racial diversity Illegitimacy of government actions Violation of the U.S. Constitution Others
Strategies Proposed/Advocated	Protest Taking up arms Limiting other groups' control Racial separation Limiting immigration Limiting government power Changing government Insistence on biblical/religious precepts Others

Discussion of Findings Relating to the Research Problem

In addressing the research problem, web pages maintained by militia groups from South Dakota and the surrounding contiguous states were examined for the criteria stated in the research problem; i.e., goal/purpose, important issues, analysis of issues, and strategies for dealing with important issues or “the problem(s).” See Figure 3.

Figure 3: Names and Locations of Militia Groups

Name of Militia Group	Location(s) of Militia Group
Iowa Unorganized Militia	Iowa
Constitution Party of Iowa	Iowa
Constitution Society	Iowa
Minnesota Minuteman Militia; Region 3	Minnesota
Minnesota Minuteman Militia; Region 4	Minnesota
Minnesota Minuteman Militia; Fifth Brigade	Minnesota
Minnesota Minuteman Militia	Minnesota
Constitution Party of Minnesota	Minnesota
Militia of Montana	Montana
Constitution Party of Montana	Montana
Montana Unorganized Militias	Montana
Billings Assault Militia	Montana
Freemen	Montana
Militia of North Dakota	North Dakota
South Dakota Unorganized Militia	South Dakota
South Dakota Constitutional Militia	South Dakota

Four hate groups were also examined in this same manner and the results were used for comparison purposes. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: Names and Locations of Hate Groups

Name of Hate Group	Location(s) of Hate Group
Ku Klux Klan	Wyoming
Aryan Nations	Minnesota, Montana, and South Dakota
National Socialist Movement	Nebraska and Minnesota
Mission to Israel	Nebraska

The first part of the research problem deals with the groups' stated goal or purpose. In terms of goals and/or purposes, two of the four hate groups in the study (Ku Klux Klan and the National Socialist Movement) explicitly referred to race and/or citizenship. Aryan Nations focused on "God's natural Law Order" and individual rights, while Mission to Israel identified Biblical truths as their goal or purpose. The ideas of "God's natural Law Order" and Biblical truths are actually placed in a racial context in their respective web pages. For the Aryan

Nations, the concept of “God’s natural Law Order” is imbedded in white supremacy. For Mission to Israel, the idea of Biblical truths is quite anti-Semitic in their interpretation.

In terms of the militias studied, the main focus for these groups was strict constitutional interpretation, fundamentalist religious beliefs, protection of and from the government, and/or personal freedoms. It was of interest to note that none of the web pages for the militia groups identified race or citizenship as part of their goal or purpose. It was also interesting that none of the hate groups identified any of the issues identified by the militias as part of their goal or purpose. Therefore, this author concluded that in terms of the groups’ stated goal or purpose, the web pages maintained by hate groups and militias in this study were not similar to each other.

The second part of the research problem addresses important issues to the groups. All four of the hate groups in this study identified race and/or citizenship as issues of importance to their groups. Specifically, the KKK was concerned with integration, while the Aryan Nations identified disappearance of the White Race and the lack of a White national homeland. The National Socialist Movement focused on non-citizens in the United States, while Mission to Israel was concerned with who is considered to be a true Israelite. Other issues of importance identified by the hate groups were religion, social institutions, and constitutional/government restrictions.

The militia groups in this study identified a plethora of important issues to their respective groups. These issues were: constitutional rights, gun control, government corruption, the right to organize and establish a militia, abortion, government intrusion, the United Nations, morality, injustice, states rights, American sovereignty, and foreign and domestic enemies. Again, neither race nor citizenship were overtly identified as issues of importance to any of the militias in this study. The issue of government restrictions was, however, identified by both hate groups and militia groups. Both groups, to a degree,

identified religion. The hate groups specify religion, while militia groups identify abortion, which can be construed as a religious issue. It appears as though the primary focus for hate groups is race, while militia groups focus on a variety of topics including social injustice, moral issues, religious issues, government, and the constitution. Therefore, an analysis of the data lend this author to conclude that, to a moderate degree, hate groups and militia groups are similar to each other in terms of their identified issues of importance as stated on their web pages.

The third aspect of the research problem looks at the groups' analysis of important issues. All four of the hate groups in this study attributed responsibility for what they perceived to be "the problem." The KKK blamed race mixing and failure to strictly interpret the Constitution. Aryan Nations finds fault with the government, claiming that it fails to represent the white race. The National Socialist Movement blames non-citizens for using too many of the United States' resources. Mission to Israel blames the government, as they believe there are too many laws, criminals, and prisons; however, this group is not liberal in its orientation. Mission to Israel advocates swift and certain action that is Biblically based in response to crime.

The militia groups' analysis of the issues included the topics of excessive government power, government corruption, protection of U.S. trade and U.S. borders, disregard for the Constitution, and conspiracies involving the government. It is important to note that "protection of U.S. trade and U.S. borders" may actually be code words for xenophobic views. They also see as threatening the denial of their right (as militias) to exist. It appears as though there is a good deal of similarity between the analyses of the issues by both hate groups and militia groups. This is interesting, given that the groups' purposes are not similar and that the groups' identified issues of importance only have a small degree of similarity. Both the hate groups and militia groups were largely concerned with the government and the Constitution. There was also a concern

regarding non-citizens in the United States. One issue that stood out was the Constitution Party of Minnesota's concern with race. Specifically, their web page proffered that the government has no authority to impose hate crime "(thought crime)" legislation. This was interesting, as this militia group did not even specify race in their goal/purpose or identification of important issues. Overall, there appears to be a good deal of similarity between hate groups and militia groups in this study when compared on the basis of their respective analysis of the issues.

The last part of the research problem deals with the groups' proposed strategies for dealing with important issues and/or problems. Three of the four hate groups (KKK, Aryan Nations, and National Socialist Movement) advocated racial separation and an overhaul/abolishment of certain social institutions (such as education, social security, and the public health system). Mission to Israel proposed arming oneself for protection and increasing the severity of criminal penalties. Another issue identified by hate groups was putting an end to alleged Jewish control of the media and social institutions. The militia groups in this study proposed a variety of actions, including reporting information about adversaries to other militia groups, abolishing government if it becomes destructive, searching for the truth about laws and the Constitution, criminalizing certain acts surrounding abortion, protesting, limiting the power and scope of the federal government, etc. There is some overlap between the strategies proposed by the hate groups and those proposed by the militia groups in this study. Both types of groups made general strategic proposals for an overhaul of certain social institutions. None of the militias in this study proposed racial separation as a strategy for dealing with "the problem." In sum, it appears as though there is a minor degree of similarity between the two groups in terms of proposed strategies.

One last interesting observation in this study was the "disappearance" of web pages for some of the groups identified in this study. These web pages,

which were obtained in February of 2000, are no longer at their previously listed addresses. While many of the groups may have simply changed their addresses, it is likely that some of them went underground. If this is the case, then a special code or password may be needed to locate and access the web pages for these groups.

Discussion of Findings Relating to the Research Questions

The research problem was further addressed through several additional research questions posed earlier. The first question deals with similarities between hate groups and militia groups in terms of their definitions of the problem. Essentially, an almost unanimously shared definition of the problem was government. All of the hate groups and all but one militia group (Minnesota Minuteman Militia) identified government as part of the problem. The Constitution was also identified as problematic by one of the hate groups (KKK) and eight out of the 13 militia groups. Violation of God's laws was identified as part of the problem by three of the four hate groups and three of the 13 militia groups in this study. Therefore, it appears as though, to varying degrees, both the hate groups and the militia groups in this study believed that government was to blame for "the problem." Other than government, there does not appear to be a consensus between the two types of groups as to who is to blame for "the problem." It is worth noting that while the two types of groups may differ in their views of what constitutes "the problem," they do achieve near consensus on the point that the government is an important aspect of "the problem."

The second question deals with the extent to which the hate groups and militia groups draw on the same sources and each other in framing their definitions of the problem. It is interesting to note that both the hate groups and militia groups referenced the bible in terms of moral/ethical behavior, punishment, and other issues. Both types of groups make many references to the U.S. Constitution in a fashion similar to that of the bible. That is, the Constitution is almost elevated to the status of a sacred text. In analyzing the web pages for

the hate groups and militia groups in this study, it did not appear as though they referenced each other. All of the hate groups provided links to other hate groups and most of the militia groups provided links to other militia groups. Of interest, however, none of the hate groups in this study provided links to militia groups or vice versa. This suggests that there may be separate interaction networks in constructing definitions of the situation.

The third question asked to what degree do the groups in this study share definitions of “appropriate” or “needed” action to be taken in response to “the problem.” Of the eight strategies for dealing with “the problem,” there were only three that were proposed by members of both the hate groups and militia groups. Of the hate groups in this study, 25% proposed taking up arms as a needed action in response to “the problem,” while 15.3% of the militias agreed with this proposal. All of the hate groups (100%) advocated an overhaul of government and social institutions in response to “the problem.” Of the militia groups, 7.6% agreed. The only area of agreement for the two groups in terms of proposed strategies fell into the other category. Hate groups proposed “other” solutions were appropriate 25% of the time, while militia groups agreed to a greater extent at 41.1%. It does not appear as though there is a great deal of similarity within the other category between militia and hate groups. Overall, it does not appear as though there is much agreement between the hate groups and militia groups in terms of proposed strategies for dealing with “the problem.”

Finally, the last question posed in this study was whether militia groups’ definitions of the situation supported classifying them as hate groups. Both types of groups identified government as “the problem.” Hate groups found this to be the case 100% of the time, while militia groups identified the government as problematic 84.6% of the time. Thus, it appears that there is a strong agreement between the two groups that the government, to varying degrees, is to be blamed for the groups’ perceptions of the problems. It does not appear as though the two types of groups agree on race as a problematic issue, as 100% of the hate groups

gave evidence of this theme, while only 7.6% of the militia groups did so. There is some agreement, albeit little, between the hate groups and militia groups on the Constitution and violation of God's laws as part of the problem. Hate groups give much more weight to the violation of God's laws (75%) as part of the problem, while only 23% of the militias agreed. The militias, on the other hand, tended to fault the Constitution (61.5%), while only 25% of hate groups did so. Based upon these findings, there appears to be little justification in identifying militias as hate groups. That is, one cannot conclude, on the basis of the findings from this study that militias automatically fall into the hate group category. Some militia groups do have some similarities in their definitions of the situation with hate groups, but many have little or no similarity.

Revisiting Theory

Symbolic interaction was the theoretical orientation used in this study. Essentially, symbolic interaction holds that the primary focus is on the individual and the interaction between one's internal thoughts and emotions and his or her social behavior. Further, things, ideas, and relationships among things and ideas can all be symbolized and enter experience of human beings as objects; objects whose meanings are anchored in and emerge from social interaction constitute social reality. The most important aspects of a situation requiring definition are from the point of view of the actors (i.e., members of hate groups and militias and those who visit their websites).

Given what we know about symbolic interaction, what are the implications of the findings of this study? The hate groups and militias who maintain web pages do so not solely for their own edification. They are attempting to influence how others (i.e., those who visit their websites) come to see and define social reality. These websites frequently highlight certain aspects of society, while down playing other aspects of our modern culture. For example, a website maintained by a hate group may stress how African Americans and Hispanics seem to be receiving "a bigger piece of the pie," however, they fail to

mention that, on average, whites have a higher socioeconomic status (SES) than either of the two groups previously mentioned. By calling attention to certain aspects and minimizing others, those who maintain these websites attempt to create for others a particular definition of a particular plan of action that is supported by the definition.

With regard to the findings in this study, it does not appear as though hate groups and militias share an overall definition of the situation. Although there are some similarities, there are more differences. For the most part, the hate groups focused on race as “the problem,” while militias tended to blame the government. The lack of shared definition is not surprising from the point of view of symbolic interaction since there is little evidence of interaction between those maintaining the two types of websites. That is, they do not provide links to one another on their web pages.

Limitations of the Study

This study dealt with the websites maintained by hate groups and militia groups in South Dakota and the surrounding contiguous states. The findings of this study cannot necessarily be generalized to hate groups and militias in other states. Even though these same groups exist in other states, they have different goals, issues of importance, analysis of issues, and proposed strategies for dealing with what they perceive to be “the problem.” A particular militia group in South Dakota may have a sister organization in another state, however, they may have totally different foci. This is true of hate groups in other areas as well.

Another limitation of this study is that the conclusion drawn here cannot necessarily be generalized to other types of groups, such as cults, motorcycle gangs, Civil War re-enactionists, and other “fringe groups.” Although these groups may share some beliefs with the hate groups or militia groups in this study, comparing them to the groups in this study would be unjustified.

Finally, a third limitation of this study was the type of statements that were accessed and analyzed. The information available on the hate group and

militia group websites was overt, public statements about their respective groups. That is, the information provided on the web pages is what the individual groups want others to know about their group. Covert statements, which often require passwords to access them, may tell a very different story from the overt messages that are displayed for public viewing and analysis. Not only do covert statements often require passwords to access them, but latent meanings may also be conveyed through code words or expressions which may suggest something more than appears on the surface. For example, opposition to the United Nation's or America's foreign enemies may mask underlying xenophobia. Further, domestic enemies may be a code expression for minority groups.

Implications for Further Research

Beyond this study, additional research might expand the area from which the sample was gathered. This could yield a great number of websites maintained by hate groups and militia groups, especially if the geographical territory in the study included states with large numbers of militias (such as Michigan or Idaho) or hate groups (such as states in the eastern and southern parts of the country). Analysis of websites maintained by hate groups from other countries would also prove to be a valuable area inquiry and research. Some hate group websites provide links to sites in other countries, suggesting that defining situations may involve interaction across national borders. Such interaction is facilitated by the technology of the Internet. Hate group and militia group web pages are growing at an alarming rate. It will be interesting to see if any of these two groups band together for more of an influence in society, or stay separate due to conflict, competition over membership, or differing perspectives. Thus, there are several avenues for research, both qualitative and quantitative, on this important topic.

Another recommendation for future research is a more thorough network analysis of linkages among these and other groups. This research could be on a

national or even international basis. Some such linkages have already been observed.

In addition, future research could focus on more of the latent content contained in the web pages of hate groups and militias. This study focused on both manifest and latent content, however, a more in-depth analysis of meanings “below the surface” would be a contribution to the existing research.

Finally, replication of this study could be conducted to determine what changes have occurred in the three years since the initial data were collected. During the period of data collection, one of the websites “disappeared” or went underground, while new sites appeared. In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks and the recent war with Iraq, it would be interesting to determine if the hate groups or militia groups have changed their definition of “the problem.”

Conclusion

This study dealt with the analysis of websites maintained by hate groups and militia groups in South Dakota and the states immediately surrounding it. The main conclusion in this study was that militia groups cannot justifiably be regarded as hate groups. While some similarities in definition of the situation are observed, they were overshadowed by many differences. The two types of groups studied appear to have rather different agendas from one another.

What is in store for our society now that the Internet has allowed increased access to racist and extremist materials? More individuals are able to access this information in the comfort of their own homes. They do not need to attend rallies, purchase books, or give lip service to any particular group or ideology. With a few clicks of the mouse, one is able to bring a burning cross or swastika into their living room. Hate now has a new and powerful way to get into our homes...the Internet.

What is the appeal of such racist and extremist rhetoric? The ties in our society appear to be lessening. People move from city to city and from state to

state with much more frequency than did individuals in the past. Individuals are much more likely to change jobs or careers now than they were a few decades ago. Thus, the bonds between family members and between communities and families are weakened.

The family itself has seen a fair amount of breakdown in the past couple of decades with the increasing divorce rate and single parent households. It is not to say that any one of these factors leads one to buy into racist rhetoric or to view militia websites; however, the lessening of the social bonds (i.e., ties to family, work, school, church, community) all leave an opening for other types of bonds to be established. Thus, one may look to Aryan Nations or the Minnesota Minuteman Militia for guidance, belonging, and the answers to life's questions.

Hate groups and militias may prove to be very seductive for people in our society who feel isolated or unjustly denied rewards such as well-paying jobs, suitable housing, access to good health care, and affordable education. When one does not receive the rewards of like which they feel entitled, then there is a tendency to place blame. Frequently, the blame is placed on minority groups. For example, a white male that feels he has been denied his rights to a good job with reasonable pay may blame a black man or Hispanic woman who he thinks "stole" his job or somehow unjustly received his rewards. With a predisposition to blame others for his lack of success in his life, this young man may find a welcome respite when accessing the web pages of certain hate and militia groups.

There is an abundance of militia and hate sites to access. These sites maintained by extremist groups are completely within their rights to exist on the Internet. Just as the Anti-Defamation League has the First Amendment right to publish a website detailing its position on various aspects of social life and culture, so does the Aryan Nations.

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