

Hate on the Net: Extremist Sites, Neo-Fascism Online, Electronic Jihad

by Antonio Roversi

Review by Louis Bailey

Written by Italian sociologist Antonio Roversi and translated by Lawrence Smith, *'Hate on the Net'* falls within the area of criminology in its exploration of the Internet as a tool for inciting and promoting racially-motivated violence. Here, Roversi builds on his previous research into 'hooligan' football supporters and extreme right-wing groups in order to present the 'darker side of the net' (p. ix). To this end, the author is interested in how Italian Ultra, fascist and neo-Nazi groups self-organise in the age of the Internet. This is followed by an examination of how armed Middle Eastern groups utilise the Internet in a post-September 11th climate. Due to the unexpected death of the author soon after the book was written, the work represents the last of Roversi's ground-breaking forays into the sociology of the Internet. As such, it forms a seminal work for future research into the relationship between hate crime and the World Wide Web.

In the introduction, Roversi describes the methodology behind his research, which he summarises as mere 'desk' research lacking the more pro-active engagement of typical sociological research. However, such humbleness downplays the extent to which the author risked his own safety for the sake of his research and the urgent message communicated therein. According to David Nelken - the book's general editor - Roversi received numerous death threats soon after the book's release in Italy.

With unstated modesty, Roversi describes the emotional affects of conducting such harrowing and traumatic research, and the impossibility of remaining the detached observer. In this way, Roversi's explicitly subjective position can be interpreted as challenging more objective strands of ethnography, which extol distanced and thus allegedly more 'scientific' forms of critical evaluation but which, ultimately, lack the necessary insight which can only come with intimacy and empathy. Graphic descriptions of racial slurs and representations of racially-motivated violence are here interspersed with personal anecdotes and reflections, both in an attempt to communicate the otherwise incommunicable and to provide some light-relief. In so doing, Roversi clears a path for the reader to come face-to-face with dense material of a particularly cruel and obscene nature, material which is fuelled by a lack of respect for humanity and an excessive thirst for violence.

Despite the deeply sickening and horrific nature of the subject, Roversi avoids value judgements and is careful not to impose his own biases and opinions. Illustrative of this is his use of the term 'armed Middle Eastern groups' rather than 'terrorists' in keeping with the groups' own perceptions of their collective identity and codes of honour. Roversi's modest yet perceptive style is refreshing and serves as a necessary contrast to the heaviness of the material presented. To this end, Roversi manages to capture enough detail to successfully convey the gist of each website without dwelling on unnecessary and gruesome details merely for the sake of satisfying morbid curiosity.

In chapter one, Roversi explains the source of his intellectual curiosity pertaining to extremist sites. He describes how, whilst searching online for games created in Flash, he stumbled across a video in which a Middle Eastern Islamic group claimed responsibility for the September 11th events. Whilst anecdotes of this nature make for interesting reading, Roversi has a tendency to drift off subject. Tangential conversations about his internet usage and, in particular, his time spent in various chat rooms are rather long-winded and distracting, and, at best, contribute little to the overall argument.

Chapter two opens with Roversi 'outing' himself as a football fan and, reluctantly, as an ex-Ultra fan. He details the event of 29th May, 1985, a European Cup match between the Italian club Juventus and English team Liverpool in Brussels, to set the scene. On this day, a fatal error of judgement on the part of the organisers' led to Liverpool fans clashing with 'innocent' Juventus fans, resulting in a mass

crush and the killing of thirty-nine spectators. The remainder of the chapter traces the rise of football hooliganism in Italy and the increasing stranglehold of Ultra groups in the area of football violence and racially-mounted violence more generally. There follows an examination of various websites representing Ultra groups, the content of which is divided into three elements – graphics and logos; photographs and videos; and 'the wall' – namely, the news feed. The resulting analysis focuses on notions of group representation and collective conviction. To this end, Roversi manages to avoid the more sensationalist aspects of some journalistic accounts, which reduce the Ultra group members to the status of idiotic barbarians. Instead, and especially worryingly, Roversi shows that this is far from the case, claiming that the groups' members are 'ordinary' citizens who study, go to work and live in the suburbs. He argues that it is the clandestine nature of the group which gives it its power.

The next chapter draws on earlier research into a group of young Nazi skinheads (or 'naziskin' as they are known in Italy) in Milan. The author describes a few nights spent 'socialising' with the group for research purposes. What follows is an insightful and, at times, humorous account of the group's behaviours, their style of dress and general outlook. We are presented with a group of insular and self-segregated youth who rely on 'cameratismo' (Italian for comradeship), nationalism and 'honour' as sustained through violence, xenophobia, racism, fascism and the easy creation of enemies. Commenting on the group's love of 'Oi!' and 'RAC' ('Rock Against Communism') music, Roversi notes that their pogo-style dancing seems like 'an enactment of a brawl to music' (p. 64). This brief ethnographic account provides an interesting snapshot of fascist and neo-Nazi youth groups in Italy and, by extension, serves as a useful introduction to the chapter's main focal point, namely fascist and neo-Nazi websites.

The remainder of chapter three examines a range of fascist websites. Roversi notes wryly that nostalgia is a common feature of the websites and that pictures of Mussolini and Hitler dominate. In addition, the majority of the websites present a revisionist history of the fascist period and not only deny the Shoah (namely, the extermination of Jews in Nazi concentration camps) but also present a range of conspiracy theories, some of which go as far to claim that Nazism was the result of a Jewish plot. Roversi's witty and insightful comments here serve to highlight the bizarre and hysterical nature of these websites, providing a compelling and accessible route into an otherwise harsh and difficult terrain.

The final chapter moves away from Italy altogether and goes on to discuss the use of the web by armed 'Middle Eastern groups', as they are here referred. This section suffers from a few limitations. Firstly, the author admits that he does not understand Arabic and that, as a result, he has been restricted to analysing websites which are in English. As such, the research presented draws on only a fraction of material pertaining to Middle-Eastern armed groups. Moreover, this material could be very different in tone from that presented by Arabic-speaking sites. Whilst the author claims to have enlisted the help of a translator for a few Arabic sites, he notes that something could have easily been lost in translation. Secondly, Roversi claims that he is not an expert in Middle-Eastern affairs. Whilst he tries to justify this point by claiming that as an expert in computer communications he seeks to only examine the role of the web in what he terms an 'unconnected war' (p. 97), there is no getting away from the fact that the current situation in the Middle East is central to the focus of this chapter.

In addition to the points notes above, it would have been valuable to gain an understanding of the author's ethnicity, race and cultural background. In the previous section, he was happy to 'out' himself as a football fan but for some reason does not 'out' his position in relation to the material discussed here. As a Westerner who has chosen to interpret these websites, Roversi undoubtedly would bring cultural and racial bias to bear on his readings and, by extension, analysis. Moreover, as one who is keen to maintain an emotional engagement and subjective positioning, the decision not to 'out' himself in the final section is an unfortunate oversight which is at odds with the original intentions for the book.

Roversi starts chapter four by providing detailed background information pertaining to Internet users in Islamic countries. The author then explains his research methodology and cites his

frustration with the volatile nature of the websites which, he claims, have a tendency to disappear, sometimes altogether and sometimes reappearing elsewhere, under a new web address. As a result, the references provided are not necessarily accurate. However, despite these drawbacks, chapter four contains some fascinating insights, including a description of a video of bin Laden in Afghanistan. According to the author, the website contains two messages – one intended for 'Western' eyes and the other designed only for Muslim viewers. In the first instance, the leader wanted to show that he was still 'at large' and, thus, a threat to the 'Western' world. The latter demonstrates what the author terms the 'Muhammad paradigm', in which bin Laden drew on symbolic passages and descriptions from the Qur'an in order to align himself with the prophet Muhammad. Similarly, Roversi examines a video which is alleged to have been made on behalf of bin Laden and Al-Qa'ida following the September 11th attacks. According to Roversi, taken together, both videos are representative of the kinds of images employed by armed Middle Eastern groups online. Here, images of military heroism and victorious actions abound and are used as a means of boosting the morale of the civilian population. Such images are presented in stark contrast to the alleged inhumanity of the enemy and are shown alongside graphic images of civilian victims and, in particular, child victims.

Roversi goes on to describe the Al Fateh website, an especially disturbing website designed for children by the Palestinian group, Hamas. According to the author, illustrated children's stories preaching Islamic law and old Islamic fables are placed next to images of dead children and children soldiers. The author draws attention to the website's powerful manipulation of propagandist narratives, including martyrdom, in the weaving of children's fable and real-life war-zone. He sees them as brainwashing and warns of its disastrous consequences.

The book concludes with a discussion of the ways in which extremist groups, such as the neo-fascists and the Middle Eastern 'crusaders', have manipulated the Internet for their own violent ends. Roversi draws attention to the paradox of the Internet which, rather than representing a harmonised global community turns out to be nothing but a breeding ground for violence, conflict and division. In so doing, he shows how the Internet – a tool of mass communication and enabler of free speech – has been used as a mouthpiece for the promotion of racial disharmony, violence and war. As the examples here show, hate sites are neither sporadic nor hidden but, instead, are shown to be prevalent and indeed thriving in the present socio-political climate. As such, *'Hate on the Net'* is a timely and extremely significant piece of research which bravely tackles the most pressing issue of our time – namely, racial division and violence. Its message must not go unheeded and it is hoped that it will spur further research on the issue of extremist organising on the World Wide Web.