

# Internet sites which promote hatred or violence

## WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

- The internet is a major, if not *the* major, source of materials used for research by schools, students and teachers.
- Materials posted on the internet are not subject to the checks and balances of other publishing methods and so are more open to use by radical and extreme groups and, more problematically for the classroom, those which promote hatred or violence

## KEY QUESTIONS

### How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

Racism, sexism, religious hatred, homophobia and the spreading of ideas based on hatred were social problems long before the advent of the digital age. However, the coming of the internet has added a dimension to this by providing tools that have made the dissemination of information easier, quicker and less open to censorship.

Groups that wish to spread hatred have utilised electronic technology since it was first available and concerns about digital hatred stretch back to the mid 1980s. A report from the UN Secretary General in 1994 noted the increase in the dissemination of racist and Holocaust denial materials. In 1997 the UN Special Rapporteur's report on contemporary forms of racism declared that:

*The Internet has become the new battleground in the fight to influence public opinion. While it is still far behind newspapers, magazines, radio and television in the size of its audience, the Internet has already captured the imagination of people with a message, including purveyors of hate, racists and anti-Semites.<sup>1</sup>*

Since 1997 the amount of internet hate communication has grown rapidly and, with the growth of social networking, it has recently developed even faster. Blogs and chat-rooms, as

<sup>1</sup>. Maurice Glele-Ahanhanzo, *Implementation Of The Programme Of Action For The Second Decade To Combat Racism And Racial Discrimination* Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, CHR Res. 1996/21, UN ESCOR, 53d Sess., UN Doc. E/CN.4/1997/71 (1997).

well as websites which promote racist, sexist, homophobic or religious hatred, are now commonplace. Alongside these, people use e-mail, video sites, internet radio, instant messaging and mail-shots to replace the more traditional leaflets and posters by electronic media. The vastly reduced cost of the on-line environment has meant that avenues that would have previously been unavailable are now within the financial means of small groups. The growth of sites has been rapid.

### **What classroom challenges might arise in RE?**

Encounters with internet hate sites are most likely to emerge as a problem in relation to homework tasks since school computers will generally be Firewall protected and students are unlikely to access hate sites in the classroom. This is a problem for all school subjects but in an RE context students may come across sites with, for example, anti Semitic or anti Muslim content. There are also a number of sites which criticise religion overall in very strong terms.

### **How can teachers address such challenges?**

There are some key questions that any person who wishes to use the internet to investigate contentious issues in RE should ask. Teachers can give students guidance along these lines if setting homework tasks that require internet use.

#### ***Is the website reliable, accurate and authoritative?***

If the website comes from an official organisation with its records in the public domain it is more likely to be authoritative: for example, a charity will have information about its aims on the Charity Commission's website if it is UK based. Another test is whether the site is endorsed or recommended by an educational or professional source (e.g. in an education magazine).

#### ***What perspective is it coming from and is it appropriate for classroom use?***

As many websites are not subject to quality assurance procedures they can easily include materials that are inaccurate and unbalanced. Websites are in theory required to conform to the law and hosts are responsible for monitoring sites, particularly in relation to the promotion of hatred and violence, though this can be difficult to police. An example of this is the English Defence League (EDL) whose blog was suspended recently. However, it is possible for an organisation to use its own server and thus avoid this level of censorship.

A 'biased' perspective is not necessarily a problem. For example, a Roman Catholic website may give a particular perspective on abortion but will provide sound evidence of this particular stance or belief. Religious and belief traditions may express their views in a vigorous and uncompromising manner but an important aspect of RE is the opportunity to reflect on different views and their implications.

### ***Is the language used appropriate?***

The language that is used by posters, especially in the blog-sphere on sites such as YouTube, can be obscene, abusive and inflammatory. Students need to be helped to discriminate between material which simply makes casual use of obscene language and material which is deliberately setting out to promote hatred against people on racist, sexist, religious or homophobic grounds and uses violent language to do so. There is a distinction between material that breaks the law by promoting racial or religious hatred and material that does not break the law but is still offensive or hurtful to some people. It is, of course, not against the law to be offensive. However, teachers will wish to encourage students to apply RE classroom criteria of respect for people even where there is disagreement about their views.

### ***Is deliberate deception involved?***

Websites may purport to be one thing but may in fact be another. Some of this is on-line mischief-making of a practical joke variety but there are darker sides, for example in racist and Holocaust denial materials. This can easily be seen by looking at websites such as [www.martinlutherking.org](http://www.martinlutherking.org) which appears to be, and in a Teachers TV programme was believed by pupils to be<sup>2</sup>, about Martin Luther King but is actually hosted by a 'White Pride' organization and quickly descends into racist abuse.

### ***How might I then use these sites in the classroom?***

Some of the materials that a teacher may find on-line will be challenging and unusable in the classroom. If students are using the internet at home, and many of them will have unfettered access, they may well come across such materials. Students' concerns can be raised and considered and difficult issues brought into the light of critical scrutiny in the controlled and safe environment of the classroom, even though such websites will not themselves be used in the context of lessons. Approach any materials in an open way, and get students to look for any evidence about reliability of materials, asking questions such as:

- What perspective are the authors of this site coming from?
- Are the arguments they are making backed up with verifiable evidence?

Make space for students to be able to approach you after the lesson to discuss in confidence some of the issues that may have been raised.

<sup>2</sup>. <http://www.teachers.tv/videos/5425>

## NEXT STEPS

### Signposts for further reading

Barnett, B (2007) *Untangling the Web of Hate: Are Online 'Hate Sites' Deserving of First Amendment Protection?* Cambria Press.

Bunt, G (2009) *iMuslims Rewiring the house of Islam*, Hurst; especially Chapter 5, 'The cutting edge: militaristic jihad in cyberspace' and Chapter 6, 'Digital Jihadi battlefields: Iraq and Palestine'. However, the whole book is an extremely interesting exploration of cyber Islamic environments by a British (rather than a North American) specialist in this field.

Gerstenfeld, P; Grant, D and Chiang, C (2003) *Hate on-line: A content analysis of extremist internet sites in Analysis of Social Issues and Public Policy*, Vol 3 No 1, pp 29-44. This can be accessed at <http://www.asap-spssi.org/pdf/asap31-Gerstenfeld.pdf> Much of this relates to the USA but the material is accessible internationally.

Leets, L (2001) *Responses to Internet Hate Sites: Is Speech Too Free in Cyberspace?* in *Communication Law and Policy* Volume 6, Issue 2 April 2001, pages 287 – 317 (available through Athena academic online journal access or by purchasing download rights).

Spielhofer, T (2010) *Children's online risks and safety. A review of the available evidence*, NFER .

Stern, K (2002) *Hate and the internet*

<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=ijlTI2PHKoG&b=846637&ct=1363047> , Accessed June 2010. Based on US experience but relevant for UK as well.

### Signposts for further resources

The Media Awareness Network offers support for dealing with hate sites. Although a Canadian organization, its material offers much guidance that teachers may find useful. See its introduction at

[http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/online\\_hate/index.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/online_hate/index.cfm)

and guide to deconstructing hate sites including a description of common characteristics at [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/online\\_hate/deconst\\_online\\_hate.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/online_hate/deconst_online_hate.cfm).

The Teachers TV programme which looks at the problems with naïve or gullible acceptance of on-line materials is an excellent place to start with students or colleagues in the classroom for a wider school debate, find it at <http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Secondary-ICT-Web-Literacy-6039011/>

The UK Council for Child Internet Safety has some useful material and links, including information on how to deal with cyberbullying, on its website at [www.education.gov.uk/ukccis/](http://www.education.gov.uk/ukccis/)

## **Signposts for further action**

School to consider reviewing its internet safety policy (a) to ensure religion and belief issues are adequately covered in guidance on hate sites; (b) to ensure students have access to counselling or support if they experience material which causes them distress.

RE department or whole school to consider developing a teaching resource on the issue of internet hate sites and the misuse of other ICT media such as mobile phones to spread hatred and inflict pain.