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Online Extremism and Online Hate

Exposure among Adolescents and Young Adults in Four Nations

Many studies in the social sciences acknowledge that there is an overlap between real and virtual world experiences. While the Internet has opened many new opportunities to expand our minds, knowledge and friendship networks, it has also created new types of risks and threats. This notion is especially noteworthy when considering children and young adults. Probably the most distinct negative online behavior that has recently received scholarly attention is online extremism and hate. This article combines earlier research findings with unique comparative data to add new perspectives to the understanding of how extremist and hate materials are seen online among young people aged 15 to 30 years old. We examined the rates and the forms of exposure in four countries: Finland, the United States of America, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Our findings show that exposure to hate material is common in all four nations. Our findings should raise a red flag in the sense that hate appears to be a part of the online experience.

The Internet is used for business, politics, recreation, education, and scores of other pro-social activities; it is also used for crimes ranging from identity theft and cyberfraud to cyberbullying and terrorism. A growing body of research investigates a variety of criminal behaviours and types of cyber-victimisations, and many scholars note that there is considerable overlap between the crimes of the “real world” and those of the “virtual world”. One form of malevolent online behaviour that has

recently garnered scholarly attention is online extremism and hate. Numerous researchers document the content, goals, targets, and consequences of these messages; however, few studies analyse the extent to which people are exposed to these messages. Even fewer studies investigate if exposure to online hate and extremism varies by country; in this research we attempt to address this gap in the literature.

We begin with a brief discussion of what online extremist and hate materials are. We then review recent efforts to account for variation in exposure to these materials. Next, we report results from surveys of adolescents and young adults in four nations: Finland, the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. We then report statistics on exposure rates among young people and the social media sites where hate materials were seen and the groups materials were targeted by. We conclude the article with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications.

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Online extremist and hate materials

Online extremist and hate materials are a form of cyberviolence.¹ At its core, cyberviolence includes online materials that express extreme views of hatred toward some group. More specifically, it is the use of information communication technology (ICT) to “advocate violence against, separation from, defamation of, deception about or hostility towards others”² Thus, anyone using ICT to devalue others because of their religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, or some other group-defining characteristic is disseminating online hate or extremist ideas.³ It is similar to cyberbullying, but online extremist and hate material aim the abuse at a collective identity rather than a specific individual.

Online extremist and hate materials are disseminated by individuals and organised groups through all of the mechanisms used on the Internet: websites, blogs, chat rooms, file archives, listservers, news groups, internet communities, online video games, and web rings.⁴ Although organised hate groups have used the web since its inception,⁵ their online presence decreased after 2011.⁶ Individuals are now the primary sources of these materials, largely because groups are more easily detected than are individuals who can easily hide behind the anonymous nature of the Internet.⁷

Most online extremist and hate materials do not directly advocate violence,⁸ and exposure does not necessarily cause trauma or other ill effects. It is important to note that many people who post extremist and hate materials do not consider the material offensive. The individuals who post such materials often view these materials as “educational” rather than “criminal.” Indeed, the main reason they post materials is to educate others about their group or ideology, recruit like-minded people to their cause, and criticise others for defaming their group.⁹ Nevertheless, researchers find that exposure to these materials correlates with several negative outcomes. These negative effects include diminished levels of trust,¹⁰ mood swings and anger,¹¹ and, on occasion, violence.¹² Recently, exposure to extremist

ideology and hate materials has been linked to terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as they attempt to recruit youth to their violent causes.

Correlates of exposure

The limited number of studies analysing exposure to online extremists and hate materials¹³ have found that exposure typically increases as users enter dangerous places on the Internet or virtually interact with dangerous people. It should be noted that this contact with dangerous people does not need to be direct. Unlike offline predatory crimes, which require direct interaction between the victim and offender,¹⁴ cybercrimes do not require direct contact.¹⁵ Rather, the asynchronous nature of the Internet allows those posting these materials to offend people without direct contact; all that is needed is to go into the virtual space where an offender once posted.

Visiting sites that advocate dangerous behaviours increases the likelihood of being exposed to these materials. In a study of Finnish Facebook users, those who visited websites promoting suicide or self-mutilation were more likely to be exposed to online hate materials than those who did not visit such sites.¹⁶ In addition, just as leaving one’s home brings individuals into contact with dangerous people,¹⁷ using certain websites and services can increase exposure. For example, in a study of American youth and young adults, those using six or more Internet services were nearly twice as likely to view online hate material as were those who used fewer services.¹⁸

Visiting certain sites likely leads to exposure to extremist and hate materials indirectly simply because the more websites one visits, the greater the likelihood that one of these sites will include offensive materials. In contrast, some behaviours likely bring one into contact with offensive materials more directly. One’s online associates, for example, would influence the likelihood of coming into virtual proximity with potential offenders since offending and being a victim are highly correlated

for both offline and online victimisation.¹⁹ In a study of young Facebook users, those who produced hate materials were over four times as likely to be exposed to hate materials as compared to those who did not produce hate materials.²⁰

In addition, it is well documented that those who are victimised once are more likely to be victimised again.²¹ Moreover, those victimised offline are at a heightened risk for experiencing online victimisation.²² These correlations are in part because victims participate in activities that occur in the company of offenders.²³ These correlations could also be a result of target gratifiability.²⁴ That is, some victims have characteristics that increase risk because they appeal to the wants or desires of an offender, either tangibly or symbolically.²⁵

Interestingly, previous studies of exposure did not find consistent demographic characteristics related to exposure. For example, gender was unrelated to exposure in both a study of Finnish Facebook users²⁶ and a study of young American Internet users.²⁷ Age, however, was inversely related to exposure in the American study, but unrelated to exposure in the Finnish study.²⁸

Exposure in a cross-national context

Although a few studies investigating exposure exist, none of these compare exposure rates across nations. It is true that the Internet is global, and people can access websites and services that are hosted in a country different than the one in which they live; however, there does seem to be variation in exposure to various online risks across nations. One of the only studies that deals with the issue of varying rates of cross-national risk is the *Cross-national comparison of risks and safety on the internet*.²⁹ At least in Europe, children in countries with more press freedom are more likely to encounter online risk than are those from countries with less press freedom. In addition, even among nations that pride themselves on press freedoms, there may be varying levels of exposure due to differences in

hate speech laws, language barriers, or other cultural factors. It is therefore necessary to consider if the exposure varies cross-nationally and, if it does, how.

To address this gap in the literature, we consider exposure in four nations: Finland, the United States of America (US), Germany, and the United Kingdom (UK). These nations were selected because they are similar in a number of respects, but also differ in important ways. First, they are all relatively wealthy liberal democracies with per capita gross domestic products ranging between the 10th highest (US.) and 27th highest (UK)³⁰ Next, they all rank among the world's leading nations in ICT use, with the Internet user penetration rates ranging between 84.0 per cent in Germany to 91.5 per cent in Finland.³¹

Yet, these nations, while similar in some critical respects, are different in many aspects. For example, they have three distinct types of welfare regimes.³² The United Kingdom and United States are Liberal welfare states; Germany is a Corporatist welfare state; Finland is a Social-Democratic welfare state. These nations also vary in the extent to which they legally protect hate speech. While all of these nations constitutionally guarantee free speech, Germany restricts speech more than the other nations, and the US. restricts it the least.³³

Finally, these nations have varying levels of tolerance toward diversity, at least as measured by the Inglehart-Welzel self-expression scale.³⁴ The UK reports the highest levels of tolerance and Germany has the lowest level among these four nations. Finland and the US. have nearly identical levels that are roughly midway between Germany's and the UK's. Therefore, despite these nations' similarities, important cultural differences exist among them that could lead to variation in exposure to extremist and hate materials.

Methods and measures

We collected the data for Finland (n=555) and the US. (n=1,033) in the spring of 2013. The data for Germany (n=978) and the UK (n=999) were collected approximately one

year later. The research team originally designed the surveys in English, and native Finnish and German speakers translated the survey into Finnish and German, respectively. The surveys were then back-translated into English and compared with the original surveys. The research team and translators resolved any identified discrepancies between the versions.

Respondents in each sample were recruited from demographically balanced panels of respondents in each nation. The panels, which were administered by *Survey Sample International (SSI)*, consist of potential respondents who have previously volunteered to participate in research surveys. Panel members were recruited through random digit dialling, banner ads, and other permission-based techniques.³⁵ Email invitations were sent to a randomly selected sample of panel members stratified to mirror each nation's population between the ages of 15 to 30 on gender and geographic region. Only those between the ages of 15 and 30 were selected for the study. This age group was selected because they have the highest rates of Internet use.

Our primary variable of interest was the extent to which respondents were exposed to hate material while online (*Hate exposure*). To measure exposure, respondents were asked, "In the past three months, have you seen hateful or degrading writings or speech online, which inappropriately attacked certain groups of people or individuals?" The variable had two response options (yes/no). We are also interested in personal victimisation experiences (*Hate victimisation*). This variable was measured by the following statement, "I have personally been the target of hateful or degrading material online" with response options (yes/no).

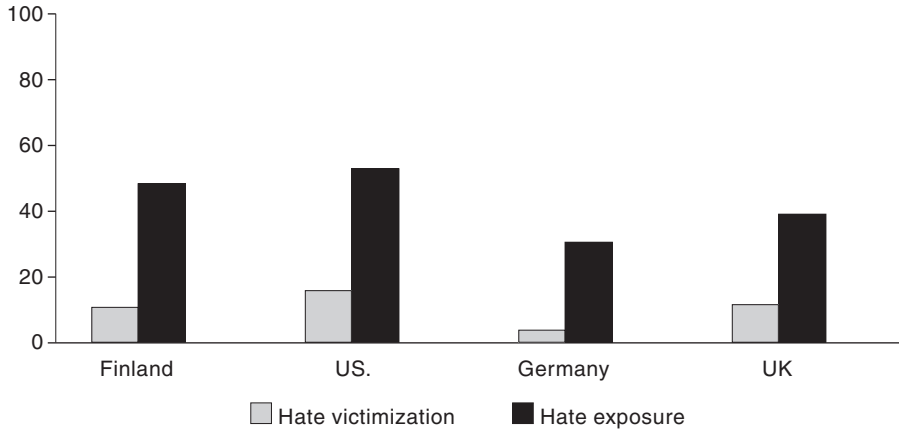
In addition to exposure to online hate among adolescents and young adults in the four countries, we examined the online services on which the respondents saw hate material and the specific groups these hate materials targeted. For the sake of simplicity, we will present all of our findings below using descriptive statistics.

Results

Figure 1 shows the proportions of respondents who were exposed to online hate material and who were personally victimised by being targets of hate materials. Of the over 3,500 surveyed adolescents and young adults, a notable share witnessed hateful or degrading material. Approximately 53 per cent of Americans, 48 per cent of Finnish and 39 per cent of British respondents said they were exposed to online hate material. The proportion is somewhat lower in Germany with 31 per cent exposed. However, among all survey respondents, far fewer said they had personally been targets of hate. Again, the share was highest in the US. (with 16%), and lowest in Germany (with only 4%). The proportions of victimised respondents are 12 per cent for the UK and 10 per cent for Finland. These findings indicate that although exposure to hate material is relatively common among young people, not many of them have been targets of such material.

Additionally, our focus was to determine where, exactly, the adolescents and young adults were exposed to online hate material. It is well-known that young people are active online using various social media platforms,³⁶ we do not necessarily know which one of these can be regarded as potentially dangerous across the four countries, but Table 1 provides some perspective to this issue. Please note that the percentages reported in the table are for those who were exposed to online hate material (e.g., approximately 53% of the US. sample and 48% of Finnish respondents).

The most popular online services were also the most common sources of hate material. Facebook was clearly the most common source for witnessing hate material in all countries. Similarly, YouTube was consistently the second most common source of exposure, although it was a distant second in all four nations. Otherwise, the prevalence of hate material in different online sites tends to vary from country to country. For example, interesting differences by country were observed when comparing Twitter and general message boards. Over 20 per cent of those exposed to

Figure 1. Exposure and personal victimisation to online hate by country (per cent)

Note: The numbers of observations are Finland=555, US.=1,033, Germany=987, UK=999.

online hate in the UK and the US. witnessed such material on Twitter. The comparable figure in Germany was only 8 per cent, and it was only 4 per cent in Finland. At the same time, more than 41 per cent of Finnish respondents who were exposed to hate content witnessed such material on general discussion boards. The proportions were less than 20 per cent in all other countries. In our opinion, these findings reflect, in part, the fact that young consumers in different nations tend to be active in different media. Moreover, various

sites are probably used for diverse purposes in different countries.

We also examined who, or what characteristic, was targeted in the online hate materials. Again, these questions were examined only for those who reported that they had witnessed hateful or degrading material. Table 2 shows the proportions of respondents who saw hate material about each targeted groups. As the table shows, in all four countries, most hate materials focused on sexual orientation and ethnicity. Political views were also com-

Table 1. Hate exposure in SNS sites and online environments by those exposed to hate material (per cent)

	Finland	US.	Germany	UK
Facebook	48	63	77	64
YouTube	37	48	44	37
Twitter	4	21	9	26
Tumblr	3	14	4	13
Wikipedia	2	5	4	5
General message board	41	19	15	15
Newspaper message boards	22	6	14	7
Blogs	16	13	8	8
Home pages	5	5	6	2
Photosharing sites (e.g., Instagram)	4	7	3	4
Online games	5	6	5	4
Instant messengers	2	4	4	4
Pop-up sites	2	6	2	5

Note: The numbers of observations are Finland=266, US.=551, Germany=299; UK=387.

Table 2. Target of hate as witnessed by those exposed to hate material (per cent)

	Finland	US.	Germany	UK
Sexual Orientation	63	61	50	55
Ethnicity	67	60	48	57
Political Views	29	48	36	31
Religious Conviction/Belief	40	45	44	43
Gender	25	44	20	44
Physical Appearance	44	41	31	39
Physical Disability	17	13	17	18
Terrorism	18	22	15	19
School Shootings	9	21	6	10
Misanthropy or General Hatred of People	23	18	28	16

Note: The numbers of observations are Finland=266, US.=551, Germany=299, UK=387.

mon targets of hate, although there were considerable differences by country. In the US., 48 per cent of respondents noted that they had seen hate targeting political views, while in Germany the proportion was 36 per cent; it was approximately 30 per cent in both Finland and the UK. Another difference can be noted regarding hate material targeting school shootings. In the US., hateful material targeting school shootings was witnessed by over 20 per cent of respondents, while fewer than ten per cent saw this type of hate material in all other countries. This finding is likely due to the fact that the US. has witnessed more school shootings than any other nation in the world.³⁷

Discussion

The Internet revolutionised social interaction, and increasing numbers of youth now spend a considerable amount of time online. While the Internet has opened countless opportunities to expand our minds, experiences, and friendship networks, it has also created new risks and threats. Online extremism and online hate material are one such threat. In this article, we investigated exposure to online hate material among adolescents and young adults, as well as the online services on which they saw such material. Additionally, we examined the specific groups these materials targeted.

Our research contributes to a growing literature about online, or viral, hate and extremism. While a number of researchers

have documented the growth of hate groups and hate material online, few have tracked if these groups and this material are actually seen, read, or heard. Using a unique sample of young Finns, Americans, Germans and Brits ages fifteen to thirty, we attempted to answer that question. Our results show that exposure to hate material is common in all four nations. This finding should raise a red flag in the sense that hate appears to be a part of the online experience.

The United States is famous for legally privileging the freedom of speech, even if this leads to greater protection for hate speech.³⁸ In part because of the relative lenient approach to hate speech in the United States, numerous prominent and organised hate groups operate there, and many of these groups are active online.³⁹ Our findings are also noteworthy in the European context. Finnish young people report seeing hate material more than German and British young people. Although exact comparisons do not exist, Finland has been reported as being a leading country in terms of both user activity and exposure to online risks.⁴⁰

Most of the hate material was seen in the most popular social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube, but our results show that this kind of material was also relatively common in different discussion boards. In addition, in the UK and US., Twitter users report seeing this kind of material frequently. This might be due to the fact that there is currently

an increase in both overall Twitter usage and the amount of hate related extremist material uploaded and shared on Twitter. Our results also show that the hate material encountered by our respondents most commonly targeted sexual orientation, ethnicity or nationality, physical appearance, gender, religious beliefs, and disability. While there were some similarities across nations regarding what was targeted for hateful expressions, notable country differences existed.

As others have noted,⁴¹ online hate is difficult to control and laws are likely to be ineffective. Not only do producers of online hate material invoke their right to free speech, laws banning viral hate are extremely difficult to enforce. We believe our findings regarding the extent to which youth are exposed to this material should serve as a warning for all authorities concerned about the potential threat posed by online hate and extremism.

Notes

1. e.g., Wall, 2001; Hawdon et al., 2014.
2. Franklin, 2010, p. 2.
3. See Hawdon et al., 2014; Oksanen et al., 2014.
4. Amster, 2009; Douglas, 2007; Franklin, 2010.
5. See Amster, 2009; Douglas, 2007; McNamee et al., 2010.
6. Potok, 2015.
7. Potok, 2015.
8. Douglas et al., 2005; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; McNamee et al., 2010.
9. See Douglas, 2007; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; McNamee et al., 2010.
10. Näsi et al., 2015.
11. Tynes et al., 2004; Tynes, 2006.
12. Daniels, 2008; Foxman & Wolf, 2013; Freilich et al., 2011.
13. E.g., Hawdon et al., 2014; Räsänen et al., 2015.
14. Cohen & Felson, 1979.
15. See Reyns et al., 2011.
16. Räsänen et al., 2015.
17. Cohen & Felson, 1979.
18. Hawdon et al., 2014.
19. e.g., Jennings et al., 2012; Bossler & Holt, 2009; Holt & Bossler, 2008; Holtfreter et al., 2008.
20. Räsänen et al., 2015.
21. See Fagan & Mazerolle, 2011; Reyns et al., 2013.
22. Helweg-Larsen et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Oksanen & Keipi, 2013; Räsänen et al., 2015.
23. Cohen & Felson, 1979.
24. For a discussion see Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996.
25. Augustine et al., 2002; Hawdon, 2014.
26. Oksanen et al., 2014.
27. Hawdon et al., 2014.
28. Hawdon et al., 2014; Oksanen et al., 2014.
29. Lobe et al., 2011.
30. International Monetary Fund 2015.
31. International Telecommunication Union, 2014.
32. See Esping-Andersen, 1990.
33. See Allen & Norris, 2011; Bleich, 2011.
34. See Inglehart, 2006; World Value Survey, 2014.
35. Lorch, 2012; see also Näsi et al., 2014.

36. e.g., Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011.
37. e.g., Hawdon et al., 2012; Sandberg et al., 2014.
38. See Allen and Norris, 2011; Bleich, 2011.
39. See Walker, 1994; Hawdon et al., 2014.
40. Lobe et al., 2011.
41. e.g., Foxman and Wolf, 2013.

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Related Project

Hate Communities: A Cross-National Comparison

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Researchers: Dr. Matti Näsi, Dr. Teo Keipi, M.Soc. Sc. Markus Kaakinen, Dr. Vili Lehdonvirta (February-May 2013), L.L.M. Emma Holkeri (February 2013-January 2014).

Collaborators: James Hawdon, Virginia Tech, the US.; Vili Lehdonvirta, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, UK, and Frank Robertz, Brandenburg Applied University for Police, Germany.

Funding: Kone Foundation, February 2013-July 2016 (€231,550). The project is a seminal study of hatred and violence on the Internet and the role online hate plays in the lives of youth in a broad sense. The project surveys online activities of 15 to 30-year-old Finns, Americans, Germans and Britons, their familiarity with and participation in online hate groups, their vulnerability to the groups' rhetorical techniques, and their attitudes and beliefs about them.

Selected international publications

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