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Revealing Hate, Safeguarding Democracy
A Summer at the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project

The Intelligence Project has a very specific and seemingly simple two-step mission statement: to expose hate groups for that they are, and to circulate this information so as to inoculate society against their hateful rhetoric. The mission statement implicitly points to a very important aspect of how many hate groups operate in America— that is, in a covert manner that often may not at first seem like “hate.” The vast majority of hate groups designated, monitored, and written about by the SPLC, do not look wear ominous white hoods like the Klan, or stop through the streets of Charleston yelling “Jews will not replace us” (though many white nationalist hate group rhetoric is just as bombastic and vitriolic, as evidenced by the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally). White nationalists are the only group that operate in such an overt way that continually raises red flags and draws media attention. More insidious, and trickier for the untrained mind to ascertain, is the other hate groups that hide in plain sight. They are comprised of men who wear expensive tailored suits who lobby the United Nations, work at reputable academic institutions, and speak on cables news shows.

My first few weeks at the Intelligence Project were spent trying to extinguish any preconceived sense I had of what hate “looked like,” as I quickly learned that looks were deceitful, and those devoted to espousing hate took a vested interest in marketing hate so expertly that it their animus was cleverly hid from plain sight, at least at first. Hate group leaders, I soon learned, are often masters at mixing violent rhetoric against a specific group of people

with pseudo patriotism, a sense of indignation at the changes and challenges of globalization, and a certain moral indignation. Hate in America is packaged neatly in a box, tied up in a ribbon, and presented to sympathetic ears in easily digestible chunks on YouTube channels, Fox News broadcasts, and weekly email newsletters. Hate simply did not always seem like hate, so it was up to the Intelligence Project to reveal it, a task that few other organizations take on.

At the beginning of my internship, I along with the two other summer interns met via video chat with Heidi Beirich, the Director of the Intelligence Project. She explained the departmental goals two with two simple objectives:

- 1) reveal hatred and expose hate groups, their activities, and how they operate and sustain itself
- 2) keep hate and hate groups out of the mainstream and force them to the margins of society

The SPLC designates over one thousand active hate groups in America. These designations are carefully organized by ideology. No hate group is identical to another: they not only follow different ideologies, but also have different membership demographics, different power structures, competing tactics, and sometimes, compete with one another and disagree ardently over strategy. The Intelligence Project (IP) contends that hate groups do not just hate for the sake of it, but rather that their actions correspond to wider world views, adherence to conspiracy theories, and ideologies. Understanding the ideology of the members of these groups is vital in not only revealing their respective activities, but also helps understand how their actions reflect deep-seeded beliefs that many people hold. IP labels groups in according to the following ideologies: anti-LGBTQ, anti-Muslim, anti-Immigrant, white nationalist, neo-confederate, male supremacist, Radical Traditionalist Catholics, and general hate. These

descriptors are not accidental, but are employed rather because of they lean more towards journalistic language. This method of organization is not fail-proof. While groups often do fit into one category over another, there is often overlap. Anti-LGBTQ hate group often also espouses male-supremacist traits; the anti-Muslim groups also heavily overlap with the anti-Immigrant lobby.

The IP writing style, both of the Hatewatch Blog and the Intelligence Report magazine, was also of utmost importance to understand in order to fully appreciate the scope and undertaking of the department. IP never argues that someone is Islamophobic, but rather that someone spreads anti-Muslim sentiment. IP never writes that someone hates gays, unless the person in question says it themselves, but rather writes that their rhetoric is anti-LGBT. This allows the department to come across as speaking the truth about each group, without seeming politically motivated.

This turn to more objective and journalistic language was, however, evolving during my summer. A new managing editor was recently hired, and the editor prioritized streamlining language throughout the blog and magazine. Past Intelligence Project content, while still telling the truth and exposing hate groups, did dip into a tone that could be understood as politically interested. At an editorial workshop midway through the summer, it was made clear that the work of monitoring groups and reporting on activities was simply too important to butcher, or run the risk of seeming overly “liberal” instead of factual and unbiased. At times throughout the summer I struggled with this. After turning in a few pages of writing in my second week, the majority of the edits I received were simply deleting adjectives. Reporting straight facts with no

added moral commentary was the objective, as hateful rhetoric, when exposed clearly and simply, speaks for itself.

In the first few days of my internship, I did not understand why so much time was spent on understanding ideology, as I had yet to understand still ignorant to the sophisticated level of political organizing and savvy with which so many hate groups are equipped. I soon realized that to fight hatred, it is not enough to simply call it out. One must understand where it comes from. Calling something “hateful” is only the first step. Understanding where it comes from, how it evolves and manifests, is vital to lessening the load of vitriol. By attempting to understand the world view of someone who runs an anti-Muslim or male supremacist group, one is exercising her critical thinking skills. Prior to my summer I rarely attempted to understand why people thought the way they thought if I deemed it horrendous, racist, or overtly prejudiced. Internally I often gave up on attempting to understand people who seem so hateful and say such horrible things, thinking such vitriol had no rhyme or reason. But at the Intelligence Project, while likely never fully “getting” why some act the way they do, a concerted effort is undertaken to attempt to understand why one thinks the way they do. This attempt to put oneself in another’s shoes is an act of critical thinking.

Critical thinking based on facts and trustworthy information is the foundation to any healthy democracy. The monitoring and reporting activities of the Intelligence Project is a valuable aspect of safeguarding democracy, as many hate groups spread misinformation and fake news in support of their various goals. For example, the Clarion Project, an anti-Muslim hate group, has spread fake news about “at-home terrorists” on their website. Ryan Mauro, a leader of the group, has gone on Fox News and argued that there are dozens of “terrorist training cells”

throughout the United States, without any substantial evidence or proof. This type of blatant misinformation only spreads fear, and support for groups like the Clarion Project come from lies and fake news. When these groups are exposed and fake news revealed, citizens are better able to make political decisions based on sound evidence.

Fighting the spread of misinformation is an important step in allowing people to exercise critical thinking skills, and to judge and act by themselves. In my first few weeks at the department, I noticed that there was a considerable amount of “group think,” within these groups. Misinformation combined with group think results only in further political polarization. When one listens to Mauro, or another hate group leader who effectively markets himself to Fox News as an ‘expert,’ and who has been interviewed on the news network multiple times, one must think critically about what he is saying before agreeing or disagreeing with his perspective and arguments. However so many hate group leaders fostered an environment of group think by fear mongering. Mauro is quick to make an emotional argument, often asking viewers if they “want a radical holy war waged on their own homeland,” or will tell parents that their children are bound to be indoctrinated in public schools into radical Muslim camps. An atmosphere of rational thought, critical thinking, and individual contemplation is absent. Instead, the viewer is contemplating the safety of her child. The viewer believes what Mauro says, despite how preposterous it may sound, because he is legitimized by a news organization, and is seen as an expert by a Fox reporter. The viewer does not exercise critical thinking skills of her own, but is rather swept up in Mauro’s forewarnings of the supposed evils of Islam and imminent spread of Sharia law. Facts and thinking take a back seat.

When Hannah Arendt wrote, “The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be evil or good,” she precisely picks up on the unthinking nature of hate. People hate because they are not thinking, engaging in simple group think, or are passively consuming misinformation and fake news. In one of our weekly meetings, Keegan Hanks, my supervisor and the Interim Deputy Director of Research, articulated a similar thought, arguing people involved in hate groups do not think that they are being hateful at all. The problem lies in the ‘not thinking.’ As the weeks progressed, I agreed with this sentiment more and more. Often while researching a particular group I would notice how comment threads or forums tended to be endless unthinking echo chambers. Everyone seemed to simply agree with one another. The value of healthy disagreement and lively discussion and debate is, I realized, vital to combatting the spread of hate.

Research Methods

In order to understand the ideologies, of which there are many, I spent the first week of my internship reading, reading, and reading more. I read dozens of past issues of the *Intelligence Report*, the department’s biannual magazine. I read articles upon articles published by RightWingWatch, an organization that monitors hate speech in media, to get familiar with the type of language and signifiers hate groups use. I quickly learned that many groups utilize a certain Orwellian double-speak: anti-LGBTQ groups replace gay with “pedophile;” anti-Muslim groups say “terrorist” instead of Muslim. I was encouraged to go down rabbit holes that one often tries to avoid on the internet. I watched YouTube channels of anti-LGBTQ leaders and actually read the comments. I listened to podcasts, watched interviews, and read through sequestered chatrooms and quarantined Reddit threads that proliferated with some of the most

disgusting slurs. It was emotionally draining and a total shock to the psyche. But doing this, and becoming somewhat acquainted with the language used by group members, I began to become a bit uncomfortable with how commonplace reading horrible slurs became.

In my first week I sat down with a few different desk leads for research tutorials. Much of what they taught me reflected rather sophisticated research techniques that I would not utilize in my ten weeks in the department— nonethless, these tutorials provided a fascinating insight into the high level of intelligence techniques the department is engaged in. Henry Charter, a senior researcher who worked on the white supremacist desk, gave us a tutorial in IntelTechniques, a software used to collect any and all data available on the internet about a particular person. This software scans the entire internet and compiles an extensive portfolio of data. Charter said that he and other researchers often used this software when trying to uncover the identities of hate group leaders who took part in the 2017 Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally. As a test-run, he suggested I plug my name into the software, to see the scope of information available on the internet. I did, and was shocked at the results. Every place I had lived, with my exact address and approximate years of residence popped up. Each school I attended, my college, and each name of my immediate and many members of my extended family members filled the screen. None of this information was anything I yearned to keep secret, yet seeing the name and address of my aunt in Michigan, and my sister in North Carolina was perturbing. This software, however intrusive it may feel, is extremely helpful when trying to (dox) hate group members. The weight of this information and the invasion into privacy (despite all of the information being a readily available in public records) did not fall lightly on Charter’s shoulders. He said he would never run someone’s name that was not an explicit target of an investigation. He also said, “No matter

how crazy some of these people may seem, how horribly racist and awful they may appear, you can never forget that they are human, and that there is a human beneath all of that.” It was a healthy reminder, as I so often felt that these people were monsters and evil. And I also had to wonder how cruel humans could be.

The 501c3 Project

I worked on the 501c3 project with the other research intern, a University of Georgia rising senior named Alec. We were given a list of roughly fifty SPLC-designated hate groups that were registered with the IRS as tax-exempt. The groups registered themselves as charities, churches, educational non-profits, and other entities that the government deemed worthy of tax-exempt status. Our task was rather simple: research each group and write a paragraph or two that exposes hate. We were to research the leaders, the members, and compile a “greatest hits” of some of the worst and most hateful things they said. We scrubbed YouTube Channels, boomer websites, Patreon pages, and a whole slew of ‘news’ websites to collect information. The design of the project was, in some ways, a microcosm of the Intelligence Project’s wider goals. In researching each group and writing a brief on its hate-related activities, our goal was not to paint a horrifying image of the group members, or to name call, nor point fingers. Rather we were instructed to take a journalistic approach, and reveal the truth. We researched the groups and simply reprinted what its leaders openly said in interviews, in podcasts, and on their websites. We did not judge or condemn, but rather reveal, label the ideology, and explain why they are designated as a hate group.

The goal of the profiling project was not to inform the IRS that these groups should not receive tax-free donations, but was rather to create a docket of groups who espouse hateful and

violent rhetoric while receiving tax-free benefits. There was talk of the profiles being sent to AmazonSmile, so that these groups would no longer appear on Amazon's webpage as groups available for donation. Additionally, a future edition of the Intelligence Report, the biannual magazine, is scheduled to focus upon the "business of hate," delving into how groups make money and how they impact wider economic issues. This project, of simply compiling profiles of each 501c3, was a small starting point for such future issues. Furthermore, some of the groups on the list had not been written about in a while, or had no concrete profile on the Hatewatch website. Some of the work we were doing was simply bringing together new information on groups and giving it to the corresponding lead researcher.

Alec and I began our research, organizing the fifty-odd groups by ideology. We started with the anti-LGBTQ groups. We devoted a week to each ideology, profiling about six to ten groups per week. Organizing our research in this manner was beneficial and helped us focus. Each ideology was a beast unto its own, and to properly profile a group, it was helpful to be fully immersed in one ideology at a time. At the end of each week, we met with the "desk lead" for the ideology we worked on. We got an hour to talk to the specialist, asking questions about certain groups that we had a hard time finding on the internet.

Hate groups designated as espousing anti-LGBTQ sentiments comprised the first round of profiles Alec and I wrote. We split the list in half, each working on five groups. Sharing an office suite and with our desks right next to one another, we were able to work together, asking each other if we had heard of a certain leader, or what a particular acronym meant. In our first few days of research we quickly realized that the groups, while different, were inherently intertwined as they shared a common ideology and worked towards a similar goal: completely

ostracizing and alienating LGBTQ people. No group, we learned, works in isolation. Rather they bolster support for one another. One group hate group leader, a Colorado-based Christian pastor who hosted a biweekly podcast called “Generations with Vision,” often advertised various publications from a publishing house that the SPLC designated as hate group, as they mainly circulated texts and materials that were overtly hateful, openly advocating for the death penalty for gay and lesbian people, and often linking gay people with pedophilia.

After about four days of researching, we submitted our profile drafts to Elizabeth, the senior researcher in charge of monitoring all anti-LGBTQ groups. She read through our drafts with track-changes, editing line-by-line. Alec and I were a bit shocked when we received the first round of edits. In dealing with such horrible slurs and hateful language, I was quick to name call in my first round of profiles. I called people homophobic, and even once described their language as ‘detrimental to a healthy of society.’ Elizabeth made clear that if we were to name call we would only be adding to the polarization and animus among clashing political groups. Just as had been explained at the editorial workshop, the hate speaks for itself. IP is tasked with research and clear reporting, not hyperbolic name calling.

My Experience

Everyday at the Intelligence Project was a somewhat surreal experience, as vital work that almost no other organization does, or is equipped to do, is conducted in a bland, nondescript, taupe walled and carpeted office space on an unassuming street in Decatur, Georgia. It looks not dissimilar to the set of *The Office*. The Intelligence Project, while physically housed in Decatur, is still based partially in Montgomery, Alabama, at the SPLC main building. While the majority of Center operations still occur in Montgomery, there are SPLC offices throughout the deep

South (in New Orleans, Miami, Decatur, and small towns in Texas and Georgia near the immigrant detention centers). Many Intelligence Project researchers work remotely (from their homes in Washington State, California, and New York), as well as in Montgomery.

My floor housed the Immigrant Justice Project and the Intelligence Project. The Immigrant Justice Project, which has regional sites near major immigration detention centers, is consumed with defending those currently being confined in detention centers opened and maintained (or rather, not maintained) initially under the Trump administration. The Immigrant Justice Project employed five legal interns, all rising third year law students. We often socialized together, and I appreciated the opportunity to learn about the other important focuses of the Center.

The internship, while immensely rewarding, was also remarkably emotionally draining. Monitoring hate groups is inherently taxing, as to do so, I had to immerse myself in the darkest parts of the internet that I previously never dared to enter. In order to report on hate speech, one has to first witness and fully experience it. This was very very hard for me. I am a sensitive person, and had a very hard time reading, researching, and reporting, without letting such vitriol sink into my psyche and affect my disposition. Alec, my fellow intern, had a similar experience. Reading pages of comment threads by white supremacists, listening to talk radio in which the women are regarded as mere property of men, and hearing the n-word casually dropped multiple times a minute in interviews on YouTube wore heavily on us. The beginning of the internship was especially hard, as everything was new to me. I left work at 5:00 feeling unbelievably tired and incredibly depleted. I relied on exercise and yoga to cleanse myself of the day, and did not want to tell anyone in my personal life the extent of the hate speech I witnessed online. As I write

this, I am tearing up. I would call my parents after work, somewhat inconsolable, wanting desperately to explain why I was so disturbed while in equal measure avoiding uttering any of the vitriol that filled my screen every day. I often wondered how the researchers around me dealt with it. I grew increasingly cynical about our state of politics, and ever more furious at the state of our divided country. I realized then—and still believe—that we currently live in such a polarized world that conversation between two groups feels almost impossible. How can we speak to each other when we do not share facts, or language? As I became more immersed in the work, the Intelligence Project’s goal of pushing hate from the mainstream to the margins, seemed to be farther and farther away.

Margins Moving to the Mainstream

About halfway through my internship I met with Samantha, the desk lead in charge of the anti-Muslim desk. She stressed that with this ideology, more than others, understanding the network was the most important thing. The anti-Muslim lobby has roots in academia, with many hate group leaders recognized as ‘experts’ on Islam, or credited by reputable universities and popular in academic circles. The network is extensive, and received its biggest platform from Fox News. Fox News, Samantha argued, continually invited people such as Daniel Pipes, who received his PhD from Harvard University and who routinely runs the lecture circuit (most recently at Pepperdine University), as an expert on Islam and Middle-East relations. Despite his impressive academic credentials, Pipes is a hate group leader. He started CampusWatch and JihadWatch, two anti-Muslim hate groups that encourage Americans to monitor the lives of Muslims, or those who simply may appear to be Muslim. Fox News interviews people with just enough academic credentials to pass as “experts,” and in return people like Pipes get airtime and

name recognition. Pipes then becomes, to some audiences, synonymous with “expert.” Fox News broadcasts news that fits its political and ideological goals while couching it in academic parlance, passing hateful rhetoric as expert analysis. Talking heads like Pipes, organizations like Middle East Forum, and broadcasters like Fox News, simultaneously legitimize each other. This network is so scary precisely because of how overt it is. Listen to Pipes’ words long enough, and one hears the hate. He routinely encourages his followers to “monitor” people who look like Muslims, fomenting an atmosphere of suspicion. But Pipes is only powerful because he is legitimized by institutions like Fox News. In turn, Fox News utilizes “experts” with degrees from Harvard, no matter the deliberate misinformation or hate speech these ‘experts’ may spread. It is a symbiotic relationship with well-oiled wheels. Without the network, Pipes would be speaking into the abyss. But thanks to Fox News, Pipes’ vitriol is broadcasted into the homes of millions Americans, daily.

The anti-Muslim network is a prime example of how hate becomes institutionalized, and hidden in plain sight. The anti-Muslim groups are not wearing white hoods like the Ku Klux Klan. They are not meeting in secluded areas, and are not seeking to work in private. They are public, and they comprise institutions. When I asked Samantha if anti-Muslim hate groups were on the rise, she answered, “No, they are declining because there is no need for action. Anti-Muslim leaders have successfully infiltrated the mainstream. They work in the White House; they work at the Department of Defense. There is no longer a great need for grass-roots anti-Muslim organizing. They are the mainstream.”

Samantha’s words lingered in the air. This trajectory that she described is precisely why the department exists— to combat hateful margins of society to infiltrate the mainstream. That

hate groups, especially under the Trump administration, have enjoyed such institutional power, makes the work the Southern Poverty Law Center, and specifically the Intelligence Project, that much more important. I am very grateful for my time at the Center, and know that the skills I learned and the way I learned to think will continue to indelibly impact whatever future jobs I may have.