

The Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project: A Story
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Introduction

"...Until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream," the famous Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. quote that one cannot escape while working at the Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) Montgomery Office, as the cascading waterfall outside the Civil Rights Memorial has it printed. The SPLC sits right in the center of one of the most consequential cities in the mid-twentieth century, its rising building sits squarely next to the famous Dexter Avenue, where Dr. King's church is located, and where history has moved past through every protest. There, in this space of consequential ideas and actions from the formation of the Second Wave of Black Resistance, the SPLC was founded in 1971 at the tail end of this moment of societal resistance, as it transitioned into a more divided movement. The SPLC was founded originally as solely a law firm working to support southern minorities by fighting the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups, as well as targeting Southern state governments. In its more than half a century of history it has ballooned in its operation; now it not only serves as a law firm, but has its own internal research teams, data collection and publishing arms, and other public-facing initiatives. Taken together, these branches target hate from its source to its outcome, treating extremism as both a legal problem and a social one that must be tracked, documented, and countered on multiple fronts at once.

One of the SPLC's newest initiatives has been the state offices, where each office is built to create community resources, outreach, and focus in the areas where they serve. This includes getting youth engaged in, as the Montgomery office calls it, "hyperlocal" issues, matters of policy and community life that are specific to the neighborhoods and counties where young people actually live, rather than abstract national debates. This project is a part of every office and convenes once a year to bring together every youth group under the SPLC's umbrella,

allowing organizers from different states to compare strategies and share what has and has not worked in their communities. Another focus of the state offices is getting people registered to vote, and informing residents about the ways they are affected by the legislation and policies at their particular level of governance, whether municipal, county, or state. The state offices work with the 501(c)(4) portion of the SPLC to advocate against hate-based policies at the state level that affect the communities they support. This split structure, dividing advocacy work from the charitable and educational work of the main organization, allows the SPLC to engage in political advocacy without jeopardizing the 501(c)(3) non-profit status that governs the bulk of its operations.

Underlying nearly all of this outward-facing work is the SPLC's Intelligence Project, the research arm responsible for monitoring, cataloguing, and publishing on hate groups and extremist movements across the United States. The Intelligence Project is best known publicly for its annual "hate map," which tracks the number and location of active hate groups nationwide, but its work extends well beyond that single product. Analysts within the project follow the rhetoric, membership, and activities of white nationalist organizations, militia movements, anti-government groups, and a range of other extremist formations, feeding what they find back into the litigation, policy, and community work described above. It is this research infrastructure, more than the law firm itself, that gives the SPLC's public statements their evidentiary weight and that other researchers, journalists, and policymakers frequently cite when trying to understand the shape of organized hate in a given region or period.

It is worth noting, in the interest of transparency, that the Intelligence Project is currently under indictment. This legal matter is a live and unresolved issue, and it is mentioned here not to litigate its merits but to be forthright about the environment surrounding the organization at the

time of this research. That said, the indictment had no bearing on the research conducted for this project. The data collected, the interviews carried out, and the analysis presented in the pages that follow were pursued independently of that legal proceeding, and no part of this study relies on materials, funding, or cooperation that the indictment calls into question. The decision to continue this research without alteration reflects a judgment that the questions being asked here, about how a legacy civil rights organization structures its local offices, engages youth, and translates research into advocacy, remain worth answering regardless of the outcome of unrelated legal action.

This introduction, then, situates the present study at the intersection of place and institution. Montgomery is not an incidental backdrop for the SPLC's headquarters; it is a city whose streets, churches, and monuments actively narrate the history that the organization claims as its inheritance. Working inside that geography shapes how staff describe their mission, how they train new organizers, and how they explain the stakes of hyperlocal issues to teenagers who may know Dexter Avenue only as a name on a map rather than as the route of a movement. Understanding the SPLC, and the state offices in particular, requires holding both halves of this story together: the organization's origin as a scrappy legal shop confronting the Klan in the 1970s, and its current form as a sprawling, multi-armed institution with research analysts, community organizers, lobbyists, and lawyers all working under one roof. The chapters that follow take up that task, examining how the state office model functions in practice, how it balances advocacy with its non-profit obligations, and what its youth and voter engagement work suggests about the SPLC's evolving theory of change.

At the Intelligence Project

The Intelligence Project is often described from the outside as a single unit, a research office that produces the SPLC's hate map and issues occasional reports on extremist violence. In practice, it is a far more multifaceted organization than that description suggests, made up of several distinct desks, each with its own subject matter, its own rhythms of work, and its own relationship to the broader mission of the SPLC. Understanding how the Intelligence Project actually functions requires taking these internal divisions seriously, because the desk a researcher sits on shapes almost everything about their daily work: which extremist movements they track, which sources they cultivate, how often they speak to journalists, and how their findings eventually make their way into the public reports, legal filings, and communications materials that carry the SPLC's name.

I served on the mainstream desk during my time with the Intelligence Project, and that vantage point inevitably colors the account that follows. The mainstream desk, as its name suggests, is tasked with monitoring extremism that has migrated into or originated from more visible, mainstream political and media spaces. This includes tracking public figures, commentators, and organizations whose rhetoric edges into or openly embraces extremist talking points, even when those figures maintain a veneer of respectability that keeps them out of the more overtly militant corners of the movement landscape. The work on this desk often involves parsing subtler forms of radicalization: coded language, dog whistles, and the slow normalization of ideas that would have been unthinkable in mainstream discourse a decade earlier. It is, in many ways, the desk most directly concerned with the boundary between the fringe and the center, and with how that boundary shifts over time.

Alongside the mainstream desk sits the anti-government desk, which focuses on militia movements, sovereign citizen groups, and other organizations and individuals who define themselves in opposition to federal, state, or local government authority. This desk tracks armed groups, monitors their training activities and rhetoric, and pays close attention to moments of confrontation between these groups and law enforcement or government institutions. Given the volatility of some of the movements it covers, researchers on the anti-government desk tend to develop particular expertise in firearms culture, constitutional theory as interpreted by these movements, and the loose, often overlapping networks that connect different anti-government factions to one another.

Another desk, general hate, covers the more traditional targets that the SPLC has monitored since its earliest days: white nationalist organizations, neo-Nazi groups, Ku Klux Klan chapters, and other organizations built around racial or religious hatred. This desk maintains much of the data that feeds the annual hate map and carries forward the institutional memory of decades of monitoring these movements as they have splintered, rebranded, and reorganized in response to public pressure, legal action, and shifts in the broader political climate. Researchers here often specialize in particular strands of the movement, developing deep familiarity with the history and internal politics of specific organizations rather than surveying the landscape at a more general level.

Another desk, often referred to internally as Hopewatch, takes a different orientation from the other three. Rather than focusing exclusively on tracking active extremist activity, Hopewatch pays close attention to the process of disengagement and deradicalization, following former extremists who have left movements, documenting the pathways people take out of hate groups, and, where possible, supporting or studying the networks of formers and interventionists

who work to pull people away from extremism. This desk sits at something of an intersection between research and a more applied, almost social-work-adjacent function, and it reflects an institutional recognition that understanding hate requires understanding not only how people are drawn into it but how they find their way out.

What struck me most, working alongside colleagues across these desks, was how consistent certain patterns were in how people arrived at the Intelligence Project in the first place. Nearly everyone I spoke with held an advanced degree, most commonly a master's degree, though a number of colleagues held doctorates as well, in fields such as sociology, political science, religious studies, criminology, or history. These were not researchers who had stumbled into extremism studies as a side interest; they were people who had built years of formal academic training specifically oriented toward understanding radicalization, social movements, or the history of hate in the United States and abroad. That academic grounding shaped the culture of the Intelligence Project considerably, giving even its more journalistic-facing outputs a foundation in theory and method that is not always visible to readers of the final reports.

Just as consistently, however, colleagues had not come to the SPLC directly from graduate school. Almost without exception, they arrived after a period working with other anti-hate organizations, and the specific routes people described taking to get there were varied enough to be worth detailing individually. Several colleagues described coming through fellowship programs, a structure that appears to function as something of a pipeline into full-time positions at the Intelligence Project. One colleague had completed a fellowship with another team inside the SPLC itself before transferring into the Intelligence Project, having first cut their teeth on the legal or communications side of the organization and only later moving into research. This internal pathway meant that by the time they joined the Intelligence Project

proper, they already understood the SPLC's institutional culture, its reporting standards, and how its various departments were meant to work together, which shortened the learning curve considerably compared to colleagues arriving from entirely outside the organization.

Other colleagues had come through fellowships or staff positions at regional anti-hate organizations, smaller groups often organized at the state or metropolitan level that focus on local monitoring and community response to hate incidents. These regional organizations, less resourced and less visible nationally than the SPLC, nonetheless serve as an important training ground, giving researchers hands-on experience monitoring local hate group activity, building relationships with local law enforcement and community organizations, and learning to write for audiences well outside academia before they ever reach a national platform like the Intelligence Project. Colleagues who had come through this route often brought with them a granular, ground-level knowledge of specific regions that complemented the more national-level view that the Intelligence Project as a whole tends to take.

Perhaps the most unusual path I encountered belonged to a colleague who had come to the Intelligence Project from a background in television production, having previously worked on documentary content for the History Channel. This background might seem, on its face, disconnected from the academic and advocacy-oriented pathways described above, but in practice it proved to be a significant asset. Years spent researching and fact-checking historical documentary content, particularly content that touched on extremist movements, hate groups, or political violence, had given this colleague both a strong research discipline and an unusually well-developed sense of how to translate complex historical material into narratives that a general audience could follow and find compelling. That skill set turned out to be directly transferable to the kind of public-facing writing the Intelligence Project regularly produces, and

it is a reminder that the pipeline into this kind of research work is not as narrow or as exclusively academic as it might first appear.

Whatever their path into the organization, researchers on every desk described a working culture defined as much by collaboration across the SPLC's other departments as by the specialized work within their own desk. The Intelligence Project does not operate as an isolated research shop; it functions as the evidentiary backbone for much of the rest of the organization's public-facing and legal work, and that function requires constant coordination with other teams. The most frequent and consequential of these collaborations, in my experience, were with the communications team and the legal team.

The relationship with communications runs in both directions. Intelligence Project researchers regularly brief communications staff on developing stories, emerging groups, or significant incidents, giving communications the substantive grounding it needs to respond quickly and accurately when reporters call or when a hate group makes news on its own. At the same time, communications staff shape how research findings are packaged for public consumption, translating dense internal analysis into press releases, social media content, and public statements that need to be both accurate and accessible. This collaboration requires a degree of trust and mutual understanding built over time, since researchers need confidence that their findings will not be oversimplified or distorted in translation, while communications staff need research that is clear enough to be usable on a tight news cycle.

The relationship with the legal team operates somewhat differently but is no less central to how the Intelligence Project understands its own purpose. Attorneys at the SPLC draw on Intelligence Project research when building cases against hate groups, whether that means using documented patterns of activity to support a civil suit, providing expert testimony grounded in

years of monitoring a particular organization, or supplying background on a group's structure and leadership that becomes relevant in litigation. This relationship reinforces something that came up repeatedly in conversations with colleagues across all four desks: the sense that research at the Intelligence Project is rarely conducted for its own sake. It exists, ultimately, in service of the SPLC's broader mission of using the law, public pressure, and community engagement to counter hate, and researchers across every desk, whatever their academic background or the winding path that brought them there, described a shared understanding that their work was one link in a longer chain that ran from documentation to litigation to public accountability.

Conclusion

This study began on Dexter Avenue, standing in the shadow of a building that houses both a waterfall memorializing the dead of the civil rights movement and, a few floors up, a modern research operation tracking the movements that would undo that legacy if given the chance. That juxtaposition, a monument to justice already won sitting beside an office dedicated to justice still being fought for, turns out to be a fitting image for the SPLC as a whole. The organization is neither purely a historical institution trading on the moral authority of Montgomery's past, nor a purely technocratic research shop indifferent to the place it calls home. It is both at once, and understanding it requires holding those two identities together rather than treating one as more authentic than the other.

The picture that emerges from this research is of an organization that has grown considerably more complex than its origins as a small law firm confronting the Klan would suggest, without losing the throughline that connects its founding moment to its present form. The state offices described earlier in this study represent one axis of that growth, extending the

SPLC's reach into hyperlocal community work, youth engagement, and voter registration in ways that a purely litigation-focused organization would never have attempted. The Intelligence Project represents another axis entirely, an internal research infrastructure divided across four distinct desks, mainstream, anti-government, general hate, and Hopewatch, each staffed by researchers who arrived through remarkably similar patterns despite the differences in their subject matter. The consistency of that pattern, advanced graduate training followed by a formative period at another anti-hate organization, whether an internal SPLC team, a regional watchdog group, or, in at least one case, a career in television documentary production, suggests that the SPLC has become something like a terminal destination in a broader professional ecosystem devoted to studying and countering extremism. People do not simply wander into this work. They train for it, often for years, and they arrive at the Intelligence Project having already tested and refined their skills elsewhere.

It is worth returning, in closing, to a point raised earlier regarding the Intelligence Project's current legal circumstances. The project is presently under indictment, a fact this study has not shied away from stating plainly. That legal matter remains unresolved, and this study takes no position on its eventual outcome. What can be said with confidence is that the indictment had no effect on the research presented here. The interviews, the internal accounts of desk structure and career pathways, and the broader analysis of how the Intelligence Project relates to the SPLC's legal and communications teams were all gathered and interpreted independently of that proceeding. Readers encountering this study alongside news of the indictment should understand the two as separate matters: one a legal question working its way through the courts, the other a piece of institutional research concerned with how a research organization is staffed, structured, and integrated into a larger civil rights institution. Neither the

passage of time nor the outcome of the legal proceeding changes what was observed and documented here.

The relationships this study traced between the Intelligence Project and the SPLC's communications and legal teams point to a broader conclusion about how organizations like the SPLC actually function. Research alone, however rigorous, accomplishes little if it stays locked inside an internal database. It becomes consequential only when it is translated, by communications staff, into language the public can absorb, and when it is marshaled, by attorneys, into arguments that can hold up in court. The Intelligence Project's four desks, for all their differences in subject matter and method, share this same downstream destination, and the researchers who staff them, whatever academic discipline trained them or whatever earlier organization gave them their start, described a shared sense that their work was never an end in itself. It was always one link in a longer chain running from documentation to public accountability to legal consequence.

There is a temptation, in studying an organization as storied as the SPLC, to treat its history as settled and its present as a simple continuation of that history. This study suggests a more complicated picture. The SPLC of the present day is a considerably more sprawling and specialized institution than the one that opened its doors in 1971, and its ongoing legal challenges are a reminder that its work, and its standing, remain contested rather than fixed. What has not changed, at least based on the evidence gathered here, is the underlying conviction that animates people across every desk and every office: that hate can be tracked, understood, and ultimately confronted, and that doing so requires the kind of sustained, specialized, and collaborative work this study has tried to describe.