

Chapter 8

Electronic Aggression or Free Speech

8.1 The Rise of Electronic Aggression

Electronic Aggression is any type of intimidation, harassment or bullying that occurs through any e-mail, chat room, instant messaging, website (including blogs), text messaging, or social media posts the content of which is often associated with some expression of anger and negativity. This includes teasing, telling lies, making fun of someone, making rude or mean comments, spreading rumors, making threatening or aggressive comments, or disseminating propaganda that is harmful to individuals or segments of society [1]. [Table 8.1](#) shows various examples of electronic aggression.

Extremist propaganda usually contains several forms of electronic aggression. Perpetrators of electronic aggression can act as lone wolves, small groups, or a large network of affiliated people and they can come from a variety of social positions, anywhere from a fast food worker to the White House staff, the halls of the U.S. Congress, and the highest elected offices and board rooms of the country. Extremist propaganda and electronic aggression are often intertwined to provide the perpetrator with some form of extrinsic benefits.

The U.S. military has published that some forms of speech are deemed unprotected in both the civilian and military community, which means the speech can be freely regulated and punished. For instance, fighting words, obscenity and dangerous speech are all types of speech that have not been afforded constitutional protections. In the military, dangerous speech includes speech that interferes with the military mission or affects morale and discipline [2].

Table 8.1 Examples of Electronic Aggression

Disclosing someone else's personal information in a public area in order to cause embarrassment or harm a reputation
Posting rumors or lies about someone in a public area
Distributing embarrassing pictures of someone
Assuming another person's electronic identity to post or send messages about others with the intent of causing the other person harm
Sending mean, embarrassing, or threatening text messages
Sexting is commonly used to describe the creation and transmission of sexual images

Social networking websites, Twitter, Facebook, and Google, among others are under pressure from advocacy groups as well as the U.S. government to address how their services can be used as an electronic aggression tool or to disseminate extremist propaganda. On the other side of that argument, free-speech activists are concerned that the efforts of a social media company could lead to some ideas and speech being censored. This debate came to the forefront in 2017 when it was determined that Russia had attempted to meddle in the 2016 U.S. election.

Elected officials in the U.S. are complicating issues further by claiming that any news they do not like is fake news. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) receives numerous complaints that television and/or radio networks, stations or their employees or guests have broadcast extreme, incorrect or somehow improper political, economic or social statements—complaints that then spill into social media feeds. In some cases, the complaints allege that certain broadcast statements may endanger the U.S. or its people, or threaten the form of government, the economic system or established institutions like family or marriage. They say these statements are un-American and an abuse of freedom of speech. The FCC also receives complaints that some broadcast statements criticize, ridicule, stereotype or demean individuals or groups because of the religion, race, nationality, gender or other characteristics of the group or individual.

The FCC is barred by law from trying to prevent the broadcast of any point of view. The Communications Act prohibits the FCC from censoring broadcast material, in most cases, and from making any regulation that would interfere with freedom of speech. Expressions of views that do not involve a clear and present danger of serious, substantive evil come under the protection of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press and prevents suppression of these expressions by the FCC. According to an FCC opinion on this subject, the

public interest is best served by permitting free expression of views. This principle ensures that the most diverse and opposing opinions will be expressed, even though some may be highly offensive. The FCC, however, does have enforcement responsibilities in certain limited instances. For example, the Courts have said that indecent material is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution and cannot be banned entirely. It may be restricted, however, in order to avoid its broadcast when there is a *reasonable risk* that children may be in the audience. Between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. (when there is the greatest likelihood that children may be watching) airing indecent material is prohibited by FCC rules. The courts have ruled that obscene material is not protected by the First Amendment and cannot be broadcast at any time [3].

In his remarks to the Hungarian Association of Journalists on October 17, 2017, Chargé d'Affaires David Kostelancik said that "A democratic society with a free press is a messy place, especially with the proliferation of blogs, social media, online news, and the nonstop news cycle. I don't claim to have all the answers about how to navigate this new media environment, though it's clear to me that as government representatives—as servants of our citizens—we must work harder to illuminate, to present the evidence, to show and not just tell, and to adhere to logic and reason when we engage in debate. We should consider other points of view, and urge our colleagues and citizens to do the same. And we must urge responsibility and professionalism and integrity on the part of the press, and should not be afraid to speak up when we see shortcomings. We must also be responsible, discerning consumers and refrain from spreading incomplete, inaccurate, or deliberately misleading information. Above all, there is one temptation to which we must not succumb: democratic governments must not attempt to silence their critics" [4].

It is sufficiently clear that the proponents of freedom of speech and those who practice electronic aggression and those who advocate for civility will have a lot to argue about in the future. Expect continued debate but also evolving legislation.

8.2 Electronic Aggression Models

There are endless configurations of ways by which electronic aggression can be perpetrated. For several years, the major concern among care givers and educators was one individual, most often a minor, being aggressive against another minor, but clearly this also happens among adults. Since the 2016 election in the U.S., electronic aggression has become more of a norm. Several cases have occurred where an individual would receive thousands of e-mails or text messages over a long period of time. Very often, such cases involve personal animosities and sexual harassment.

There have also been instances when an extremist group was electronically aggressive toward an individual. Such cases have most often been based on traditional hate crime models of intimidation and harassment because of race, ethnicity,

or religion. They have also been rooted in dislike of an individual's political perspectives or social beliefs. Jennifer Longdon, a gun safety advocate, has suffered considerable electronic abuse but has also been abused physically and emotionally in public for her personal position on guns, according to numerous sources. There were also fake news stories about her in right-wing publications. She is not the only person who has suffered at the hands of gun rights advocates for their activism. The gun rights advocates in these cases were motivated by tribalism; they did not know each other, they just identify with their cause and joined together to abuse their victims electronically and in person.

Another form of electronic aggression is similar to shooting a gun into the air—not aiming at anything in particular and not hitting anything as well. These rants are usually perpetrated by individuals as a way of expressing their dislike or hatred of something or somebody. For years people would make aggressive and often obscene posts in social media about Barack Obama. These posts were usually poorly written and tended to blame Obama for everything the creator thought was wrong with the world. Of course, Barack Obama would probably never see the posts.

One element of aggressive electronic posts that grew popular over time is the inclusion of *visual content* including photographs, drawings, charts, or graphs. The visual element was usually designed to mock or disparage the target subject, person, or organization the aggressors had issues about. Some of the visual content was rather amusing but much of it was racist, rude, and despicable.

8.3 Electronic Aggression at the Tribal Level

Many politicians in the U.S. have become extremist propagandists and some political parties thrive on white nationalism, regionalism, and tribalism as a divide-and-conquer tactic to canvass for votes as part of their campaign strategy. Tribes are most active and easily mobilized as political, social, and economic entities at the village level, but social media can help mobilize tribal members across the U.S. when Election Day comes. Tribe members relate to their virtual leaders and other tribe members through extremist social media propaganda and thus do not need to have physical contact with each other to feel tribe membership.

Tribe members also seem to respond positively to electronic aggression that targets the perceived enemy or nontribal individuals or groups. Watching electronic aggression unfold on social media motivates and binds the tribe members. Many observers feel that Donald Trump has mastered electronic aggression and his tribal members thrive on seeing it happen. There have been an endless stream of social media posts, articles and news broadcasts highlighting his aggressive electronic messaging.

On Christmas Eve, 2017, for example, President Donald Trump retweeted an altered image of himself that showed a splatter covering the CNN logo on the bottom of his shoe; the photo was captioned: Winning. As with most of Donald

Trump's social media posts, this one received thousands of likes and retweets from his 45 million followers. The tribe members are loyal social media followers and support Trump's posts regardless of how aggressive they are or how blatantly inaccurate the posts may have been.

In addition, the Trump tribe members help to aggressively attack any social media posts that criticize, doubt, expose, or otherwise disparage Trump, regardless of the validity of the content of the posts. The same type of propaganda, misinformation, and social media aggression has contributed to the fanatical anti-American and anti-Semitic incitement that has permeated much of the Arab world. It also constitutes a real threat to long-term U.S. interests and security [5]. The long-term effects this electronic aggression can have on U.S. politics, culture, and global standing could end up being seriously damaging.

Electronic aggression by tribe members does not require continuous prompting or direction from a tribal leader. Once a person or organization has been repeatedly victimized by the electronic aggression of a tribal leader, members will carry on that aggression at any opportunity. The case studies here are Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Although Trump did sometimes signal attacks by using his social media posts to aggressively attack Obama and Clinton, they were also attacked by the tribe on a constant basis across social media platforms. At the end of December 2017, Twitter was afire with the posts about Barack Obama being named most admired man, beating out Donald Trump, and of course this set the tribe off on an aggressive social media tangent.

Extremists can use social media to customize their *personal propaganda feed* to coincide with their individual beliefs or those of their tribe. One dangerous result of this is that, even if a specific extremist article, post, or discussion thread is proven to be fake news or just a blatant lie, the extremist may never be exposed to that revelation. If their ideas are never challenged or they never encounter an alternative narrative, the extremist will get so locked into their belief system it may be impossible to ever break the belief pattern or set.

The governments of the world collaborate to counter extremist propaganda on a regional and global basis, but within the U.S. there is little formal structure or process to counter home-grown extremist propaganda. There are some liberal organizations that work to do so, and several media organizations perform fact checking duties and provide weekly reports that expose the lies and misleading information that politicians and other would-be influencers spread, but those that close off their social media feeds may never encounter that information.

8.4 The Electronic Aggression of White Nationalism

There is a growing consensus that white nationalists, Nazis and Nazi sympathizers are increasing their use of social media. During the 2016 election in the U.S., social media became the grandstand for white nationalism and remains so at this

writing. Since the August 2017 white nationalist rally in Charlottesville when hundreds of torch-bearing white nationalists, white supremacists, Klansmen, and neo-Nazis chanted racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant slogans and violently engaged with counter-demonstrators on and around the grounds of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, that use has been accelerated. In addition, groups such as these have been recruiting college students and spreading leaflets and flyers on college campuses.

There has also been increased social media activity by those who oppose white nationalism. Dozens if not hundreds of elected officials across the U.S. have denounced totalitarian impulses, violent terrorism, xenophobic biases, and bigoted ideologies that are promoted by white nationalists and neo-Nazis. One such effort was a joint resolution passed by the U.S. Congress condemning the violence and domestic terrorist attack that took place during events between August 11 and August 12, 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, recognizing the first responders who lost their lives while monitoring the events, offering deepest condolences to the families and friends of those individuals who were killed and deepest sympathies and support to those individuals who were injured by the violence, expressing support for the Charlottesville community, rejecting white nationalists, white supremacists, the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, and other hate groups, and urging the President and the President's cabinet to use all available resources to address the threats posed by those groups [6].

Many of those opposing white nationalism and racism consider President Trump to be largely responsible for its rise, including his appointments of white nationalists to government positions. Congressman Al Green's Articles of Impeachment against President Trump claim that under the inane pretext of dispensing with *political correctness*, he produced a demonstrable record of inciting white supremacy, sexism, bigotry, hatred, xenophobia, race-baiting, and racism by demeaning, defaming, disrespecting, and disparaging women and certain minorities. In doing so, he has fueled and is fueling an alt-right hate machine and its worldwide covert sympathizers engendering racial antipathy, LGBTQ enmity, religious anxiety, stealthy sexism, and dreadful xenophobia, perfidiously causing immediate injury to American society. Further, on September 23, 2017, Donald Trump incited race-baiting and racism, engendering stealthy sexism and racial antipathy when he disrespected, disparaged, and demeaned mothers of professional football players by calling them dogs as he made the widely published statement: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired! He's fired!'" [7].

In October 2017, J. Richard Cohen, President of the Southern Poverty Law Center, testified before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

of the U.S. Senate Exploring Free Speech on College Campuses. He made several major points on the subject:

- The debate over free speech on college campuses is taking place against the backdrop of increased activity by a white nationalist movement that has been emboldened by President Trump's rhetoric and that is targeting colleges and universities.
- Although university officials and students may find white nationalism abhorrent, they must respect the First Amendment rights of white nationalist speakers and of the students who want to listen to them.
- University administrators and public officials, particularly the President, must speak out forcefully against white nationalism and in support of the First Amendment. The President also should heed Congress's call to use his administration's resources to fight the growing prevalence of hate groups in our country [8].

The white power symbol and the discussion of that symbol have become more prevalent in social media posts. Not all people even understand the symbols when they see them. There are several hate-oriented hand signals, and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) hosts a Hate on Display™ Hate Symbols Database. This database provides an overview of many of the symbols most frequently used by a variety of white supremacist groups and movements, as well as some other types of hate groups (<https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols>).

8.5 Extremist Religious Propaganda in the U.S.

The debate on freedom of religion in the U.S. has evolved into a yelling contest about the concept of religious liberty. However, protecting religious freedom does not include creating a right to harm or discriminate against others. U.S. House of Representatives Democrats feel that the Trump Administration has chosen to use the protection of religious liberty as a justification to take away women's access to contraceptive care and to undermine the civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans. The Administration's executive actions could allow corporations, whether publicly-traded or closely-held, to deny essential health coverage for women and allow entities receiving federal funds to engage in invidious discrimination against people based on their gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity, among other bases [9].

What it has all boiled down to it that the religious Christian right in the U.S. wants to be able to discriminate against LGBTQ citizens as well as anyone else that

does not adhere to Christian beliefs or does not act in accordance to the right-wing Christian interpretation of the Bible. That is clear enough and can be worked out in Federal court over time. However, this yelling contest has resulted in a large volume of extremist propaganda in social media.

Conservative Christian leaders, especially those of the mega churches and the television evangelists, have long condemned LGBTQ citizens by making statements like LGBTQ people poison children's minds and are pedophiles, LGBTQ must be banned from our military, and why has this evil ever been allowed to exist?

In August 2017, The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), during the annual conference of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, published the Nashville Statement. The statement, which strongly condemned homosexuality and same-sex marriage, was signed by more than 150 Evangelical Christian leaders, some of whom have either worked closely with President Donald Trump or served on his Evangelical Advisory Board. Those leaders wanted to push their agenda with the hope that under the Trump Administration they would garner support to combat the LGTBQ population, which they consider to be evil. Social media went wild with extremist propaganda from numerous directions.

The CBMW was going into full throttle extremist propaganda mode with the Nashville Statement. However, it crashed and burned rather swiftly and the backlash to the statement was encouraging for the LGBTQ and other civilized communities. Nashville Mayor Megan Barry tweeted that the document is poorly named and does not represent the inclusive values of the city and people of Nashville. The hashtag #NashvilleStatement is still steeped in controversy on Twitter.

8.6 Extremist Propaganda through Censorship

Donald Trump has been well known for rejecting inclusion and political correctness. One of his campaign complaints was that the U.S. has become too politically correct and that keeps people from using the phrase Merry Christmas. Numerous social media posts made it clear that people never stopped saying Merry Christmas and questioned Trump's grip on reality.

In a twist on that saga, in December 2017, print, broadcast, and social media were again in flames over the reported censorship of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which had reportedly been warned not to use seven hot-button words in future budget proposals. The banned words were diversity, fetus, transgender, vulnerable, entitlement, science-based and evidence-based. We will see how that unfolds in the future.

In a similar move, the term *climate change* has reportedly been removed from U.S. government websites. In typical fashion, when exposed, Trump Administration loyalists denied such censorship. However, at the time of this writing the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Climate.gov website was still operational. Its mission is to provide science and information for a climate-smart nation. NOAA Climate.gov is a source of timely and authoritative scientific data and information about climate. Our goals are to promote public understanding of climate science and climate-related events, to make data products and services easy to access and use, to provide climate-related support to the private sector and the nation's economy, and to serve people making climate-related decisions with tools and resources that help them answer specific questions.

8.7 Summary

Extremist electronic aggression is permeating social media. Even though much of that aggressive expression is protected by the First Amendment, it is no less antagonistic or harmful to society. The extremists are setting a tone for more hate and intolerance to spread. This chapter examined electronic aggression and how it is driven by nationalism, tribalism, clan conflict, and bigotry. Key points covered include:

- Electronic aggression is any type of intimidation, harassment or bullying that occurs through any e-mail, chat room, instant messaging, website (including blogs), text messaging, or social media posts, the content of which is often associated with some expression of anger and negativity.
- Extremist propaganda and electronic aggression are often intertwined to provide the perpetrator with some form of extrinsic benefits.
- It is sufficiently clear that the proponents of freedom of speech and those who practice electronic aggression and those who advocate for civility will have a lot to argue about in the future.
- There are endless configurations of ways by which electronic aggression can be perpetrated. For several years, the major concern among care givers and educators was one individual, most often a minor, being aggressive against another minor, but clearly this also happens among adults.
- Many politicians in the U.S. have become extremist propagandists and some political parties thrive on white nationalism, regionalism, and tribalism as a divide-and-conquer tactic to canvass for votes as part of their campaign strategy.
- Extremists can use social media to customize their propaganda feed to coincide with their individual beliefs or those of their tribe. One dangerous result of this is that even if a specific extremist article, post, or discussion thread is

proven to be fake news or just a blatant lie, the extremist may never be exposed to that revelation.

- There is a growing consensus that white nationalists, Nazis and Nazi sympathizers are increasing their use of social media.
- The debate on freedom of religion in the U.S. has evolved into a yelling contest about the concept of religious liberty. However, protecting religious freedom does not include creating a right to harm or discriminate against others.

8.8 Course Activities

Course project number one: Read and discuss *It Can't Happen Here* (2014) by Sinclair Lewis.

Course project number two: Research two articles on any of the subtopics in this chapter that take opposite perspectives on the topic. Write a 500-word summary of the opposing viewpoints.

Course project number three: In a panel setting, discuss the articles and opposing viewpoints from course assignment number two.

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