

How groups and individuals spread racist hate online

January 30 2019, by Ana-Maria Bliuc, Andrew Jakubowicz And Kevin Dunn



We could see even sharper divisions in society in the future if support for racism spreads online. Credit: [Markus Spiske/Unsplash](#)

Living in a networked world has many advantages. We get our news

online almost as soon as it happens, we stay in touch with friends via social media, and we advance our careers through online professional networks.

But there is a darker side to the internet that sees far-right groups exploit these unique features to spread divisive ideas, racial hate and mistrust. Scholars of racism refer to this type of racist communication online as "cyber-racism."

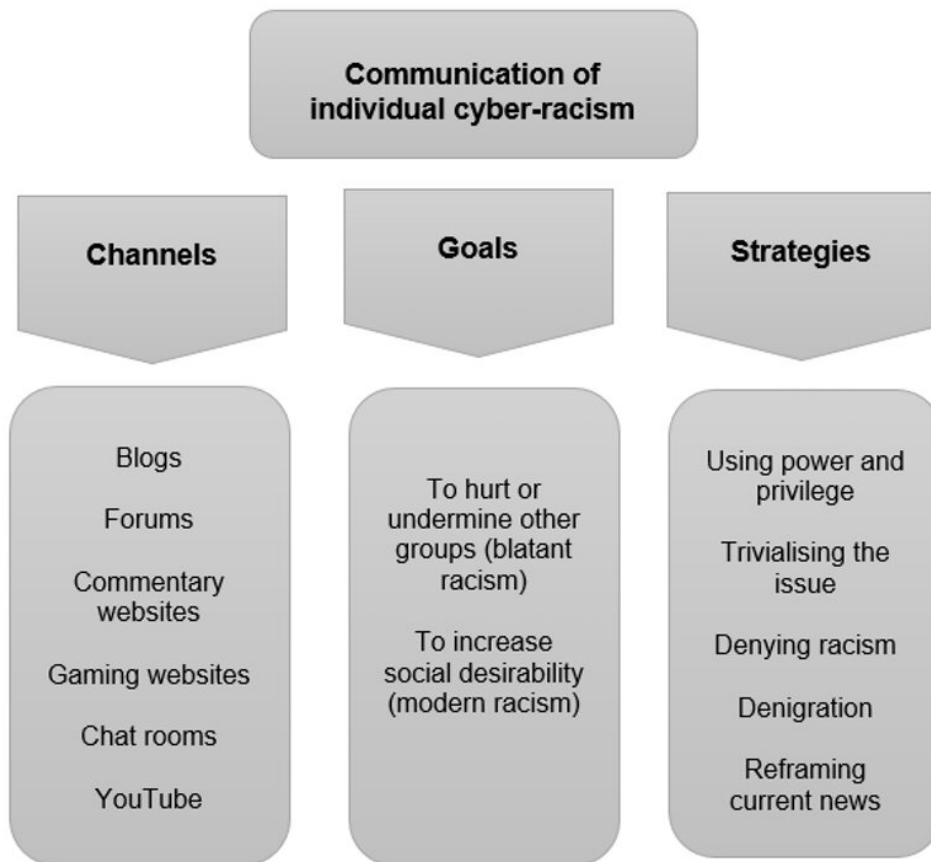
Even the creators of the internet are aware they may have unleashed a technology that is causing a lot of harm. Since 2017, the inventor of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, has focused many of his comments about the dangers of manipulation of the internet around the spread of hate speech, [saying that](#): "Humanity connected by technology on the web is functioning in a dystopian way. We have online abuse, prejudice, bias, polarisation, [fake news](#), there are lots of ways in which it is broken."

Our team conducted a [systematic review](#) of ten years of cyber-racism research to learn how different types of communicators use the internet to spread their views.

Racists groups behave differently to individuals

We found that the internet is indeed a powerful tool used to influence and reinforce divisive ideas. And it's not only organised racist groups that take advantage of online communication; unaffiliated [individuals](#) do it too.

But the way groups and individuals use the internet differs in several important ways. Racist groups are active on different communication channels to individuals, and they have different goals and strategies they use to achieve them. The effects of their communication are also distinctive.



Channels, goals and strategies used by unaffiliated people when communicating cyber-racism.

Individuals mostly engage in cyber-racism to hurt others, and to confirm their racist views by connecting with like-minded people (seeking "[confirmation bias](#)"). Their preferred communication channels tend to be blogs, forums, news commentary websites, gaming environments and chat rooms.

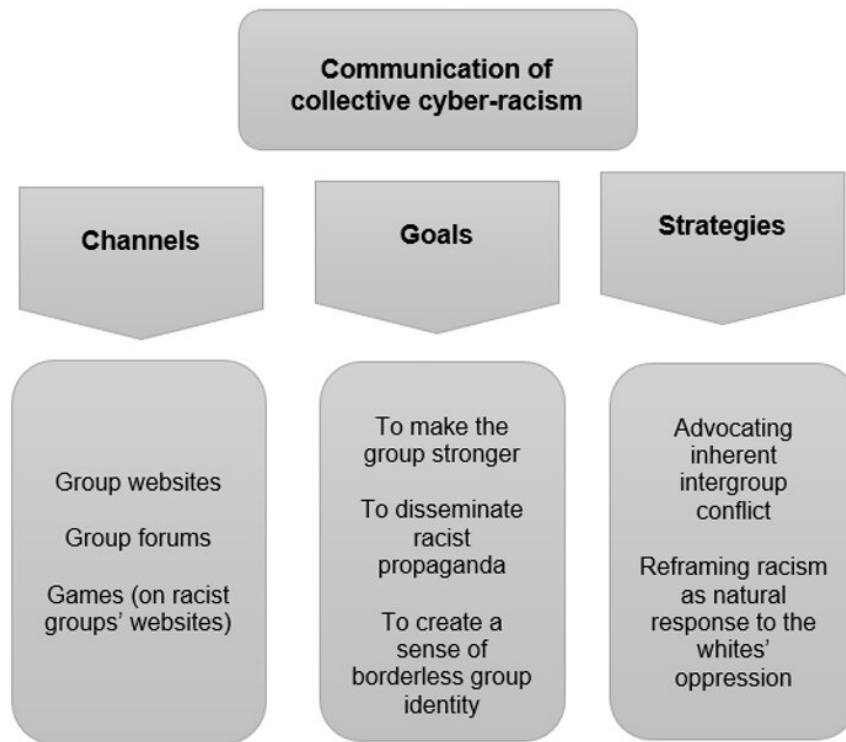
Strategies they use include denying or minimising the issue of racism, denigrating "non-whites," and reframing the meaning of current news stories to support their views.

Groups, on the other hand, prefer to communicate via their own websites. They are also more strategic in what they seek to achieve through online communication. They use websites to gather support for their group and their views [through racist propaganda](#).

Racist groups manipulate information and use clever rhetoric to help build a sense of a broader "white" identity, which often goes beyond national borders. They argue that conflict between different ethnicities is unavoidable, and that what most would view as racism is in fact a natural response to the "oppression of white people."

Collective cyber-racism has the main effect of undermining the social cohesion of modern multicultural societies. It creates [division, mistrust and intergroup conflict](#).

Meanwhile, individual cyber-racism seems to have a more direct effect by negatively affecting the well being of targets. It also contributes to maintaining a hostile racial climate, which may further (indirectly) affect the well being of targets.



Channels, goals and strategies used by groups when communicating cyber-racism.

What they have in common

Despite their differences, groups and individuals both share a high level of sophistication in how they communicate racism online. Our review uncovered the disturbingly creative ways in that new technologies are exploited.

For example, racist groups make themselves attractive to young people by providing interactive games and links to music videos [on their websites](#). And both groups and individuals are highly skilled at

manipulating their public image via various narrative strategies, such as humour and the interpretation of current news to fit with their arguments.

A worrying trend

Our findings suggest that if these online strategies are effective, we could see even sharper divisions in society as the mobilisation of support for racism and far-right movements spreads online.

There is also evidence that currently unaffiliated supporters of racism could derive strength through online communication. These individuals might use online channels to validate their beliefs and achieve a sense of belonging in virtual spaces where racist hosts provide an uncontested and hate-supporting community.

This is a worrying trend. We have now seen several examples of violent action perpetrated offline by isolated individuals who radicalise into white supremacist movements – for example, in the case of [Anders Breivik](#) in Norway, and more recently of [Robert Gregory Bowers](#), who was the perpetrator of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting.

In Australia, unlike most other liberal democracies, there are effectively no government strategies that seek to reduce this avenue for the spread of racism, despite many Australians expressing a desire that this be done.

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