

AIN'T NO GAME: ANTISEMITISM IN GAMING AND ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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According to Statista, in the weeks following the October 7 attacks on Israel by Hamas, antisemitic content on the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter) spiked by over 900 percent. Statista's data highlights the dramatic increase of antisemitism in digital spaces and reiterates the need to support young people dealing with hate speech online.¹

Exposure to antisemitic abuse on social media and within gaming spaces can have a profound impact on the mental health and emotional well-being of (not only) Jewish users, particularly the young. These digital platforms, intended for connection and recreation, can become spaces of exclusion, hostility, and targeted harassment, leaving lasting psychological scars on those subjected to such abuse.² The hostile environment created by such abuse can create feelings of fear, anger, and helplessness, eroding a victim's sense of safety in digital spaces. For young users, the internalization of such abuse can contribute to long-term trauma, manifesting for example as anxiety or depression.³

Digital platforms serve as primary hubs for social interaction and cultural exchange, especially among younger demographics. Anonymity offered by social media and gaming platforms has become a significant factor in the rise of antisemitic hate speech. Platforms such as X, Instagram, and popular gaming environments provide users with the anonymity to spread hateful messages with minimal fear of repercussions. This lack of accountability emboldens individuals to post inflammatory and discriminatory content that they might avoid expressing in person.⁴

The lack of robust regulatory frameworks has enabled harmful hate speech, including antisemitic rhetoric, to proliferate unchecked.⁵ Addressing this requires a multifaceted approach that combines legislative action, technological solutions, and societal education to ensure these spaces remain safe and inclusive for all users.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Antisemitism Surges Online

Antisemitic content on platforms like X spiked by 919 percent following the October 7 Hamas attacks, spreading hate that deeply affects Jewish users, especially the young. Enhanced moderation systems combining AI and human oversight, along with stricter regulations, are needed to curb this surge.

Gaming as a Breeding Ground for Hate

Unmoderated gaming spaces foster antisemitic slurs, memes, and symbols, normalizing hate speech in digital culture. Gaming platforms must implement stronger moderation, promote education, and create inclusive communities.

Anonymity Fuels Toxicity

Anonymous accounts enable users to engage in hate speech without any fear of repercussions, fostering a hostile online environment. Balancing user privacy with accountability through improved tracking and penalties can address this issue.

Algorithms Amplify Hate Speech

Social media algorithms prioritize divisive content, creating echo chambers that spread antisemitism and extremist ideas. Platforms must redesign algorithms to limit harmful content, with oversight and updated laws holding them accountable.

Moderation Urgently Needed

The rise of antisemitic behavior in gaming communities has become an alarming trend, exacerbated by the expansive reach and anonymity afforded by online platforms. Multiplayer games and virtual communities, designed to connect players worldwide, have inadvertently fostered environments where hate speech thrives, with racist and antisemitic slurs becoming disturbingly commonplace during gameplay.⁶

Multiplayer games, particularly those with voice or text chat features, allow players to communicate freely during gameplay. This open communication is often unmoderated or under-moderated, facilitating the spread of hate speech, including antisemitic rhetoric.⁷

The anonymous nature of many gaming accounts emboldens individuals to engage in toxic behaviors without any fear of real-world repercussions. This anonymity reduces the social consequences traditionally associated with discriminatory language and behavior. Repeated exposure to and casual use of antisemitic language or symbols within these spaces risks normalizing such behavior. Over time, this creates a subculture where hate speech becomes embedded in the gaming experience, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination.⁸ Antisemitic memes and symbols have permeated gaming forums and chat rooms, evolving into effective tools for spreading hatred under the guise of humor or cultural references. These digital platforms, which are often designed for player interaction and community building, have been hijacked by individuals and groups seeking to normalize antisemitism and other forms of bigotry.⁹

Memes, characterized by their rapid creation and shareability, are often designed to be provocative and easily understood within specific subcultures. Gaming forums, known for their vibrant meme-sharing cultures, provide fertile ground for antisemitic content disguised as humor or satire. Antisemitic tropes, such as caricatures or conspiracy theories, are embedded in memes and disseminated widely, normalizing these ideas among unsuspecting or complicit audiences. Hate symbols, such as swastikas or references to Holocaust denial, appear in customized avatars, in-game graffiti, and forum posts. Their subtle integration into gaming-related content makes them harder to identify and moderate.¹⁰

The constant exposure to antisemitic memes in ostensibly casual or humorous contexts risks desensitizing users, particularly younger players, to the seriousness of such rhetoric. Furthermore, the reinforcement of stereotypes through memes and symbols perpetuate harmful stereotypes, embedding them within the digital culture of gaming and beyond.¹¹ This can lead to cross-platform proliferation, where content origination in gaming forums migrates to mainstream social media platforms, spreading antisemitic ideas to wider audiences.¹²

To combat the spread of antisemitic memes and symbols, it is critical to implement stronger moderation policies, promote digital literacy to identify and challenge such content, and foster gaming communities that actively reject hate speech.

Anonymity as an Amplifier for Hate Speech

The anonymity provided by social media and gaming platforms plays a pivotal role in enabling the spread of hate speech, including antisemitism, with little to no consequences. This feature, intended to promote free expression and privacy, has instead created a breeding ground for toxic behaviors that would be less likely to occur in face-to-face interactions.

Users operating under pseudonyms or avatars are shielded from social and legal consequences of their actions. Without the fear of real-world accountability, individuals feel emboldened to express hate-filled views or engage in harassment. This lack of traceability also makes it difficult for victims to seek justice, further emboldening perpetrators. The anonymity of online platforms lowers the moral threshold for engaging in harmful speech. Individuals who might not openly express antisemitic beliefs in public feel freer to do so in digital spaces, often escalating their rhetoric over time.¹³

The proliferation of anonymous hate speech fosters a hostile environment that disproportionately affects targeted groups, such as Jewish communities.¹⁴ Victims often experience significant emotional distress, particularly when hateful content goes unaddressed by platform moderators.¹⁵ Anonymity undermines trust in digital spaces, deterring vulnerable groups from participating in online communities and silencing voices that could counteract hate speech.

The Anti-Defamation League's analysis on online anonymity explores its dual role in enabling both positive and harmful activities in digital spaces. While anonymity may sometimes be essential for protecting free expression, especially for vulnerable groups and political activists, it significantly contributes to the spread of hate speech by providing a shield against accountability. The report notes that anonymity emboldens individuals to express hateful and extreme views they might suppress in face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, platforms with anonymous features often face greater challenges

in moderating harmful content effectively, as tracking and penalizing offenders becomes more difficult.¹⁶

While anonymity is a cornerstone of digital freedom, its misuse has contributed to a toxic online ecosystem where antisemitism and other forms of hate thrive. Balancing the need for privacy with mechanisms to ensure accountability is crucial. Strengthening platform moderation, improving reporting systems, and fostering a culture of responsibility are essential steps towards mitigating the harm caused by anonymous hate speech.

Role of the Platform Hosts

Social media algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, have unintentionally contributed to the spread of divisive and extreme content, including antisemitism. By prioritizing content that generates strong reactions, these algorithms often amplify hate speech and conspiratorial narratives, further promoting harmful ideologies within online communities.¹⁷

Once a user interacts with antisemitic content—by liking, sharing, or commenting—the algorithm begins to recommend similar material, creating a feedback loop. Such processes can isolate users in online echo chambers where their existing biases are reinforced, making it easier for extremist ideas to gain traction.¹⁸ Algorithms do not currently possess the capability of differentiating between harmful and benign content, focusing only on engagement. This is particularly true, as users often are either not aware or do not care about the filtering mechanisms.¹⁹ Therefore, posts containing hateful and provocative rhetoric such as antisemitism, naturally elicit greater engagement and more quickly gain traction, spreading further across the internet.

The Anti-Defamation League's report, "From Bad to Worse: Amplification and Auto-Generation of Hate," examines how social media platforms' algorithms and features can inadvertently promote antisemitic and extremist content. The study found that platforms like Instagram and Facebook often recommend such content to users, while search functions may auto-complete terms leading to hateful material. The report emphasizes the need for tech companies to adjust their algorithms to prevent the spread of hate and calls for legislative updates to hold platforms better accountable for amplifying harmful content.²⁰

Such studies highlight the importance of platforms providing greater transparency about how their algorithms work and the criteria used to prioritize content. Algorithms should be reassessed to work in tandem with human oversight so that harmful content is flagged and removed. Education promoting digital education can help users identify and reject algorithmically amplified hate speech, reducing its impact. In addition, governments should work with social media companies to establish guidelines that prevent algorithms from blindly promoting harmful content.

However, online antisemitism is not confined to digital spaces; it can spill over into the real world with devastating consequences. Individuals radicalized in online echo chambers frequently act on the rhetoric they encounter, targeting Jewish individuals and institutions in violent attacks.²¹ These threats of violence are exacerbated by the accessibility of extremist ideologies on social media, gaming platforms, and dark web forums, which provide both inspiration and tactical guidance for individuals seeking to inflict harm. Online spaces, especially unregulated forums and private groups such as Telegram, Twitch, 4Chan and Discord allow individuals to immerse themselves in antisemitic ideology without challenge. These antisemitic echo chambers often reinforce hate through conspiracy theories and propaganda.²²

In Halle (Germany) an attacker radicalized through far-right forums and influenced by antisemitic conspiracy theories attempted to storm a synagogue during Yom Kippur in 2019, one of the holiest days in the Jewish calendar. The attacker live streamed the attack on a gaming platform, mirroring tactics seen in other extremist attacks. Before the shooting, he shared a manifesto online filled with antisemitic rhetoric, including references to Jewish control and Holocaust denial. Although the synagogue's security door prevented a massacre, the attacker murdered two people outside, demonstrating the real-world consequences of online hate.²³

The link between online antisemitism and real-world violence is clear and alarming. Examples such as the synagogue attack in Halle illustrate how digital platforms act as breeding grounds for radicalization. Tackling this issue requires urgent and comprehensive measures, including the regulation of hate speech online, improved platform moderation, and educational initiatives to counter extremist ideologies before they lead to violence.

Using AI and Education to Combat Hate Speech

Social media and gaming platforms must implement robust content moderation systems, blending AI tools and human oversight, to identify and remove hateful content swiftly. Social media and gaming platforms should be required to publish transparency reports detailing their efforts to combat hate speech, including data on flagged content and actions taken. Governments should impose fines or other sanctions on platforms that fail to enforce policies against hate speech and antisemitic content, particularly when such failures lead to real-world harm.

As AI continues to cloud the line between information and misinformation, governments should require educational institutions to teach digital literacy classes so that people can clearly identify hateful propaganda in online spaces. Social media platforms should publish mandatory transparency reports detailing incidents of hate speech, antisemitism, and their content moderation efforts. Penalties for non-compliance enforce structural penalties for platforms that fail to address hate speech effectively. These may include fines, temporary restrictions on platform operations, or mandatory audits. Also, platforms should invest in the development of AI Moderation Tools: advanced AI technology capable of detecting hate speech is urgently needed.

Social media platforms should also invest in AI-based content moderation to improve hate speech detection. League of Legends (Riot Games) introduced robust reporting mechanisms and implemented real-time penalties, such as temporary bans for hate speech violations. Politicians and policymakers must acknowledge the destructive nature of antisemitism in digital spaces and act decisively to regulate platforms where hate speech thrives. Social media and gaming platforms shape the perspectives of millions, particularly young people, making it imperative to combat hate speech and promote tolerance. By strengthening regulation, investing in technology, and fostering education, governments and industries can create safer digital environments and ensure that these spaces contribute positively to societal values.

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