

Enemies of the people: Mark Potok monitors hate

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

Mark A. Potok heads up the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project and is editor of Intelligence Report magazine. The SPLC, founded as a law firm specializing in protecting civil rights, is one of the chief monitors of race-based hate groups and other extremist activities. Before coming to the SPLC in 1997, Potok spent almost 20 years as an award-winning reporter. While at USA Today, he covered the 1993 siege in Waco, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and the trial of Timothy McVeigh. In 1996 he was nominated by his editors for a Pulitzer Prize for his stories on racism in Texas public housing.

The SPLC has reported that the number of hate groups and hate crimes has risen since the election of President Obama. How do you explain this increase?

In the past year there have been two new factors. First is the economy. Hate groups have tried to exploit the economy and blame the downturn on “illegals.”

Second is the election of a black man to the presidency. Obama's ascension represents the massive demographic change that is under way. Every white supremacist knows and fears the year 2042—the year when, the Census Bureau predicts, the number of whites falls below 50 percent of the population.

It's not merely that the country is changing; it's that the die is cast—nothing will prevent this country from becoming a genuinely multiracial democracy in which no racial group dominates. Even if we were to seal the borders today, whites would still lose their majority.

Do you see a connection between mainstream talk show hosts and right-wing domestic terrorists?

Engaging in democratic protests is not the same as blowing up federal buildings. That said, I'd contend that when Rush Limbaugh, Lou Dobbs, Sean Hannity and their

ilk make defamatory and almost always completely false attacks on various groups, there are people who take their words as gospel.

One interesting fact about hate crimes is that they are very often carried out by young men who see themselves not as thugs but as righteous and brave defenders of their communities. Very often, the typical hate criminal is the young man who has listened to his parents complaining about immigrants or about the people of color who moved in down the block. Or it's the man who has listened to Lou Dobbs ranting about people crossing the borders or who has heard some incredibly nasty sermon about homosexuals and thinks to himself, "My race, my people, my tribe are under assault, and the brave young men of the tribe have to protect it."

At the time when the Lou Dobbsses of the world were most vociferously and viciously condemning immigrants, anti-Latino hate crimes in this country went up by 40 percent, according to FBI statistics.

What influence has the Internet had on far-right movements?

When the Internet first became a big thing in the mid-'90s, most of these groups thought it was going to solve all their problems. They thought: if only we could speak directly to "the people," then they will rise up in righteous anger and turn us into an all-white nation. They imagined that what stood between them and the people were the editors at the *New York Times*.

It turns out there aren't all that many people who share their views. The Internet helped the far-right groups in certain ways, but it didn't help them push their ideologies terribly far.

But the Internet makes it easier for people to organize. The average white supremacist of 25 years ago was a man standing alone in his living room shaking his fist at the ceiling. Today the average white supremacist gets up in the morning, turns on his computer and finds 50 stories that have been forwarded to him. Included are listings of activities in which he could participate as well as animated discussions of ideology. The person who formerly felt isolated and powerless now knows that he is part of a movement. The Internet has helped to give a kind of momentum to many white supremacists and hate groups.

The Internet also allows people to explore this world from behind a screen, with total anonymity. An interesting case: on January 21, 2008, the day after Obama's

inauguration, a young man in Brockton, Massachusetts, stormed out of his house and started murdering black people. He killed two, raped and almost killed a third. He later told police he planned to kill as many blacks as he could. He had spent the six months since Obama's nomination on the Internet, perusing white supremacist Web sites, and had concluded, without any personal contacts in the movement, that the white race was being subjected to genocide and that he had to fight back to defend his people from extinction.

What else is going on among the groups you monitor?

In the past four years we've seen the appearance of about 350 new anti-immigration groups. These are groups—like the Minute Men—that don't rise to the level of being hate groups by our criteria but nevertheless are filled with conspiracy theories about what people with brown skin are up to.

On top of all of that, we have the resurgence of the militia groups of the 1990s. These groups see the primary enemy as the federal government. The difference today from the 1990s is that the face of the federal government is the face of a black man. That has helped to racialize the militia movement.

Meanwhile, the Tea Party crowd is filled with very familiar conspiracy theories about the government planning to impose martial law, about Obama really being a nefarious socialistic one-worlder. There is a great deal of cross-pollination between these groups, and back of it all is real anger at the way this country is changing.