

# Inundated with Online Antisemitism

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## Abstract

Online technology has produced expressions of antisemitic abuse that, whether or not they are novel in content, do have novel experiential consequences. Online platforms have broadened, although not necessarily deepened, the Jewish experience of antisemitism. At the same time, they have multiplied the opportunities for Jewish action against antisemitism. However, the rapid growth in “decentralized” Jewish activism against antisemitism raises questions about its efficacy and the consequences for Jews who engage in this kind of activism. Thus, the practice of countering online antisemitism is therefore nascent, ill-understood, and imperfectly mapped. Above all, the experience of those engaged in this world is under-researched. This research note sketches agendas for research and Jewish communal action that might respond to these developments at a time when “exhaustion” has become a key experiential component of the contemporary Jewish experience of antisemitism and the fight against it.

**Keywords** social media, health, experience, internet, Labour Party

Those of us who study online contemporary antisemitism are facing unprecedented challenges regarding what we are trying to describe, measure and mend. Specifically, the emergence of interactive Web 2.0 technology has created new outlets of misinformation producing spaces of antisemitism so different from earlier versions that they beg an evolutionary question: has the new technology created a new species?

Consider the following. Online technology enables new and abundant channels for personal public expression in which anonymity facilitates and even encourages abusive behaviour. This leads to an abundance of antisemitic harassment and abuse, as well as to other forms of antisemitic discourse. It is now trivially easy to produce a storm of tweets or posts aimed at Jewish individuals or collectives. In the past, engaging in antisemitic abuse on an individual basis did not “benefit” from the same economies of scale. The pleasures of abuse were, of necessity, confined to what could be expressed

towards particular Jewish individuals or perhaps small groups, confined to a particular space and time. Repeating or extending this abuse required movement in space and time. It may well have been the case that part of the attraction of joining in with or supporting organised antisemitic campaigns or systematic forms of antisemitic oppression was the “efficiencies” involved—one could be part of a collective process that caused many more Jews to suffer over a much longer expanse of space and time. Nonetheless, the particularly exciting pleasures of face-to-face abuse were still logistically complex to replicate more than occasionally.

Online abuse sometimes encourages physical assault and sometimes does not. But what it sometimes lacks in depth it gains in breadth. Jews can be individually and personally abused repetitively and in great numbers, without having to join in with a wider campaign and all the disciplinary or legal constraints that this may involve.

Concomitantly, the Jewish experience of antisemitism may also have expanded in breadth, if not necessarily in depth. Individual Jews and Jewish organisations can and often do experience antisemitic abuse that is continuous, repetitive and broad-based, even if it may not result in direct physical assault. This is a novel development. Certainly, previous generations of Jews may have faced systematic antisemitic discrimination, but such a structuring force is generally experienced as continuous pressure, rather than a rapid and near-constant succession of individual experiential moments. Certainly, previous generations of Jews may have faced violent assault, but while this may have been an ever-present possibility, it was irregularly enacted. Certainly, previous generations of Jews faced harassment and abuse from individuals, but the variety of individuals who would perpetuate this abuse was likely to be tightly circumscribed in space and time. It is probably then that only the most prominent Jewish public figures in the past who experienced anything comparable to online antisemitism today and, even then, the delivery of one or two batches of antisemitic hate mail a day is not as incessant as the potentially continuous experience of being abused online today.

Just as online technology multiplies opportunities and instances for antisemitic expression, it also multiplies opportunities for its contestation. Jews can talk back to antisemites with as few external constraints as the antisemites themselves. On some online platforms they can go further and ban abusers. Similarly, just as online antisemites can threaten offline assault, so too its victims are capable of “doxing” antisemites and pursuing them offline. Yet power and privilege rarely make for an even landscape. Quantitatively it implies that a near-reciprocal exchange of hostile interactions between antisemites and Jews is possible.

The abundance of opportunities for Jews to fight antisemitism also appears to be unprecedented. There is, of course, a long history of Jews fighting antisemitism at particular times and spaces. In some respects, the online struggle

against antisemitism builds on some of these older models. For example, the well-established UK Jewish Labour Movement has a prominent online presence—both officially as an organisation and in terms of individual activists. They identify and report antisemitic content and actively contest antisemites and their apologists in their ongoing battle with Labour Party antisemitism. Yet a host of individuals and looser organisational entities contest online antisemitism as well. The ticket price for antisemitism activism is minor. Such Jews were previously part of wider movements or organisations. The proliferation of decentralized and autonomous activism today suggests an unprecedented level of self-directed involvement in Jewish struggles against antisemitism. This leads to complex questions regarding the place of established mainstream Jewish organisations (as it has done in the United Kingdom, where some online fighters against antisemitism regularly disparage what they see as the lacklustre response of organisations such as the Board of Deputies).

One under-addressed question in the online struggle of antisemitism is what it would look like to “win.” Concrete achievements are definitely possible of course: an antisemitic Twitter account identified, reported and banned; exposing and censoring those who have posted online antisemitic material; “offline” consequences such as being expelled from a political party. Such achievements, while valuable in and of themselves, are nonetheless unable to impact the never-ending deluge of online antisemitic material. Add to that the process of accounts closing and reopening under new names and those who post material that falls shy of regulatory proscription. In this sense, “victory” seems to be endlessly deferred in a continual series of online contestations. Defining a win against online antisemitism may involve an endless series of battles that only temporarily reach a “satisfying” end.

The practice of countering online antisemitism is therefore nascent, ill-understood, and imperfectly mapped. Above all, the *experience* of

those engaged in this world is under-researched. For all the very public self-presentations that online activists against antisemitism engage in, we have to understand self-representations of this kind as such; they are not a substitute for detailed accounts of the ways in which online experience is woven into the fabric of everyday life. Reframing the concepts may offer some insight.

Consider, for instance, focusing on repetition component of antisemitism and ask: What does it mean to engage in a continuous series of open-ended battles with no victory? How does this compare with previous generations who fought the same fight? Does the toll differ with online antisemitism? Do the online encounters impact on the offline experience of antisemitism? An investigation of the phenomenology of exhaustion might be helpful here.

On a personal note, I am more than familiar with the experience of chronic exhaustion. As someone who struggles with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and researches (and sometimes fights) online antisemitism, I find myself exhausted, frustrated in a fight that is profoundly unsatisfying. Stamina notwithstanding, there is a shared weariness pervading those of us who fight antisemitism. I saw it specifically with British Labour Party investigations. Such feelings may not be limited to Jewish experience.

For instance, the publication house of my last work voiced concern over finding reviewers given that the antisemitism issue had become stale, boring and predictable. Among non-Corbynite Jewish Labour activists, a waning “stay and fight” stance has become discernible. Noble in intent, but ineffective in practice, the costs of fighting

online antisemitism may outweigh the benefits. With ongoing repetitive crises, consuming energy levels and Sisyphean no end in sight results, the question of why bother trying is not an unreasonable one to ask.

Comparing online antisemitism’s experiential dimensions with those of previous periods may enable a more nuanced examination of privilege and power. For example, the perception of Jewish privilege delegitimizes antisemitism and excludes it from the master narrative of racism. The online experience demonstrates an acute irony: compared with other more virulent antisemitic periods, Jews use more agency than ever, yet the more Jews fight antisemitism today, the more pervasive it becomes. Previously neutral spaces become “contaminated.” And as the growth of contaminated spaces reaches saturation point, so does the potential for antisemitism to become unprecedentedly broad in its reach.

I am sketching dual antisemitism agendas here, one for research and one for organizational activism. While activists have no shortage of material to draw on, the provision for other forms of support are much more variable. Certainly, Jewish communal organizations require more thoughtful and innovative approaches to care. “Fighting” antisemitism has never just been a matter of engaging antisemites. Rather it is a Jewish experience that impacts on multiple dimensions of Jewish life.

The Internet’s capacity to mass market and globally distribute antisemitic beliefs is without historical precedent with online fighters showing signs of battle fatigue—understandably weary and disengaged in a war they cannot be confident of winning.

