

Explainer: What is the online forum 8chan?

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Clarissa Hernandez holds Ezra Magallanes as they visit a makeshift memorial for victims of a mass shooting at a shopping complex Monday, Aug. 5, 2019, in El Paso, Texas. (AP Photo/John Locher)

An anonymous online forum called 8chan has drawn attention in the wake of mass shootings in Texas and Ohio because violent U.S. extremists have used it to share tips and encourage one another. The site

suffered sporadic outages Monday after its cybersecurity provider cut off support for what it called a "cesspool of hate."

WHAT IS 8CHAN?

The online message board dates back to 2013. Under the banner of free speech, it allows users to post graphic and extremist content and doesn't censor posts.

The site has been linked to violent extremists. Police are investigating commentary posted on 8chan believed to have been written by the suspect in a shooting Saturday that killed 22 people in El Paso, Texas.

If there is a connection, it would be the third known instance of a shooter posting to the site before going on a rampage. In March, the gunman in mass shootings at two New Zealand mosques posted a rambling manifesto to the site, as did another who injured several people and killed one at a California synagogue in April.

8chan's founder, Fredrick Brennan, is no longer running the site. In an interview with The New York Times on Monday, he said the site wasn't doing any good and called for it to be shut down .

WHY DID 8CHAN GO DOWN?

The site went down briefly after security provider Cloudflare said it would stop supporting the site. Without Cloudflare, the site was vulnerable to outside hackers who shut down the site.

"8chan has repeatedly proven itself to be a cesspool of hate," Cloudflare CEO Matthew Prince wrote. "They have proven themselves to be lawless and that lawlessness has caused multiple tragic deaths."

CAN 8CHAN BE SHUT DOWN?



Rene Aguilar and Jackie Flores pray at a makeshift memorial for the victims of Saturday's mass shooting at a shopping complex in El Paso, Texas, Sunday, August 4, 2019. (AP Photo/Andres Leighton)

8chan's popularity rose after the similarly named but unaffiliated site 4chan cracked down on more extreme posts. Because the U.S. doesn't specifically outlaw domestic terrorism the way it does foreign-sponsored extremism, such sites enjoy broad protection from government oversight under the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment.

Even if that weren't the case, content on sites like 8chan are also difficult

to stamp out because users can simply move on if moderators grow stricter or if a site shuts down.

"Dealing with incitement to violence and hatred online goes well beyond any one platform," the Anti-Defamation League's Oren Segal said.

"These hate and racist posts will find another way to get their message out and another site with less scruples will pop up to host them," added Tim Bajarin, a technology columnist and president of Creative Strategies. "The internet has always been a Wild, Wild West medium with very little controls to keep this type of harmful commentary from seeing the light of day."

WHAT ABOUT REGULATION?

Mutale Nkonde, a fellow at the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard, said it's time to think about creating a legal definition for harmful speech that could be regulated.

"We need to seriously balance do we want to be secure as a nation and have the ability to go to Walmart or we want to protect the speech of those who want to destroy our country from within?" she said.

But there has been resistance to passing legislation, said David Kaye, the U.N. special rapporteur on freedom of expression and a University of California-Irvine law professor.

"It's very difficult to get any kind of law adopted in the United States," Kaye said. "Even after these terrible crimes and the connection the 8chan forum has to them, I don't see much of a likelihood of a pretty serious debate about how the companies should be regulated."

Kaye said that in the absence of U.S. government action on online

speech, the most Americans can hope for is that companies like Cloudflare are transparent about their policies regarding hate speech—and what should be regarded as incitement to violence and not tolerated.

"There is probably horrible content that's being hosted by its clients in other parts of the world," he said, "but is it applying the same measures there?"

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