



President Trump urging fight against online extremism

Trevor Shirley

August 6, 2019

As authorities try to prevent the next mass shooting many are asking what can be done about hateful, extremist writings on the internet? The president has called on law enforcement and media companies to do more to police internet hate speech but many say it is impossible to contain.

“Online hate is bigger than any individual platform, and we need a new way of looking at how it spreads across different platforms.” Rhys Leahy said.

Data scientist Rhys Leahy studies online hate speech in particular how it spreads she compares controlling it to breaking a piece of glass.

Shards, she says, like 8-chan, a forum where the alleged El Paso shooter reportedly posted a racist manifesto minutes before his massacre

“The big pieces, when you’re picking it up, those are like the big platforms, they’re easy to work with,” Leahy said. “The ones that are problematic are the little shards you may step on later.”

On Monday, the president called on media companies and law enforcement to crack down on internet hate speech but free speech advocates say not so fast.

The Cato Institute’s Matthew Feeney says censorship by the government is a slippery slope. “Most of the very offensive speech people see online is constitutionally protected,” Feeney said. “The vast majority of creepy weirdos don’t turn out to be mass shooters, so I worry that the policing of the web will lead to overenforcement and false positives.”

And shutting down a site like 8-chan may not make a difference. Leahy says immediately after the shooting online posters were already looking ahead.

“In the same 8-chan thread where the shooter posted his manifesto, someone asked so when this place gets shut down...where are we all going next?” Leahy said.