

ALL HALE - WHEN HATEMONGERS CATCH THE MEDIA WAVE

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Author: Julia Keller, Tribune Staff Writer.

Matthew Hale never had a better friend than the news media.

Without media attention, Hale's World Church of the Creator would be an obscure, ragtag group of pathetic hater's desperate for any scraps of publicity they could scrounge.

Thanks to the media, however, which worked overtime to cover the July 2 murder spree allegedly perpetrated by former church member Benjamin Smith, Hale and his followers have been dancing in the kind of hot spotlight that money can't buy.

The heinous ideas they espouse have enjoyed a dream forum: The Tribune, National Public Radio, "Today," the Washington Post and other news organizations.

So what can media do about, in effect, handing over their pages and airtime to bigots who happen to make news?

Nothing -- which points out a central perversity of the information age: The job of informing the public sometimes means serving as the purveyor of views that most of us find repugnant. Reporters, by and large, can't pick and choose which stories they cover; news is news.

And sometimes, as in the case of Smith and Hale, news is nauseating.

As Hale told a Tribune reporter last week, "Come on in. You'll see we're just working away here to get our message out."

Thanks to the front page story July 11 in which that quotation appeared, his hate-filled message now has been spread beyond anything even the megalomaniacal Hale probably could imagine.

Doubtless, a majority of reporters and editors are sensitive to the dilemma: By reporting the news in a straightforward, objective fashion, many times they end up inadvertently legitimizing the very ideas that gave rise to the horrific acts. They grant mainstream status to notions that otherwise would be relegated to the slimy margins.

The racist rampage allegedly undertaken by Smith this month, which resulted in the deaths of former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong and Indiana University economics student Won Joon Yoon, and the wounding of nine others, before Smith committed suicide, understandably drew widespread media attention.

Trying to ascertain Smith's motivation, reporters explored his association with Hale and the now-notorious church based in East Peoria, which advocates white supremacy. Naturally, reporters were eager to interview Hale, the church's neatly groomed, well-educated leader with the choirboy looks and the goose-stepping mind-set.

And interview him they did: From Katie Couric of "Today" to Noah Adams of National Public Radio, reporters thrust microphones at Hale all last week, capturing his racist, anti-Semitic invective and sending it forth to viewers, listeners and readers.

"I wanted people to hear (Hale's) voice," Adams said from Washington, D.C. "I found what I was looking for. I felt a shudder.

"I've never had that happen before. I've had interviews that made me mad, that were frustrating, but I've never had quite this reaction," added Adams, who has done an estimated 10,000 interviews in his 25 years at NPR. "I don't know what it was about him. It's going to take me a while to figure it out."

Listeners apparently shared his visceral response to Hale's words; the July 6 interview "dominated the mail response for the week," Adams said. Sixty to 70 percent of the correspondents said they favored airing it, he added.

"I think many people are sheltered. I'm not around that world he was describing. That was my motivation: 'Let's give people an idea of what's going on in the world.'"

Steven Brill, publisher of the media watchdog magazine Brill's Content, said the problem faced by reporters on the Hale story was a familiar one, given Smith's alleged acts: Violence is a dandy attention-grabber.

"You always have that problem. If someone takes hostages and demands a hearing, they get one. There's no getting around it. What's unprecedented about this story is the nature and appetite of the news media environment we have now."

Five years ago, Brill said, Smith's saga and his relationship to Hale's church might have been a one- or two-day story in a regional paper. "It would never have gone a second day in national newspapers."

Instead, though, it was played day after day on television, radio and newspapers, a drumbeat Brill blames on the increasingly competitive news business. More and more news outlets are chasing the same dwindling audience share; big stories, according to current thinking, are apt to win back viewers and readers.

"So many news organizations," Brill said, "play the same big story at the expense of all the others."

Ultimately, though, Brill is in favor of uncensored news coverage, even if it ends up providing a soapbox to sickos. "You have to decide that more information is better than less information."

Keith Woods, who teaches journalism ethics at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Fla., agreed.

"I definitely side with people who give you more information. It's important to guard against being paternalistic in our coverage" and deciding what the public should and shouldn't hear, Woods said.

Journalists, however, must guard against being exploited by their sources. "It's important, when you present the views of someone like Hale, that you not present them unmediated. You don't just give him an open mike.

"We have to balance the needs of hearing from the people themselves with the need to contextualize their views."

The problem of media complicity in publicizing fringe organizations, then, is an old one, with this new twist: These days, hate groups generally maintain Web sites to lure potential converts. Web-savvy readers don't require the exact address; search engines

can find home pages in a jiffy. With Web sites and e-mail links, like-minded people -- and in some cases, those minds seem fatally diseased -- can link up as never before.

One need only contrast Smith's lame attempts to disseminate his racist, anti-Semitic views prior to his rampage -- film footage aired last week by ABC News shows him travelling through neighborhoods, flinging leaflets on doorsteps like some twisted paper boy -- with the immense, instantaneous reach of the Internet to understand how the information age is transforming the odd and odious convictions of a few into cultural forces to be reckoned with.

Woods, however, still advocates information dispersal, even when the information is revolting.

"It's important for those who oppose racism to know where it exists."

Caption: PHOTOS 2

PHOTO: Mathew Hale looks into the camera during one of the TV interviews that gave national exposure to his beliefs. Tribune photo by Bonnie Trafelet. PHOTO: Stephen Brill, publisher of the media watchdog magazine Brill's Content, says the World Church of the Creator presented a common problem for reporters. Photo by Suzanne Mapes/AP.

Memo: Mixed messages

A look at four emerging issues in the media this week.

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