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## Combatting hate speech on the Internet

International conference highlights cultural differences, demonstrates need for education

*The Internet has placed a wealth of information at the fingertips of millions around the world. For many, it has become an indispensable source of news, communication and entertainment. The burgeoning industry of electronic commerce brings an ever-increasing array of items just one click away from home delivery. Children and adults alike can research virtually any subject from the comfort of the family room or den. People can maintain constant contact with distant family and friends without the delay of standard mail or the cost of long-distance telephone calls; furthermore, they can make new acquaintances based on common interests. All of these advantages enrich the overall quality of life for the 250 million people who currently use the Internet, yet each holds significant potential for abuse and mayhem.*

*Not everyone who uses the Internet has innocuous intentions. Right-wing extremists in particular have embraced this new medium as an efficient means of disseminating their hate-filled and often-violent rhetoric.*

- *Germany has encountered problems with online bookstores selling Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* to its citizens, which is prohibited by national legislation.*
- *A judge in France recently ordered an international Internet service to prohibit access of French citizens to online auctions of Nazi memorabilia—items that offend “the collective memory of the country.”*
- *The white supremacist group Stormfront has registered various Internet addresses associated with other organizations, which are designed to trick unsuspecting visitors into reading their propaganda, a practice known as “cybersquatting.”*
- *Two brothers who searched the Internet for religion found the virulent Christian Identity movement, which influenced them to murder a homosexual couple and to firebomb several synagogues in Sacramento.*

*To counter this rising threat, the German Ministry of Justice teamed up with the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a global human rights organization named after the Austrian Nazi hunter, to host a two-day symposium in Berlin, Germany, in June 2000. The conference on “The Internet and the Changing Face of Hate” featured an international panel of speakers, which discussed the challenges in monitoring and prosecuting Internet activity that constitutes a crime in one jurisdiction but is protected in another.*

### Technology—Good and Bad

Leaders in electronic commerce painted vivid descriptions of the industry's future, which is predicted to grow to \$233 billion by 2004. Consumers, for instance, would have unlimited free access to entire libraries of publications, paying only for hard copies. Instead of choosing music from a catalog, subscribers could listen to all selections, paying a fee appropriate to their level of usage. The new technology would allow individuals to maintain entire video and music libraries online. Such innovations, however, would also require new legislation to protect intellectual property rights and to prevent illegal transactions.

“The Internet is a global phenomenon that carries tremendous opportunities and risk,” said the chief executive officer of a multinational corporation based in Germany. “Many dangers are inherent in this open form of communication, and we will be called upon to think in global terms.” Already, the removal of barriers through e-commerce has presented problems. Both Germany and the Netherlands ban the sale of *Mein Kampf*, but online bookstores based in the United States, where free speech is protected, carry the English edition of this work.

Innovative marketing practices further compound the issue. Not only do electronic booksellers sell *Mein Kampf* to a citizen in Germany, but at least one site recommends additional works of hate literature to those who purchase the book.

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution preserves the right of Americans to read virtually whatever they choose, and the wide selection offered by Internet retailers further supports that freedom. When viewing the descriptions of such controversial works as *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a blatant example of anti-Semitic propaganda, consumers can see the nature of the publication. On one site, the cover of *The Turner Diaries* appears under bold red letters iden-

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tifying it as the notorious document believed to be the blueprint for the Oklahoma City bombing.

### The 21st Century Soap Box

Conversely, many of the hate sites on the Internet market their wares as wholesome and family-oriented, as these extremist organizations attempt to attract new followers. Women and children have emerged as an especially attractive target audience in recent years. These groups view women as the key to “preserving the white race,” using feminist language to entice modern women into embracing their role as the breeders and familial support in a male-dominated society. Children are introduced to these radical philosophies through brightly colored web sites, featuring puzzles, coloring books and youth clubs.

Only one hate site existed on the Internet in April 1995, the time of the tragedy in Oklahoma City. Now, human rights groups are tracking more than 2,000 problematic sites. Although many of these sites originate in the United States, the problem is global. Sources reveal that, last year, the number of extreme right-wing home pages in Germany rose to 330 from 200 in 1998, representing almost a tenfold increase during the past four years. France alone hosts 120 extremist sites. The fact that different nations impose different restrictions on such sites presents an international dilemma.

In September 1997, the French government was alerted to the presence of a site published by the Charlemagne Skinheads, a French extremist group renowned for its violence. The French authorities quickly shut down the site in France, but it immediately reappeared with a new host in Toronto. The French government is currently working with the Canadians to remove the offensive site, but their efforts have proven unsuccessful. In another example, a pro-Nazi site known as “Website Berlin” targets Germans, yet is published by a California-based Moslem group. With the current legislation, the German government cannot take action against

a web site protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, even though it is aimed at German citizens. These situations illustrate the impasse that occurs without double criminality, when an act is illegal in only one of the countries involved. International cooperation can help alleviate this problem by establishing minimum standards of conduct, which would uniformly prohibit certain actions in all participating nations.

Such standards could also address the issue of cybersquatting, a practice in which hate groups register domain names affiliated with other organizations to provide erroneous information about the mimicked party, making it difficult to distinguish fact from fallacy. Unsuspecting visitors are easily led astray. One such site attacks the late civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., while presenting itself as a legitimate, scholarly source of information. The offline rules governing protection of an organization’s name apparently do not apply in cyberspace.

### Electronic Gatekeepers

Representatives of the European Union attended the conference with several proposed solutions to the issue at hand. The two dominant recommendations both focused on forms of censorship: banning books and filtering Internet content.

*A blacklist of books.* In the minds of European leaders, banning the sale and dissemination of known hate literature would solve an immediate problem. If Americans would stop selling books whose offensive nature warranted their prohibition in other nations, this simple act could eliminate one source of this propaganda.

Unfortunately, this proposal directly opposes the fundamental liberties set forth in the First Amendment. An American panelist at the conference, Michael A. Vatis of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, explained to the European attendees the historical significance of this amendment that presents a significant obstacle in reaching an international consensus. “This freedom was

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founded on one of the main tenets of our nation's fathers," said Vatis, who is Director of the National Infrastructure Protection Center (NIPC), an interagency organization created to protect the country's critical information systems. "The approach is to allow a free marketplace of ideas. It is up to the people themselves to decide what is good." There are indeed instances in which the nation limits this freedom, specifically in cases where the speech constitutes "a clear and present danger" of violence. However, denying a group or individual the liberty to express a viewpoint because the government disapproves of its nature sets the stage for tyranny and oppression—the very conditions that led to the nation's formation.

*Electronic filters.* A number of the conference panelists supported the use of filtering systems, which would prevent users from accidentally accessing extremist literature. Even if the government could not ban their violent messages, such systems would effectively deprive hate groups of an audience for their marketing tactics.

While the voluntary filtering of Internet content does not present ideological barriers, it does have some practical problems. First of all, most filtering systems lack the sophistication level required to be truly useful. Programming the system to screen out racist literature, for instance, could also block sites that denounced racism. Another concern arises from the fact that the family members whom filters are primarily designed to protect—the children—often possess most of the technological skill. Once the parent has left the room, a skilled teenager will have little trouble removing the electronic guardian.

One organization, on the other hand, seems to have addressed these issues effectively. Based in the Southwestern United States, the company licenses filtering lists from multiple sources that continuously update their databases. The firm then uses this extensive data collection to analyze and filter every byte of information routed to its clients' systems, applying country-specific standards to ensure

nothing passes that would not meet the restrictions of prime-time television. The client software embeds itself as an integral part of the operating system, which prevents precocious children from disabling it. Also, parents receive a quarterly report that documents each family member's Internet usage; this feature discourages attempts to locate the master password to deactivate the system.

Even though initial reports of this system are favorable, filtering does not address the crux of the problem, but circumvents it. The global community must accept that it cannot permanently shield its citizens from hate, and take appropriate action.

### **The Need for Education**

Several of the conference attendees advocate education and open discussion as a more productive alternative to censorship. According to Vatis, "the answer to hateful speech is not to prohibit it, but to speak against it, to foster tolerance and to foster understanding." The Internet did not introduce hate speech to society; it only facilitated its dissemination. The world cannot expect to eliminate this undesirable element by outlawing its presence on the World Wide Web. Neither can society hope to minimize their impact by ignoring these activists of ill will.

Education must be a continuous process, reinforced through words and deeds. In the workplace, this course of action can take the form of diversity training. For instance, the FBI requires that all new agents in training visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., as part of their curriculum, and each year, more than 13,000 law enforcement and public education professionals complete the Tools for Tolerance training course, sponsored by the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, Calif. Because of the success experienced by the Museum of Tolerance, the Wiesenthal Center plans to build a second institution in New York. Facing History and Ourselves, a non-profit

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educational organization based in Brookline, Mass., conducts annual training institutes for Boston Police Department recruits, a program initiated in 1996.

Although the organization's outreach has expanded in recent years to the law enforcement community, Facing History primarily focuses on reaching adolescents through teacher education programs that include in-depth training, individualized follow-up and classroom resources. Educators expose their classes to sophisticated history and literary texts, and the students explore these resources through critical reading, writing and speaking. The program addresses the seduction of hate groups, which offer a sense of belonging but undermine the essential democratic principles of liberty and equality.

The leaders of the organizations that participate in these programs deserve commendation. Studies have shown that educational outreach initiatives such as these have proven effective in reducing violence and improving relations between diverse groups. Thus far, however, these efforts have centered around law enforcement and education professionals. As community leaders, businesses need to bring such educational initiatives to their employees. Corporate diversity initiatives not only foster stronger employee relations, but they also contribute to greater openness and understanding within the home. These programs offer the most effective solution to counteracting the aggressive recruitment tactics employed by many extremist groups. Through education, society can expose the hate-filled propaganda disseminated by these organizations, while spreading a message of tolerance and understanding. Such a grassroots campaign can weaken the effectiveness of hate groups' online marketing endeavors.

Rather than shielding individuals from negative rhetoric like *Mein Kampf* through censorship, society's leaders must provide citizens with the

moral tools necessary to recognize and reject messages of hate. Teaching people respect for one another in the offline world will also engender respect and understanding in the online world.

The strength of the United States demonstrates the power of freedom—including freedom of speech. Instead of attempting to silence hateful speech, society must respond with words of tolerance and enlightenment. Freedom of speech remains one of the most precious liberties protected by this nation, but to be effective, it demands that individuals demonstrate the courage to speak out when others would pervert this freedom for evil purposes.

*The problem of hate dissemination on the Internet reflects a fundamental problem in the real world: most people do not live in a carefully controlled environment. Parents, for instance, cannot protect their children at all times; they must instead teach them basic moral principles and rely on them to behave appropriately on their own. A responsible, civilized society needs to educate its citizens on the importance of embracing diversity and to trust them to make the right decisions when confronted by purveyors of hate.*

*Instead of focusing on the impossible task of reaching a global consensus of laws, the international community must unite to combat the growing dissemination of hate literature with education and enlightenment. Each government, corporation and individual needs to take a stand in the war against hate. To effect global reform, society must begin by acting at the most local levels. Future negotiations can facilitate international cooperation, but the key to a diverse society lies in the hands of an educated, informed citizenry.*



The Lipman Report Editors