

# Calgary Herald

## Unmask liars hiding behind free speech: Education's key, not human rights commissions hearings

Saturday, December 20, 1997

Page: J5

Section: Comment

Byline: Catherine Ford

Column: Catherine Ford

Trying to control the avalanche of disinformation, misinformation and, as the expression goes, damned lies on the Internet is as pointless as trying to empty the Pacific with a teaspoon. It's impossible.

That's what makes the continuing efforts to censor the tired rantings of Holocaust deniers such as Ernst Zundel so pointless, so wearying, so expensive.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission this past week adjourned until April yet-another hearing into the vile outpourings of Zundel, this time on a computer web site. The complaint to the commission was backed by a loose coalition of groups with a particular axe to grind: They believe Zundel spreads contempt and hate on his web site. If seeing and reading is believing, they're right.

While this marks the first serious attempt to apply human rights laws to the Internet, it will likely prove as ineffective and unenforceable as attempts to silence any fanaticism have been.

Not for nothing are these sites launched from computers in the United States and quote -- at length and repeatedly -- the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States guaranteeing freedom of speech.

In case anyone misses the importance of this law that protects liars and hate-mongers, the computer links all quote the appropriate passage. One web site states: "The concepts expressed in this document are protected by the basic human right to freedom of speech as guaranteed by . . . and reaffirmed by the Supreme Court as applying to Internet content on June 26, 1997."

Freedom of speech, curiously enough, doesn't seem to encourage truth, it encourages lies, hatred and contempt, under the banner of permission. The freedom to speak out without fear of censorship is regard by the likes of Zundel and other revisionists as an invitation to say what they will.

That they can is admirable.

That they do is reprehensible.

The proper counterattack is not whining to human rights commissions, but a rigorous program of education for anyone exposed to this garbage, especially children.

Better the money and effort be spent on teaching a generation of children with little critical faculty how

to think and how to judge.

They are, after all, exposed increasingly to the one medium that has no editors, no critical eyes, and no control. Unless they are taught by savvy people who recognize lies -- damned and otherwise -- for the manipulative, foolish and sloppy thinking they are, children of all ages will be tempted to believe because the words are "printed" they are right.

The Internet's lack of a filter, and its presentation of all words with the same weight is dangerous. One comment bears repeating often enough until computer users understand: The Internet, for all of its usefulness, has become the repository of every lame-brained theory, every mutant thought, every outpouring of malice and hate of which the human mind is capable. No opinion is too banal; no idea too gross; no theory too far-fetched.

Worse, it has no tell-tale signs of fanaticism, although the repeated use of First Amendment admonitions could become just such a warning that what follows is likely a lie.

It's the delivery, not the message that's new. Let me explain: Madness and psychosis manifest themselves in various ways. Every month at this time, along with the full moon, a brigade of the crazy and demented appear to bay at the bright light in the sky. Some, instead of growing hair on their faces, write letters to newspapers. They write them in red crayon and on torn-out newspaper pages; they type them on broken typewriters and painstakingly underline each and every word many, many times. They write in the margins and they stuff the envelopes with tracts and pamphlets and vile commentary from obscure mail boxes in Ohio or Idaho, all of which purport to "tell the truth."

That so-called truth usually falls into a number of categories: Holocaust denial, religious fervor (sometimes the two are combined), and the belief that aliens and UFOs abound.

Conspiracy theories are rampant -- elaborate, fanciful and moronic -- as are vulgarity, filth and innuendo.

The Internet erases the ability to immediately spot the crazies, because there is no such thing as red crayon on the World Wide Web. There are only typeset words, easy to read and not at all scratched or wobbly or crammed together, or underlined repeatedly in different-colored inks.

The challenge in combatting hatred in its guise as

free speech is a unending commitment to identify the sources and call them by their real names: liars.

(Catherine Ford can be reached by e-mail at [fordc@theherald.southam.ca](mailto:fordc@theherald.southam.ca))