

II. Defining the Problem: The Internet as a Tool for Hate

Few Americans would willingly welcome hate groups such as neo-Nazis or the Ku Klux Klan into their homes to spread their pernicious message of hate. Yet, as a result of the fast spreading technology of the Internet and the World Wide Web, many people have, through inadvertence or curiosity, encountered hate-filled messages and images on the screens of their home computers.

– from *The Web of Hate: Extremists Exploit the Internet*,
Anti-Defamation League

The Emergence of Hate Speech Online

By using any of the many search engines available through the World Wide Web, an Internet search of the words “Ku Klux Klan” will produce an extensive list of Web sites promoting hate. These sites are readily accessible to the approximately 160 million Americans, including significant numbers of impressionable children and youth, who today use the Internet.

Even before the birth of the World Wide Web, media-savvy leaders of some organized hate groups recognized the potential of technology to disseminate their messages and further their goals. In the 1980s, Louis Beam, a leader of the Ku Klux Klan, and neo-Nazi publisher, George Dietz, collaborated to create a computerized bulletin board accessible to anyone with a computer, phone line, and modem. The bulletin board, “Aryan Nation Liberty Net,” was subscription-based and designed to recruit young people, raise money, and incite hatred against the “enemies” of white supremacy.

In the early 1990s, many bigots united in organized online discussion groups called USENETs. USENET newsgroups were similar to the “Aryan Nation Liberty Net” but were more easily accessible to anyone with Internet access. USENETs were free and provided a venue for participants to write, read, and respond to messages of hate.

The evolution of the Internet into the World Wide Web, with its easily accessible and inviting graphic interface, has provided people, including extremists, with new ways to communicate with each other and with a vast new potential audience, using not only words, but also pictures, graphics, sound, and animation.

Don Black, a former Klan leader and convicted felon who learned to use computers while incarcerated, is attributed with creating one of the earliest hate sites, *Stormfront*, in 1995 (McKelvey, 2001). Since its creation, *Stormfront* has served as a veritable supermarket of online hate, stocking its shelves with materials that promote anti-Semitism and racism. *Stormfront* is among the most visited hate sites on the Internet, claiming upwards of five million visits to the site over the past decade. When first created, the site contained links to a scant handful of other Web sites with similar messages of hate. Today, *Stormfront* provides links to hundreds of white supremacist sites, and hundreds of other sites are easily found online.

Who is Spreading Hate Online?

A wide variety of people with bigoted ideologies, including Holocaust deniers, “Identity” adherents, Ku Klux Klan members, and virulent homophobes, use the Internet to spread their views.

Extremists Seeking Credibility

A common rationale among extremists is to use the Web to build increased respectability and mainstream acceptance of their ideas. Such groups typically characterize themselves as legitimate activists who have been unfairly denied mainstream attention. For example, David Duke, former leader of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, veils an ideology of white supremacy behind misleading rhetoric of “white rights.” By couching bigotry in pseudo-scientific and sociological terms, Duke articulates a subtle but virulent brand of racism that exploits race-related issues such as illegal immigration and affirmative action. Other examples of Web sites designed to increase the respectability of extremist groups include the Council of Conservative Citizens and American Renaissance, which sponsor both a monthly print publication by the same name and a Web site.

14

Holocaust Deniers

Holocaust denial is a propaganda movement that seeks to deny the reality of the Holocaust, the systematic mass murder of six million Jews and millions of others deemed “inferior” by the Nazi regime in Europe during World War II. Misrepresenting their propaganda as “historical revisionism,” Holocaust deniers attempt to disseminate their extremist ideas by offering unsupported arguments against the established historical facts of the Holocaust. Their beliefs include accusations that Jews have falsified and exaggerated the tragic events of the Holocaust in order to exploit non-Jewish guilt. Holocaust denial groups have posted thousands of Web pages, filled with distortions and fabrications, designed to reinforce negative stereotypes such as the contention that Jews maintain control of academia and the media. Among the most visited sites promoting

Holocaust denial are the Institute for Historical Review, Bradley Smith and his Committee for Open Debate of the Holocaust (whose efforts focus largely on U.S. college campuses), and sites sponsored by Ahmed Rami, Ernst Zundel, and David Irving.

“Identity” Adherents

The Identity Church, a pseudo-theological movement that promotes racism and anti-Semitism, emerged in the U.S. during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Proponents of this movement use inflammatory and degrading language to promote hate against many groups of people, including Jews, African-Americans, and other people of color. Identity organizations that have a notable presence on the Internet include Aryan Nations, the Posse Comitatus, the Church of New Israel, America’s Promise Ministries, Scriptures for America, and the 11th Hour Remnant Messenger.

KKK Members

Although the Ku Klux Klan has undergone many permutations throughout its violent 130-year existence, the group is currently fragmented. The Internet is providing a means for the group’s various factions to gain strength. Web sites of these factions share many commonalities, including information on upcoming rallies, explanations of customs (such as cross burning), and spurious accounts of Klan history. The American Knights and the Imperial Klans of America are two factions with a significant online presence.

Neo-Nazis

Numerous groups and individuals have created and maintain Web sites promoting the anti-Semitic, racist ideas of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi party. The National Alliance, one of the largest and most active neo-Nazi organizations in the United States today, was founded by William Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries*. The stated mission of this group is “to build a better world and a better race” and to create “a new government . . . answerable to White people only” (*Extremism in America*, 2001). When Pierce died in July 2002, leadership for this group was transferred to Erich Glibe, who recently expressed his admiration for both domestic and international terrorist groups. Though Glibe does not necessarily agree with their political views, he praised the Islamic terrorists who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, describing them as “serious, patient, and organized, and they had the discipline to keep their mouths shut so as not to leak any information about what they were planning” (*Extremism in America*, 2001).

The National Alliance Web site features transcripts from a weekly anti-Semitic radio broadcast, online access to many articles from the group’s National Vanguard magazine, and a catalog of books with over six hundred titles. The National Alliance has recently focused most of its attention on recruiting young racists through the online marketing of white power music. In recent years, dozens of violent crimes, including murders, bombings, and robberies, have been either traced to National Alliance members or appear to have been inspired by

neo-Nazi propaganda. Other neo-Nazis groups and individuals with a significant online presence include the National Socialist Movement, Matt Koehl, and Gerhard Lauck. In Germany, where distribution of hate literature is now illegal, Lauck has successfully used the Internet to sidestep national laws and widely distribute his literature and ideas throughout the country.

Racist Skinheads

Racist skinhead groups share common hateful beliefs and promote these beliefs with others. Skinheads typically align themselves with the perception of strength, group belonging and superiority promoted by the white power movement. A major aspect of racist skinhead life is devotion to musical groups who record rock music with hateful lyrics. Skinheads have effectively combined bigotry-laced hard rock and the Internet as a main propaganda weapon and means of attracting young recruits. Resistance Records, owned by the National Alliance, is a multi-million dollar enterprise that uses its Web site to market white power rock CDs by groups such as Angry Aryans, and subscriptions to *Resistance* magazine – the *Rolling Stone* of the hate movement. Other notable racist skinhead Web sites include those of the Hammerskin Nation, Plunder & Pillage, and Panzerfaust Records.

Westboro Baptist Church

Incorporated in 1967 as a not-for-profit organization, the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) describes itself as an “Old School (or Primitive)” Baptist Church. Promoting virulent homophobia, the WBC claims responsibility for staging tens of thousands of protest rallies across the U.S. and abroad. The WBC Web site is devoted to spreading hate against people who are gay through homophobic language and ideas, photos and other graphics, and a variety of documents that support their position that the United States is “doomed” because of support and tolerance for gay Americans.

16

World Church of the Creator (WCOTC)

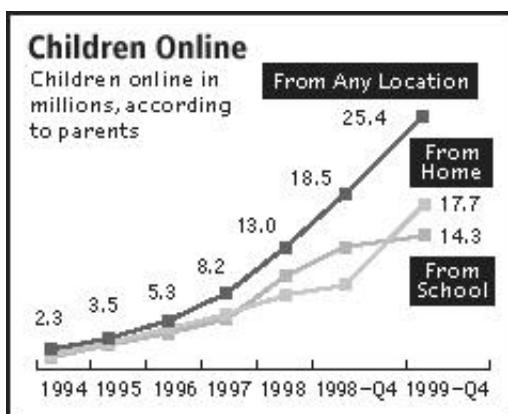
The World Church of the Creator is one of the fastest-growing hate groups in the U.S. today. The group’s primary goals, articulated in their motto, “RaHoWa,” (Racial Holy War) and their belief system, Creativity, is the “survival, expansion, and advancement of [the] White Race exclusively” (*Extremism in America*, 2001). Creators, as group members call themselves, do not align themselves with any religious beliefs, instead placing race as the ultimate issue influencing all realms of life. The hatred of WCOTC members is directed toward many groups, including mainstream Christians, African-Americans and other people of color, and Jews, who are particularly vilified.

The WCOTC Web site is extensive, frequently updated, and designed to make membership easy. Visitors to the site are provided with a membership form, a list of local “churches,” and a detailed manual that explains the group’s beliefs and practices, including such topics as planning WCOTC wedding ceremonies and dealing with law enforcement. The group also sponsors more than thirty other

affiliated Web sites and distributes propaganda through extensive online mailing lists, bulletin boards, and chat rooms. A “Comedy” section of the WCOTC Web site includes pictures, jokes, and free downloadable racist video games targeted toward teens.

How Do Children Encounter Hate Online?

Today, children and youth regularly use the Internet for schoolwork, entertainment, and socializing. A report based on a 1999 national survey on parents and their children and the Internet (*Children, Families and the Internet, 2000*) conducted by Grunwald Associates, in collaboration with the National School Boards Foundation, reported that 25.4 million children ages 2-17 access the Internet in the U.S. on a regular basis, as illustrated in the chart to the right. This number is an approximate 40-percent increase since the previous year. These children may encounter hate on the Internet in a variety of ways, including online bulletin boards, chat rooms, Web sites, and USENET newsgroups.



© 2001 Grunwald Associates

17

The USENET, an Internet communication system that contains thousands of public discussion groups, attracts hundreds of thousands of participants each day, both active (those who write) and passive (those who simply read postings). Newsgroups have been compared to community bulletin boards, providing another forum for extremists to debate and discuss their ideas and to insult, harass, and threaten the targets of their hatred.

It should be noted that while some USENET newsgroups are devoted specifically to white supremacy, most are concerned with mainstream, legitimate topics. A common tactic of online bigots is to post messages promoting their beliefs on multiple mainstream newsgroups with the hope of attracting new supporters. Some groups, including the National Alliance, have engaged in this strategy for many years, often tailoring their messages to the particular interests of the newsgroup where they are posting. For example, for a newsgroup focusing on food, extremists have posted messages promoting the “kosher tax,” a falsehood which suggests that standards required of vendors to maintain compliance with kosher food standards result in increased food prices for all consumers.

The strategies employed by hate groups have been expanded to Web-based bulletin board systems, particularly those hosted by legitimate companies such as CNN, America Online, and Yahoo! People who visit such bulletin boards, expecting to find rational, informative conversations on topics of mutual interest, instead can encounter disturbing messages posted by extremists.

Chat Rooms

“Chat” rooms provide opportunities for multiple computer users from diverse geographic locations to engage in simultaneous real-time online communication. Once a chat has been initiated, participants can join the conversation by typing text on their home computers and sending it via their modem. Entered text appears almost instantaneously on the monitors of all other participants in the chat room. In many respects, chat rooms are similar to conference calls.

Many hate group extremists, including white supremacists such as WCOTC leader Matt Hale, regularly host chat sessions in order to interact with their supporters. As with USENET newsgroups, extremists also try to enter mainstream chat rooms in search of new recruits.

Instant Messaging

Instant messaging allows an Internet user to engage in a private chat room with another person or persons with access to the same instant messaging system. Typically, the instant messaging system alerts the user when someone on the user’s private list is online. The user can then initiate a chat session with that particular individual. Instant messaging resembles a traditional telephone conversation between two people.

18

Computer users with online access can add anyone on the same instant messaging system to their private list. Unsuspecting users, including children, can easily be added to the instant messaging lists of white supremacists or other hate groups. The following is an account of the experience of one 11-year-old Jewish boy (Lieberman, 1999):

“Out of the blue, someone asked if my grandparents were one of the Six Million. I responded, ‘No, they survived.’ The next statement that appeared on my computer screen was, ‘Oh - that’s too bad.’ The remark puzzled me. I then asked what was meant by that statement. The person wrote, ‘Any Jew that survived was a mistake – and now – you’re here.’ I got very scared and shut down my computer.”

E-mail

E-mail can easily and inexpensively be used to spread hate propaganda. Extensive mailing lists may be purchased for an established fee, or can be readily created using one of a number of free online directories. Large-scale e-mail mailings are free of the typical postal fees and materials costs associated with traditional mass postal mailings. Without ever revealing their identities,

enterprising groups and individuals are now able to mass-mail unsolicited hate materials to tens of thousands of people.

Hateful e-mail can also be directed at a single, specific target. When the 11-year-old described earlier turned his computer back on, he found hundreds of anti-Semitic e-mail messages in his mailbox from “Adolph Jr.” with the subject “Jewish extermination part two.”

The World Wide Web

Though purveyors of hate make use of all the communication tools the Internet provides, Web site development is their forum of choice. Bigots, promoting their messages of hate on bulletin boards, in chat rooms, via instant messages, or with e-mail, often encourage their readers to gain additional information by visiting their Web site.

In addition to the World Wide Web’s multimedia capabilities and popularity with Internet users, the Web also allows bigots to present their messages of hate without mediation. Although civil rights activists may critique a group’s manifestoes in USENET newsgroups and other interactive forums, hate groups are under no obligation to publish these differing perspectives on their Web sites. When children visit a hate site, they see only the opinions of the individuals creating that site, often presented as hard fact. Other points of view that may discredit or disagree with those opinions can only be accessed through additional online research.

Although the ability to assess the accuracy and reliability of online information is now a vital skill for children and youth, the nature of the Internet can make it difficult for people to evaluate the credibility of organizations sponsoring Web sites. Both the reputable and the disreputable are on the Web, and many Web users lack the experience, knowledge, and skills to distinguish between them. Increasingly, Web development tools have made it easier for members of hate groups to create sites that visually resemble those of reputable organizations. Consequently, these groups can easily portray themselves as legitimate voices of authority.

Generally, people locate specific Web sites in one of three ways: by connecting from another site via a link, through Web directories, and by using one of a number of online search engines. If children follow links from legitimate sites, they are unlikely to end up at a hate site without being aware of the nature of the site. Mainstream sites rarely link to hate sites, and those that do, typically do so in an educational context, so readers understand that if they click on the link, they will be taken to an extremist site.

Web directories, which contain categorized lists of specific sites and their Web addresses, rarely provide descriptions about the sponsors or content of listed sites. While some directories accurately classify hate sites as such, others describe these sites using some of the misleading terms that extremists

themselves employ, such as “White Pride” and “Racist.” In one leading Web directory, students can find Holocaust denial sites under the term “Revisionism,” the same euphemism that Holocaust deniers use to infer legitimacy for their beliefs. Some Web directories have separate versions which include only those sites that are appropriate for children, such as Yahoooligans by Yahoo! These child-friendly directories are designed to be free of addresses for hate sites and other inappropriate content.

While many Web directories provide useful information for identifying hate sites, most search engines do not. Search engines, unlike Web directories, provide users with listings that are based on a computer algorithm, without the added benefit of human assessment and evaluation. Search engines tend to classify Web sites on the basis of how sites describe themselves. Although search engines are indispensable for conducting online research, providing extensive listings of Web sites associated with a particular term, children need instruction to prepare them for the possibility of encountering hate and misinformation while conducting online searches. Many hate sites purposefully describe themselves in misleading terms so that search engines will include their sites in search results for legitimate, benign terms, such as “Civil War” or “Holocaust history.”

Examples of Hateful Web Sites Targeting Youth

Some hate sites are designed to specifically reach youth and influence their thinking. The following Web sites are examples:

20

Martin Luther King, Jr.: An Historical Examination: This misleading hate site, which is designed to interest students researching the civil rights movement, appears under a variety of different Web addresses when children search for information about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The site provides a number of links with titles such as “The Truth About King: Who He Fought and Fought For” and “Jews & Civil Rights: Who Led the Civil Rights Movement.” By clicking on these titles, the Web user is directed to Web sites that include hate propaganda from the National Alliance and David Duke. “If you are a teacher or student, I hope you will take a stand for right and wrong and use this information to enlighten your peers,” writes neo-Nazi National Alliance member Vincent Breeding, credited with creating and maintaining the site.

Stormfront.org for Kids: 12-year-old Derek Black, son of *Stormfront* Webmaster Don Black, is credited with creating this Web site that targets youth. “I used to be in public school. It is a shame how many white minds are wasted in that system,” Derek writes on his site. “I am now in home school. I no longer get attacked by gangs [sic] of non-whites and I spend most of my day learning, instead of tutoring the slowest kids in my class.” In the past, the site has provided visitors with a free “white power” version of a popular video game, and currently attempts to maintain the interest of visitors by including sections such as “Optical Illusions.”

Links to other hateful Web sites are also included.

World Church of the Creator Kids!: This game-based site describes its purpose as making it “fun and easy for children to learn about Creativity.” The site features word search puzzles, where children look for terms such as “racetractor,” and word unscrambling games with hints like “this is what the white race faces if we don’t save it” (answer: extinction). The site also contains racist crossword puzzles with clues such as “equality between the races is a ____” (answer: “myth”) and fables with extremist morals, such as “the greatest gift a White Person can give another White Person is the chance at White Salvation.” An e-mail address is provided for children who enjoy the site to contact World Church of the Creator.

Youth and the Electronic Community of Hate

The Internet has provided the means for extremists to create an “electronic community of hate.” Proponents of bigotry are no longer isolated from others who share their beliefs. They can communicate easily, inexpensively, and sometimes anonymously with thousands of compatriots from the comfort of their own homes. The organized network of hate on the Internet poses grave risks to children, ranging from victimization to entanglement in the Web of these anti-social, hate-filled, and violent influences.

Hate groups sometimes target children and teenagers directly using sophisticated marketing strategies. Tara McKelvey reported in *USA Today* that, “just as fashion editors and e-book publishers have started reaching out to elementary school children and teens ... so have hate groups.” Hate propaganda, from subtle to heavy handed, is aimed at influencing both the attitudes and behaviors of impressionable young readers. Hate groups are increasingly spreading their ideas by developing and selling online products that typically appeal to youth, such as CDs, jewelry, books, and other items. At the extreme, anti-Semites and racists use the Internet to recruit new, young members. A number of sites provide online application forms, making it easy for children and youth to gain membership. Some hate sites provide links to pages with detailed instruction on bomb-making, a serious concern in light of the increase in acts of violence in schools over the past decade.

A variety of family and community influences can cause youth to feel isolated and alone. The “electronic community of hate” can provide a sense of value, importance, and belonging to lonely and impressionable young people. Although a large majority of families would never allow their children to attend the meeting of a hate group, young people can easily participate in the “electronic community of hate” without their parents’ knowledge by simply logging on to the Internet from the privacy of their bedrooms, living rooms, or at school or library computers with unfiltered Internet access. Staff from the Anti-Defamation

League who monitor hate on the Internet report that online communications and requests for guidance are common occurrences between teenagers and those espousing racist ideologies online.

In addition, young people who become entangled in the online Web of hate discover exciting opportunities to assume roles of power, influence, and responsibility. Many young people have well-developed computer skills that are of great value to hate groups interested in creating, hosting or expanding Web sites. In 1998, the Webmaster for the World Church of the Creator (WCOTC) was 20-year-old Kelly Daniels, who was living in his parents' basement at the time. Daniels ran Candidus Productions, the official WCOTC Web site design company, and went on to design the Resistance Records Web site and to join the National Alliance.

In addition to influencing young people's beliefs and attitudes, exposure to hate on the Internet can also influence children's actions. Using the Internet, people espousing racists, anti-Semitic ideologies have encouraged youth to translate hateful thinking into action, which ranges from excluding classmates to committing violent hate crimes. In 1999, white supremacist Internet materials were implicated in two horrific, hate crime sprees, described below. Though the extremists charged with these crimes were not children when the crimes were committed, all three perpetrators became involved in the hate movement through the Internet at a time when they were young and impressionable.

Matthew Williams

22 | While attending the University of Idaho, Matthew Williams was a solitary student who turned to the Internet in search of a new spiritual path. Described as a "born fanatic" by acquaintances, Williams reportedly embraced a number of the radical-right philosophies he encountered online, from the anti-government views of militias to the racist and anti-Semitic beliefs of the Identity movement. He regularly downloaded pages from extremist sites and continually used printouts of these pages to convince his friends to also adopt these beliefs. At age 31, Matthew Williams and his 29-year-old brother, Tyler, were charged in July 1999 with murdering a gay couple, Gary Matson and Winfield Mowder, and with involvement in setting fire to three Sacramento-area synagogues. On June 18, 1999, while investigating the crimes, police discovered boxes of hate literature at the home of the brothers (Anti-Defamation League, 2001).

Benjamin Nathaniel Smith

Another violent episode occurred in 1999 in the Midwest, just a few weeks after the arrest of the Williams brothers. Named "Creator of the Year" in 1998 by World Church of the Creator leader, Matt Hale, 21-year-old Benjamin Nathaniel Smith went on a racially-motivated shooting spree in Illinois and Indiana over the July 4th weekend. Targeting Jews, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans, Smith killed two and wounded eight before taking his own life, just as law enforcement officers prepared to apprehend him (Anti-Defamation League, 2001).

Can Hate on the Internet be Eliminated?

Technologically and legally, it is likely that removing hate speech from the Internet is almost impossible. Decentralized by design, the Internet is a worldwide network that consists of thousands of computers with high-speed connections. Often described as an “information superhighway,” the Internet crosses international borders, has thousands of unpoliced on-ramps, and has no uniform rules of the road. Because the Internet is global, the laws of the most permissive country have historically set the tone. In general, it is the United States, with its cherished right of free speech, that tends to govern the freedoms afforded online speech. U.S. citizens must often struggle to reconcile their belief in the Constitutional right of free speech with the recognition that the Constitution provides the same rights to all, including hate groups. The protection of these freedoms results in an environment where legitimate dialogue exists alongside hate. A number of people with extremist views from other countries exploit these American freedoms and store their hate sites on computers in the U.S., thus avoiding more stringent laws in their home countries.

The First Amendment shields the majority of hate speech from government regulation. Unless blanket statements of hate, such as “I hate Blacks,” contain specific threats, they are protected under the First Amendment. This is true even if such statements mention specific names and cause distress to those individuals. Additionally, in a 1997 Supreme Court decision, *Reno v. ACLU*¹, lawmakers clarified that traditional First Amendment protection of free speech did extend to speech on the Internet.

The First Amendment does not protect all speech. Speech that is threatening or harassing, for example, may be legally actionable. Threats are generally defined as an individual’s declaration of intent to hurt another person. Threatening speech is by far the most likely type of unprotected hate speech to be prosecuted. To be prosecuted, threats must be believable and directed at a specific person, organization or institution. Courts will look at the context in which a statement was made to determine if it is threatening. Prosecution of threatening speech is one measure that has led to some success in the battle against hate on the Internet.

The nature of the Internet, however, complicates the prosecution of threatening hate speech. By using any one of a number of services that provide almost complete anonymity, people intent on promoting bigotry may send repeated e-mails to a person without revealing their identity. A prosecutable message may easily and anonymously be transmitted to multiple computers in other countries, even if both the sender and the recipient of the message live in the United States. It is not unusual for foreign companies, responsible for computers that are used to transmit such messages, to refuse to provide information to law enforcement

¹*Reno v. ACLU*, 521 U.S. 844 (1997).

agencies in the United States. For example, in the incident described earlier in this publication, in which an 11-year-old Jewish child received multiple e-mail messages from “Adolph, Jr.,” many of the messages contained death threats. The Internet Service Provider used to transmit these messages from the Netherlands refused to respond to inquiries about the incident, and authorities were unable to determine the source of the messages. Even when Internet Service Providers want to help investigators, they may be unable to provide the information necessary to identify the culprit. Such companies keep logs of the activities on their computers for a limited time only. If an investigation begins even a week after a potentially criminal message was sent, the relevant records may have already been deleted.

Though most of the thousands of Internet Service Providers that exist in the United States do not regulate hate speech *per se*, some contractually prohibit users from sending bigoted messages on their services, even when that speech is legally permissible. Such prohibitions do not violate the First Amendment because they are stipulations of private contracts with users and do not involve government action. The effectiveness of this strategy is very limited, however, as subscribers who lose their Internet accounts for contract violation may easily sign up with another service that has more permissive regulations. Furthermore, many companies that provide Internet service in the United States have little incentive to regulate the speech of their users because the Telecommunications Act of 1996² specifically states that Internet Service Providers cannot be held criminally liable for the speech of subscribers.

²Telecommunications Act of 1996, Public Law No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56 (1996).