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Challenging Online Hate: A Media Education Response

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Thank you. I am honoured to have been invited by the OSCE to speak today on this important issue.

The Media Awareness Network is a national non-profit education organization. Our mission is to promote media education and its widest possible integration into Canadian schools, homes and communities.

We host one of the largest education Web sites in Canada, which contains hundreds of free media education resources for students, teachers and researchers. Our site now gets over 300,000 individual users each month. Fifty percent of our users are American, 20 percent are Canadian and 20 percent European. The Netherlands is number four among the European user group.

Canada is a world leader in media education. Learning outcomes for media literacy are now included in curricula of every Canadian province and territory, from primary through to post secondary.

The goal of media education is to create a media literate individual. It is now widely accepted in education circles that in order to be literate today, children and young people must be able to *read*, understand and bring critical thinking skills to information in many different forms.

Media literacy involves analysis, evaluation, production and critical reflection. These

skills are at the heart of a healthy, informed society, and they are increasingly important as young people turn to the Internet as their main source of information.

Canada is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. The United Nations has ranked Toronto the world's most multicultural city. Our population includes more than 200 ethnic origins; more than 13 percent are visible minorities and that is expected to rise to 20 percent over the next decade; and 82 percent of Canadians say the government should preserve and enhance multiculturalism.

We pride ourselves on being an open and tolerant society and we recognize that diversity is the source of our strength. However, many of our ethic communities continue to experience inequities and prejudice that impede their full integration and participation in society.

Canada is also a highly connected country. Our extensive cable television and telephone infrastructure made it relatively inexpensive to bring access to most regions of the country.

We were the first country to have every library and school connected to the Internet. We're currently second among OECD countries in broadband penetration (after Korea). In 2001, 80 per cent of homes with children had Internet access.

Today's children are growing up in a rapidly evolving global media environment. A 2001 UNESCO report concluded that a new media landscape and new media order are emerging. Media cultures are changing: information is flowing more freely and the volume of information is expanding. National media markets are being integrated into a global power structure. People from around the globe can now view media from many different places. The distinction between computers, television, radio, press, books and telephones is dissolving.

In this borderless media world of VCRs, DVDs, satellite TV, and the Internet, children and young people have increasing access to media products from around the globe.

Rating and classification systems, legislation and industry codes and guidelines are no longer enough to protect children -- particularly as more young people use wireless devices to access the Internet, play video games, watch movies and listen to music. Digital media are forcing a shift in responsibility from statutory regulators toward the individual household.

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, known as the CRTC, studied the issue of controlling Internet content and in 1999 became one of the first broadcasting and telecommunications regulators in the world to clarify its position when it announced it would not regulate Internet Service Providers.

Following the CRTC decision, the Canadian government released its strategy on illegal and offensive Internet content. Legislation and self-regulation are components of the strategy. However, recognizing the difficulty of controlling content in a global medium, the government identified "awareness, education and knowledge" as the foundations of its approach.

The Media Awareness Network was recognized in both the CRTC decision and the government strategy as the leading public education organization working in this area.

Our work in Internet literacy over the last eight years has been focused on developing education resources; influencing public policy; and conducting research on young Canadians' Internet use.

In 2001, we surveyed over a thousand parents and nearly six thousand children and teens to better understand what Canadian kids are doing online – and whether they're engaging in risky behaviours.

Our research showed that young Canadians are heavy online users: almost 50 per cent go online for one to three hours each day and 50 per cent are alone most of the time.

A significant number indicated they'd been exposed to hateful messages online. Eighteen per cent said they have come across a Web site that was really hateful towards someone. Twenty one per cent of these sites targeted a group of people based on race, gender, religion, language or sexual orientation.

While young people may be a more vulnerable group online because of their limited life experience, in many ways, they understand the Internet more intuitively then adults.

In focus groups we conducted this past winter young people told us that they didn't understand why adults wanted to control their Internet experiences. Efforts to keep young people from being exposed to inappropriate material are ineffective they felt because of there are too many access points and too many places where unsupervised exploration is possible.

The Internet doesn't work on the principles of *censorship* or *control* they feel, but rather on principles of *responsible decision-making* and *calculated risk-taking* – and those are the kinds of skills they want to develop.

Our professional development programs are addressing this critical need by training teachers and librarians, in every jurisdiction in the country, to help students develop critical thinking and web smarts to apply to their Internet experiences.

The Canadian government has funded our two latest anti-racism programs aimed at educating teachers and students about diversity representation in the media and online hate. These programs include professional development workshops for teachers, classroom teaching lessons and interactive games for students.

An effective media education strategy to address online hate starts with an examination of stereotypes and bias.

Teachers and students are encouraged to examine their own cultural biases and preconceived notions. Next they need to understand how stereotypes function in society and popular culture and how negative stereotypes can influence our perceptions of entire groups of people.

This award-winning poster sets the tone for the *Exploring Media and Race* program by emphasizing how easily we make false judgements assumptions about people. The poster lists a series of crimes which we connect with the face. At the bottom of the list we discover this is a photo of the arresting police officer, not the criminal.

The key concepts that ground media education are introduced. The first concept is: audiences *negotiate* meaning. We all bring our own life experience, knowledge and attitudes to the media we encounter. The objective of media education is to help students to step back and ask critical questions about what they're seeing – rather than just absorbing media messages passively and unconsciously.

The next key concept is that all media are constructed. We learn that the process involved in representing people, places and events to viewers – involves steps and decisions on who to leave in, and who to leave out.

Through representation of minorities, media have the power to grant or deny legitimacy to whole groups of people.

The chronic under-representation makes those few minority faces, voices and realities that we *do* see, even more significant. When media depictions of a particular group in society reflect a full range of characters – we are less likely to make generalisations about them.

Many mainstream media portrayals rely on and reinforce racial stereotypes. Consider the kinds of messages about race and gender promoted in popular youth-oriented genres such as music videos and movies.

Even well-intentioned portrayals can still perpetrate stereotypes while reinforcing the concept of "the other."

Another key concept of media education looks at the role of mass media as "big business." How, for example, the demand from lucrative foreign markets for action films, preferably with white action heroes, affect film content and development in North America.

And finally, we introduce the key concept that ideological messages about values, power and authority underpin all media.

Following an examination of how stereotyping and bias in media culture may contribute to racist attitudes and beliefs, teachers and students learn the ways in which hate is expressed on the Net our second program *Deconstructing Online Hate*.

The educator workshop starts with a series of seemingly innocent Web resources that are in fact, fronts for the white supremacist organization Stormfront.

When examining hateful content it's difficult to isolate it from the culture of the Internet -- in particular kids' online culture. We look at the whole "spectrum" of hateful messages that kids are being exposed to -- starting with the cruel satire and tasteless humour sites so popular with young people.

To online games that promote degradation and violence as entertainment. And, at the farthest end, Web sites designed by organized hate groups.

We look at the fine line between satire and humour, and intolerance and hurtfulness by asking participants to decide for themselves whether or not particular sites we've found on the Net are tasteless humour or hate.

Next we examine the ways hate groups use the Internet to target young people, through music, clubs, discussion forums and online games.

We examine the ways that hate mongers exploit the multimedia capabilities of this powerful, interactive medium. And the clever use of deceptive keywords in meta-tags.

We look at how propaganda is used to sway opinion by deconstructing actual hate sites on the basis of wordplay, name-calling. symbols and imagery, religious authority, pseudo-science, nationalism, fear mongering and revisionism.

Participants are led step-by-step through the deconstruction of this revisionist site that is hosted on a U.S. university server. They learn how to authenticate the source of the information by comparing search results on the author, recognizing personal page notations in URLs, and doing a link search to see which organizations link to or talk about this particular Web site.

We encourage students to debate pertinent issues relating to online hate, such as the appropriateness of a university hosting Web pages known to contain false and inflammatory information or where the line should be drawn between freedom of expression and indecent or illegal Web content

And, of course, we help them understand that at its core, online hate is nothing more than old-fashioned propaganda, wrapped in flashy new packaging.

One of the more ambitious teaching tools in this program, which is currently in development is an interactive game – Aliens vs. Earthlings. On this "Anti-Earthling" Web site, the aliens have incorporated the same methods of persuasion used by white

supremacist and other hate organizations to spread their messages of hatred towards humans.

This resource will allow students explore the issues surrounding hate sites in an educational and non-threatening manner.

Teaching kids how assess the credibility of online information is essential because studies have shown that children believe information on a computer screen before they believe something an adult has told them.

Almost 40 percent of teenagers in our survey believe that they can trust *most* of the information they find online.

Our *Fact or Folly* program teaches online authentication skills to teachers and students. *Reality Check* is a new classroom resource to teach kids strategies for authenticating online information and detecting bias and stereotyping in Internet content.

CyberSense and Nonsense, is an interactive game on our site where young children kids learn about authenticating online information in a humourous way. When the three CyberPigs stumble across a "We Hate Wolves" Web site they experience first hand, the difference between information on valid, authenticated sites, and sites which are nothing more than the outpouring of emotion and opinion.

For pre-teens we have "Jo Cool, Jo Fool" in which students follow the Jos as they surf the Net. Students must decide if the Jo's are being cool or fools as they make various decisions.

When Joseph discovers a homework site while researching human rights he must decide whether to use the information he's found. Kids discover Jo's a fool for accepting the content on this site at face value -- turns out the Homework Nook is actually a cleverly disguised hate site.

Despite the fact that we are a very small NGO with limited resources, we've been very successful in getting our materials into communities where they're needed. One reason is the Internet itself. Many of the resources you've just seen are free to download from our Web site, as well as extensive teaching lessons on stereotyping, diversity, online hate, authenticating Internet information and many more media-related topics.

The second reason for our success lies in our partnership approach. We engage not-for-profit, government and industry partners in bringing our programs to the schools and the public. This ensures efficient delivery of our resources and links to public policy.

For example, we recently launched a national public awareness campaign, called Be Web Aware, with the support of several of Canada's leading media industries. The goal of the campaign is to raise awareness of Internet issues, among parents, and to get them involved in their children's online activities.

Eventually, the increased profile the Internet offers hate groups may be their undoing. By bringing what used to be secretive and hidden out into the mainstream, the Net is exposing racist propaganda for what it is – and also providing us with tremendous opportunities to counter this issue.

From taunting and bullying, to hate-related symbols, to hate literature and hate sites – we must confront and challenge hate in all its forms and what better place to start this process than in the safe, caring – and respectful – environment of our schools.