

**OSCE MEETING ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACIST,  
XENOPHOBIC AND ANTI-SEMITIC PROPAGANDA ON THE INTERNET  
AND HATE CRIMES**

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Thank you. I am honoured to have been invited by the OSCE to speak today on this important issue. Internet hate is of great concern to Canadians and I welcome the opportunity to show you what our organization, with the support of the Canadian government, our media industries and education partners, have accomplished in the area of anti-racism and hate education for young people.

The Media Awareness Network is a national non-profit education organization. Our mission is to promote media education in 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.

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

Media education is integrated into the core curriculum of every Canadian province and territory, from primary through to the end of secondary school.

Right from the start, Canada has been a leader in connecting its citizens to the Internet. 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 and are currently second among OECD countries in broadband penetration. In 2001, 80 per cent of homes with children had Internet access.

The speed with which this technology entered our daily lives means we've had to struggle to keep ahead of the challenges that unfettered access to unregulated global information has brought with it.

We hope the lessons we've learned along the way, and the distinctly Canadian approach we've taken to addressing offensive and hateful online content, will help other countries as they build their Internet capacities.

In 1999, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, known as the CRTC, became one of the first broadcasting and telecommunications regulators in the world to clarify its position on the Internet 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. The strategy defined “awareness, education and knowledge” as the foundations of its approach.

Because of our pioneering role in Internet literacy, 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 conducting research on young Canadians’ Internet use, developing education resources and influencing public policy.

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.

When examining hateful content it’s difficult to isolate it from the culture of the Internet – in particular kids’ online culture. We’ve studied the whole “spectrum” of hateful messages that kids are being exposed to, from benign “put down” humour – through to extreme racist sites. What we’ve found is that there’s a thin line between actual hate and the cruel satire and tasteless humour so common and popular with young people.

For example, 13 per cent of the young people who have their own Web sites say their site contains rude or insulting remarks about someone, such as a teacher or classmate. Only one quarter of the youth in our study reported finding hateful content disturbing and just four per cent told an adult about it.

The anonymity the Net encourages young people to say things in interactive environments they would never say face to face. For example, this *Skateboarding Magazine* site hosts a discussion board where conversations often degenerate into hateful comments. In this strand we see that the ultimate insult is to call someone gay.

The popular site *Rate My Teacher* invites students to rate teachers on a scale of one to five and then add their comments. While some of the comments are positive, others are insulting, even hateful – and all are anonymous.

Humour sites like *uglypeople.com* help to foster a culture where meanness and cruelty is acceptable behaviour.

Other sites promote violence as entertainment. On *Who Would You Kill* users can post their thoughts on how they would like to kill certain celebrities. The popular *Newgrounds* site features crude movies of famous people being degraded and killed.

*Fugly.com*, a site popular with adolescent boys, currently features an activity where visitors are invited to submit a witty “ethnic bashing” quote to accompany this photo of monkeys.

It’s not difficult for young people to make the leap from sites where racist content masquerades as humour, to extreme hate sites – especially when hate mongers are directly targeting young people through online music and games.

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 than adults.

In focus groups we conducted this past winter, young people told us that the Internet doesn’t work on the principals of censorship or control, but rather on principals 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 crucial 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.

We’ve created several interactive resources to help children and young people understand online bias and hate.

In *CyberSense and Nonsense*, young children learn about authenticating online information when the three CyberPigs stumble across a “We Hate Wolves” Web site. The Pigs 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 Joseph and Josie as they surf the Net. Students must decide if the Jos 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 – it turns out the *Homework Nook* is actually a cleverly disguised hate site.

*Reality Check* is a new classroom resource we’ve created to teach kids strategies for authenticating online information and detecting bias and stereotyping in Internet content.

The Canadian government has funded two new, extensive anti-racism programs aimed at

educating teachers and students about diversity representation in the media and online hate.

The *Media and Race* program raises awareness of the factors in media culture that may contribute to racist attitudes and beliefs.

The *Online Hate* program looks at the ways in which hate is expressed – on the Net, and in popular culture – and offers a practical approach for teaching young people about the strategies and motives of hate mongers. Several related lesson plans accompany the program including one where students examine their own actions in spreading cruel messages.

One of the more ambitious teaching tools in this program, which we are currently producing, is an interactive mock hate site – 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 help students explore the issues surrounding hate sites in an educational and non-threatening manner.

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, along with extensive teaching lessons on stereotyping, diversity, online hate, authenticating Internet information and many more media-related topics.

I think 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.

In conclusion, the critical challenge facing us in this age of global information and converging technologies is to create a generation of informed, engaged and responsible online citizens.

The Internet can be a instrument for spreading hate or it can be a tool for promoting value systems that embrace tolerance and respect, irrespective of race, religion or culture. We believe that awareness and education are the keys to ensuring that children and young people use the technology in a safe, wise and responsible way.

Thank you.