

## **Fighting Speech with Speech: David Duke, the Anti-Defamation League, Online Bookstores, and Hate Filters**

Rosemarie L. Coste  
*Texas A&M University, Department of English*  
*rcoste@tamu.edu*

### **Abstract**

*Examination of the handling of one recently published book, white supremacist David Duke's My Awakening, points out some important technologically-driven changes in the way books are marketed. At Duke's website, copies of the book can be ordered and lengthy excerpts are presented. A detailed review and a different selection of excerpts of My Awakening are presented at the website of an organization opposed to Duke's ideas: the Anti-Defamation League, which markets software designed to block access to websites such as Duke's. The major online bookstores sell My Awakening, posting reviews submitted by members of the public, most of whom give it and Duke's politics the highest possible rating. Filtering software may recognize Duke's website and block access to hateful rhetoric there, but similar rhetoric posted as online book reviews remains publicly available; rather than attempting to adapt filtering software to public forums such as online bookstores, information must be added at such sites enabling human visitors to detect hate speech.*

### **1. Introduction: words about words, bits about bits**

One of the best features and biggest problems of the World Wide Web is the huge variety of information available online. With time, tools, and some ideas about where and how to search, useful data on almost every topic can be located; unfortunately, that useful data is often difficult to recognize due to the noisy swarm of other data surrounding it. Users and designers of internet search engines are painfully aware of this problem, and most are also acutely conscious that much more information exists than can be easily found. Search engines, created to help people locate online information, sometimes misidentify the content of websites for the same reasons people do, because they rely on words to identify content although words can have a variety of meanings depending on context, or because sites are deliberately mislabeled in an attempt to attract visitors; sometimes, also, information exists but is poorly indexed or unindexed, making it unfindable and therefore unusable by anyone not directly informed of its location.

The need to locate and identify information is met, sometimes unsatisfactorily, by the creation of metadata, "bits that describe other bits" [11]. However, the need to create information to describe information is not at all unique to online applications: labels on paper file folders, call numbers on library books, and indexes within books are all familiar methods of making large collections of information more manageable and accessible. Another method of creating information to help make sense of other information is the *review*, by which one person recommends to another that a product does or does not live up to its advertising and is or is not worth its price. In a world of information overload, additional information seems to be the most effective tool for cutting through the thickening data smog.

### **2. Sensitive subjects**

The internet provides not only a huge collection of information, but a variety of easy means of examining and adding to that information. That ease is technical and, more importantly, emotional: online anonymity means that one's electronic activities need not spill over into one's physical life, so that, as Clifford Stoll observes in *Silicon Snake Oil*, "Participants at this masked ball are free to talk about otherwise uncomfortable or verboten subjects. ... No matter how dangerous the situation seems, you're always safe" [12]. Anonymity-induced feelings of freedom to explore and express ideas without fear of repercussion can be liberating, making it possible to ask questions and make statements that might be emotionally impossible in situations inhibited by the tense proprieties of personal presence. As Stoll maintains, though, removal of inhibitions on the part of both speaker and listener can also have unpleasant results:

Anonymity and untraceability seem to bring out the worst in people. ... Meet a bigot on the street who's shouting obscenities, and you get away from him fast. Should the same person post to net news, you'll read most of his message before going on to the next. Access to the network gives both audience and credibility to extreme opinions [12].

Like others who feel more free in the faceless safety of cyberspace than in the physical world, purveyors of racism and other forms of hate are ubiquitous on the internet, maintaining their own websites, newsgroups, and chatrooms. Although their existence is troubling to many, their online manifestations seem to deserve the same legal protection accorded to their meetings and marches in the physical world in which, with permits and police protection, they are allowed to go about their business.

If a Ku Klux Klan website is as acceptable as a Ku Klux Klan rally on the courthouse steps, are other analogies between the physical world and cyberspace valid in finding a place for these discordant voices in the electronic community? What happens when online hate groups spill out of their own domains and into other forums? Do they have a place among the variety of citizens who “engaged in public debate and distributed messages through the common gathering place of the *polis*,” [10], manifested now as the users of new technologies that are “often examined for their technical components (speed, efficiency), but are less likely to be examined for the way they impact human rhetorical interactions” [10]? If hate speech moves into an electronic forum occupied by a majority who find it threatening and distasteful, must it be tolerated and heard? As detailed by Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech*, the KKK’s 1990 burning of a cross in a black Minnesota family’s front yard sparked an intense legal debate over the competing claims of protected expression and illegal assault; considering the difficulty of making this evaluation in the physical world, is it possible that “hateful remarks are injurious actions” [4] in cyberspace, even if no physical harm is possible and remarks are posted to general readers rather than targeted at any individual? In an online world of anonymous authors and unstated affiliations, how is it possible to distinguish hate speech from the honest exploration of complex and sensitive subjects like racism?

## 2.1 Too much information: reviewing books on racism

In a review entitled “The Strange Death of Segregation,” George M. Fredrickson, Professor of American History at Stanford University, examines two new books on racism: Anthony W. Marx’s *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa, and Brazil*, and *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and Africa in the Apartheid Years*, by Robert Kinloch Massie. Published in the May 6 1999 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Fredrickson’s essay occupies three oversized pages, summarizes and responds to the main ideas in both books, and concludes with a detailed statement of the achievements and shortcomings of each.

Fredrickson’s complex response to these two book-length discussions of a confusing and sensitive issue is easily reduced to soundbites, memorable enough to provide some guidance on future book shopping expeditions: Marx doesn’t explain uniqueness between states; Massie discusses trees but not the forest.

Is this, enabling the well-prepared book shopper to make informed choices, the purpose of book reviews? In *The New York Review of Books* and similar forums, making recommendations that may save readers from wasting time and money on books unlikely to meet their needs seems to be only a part of the project: founded in 1963 to be “a new kind of magazine -- one in which the most interesting and qualified minds of our time would discuss current books and issues in depth” [1], *The New York Review of Books* makes no pretense of examining books without reference to the social situations with which they are intertwined. A book review may be a practical exercise in suggesting which books may suit which readers; it is also as much an exercise in social as literary criticism.

Like other types of literary and social discourse, book reviews now exist in some new forms and forums, taking advantage of expanding opportunities for information exchange. One important development is the reduced cost, and therefore the increased accessibility, of this information, at least for consumers with ready access to the World Wide Web. The subscription price for the paper edition of *The New York Review of Books*’ is \$58 for one year; for approximately twice that price, a swelling variety of Internet Service Providers offer a year’s access to electronic mail, chatrooms, newsgroups, and the World Wide Web, including at no extra cost *The New York Review of Books*’ robust website at <http://www.nybooks.com/nyrev>. Among many other things, that site provides the full text of Fredrickson’s May 6 review.

In addition to that review, the [nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com) website provides links to 37 other contributions, all on issues of race, written by or responding to Fredrickson between February 1971 and May 1999; links are provided to the electronic bookstore at <http://shop.barnesandnoble.com>, one of several online sites where the reviewed books may be ordered; the web browser software that provides access to the website also provides tools for electronically searching the essay and copying portions of it into other documents, facilitating quotation and response; the electronic archive at the website is keyword-searchable, so reviews of other books discussing related subjects or written by the same authors may be easily located and examined.

For most readers, the printed edition of *The New York Review of Books*, although lacking some of the features of

its electronic sibling, retains substantial charm: it is easily carried to the lunchtable, where it is only slightly damaged by drips and spills; it is visually attractive and beautifully illustrated; it lends itself uncomplainingly to underlining, highlighting, doodling in the margins, and ripping out pertinent portions to be tacked up on a bulletin board. However, the electronic edition available at the website is a superior tool for active engagement in intellectual inquiry in that it facilitates and encourages connection to the larger context of issues and ideas available through use of the technological tools provided.

*The New York Review of Books* is far from the only electronic repository of book reviews, reader responses, and literary criticism. Nybooks.com provides a link from its own collection of lengthy, scholarly book reviews to barnesandnoble.com's electronic bookstore, which maintains a facility for all readers to publicly post their brief evaluations of books. In doing this, nybooks.com is aiding the decentralization of knowledge and authority identified in *Being Digital* as one of the empowering characteristics of the digital age: everyone with something to say, not only those with academic credentials and excellent writing skills, is entitled to publish remarks about a book. Negroponte's observation in *Being Digital* that personal computing has eroded the power of the once-mighty Information Systems manager applies to all who would cling to the illusion that they have the exclusive right or wisdom to store and control information; anyone "who used to reign over a glass-enclosed and air-conditioned mausoleum, is an emperor with no clothes, almost extinct" [11]. If decentralized computing technology has also, as Negroponte maintains, created a possibility for the decentralization of knowledge and power, then people who never expected it and whose education never prepared them for it are now in a position to make their ideas heard by millions.

### 2.1 "Community View": reader comments at online bookstores

Power may be decentralized by increased access to technology, but that available power is not necessarily put to use: surfing the net, seeking and enjoying the information available online, is a far cry from actively adding to that information. Nybooks.com directs book shoppers to barnesandnoble.com's sales page for *Making Race and Nation*, where reader comments are invited but only publisher-provided information is currently posted: as of May 10 1999, no customer reviews have been posted for this January 1999 book. The electronic storefront of another major bookstore, borders.com, lists minimal bibliographic information describing *Making Race and Nation*; anyone wishing to add to this description by

offering the "Community View" is welcome to post a review, but no one has done so. At online-only competitor amazon.com, readers are invited to "Be the first person to review this book!"; only the publisher-provided description is posted, but other books purchased by shoppers who purchased *Making Race and Nation* are identified and recommended.

Neither *Making Race and Nation* nor *Loosing the Bonds*, the subjects of Fredrickson's careful study in *The New York Review of Books*, have prompted shoppers at the major online bookstores to comment; neither has Fredrickson's 1997 *Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, & Social Movements*, although all are selling well. Amazon.com rates the popularity of *Loosing the Bonds* at 110,783<sup>rd</sup> and *The Comparative Imagination* at 106,518<sup>th</sup> in its multi-million item inventory, with *Making Race and Nation* strongly ahead of both at 59,500<sup>th</sup>.

### 2.3 Popular books, popular reviews, popular forum

While amazon.com's shoppers have not chosen to publicly discuss the aforementioned scholarly books about race, they have posted forty-three reviews of another book on the same subject: David Duke's 717-page *My Awakening*, self-published in December 1998 and, as of May 10 1999, ranked 1751<sup>st</sup> in popularity. The volume of sales at the other major online bookstores is lower than at the more-established amazon.com, but the situation is similar: customers are silent about scholarly books on race such as those by Fredrickson, Marx, and Massie, but have posted four reviews of *My Awakening* at borders.com and twelve reviews at barnesandnoble.com. For example, an anonymous reviewer posted this five-star review dated December 30, 1998 at barnesandnoble.com:

#### THE BOOK THAT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD!!!!

This is a powerful book of truth that will make believers out of skeptics. Many readers will find the content very shocking, and even chilling. But these facts must be widely known, and Mr. Duke provides over 1000 references for people who find it hard to believe. I urge all European-Americans to buy this book and approach it with an open mind, you'll never be the same again! Once this amazing book is widely read, it will change the face of the earth!

At borders.com, the same review appeared January 11, 1999, unchanged except for corrected spelling and identification of the author as vincent.breeding@stormfront.org. This author's affiliation

with Stormfront, a white supremacist organization with ties to David Duke, clarifies the content of the review: like many of the posted reviews, these are the words of a David Duke disciple, not those of an objective critic.

David Duke, a white supremacist whose campaigns for the governorship of Louisiana and other political offices focused national attention on the question of how openly one can endorse racist views and remain politically viable, took a step that the authors of *Loosing the Bonds, Making Race and Nation*, *The Comparative Imagination*, and most other books have failed to do: he accepted amazon.com's offer to publish his remarks to their online shoppers. Duke's own comments about himself and his book, along with his email and website address, are listed on amazon.com's sales page for *My Awakening*; these comments appear just under an image of the book's cover, information on its price, availability, rating (four of five stars), and popularity (1,751<sup>st</sup>), a listing of other books purchased by those who purchased *My Awakening*, and an invitation to "Write an online review and share your thoughts with other readers!"

The thoughts Duke shares with shoppers at amazon.com begin with defiance: "**Before you condemn me, hear me out!** If you really are open-minded and tolerant of different ideas and personalities, I challenge you to read this book." Most importantly, Duke continues the connection to context that is the defining and supremely useful feature of the World Wide Web: violating amazon.com's instructions that reviewers refrain from including "Phone numbers, mail addresses, URLs," he identifies his own email address and website, encouraging interested readers to communicate directly with him or visit his site to learn more about his ideas on racism and his vision of the future. Although amazon.com does not provide a link to Duke's website, the URL can easily be copied or remembered for later use: [www.duke.org](http://www.duke.org).

### 3. "The Coming White Revolution: Born on the Internet"

David Duke's website at [www.duke.org](http://www.duke.org) advertises *My Awakening* as "a reference book for all patriots," two-thirds of which is dedicated to a discussion of race offering "compelling evidence that belief in racial equality is the modern equivalent of believing that the earth is flat" [7]. In addition to posting selected portions of *My Awakening*, from chapters with titles such as "Race and Reason", "Race History", "Jewish Supremacism", and "Who Runs the Media?", the website contains instructions for tuning in to Duke's net radio broadcasts, a list of his publications and interviews, an online library of race-related

publications available for reproduction, and an online store where t-shirts, bumper stickers, and books can be purchased; Duke's site also provides links to more militantly racist sites such as Stormfront and National Alliance.

At [www.natvan.com/what-is-na/](http://www.natvan.com/what-is-na/), National Alliance lists among its goals "White Living Space", "An Aryan Society," and "An Economic Policy Based on Racial Principles". Among the tools offered to advance those goals are several pre-formatted leaflets and an invitation to "Print your own leaflets using the free Adobe Acrobat Reader, then distribute them wherever receptive Whites might be"; by centralizing the design but decentralizing the printing and distribution of leaflets, National Alliance uses new technology to distribute and accelerate the effort of spreading their carefully-formatted messages. The homepage at [www.stormfront.org](http://www.stormfront.org) calls itself a "White Nationalist Resource Page", identifying Stormfront as "a resource for those courageous men and women fighting to preserve their White Western culture, ideals, and freedom of speech and association—a forum for planning strategies and forming political and social groups to ensure victory"; Stormfront also provides a link to the White Racial Loyalist webring of 54 sites and invites anyone maintaining a "pro-White website" to join that ring. By using amazon.com as a means of inviting shoppers to visit [duke.org](http://duke.org), then providing links from [duke.org](http://duke.org) to other sites that are linked to other sites, David Duke provides book shoppers with easy access to the online world of white supremacist websites.

Like his colleagues at National Alliance and Stormfront, David Duke is aware of improvements in information technology and is working is to take maximum advantage of them. On a page entitled "The Coming White Revolution: Born on the Internet," Duke's website contains a lengthy discussion of the internet's value for his sympathizers and "how we can utilize it to awaken our people and change the world" [5]. Intermingled with examples of the many innocuous and pleasant uses of the internet and basic information about the low price of modems and the simplicity of internet setup are outbursts of anger toward those Duke believes control the content of newspapers, television stations, and other pre-internet media:

The alien, anti-White media has been my unrelenting enemy. It has been yours as well, because it supports every pernicious liberal program that you can imagine. Up until now, unless someone met me personally, or read my material, the only way they could judge me is by what the liberal-biased media says. Now, that situation has changed. Millions of people are going online in

America. Now, if they want to find out about me and my ideas and issues all they have to do is go into one of the search engines and search for "David Duke." Hundreds of sources will show up [5].

The internet's decentralized and uncontrolled nature give Duke hope that no "liberal-biased" conspiracy could ever gain similar control of it. While Duke does not discuss the growing online presence of newspaper and television news agencies and does not seem aware of the role of human editors and indexers in managing many search engines, he is aware of and incensed by the efforts of anti-hate groups such as the Anti-Defamation League, which offers internet filtering software to block access to sites like David Duke's.

On its webpage marketing HateFilter™ software, the Anti-Defamation League reconciles its effort to block hate speech with its "traditional view that the best way to combat bad speech is with more speech" by saying that "the Internet is different from libraries and bookstores, where material can be labeled and organized in a way which enables parents to exercise discretion about what their children see" [3]. On the same page, the ADL explains that HateFilter is driven by a human-generated list of identified hate sites. Such a list might block access to easily-recognized sites with a major identifiable focus, such as those belonging to Stormfront and David Duke; it will never block access to online book reviews such as this one posted on amazon.com:

**You will have an "Awakening" too...It is a masterpiece!**

Anyone who really loves God and Country - (America) will want to read Hon. David Duke's amazing book "My Awakening" and learn the "documented facts" and truth of how our "enemies within" that own and/or control most of our sell-out federal and state politicians (traitors)/money banks/movies/music/nearly all TV networks and entertainment/newspapers and magazines/and most of the publishing houses. They have even infiltrated our schools, religious seminaries and churches - you name it and they call evil good and good evil! You will have an "Awakening" too and you will know who the real "hate groups", racists and America's enemies are when you read David's amazing masterpiece!! It could save America with our Lords Will.

Even if a hate filter were to scan the entire body of this review for key words, it is not likely to make the connections that an experienced human reader can make. The equation of politicians with traitors, the belief that the

finance and entertainment industries are controlled by "enemies within", the promise that the "real" racists are not who they appear to be: all these are hallmarks of the rhetoric of white supremacist groups. The words of these groups as published at their own identifiable websites would be blocked by HateFilter, but their words in the public forum of the online bookstore remain openly available.

The difficulty of recognizing hate speech when it is mingled with other forms of discourse on the internet leads organizations like ADL to target it for particular scrutiny and to make the results of their examination generally available. It also prompts them to become publishers of hate speech themselves, posting extracts of *My Awakening* along with a review of the book by ADL's National Director as evidence for their contention that "his own words show that he is what he is, an unabashed racist and anti-Semitic hatemonger" [8]. The portions of *My Awakening* posted on the ADL website are different in character from those posted on Duke's official site. While Duke's own selections emphasize his childhood fondness for black people and his youthful admiration for Israeli heroics in the Six-Day War, chronicling his gradual and seemingly-reasonable disillusionment from these idealistic positions, ADL posts extracts such as "No Jewish leader has to direct his minions to seek political control of Gentile nations; they do it as naturally as the Blue Jay appropriates another bird's nest" [8].

Publishing ugly descriptions of the people whom they are chartered to protect from such ugliness, ADL confirms Butler's assessment that

proposals to regulate hate speech invariably end up citing such speech at length, offering lengthy lists of examples, codifying such speech for regulatory purposes ... there appears to be no way to ameliorate its effects except through its recirculation, even if that recirculation takes place in the context of a public discourse that calls for the censorship of such speech [4].

If Butler is correct that there may be no means to fight hate speech without recirculating it, ADL's publication of unpleasant portions of *My Awakening* is a more effective effort than their parallel project of blocking access to such words through their HateFilter software.

In a portion of *My Awakening* posted on the Anti-Defamation League's website at www.adl.org, Duke calls them "a multimillion-dollar, worldwide organization whose whole purpose is to defame and discredit those who simply tell the truth about Jewish supremacism and hatred against Gentiles" [8]. Considered together, Duke's online attacks against ADL and ADL's equally intense statements

against Duke are a complex demonstration of the struggle to present and defend against hate speech.

Anti-hate groups like the Anti-Defamation League work to identify and block the messages of racists like David Duke; Duke and his colleagues work to make their messages harder to identify and block. One method used by Duke to reduce interference with his messages is to alter their negative vocabulary, as pointed out by ADL: "In an attempt to demystify Klan ritual, he renamed the position of Grand Wizard 'National Director,' and referred to cross burnings as 'illuminations' [8]. Another method of reducing interference is to publish in wider forums, moving beyond KKK rallies and into the Louisiana legislature and the internet, including the major online bookstores. The struggle for control of the discourse is manifested in the struggle to invent appropriate technology to either generate or block racist messages; the technological escalation of Cold War weaponry is relocated to cyberspace, with the balance of power now clearly favoring those who would generate more information rather than those who would attempt to identify and block undesirable information.

### 3.1 Hate speech and free speech: expanding into cyberspace

The mass storage and rapid access capabilities of the internet make it an ideal tool for educators, advertisers, politicians, and many others whose business is the exchange of ideas. By providing instant access to information, the internet has made possible new techniques of publication, personal communication, and intellectual inquiry; pushed and prodded by the early adopters of this technology among their friends and colleagues, even the most reluctant to embrace change find themselves urgently compelled to learn to use this tool in order to avoid being left behind in a cloud of silicon dust.

Attempts to persuade the hesitant to adopt a new technology or acquire a new skill are a familiar and time-honored type of discourse: arguments of this sort document humanity's ongoing effort to create and use the tools that expand our abilities beyond the limits of our own brains and bodies. Invention and adoption of increasingly sophisticated tools is as central a part of human evolutionary history as the development of erect posture and opposable thumbs.

Perhaps the effort to bring one's friends up to date, encouraging and enabling them to take advantage of the best tools available, is simply a manifestation of healthy interest in their success and thereby in the success of the human species. Engaging in discourse for such a purpose should then be a positive and praiseworthy effort, advancing the cause of progress. Is this true when the tool

in question is innately or potentially dangerous, or when it can be used by some people to harm others? Can an exhortation to study and exploit modern technology be an example of hate speech if the purpose of that exploitation is the advancement of racist causes? If, as Butler maintains in *Excitable Speech*, "hate speech constitutes the kind of act that seeks to silence the one to whom it is addressed" [4], what can be made of speech that seeks to spur the addressee into the creation of further speech carrying messages of hate not *to*, but *about*, the hated?

Positioning himself and his supporters as the oppressed and voiceless in a pre-internet world, creating new definitions and connotations for old terms like "patriotism" and "egalitarianism" to express his ideas in a society that would prefer not to hear them, Duke appears to be entitled to undertake the "subversive resignification" [4] recommended as the best remedy for being silenced by the dominant discourse. Butler may not have people like David Duke in mind when she asks in *Excitable Speech*:

What is the performative power of claiming an entitlement to those terms—"justice", "democracy"—that have been articulated to exclude the ones who now claim that entitlement? What is the performative power of calling for freedom or the end of racism precisely when the one or the "we" who calls has been radically *disenfranchised* from making such a call, when the "we" who makes the call reterritorializes the term from its operation within dominant discourse precisely in order to counter the effects of that group's marginalization [4]?

If Duke's place is, as he claims, that of an oppressed and marginalized minority, then his fight to escape the power structure by making new claims about recognized terms and moving his discourse to the new territory of the internet is not, as the Anti-Defamation League would have it, an example of Duke's duplicitousness but Duke's logical exploitation of the only means available to him of escaping oppression and making his voice heard. Duke's vision of the future of the World Wide Web is one in which his followers share his ideas with their friends, "by making one little click on your computer mouse - with no postage or long-distance phone costs! If one out of ten of your friends does the same, the program spreads around the nation and the world at tremendous speed" [6]. Through the assistance of an electronic community of like-minded people, willing and able to use high-speed, low-cost telecommunication to spread his ideas, Duke predicts that "The same race that created the brilliant technology of the Internet, will - through this powerful tool - be awakened from its long sleep" [6].

As demonstrated by the vociferous presence of Duke supporters as reviewers of *My Awakening* at online bookstores, Duke is successful in using the internet to widen the circulation of his ideas. Do the proprietors of non-racist websites, such as the online bookstores, face any consequences of publishing the words of Duke and his supporters, especially if those words are eventually embodied in actions? Butler proposes that they may, and that there is precedent for believing that “speech not only produces injury as one of its consequences, but constitutes an injury itself” [4]; Butler wonders if those who deliver an injurious message can be absolved of legal and ethical responsibility for its content. She points out that “The subject who speaks hate speech is clearly responsible for such speech, but that subject is rarely the originator of that speech. Racist speech works through the invocation of convention; it circulates ...” [4].

If amazon.com publishes the words of David Duke’s followers, and those followers are merely circulating the ideas of Duke himself, does responsibility for the potential injurious results of that speech end with Duke? Responsibility for the effects of speech appears to be “linked with speech as repetition, not as origination” [4]; if this is so, everyone who aids the circulation of injurious speech shares liability for the damage it may cause.

### 3.2 Hate speech and persistent speech: can something be done?

Individuals and organizations espousing unpopular views have been quick to adopt the internet as an unsupervised and unregulated vehicle for spreading their ideas. The internet is home to an assortment of racists and other hate groups, just as easily found by searching for websites using positively-connoted keywords like “patriot” as by negative terms like “anti-Semitism”; while “patriot” finds white militia groups in the midst of flag manufacturers, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the New England Patriots football team, “anti-semitism” locates Holocaust revisionists and White Pride World Wide alongside the Museum of Tolerance and numerous tributes to Holocaust victim Anne Frank. By making themselves simply part of the mixed multitude of sites that can be found by using conventional language, racist voices are enabled to hide in plain sight, appearing to be part of mainstream discourse; their creation of their own terminology, derogatorily calling anti-racists “egalitarians” and non-white or non-Christian citizens “aliens”, makes it possible for those familiar with these coded words to locate and understand each other in the midst of the general hubbub of the internet.

**3.2.1 Limitations of filtering.** This vagueness of language makes it almost impossible for filtering software to detect and block access to more than a small fraction of the messages it is designed to provide protection from. Filtering software operates two ways: like HateFilter™, by recognizing pre-identified websites and like NetNanny™, by also scanning for key words and phrases. With the shifting vocabulary of racist meanings added to general-purpose words like “patriot” and “alien”, and the growing practice of hateful messages being posted in open forums such as online bookstores, neither approach is completely effective, leaving only one reliable hate filter: the human mind’s ability to quickly recognize and reject what it finds objectionable and repulsive. The urge to turn away from viewing the mutilated victims at an accident scene, to change the subject when conversation becomes uncomfortably heated, to leave the room rather than engaging in fruitless argument: all these are manifestations of the natural self-protective ability most people have which keeps the horrifying and the hateful at a distance. Filtering software may be useful in limited circumstances, keeping unsupervised children from exploring sites forbidden by their parents, but it is doomed to incompleteness; more productively, means must be sought to make data such as that presented in online book reviews amenable to efficient scanning by adult readers’ mental filters.

**3.2.2 Databases versus lists.** The system of collecting and posting book reviews, almost identical at the major online bookstores, has several notable problems which combine to make it very difficult for the mind’s built-in shields and filters to operate; these defects also make online book reviews minimally useful to authors and publishers looking for honest feedback and to book shoppers seeking unbiased recommendations. If most positive reviewers are friends and followers of the author, and most negative reviewers respond to the ideology of the author as known to them externally to the book, what useful information about the book itself is generated by this process?

In one sense reviews at online bookstores provide too little information, with no reader feedback at all for many books which are being purchased but whose authors do not have pre-existing bands of disciples and opponents; the absence of links to external sources, such as nybooks.com, that have collected extensive information about those same books, is a major deficiency. Even when reader comments are available, many of them are focused outside the book and provide no pertinent information about it; for *My Awakening*, five-star reviews like this one at amazon.com are typical:

**Fantastic book.**

For all the superficial rhetoric that Duke is a racist (promulgated chiefly by our junk media) this book will open the public's eye. Duke solidifying here opinions shared by tens of thousands of Americans afraid to engage them in discourse. ... Duke, to me, is the embodiment of the Nietzschean superman just for standing up for these causes in such an anxiety-prone (or politically correct) time.

These are comments about the author and the society the author lives in: what do they say about the book?

At the same time, the reviews posted by online bookstores provide too much information by listing all comments sequentially, doing nothing to help the reader search the potentially-lengthy list of comments for appropriate and meaningful insight into the book. For the many books which have had few or no reviews posted, the problem is not evident; for *My Awakening*, the collection of reviews is long enough that scrolling through it to find substantive comments is tedious and unrewarding, relying on the human eye and memory to search and sort the lengthy text. Online bookstores and their review collections are only a few years old; if they become more popular with time, and if early comments will be preserved and added to when books are no longer new, the sequential organization of review data will make it increasingly unappealing to read.

Another pressing problem is that, since shoppers at the online bookstores use the review facility as a public soapbox for the presentation of social complaints and political ideologies, some of the content of the posted reviews strongly resembles the content of hate sites from which other shoppers may have chosen to be shielded by hate filter software; however, within the safe boundaries of an online bookstore, that content is not likely to be examined or recognized by such filters. The sequential presentation of review data makes it difficult for anyone who objects to certain content to avoid encountering it, other than by avoiding the online bookstores altogether.

**3.2.3 Reviewers versus readers.** Additionally, there is no assurance that reviews are written by people who have actually read the book they are talking about: comments like the following at amazon.com demonstrate that reviewers, while they may be interested in and shopping for the book, and may have tales to tell about how they became aware of the book, are not necessarily readers:

**Awarding 5 stars 'til I read it!**

Okay-I haven't read the book, however, I'm giving 5 stars in advance. ... THANK YOU Mr. Duke for the show of guts!

This review demonstrates another problem: the initially-suggested default ranking of five stars at all three online bookstores encourages the awarding of that rank without hesitation or consideration; in combination with a body of reviewers who are established devotees of the author, this makes the ranking system useless.

**4. Recommendations**

Many of these problems can be rectified by changing the way customer information is collected and presented by the online bookstores. An easy example is the default ranking: automatically suggesting a middle-of-the-road three stars rather than the current superlative five stars might prompt momentary consideration of whether the book is actually better or worse than mediocre. Another improvement would be to create a separation between the collection and the presentation of online reviews. The current process collects input from shoppers who are not necessarily readers: presented as part of the system that collects book orders, it is natural that the offer to post online book reviews, extended to people who are just in the process of purchasing a book, results in comments about why the book is being purchased or how wonderful or terrible the author is reputed to be rather than substantive comments about the book.

Examining online book reviews is a useful activity for shoppers only if those reviews were created by readers: moving the point at which data is collected, perhaps by emailing purchasers of a book a few weeks after it is shipped to verify that it was received satisfactorily and ask for feedback to guide future purchasers, would improve the chances of meaningful input; since books are often purchased as gifts, the separation between purchaser and reader could be accommodated by having the purchaser forward the email to the reader. In addition, the offer of a small incentive, such as inclusion in a prize drawing, to encourage response to the request for feedback might encourage broader participation by readers with no particular axe to grind; for many such people, the pleasure of seeing one's ideas publicly posted is not sufficient to justify the effort to organize and present those ideas.

Relocating the collection of reviews away from their presentation would also reduce the likelihood of a review consisting of a personal attack on another reviewer: all three online bookstores request that reviewers address the book and not other reviewers, but that request appears to be neither heeded nor enforced. For example, this five-star posting from "deonm" appears twice at amazon.com



**This book MUST NOT BE STIFFLED in its distribution!** "MY AWAKENING" must not be allowed to be stifled in its distribution to the American People. Because TREASON GOVERNS AMERICA, I fear that every subversive arm of organized sensorship will be brought to bear against the distribution of this revolutionary classic informational volume. This book must be considered a national treasure and should be used as a mass weapon against universal global tyranny and genocide. This book must be distributed to the masses while there are still enough of us pre-Government educated "survivors" around who can read and think for ourselves. Thank you, David Duke, for a true masterpiece in RESEARCH literature!

A heated one-star response follows:

**With supporters like this, he doesn't need enemies**

Take a good look at the what some of the people who gave this book 5 stars have said: "THIS BOOK MUST NOT BE STIFFLED" says the guy from Idaho. Indeed. No stiffling, then. ... Don't buy this nonsense.

Other reviewers debate each other on the thoroughness of Duke's research, the credentials of his authorities, and the motivations of both his supporters and opponents: the online review facility has become another forum for antagonizing believers on both sides, rather than a helpful tool for book shoppers.

Other serious limitations of the usefulness of online book reviews could be lifted by addressing three problems simultaneously: excessive information, insufficient information, and the need to facilitate individuals' use of their built-in mental filters. Each review is currently presented with bold-face headlines, optionally including information about the author, followed by the main text in a normal font. Reviews are appended to each other sequentially, with the most recent reviews appearing first at amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com but last at borders.com; none of the bookstores offer any means of reordering or limiting the list. By organizing collected reviews in a hierarchical, searchable way rather than as a sequential list, adding the "bits about bits" that seem to be the only way to make large amounts of data manageable, their usability could be greatly increased.

Collected reviews could become a usable database, rather than an electronic version of a long paper scroll, by restructuring them so that only the headlines and the

author information are initially presented, and so that the reader can use this initial presentation to sort and search for such things as reviews written by authors who have signed their names or whose reviews are at neither the one-star nor the five-star extreme or who live in the reader's part of the world or, especially in the case of political writing like Duke's, who are likely to be eligible to vote for the author in a future election.

Transforming lists into databases also facilitates use of the only viable hate filter, the one built in to the human mind, to identify and avoid comments likely to be shocking and unpleasant: headlines such as "**A DEFINITE SETBACK FOR THE ENEMIES OF OUR NATION**", "**A Book For ALL True Americans**" and "**A book every White person should read**" warn those who may know themselves to be categorized as "ENEMIES" or to be seen as other than "True" or "White" that their sensibilities are likely to be offended if they read the review behind the headline.

**4.1 The cases of Abraham H. Foxman and "deonn"**

If online bookstores provided a method, expanding the approach used at nybooks.com, of locating all comments written by or responding to an author, added understanding of who is saying what about a book and how to interpret that response could be gained. One improvement would be to facilitate linking to non-bookstore sites containing detailed reviews. For instance, ADL's website contains Abraham H. Foxman's lengthy review of *My Awakening*, prefaced by permission to reproduce it and permission to contact him; while Foxman is clearly interested in having his review more widely read, he has not taken the step of posting any portion of it at the online bookstores nor has he, like Duke, presented bookstore shoppers with a URL at which the full review might be read. Perhaps, unlike Duke, Foxman is inclined to respect amazon.com's request that URLs be omitted from reviews. Here again, the practical and responsible step seems to be to enable addition of information rather than to attempt to police and block unauthorized information, such as Duke's posting of his URL. Rather than removing the unauthorized reference to duke.org, amazon.com could authorize and activate it and all other links proposed by reviewers: remaining a conduit to duke.org, amazon.com would then also provide direct access to the opposing views at adl.org.

Like ADL's Foxman, reviewers who sympathize with Duke would receive a fairer hearing if it were easier to locate the wider context of their ideas. For example, "deonn," a participant in the five-star versus one-star debate at amazon.com cited above, continues the discussion with this five-star posting at

barnesandnoble.com, signed by “Richard F. Masker, ICA (deonm@earthlink.net), a Police advisor and consultant, May 8, 1999”:

### **Rosetta Stone Revisited**

We all know the enormous value of the Rosetta Stone in the science of Egyptology. David Duke has produced the magic key to unlocking the world's brain-dead masses to the vital subject of Racial/Social criminal parasitism (Gentile Genocide) in the FIRST WORLD. Now Americans can truly discover the New World Order in all its criminality, filth, cunning, tyranny and Conspiracy. This book should be mandatory reading in every Police Academy, college and university in the 'White Western World.' ... Thank you David Duke for a wonderful work in the service of all honest but propagandized humankind.

It may be that “deonm,” now identified with a name and a profession, is an expert and serious thinker on the subject of racism and has posted insightful responses to many race-related books at the online bookstores, but there is currently no way to find those postings and reconstruct the history of “deonm”'s ideas in the way that Professor Fredrickson's career can be traced at nybooks.com. It may also be that “deonm” is a violent extremist, and examination of his words at other online sites would clarify some of the references in his book reviews. As one of the few Americans signing a petition against proposed hate crime legislation in Canada, online at <http://www.canadafirst.net/cafe/>, “deonm” claims to speak for the International Conspiratological Association, saying “We recognize the continuous and growing threat of Judaeo/Marxism throughout Western societies. We oppose any form of censorship of free speech and the dissemination of the truth as it is slandered as "hate" by the organizers of Communism.” The picture of “deonm”'s motivations and affiliations becomes clearer as fragments of his words are assembled from around the internet.

Just as it is clear that Foxman's comments on *My Awakening* and other matters are informed by his position as a leader of ADL, it should be clear that “deonm” speaks for the International Conspiratological Association. Until there is a way to search the archive of reviews within, across, and beyond bookstores, developing connections to the body of other internet contributions by a reviewer, the online bookstores' customer review facility will be more a toy than a tool.

## **5. Conclusion**

The usefulness of expanding the availability of information without adding to its quality has been debated for many years:

“Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end,” Thoreau writes in *Walden*. “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.” That magnetic telegraph has evolved into the Internet. How will the promise of computerized communication be fulfilled [12]?

As Colomb and Simutis observe in their study of computer-mediated communication in classrooms, “The scenario is a familiar one for new computing technologies. Similar arguments about brave new textual worlds marked the early enthusiasm for hypertext” [5]: unless practices are adapted and tools are developed to facilitate information exchange, the mere existence of that information is not sufficient to make it valuable. Enabling people to share ideas seems a noble goal; however, an idea in isolation, without insight into its originator's identity and motivation, and disconnected from the larger context of its history and its relation to supporting and opposing ideas, is likely to be of little use. Whether posted electronically on a website or scrawled in chalk on a sidewalk, words of protest or praise are meaningful and effective only when they can be distinguished from the noise that clogs unmanaged communication channels.

It may be fun for book shoppers to imagine that their ideas are able to influence other shoppers; however, without some ability to discover who a reviewer is and why that reviewer's opinions should be taken seriously, reading those opinions is likely to be merely an exercise in idle curiosity. When online reviews are structured so that they can be searched and sorted and individual voices can be recognized, the way is paved for the “digital sister-in-law” [11] called for in *Being Digital*, an electronic interface agent acting as a reviewer who knows not only the available data but the preferences of the human on whose behalf it acts: if advice on book selection from Professor Frederickson or ADL Director Foxman or ICA spokesman “deonm” has been good before, according well with a shopper's tastes, the interface agent should be able to query the database of available book reviews for further thoughts from the same reviewer. If those thoughts might be seen by some as hateful, but are seen by that shopper as instructive and helpful, perhaps the online bookstore's responsibility for the circulation of hate speech is lightened. Posting a lengthy sequential list of comments, some of which are hurtful, is simply the latest demonstration of the “improved means to an unimproved end” deplored by Thoreau; changes such as those outlined

above will make this data not only available but useful.

### Works Cited

[1] "About the Review." Online at <http://www.nybooks.com/nyrev/about.html>> 5 March 1999.

[2] Anti-Defamation League. "David Duke on ADL." David Duke: In His Own Words. Online at [http://www.adl.org/special\\_reports/duke\\_own\\_words/on\\_adl.html](http://www.adl.org/special_reports/duke_own_words/on_adl.html). 22 February 1999.

[3] ---. "What is Hate Filter?" Online at <http://www.adl.org/hate-patrol/info/default.htm>. 22 February 1999.

[4] Butler, Judith. Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative. New York: Routledge, 1997.

[5] Colomb, Gregory C. and Joyce A. Simutis. "Visible Conversation and Academic Inquiry: CMC in a Culturally Diverse Classroom." Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Susan C. Herring, ed. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996.

[6] Duke, David. "The Coming White Revolution: Born on the Internet." David Duke's Official International Web Site. Online at <http://www.duke.org/writings/internet.html>. 28 February 1999.

[7] ---. "My Awakening: A Path to Racial Understanding." David Duke's Official International Web Site. Online at <http://www.duke.org/awakening/default.html>. 28 February 1999.

[8] Foxman, Abraham H. "David Duke's My Awakening: A Minor League Mein Kampf." David Duke: In His Own Words. Anti-Defamation League. Online at [http://www.adl.org/frames/front\\_duke\\_own\\_words.html](http://www.adl.org/frames/front_duke_own_words.html). 22 February 1999.

[9] Fredrickson, George M. "The Strange Death of Segregation." The New York Review of Books. Volume XLVI, Number 8. May 6, 1999. 36-38.

[10] Gurak, Laura J. "The Rhetorical Dynamics of a Community Protest in Cyberspace: What Happened with Lotus MarketPlace." Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural

Perspectives. Susan C. Herring, ed. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996.

[11] Negroponte, Nicholas. Being Digital. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

[12] Stoll, Clifford. Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway. New York: Anchor, 1995.