

Critical Surfing: Holocaust denial and credibility on the Web.

by Shane Borrowman

A critical approach to surfing the Internet should be taught to students. Examination of several Web sites devoted to Holocaust denial illustrates the use of ethos construction and technological packaging to improve the credibility of their message. The Internet is more open to hate speech than traditional media such as television or print media, indicating the need for a critical approach.

© COPYRIGHT 1999 Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation

Holocaust Denial and Credibility on the Web

When my first-year composition students are not writing on gun control, euthanasia, or abortion, they often gravitate toward the newest cliched political issue: censorship of the Internet. Generally, their arguments focus on an old issue, pornography, in a new medium. The issue of porn versus art isn't new for either teachers or students, of course.

But the Web has brought another, somewhat-related issue further into the public sphere than did either television or the print medium. Hate speech in general--and Holocaust denial in particular--is reaching far larger audiences on the Web than it was ever able to do in the past. (Holocaust denial, as I am using the term here, refers to the body of pseudorevisionism that argues that the accepted history of Nazi persecution of Jews, homosexuals, and others, is a fiction.)

This wide availability makes Holocaust denial a very appropriate topic for students in a college composition class, where many, often most, blindly surf the Internet as their only form of research. Such a topic allows for discussions of the First Amendment and its limits (or lack thereof), the warped world of bigotry and racial intolerance, source credibility, and the construction of ethos.

Revisiting the Perils of Television

When I approach such controversial topics in my classroom, I begin by drawing some parallels between television and the Internet. It is important for students--and teachers--to know that the current debates about the Internet are very similar to those of forty years ago about television. Reduced to simple binaries, as debates often are, the questions about television were

1. Will television bring families together to bask in its warm glow or will it tear them apart?
2. Will television educate children or will it make them incapable of sustained, linear thought?
3. Will television educate kids? Or will it blind them and deform their teeth and jaws as they rest their chins on their palms for hours on end, as one orthodontist suggested in an issue of TV Guide from 1953? (Spigel 1-10)

Ultimately, the debate is the same reductive question we still ask today: Is television a good thing or a bad thing?

The questions about the Internet are very similar to those over television:

1. Will the Internet bring us together as a global village or further isolate us in a world where everyone reads an online newspaper, customized to his or her interests, and exchanges e-mail with people who are never met face-to-face?
2. Will the Internet educate children or make their thinking shallow?
3. Will the Internet educate or simply entertain children while it ruins their eyes?

Again, the debate seems to boil down to the question, Is the Internet a good or a bad thing? I have found that if I discuss this comparison between television and the Internet early in the term, we can begin to break students out of the black-and-white thinking that often dominates their view of the world. By exposing the shade of gray between the

Critical Surfing: Holocaust denial and credibility on the Web.

extremes of good and bad, right and wrong, students can be pushed to ask--and answer--much more complicated questions.

For the Internet, as with television, the question of good versus bad may be largely irrelevant. Television has gone from being in only a small fraction of American homes in 1950 (Spigel 1) to being in 98 percent of homes in 1998. In 1990, fewer than 5 percent of Americans were connected to the Internet; in 1998 it is estimated that 20 percent (or more) of Americans have Internet access. Like television, the Internet seems to be here to stay--regardless of any debate over its innate goodness or inherent villainy.

When it comes to hate speech--including Holocaust denial--however, the two media are very different--which often surprises students because television has become so normalized for most of them that it functions almost entirely on a subconscious level. Television is a market-driven medium. It entertains to attract viewers who can then be shown commercials; therefore, television must appeal to the largest possible audience to be profitable.

In this situation, Holocaust denial has little place. As Neil Postman writes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, "For television--bless its heart--is not congenial to messages of naked hate. For one thing, you never know who is watching, so it is best not to be wildly offensive" (116). Thus, people who would deny the reality of the Holocaust are only regularly allowed access to one type of television programming, the talk show, where being wildly offensive is often the entire point.

So Holocaust deniers have little access to television--and to the 98 percent of Americans who own a television. The same is true, although to a lesser extent, with the print medium. Publishers prefer books with wide audience appeal, and few messages of naked hate have such appeal. (Two notable exceptions are Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries*.)

Hate Speech on the Internet

But, on the Internet, hatred can thrive. It is the most free press imaginable, and Holocaust deniers can publish their works as widely as they like--or as widely as their hardware and software allow. Although their message on television, when it is there at all, is mediated by a reporter, producers, or a talk-show host, the deniers' message can be constructed on the Web in any way they choose. This freedom allows them great latitude when constructing their ethos--their credibility or authority, to loosely paraphrase Aristotle's definition from his *Rhetoric* (1.2.4).

When I talk about ethos with my students, I have found it useful to divide it into two separate, sometimes overlapping types: academic ethos and techno-ethos. The first, academic ethos, is the one with which we are all familiar; it is the credibility that comes from being recognized as an expert in a given field of knowledge. The second type is still in the process of evolving; techno-ethos is the credibility or authority that is constructed online in the programming proficiency demonstrated on a flashy Web site. Holocaust deniers, at times, effectively use both.

Academic ethos is the traditional, print-based ethos that is constructed through linear argumentation. When academic ethos is at work, a reader is convinced that the writer is a rational, reasonable, intelligent individual who is engaging in an honest dialogue with his or her audience. Academic ethos, then, has Aristotelian overtones--readers are led to believe that a writer is being ethical and fair in the construction of his or her argument. For Holocaust deniers the construction of such an ethos is enormously important.

Academic Ethos

Without the facade of respectability that academic ethos brings them, the deniers are left with their bigotry and anti-Semitism revealed. Briefly, let me cite two examples, both of which I have chosen because of their prominence in the public sphere (in both the traditional sense and in the cyber-sphere): the work of Dr. Arthur Butz at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and the mission statement of the Institute for Historical Review.

On the surface, Dr. Butz appears credible. He is an associate professor at a major university, and he is the author of a lengthy work on Holocaust denial: *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century: The Case against the Presumed Extermination of European Jewry*. That makes him a perfect place to begin a discussion of Holocaust denial and ethos construction with students, for his ethos is one already known to students: that of the professor. As Deborah Lipstadt, the foremost

Critical Surfing: Holocaust denial and credibility on the Web.

American expert on Holocaust denial, writes, "Butz's position as a professor at one of the more prestigious universities in the country enhanced the sense of controversy [his book generated]. It was hard for the public to reconcile Holocaust denial with the pursuit of truth to which universities and their faculty are supposedly dedicated" (123). Butz takes full advantage of his academic ethos to legitimize his "controversial" views.

Dr. Butz possesses and effectively deploys academic ethos. His book is lengthy, almost 400 pages counting appendices, which, combined with his title and subtitle, is enough to convince some people that his ideas are valid and worthy of consideration. As one student recently told me during a discussion of Butz's work, "It's hard to believe that someone's ideas could all be lies when they're that long and well documented." Butz plays off of the popular conception that knowledge is value-free and disconnected from ideologies, and this smoke screen serves to focus readers' attention on his empty (but academic-sounding) argument--rather than on the man behind the curtain of respectability.

Academic ethos such as Butz's often seduces students, I suspect, because they are accustomed to taking notes on (and then being tested on) the lectures they hear from professors; they are not accustomed to challenging--and even entirely discounting--the ideas with which they are presented in the academy. Butz understands the implicit authority his position lends his argument. As he writes in the introduction to his text, which I often share with students:

There will be those who will say that I am not qualified to undertake such a work and there will even be those who will say that I have no right to publish such things. So be it. If a scholar, regardless of his specialty, perceives that scholarship is acquiescing, from whatever motivation, in a monstrous lie, then it is his duty to expose the lie, whatever his qualifications. (8)

Butz presents himself as a scholar engaged in the pursuit of truth, a truth which stands in opposition to the accepted version of the history of the Holocaust. This search-for-the-truth defense often works on students, convincing them that his ideas must have some merit. As one anonymous student wrote, in the copy of *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century* that my university's library carries, "This guy is really smart." (And just the fact that the library at a major university carries the book gives Butz's academic ethos a boost.) The student's comment is written in blue ink, and blue ink underlines passages throughout that copy of the text. Butz's academic ethos worked, convincing that nameless student that debate exists where none should.

On the Web, Dr. Butz relies on the same strategy to construct his ethos. His site is simple and unadorned. Beneath his name, and before the copyright, Butz identifies himself as an "Associate Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering" and names the university at which he works. With no fanfare, Butz states that he is the author of a book on "Holocaust revisionism." The reference to his published work and to his profession serve to construct Butz's ethos on the Web; he relies on traditional, familiar means.

What makes the site interesting, and worth showing to students despite its lack of technological refinement, is the second full sentence: "This Web site exists for the purpose of expressing views that are outside the purview of my role as an Electrical Engineering faculty member." This is the point where, as one of my students wrote, Butz's "professor's mask slips a little." The line reads like exactly what it is: a disclaimer put in for legal purposes. For critical Web suffers, this has a direct effect on Butz's credibility. As a Web site, Butz's quickly exhausts its usefulness in the composition classroom.

A group with which Butz is loosely affiliated, however, has a Web site that provides much more fuel for classroom discussion: the Institute for Historical Review. Although this group's Web site is rather large, I have chosen to focus on only the mission statement the IHR provides (a document included with any materials the IHR mails out).

In the first line of the "Record and Mission of the Institute for Historical Review," the IHR begins creating its scholarly, academic ethos: "Founded in 1978, the Institute for Historical Review (publisher of the Journal [of Historical Review]) is a not-for-profit research, educational and publishing center devoted to truth and accuracy in history." They continue this reasonable approach to ethos construction: "The IHR continues the tradition of historical revisionism pioneered by distinguished historians such as Harry Elmer Barnes, A. J. P. Taylor, Charles Tansill, Paul Rassinier and William H. Chamberlin." This is the document's opening paragraph, a mere two sentences in which the tone for the IHR's ethos construction is powerfully set.

Critical Surfing: Holocaust denial and credibility on the Web.

When I have shared this paragraph with students, they have generally responded positively to the group's ethos construction. As one student wrote in his journal, "I didn't know who any of the historians the IHR mentioned were, but I figured someone did. By associating themselves with these other historians, even though I didn't know them, the group gained some credibility." This reaction, passive and accepting, is the norm rather than the exception.

There is a subtext to the IHR's mission statement, though, which students rarely miss. This subtext becomes clear when the Simon Wiesenthal Center is mentioned:

In addition [to attacks from the Jewish Defense League], well-financed special interest groups seeking to curtail open discussion of vital historical issues have for years targeted the Institute, grossly misrepresenting its work and purpose. Prominent among these are the Simon Wiesenthal Center (Los Angeles) and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (New York)--stridently partisan organizations with well documented records as staunch apologists for narrow Zionist-Jewish interests.

In passages such as this, the academic ethos of the IHR begins to crumble. When the IHR writes of "narrow Zionist-Jewish interests" its ideology slides through its ethos.

Techno-ethos

Both the Institute for Historical Review and Dr. Butz present opportunities for discussions of Holocaust denial and of academic ethos in the classroom, but neither of them provides good examples of what I have termed techno-ethos. Neither Butz nor the IHR takes advantage of the new medium; instead, they treat the Web like an extension of the traditional print medium, and they construct their ethos in traditional ways--with plain fonts on a plain background. One group of deniers, however, does understand the possibilities of the Web: CODOH, the Committee for Open Discussion of the Holocaust Story.

The CODOH Web site has everything that the other two revisionist sites I have discussed do not. Articles and a mission statement are present on CODOH's site, thus allowing them to construct an academic ethos as Butz and the IHR do, but the majority of CODOH's "credibility" is constructed through technological means.

CODOH's site is filled with color, in the background and the text. It is both easy to read and visually appealing. Various sizes of font are used, some of them three-dimensional. Frames break the page up, and helpful menus are everywhere. Pictures are also heavily used: a bald eagle at the top of the page, Samuel Johnson, and Bradley Smith (the director of CODOH) himself. On the first page that a sufferer sees, a counter reports that more than 500,000 people have accessed CODOH's home page. CODOH's site is, as one student wrote in her journal, "alive in a way that a printed page can't be." CODOH understands the possibilities of the Web, and the group makes use of them.

CODOH's message, unlike those of Butz and the IHR, is also being continuously revised to fit the new technology. Nearly each time I return to their site something new has been added. In the time I have taken to write this, for example, I have seen the site go from a single page with multiple colors to a multi-framed page to a multi-lingual site with frame, nonframe, and text-only versions. Such innovations make the group appear both savvy and, somehow, more credible in the visual medium of the Web. CODOH's ethos, in part, is constructed through their effective and creative use of the available technology.

After I had viewed the CODOH site with my students, one of them, a man who designs Web pages for a living, made this statement during a conference in my office: "On the Internet, you don't have to worry about constructing your ethos like you do in an argument, and no one can see what you really look like. Just put it out there so it looks good, no matter what you say." Just as Butz and the IHR rely on the "search for truth" defense to justify their denial, CODOH, it seems, relies on the public's blanket acceptance of well-packaged information on the Web to lend credibility to its view of the "Holocaust Story."

Critical Thinking/Critical Surfing

I believe that the Internet must be discussed in the classroom. Although all teachers may not be comfortable with

Critical Surfing: Holocaust denial and credibility on the Web.

discussing the subject of Holocaust denial, and it is certainly a topic that should be approached carefully, intelligent use of the Internet must be taught in the classroom. As Postman prophesied,

Although I believe the computer to be a vastly overrated technology, I mention it here because, clearly, Americans have accorded it their customary mindless inattention.... Thus, a central thesis of computer technology--that the principal difficulty we have in solving problems stems from insufficient data--will go unexamined. (161)

When my students write papers in which they quote only anonymous Internet sources, I fear that this "central thesis" has already taken hold. "The Information Age" and "The Information Superhighway" have both become such common expressions that they are used daily everywhere from Presidential speeches to television commercials. The underlying assumption, of course, is that information is value-neutral and ideologically unencumbered, that the facts somehow speak for themselves.

As a composition teacher, I spend endless amounts of time and energy teaching students to read critically. Many of us who teach at the college level also push our students to watch television critically. Now we need to teach them to surf critically.

Television may be a nearly inescapable part of modern life. But the role of the Internet in society is still being negotiated. As teachers, we must be--and we must teach our students to be--critical participants in those negotiations. The point where ethos construction, Holocaust denial, and the Internet intersect is a good place to start negotiating.

WORKS CITED

Aristotle. 1991. *On rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse*. Trans. George A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford University Press.

Butz, A. R. 1997. *The hoax of the twentieth century: The case against the presumed extermination of European Jewry*. 10th edition. Newport Beach, Calif.: Institute for Historical Review.

--. "Home Web page of Arthur R. Butz." <http://pubWeb.acns.nwu.edu/-abutz/> Dec. 8, 1997.

CODOH Home Page. <http://www.codoh.com/>

Lipstadt, D. 1993. *Denying the Holocaust: The growing assault on truth and memory*. New York: Penguin.

Postman, N. 1985. *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Penguin.

"Record and Mission of the Institute for Historical Review." http://www.kaiwan.com/~ihrgreg/ihr/pamphlets/v15n5p18_Staff.htm Dec. 10, 1997.

Spigel, L. 1992. *Make room for TV: Television and the family ideal in postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Evans, R. J. 1989. *In Hitler's shadow: West German historians and the attempt to escape from the Nazi past*. New York: Pantheon.

Goldhagen, D. J. 1996. *Hitler's willing executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Knopf.

Henry, F., and C. Tator. 1994. *Holocaust denial: Bigotry in the guise of scholarship*. New York: A Simon Wiesenthal Center Report.

Herf, J. 1997. *Divided memory: The Nazi past in the two Germanys*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Critical Surfing: Holocaust denial and credibility on the Web.

Lipstadt, D. E. 1986. *Beyond belief: The American press and the coming of the Holocaust 1933-1945*. New York: Free Press.

Vidal-Naquet, P. 1992. *Assassins of memory: Essays on the denial of the Holocaust*. Trans. J. Mehlman. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shane Borrowman is a teaching associate in the English department of the University of Arizona at Tucson.