



Let's update the down side — and the fun side — of the Internet

By Chuck Thomas

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Let's try again to make sense of what's happening these days out in cyberspace, with the clear understanding that much of what's going on is plain nonsense.

Internet mischief has become so epidemic that it has wound up in court, all the way from Ventura County to Vermont.

Right here in Ventura, Judge Edward Brodie held a jury foreman in contempt of court, for posting an online blog about the case in a murder trial — despite the judge's admonition for jurors not to discuss the case during the trial.

In bitter divorce case, a Vermont Family Court judge ordered a man to remove "any and all Internet postings" about his wife and their marriage. Some First Amendment scholars told The New York Times that such an order may well be an unconstitutional infringement on freedom of speech. The husband's postings exemplify what have come to be called "gripe sites" online.

Meanwhile, here are some other examples of trouble in the wide, wacky world of the Internet:

— A Rockford, Mich., woman is on trial for trying to hire someone to kill an Oroville, Calif., woman, with a posting on Craigslist, the Internet's prime classified ad site.

In New York, seven teenagers are on trial for robbing and beating people they lured to Long Island with a posting on Craigslist, offering great discount deals on Porsches.

In Newsweek, Matthew Philips reports that Craigslist has become the favorite online shopping site for everyone from child molesters to prostitutes. With "tens of millions" of postings every month, it's clearly not easy to police Craigslist — though Philips says police do use it to track down illegal activity.

— Two other popular online sites, MySpace and Facebook, are also familiar to police, especially for tracking child molesters. Clare Trapasso of The Associated Press reports that a man is serving a 14-year prison sentence for using MySpace to set up a sexual encounter with an 11-year-old girl.

Hemanshu Nigam, MySpace's security officer, told AP: "This is an industrywide challenge, and we must all work together to create a safer Internet."

According to AP, MySpace has more than 200 million registered users worldwide, while Facebook claims more than 61 million active users.

— Hit-piece blogs have become so prevalent, they have inspired a whole new online industry of "reputation repair." Included in this burgeoning business are such services as ReputationDefender, ReputationHawk and International Reputation Management.

Newsweek's Lorraine Ali reports: "You no longer have to be a paparazzi-plagued star to be misrepresented on a worldwide stage. Anyone can say anything online (it's estimated that 1.6 million blog posts are created daily)," and with today's search engines, there's easy access to all the cheap shots people want to take.

Please don't misread this as a plea for censoring the Internet, but there must be some constitutional way to make people take responsibility for what they post in blogs. Now, however nasty their posting may be, the victim may never even track down the source.

As regular readers of this column know (all three of them), I've compared the Internet to a sewer flowing through the center of town, inviting anyone to throw anything in — including any kind of garbage. Why so many people feel compelled to bad-mouth someone else is something of a mystery, but we should at least know who's disposing of this high-tech trash.

Let's wrap this up on a less depressing note, by referring to some online sites that are there just for fun.

You can now take virtual vacations — no reservations needed, no cost and no airport baggage hassles — by logging on to such sites as <http://www.earthcam.com> — to view photos of places you've always wanted to go, from surfing in Hawaii and Scuba diving in the Caribbean to watching Old Faithful erupt in Yellowstone and going on a safari in Africa.

Among the more bizarre sites online is <http://www.comicwonder.com> — dedicated to preserving the art of telling jokes. Jeff Fitzsimmons, the site's creative director, told the Milwaukee Journal, "A joke is not a joke until it's told." He means until it's told vocally, and that's what the site is meant to encourage.

As someone who rounds up the best printable e-mail humor occasionally, I have to take issue with Fitzsimmons because many jokes, especially some puns, only work in print.

Take this joke, please:

When a man's car breaks down, he seeks shelter in a nearby monastery, and while waiting for dinner to be served, he wanders into the kitchen. He detects the odor of fish and chips, and asks the monk at the stove, "Are you the fish friar?"

"No," comes the reply. "I'm the chip monk."