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## Covert Censorship on the Web

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***“An honest man can feel no pleasure in the exercise of power over his fellow citizens.” – Thomas Jefferson, (1743-1826), US Founding Father, drafter of the Declaration of Independence, 3rd US President. Source: letter to John Melish, January 13, 1813.***

Do private companies and business entities in the business of making information available on the web abuse the First Amendment rights of the rest of the country when they engage in censorship of information on their sites?

Google banned Loompanics from their AdWord program over a year ago. We had no sooner gotten excited about being able to use ad words on Google, when Google decided that we violated their “editorial guidelines” and bumped us off. We were disappointed, but not all that surprised. It isn't as though we aren't used to that kind of thing after all this time. We're banned more often than not.

Not that we have all that much in the way of sexually explicit material-we don't. We carry a few *Tijuana Bibles*, some instructional sexual material and a few books for and about sex workers. Not exactly the stuff that would make Loompanics a mondo sex site. But if we were, Google would have a place for us on their Adult Content site. Maybe...

No, it is our other information, the far-less-mainstream-than-sex information. The drug books that counter the line touted by the government and their War on Drugs propaganda, personal privacy, as in identity books, weapons, and explosives books. Information that some people evidently think should not be available for the sating of curiosity and wonder.

One of our authors, Uncle Fester, has been dialoging with Google employees, (or robots being passed off as employees) for months over their interpretation of what is allowable as an ad on their site and what isn't. Guidelines apparently only serve as a very loose structure that Google interprets according to which way the

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Loompanics Unlimited  
 PO Box 1197  
 Port Townsend, WA 98368

(360) 385-2230 Voice  
 (360) 385-7785 Fax

service@loompanics.com

corporate/political winds are blowing. At this time, most of the freedoms Americans are used to enjoying have been blown off the map by those same corporate/political winds.

The Google rede might well be, "Let's suck up to the powers that be and promote brainless adherence to whatever madness the present administration wants. We'll do this, in the interest of further enriching corporate buddies in the system, and maybe us too if we toe the line. And to that end, let's effectively squash any opinion that doesn't mirror that of the administration by refusing to allow ad-words that are not homogenized to what we consider an acceptable level on our search engine."

That isn't to say that Google will own up to censorship, except in a very backhanded way. As you can read in their "POLICY DEFINITIONS: unacceptable Content: Google believes strongly in freedom of expression and therefore offers broad access to content across the web *without censoring search results.*" (our italics) Captain Sub-text would have to add to that, "Of course, we censor the ads that are placed with us." This is reinforced with their next sentence, "Please note that the decisions we make concerning advertising in no way affect the search results we deliver." They know they are engaging in censorship. As if denying people the ability to see ads doesn't affect the overall search results – why else would companies *want* to advertise?

We're in excellent company, though. Paladin was booted off Google's AdWord program as was FS Books, and of course, Fester and countless others. And people wonder why they only see ads for Barnes & Noble and Amazon when they're looking for books online. Maybe it's because any information about the uppity independents with controversial material is effectively squashed by denying them any ability to advertise?

One might argue that as business entities, it is the right of the suits behind the search engines to accept or decline business as they choose. However, when the business of that company is the dissemination of information, and moreover, when that company deliberately conveys the public image of being a vast storehouse of information of all kinds, it is misleading to intentionally keep information, particularly information that could be found in other places on their site, from being available – that is censorship, plain and simple.

Those in favor of having thought police might say, what difference does it make if ads are available for viewing as long as the information is accessible by "search"? If people don't know about a particular product and it is but a hair's width away from the specificity that a search engine, (any search engine not just Google) requires, then *how can it come up in a search?* That's why the ads are there in the first place. Not allowing the ads creates defacto censorship and does affect search results.

Here is Google's response to Fester's question about his disappeared ad:

*Thank you for your email, and welcome to Google AdWords. It has come to my attention that you were not able to locate your ad for a selected amount of keywords in*

*your campaign. Our AdWords Specialists review all of the ads in the Google AdWords program to ensure that they comply with our advertising guidelines. Your ad was awaiting approval since you recently submitted your ad, and the keywords that did not trigger your ad were flagged by our system.*

*Now that your ad has been reviewed, it appears that you are advertising products that we do not permit. When ads do not meet our standards, we temporarily disable them. Your ad is currently marked 'disapproved' and therefore is not running. You can review our guidelines at: <http://adwords.google.com/select/guidelines.html>. If you have any further questions regarding the disapproval, please reply to this email. If you received a disapproval message, include a copy of it with your reply. I will then be able to address your questions.*

*I will include the details to your disapproval here: Ad Group: 'www.unclefesterbooks.com' AD TEXT: uncléfesterbooks.com Books and videos on the things THEY don't want you to know www.unclefesterbooks.com Ad Status: Suspended – Pending Revision Ad Issue(s):*

#### *Unacceptable Content*

*DENIED EXCEPTION(S): After careful consideration, we are unable to grant the exception requests listed below. Your ad or keyword is no longer active. For your convenience, I've included your original message to us directly below each policy violation.*

*Capitalization: THEY*

*Your explanation: THEY want people to remain ignorant of the fields covered in my books.*

*SUGGESTIONS: Content: At this time, Google policy does not permit the advertisement of websites that contain "the promotion of violence," "drugs or drug paraphernalia." As noted in our advertising terms and conditions, we reserve the right to exercise editorial discretion when it comes to the advertising we accept on our site.*

*Information about a subject is automatically considered to be "promotion."*

The above is just a sample of the pile of e-mailed correspondence to Fester from Google and there is way too much to put each example into this article. Read as a whole, it was stunning to find the responses from Google to be so obviously canned. The message is that they really do not care what the response is from someone they kick off their AdWords. Why would they?

Perhaps we are being naïve to expect some semblance of Freedom of Speech anywhere these days. While with diligent pursuit, it is possible to find information for which you would have had to search for many more hours in pre-Internet days, and it is still possible for open communication to take on a life of its own on the net, the freedom of the World Wide Web is slowly being usurped by corporate interests.

“Silenced: Censorship and Control of the Internet,” was the result of a twelve month study undertaken in October of 2003 and managed jointly by Privacy International and the GreenNet Educational Trust. They note that “one of the most important trends in recent years is the growth of multinational corporate censors ....” Further, they say, “It is arguable that in the first decade of the 21st century, corporations will rival governments in threatening Internet freedoms.” In 2005, we are seeing that scenario taken a step further, and have a corporate government already in place threatening ALL freedoms.

Google is a fine example of corporate censorship, as is eBay, which censors right along with the best of the corporations in its decisions as to what it will allow to be sold and what it won't. Jim Schneider at FIW Press tells me that he is in day 120 of his 30-day suspension for selling books that are considered paraphernalia (Fester's books). “They have no review and no appeals process. Sending them email gets a canned response, and they're pretty much lawsuit proof since their AUP states that they're the sole arbiters of what is and is not acceptable.”

That's a financial blow to Mike Shoen also. He printed over \$9,000 worth of bumper stickers with pithy phrases like “Pray for Peace, Empty Warheads in Washington,” and “Dare to Keep the CIA off Drugs,” among the nineteen bumper stickers he was trying to sell on eBay. His site also included three quotes (not even for sale) to get people thinking. An anti-war quote by Dwight D. Eisenhower, another from the former director of the DEA about the CIA selling drugs, and this quote from Herman Goering: “Why of course the people don't want war. Why should some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? Naturally the common people don't want war, neither in Russia, nor in England, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policies, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.” eBay said he was promoting Nazis. Says Mike, “Jeez, I guess it is OK to trick people into supporting war but somehow Nazi-like to oppose such tricks. Orwell was right.”

And then there is Jeff Bezos' behemoth, Amazon, that appears to be too big for its brain to know what the fingers and toes are up to, or those that animate this monster may simply pretend to be dumb and use that as a way to side-step censorship charges. Pat, canned answers are given for questions about why books and their reviews have disappeared. Books are listed as Out of Print that are not. Books that *are* out of print are shown as the result of a search instead of the current edition that is in print. Search-inside-the-book program books that were accepted upon submission never appear on the site. Canned responses from supposedly real people or responses from people with names that come from addresses like Nobody@amazon.com, or being told that the e-mail that was just sent to you cannot be responded to and you have to

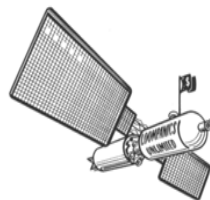
contact someone else or no response at all. Amazon doesn't seem to care about the time the author or publisher of a book (or books they'd like to see go away) takes to try to find out what happened. It's like living in a novel by Kafka. Maybe a lifetime could go by in this manner, with one canned response after another filling your days.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Certainly, Google, eBay and Amazon are not the only corporate entities on the web indulging their lust for power and control. The other corporate entities located in cyberspace have similar censorship issues and they will continue to flex their muscles in the form of censorship and control on the web. Frustration from web users will continue to grow, but the net will continue to get tighter in regards to what information will be freely available.

Not that I think this loss of free access to information will go down without a struggle from the rest of us, but with Carnivore and other software spies working in sync with the supposed "lofty ideals" of those who would control the information we have access to, Freedom of Speech may become one of those empty phrases we hear bandied about, without any real substance. Let us not let it go quietly.

Loompanics Unlimited • 2005 Spring Supplement

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