

# [Propaganda in the online free speech campaign 13717](https://assignbuster.com/propaganda-in-the-online-free-speech-campaign-13717/)

Propaganda in the Online Free Speech Campaign

Propaganda and Mass Communication

July 1, 1996

In February 1996, President Bill Clinton signed into law the

Telecommunications Act of 1996, the first revision of our country’s

communications laws in 62 years. This historic event has been greeted with

primarily positive responses by most people and companies. Most of the

Telecommunications act sets out to transform the television, telephone, and

related industries by lowering regulatory barriers, and creating law that

corresponds with the current technology of today and tomorrow. One part of the

Telecommunications act, however, is designed to create regulatory barriers

within computer networks, and this has not been greeted with admirable

commentary. This one part is called the Communications Decency Act (CDA), and

it has been challenged in court from the moment it was passed into law. Many of

the opponents of the CDA have taken their messages to the Internet in order to

gain support for their cause, and a small number of these organizations claim

this fight as their only cause. Some of these

organizations are broad based civil liberties groups, some fight for freedom of

speech based on the first amendment, and other groups favor the lowering of laws

involving the use of encrypted data on computers. All of these groups, however,

speak out for free speech on the Internet, and all of these groups have utilized

the Internet to spread propaganda to further this common cause of online free

speech and opposition to the CDA.

Context in which the propaganda occurs

Five years ago, most people had never heard of the Internet, but today the

Internet is a term familiar to most people even if they are not exactly sure

about what the Internet is. Along with the concept of the Internet, it is

widely known that pornography and other adult related materials seem to be

readily available on the Internet, and this seems to be a problem with most

people. Indeed, it does not take long for even a novice Internet user to search

out adult materials such as photographs, short movies, text based stories and

live discussions, chat rooms, sexual aide advertisements, sound files, and even

live nude video. The completely novel and sudden appearance of the widely

accessible Internet combined with the previously existing issues associated with

adult materials has caused a great debate around the world about what should be

done. The major concern is that children will gain access to materials that

should be reserved only for adults. Additionally, there is concern that the

Internet is being used for illegal activities such as child pornography. In

response to the concerns of many people, the government enacted the

Communications Decency Act which attempts to curtail these problems by defining

what speech is unacceptable online and setting guidelines for fines and

prosecution of people or businesses found guilty of breaking this law. While

the goal of keeping children from gaining access to pornography is a noble one

that few would challenge, the problem is that the CDA has opened a can of worms

for the computer world. Proponents of the CDA claim that the CDA is necessary

because the Internet is so huge that the government is needed to help curb the

interaction of adult materials and children. Opponents of the CDA claim that

the wording of the CDA is so vague that, for example, an online discussion of

abortion would be illegal under the new law, and our first amendment rights

would therefore be pulled out from under us. Opponents also argue that Internet

censorship should be done at home by parents, not by the government, and that

things such as child pornography are illegal anyway, so there is no need to re-

state this in a new law. At this point, the battle lines have been drawn and

like everything else in society, everyone is headed into the courtroom to debate

it out. While this happens, the propagandists have set up shop on the Internet.

In terms of a debate about the first amendment and the restriction of free

speech, this current battle is nothing new. The debate over free speech has

been going on for as long as people have been around, and in America many great

court cases have been fought over free speech. The Internet’s new and

adolescent status does not exclude it from problems. Just as all other forms of

mass communication have been tested in the realms of free speech and propaganda,

so will the Internet.

Identity of the propagandists

There are scores of online groups that work to promote free speech on the

Internet, but there are a few who stand out because of the scope of their

activities, their large presence on the Internet, and their apparently large

numbers of supporters. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) is today one of

the most visual online players in the fight against the CDA, but was established

only in 1990 as a non-profit organization before the Internet started to gain

its status as a daily part of our lives. Mitchell D. Kapor, founder of Lotus

Development Corporation, along with his colleague John Perry Barlow, established

the EFF to “ address social and legal issues arising from the impact on society

of the increasingly pervasive use of computers as a means of communication and

information distribution.” In addition, the EFF also notes that it “ will

support litigation in the public interest to preserve, protect and extend First

Amendment rights within the realm of computing and telecommunications technology

.” Also in the press release that announced the formation of the EFF, Kapor

said, “ It is becoming increasingly obvious that the rate of technology

advancement in communications is far outpacing the establishment of appropriate

cultural, legal and political frameworks to handle the issues that are arising.”

Clearly, the EFF is very up-front and open about its belief that the American

legal system is currently not equipped to handle the daily reliance and use of

computers in society, and that the EFF will facilitate in handling problems in

the area of litigation and computers. Initial funding of the EFF was provided in

part by a private contribution from Steve Wozniak, the co-founder of Apple

Computer, and since then contributions have come from industry giants such as

AT&T, Microsoft, Netscape Communications, Apple Computer, IBM, Ziff-Davis

Publishing, Sun Microsystems, and the Newspaper Association of America. It is

likely that these companies see the need for assistance when the computer world

collides with the world of law, and also see the EFF as one way for the rights

of the computer industry and its customers to be upheld. A second player in the

area of online free speech protection is the Center for Democracy and Technology

(CDT). The CDT, founded in 1994, is less up-front about their history and

funding, but states that its mission is to, “ develop public policies that

preserve and advance democratic values and constitutional civil liberties on the

Internet and other interactive communications media.” Like the EFF, the CDT is

located in Washington, DC, and is a non-profit group funded by, according to the

1996 annual report, “ individuals, foundations, and a broad cross section of the

computer and communications industry.” A third major player in the online free

speech movement is The Citizens Internet Empowerment Coalition (CIEC, pronounced

“ seek”). This is the group who filed the original lawsuit against the US

Department of Justice and Attorney General Janet Reno to overturn the CDA based

on, in part, the use of the word “ indecent”. The plaintiffs in this lawsuit are

a very diverse group, and include many who are also cited as contributors to the

EFF. Some of these plaintiffs include the American Booksellers Association, the

Freedom to Read Foundation, Apple Computer, Microsoft, America Online, the

Society of Professional Journalists, and Wired magazine. In their appeal to

gain new members, CIEC states that they are, “ a coalition of Internet users,

businesses, non-profit organizations and civil liberties advocates formed to

challenge the constitutionality of the Communications Decency Act because they

believe it violates their free speech rights and condemns the Internet to a

future of burdensome censorship and government intrusion.” Like the CDT, CIEC

does not directly state what organizations support their cause or how much money

is changing hands, but based on the companies supporting the lawsuit filed by

the CIEC, it is almost certain that the same computer and publishing related

companies are paying for CIEC’s existence. Finally, unlike other groups which

are activists for several causes, CIEC has the one and only mission of

challenging the CDA and does not claim to have any other purpose.

Ideology and purpose behind the campaign

There are several interrelated reasons motivating the online free speech

movement. The most visual, and therefore one of the most obvious, reasons for

the online presence of the free speech movement is to sign up new supporters.

Current technology of the Internet is ideal for gathering information from

people without inconveniencing them. While exploring the Internet in the privacy

of one’s own home, it takes only seconds to type in your name, address, and

other information so that it can be sent to the headquarters of an organization.

When compared to the traditional process of walking into a traditional

storefront, talking with a human, and then writing out your membership

information on paper, this new electronic method is superior. A person can

become an online free speech supporter at 2am while sitting in his or her

underwear and eating leftovers while sitting at home without having to worry

about talking to a pushy recruiter. Because of this ease of gathering

information, it is possible for

an organization to quickly recruit large numbers of members. Also, in terms of

the demographics of the members, the mere fact that they are signing up online

generates a certain, desirable demographic group of people. Even though

computers are becoming easier to use every day, the majority of Internet users

are educated and tend to have higher incomes than the average. At the head of

CIEC’s page where new members are encouraged to sign up, there is a large banner

proclaiming, “ Over 47, 000 Individual Internet Users Have Joined as of June 17,

1996!”. This particular technique of announcing the number of new recruits is

popular among various online organizations who recruit new members because it

lets the user know that he is not alone. The user will see the large number and

know that he or she will be part of a large group of supporters and therefore

feel safe about signing up with the cause. Once an individual gets “ in the door”

of an online free speech website, he or she is encouraged to become a member or

supporter, but why are the supporters needed? I believe that when presented in

a legal setting, these large membership lists can be used to demonstrate that

numerous people do exist who are in favor of the online free speech campaign.

Just as people vote for laws or politicians, membership lists demonstrate that

people have “ voted” for this cause. While a membership list is not quite as

powerful as an election, it does show that real “ everyday” people support this

cause. When the online free speech campaign takes the CDA case to the Supreme

Court, it will be armed with long lists of people who support what these

organizations are trying to do, and the knowledge of all of the supporters could

be just enough to tilt the judges’ decision in the right direction. Another

purpose behind the online free speech campaigns is to attract more businesses to

the effort. When, for example, a software company who advertises on the Net

proclaims to be a supporter of the movement, then the movement gets free

advertising. When the names of computer companies such as Microsoft and Apple

are mentioned in the introductory and sign up information, other companies might

feel the urge to join because of the “ me too” effect in which the smaller

companies look up to the bigger companies and might tend to adopt the policies

of the giants. For example, if YYZ Software knows that Microsoft is supporting

the free speech online movement, YYZ might feel important if it supports the

cause too. While the number company owners or managers browsing a site will be

much smaller than the number of individual people looking at the same site, this

idea of throwing around the name of famous companies is an attempt to attract at

least some supporters. Even though only a small number of supporters could be

gained through this channel, it is still a channel, and therefore important no

matter how small. Also, if this method happens to bring a large company into

the group, then the organization could gain great financial support. While it

is likely that all the Netscapes and IBMs of the world are already aware of the

online free speech movement, new companies and new fortunes are made frequently

in the fast moving world of the computer industry, so an unknown company today

could be a key player tomorrow. It is, therefore, important for the online free

speech movement to be constantly recruiting new companies, because the need for

large financial backers never ends, and you never know when a mom and pop

operation today will be the next Microsoft tomorrow.

Another motivation behind the campaign is the protection of businesses

and their interests. For example, a new online magazine for scientists in the

biomedical field is being formed, and the company behind the venture, Current

Science, is investing between $7. 5 and $9 million in the project (Rothstein).

With money like this at risk, it is obvious that freedom of speech must be

secured in order for ventures like this to work. Finally, the ultimate goal for

all groups is the repeal of the CDA, but the deletion of the CDA does not mean

the end of free speech problems on the Internet, so these groups will always

exist in some form or another. Just as there is an ongoing debate about what

books are appropriate for who, there will always be a debate about what Internet

content is appropriate for who. Add to this the global aspect of the Internet,

and the scope and complexity of the issue can be envisioned.

Target audience

The clever, or perhaps just convenient aspect about online free speech

propaganda is that the propaganda is located at the very same spot that the

debate is about. In other words, if you want to promote free speech, go to

where the speech is taking place- the Internet. By promoting propaganda online

about online free speech, you are directly targeting the audience you want to

target. People who do not utilize the Internet will be less interested than

those who do, so it makes sense to locate your campaign on the Internet, where

the people there will naturally be more concerned about computer censorship

issues. An added bonus of the Internet is its relatively low cost compared to

traditional media outlets such as print or radio, so not only are these groups

promoting their causes almost directly to the people they want to reach, they

are doing it at a very low cost compared with more traditional methods. On the

other hand, these online free speech organizations have little, if any

propaganda outside of the Internet, so they are therefore not reaching the

maximum number of possible people. While they all maintain traditional offices,

phone numbers, postal mailing addresses, and fax numbers, they are virtually

unknown by the populace outside of the Internet. While purchasing print or

television advertisements might not be as direct and monetarily efficient as

utilizing the Internet to promote propaganda, those traditional methods would

help get the word out to the largest number of people.. Just as all other forms

of mass media have been utilized for the spread of propaganda, so will the

Internet.

Media utilization techniques

This section is by far the most interesting because it deals primarily

with the actual examples and techniques of propaganda used by the online free

speech movement. While the propaganda of these groups is primarily limited to

the electronic realm of the Internet, it is important to remember that the

Internet is itself a multimedia tool. Unlike newspaper, for example, the

Internet can convey words, pictures, sound, and moving video. As an added

dimension, these forms can vary in unlimited colors, intensities, qualities and

quantities so that the viewer does not always know what to expect. The

important propagandistic idea of utilizing all available channels to maximize

the effect of propaganda is certainly at use here.

My first involvement with the online free speech movement, and the

reason why I decided to investigate this topic, was the Blue Ribbon Campaign.

Almost a year ago, I began to notice the occurrence of the same blue ribbon icon

on many different Internet web locations and homepages. These icons are similar

to the red AIDS awareness ribbon in terms of their appearance and function, and

the actual size of the icon in most locations is typically only about 8 mm high

by 25 wide. Of course this size depends on several computer specific variables,

but the point is that the Blue Ribbon Campaign icon is small so that it appears

quickly without taking much transfer time. The people behind the Blue Ribbon

icon knew that if they created a large space and time hogging image, that people

would become frustrated with the lethargic image and fail to gain respect for it.

However, in reality, this small icon is tiny and unobtrusive so that its

appearance on a web page is not bothersome.

The idea of using a blue ribbon is smart because of the association with

the AIDS red ribbon campaign. While people have different opinions about

homosexuality, most people, if not all, agree that aids must be stopped. Using

this logic, it makes sense to utilize this almost universal appeal of the red

ribbon by the creation of a blue ribbon. Additionally, the red ribbon icon is

very well established and is widely recognized, so once again, the adoption of a

similar blue ribbon icon is smart.

The genius of the Internet’s world wide web is the use of hyperlinks or

hypertext. Hypertext is the system of allowing the reader to click on something

and be instantly transported to another location that relates to what he or she

clicked on. Every time a Blue Ribbon Campaign icon exists on the world wide web,

it contains the Internet homepage address of the Electronic Frontier Foundation,

one of the key players in the online free speech movement. Therefore, by

clicking on the Blue Ribbon icon, the reader is instantly transferred to EFF’s

homepage. When compared again to the AIDS red ribbon movement, the advantage of

the Internet system are obvious. When one sees a person wearing an AIDS red

ribbon, he or she can not automatically and instantaneously receive information

about AIDS. The person would have to ask the red ribbon wearer for a phone

number or address where AIDS information could be found. With the Blue Ribbon

Campaign, however, the information is instant, and it fits right in with today’s

fast moving society. A person can see the Blue Ribbon icon, and can immediately

see what it means. There is no time for the person to lose interest due to

making a phone call or waiting for a postal letter to be delivered.

Therefore on a daily basis I was seeing the Blue Ribbon Campaign icons,

and several times I clicked on those icons in order to gain more information

about this symbol that kept popping up all over the place. If, on a particular

day, I was not in the mood to learn about the EFF, I could easily go back to

what I was doing before I clicked on the blue ribbon icon. However, since the

icon kept appearing at various web sites, there were times when I did feel like

exploring this interesting phenomenon further, and because the blue ribbon icon

was easy to run across, it was easy for me to enter the EFF and see what they

had to offer.

The EFF’s homepages do contain a brief history of the organization, but

there is no information about the actual origin of the Blue Ribbon Campaign.

According to electronic mail I received from Dennis Derryberry at the EFF after

querying about the origin of the Blue Ribbon Campaign: The Blue Ribbon Campaign

does not belong to any specific group; it is shared by all groups and

individuals who value and support free speech online. I believe the idea

originally was sparked by a woman who has been helping us with membership

functions, but amid all the expansion of the campaign, we kind of forgot where

it really came from. I guess that’s just the spirit of a campaign for the

benefit of the many. (Derryberry) Even if the Blue Ribbon Campaign does not

belong to any one group, it was originated by the EFF and all of the blue ribbon

icons point back to the EFF.

One of the first options of things to do when one first sees the EFF’s

opening page is to join the EFF, the Blue Ribbon Campaign, or both.. Joining

the Blue Ribbon Campaign is simple, and basically involves just giving them a

small amount of personal information and then copying one of several blue ribbon

icons to be used on your web site. There are many, many different blue ribbons

available of all different sizes and compositions, but they all revolve around

the basic blue ribbon idea. If a user is not fully pleased with the online

selection if available icons, there is an option to receive information about

many others that are available. Finally, it is also possible to create your own

blue ribbon icon and allow the EFF to give it away to be used for the same cause.

This entire emphasis on the graphic image of the campaign is a smart move

because people’s interest is aroused by images more than words. If the words

“ Blue Ribbon Campaign” were seen everywhere, the impact would be less dramatic

than the colored image of the blue ribbon that accompanies these words. Even

though the doorway to the EFF is graphic based, the bulk of the EFF’s web site

contains document after document of textual information that all relates to the

CDA and freedom of speech. Also located here is the entire text of the

Telecommunications Act of 1996, including all text of the CDA. Internet users

who click on the blue ribbon icon will be taken directly to the part of the

EFF’s website that deals with the Blue Ribbon Campaign. Because the Blue Ribbon

Campaign is not the only cause the EFF supports, there is of course much more to

the EFF’s website than just this. Some of the sections of the EFF’s homepage

are:

The Blue Ribbon Campaign section on the EFF’s homepage is set apart from

the other areas by use of the traditional blue ribbon icon. This section begins

with a link to the newest information about the CDA, and then goes on to list

links to several things including introductory information about the campaign,

federal, state, and local information, an archive of past information, examples

of Internet sites that could be banned under the CDA, activism information, and

finally a “ Skeptical?” link to a page that tries to convince skeptics about

believing the EFF’s cause.

About EFF is the first thing that new visitors to the site will want to

read. This contains a brief history of the organization and answers most of the

questions people might have. This area also goes into the beliefs and

motivations behind the EFF.

Action Alerts is a list of current events that the EFF is currently

monitoring. For example, one of the most recent action alerts deals with the

latest decision on the CDA. This section also encourages people to take action

in the Blue Ribbon Campaign and provides a list of various ways to help. At the

top of the list there is a disclaimer about civil disobedience being “ at least

nominally illegal”. Some of the suggested activities include: supporting a

28th amendment to the U. S. Constitution to extend First Amendment rights to the

Internet, attend rallies, wear T-shirts that promote free speech online, put a

real blue ribbon pin on your backpack if you are a student, etc.. This section

also contains a list of previous example of protest and demonstration of CDA

opposition, so show that people have actually gone out to stand up for the

things that are promoted on this site.

Guide to the Internet is a document that helps acquaint novices with the

Internet in general, and does not contain any EFF or free speech related

specific material. While this seems pretty innocent, its purpose here is a bit

deeper. If more people can become more familiar with the Internet, then more

people will use the Internet and therefore hopefully become interested in online

free speech.

Archive index is an essential tool on the EFF website because of the large

number of different documents available here. This is a searchable index that

aides users in finding specific information contained in the EFF pages. For

example, if you wanted to see if the word “ pornography” occurred in the CDA, you

could search for it.

Newsletter is a section that contains the current and past newsletters

of the EFF. These newsletters are updates about things the EFF is currently

involved with. I think that although much of the information contained in these

newsletters is redundant in that it can be found elsewhere on the site, there

are two reasons for this. First, the newsletter format is one that everyone is

familiar with. If a person is new to the EFF site and sees the “ newsletter”

section, he or she will automatically have a general idea how information will

be presented in this format, and it will therefore be easier and more welcoming

to read than other types of information. Secondly, the newsletter is important

because it is repeated information. One key aspect of propaganda is repetition,

so the duplication of certain information in the newsletter accomplishes that.

Calendar is a listing of future events and dates that are important to

EFF. Many of the listings here are protest rallies and schedule speeches that

look good when many people attend. This provides a consolidated listing of

dates that is easy to access, without having to search all over the site for

things. Also, the information here is available for download so that it can be

put into a person’s personal time management software on his or her own computer.

This gives the EFF an indirect link to remind you where to go and when.

Job openings provides information about applying to the EFF for a job

with the EFF.

Merchandise lets members and nonmembers purchase T-shirts and metal Blue

Ribbon Campaign pins to help spread the word.

Awards gives a list of the 19 awards won by the EFF for various things

such as “ Best of the Web” and “ Top 250 Lycos Sites”. The display of these

awards legitimizes the organization and shows to others that many people are

visiting this site.

Staff Homepages at first seems somewhat boring, but this section is

actually a list of the staff, in rank order, and a short description of what

each person does at the EFF. Clicking on the person’s name takes you to their

homepage. This display of information once again reinforces the idea of white

propaganda that the EFF uses.

Miscellaneous contains a sponsors list, other publications of interest,

and EFF related images, sounds, and animations.

A second example of online free speech propaganda on the Internet is a

homepage promoting the lawsuit filed by The Citizens Internet Empowerment

Coalition (CIEC, “ seek”) against the U. S. Department of Justice and Attorney

General Janet Reno. This page is designed to look like a 1700’s handbill or

poster and to arouse emotions of patriotism and fighting for one’s country. It

would be difficult for an American to view this document and not be reminded of

how we fought for our freedom from the English. Icons of patriots shouting out

loud, canons and American flags, and pictorial representations of the

Constitution all arouse emotions of fighting for what is right. This page also

contains an 4 minute audio clip that is available for download. This audio is

Judith Krug of the American Libraries Association speaking about the censorship

of libraries. The reader has to only click on the icon and the audio will be

transferred to his or her computer and the user listens to the audio as it is

transmitted. Aside from these audio and visual messages, this site is

similar to the EFF’s in that it contains lots of information and links to

related anti-CDA sites.

Another website that utilizes propaganda is operated by the Center for

Democracy and Technology (CDT). This site is one of many that utilizes an

animated “ Free Speech” icon that displays fireworks exploding in the air. Like

other examples, this too is very patriotic. Also like other sites, the CDT

displays various Internet awards they have won, as well as the number of people

they have signed up who support the lawsuit against the CDA.

Counter propaganda

While there are groups and people who favor the CDA, there is very

little propaganda promoting these beliefs. Part of the reason for this is that

the whole debate over the CDA seems to be a very nonpartisan issue in terms of

Republicans and Democrats. If this had been a partisan issue, there would

certainly be propaganda on both sides. The main reason that little counter

propaganda exists is that the CDA is the law, so people who are for it have

already been appeased to a certain extent. The anti-CDA groups are protesting

and using propaganda because the CDA is the law, and they want it changed. As

with many things in life, it is more common to hear complaints from people who

are not satisfied than from people who are ple