Social Ethics in the Electronic Community

Michael Zareny

Kim reread the message from Jack Oiler, a University alumnus now working in Australia:

My concern is about one M Zareny, who is using his University computer account to post UseNet articles in rec.arts.books and to send messages with extremely derogatory claims about gay men. Normally I would be most solidly against censorship, but if similar remarks about the immorality of Jews or Blacks were made, they would probably be illegal. I have tried at great length to reason with MZ, but his prejudices seem to be beyond reason. He was previously using an account elsewhere before he moved to the University. As an alumnus, I am disappointed to see Zareny's trash emanating from the University. I also think that if the hate laws covered gender orientation, he would be in violation of the law.

Could you please respond to my plea? As I said, I am very uncomfortable with censorship of any form, but MZ has been going on for more than three years now, and his views are quite beyond rational comment. I have suggested that we take the debate to philosophical journals instead of the Internet (he suggested the same thing, but shows no signs of doing so, despite my having published papers on issues underlying the topic), since there are some established standards there. He has made unsubstantiated remarks about my character and relations with my students, that if I were in the US I might consider taking legal action over.

This, Kim thought, was going to be a tough one. Kim went to the keyboard computer, fired up a UseNet reader, and told it to retrieve recent articles from rec.arts.books. Social Ethics in the Electronic Community

Michael Zareny (B)

Kim remembered why many UseNet groups had lost their appeal. The rec.arts.books group was much as Kim remembered it: a sometimes heady, more often banal conglomeration of comments on books, comments on comments on books, comments on commenters on books, flame wars, and utter irrelevancies, with obscenity, rudeness, and insults (and occasionally insights and wisdom) sprinkled throughout. Kim agreed with Oiler that Zareny's assorted missives were rude and offensive, but Zareny wasn't the only offender - and offenders were equally likely to be anti-gay or pro-gay. Moreover, Zareny's offensive comments often elicited responses in kind.

"I think," Kim decided, "that if Oiler wants to read rec.arts.books, the price may be putting up with Zareny - after all, no one *has* to read UseNet groups. But I'll send Zareny a message, telling him that civility is a better choice than offensiveness. Maybe that will settle this down."

Kim checked the username list for "zareny", the University username in the postings. It wasn't there. Kim checked the online directory for a "Michael Zareny". No such individual. Kim double checked with the Registrar and Personnel: no student or employee named Zareny.

Kim rechecked the UseNet postings: most seemed to be from the address "zareny@university.edu," which clearly wasn't valid (mail to that address would be returned by the university.edu mailhub with an error message). But a few postings gave the address "zareny@gosh.university.edu".

Kim looked up "gosh.university.edu" in the University host tables, and discovered, with some consternation, that it was a UNIX workstation on an Academic Computing student staff member's desk.

The staff member knew nothing about any Zareny, but the staff member and Kim quickly found a local account for a "zareny" in the workstation's password file - and that the workstation had been set to permit access from the Internet. Apparently all this had been done by the workstation's previous user; the current user said he'd simply left everything as he found it.

Social Ethics in the Electronic Community

Michael Zareny (C)

The next day Kim was talking to a librarian friend at another local institution about Zareny. "That name sounds awfully familiar," the librarian friend said. Later that day Kim got another message:

I knew I'd heard that name! There's an undergraduate who wrote a huge thesis, 500 pages of detailed philosophical arguments. Here's the citation:

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AUTHOR: Zareny, Michael.

TITLE: Symbols in modern thought / by Michael Zareny.

PUB. INFO: 1993.

DESCRIPTION: 569 p.; 28 cm.

NOTES: Thesis (A.B.)--Other University, 1993.

Includes bibliographical references.

SUBJECTS: *S1 Meaning (Philosphy)

AUTHORS: *A1 Zareny, Michael.
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Thing is, I think this guy is now a graduate student here. Do you want me to say anything to anybody about what he's been doing?

"Ah," Kim thought, "maybe I can let someone else handle Zareny."