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# national news

## Mandate to censor

*CompuServe deletes gay newsgroups and blames Germany; German officials deny they told CompuServe what to do*

by Rex Wockner



**T**he CompuServe on-line service deleted more than 200 Internet Usenet newsgroups from its worldwide system on Dec. 27, saying it was responding to a "direct mandate from the prosecutor's office in Germany."

Gay newsgroups were hit hard in the sweep. Nonsexually oriented groups that were banned include soc.support.youth.gay-lesbian-bi, clari.news.gays, alt.homosexual, alt.motss.bisexual, gay-net.coming-out, gay-net.international, and shamash.gayjews.

Usenet newsgroups are message boards where one Internet user posts a comment and others respond minutes, hours or days later. There is no live interaction. There are over 16,000 Usenet newsgroups, a few of which carry erotic stories (such as alt.sex.stories.gay) or erotic photos.

In a press release, CompuServe said the censored newsgroups were "specifically identified to CompuServe by the German authorities as illegal under German criminal law."

"CompuServe did not select any groups or determine the nature of the newsgroups that have been impacted by this action," the company said. "German government officials, as part of an investigation of illegal material on the Internet, ordered CompuServe to do what was necessary with respect to specified newsgroups in order to comply with German law."

That contradicts information German officials released on Jan. 2, 1996. Manfred Wick, Munich's senior public prosecutor, said that his office did not provide CompuServe with any such list as part of its investigation of child pornography on the Internet.

"We did not make any stipulations. It was the decision of CompuServe alone," Wick said.

Zapped groups include dozens beginning with "alt.sex" or "alt.binaries.pictures.erotica" as well as the specific groups alt.recovery.addiction.sexual, alt.religion.sexuality, alt.support.disabled.sexuality,

clari.news.crime.sex, clari.news.sex, and rec.arts.erotica.

Newsgroups beginning with "clari" are commercial groups that carry nothing but Associated Press and Reuters wire-service news reports.

"German authorities are investigating newsgroups and other Internet content that may contain child pornography, other pornographic material illegal for adults, as well as content that although not illegal for adults is of such an explicit nature that it is illegal for minors," CompuServe said.

The company pointed out that, "CompuServe, as an access provider, is not responsible for the origination or nature of content on the Internet over which it has no creative or editorial control."

CompuServe "is investigating ways in which we can restrict user access to selected newsgroups by geographical location," the company said.

In fact, CompuServe users who know their way around the Internet can use any number of Internet tools to traverse cyberspace from within CompuServe and

view the banned newsgroups elsewhere. Ultimately, anything generally available on the 'Net anywhere in the world can, one way or another, be accessed by any computer connected to the 'Net. The Internet was designed—by none other than the U.S. Department of Defense—to be sabotage-proof. It can't even be killed by bombs; it would reroute itself around the devastation.

The simplest way to circumvent CompuServe's censorship is merely to cross-post messages between banned and nonbanned groups. Traffic for alt.homosexual can be carbon-copied to, for example, soc.motss, which is one of the busiest gay newsgroups ("motss" stands for "members of the same sex"); it may have survived censorship because it contains neither the word "sex" nor the word "gay" and because the cybercops may not have known what "motss" stands for.

CompuServe has 4 million subscribers in more than 140 countries.

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