

# Antisemitism in the Urban Dictionary and the Responsibilities of Online Publishers

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## Abstract

This article focuses on antisemitic and racist content in the Urban Dictionary: a global top-1000 website built upon user-generated content. It argues that the Urban Dictionary's founding principles have directly facilitated the site's exploitation as a platform for the dissemination of antisemitic hate speech and white supremacist ideology. These principles can be seen as typifying the free speech absolutism that became dominant within the US tech industry during the 1990s. However, the right to free expression cannot reasonably be taken to exempt internet companies from responsibility for content whose publication they facilitate. The article concludes by arguing that websites such as the Urban Dictionary are essentially publishers, and that the solution to the problem of their indulgence of bigots may be for those who do not wish to be associated with bigotry to refrain from doing business with institutions that publish content that they consider abhorrent.

**Keywords** alt-right, antizionism, brand contamination, definitions, dictionaries, free speech, Urban Dictionary, user-generated content, Web 2.0

## INTRODUCTION

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By defining and modelling correct and/or appropriate usage for the words of a language, lexicographers can exercise a subtle influence on those who use them. Tom Dickins explains their particular role as follows:

Much of the “ideological” content of a dictionary resides in the detail. Dictionaries may not offer the scope of a textbook or a political pamphlet to re-interpret past and present realities, but, unlike other publications, they are a constant source of reference and users tend to trust them implicitly.<sup>1</sup>

Such trust may be diminished when a dictionary does not have authoritative status. However, in the online world, non-authoritative but open-access texts may be a far more constant source of reference, as they are easily and almost

instantly available at all times. This article focuses on the ways in which multiple definitions and examples within the Urban Dictionary—a slang dictionary featuring user-generated content—appear to have been constructed in order to communicate and normalize an antisemitic and white supremacist worldview.

## Identifying Antisemitism

When antisemites speak plainly, their bigotry is readily apparent. However, much antisemitic discourse is expressed in subtle and coded ways, especially online.<sup>2</sup> In identifying examples of antisemitism, this article therefore draws on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism (henceforth, the IHRA Definition), which both recognizes antisemitism as a “perception”—that is, as cognitive or ideational in character, and thus not

limited to behavioural or emotional hostility—and recognizes that this perception may be inherent in certain ways of thinking about Israel no less than in classic antisemitic tropes.<sup>3</sup> This is an acknowledgement of what has been called “the new antisemitism” or “antizionist antisemitism”: what might more straightforwardly be referred to as ‘Israel-related antisemitism.’<sup>4</sup>

### Three Lexicographic Forms of Bigotry

Alongside the above, this article employs a novel three-part typology of means by which it is assumed that bigotry can be expressed or communicated through dictionary definitions and examples. These means are as follows:

Type I: definitions and usage examples for hateful slurs, which do not make clear that usage of the slurs is unacceptable, or which argue that their unacceptability is to be regretted. Contemporary lexicographers are very much aware of this form of bigotry. For example, in 1998 Merriam-Webster responded to criticism by revising its definition of “nigger” as “a black person” or “a member of any dark-skinned race” to begin with a warning that would leave readers “in no doubt that the word offends most people.”<sup>5</sup>

Type II: definitions and usage examples for terms denoting specific groups that make sense only given a bigoted and stereotypical understanding of those groups. A good example of this is the use of the word “jew” as a verb meaning “haggle”—this behaviour being a stereotypical attribute of Jews. It was not until 2019 that the Association of British Scrabble Players removed that definition from its official dictionary, following lobbying from the Community Security Trust.<sup>6</sup>

Type III: definitions and usage examples intentionally designed to encode bigoted understandings of the world. Examples can be found in the Nazi-era *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, multiple entries within which appear

to have been written in order to justify twentieth century antisemitic views.<sup>7</sup>

Although Type I lexicographic bigotry is, thanks to twenty-first-century preoccupation with verbal hygiene, perhaps the most easily recognized, types II and III are arguably more dangerous, as they perpetuate understandings of the world that can serve as a motivation or justification for persecution and violence. In the body of this article, all three types shall be used as a framework for understanding bigotry as expressed in dictionary definitions published on a single popular website.

### The Urban Dictionary

Founded in 1999 and operating out of the United States, the Urban Dictionary is a well-established Web 2.0 site, predating Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and even Wikipedia. According to the web traffic analytics service, Alexa Internet, Urban Dictionary falls comfortably within the world’s top 1000 internet sites, ranging between 640th and 757th place from September to December 2019, and receiving incoming links from more sites than the average for what that particular service regards as its four main competitors, that is, Merriam Webster (which ranged between 599th and 515th place in the world rankings during the same period), dictionary.com (which ranged between 847th and 634th), the Free Dictionary (between 635th and 688th), and the Cambridge University Press website (337th and 334th).<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing, the Wikipedia page for Urban Dictionary cites numerous indicators of the site’s influence, including its official use as a legal resource.<sup>9</sup> It can further be observed that Google searches for current examples of internet slang often place the Urban Dictionary very highly. For example, the Urban Dictionary page for “chonky”—an affectionate word used to describe overweight animals—was placed first in the Google rankings as of the time of

writing, when browsing privately from the United Kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

There appears to have been only a single scholarly attempt to theorize the Urban Dictionary. Caroline Tagg writes as follows:

Its purpose is to document slang usage as defined by its users, and it accepts multiple and contrasting definitions of the same word. It also accepts neologisms invented for the purpose of entering them into the dictionary. These often serve to document or highlight existing concepts or practices. . . .

As [Urban Dictionary's] founder, Aaron Peckham puts it, "Every single word on here is written by someone with a point of view, with a personal experience of the word in the entry". The contrast between Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary is similar to that between [wikis] and blogs, which Myers has theorised in terms of competing models of knowledge. According to [the] "public" model [of wikis], knowledge is a group endeavour: "anyone can contribute, but . . . only with the agreement of others can one's contribution stand". But in the "private" model of the blogosphere, knowledge is an individual possession: "everyone is entitled to say what they want" and "everyone has the right to be heard". As Peckham's statement would suggest, these assumptions also underpin Urban Dictionary.<sup>11</sup>

As we shall see, such allowances appear to be extended to antisemites and other bigots, who are permitted not only to express hateful views, but also to convey those views to an audience through the online publishing platform that the Urban Dictionary provides. As a result, numerous Urban Dictionary entries express a hateful point of view and encode a bigoted understanding of the world. It seems likely that this results from the deliberate activity of digitally-active white supremacists (now sometimes referred to as the "alt-right"), whose use of the internet for outreach has been a cause for concern since the late twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

## ANTISEMITISM AS MANIFEST IN URBAN DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS AND EXAMPLES

### Type I

It is possible to locate many entries for racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual slurs on the Urban Dictionary. This in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Whether a dictionary entry should be considered bigoted depends not on the word being defined but on the precise form of the definition and examples.

The top entry for the word "kike" appropriately defines the word as "[a] racist name for a Jewish person," while the second identifies it as a "racial slur" and the third as "a degrading way of calling someone a Jew"; the fifth and sixth were similar. However, several highly placed definitions of the word appear to have been constructed in order to suggest that its use should *not* be regarded as offensive. For example, the fourth definition was the dubious "A word that Jews use because they can't say the n-word," while the seventh simply defined the word as meaning "A Jew. A Hebrew. A person of Jewish ancestry." The latter, moreover, added an example clearly intended to mock Jews: "Ike the Kike bought a box of matzos for his girlfriend." Both of these entries appear to normalize the racial slur, and as such are classifiable as Type I lexicographic bigotry. However, the eighth entry defines "kike" to mean "A member of a god-hating tribe that has been kicked out of every country they have resided in, including their home country," and thus not only treats "kike" as an unproblematic term for "Jew" but adds a hateful assertion about Jews. As such, it spills over from Type I into Type III lexicographic bigotry.

The situation with regard to the word "Yid" was even less encouraging. The fourth highest-placed entry was the only one on the first page to recognize the word as a slur. Indeed, the third entry directly argues that treating the word as a slur involves "a major misconception." Thus, Type I lexicographic bigotry is again in evidence.

The Urban Dictionary also features more unusual examples of offensive terms, such as “holocaust nigger,” whose sole definition consists of just two words: “A Jew.” This instance of Type I lexicographic bigotry is accompanied by an example that accuses every Jew (or, to use its actual words, “every holocaust nigger”) of making false claims about the Holocaust, and

a looping video with the caption “playing the victim” (an implied accusation against all Jews). Fig. 1 is a screenshot of the entry, illustrating the structure of a typical Urban Dictionary page, with external advertisements placed by Google AdSense and the offer of a print-on-demand Urban Dictionary-branded mug featuring the word in question.

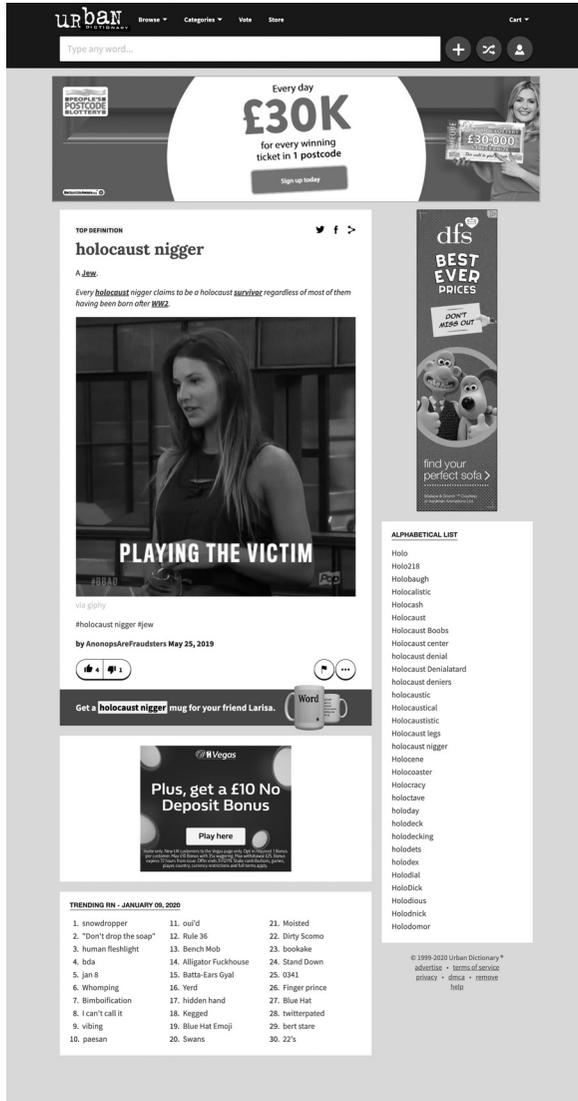


FIGURE 1. Urban Dictionary entry for ‘holocaust nigger’

As the screenshot shows, the Urban Dictionary is able to receive advertising revenue from a range of sources. At the time when the screenshot was taken, these included the People's Postcode Lottery, the bookmaker and online casino games company, William Hill, and the major British furniture retailer, DFS, whose advert featured the popular cartoon characters, Wallace and Gromit. Branding for all of the aforementioned appears alongside this gratuitously offensive dictionary entry. But even if the Urban Dictionary had spared its advertisers from direct embarrassment by restricting advertisements to less controversial pages, it is hard to see why any reputable organisation would want to be associated with a website that popularizes terms such as "holocaust nigger"—and still less with one that retails "holocaust nigger" mugs.

## Type II

As one might expect, there were numerous examples of Type II lexicographic bigotry with regard to the words "Jew" and "Jews," which were combined under the headword "Jews." The 11th most highly placed entry for that headword gives a reasonable definition for the noun "Jew" and then notes that "Jew is also used as a derogatory term for those who fit into the Jewish stereotype (cheap, money-hungry, unfair, or unscrupulous in business)." This arguably includes enough warning signals ("derogatory . . . stereotype") to avoid classification as Type II lexicographic bigotry, but the same cannot be said for the 15th most highly placed entry, which gives three reasonable definitions of the noun "Jew" and then defines the verb "Jew" as "to cheat someone, to get someone down on their price, to be stingy," without giving any indication that this usage might be considered offensive. As for the 25th, it solely consists of "Verb: To steal something from someone and never return it," while the 26th solely consists of "A cheap ass niggah . . . Or female" (ellipsis in original; given the spelling, the intention behind the latter use of the word "niggah" may perhaps not have been to offend).

The examples provided for these last two, that is, "I Jewed your family" and "why you gotta be such a Jew?," clearly normalize the antisemitic association of unscrupulousness and miserliness with the ethno-religious category of the Jew. Whatever the intentions of the authors of these definitions, using the standard term for members of a particular group as a verb denoting a form of criminal activity, or as a noun denoting ungenerous or miserly members of other groups, acts to cement the idea that these behaviours or tendencies are characteristic of that group. While the construction of such definitions would probably not be considered to amount to "[m]aking mendacious, dehumanising, demonising, or stereotypical allegations about Jews"—the first example provided by the IHRA Definition—these definitions only make sense in relation to a belief in the truth of such allegations, and as such clearly exemplify Type II lexicographic bigotry.

## Type III

It is with regard to Type III lexicographic bigotry that the Urban Dictionary really distinguishes itself. We have already seen an example of Type III lexicographic bigotry in discussion of definitions of the word "kike." But much of the anti-Jewish bigotry in the Urban Dictionary is articulated in relation to Zionism. For example, the sixth-from-top entry for "Judaism" defines the word as denoting "A peaceful, spiritual religion that is not at all *meant to be* nationalistic or greedy" (emphasis added) but adds "SEE: NOT Zionism," implying that the latter is the opposite of all these things. A link to the website for the US branch of the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta sect is provided in the example, together with the words "Judaism is not Zionism—learn the fucking difference!" However, it would be a mistake to see all of the bigotry articulated in relation to Zionism solely in terms of the "new antisemitism." For example, the top definition for "Zionist" defines a Zionist as "[a] race supremacist, colonialist, extremist" and as "[o]ne

who believes in a political ideology that hijacked Judaism, soon to hijack Christianity.” The idea of a forthcoming “hijack” of Christianity has nothing to do with the actually existing State of Israel, nor with the political movement which led to its foundation. By analogy with “antisemitism without Jews,”<sup>13</sup> such discourse has been theorized as “antizionism without Zion.”<sup>14</sup> The “Zionism” that it affects to oppose is a fantasy unconnected to the actually existing Jewish state, being no more than the old idea of a Jewish conspiracy to take over the Christian world, referred to as “Zionist” for perhaps no other reason than the allusion made in the title of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (which despite their name, make no reference to the politics of Zionism).<sup>15</sup> The second example of the IHRA Definition emphasizes the particular importance of “the myth [of] a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions,” and this is exactly what we see here.

The myth of a world Jewish conspiracy is invoked in many other Urban Dictionary entries, such as the example for the sole entry for the word “Zio-vermin”: a term which is said to refer to “those who promote the notion that Christianity is a form of subservient slave religion to Judaism.” That example further engages in Holocaust inversion with its reference to “the Zio-vermin bankers who financed Hitler in order to generate profit for German / Zio-vermin corporations that built the Nazi war machine.”<sup>16</sup> Conspiracy fantasy is also promoted by the fifth-from-top entry for “Mossad,” which defines the latter as “[t]he institution behind all of the worlds tragedy,” and also states that Mossad “control[s] the media, the US government, and your life.” This is more of the same “antizionism without Zion”: it is not a discussion of the actual Mossad, but a quasi-theological discourse in which “Mossad” denotes an omnipresent and virtually omnipotent force of abstract Jewish evil.

The seventh example provided by the IHRA Definition consists in “Denying the Jewish

people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour.” Many entries in the Urban Dictionary appear designed to do precisely that. The top entry for “Israel” describes that country as “An ethno-religious, race supremacist, settler colonial, apartheid project created for some Jews in the Arab heartland mainly by terrorism and ethnic cleansing.” Like the above-quoted definitions of Judaism and Zionism, it attempts to draw a line between the religion of Judaism and the politics of Zionism, adding that “Israel came into being propelled by Zionism, a concept which made a mockery of Judaism’s moral values and ethical principles.” However, the second-from-top entry identifies Israel with quintessential Jewishness, defining it as “[l]iterally a Jewish ethnostate birthed out of the wrongful theft of land from the Palestinians” and “a liv[ing] embodiment of stereotypical Jewry.”

The top Urban Dictionary entry for “Zionism” is very closely related to the above, and defines its subject as “[a] colonial enterprise which created a state for some Jews in the Arab heartland mainly by terrorism and ethnic cleansing,” also adding that “Zionism made a mockery of Judaism’s moral values and ethical principles.” The same implication is taken further under headwords such as “Zionazi,” where the example given by the top entry consists of the statements that “[t]he Zionazi illegal settlers in the West Bank repeatedly use violence to intimidate Palestinians and seize their land” and “[t]he Israeli goverment aids and abets Zionazism,” and “Zionazism,” where the example given by the sole entry consists of the statement that “[t]he current Zionazism [sic] practices are eliminating Palestinian people, through the act of ethnic cleansing.” These entries would be regarded as antisemitic under the tenth example provided by the IHRA Definition, that is, “[d]rawing comparisons [between] contemporary Israeli policy [and] that of the Nazis.” On the other hand, the fourth-from-top entry for “Zionazi” refers neither to Palestine nor indeed to Israel, stating instead that “[a] Zionazi is defined by

their will to create and support a single government or group that rules the world, such as the totalitarian New World Order” and that “Zionazis are working to centralize authority across national boundaries at the expense of personal freedom and economic liberty.” This is neither a rational critique of real-world Zionism nor even a comparison between Israeli policy and that of the Nazis, but simply an assertion of the reality of the antisemitic fantasy of a world Jewish conspiracy (referred to in the IHRA Definition’s above-quoted second example). In other words, it is yet another expression of the “anti-Zionism without Zion” discussed above: old-fashioned conspiracy-fantast antisemitism.

Extreme right-wing attempts to exonerate Adolf Hitler and other Nazis by presenting the Holocaust as having been exaggerated or even fabricated by Jews or Zionists have been in evidence almost since the end of World War II,<sup>17</sup> and are referred to in the fourth and fifth examples provided by the IHRA Definition. Some entries in the Urban Dictionary do not go quite this far, merely using humour to trivialize the Holocaust. For example, the fourth-highest entry for “Hitler” defined the latter as “[s]omeone who got 6 000 000 kills in a single match,” while the fifth-highest made an almost identical reference to online gaming culture by defining him as “a man with a K/D [kill/death] ratio of 6 000 000 / 1.” However, other entries seek to deny or minimize the Holocaust, or at least to imply that belief in the Holocaust is the result of a Jewish conspiracy. For example, the top entry for “Holohoax” refers with apparent neutrality to “belie[f that] a smaller number of Jews died or that [the Holocaust] did not happen at all,” but then presents an example that presumes the correctness of that belief: “The Holohoax became a possibility after new evidence came out.” Likewise, the second-from-top definition pretends to a sort of neutrality on the factuality or otherwise of the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews, yet comes down on the side of those who deny

its reality: “Although it is unsure whether the Holocaust was real or not, people who ‘deny’ the Holocaust seem to provide more proof and evidence supporting the fact the Holocaust never happened.” The example accompanying this definition dramatizes this idea with a dialogue between a hypothetical “Person 1” who says “I believe that Hitler killed and utterly slaughtered over 6 million Jews during WWII” (an explicit statement of apparently unsupported belief) and a hypothetical “Person 2” who replies, “It’s just a Holohoax created by Jewish media into brainwashing [sic] our current generation into believing [Hitler] was evil” (and does not hedge this claim with the words “I believe” or anything else to that effect). Not until we reach the fourth-from-top entry for “Holohoax” do we find a definition which identifies this term as one used by “white supremacists and antisemites.”

## BIGOTRY AGAINST OTHER GROUPS IN THE URBAN DICTIONARY

Although most forms of bigotry are outside this article’s remit, it is clear that antisemitism is not the only one to find open expression in definitions and examples published on the Urban Dictionary website. For example, the top definition of the racially offensive term “nigger” is not a definition but only an expression of displeasure over how taboo against using that particular word has “caused numerous school districts to ban the great American novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.” This would appear to be an example of Type I lexicographic bigotry. By contrast, the second-from-top entry suggests that not all black people are “niggers” but that the term correctly denotes “gang-banging, uneducated, welfare-abusing, cap-popping, thuggin[g], no-good, drug-selling/using, nothing-but-rap-listening, terrible parenting, never-want-to-get-ahead-in-life blacks that nobody wants around.” This arguably exemplifies Type II lexicographic bigotry by suggesting that the term can legitimately be used to describe any black person who conforms to the

racist stereotype of a black person. The fourth-from-top entry simply defines “niggers” as “criminals, thugs, and under-achievers who blame white people for . . . all their problems.” Given that there is no attempt to suggest that the term does not refer to all black people, it can probably be taken as an example of Type III lexicographic bigotry: the author of the definition is suggesting that all black people fall into that category, as well as treating “nigger” as an unproblematic label for all of them. The fifth-from-top is essentially the same as the second, while the third, sixth, and seventh all object to the prohibition of the word’s use by non-black people.

Not infrequently, one finds multiple forms of hate expressed in a single definition. This is not surprising, as the most digitally vocal antisemitic community in the US, i.e. the white supremacist “alt-right,” espouses an ideology of hatred towards all non-white groups. For example, the neologism “nigropolis” is defined as “The world after whites are all killed and race-mixed by Zionist Jews and niggers.” As with the Urban Dictionary neologisms discussed by Tagg (see above), this one would appear to have been invented in order to promote an existing idea: the racist “great replacement” or “white genocide” conspiracy theory, which has motivated a series of recent mass shootings by white supremacists targeting Jews and Muslims.<sup>18</sup> For that reason, the sole entry for that particular word can be classified as Type III lexicographic bigotry.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that individuals with a hateful agenda have been able to exploit the publication infrastructure provided by the Urban Dictionary, turning it into a platform for the dissemination of antisemitism and other forms of bigotry. This exploitation is argued to have been facilitated by the site’s founding principles, which (as we have seen) presuppose the effective equality of all points of view.

The Urban Dictionary’s lexicographic free-for-all can be seen as a specific expression of the absolutist approach to free speech which has proliferated throughout Silicon Valley since the publication of the so-called Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace and its subsequent promotion by the lobby group known as the Electronic Frontier Foundation.<sup>19</sup> The Declaration describes the internet as an immaterial realm in which governments “have no sovereignty” and real-world “legal concepts . . . do not apply”.<sup>20</sup> Ideas that have been legally established to be fallacious.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, while it presents racial prejudice as having no meaning in cyberspace because online identities are disembodied, its espousal of the ideal of “a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity”<sup>22</sup> appears to have been translated into a commitment to the idea that it is wrong to do anything that might impede the dissemination of any form of discourse, including expressions of racial prejudice and incitements to real-world violence. Jessie Daniels writes as follows:

When several tech companies kicked alt-right users off their platforms after Charlottesville, they were met with a vigorous backlash from many in the industry. Matthew Prince, CEO and co-founder of Cloudflare, who reluctantly banned virulently racist site, *The Daily Stormer*, from his service . . . fretted about the decision. “As [an] internet user, I think it’s pretty dangerous if my moral, political, or economic whims play some role in deciding who can and cannot be online,” he said. The Electronic Frontier Foundation issued a statement that read, in part, “we believe that no one . . . should decide who gets to speak and who doesn’t.”<sup>23</sup>

Such arguments are commonplace where internet services are under discussion. Yet companies of the type represented by Urban Dictionary are at heart publishers—and to run a publishing company on the assumption that no one has the right to make editorial decisions would seem

perverse. Certainly, it cannot be justified on grounds of any reasonable interpretation of the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which only acts to limit the power of government, and says nothing about a publisher's right to engage in the kind of decision-making that the business of publishing has always involved, whether on grounds of decency, profitability, politics, morals, religious convictions, personal tastes, or anything else that editorial policy or arbitrary preference may choose to prioritise.<sup>24</sup>

The right to free expression does not imply the right to dissemination through a global top-1000 website. Nor does it place a privately owned company under obligation to retail "Holocaust nigger" mugs. If these things happen, that is because the owners or

employees of the website or company in question have made choices which facilitated their occurrence. And if they are free to make such choices, then others must likewise be free to respond as they see fit within the framework that is afforded them by the market and the law. While some may consider a policy of indiscriminately publishing anything at all to be admirable, having adopted such a policy for philosophical or commercial reasons cannot exempt a publisher from responsibility when bad actors use its platform to disseminate materials that society as a whole is likely to consider repugnant. For when a publisher refuses to take its responsibilities seriously, customers, advertisers, and others have every right to take their business elsewhere.

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