

INTERNET PLUSES AND MINUSES

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Libel laws in this country divide the population in two: private persons and public persons. Following *New York Times v. Sullivan* in 1964, the former category is entitled to plenty of protection while the latter is not. In other words, if someone smears the average person, he or she can sue and has a good chance of winning. If someone smears me, I have to prove that the offender knew that what he was saying was false when he said it and that he had malicious intent. In other words, good luck.

Is this fair? Probably. After all, if free speech is to be prized, then those who hate me need to be protected in exercising their free speech rights. I am, after all, a public person. Imagine what it would be like if every time you wrote something about some public person whom you can't stand you had to worry about being sued. You'd likely shut up. The loser, then, would be free speech.

Having granted all this, even though people have a legal right to bash me, no one has a moral right to misrepresent me. And this happens all the time, especially lately. Why especially lately? Because we are all over the place—TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, the Internet—we are riding high. And while our fans love it, our adversaries do not.

The Internet is a medium that can be used or abused. For researchers like me, I love it. But I also know that the quality, in terms of accuracy, ranges from A-Z. An undiscerning user can easily be misled, the results of which can be far reaching.

Recently, there has been a spew of articles, investigative reports, blog stories and immense chatter about the Catholic League. In one such instance, a pro-abortion group got a

generous grant from an elite foundation to do a hit job on me. They looked for dirt but couldn't find any. So what did I do? I wrote them a letter correcting their typos.

Those who write on obscure blog sites don't bother me because only idiots would cite them as a credible source. But when the *Washington Post* allows bloggers to attack me with abandon, that's another thing altogether. So it was with Anthony Stevens-Arroyo who wrote "Catholic League Shenanigans" on May 16.

Here is how he starts: "The Catholic League is not the 'All Catholic' League. It is not official Catholicism: still less does it speak for each and every one of the nation's 60 million Catholics."

That's right, the Vatican is the "All Catholic" League and we never claimed to represent "each and every one of the nation's 60 million [we're actually closer to 70 million, but never mind] Catholics." But I hasten to add that the Catholic League is listed in the *Official Catholic Directory* and is not, therefore, some wayward organization that goes about willy nilly slapping the name Catholic on its masthead.

The next part is priceless. "As someone who once endeavored to work with the League, I was disappointed to learn that it is run out of a single office by a single ego. So while I find newsworthy the recent exchanges between the League's president, Bill Donahue [*sic*] and Evangelical pastor, John Hagee, they don't amount to dogma."

I asked our staff if anyone had ever heard of this guy, and no one had. So I take it that when he says he "endeavored" to work here, what he really means is that he didn't get an interview. Perhaps that's because he can't spell my name. In any event, it is true that we don't have multiple offices, but it is not fair to say that our office has just one ego—there are ten others. All of whom can spell my name.

Stevens-Arroyo questions why the Catholic League “waited until February of 2008 to become angered by Hagee’s career of bigotry over two decades?” He says it is because February was when Hagee endorsed McCain.

Now if he had bothered to read our website, he would have learned that I first wrote to Hagee in 1997. Therefore, the answer he supplies to his own question implodes. But this is small potatoes compared to this gem: “The Catholic League demanded the dissolving of Obama’s Catholic support committee, accusing all of the members of disloyalty to the faith and labeling the actions of the Democratic Senator as ‘Hitlerian.’”

In actual fact, I never made such an accusation. What I did was to report on the NARAL voting record of those members of Obama’s advisory group who were, or currently are, public office holders. And I never labeled “the actions” of Obama “Hitlerian.” What I said is that Obama made a “Hitlerian decision” when he voted to allow a baby who survives an abortion to die without attending medicinal care. I stand by that accusation.

Stevens-Arroyo makes a desperate, and failed, attempt to equate abortion with “major Catholic teachings like forgiveness of Third World debt” and other related issues. But there is no Catholic teaching on this subject, nor is there a listing for it (unlike abortion) in the Catholic Catechism.

So continue to use the Internet, but beware of the charlatans, demagogues and liars who populate it.