

science

Dal bans troublemakers on Internet

by Steve Tonner
with files from *The Ubysey*

Dalhousie, along with several other universities, has cut off access to a computer newsgroup dealing with the secret Ontario trial of Karla Homolka. But even this step cannot stop Dal students from reading banned information with relative ease.

The censored group, alt.fan.Karla-Homolka, dealt with the manslaughter trial of Karla Teale (formerly Homolka), who was convicted of manslaughter in the deaths of teenagers Kristen French and Leslie Mahaffy, and was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

A ban was imposed by an Ontario court on most details of the trial, allegedly to ensure a fair trial for Teale's husband, Paul. He is charged with first-degree murder and seven other offences.

Bans apply to published material, with electronic communication like the Internet occupying a grey area of the law.

While censorship of the Homolka newsgroup does prevent it from being carried on that university's news machine, it does not prevent students from getting access to the information in other ways. For anyone who is Internet-literate enough and who knows where to look, the group is still accessible.

Peter Jones of Dal's University Computer Information Services said

Dalhousie decided to drop the newsgroup because legal advice indicated they would be "in contempt of court for violating the publication ban" if they did not do so.

Dalhousie, in axing the newsgroup, only cut off access to those readers who want to connect to the Dalhousie news machine. It is a fairly simple matter to connect to other news machines, which carry the group.

Controlling electronic transfers of information is "impractical", says

and we thought it would be better to be safe than sorry because of the fact of the possible illegality of it," he said.

A Dalhousie student disagreed with the cancellation of the group.

"It shouldn't be done because everyone in Canada knows about the trial, so there should not be any censorship. You're not going to get a clean jury no matter where you go now."

A UBC chemistry graduate student was also upset at the ban.

"My thing against banning newsgroups has nothing to do with what should and shouldn't be on them," she said.

"If you haul up the [picture] files off alt.sex.bondage or whatever, you're going to get stuff which could not cross the borders and be sold in Canada in published form.

"I consider myself a feminist, and

if you're going to start banning newsgroups you shouldn't start with this one," she said.

The information from the now unavailable Homolka group has already been "cross-posted" on other newsgroups like "soc.culture.canada," which deal with a wider range of issues.

As well, a service called "ftp" (file transfer protocol) can give access to most of the information on the trial that has been published in the United States, where the publication ban is not in effect.

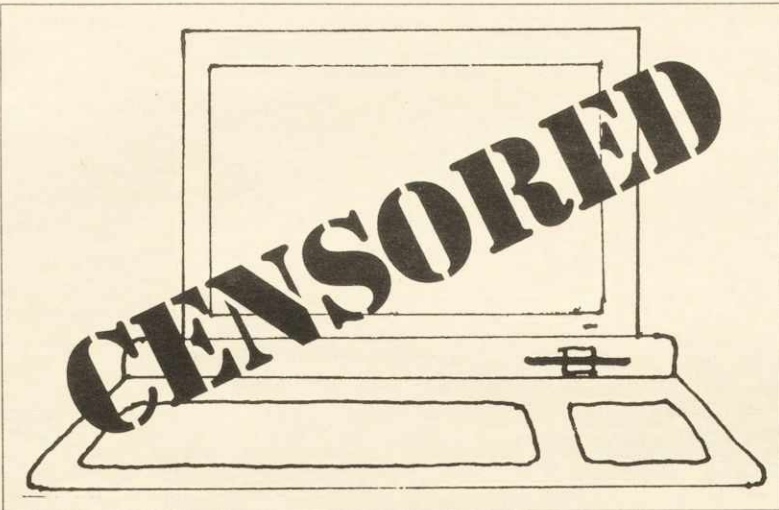
Leigh says the blacking out of the Homolka group might conceivably be just the start.

"If there's any chance of any

newsgroup being illegal we would likely remove it. We would only do that on the advice of the appropriate use group. The idea is not to censor it as such but we cannot do anything illegal," he said.

When asked if Dalhousie would

drop other groups which might carry illegal material, Peter Jones said, "Not if I can help it." He said that he would prefer to keep groups rather than arbitrarily cut everything with any mention of the Karla Homolka case.



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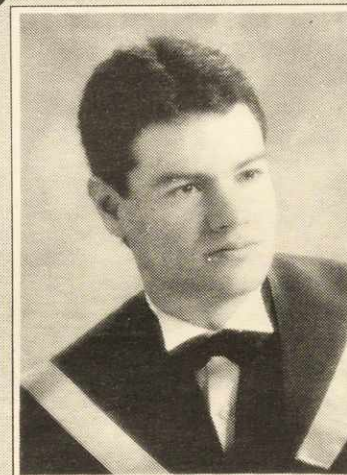
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