11-1-2001

September 11, the Holocaust and the Internet

Michael Steele

Pacific University

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Interface: The Journal of Education, Community and Values at CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Volume 1 (2001) by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.
September 11, the Holocaust and the Internet

This article is available at CommonKnowledge: https://commons.pacificu.edu/inter01/11
September 11, the Holocaust and the Internet

By Michael R. Steele, Berglund Fellow <steelem@pacificu.edu>
Distinguished Professor, Pacific University

The village of Le Chambon in the French Alps is famous in the field of Holocaust studies for the incredible acts of courage those French Quakers performed to save many hundreds of Jewish children from the clutches of the SS. Rev. André Trocmé and his wife Magda served as brilliant examples of what has come to be known as “The Courage to Care.”

Phillip Hallie, a Jewish American scholar, wrote a stunning book two decades ago about the Chambonnais, Lest Innocent Blood be Shed. He lived there for parts of several years and came to know the people well.

Hallie, a longtime Professor of Philosophy at Wesleyan University, had served in the US Army in World War II in Europe. His weapon was HE (High Explosive) White Phosphorous, an incredibly brutal weapon, as he learned. The weapon changed his life; he often said that his wife never knew who was coming down the steps for breakfast each morning.

After the war, Hallie chose to study evil. He earned a Ph. D. in this field, the philosophy of evil, and taught about evil for more than twenty years. At a Salado Institute symposium in 1987, with NEH sponsorship, he joined Bill Moyer, Rollo May and Maya Angelou in a discussion of “Facing Evil.” As Hallie admitted, “you begin to imitate what you are interested in.” Alarmed by what he was seeing in his own life, he decided to study unalloyed good. He chose the village of Le Chambon.

He studied the Chambonnais on and off for years and eventually produced his award-winning book about these amazing people tucked away high in the French Alps. What he did not expect was that as he came to know them very well, he also found that he resented them.
Having an exquisitely developed conscience and moral compass, Hallie admitted in the 1987 Salado symposium, that this emerging resentment within him drove him to try to understand the reasons for this surprising negative reaction.

After considerable soul-searching, he found that he harbored resentment for these French Quakers “because they had done nothing to stop Hitler.” Instead, “they had left it to conscientious killers like me to stop Hitler.” He felt that he had been asked to pay a terrible personal price for their inaction.

Hallie had been a very good soldier in the War, but the weapon he used had left scars far deeper than he could have ever imagined. He recalled firing the weapon over frozen terrain at a German bunker only to see “beautiful blond German heads come flying back.”

His self-analysis is a great challenge to us today. It is a particular challenge to me personally, a Holocaust scholar, born in 1945, son of a career military father and brother, whose war was Vietnam—and who chose to become a pacifist, much like the Chambonnais.

There are many resonances in my life that echo from Hallie’s haunted life. One tries conscientiously not to be a part of evil. I teach about war and the Holocaust and genocide . . . and interrogate myself about Hallie’s insight about imitation. I cannot, simply cannot, kill. It’s that basic. Yet I doubt if I have one iota of the courage that the Chambonnais displayed.

But I am also keenly aware that if someone doesn’t recognize and deal with the incipient signs of an evil that could threaten to engulf humanity, then that very evil is likely to continue on its course. Early intervention is best.

Much of my work at Pacific University deals with issues related to the Holocaust. It struck me almost immediately, in light of the attacks in New York and at the Pentagon, that the important work and message of the Holocaust Resource Center on campus would become even more significant for the teachers and students served around the state. My Berglund project, to be completed by the end of this year, involved the creation of a Holocaust Center webpage offering assistance to teachers for classroom matters related to hate speech, Neo-Nazi materials, and Holocaust denial.

Yet modern technology had been intimately involved in all phases of the WTC tragedy. Computer-aided flight instruction trained the terrorist pilots. E-mails were sent by victims in their burning buildings. Video cameras recorded the movements of some of the terrorists in their final hours at stores, ATMs, and airports before the attacks. Record keeping devices tracked their phone calls and credit card purchases. Black boxes immortalized the final anguished moments of sophisticated airliners headed towards their doom.

Since that terrible day, we have come to know that children had for several years been playing computer games that realistically depicted a jet airliner’s path for a crash into the WTC. . . .
then the realism stopped for the “crash” had none of the gut-wrenching facts of an actual crash. It was completely sterilized, a cheap thrill with none of the human tragedy. Nevertheless, this form of “entertainment” had been developed and marketed by a major corporation, with the full involvement of allegedly rational adults. One necessarily wonders if there were moral and ethical failures in this matter.

Internet sites having to do with sensitive national projects, hazardous material complexes, and sensitive government departments and programs have since been closed to public access. The vaunted claims that the Internet fosters cyberdemocracy have had to be reevaluated. There are, in the new world revealed by the terrorist attacks, entire areas of national concern that open yawning gulfs of security concerns. The Internet can be a weapon platform as well as a platform for e-mails.

Just as authorities are reevaluating the role of the Internet, I am rethinking the very nature of my Berglund project. I had high hopes that it would serve the needs of teachers whose students may have innocently encountered hate speech or Neo-Nazi Internet sites in the process of doing class projects. This may still be the case and, indeed, the problem may be greater now that skinhead groups have become even more active in their attacks on minorities, using the heightened fears and prejudices that have emerged since the attacks. But their activities are out on the streets, against flesh and blood innocents.

Now my concern is whether involvement in the Internet, a webpage to counter hate speech, is sufficient. As a Holocaust scholar, I am quite familiar with the issues of what should have been done by concerned people at the time of the rise of the Nazi party. Needless to say, there were ubiquitous and massive failures, both personal and institutional. From Hallie’s perspective, the people of Le Chambon in France had already failed long before the first SS soldiers appeared in their village hunting for Jewish children they knew to be there.

How do these concerns touch us today? Academics have always faced charges of ivory tower elitism and isolation from the real world. In my own career, I have consistently counterargued that the intellectual life must not be divorced from the so-called real world. Having said that, I now wonder if an academic who works on the Internet is not doubly removed from reality. Is there something about the Internet that is analogous to the sterilized computer game with a jetliner crashing into the WTC—with no fireball, no shards, no fragmented human bodies? In essence, is the Internet engagement or escape? In terms of the French village, is involvement with the Internet doing anything to stop evil?

As I write this, the Viet Nam years of warfare, conflict, and terrible personal traumas and stress linger in the back of my mind. I also cannot help but think of Hallie. Conscientious killers. There were multiple and conflicting calls for action during the Sixties; people more or less had to choose sides. I see less of this today, but the call for action remains a constant. And the presence of the Internet as a major factor in our lives complicates matters considerably.
The proposed website will move forward and, hopefully, it will help as designed. I will, however, continue to question the efficacy of all such matters. When intense hatred is involved on a large scale, perhaps the best place to be is directly in the field.

If that is the case, are we then faced then with a stark choice between a webpage that attempts to defuse racial hatred and ignorance, or involvement with today’s equivalent of White Phosphorous? Does the Internet help us define and perceive evil? Does it help us act more directly against evil? Or is it merely a technological tool that remains neutral? It is likely that it is a neutral tool that simply takes on the moral shape to which it is put.

Phillip Hallie, who became my friend, died several years back and is thus not available to offer his insights. I am not sure that his answer would clarify matters, or console a bruised conscience. I am sure, however, that he would want us to take some form of action and not wait for the arrival of those in jackboots.

**Useful Resources:**
http://www.yad-vashem.org.il/visiting/sites/chambon.html

http://www.wlu.ca/mtr/MediaCollection/F/v075.htm

http://www.salado-institute.org/#symposia

**Bibliography**
ACLU. “Hate Speech on Campus.” http://www.aclu.org./library/pbp16.html


Hill, Steven. “Internet Decency and the First Amendment.”
http://www.igc.apc.org/enVISION/telecom.htm


Peck, Robert S. Libraries, the First Amendment and Cyberspace, 1999.

Weitzman, Mark. “The Internet is Our Sword: Aspects of Online Anti-Semitism.”

“The Inverted Image: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Catholicism on the Internet” (Simon Wiesenthal Center reports)

West, Raeto. “Free Speech, the Internet and Holocaust Revisionism" (online).
http://www2.prestel.co.uk./littleton/ww2_holocaust_revisionism.htm


This entry was posted in Uncategorized by Editor. Bookmark the permalink [http://bcis.pacificu.edu/interface/?p=2281].

6 THOUGHTS ON “SEPTEMBER 11, THE HOLOCAUST AND THE INTERNET”

Adalberto

on February 3, 2014 at 3:36 AM said:

Recognizing the contact data rates is actually important details when snapping in dim light, and moreso when utilizing extended telephoto contacts. Individuals have long anticipated concerning the Nikon digital cam. There is actually a camera with an impact immune variations, water-proof capacities, options and also crush resistance freezers resistance capacities.
**Online Business**

on **February 4, 2014 at 1:28 PM** said:

Good article! We will be linking to this great content on our site. Keep up the good writing.

By the Way, Are you earning enough income on the internet from your site? For hundreds of thousands of people like me internet could be the major revenue stream. I don’t just develop a web site, I love creating a web business out of my every blog. If you are also searching for ways to increase your online income than I suggest you to check the [CashClub.info](http://bcis.pacificu.edu/interface/?p=2281) web site to discover the secret strategies for developing niche site to generate income as high as **$37,423 Per Month Online**. Cheers

---

**Mendy Kaluna**

on **February 5, 2014 at 7:48 PM** said:

Ciao a tutti, sono nuovo di questo forum e ho una domanda che sembrerà ovvio per voi ... Come faccio a creare un nuovo post o discussione che apparirà nella sezione Nuovi messaggi ...? Cauz quando clico su nuovi messaggi, non ho il pulsante Nuova Discussione disponibile ...
Roberto Shober
on February 6, 2014 at 6:10 AM said:

Can’t say this is excellent, but i agree this is a good piece of work which warrants some appreciation from you guys.