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Tough Love and Free Speech

How a 'child advocate' gamed the media

[Maia Szalavitz](#) | August 24, 2007

Sue Scheff has some serious chutzpah. Portrayed by [ABC News](#), the [Washington Post](#), the *Wall Street Journal* and [Forbes](#) as a beleaguered mom running a small business to help parents find treatment for troubled teens, Scheff's been telling reporters about a service called [Reputation Defender](#), which she says allowed her to triumph over a bunch of rage-filled Internet cranks. Scheff says these vengeance-seeking wackos nearly destroyed her, an innocent businesswoman, with a series of libelous comments posted on online discussion boards. They had called her a "fraud" and "con artist," she says, and claimed that she was referring teens to tough love programs that then abused them.

What none of this media coverage mentions is that a few years back, *Scheff* was sued for the same types of comments now directed at her—highlighting the abuses of a "tough love" rehab center (in this case, one of Scheff's rivals). At the time, she framed the suit against her as an attempt to squelch her free speech.

The major news organizations also mention an \$11 million libel judgment Scheff boasts about winning against one of her critics, a woman named Carey Bock. But none of these accounts actually looked into the details of that judgment. Bock's home had been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina during the course of the legal action. Due to her address change, and the stress and depression brought on by the storm, she wasn't even present at her own trial, nor was she represented by counsel.

Bock's current lawyer, Tom McGowan, says he's seeking to have the judgment set aside, because Bock never received notice of the trial date. "They get pretty wacky on these sites, but it's an outrage what's going on," says McGowan. If Bock had actually made it to court, the outcome may well have been quite different.

While all of this may seem like an installment of "News of the Weird," it has serious implications for free speech on the Internet—and highlights how the media often fails to get the whole story.

The saga begins in 2000, when Scheff sent her own daughter to a program affiliated with the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASP, sometimes called WWASPS). Scheff was initially a booster of WWASP, and even referred other parents to its programs. For a referral, WWASP paid \$1000 per child, or offered a month's free treatment for the referrer's child. WWASP clients spend at least 18 months in treatment, at \$3000-\$5000 per month.

At some point, Sue Scheff became aware of online bulletin boards where teens who had been in WWASP programs were telling horrific stories of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. Users also posted media accounts detailing how nine WWASP-affiliated programs were closed following police

investigations, regulatory infractions and/or [allegations of child abuse](#).

Scheff later wrote on [her website](#) that she had become uncomfortable with some of the organization's methods. She removed her daughter from the program, and began posting her own allegations against WWASP on online forums, under several different names. She also set up her own consultant business, called Parents Universal Resource Experts (PURE), and began taking referral payments for placing teens, just as WWASP does.

While this sort of practice isn't illegal, it's widely considered unethical. Conflicts of interest arise when consultants get higher referral fees from some programs than they get from others. The temptation arises to place kids in the programs that pay more, even though these may not be the programs best suited to a particular child. Once you're being regularly paid by a program, it's hard to be objective about its quality. This is why codes of ethics in psychology and psychiatry [typically bar](#) such "dual relationships."

Under the [Lanham Act](#), which bans business competitors from making false and inflammatory claims about rivals, WWASP sued Scheff over her critical online posts. Because the court was able to substantiate Scheff's claims with [vivid testimony from victims](#), WWASP lost.

Soon, however, the online boards buzzed again with yet more reports of abuse at new programs, and this time they included programs where Sue Scheff was referring children. It was around this time that Scheff launched her own lawsuit against Bock. Scheff had helped Bock remove her two sons from a WWASP program, but Bock eventually become outraged by what she considered to be Scheff's unethical referrals. The \$11 million judgment resulted only after Bock [didn't show up in court](#) to defend herself.

(Note: The original version of this article stated that the judgment against Bock was "default." Technically, this is incorrect. There was a trial and verdict. But Bock wasn't present, nor did she have counsel present to represent her.)

Meanwhile, child welfare investigators substantiated charges of abuse in 2005 at the Whitmore Academy in Utah, a program to which Scheff made referrals. Regulators [shut the program down](#). Just last month, another complaint was filed against Scheff and another program where she places teens, the Focal Point Academy in Nevada. In that filing, a Florida couple alleges that Scheff failed to disclose that she was being paid by Focal Point, nor did she tell them that the business was licensed only as a foster home, not for residential treatment. The complaint describes these failures to disclose as "fraudulent misrepresentations" and "kickbacks."

The complaint also details how the couple's teenage son, R.G., was sexually abused by other boys at the program, who "would hold R.G. down in order to take out their penises, which they would rub on his face, while they threatened and beat him." He was also allegedly repeatedly threatened with anal rape—and the complaint charges that he was beaten after reporting the bullies to school authorities, who neither reported the sexual abuse to the state as legally required, or made efforts to stop it.

Eventually, Scheff hired Reputation Defender to rehabilitate her image online. Reputation Defender sells itself as a service that removes reputation-damaging posts on the Internet, or at least attempts to make them less prominent on search engines. Scheff and Reputation Defender appear to have contacted the Internet service providers for the site that hosts the most popular discussion boards for victims of tough love programs, a site called [fornits.com](#). According to *fornits* founder Ginger McNulty, two different service providers recently removed fornits.com from their servers after complaints. Both ISPs refused to divulge the source of the complaints. But the timing is awfully suggestive.

(Disclosure: McNulty did some paid web design work for my book *Help at Any Cost*.)

The Electronic Frontier Foundation—a premier defender of free speech on the net—was quoted in *Forbes* as supportive of Reputation Defender. But its spokesperson, staff attorney Kevin Bankston, said that the group was described to him as using positive articles to defend against negative ones, not suppressing speech. “To the extent that Reputation Defender is using baseless legal threats to get speech critical of its clients taken down—that is something we’d have serious problems with,” he said.

Fornits is a mostly unmoderated forum, and, as a result, can sometimes include obscene, angry, and off-color rants and slurs. But it's also one of the best sources parents and journalists have for finding out about abuse in residential teen tough-love programs, often straight from the mouths of abused teens and their parents.

Before the Internet existed, thousands of teens who felt they had been harmed by tough love had few ways of complaining, or finding out if others had endured similar experiences. Without places like *fornits*, they can't be heard, in part because journalists have few other ways to find them.

“It’s unfortunate that nuts and angry people have chosen to attack Sue Scheff in obscene terms,” says attorney Phil Elberg, who represented *fornits* when it was sued along with Bock by Scheff (the *fornits* case was dropped). Elberg's one of the few lawyers to have won multimillion dollar judgments against tough love programs. He adds, “This has allowed the focus to shift away from the tactics that Scheff has used and the fact that she describes herself on the net as a child advocate and a critic of the industry, when in reality, she symbolizes so much of what is wrong with it.”

Also unfortunate is the reporting by ABC News investigative reporter Martin Bashir on the new show, *I-Caught*, as well as coverage in the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes*. All told only half the story. Both McNulty and McGowan say they tried to contact these reporters to set the record straight, but were ignored.

The whole sordid story reveals the flaws in both unmoderated online media and in what passes these days for journalism. One way Reputation Defender has managed to move positive stories about Scheff up the ranks on Google is by posting “news stories” she has written on citizen journalism sites like [NowPublic](#). But the mainstream media is not supposed to be as easy to game.

They could start correcting the record by reporting on Reputation Defender’s attempts at censorship and obfuscation, instead of cheering on efforts to silence websites that, for all their flaws, have a history of exposing real incidents of child abuse.

Maia Szalavitz is author of [Help At Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids](#) (Riverhead, 2006) and a senior fellow at [stats.org](#). Her latest book, co-written with Dr. Bruce D. Perry is [The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook](#). (Basic Books, 2007).

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