

Out of context

by Rachel Gold  
Special to Q-Notes

Because we can visit a web site in our pajamas and have a "discussion" with other people, we tend to treat those interactions like spoken conversations. The difference is that when you stop speaking, that conversation disappears. An online discussion sticks around.

Organizers and participants of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival found this out the hard way in mid-September when a radical right-wing organization took a series of discussion posts out of context to involve a state senator and law enforcement officials in a search for "child abuse" at the event.

The Music Festival's online discussion forum went offline for about two weeks in early September as the organization was attacked for allegedly allowing children to witness sex acts between women at the event.

Festival organizer Lisa Vogel explained to discussion participants that the board went down because of "a campaign of misinformation and harassment directed at the Festival by Americans for Truth about Homosexuality (AFT) and the American Family Association of Michigan. Much of this began when a freelance reporter affiliated with AFT constructed a false and sensational portrait of the Festival by selectively quoting shreds of [bulletin board] comments out of context."

AFT ([www.americansfortruth.org](http://www.americansfortruth.org)) posted the story on August 31, charging "Radical lesbian festival featured homosexual acts per-

formed in front of children." "Performed" is a funny word to use in the context of an artistic festival where many talented women took the stage. The "acts" described by AFT, on the other hand, include nudity, sexual acts that young people may have overheard or witnessed, and some very frank workshops.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival ([www.michfest.org](http://www.michfest.org)) is an annual gathering held in August where women, mostly lesbian, camp out in the woods for a week, fend off bugs, listen to music, attend workshops and wear whatever they want or nothing at all. (This gives way to exemplary fashion statements such as the women who wear only boots, a fanny pack and a hat; one reason you don't see lesbian fashion designers.)

Dozens of workshops span topics from politics to art. The music plays from morning to night on different stages and includes some recognizable names from folk to punk performers. Women can shop for jewelry, clothes and lesbocentric knickknacks.

A few hundred women bring their children, who have a separate campground with three facilities for different age groups. Children can also wander the larger camp (unless they're male and over the age of five).

During my experience at the womyn's music fest — where I took off my shoes and got stared at for walking barefoot in the woods while the bare-breasted women got not a blink — I saw no sex at all, overheard no sex (and I'm a light sleeper) and didn't even find a likely dating prospect. The campground is sectioned

in such a way that the relatively small percentage of women who want to participate in or watch "sex acts" can be easily avoided by anyone who isn't out to find them.

Granted, a few of the workshops on sexuality are wild. It's important to remember that the Festival is held on private lands and that it takes some effort, and money, to get there. The women and children there are taking a vacation and choosing whether or not to bring their families. The hollow accusation that gays disproportionately abuse or molest children has been long and loudly touted by the right wing.

It comes in second only to the notion that we indoctrinate youth into our "lifestyle." The discussion of children at the festival provided one more opportunity to trot out one of the last remaining scare tactics of the right.

According to Felicia Park-Rogers, the executive director for Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere ([www.colage.org](http://www.colage.org)), "Of the dozens and dozens of peer-reviewed, social science studies done on lesbian parents, none of them show that lesbian mothers are any more likely than heterosexual parents to abuse their children. In fact if anything, perhaps due to extra scrutiny, there is far less [abuse]."

Park-Rogers is also the daughter of a gay father and lesbian mother. She points out that most children of gays and lesbians turn out to be heterosexual. In fact, many gay and lesbian parents want their children to be heterosexual so they won't have to face the kind of discrimination they have faced in their own lives.

"I think the majority of lesbian mothers

want their children to be happy and to be free," she said. "Like any parent, they have concerns that if their children come out, they may face extra discrimination, similar to what they have experienced."

She added that having spoken to the women who run the childcare programs at the Festival, "They're places that are highly protected. They're run by professionals. They are really unique opportunities for kids who come from similar backgrounds to gather in a supportive environment."

The Music Festival participants having the discussion about children at the event were creating a responsible conversation expressing a variety of needs in the planning of the event. You'd never know that from AFT's campaign of deliberate misinformation, but that's the danger of conversation on the Internet — it's very easy to take it out of context.

Many corporations have already discovered the potential of discussion boards to pass misinformation, or accurate but unfavorable information, and have required employees to refrain from negative posts about the company they work for.

In addition, we've slowly been learning that in the world of email and discussion groups it's easy to misunderstand someone's meaning without the help of body language and vocal inflection. We have to work a little harder for accuracy in this new medium and resist jumping to conclusions.

According to Vogel, the Festival won't pursue legal action against its attackers because it "risks giving this campaign legitimacy." She added, "As we start the bulletin board up again, please remember that this is an Internet bulletin board and that anyone has access to it. It is a public, not a private, space." ▼

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it's easy to  
misunderstand  
someone's meaning.**

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