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ONTARIO

Ontario court awards \$1.7M in damages to group labelled ‘groomers’ in smear campaign

Members of an AIDS information group targeted by an anti-LGBTQ+ smear campaign were awarded more than \$1.7 million in damages.

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Lawyer Douglas Judson is shown in this undated handout photo.

Douglas Judson/The Canadian Press/Handout

By Sharif Hassan The Canadian Press

The lawyer for members of an AIDS information group who were targets of an anti-LGBTQ+ smear campaign says a court ruling awarding them more than \$1.7 million in damages sends a “strong message” about the consequences of online hate.

An Ontario Superior Court judge issued the ruling this week in the case of eight volunteer directors and staff members of the Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange, who were referred to as “creeps,” “groomers” and “pedophiles” online by a British Columbia man.

The plaintiffs’ lawyer, Douglas Judson, said he was glad the “very long saga” for his clients has ended.

“They have been relentlessly targeted online by this individual with some of the most depraved libels imaginable,” Judson said in a phone interview.

“I think that it’s important that they have received judgment in their favour and in very clear terms denouncing this type of malicious expression.”

The default judgment released Monday says Peter Scott Blackwell, who did not appear in court or send a representative, started the smear campaign in May 2023 when he posted defamatory profiles of the plaintiffs on his website.

The website displayed their names, pictures and the logo of the organization, labelling each person as a “GROOMER,” according to the judgment. That term was defined as someone who manipulates children to “participate in sexual activities.”

The defendant also used interconnected social media accounts to amplify his hateful messages, the judgment said.

The court ruling also issued a permanent injunction requiring the defendant to remove the defamatory content against the Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange, a Toronto-based non-profit that provides sexual health information to people at risk of HIV and hepatitis C, including members of the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized groups, and avoid posting such content targeting the organization in the future.

Judson said some of the defamatory posts that had disappeared have resurfaced at various times.

“So as far as I know, the lion’s share of it is still on the internet today,” he said. “But once we have the court’s issued order, I will be taking enforcement steps to ensure that it is complied with.”

One of the plaintiffs, who was the target of at least 34 defamatory publications, is

Andrew Brett, the director of communications at CATIE.

Brett declined an interview request and instead referred to his LinkedIn post about the court's decision, in which he noted while the ruling has set a precedent, "this legal victory underscores a critical failure in how we handle online abuse."

More needs to be done to hold internet companies that are hosting hateful content accountable, he said.

Online hate wasn't the only approach the defendant used to harass the victims, according to the court ruling.

Blackwell also left two voicemail messages at the organization's office threatening to post additional content about everyone, calling them "child-grooming pedophiles."

The Canadian Press reached out to Blackwell via social media but received no response.

On his website, Blackwell says the goal of his platform is "fearlessly exposing the truth and ensuring unwavering accountability for individuals who engage in corrupt and deceitful practices."

Judson said they tracked down Blackwell after contacting the internet company hosting his website.

He said the court ruling has wider implications concerning marginalized groups and hate speech.

"It sends a very strong message that hate has consequences, that expression online that baselessly attacks reputation with these insidious allegations of pedophilia or child abuse or other such slurs can attract serious civil liability," he said.

"It is not the Wild West. There is law that governs how we express ourselves."

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