

Frederic T. Sommers, a Professor at Brandeis University, is one of 650 subscribers on an Internet mailing list dedicated to feminist philosophy. Professor Sommers is the husband of Professor Christina Hoff Sommers of Clark University, a philosopher who has strongly criticized feminist scholarship in philosophy, and who has been involved in several very unfriendly exchanges in print with various feminist philosophers who contend that she grossly misrepresents feminist scholarship for the purpose of belittling and ridiculing it. Many subscribers to the Internet feminist philosophy list want to have Professor Frederic Sommers removed from the mailing list because they say he has shared messages from the list with his wife. It is inappropriate, these list members say, for any of the 650 subscribers to the service to pass messages on to outsiders without the permission of the author of the message in question. Professor Sommers refuses to say whether his wife reads his electronic mail, but vows to take the removal of his name from the list to court if necessary. He maintains that he is interested in feminist philosophy, and therefore has a right to be on the list.

Would the manager of the list, a professor of women's studies at the University of South Florida, be within her rights, from a moral standpoint, if she removed Professor Sommers' name from the list? Why, or why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: It would be unreasonable to remove Professor Sommer's name from the list. The Feminist philosophy internet group has a right, as a private organization, to decide upon its own rules, procedures, and practices. Nonetheless, from an ethical standpoint, it may not arbitrarily expel members. In this case, agreeing not to share messages with people outside the list members was not a condition of membership in the group. Furthermore, the legitimate expectations of people who communicate by means of the internet is insufficiently settled to make a definite judgment about what Professor Sommers should or shouldn't have done in this regard.

Case from the 1995 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995.