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Blurring the lines on hate

The Orange County Human Relations Commission just released its 2005 report on hate crimes and incidents in the county. The executive summary of the report said it hopes to inspire the public to "join those who endorse hate-crime legislation." Yet the numbers suggest that there is no great epidemic of hate, especially after parsing the data and realizing that the commission - always eager to justify its tax funding and donations - purposefully blurs the line between criminal acts and free speech.

Any place with nearly 3 million people will certainly see its ugly moments. The report showed a total of 152 hate crimes and incidents in 2005, exactly the same number as in 2004. Only 97 of those are actual *crimes*, however. A hate crime is a criminal act targeted at people because of their race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. A hate *"incident,"* by contrast, is any legal activity that the commission's staff determines to be hateful. An obvious example would be the shouting of an ethnic slur.

Blurring the distinctions between crimes, which should be punished, and obnoxious speech, which should be dealt with by individuals and through societal norms and mores, ultimately leads to pressure to erode the First Amendment's protections. For instance, the Human Relations Commission in 2002 actually monitored the Web postings of a local elected official on an evangelical Christian Web site and lobbied for that official's removal because he viewed homosexuality as a sin and was opposed to illegal immigration. It's quite chilling for a government-funded entity to set itself up as monitor of appropriate political dialogue.

This county has undergone vast and rapid demographic changes, yet the report confirms what most of us know to be true: Orange County remains a land of opportunity for people of all backgrounds, despite some troubling actions by a few people. The best way to make this an even more tolerant place is through individual commitment to decency, not through laws and agencies that monitor speech.