

## Judge frees man jailed for Web postings

By The Associated Press

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SEATTLE — A King County judge has released Paul Trummel from jail, giving the unlikely poster child for free speech another chance to remove from his Web site addresses and phone numbers of his perceived enemies.

Trummel spent 110 days in jail for posting the information, and if he doesn't delete it by June 21, he's going back, Judge James A. Doerty said yesterday.

The case has outraged free-speech and free-press groups from around the world, who say Trummel didn't break the law.

"All he's alleged to have done is publish names and phone numbers on the Internet. It's not against the law to do so," says Sandra Baron, executive director of the Libel Defense Resource Center in New York. "We are a nation that simply does not put people in prison for vituperative speech."

"There's nothing illegal about posting that stuff," Lucy Dalglish, executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press in Washington, D.C., told the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. "The fact is that anyone in that same building could go out and post the same information, and it would be completely legal."

The matter began a few months after Trummel, who has a long history of pestering people he doesn't like, moved into the Council House, a federally subsidized retirement home in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood, in November 1998.

He complained about noisy neighbors. When he felt his complaints were ignored, he began publishing a newsletter and [Web site](#).

Trummel accused staff and residents of being bigots, violating housing laws and conspiring to keep him awake at night.

He alleged that building administrator Steve Mitchell sympathizes with Muslim terrorists, has a "sexual dysfunction" — homosexuality — and that he intimidated dozens of residents into testifying against Trummel in this case.

Asked in a jailhouse interview about his basis for making the accusations, Trummel said, "Sources."

People at Council House said he's obsessive, delusional and often tried to browbeat them into making comments or spied on them by listening at their doors.

"It's been horribly scary," said Council House resident Nathaniel Stahl, 59. "He's spent all these years trying to really hurt people here."

That kind of fear is what Council House staffers say makes this case harassment, not the exercise of free speech.

"I'm a healthy, 37-year-old male. I can handle the stress of having him say I'm a Muslim terrorist sympathizer," Mitchell said. "But to a 93-year-old woman, losing sleep because of stress is hazardous. People are terrified of him."

Doerty agreed, and in April 2001 barred Trummel from the premises. His anti-harassment order, revised in October, also said Trummel cannot list the addresses and phone numbers on his Web site or contact any past, present or future residents or managers at Council House — even his friends.

"Factually, the case is about a mean old man who becomes angry and vicious when he doesn't get his own way," Doerty said yesterday. "He was not ordered to quit writing or publishing in any way."

Doerty's comments betrayed his thinning patience and, according to Trummel's lawyers, his bias.

"Judge Doerty's diatribe was designed pretty much to support his own interpretation — or misinterpretation — of the underlying law in the state," said attorney Bob Siegel.

He didn't know whether Trummel would remove the addresses and numbers now that he's out of jail.

Baron, of the Libel Defense Resource Center in New York, questioned whether Trummel's case was really one of harassment.

Barring threats, she said, "It's very rare for speech alone to constitute harassment."

If Trummel has defamed Council House, it can sue him, she noted. But Council House managers said they don't want to bother filing a defamation suit because Trummel doesn't have the money to pay damages, something Baron calls irrelevant.

If Trummel were to lose a defamation suit, but continued publishing defamatory statements, then a judge might write a narrow injunction ordering him not to repeat the libel, Baron said. In extreme circumstances, violation of such an order might result in jail time.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development investigated many of his claims against Council House and found them baseless, a spokesman said.

And Trummel's credibility can be questioned elsewhere. He claims to have been the director of the University Press at the University of Massachusetts in Boston; the school said he briefly advised a student-run project there in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

Until reminded otherwise, he claims to hold two doctorates — from the University of Washington and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York. He was kicked out of a master's degree program at Washington because he did not take the proper courses, prompting him to write a barrage of harassing e-mails to faculty and staff at the university.

The university's public-records officer quit rather than continue dealing with him, said Cheryl Reid, a spokeswoman for the state Attorney General's Office, which investigated but never brought charges because eventually the harassment stopped.

Though he claims to have been a professor at RPI, he was only a graduate student, and he was fired from an assistant professorship at Fitchburg State College in Massachusetts, the *Post-Intelligencer* reported yesterday.