

Woman Cleared in Mass Obscene E-Mailings
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A death penalty opponent who sent e-mails laced with obscenities and references to Adolf Hitler and Osama bin Laden to a pro-death-penalty Web site was not guilty of a crime, a judge ruled.

Police charged Rachel L. Riffie with misdemeanor electronic harassment after they traced to her two e-mails and three Web site postings sent to a pro-death penalty site run by Frederick A. Romano, the brother of a murder victim.

On Monday, Circuit Judge J. Barry Hughes acquitted Riffie, 34, of Sykesville, ruling that state law protects political speech. He said the Web site invited discussion, and a few e-mails do not constitute a pattern of harassment.

Prosecutor Jennifer L. Darby, who refused to read the communications in the courtroom, said Romano felt threatened by the vicious tone of the e-mails and postings.

But defense attorney Andrew M. Dansicker said Riffie did not know the communications expressing her strong anti-death penalty views would go to Romano himself, any more than someone sending a message to Microsoft would assume "Bill Gates would get it."

"They're angry, they're vulgar, they're curse words _ and they're not directed at Mr. Romano," Dansicker said.

Romano's Web site focused on Steven H. Oken, who was executed last June for killing Romano's 20-year-old sister, Dawn M. Garvin, in 1987. Oken also was convicted of killing two other women during a 15-day spree.

The e-mails and postings were sent around the time of the execution.