

Who are these haters that poison the well of our discourse?

Andrew Stafford. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 12, 2012.

'Comment forums remind me of children's playgrounds, where the bullies always win.'

IN THE online edition of Melbourne-based publication *King's Tribune* last month, editors Jane and Justin Shaw came to a radical decision. They resolved - after a few months of earnest consideration was capped by one post of anonymous, misogynist bilge too many - to turn comments on their website "off".

Given the magazine deals mostly in robustly expressed opinion, and not wishing to discourage debate, the Shaws made an even more radical suggestion: letters could be sent by email or Facebook, or even (are you sitting down?) by post. The most cogent, topical and witty of them would be considered for publication.

It's important to note the *Tribune* is a small venture. It began five years ago as a newsletter for a St Kilda bar and became a "real" magazine last October, extending its reach through newsagents into Sydney and Canberra. Its circulation is less than 1000; the Shaws keep day jobs.

There are practical reasons for a small publication like the *Tribune* to disable comments: neither the editors nor individual writers have the time, energy or inclination to monitor and moderate, much less reply to them all. There are more pressing things, such as getting out the next issue.

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The *Tribune* is not alone. Many bloggers are heading down the same path, which seems counter-intuitive, given immediacy and interactivity were two of the key attractions of blogging in the first place. But how many people are actually bothering to read the so-called bottom half of the internet, let alone add to it?

My guess is that it's a tiny minority, but it's a minority that's having a disproportionate influence on both the tone and direction of the print and electronic media.

The key question for older mastheads in particular is how much immediate, non-considered, anonymous commentary enhances public debate - after they've spent valuable resources weeding out the spammers, trollers, and astroturfers that deliberately seek to distort and/or poison it.

There's some evidence the astroturfers, in particular, are on the march. British writer George Monbiot recently told of being contacted by a whistleblower that worked as part of a PR team paid to infiltrate comment threads and forums, doing the bidding of their corporate clients. The whistleblower worked under 70 different usernames.

The implications for debates on contentious topics such as climate change - which is not actually scientifically contentious, unless you have an enormous vested interest in convincing the public otherwise, or at least sowing the seeds of confusion and doubt - are obvious. And alarming.

Then there's the issue of anonymity. This might be vital if you're a Chinese or Syrian dissident or, for that matter, a spambot turned corporate whistleblower. Mostly, though, it just allows people to indulge their worst tendencies, not



only towards individuals but entire social groups.

In this respect, a culture of widespread online bullying - particularly towards female writers - actually has the potential to drive some of our brightest voices out of public life altogether. Writers have always needed thick hides, but for some the price of your anonymity can be measured in their therapy bills.

It's true that people haven't changed in their tendency to be biased, ill-informed, unreasonable or at times plain inarticulate, and that we shouldn't blame the technology (which can also be such a transformative agent for good) for the shortcomings of those who abuse it.

After all, people can also be wise, considered, challenging and eminently reasonable, and they too can reach a wider audience than ever before. In practice, though, this rarely happens. Mostly, comment forums remind me of children's playgrounds, where the bullies always win - because everyone else scarpers.

The sad truth is that controversy outrates reason every time. We live in an immoderate age. It's why Ray Hadley, Kyle Sandilands, Alan Jones and Andrew Bolt are among the best-paid and most powerful media personalities in the country.

Does the popularity of *The Drum*, *The Punch* and even, for that matter, Q&A depend first and foremost on the talent of their writers and guests? Or do they live or die on the extent of the frenzy they generate? This is a difficult dilemma for mainstream media publications, which (unlike *The King's Tribune*) base part of their online business models on advertising pageviews.

The genie is long out of the bottle, to the point that it's both impossible and undesirable to stuff it back in. But, were the genie able to grant three wishes, I'd request genuine transparency of identity (why can't names and addresses be withheld, where clearly necessary, on request?), a much tougher line on personal abuse and a greater weighting towards comments that actually expand discussion.

All of which takes time, money and human resources. But with the nation's political and personal manners increasingly coarse, it might help elevate the tone of how we speak to each other, and provide at least some protection from an army of baiters, haters and spivs.

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Beware attempts to suppress conflict on the internet

By Jason
Wilson

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Andrew Stafford offered [a new version](#) of a well-worn complaint in The Age yesterday, arguing that online incivility threatens rational political debate.

An online mob, he says, is "coarsening" our public discourse. Far from expanding the reach of democratic discussion, he thinks, the comment threads of political websites - from blogs, to magazine sites, to the websites of major mastheads - may actually be circumscribing debate by excluding those who can't handle the abuse that flies at anyone who sticks their head above the parapet.

There are some specific beefs, which are also familiar. He worries about astroturfers manipulating public opinion with organised attempts to change the course of public conversation.

Wearily conceding that "the genie is out of the bottle", he still wishes that "anonymous" commentary could be stamped out (presumably he means pseudonymous commentary here as well); that "personal abuse" could be clamped down on; and that a greater weight could be given to comments that "expand discussion".

This worry is as old as the internet itself. Along with its mirror image - the utopianism of deliberative "virtual communities" - it is an evergreen, normative, foundational story about the changes set in train by the internet and the practices of ordinary users.

For years now, many have looked to the internet to either redeem democracy, or for proof of democracy's final corruption.

The difficulty is that the more jaundiced tradition, in which Stafford's piece is just the latest entry, echoes a longer tradition of pessimism about democracy itself.

The worry about anonymity, for example, which is always raised in complaints about comment culture, has a long history that is intrinsically bound up with a hostility both to the broader circulation of information and the widening of public debate - both of which have been fundamental to the expansion of democracy.

While journalists now are professionally motivated to claim bylines, in the nineteenth century, when parliamentary and political reporting was in its infancy, they struggled to maintain their anonymity in order to preserve their safety.

The middle 1800s saw French and British parliaments debate compulsory bylines - politicians wanted to know who was criticising them and why, in the hope that identifying them would moderate their criticism.

This debate even managed to enter the canons of Western philosophy. Arthur Schopenhauer (no friend of democracy), in part exercised by anonymous reviews of his books, demanded an end to anonymity in his work *The Art of Literature*:

"Anonymity is the refuge for all literary and journalistic rascality. It is a practice which must be completely stopped. Every article, even in a newspaper, should be accompanied by the name of its author; and the editor should be made strictly responsible for the accuracy of the signature."

The ostensible reason for wanting to end anonymity, then as now, was the accountability of critics, but the real desire - to avoid criticism and, in the case of politicians, democratic accountability - is obvious.

While Stafford allows that people in authoritarian regimes may have reasons to be anonymous in order to preserve their safety, he thinks that citizens in Australia's liberal democracy ought to have to stand by their words. But this misses the fact that even here, anonymity or pseudonymity is a condition of possibility for online political discussion for some citizens.

While the lives of Australians may not be endangered by their political opinions, their livelihoods might (and I know many public servants, for example, who are in this position).

A default to real names may or may not buy heightened civility, but the price will be the exclusion of a great many people from entering online debate at all.

Similar points were made during the 'nymwars' that intensified around the launch of Google+ last year, when many users argued that they had good reasons for preserving pseudonymity online, and Google's demand that they use their real names effectively excluded them from using the service.

Google themselves quietly dropped the requirement for real names recently in the wake of this user revolt.

Stafford's piece also hews closely to the generic conventions of pessimism about the internet and democracy by proposing a narrative of decline, wherein the internet's capacity has uniquely enabled a fall into generalised incivility, and wherein that incivility now is worse than it ever has been.

But is this narrative really sustainable? As antagonistic as political debate might be now, surely there is no adverse comparison to be made with the big strikes of the 1920s; the street fighting of the 1930s; Menzies' attempt to outlaw communism in the 1950s; the conflict around Vietnam or Springbok rugby tours from the late 1960s; or the acrimony around the dismissal of the Whitlam government in the 1970s.

Australians have had long, acrimonious, impassioned and even violent political conflicts long before the world wide web came along. Democracy has survived.

Indeed, there are many political scientists and philosophers who argue that we need to turn the question on its head by seeing argument and conflict as part of the essence of democracy, not as its problematic excess.

Political scientist Susan Herbst, in her 2010 book *Rude Democracy*, starts with the proposition that arguments proposing that incivility is worsening or improving are senseless, unable to be settled, and miss the point of how civility and incivility function in democratic debate.

Overall levels of civility and incivility may fluctuate in accordance with circumstances, but it is difficult to sensibly measure them. Better, she says, to think about civility and incivility as strategic assets which can be deployed in rhetorical conflict.

Rather than seeing incivility as an "end state" into which a society can fall, we will achieve more by inculcating a "thick-skinned liberalism" in younger citizens by teaching them to argue, and just as importantly to listen carefully to those with whom they disagree.

More radically, the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe has elaborated over time a theory of agonistic democracy that embraces conflict, replacing it at the heart of democratic processes, casting impassioned dissension as democracy's essence.

She thinks that the idea that eventually rational consensus on controversial issues is possible - a belief that underpins deliberative models of democracy - is a dangerous illusion.

The radical pluralism of modern societies means that liberal consensus can only be imposed. Rather than seeking it, we should institutionalise and channel inevitable conflict in a way that allows us to be adversaries, not enemies, and in a way that reverses the long process of political disengagement in Western democracies:

"Far from jeopardising democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence. Modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order."

For Mouffe, conflict can only be repressed - it always re-emerges elsewhere. And one suspects that many of the complaints about the internet's role in promoting incivility are actually reactions to its emergence and sudden visibility.

In a world formed by what Brian McNair calls "cultural chaos", where elites and gatekeepers have lost control of political debate, it is more difficult to ignore dissent, conflict and the political passions.

These views of incivility and political conflict make it possible to understand it as something which is essential to democracy, which ought to be seen in a broader perspective, and about which empirical questions can be asked. It allows us to move beyond the old normative stories to consider incivility's part in the functioning of our democracy.

In collaboration with [Ethos CRS](#), I and other researchers will be asking such questions in coming months. Stafford's point about the danger that incivility may deter entrants to political debate might be pointing to something important, but what is the scale and nature of that problem? How does enlarged democratic debate affect those at the frontlines of democracy - political staffers, politicians, journalists, bloggers?

In a context where impassioned political conflict is more visible, and final consensus on big-ticket issues is unlikely, how can important policy best be made and enacted? We hope to have some answers later this year.

Such views of conflict and incivility also give us some grounds for guarded optimism. At its heart, after all, the modern unfolding of democracy has been about an opening up of public spaces, including discursive spaces, to broader participation.

It proposes a radical equality. It means accommodating the unpractised speaker, impassioned voices, new modes of dissent, new styles of argument.

We need to look carefully at demands for politeness: they often function as demands that only a certain kind of speech be heeded, and a certain kind of speaker be admitted.

Our starting point should be a recognition that conflict is a fundamental part of democracy, and not something with which we ought to accuse it.

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Topics: [internet-culture](#), [government-and-politics](#)

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Where Anonymity Breeds Contempt By JULIE ZHUO. November 29, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/30/opinion/30zhuo.html>

THERE you are, peacefully reading an article or watching a video on the Internet. You finish, find it thought-provoking, and scroll down to the comments section to see what other people thought. And there, lurking among dozens of well-intentioned opinions, is a troll.

“How much longer is the media going to milk this beyond tired story?” “These guys are frauds.” “Your idiocy is disturbing.” “We’re just trying to make the world a better place one brainwashed, ignorant idiot at a time.” These are the trollish comments, all from anonymous sources, that you could have found after reading a CNN article on the rescue of the Chilean miners.

Trolling, defined as the act of posting inflammatory, derogatory or provocative messages in public forums, is a problem as old as the Internet itself, although its roots go much farther back. Even in the fourth century B.C., Plato touched upon the subject of anonymity and morality in his parable of the ring of Gyges.

That mythical ring gave its owner the power of invisibility, and Plato observed that even a habitually just man who possessed such a ring would become a thief, knowing that he couldn’t be caught. Morality, Plato argues, comes from full disclosure; without accountability for our actions we would all behave unjustly.

This certainly seems to be true for the anonymous trolls today. After Alexis Pilkington, a 17-year-old Long Island girl, committed suicide earlier this year, trolls [descended on her online tribute page](#) to post pictures of nooses, references to hangings and other hateful comments. A better-known example involves Nicole Catsouras, an 18-year-old who died in a car crash in California in 2006. [Photographs of her badly disfigured body were posted on the Internet](#), where anonymous trolls set up fake tribute pages and in some cases e-mailed the photos to her parents with subject lines like “Hey, Daddy, I’m still alive.”

Psychological research has proven again and again that [anonymity increases unethical behavior](#). Road rage bubbles up in the relative anonymity of one’s car. And in the online world, which can offer total anonymity, the effect is even more pronounced. People — even ordinary, good people — often change their behavior in radical ways. There’s even a term for it: the [online disinhibition effect](#).

Many forums and online communities are looking for ways to strike back. Back in February, Engadget, a popular technology review blog, [shut down its commenting system](#) for a few days after it received a barrage of trollish comments on its iPad coverage.

Many victims are turning to legislation. All 50 states now have stalking, bullying or harassment laws that explicitly include electronic forms of communication. Last year, Liskula Cohen, a former model, persuaded a New York judge to require Google to reveal the identity of an anonymous blogger who she felt had defamed her, and she has now filed a suit against the blogger. Last month, another former model, Carla Franklin, persuaded a judge to force YouTube to reveal the identity of a troll who made a disparaging comment about her on the video-sharing site.

But the law by itself cannot do enough to disarm the Internet’s trolls. Content providers, social networking platforms and community sites must also do their part by rethinking the systems they have in place for user commentary so as to discourage — or disallow — anonymity. Reuters,

for example, announced that it would start to block anonymous comments and require users to register with their names and e-mail addresses in an effort to curb “uncivil behavior.”

Some may argue that denying Internet users the ability to post anonymously is a breach of their privacy and freedom of expression. But until the age of the Internet, anonymity was a rare thing. When someone spoke in public, his audience would naturally be able to see who was talking.

Others point out that there’s no way to truly rid the Internet of anonymity. After all, names and e-mail addresses can be faked. And in any case many commenters write things that are rude or inflammatory under their real names.

But raising barriers to posting bad comments is still a smart first step. Well-designed commenting systems should also aim to highlight thoughtful and valuable opinions while letting trollish ones sink into oblivion.

The technology blog Gizmodo is trying an audition system for new commenters, under which their first few comments would be approved by a moderator or a trusted commenter to ensure quality before anybody else could see them. After a successful audition, commenters can freely post. If over time they impress other trusted commenters with their contributions, they’d be promoted to trusted commenters, too, and their comments would henceforth be featured.

Disqus, a comments platform for bloggers, has experimented with allowing users to rate one another’s comments and feed those ratings into a global reputation system called Clout. Moderators can use a commenter’s Clout score to “help separate top commenters from trolls.”

At Facebook, where I’ve worked on the design of the public commenting widget, the approach is to try to replicate real-world social norms by emphasizing the human qualities of conversation. People’s faces, real names and brief biographies (“John Doe from Lexington”) are placed next to their public comments, to establish a baseline of responsibility.

Facebook also encourages you to share your comments with your friends. Though you’re free to opt out, the knowledge that what you say may be seen by the people you know is a big deterrent to trollish behavior.

This kind of social pressure works because, at the end of the day, most trolls wouldn’t have the gall to say to another person’s face half the things they anonymously post on the Internet.

Instead of waiting around for human nature to change, let’s start to rein in bad behavior by promoting accountability. Content providers, stop allowing anonymous comments. Moderate your comments and forums. Look into using comment services to improve the quality of engagement on your site. Ask your users to report trolls and call them out for polluting the conversation.

In slowly lifting the veil of anonymity, perhaps we can see the troll not as the frightening monster of lore, but as what we all really are: human.

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“Real Names” Policies Are an Abuse of Power

Everyone’s abuzz with the “nymwars,” mostly in response to Google Plus’ decision to enforce its “real names” policy. At first, Google Plus went on a deleting spree, killing off accounts that violated its policy. When the community reacted with outrage, Google Plus leaders tried to calm the anger by [detailing their “new and improved” mechanism to enforce “real names”](#) (without killing off accounts). This only sparked increased discussion about the value of pseudonymity. Dozens of blog posts have popped up with people expressing their support for pseudonymity and explaining their reasons. One of the posts, by [Kirrily “Skud” Robert](#) included a list of explanations that came from people she polled, including:

- “I am a high school teacher, privacy is of the utmost importance.”
- “I have used this name/account in a work context, my entire family know this name and my friends know this name. It enables me to participate online without being subject to harassment that at one point in time lead to my employer having to change their number so that calls could get through.”
- “I do not feel safe using my real name online as I have had people track me down from my online presence and had coworkers invade my private life.”
- “I’ve been stalked. I’m a rape survivor. I am a government employee that is prohibited from using my IRL.”
- “As a former victim of stalking that impacted my family I’ve used [my nickname] online for about 7 years.”
- “[this name] is a pseudonym I use to protect myself. My web site can be rather controversial and it has been used against me once.”
- “I started using [this name] to have at least a little layer of anonymity between me and people who act inappropriately/criminally. I think the “real names” policy hurts women in particular.
- “I enjoy being part of a global and open conversation, but I don’t wish for my opinions to offend conservative and religious people I know or am related to. Also I don’t want my husband’s Govt career impacted by his opinionated wife, or for his staff to feel in any way uncomfortable because of my views.”
- “I have privacy concerns for being stalked in the past. I’m not going to change my name for a google+ page. The price I might pay isn’t worth it.”
- “We get death threats at the blog, so while I’m not all that concerned with, you know, sane people finding me. I just don’t overly share information and use a pen name.”
- “This identity was used to protect my real identity as I am gay and my family live in a small village where if it were openly known that their son was gay they would have problems.”
- “I go by pseudonym for safety reasons. Being female, I am wary of internet harassment.”

You’ll notice a theme here...

Another site has popped up called [“My Name Is Me”](#) where people vocalize their support for pseudonyms. What’s most striking is the list of people who are affected by “real names” policies, including abuse survivors, activists, LGBT people, women, and young people.

Over and over again, people keep pointing to Facebook as an example where “real names” policies work. This makes me laugh hysterically. One of the things that became patently clear to me in my fieldwork is that countless teens who signed up to Facebook late into the game chose to use pseudonyms or nicknames. What’s even more noticeable in my data is that an extremely high percentage of people of color used pseudonyms as compared to the white teens

that I interviewed. Of course, this would make sense...

The people who most heavily rely on pseudonyms in online spaces are those who are most marginalized by systems of power. **“Real names” policies aren’t empowering; they’re an authoritarian assertion of power over vulnerable people.** These ideas and issues aren’t new (and [I’ve even talked about this before](#)), but what is new is that marginalized people are banding together and speaking out loudly. And thank goodness.

What’s funny to me is that people also don’t seem to understand the history of Facebook’s “real names” culture. When early adopters (first the elite college students...) embraced Facebook, it was a trusted community. They gave the name that they used in the context of college or high school or the corporation that they were a part of. They used the name that fit into the network that they joined Facebook with. The names they used weren’t necessarily their legal names; plenty of people chose Bill instead of William. But they were, for all intents and purposes, “real.” As the site grew larger, people had to grapple with new crowds being present and discomfort emerged over the norms. But the norms were set and people kept signing up and giving the name that they were most commonly known by. By the time celebrities kicked in, Facebook wasn’t demanding that Lady Gaga call herself Stefani Germanotta, but of course, she had a “fan page” and was separate in the eyes of the crowd. Meanwhile, what many folks failed to notice is that countless black and Latino youth signed up to Facebook using handles. Most people don’t notice what black and Latino youth do online. Likewise, people from outside of the US started signing up to Facebook and using alternate names. Again, no one noticed because names transliterated from Arabic or Malaysian or containing phrases in Portuguese weren’t particularly visible to the real name enforcers. Real names are by no means universal on Facebook, but it’s the importance of real names is a myth that Facebook likes to shill out. And, for the most part, privileged white Americans use their real name on Facebook. So it “looks” right.

Then along comes Google Plus, thinking that it can just dictate a “real names” policy. Only, they made a huge mistake. They allowed the tech crowd to join within 48 hours of launching. The thing about the tech crowd is that it has a long history of nicks and handles and pseudonyms. And this crowd got to define the early social norms of the site, rather than being socialized into the norms set up by trusting college students who had joined a site that they thought was college-only. This was not a recipe for “real name” norm setting. Quite the opposite. Worse for Google... Tech folks are VERY happy to speak LOUDLY when they’re pissed off. So while countless black and Latino folks have been using nicks all over Facebook (just like they did on MySpace btw), they never loudly challenged Facebook’s policy. There was more of a “live and let live” approach to this. Not so lucky for Google and its name-bending community. Folks are now PISSED OFF.

Personally, I’m ecstatic to see this much outrage. And I’m really really glad to see seriously privileged people take up the issue, because while they are the least likely to actually be harmed by “real names” policies, they have the authority to be able to speak truth to power. And across the web, I’m seeing people highlight that this issue has more depth to it than fun names (and is a whole lot more complicated than boiling it down to being about anonymity, as [Facebook’s Randi Zuckerberg foolishly did](#)).

What’s at stake is people’s right to protect themselves, their right to actually maintain a form of control that gives them safety. **If companies like Facebook and Google are actually committed to the safety of its users, they need to take these complaints seriously.** Not everyone is safer by giving out their real name. Quite the opposite; many people are far LESS safe when they are identifiable. And those who are least safe are often those who are most vulnerable.

Likewise, the issue of reputation must be turned on its head when thinking about marginalized people. Folks point to the issue of people using pseudonyms to obscure their identity and, in theory, “protect” their reputation. The assumption baked into this is that the observer is qualified to actually assess someone’s reputation. All too often, and especially with marginalized people, the observer takes someone out of context and judges them inappropriately based on what they get online. Let me explain this in a concrete example that many of you have heard before. Years ago, I received a phone call from an Ivy League college admissions officer who wanted to accept a young black man from South Central in LA into their college; the student had written an application about how he wanted to leave

behind the gang-ridden community he came from, but the admissions officers had found his MySpace which was filled with gang insignia. The question that was asked of me was “Why would he lie to us when we can tell the truth online?” Knowing that community, I was fairly certain that he was being honest with the college; he was also doing what it took to keep himself alive in his community. If he had used a pseudonym, the college wouldn’t have been able to get data out of context about him and inappropriately judge him. But they didn’t. They thought that their frame mattered most. I really hope that he got into that school.

There is no universal context, no matter how many times geeks want to tell you that you can be one person to everyone at every point. But just because people are doing what it takes to be appropriate in different contexts, to protect their safety, and to make certain that they are not judged out of context, doesn’t mean that everyone is a huckster. Rather, people are responsibly and reasonably responding to the structural conditions of these new media. And there’s nothing acceptable about those who are most privileged and powerful telling those who aren’t that it’s OK for their safety to be undermined. And you don’t guarantee safety by stopping people from using pseudonyms, but you do undermine people’s safety by doing so.

Thus, from my perspective, enforcing “real names” policies in online spaces is an abuse of power.

Understanding the “Civility Crisis”

Cornell Clayton

Essay

by | © Washington State University



Hollering “You lie!” in the middle of President Obama’s speech to Congress last September, Joe Wilson of South Carolina clearly broke the bounds of civil political behavior. Although Wilson quickly apologized, his outburst became a prime example of what many see as the “civility crisis” that confronts American democracy. A *New York Times* [editorial](#) lamented “So much for civility” while the *Chicago Tribune* asked “Whatever happened to that quaint relic called civility?” Indeed, calls for greater civility are now a regular feature in discussions about American politics. President Obama addressed the question directly during his commencement speech at Notre Dame in May. Outside the auditorium at which he spoke, the president passed a crowd of protestors who sported guns and placards of Obama in painted joker face. Inside Obama mused that we must find a way to make our political debate less angry and more civil. Public commentators from the political left, right, and center—from Steven Carter to Dinesh D’Souza to Gertrude Himmelfarb and Deborah Tannen—have recently written books that warn of the consequences for American democracy of declining civility. Civility is even on Facebook, where the Civility Project, started by Professor P.M. Forni at Johns Hopkins University, maintains a website.

Is there a civility crisis in the United States? A recent survey by Rasmussen Reports found that an overwhelming majority of Americans (75 percent) think so, and anecdotal evidence of the coarsening of our public debate abounds. From the public exploitation of lurid details in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, to the burning of effigies of George Bush by protesters of the invasion of Iraq, to outbursts at town-hall meetings over healthcare reform, to the regular rants of radio and cable television talk show hosts, it appears that political debate in the United States has become angry, bitter, and... well... uncivil! Consider the fact that according to transcripts of Glenn Beck’s show on Fox News, over an 18-month period President Obama and Democrats were compared to Hitler or Nazis nearly 350 times. Wilson’s outburst, in response to the president’s assertion that health care reform legislation would not cover illegal immigrants was not only rude but also wrong. The reform plan that passed Congress did nothing to change benefits for illegal immigrants. But facts matter little in the shouting matches that now pass for political debate.

Yet if political debate today is polarized and often lacks common courtesy, it is not clear whether this is part of a general decline in civility or how it will impact American democracy. Indeed this is not the first time that American politics has been marked by raucous and unruly behavior. During the election campaign of 1800 the political supporters of both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson printed ugly lies and half-truths about their opponents in party controlled newspapers. In the years before the Civil War it was not uncommon for political arguments to devolve into fist-fights or even deadly duels. In 1865 Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts was brutally attacked on the Senate floor by a cane-wielding Preston Brooks of South Carolina for giving a speech against the fugitive slave act. The women suffragettes in the early part of the twentieth century were accused of offending the manners of civilized

society, as were African Americans who sought to change the political structures of the South during the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the predecessor of today's bombastic radio talk shows was Father Charles Coughlin, who used radio appearances in the 1930s to stoke anti-Semitism and inveigh against President Franklin Roosevelt as a socialist tyrant.

Uncivil political behavior is also popular and profitable. There is a reason why rude and loutish political talk shows dominate the airwaves—they attract huge audience ratings and advertising dollars. Rush Limbaugh's show is the highest rated program on radio, attracting 15 million listeners a week. Joe Wilson, after publicly apologizing for his behavior, instantly became a hero to many Americans; within days of his misdeed more than a million dollars poured into his re-election campaign, "You lie!" T-shirts and bumper-stickers appeared, and Wilson became a sought-after speaker at conservative political rallies. Far from suffering for his display of incivility, Joe Wilson capitalized on it.

But is rude behavior good for democracy? The quality of democratic decision-making depends on the quality of public debate, and there may be good reasons to argue for a more civil tone in our public discourse today. Before jumping on the civility bandwagon, however, we might want to examine more carefully the ways in which civility and democracy are related. Research in the social sciences indicates that this relationship is more complicated, and frankly more interesting, than much of the current discussion suggests. Consider just three aspects of this relationship. First, in a fascinating book entitled *Rudeness and Civility*, cultural historian John Kasson points out that what passes for "civil" or "polite" behavior is neither fixed nor universal. The idea itself is merely a set of culturally and historically defined practices. Thus, what passes for polite conduct in one culture or time period may not be so in a different place or time. A common gesture, such as flipping one's fingers under the chin for example, would be considered highly offensive in a conversation with an Italian but may go entirely unnoticed in conversations elsewhere. Political behavior is especially sensitive to specific institutionalized norms and practices. Interrupting the president's speech by yelling an insult clearly violated the norms of decorum and behavior in the United States Congress, but a similar outburst would probably raise few eyebrows during question time in the British Parliament where booing and hissing of opposition speakers, including the prime minister, is common practice—Order! Order!

Questions about acceptable political behavior are also tied in important ways to deeper questions of political power and democratic equality. Those who hold power are able to press their claims and protect their interests within the accepted channels of political conduct, but those without power may often be excluded from making claims in a "civil" way. The political scientist Virginia Sapiro, for example, has noted that for most of American history women violated the norms of civility by simply engaging in public political debate. Women were not supposed to speak openly on such matters and they were literally banned from most spaces where politics took place. For instance, when the reformer Fanny Wright became the first woman to speak at Tammany Hall in 1836, she was shouted down by men who saw her very presence there as improper. Other groups seeking inclusion in American democracy—African Americans, labor organizers, Native Americans, and gay Americans, among others—have historically faced similar dilemmas; either they could wait patiently for others to press their rights within the existing frameworks of "civil behavior" or they could seek democratic reform themselves by confronting and challenging those frameworks. So while some forms of civil behavior may be essential to democratic deliberation, acts of "incivility" and contestation may also be an important part of broadening democracy and empowering excluded groups.

Finally, styles of political discourse are never far removed from the actual cleavages and substantive issues that divide the public. During historical periods when there exists a general consensus about the scope and purposes of government (immediately following WWII in the United States, for example), political debate tends to focus on narrow questions of policy and government efficiency, on how best to achieve agreed upon ends. Political debate can be conducted in civil and courteous ways during such periods precisely because political opponents do not question each other's fundamental values or motives. However, during periods of deeper political disagreement (such as prior to the Civil War in the 19th century, the New Deal in the 1930s, or the so-called counter-culture era of the late-1960s), political discourse will necessarily move beyond technical questions of policy and efficiency to focus on more fundamental values such as the meaning of freedom or equality, raising deep questions about political identity and citizenship or what it means to be an "American." These are critical periods for democratic self-governance, but they

will also understandably provoke a more emotional, even violent style of political discourse.

These and other factors are undoubtedly shaping today's politics and the attendant concern that there is a civility deficit. A more respectful and reasoned public discourse undoubtedly would enhance democratic decision-making and make ordinary citizens less cynical about government and those who aspire to public service. The country, however, is undergoing important economic, social, and demographic changes that raise fundamental questions about American values and our national identity. Previously excluded groups, such as new immigrants and gay Americans, are pressing rights claims. New media—the Internet, YouTube, the blogosphere, 24-hour cable news networks, social media such as Facebook and Twitter—has also radically changed the way Americans communicate with each other, altering the norms of discourse. A better appreciation of these factors may help us to understand what lies behind the seeming anger and bitterness in some of today's political discourse. Placing today's raucous political behavior into a broader historical context may also help us realize that it is neither unique nor part of a general decline in manners and civility, but is part of a more cyclical process in democratic governance.

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How the internet created an age of rage

Tim Adams

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Websites are increasingly encouraging readers to leave comments, but with users able to hide behind aliases, often such attempts at discussion end in hate-filled bile and a mob mentality. Photograph: Sami Sarkis/Getty

For a while after his first TV series was broadcast in 2009, comedian Stewart Lee was in the habit of collecting and filing some of the comments that people made about him on web pages and social media sites. He did a 10-minute Google trawl most days for about six months and the resultant collected observations soon ran to dozens of pages. If you read those comments now as a cumulative narrative, you begin to fear for Stewart Lee. A good third of the posts fantasised about violence being done to the comic, most of the rest could barely contain the extent of their loathing.

This is a small, representative selection:

"I hate Stewart Lee with a passion. He's like Ian Huntley to me." Wharto15, Twitter

"I saw him at a gig once, and even offstage he was exuding an aura of creepy molesty smugness."

Yukio Mishima, dontstartmeoff.com

"One man I would love to beat with a shit-covered cricket bat." Joycey, readytogo.net

"He's got one of those faces I just want to burn." Coxy, dontstartmeoff.com

"I hope stewart lee dies." Idrie, Youtube

"WHAT THE HELL! If i ever find you, lee, i promise i will, I WILL, kick the crap out of you."

Carcrazychica, YouTube

"Stewart Lee is a cynical man, who has been able to build an entire carrer [sic] out of his own smugness. I hope the fucking chronos disease [sic] kills him." Maninabanasuit, Guardian.co.uk

"I spent the entire time thinking of how much I want to punch Stewart Lee in the face instead of laughing. He does have an incredibly punchable face, doesn't he? (I could just close my eyes, but fantasizing about punching Stewart Lee is still more fun than sitting in complete, stony silence.)"
Pudabaya, beexcellentogether.com

Lee, a standup comedian who does not shy away from the more grotesque aspects of human behaviour, or always resist dishing out some bile of his own, does not think of himself as naive. But the sheer volume of the vitriol, its apparent absence of irony, set him back. For a few months, knowing the worst that people thought of him became a kind of weird compulsion, though he distanced himself from it slightly with the belief that he was doing his obsessive collating "in character". "Collecting all these up isn't something I would do," he suggests to me. "It is something the made-up comedian Stewart Lee would do, but I have to do it for him, because he is me..."

Distanced or not, Lee couldn't help but be somewhat unsettled by the rage he seemed to provoke by telling stories and jokes: "When I first realised the extent of this stuff I was shocked," he says. "Then it appeared to me that a lot of the things I was hated for were things I was actually trying to do; a lot of what people considered failings were to me successes. I sort of wrote a lot of series two of *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* with these comments in mind, trying to do more of the things people hadn't liked."

The "40,000 words of hate" have now become "anthropologically amusing" to him, he insists. "You can see a lot of them seem to be the same people posting the same stuff under different names in different places, and it is strange to see people you have known personally, whom you thought you had got on fine with at the time, abusing you under barely effective pseudonyms."

He's stopped looking these days, and never really tried to identify or confront any of his detractors. "I am slightly worried that some of them might be a bit insane and hope I haven't made myself or my family a target."

Lee is, of course, not alone in having this anonymous violent hatred directed toward him. On parts of the internet it has become pretty much common parlance. Do a quick trawl on the blog sites and comment sections about most celebrities and entertainers – not to mention politicians – and you will quickly discover comparable virtual rage and fantasised violence. Comedians seem to come in for more than most, as if taboo-breaking was taken as read, or the mood of the harshest baying club audience had become a kind of universal rhetoric. It's not quite heckling this, though is it? A heckle requires a bit of courage and risk; the audience can see who is doing the shouting. Lee's detractors were all anonymous. How should we understand it then: harmless banter? Robust criticism? Vicious bullying?

The psychologists call it "deindividuation". It's what happens when social norms are withdrawn because identities are concealed. The classic deindividuation experiment concerned American children at Halloween. Trick-or-treaters were invited to take sweets left in the hall of a house on a table on which there was also a sum of money. When children arrived singly, and not wearing masks, only 8% of them stole any of the money. When they were in larger groups, with their identities concealed by fancy dress, that number rose to 80%. The combination of a faceless crowd and personal anonymity provoked individuals into breaking rules that under "normal" circumstances they would not have considered.

Deindividuation is what happens when we get behind the wheel of a car and feel moved to scream abuse at the woman in front who is slow in turning right. It is what motivates a responsible father in a football crowd to yell crude sexual hatred at the opposition or the referee. And it's why under the cover of an alias or an avatar on a website or a blog – surrounded by virtual strangers – conventionally restrained individuals might be moved to suggest a comedian should suffer all manner of violent torture because they don't like his jokes, or his face. Digital media allow almost unlimited opportunity for wilful deindividuation. They almost require it. The implications of those liberties, of the ubiquity of anonymity and the language of the crowd, are only beginning to be felt.

You can trace those implications right back to the genesis of social media, to pioneering Californian utopias, and their

fall. The earliest network-groups had a sort of Edenic cast. One representative group was CommuniTree, which was set up as an open-access forum on a series of modem-linked computers in the 1970s when computers were just humming into life. For a while the group of like-minded enthusiasts ran on perfectly harmonious lines, respecting others, having positive and informed discussions about matters of shared relevance. At some point, however, some high school teenagers armed with modems accessed the open-access space and used it to trash and abuse the CommuniTree, taking free speech to uninhibited extremes that the pioneers had never wanted. The pioneers were suitably horrified. And eventually, after deciding that they could neither control the students through censorship, nor tolerate the space with them in it, they shut CommuniTree down.

This story has become almost folkloric among new media prophets, a sort of founding myth. It was one of the first moments when the possibilities of the new collective potential was tainted by anonymous lowest-common-denominator humanity, a pattern that has subsequently been repeated in pretty much all virtual communication. Barbarians, or "trolls" as they became known, had entered the community, ignoring the rules, shouting loudly, encouraging violence, spoiling it for everybody. Thereafter, anyone who has established a website or forum with high, or medium-high ideals, has had to decide how to deal with such anonymous destructive posters, those who got in the way of constructive debate.

Tom Postmes, a professor of social and organisational psychology at the universities of Exeter and Groningen in his native Netherlands, and author of *Individuality and the Group*, has been researching these issues for 20 years. "In the early years," he says, "this online behaviour was called flaming. And then that became institutionalised. Among friends, the people who engaged in this activity were actually quite jocular in intent but they were accountable to standards and norms that are radically different to those of most of their audience. Trolls aspire to violence, to the level of trouble they can cause in an environment. They want it to kick off. They want to promote antipathetic emotions of disgust and outrage, which morbidly gives them a sense of pleasure."

Postmes compares online aliases to the tags of graffiti artists: "Trolls want people to identify their style, to recognise them, or at least their online identity. But they will only be successful in this if an authority doesn't clamp down on them. So anonymity helps that. It's essentially risk-free."

There is no particular type of person drawn to this kind of covert bullying, he suggests: "Like football hooligans, they have family and live at home but when they go to a match the enjoyment comes from finding a context in which you can let go, or to use the familiar phrase 'take a moral vacation'. Doing this online has a similar characteristic. You would expect it is just normal people, the bloke you know at the corner shop or a woman from the office. They are the people typically doing this..."

Some trolls have become nearly as famous as the blogs to which they attach themselves, in a curious, parasitical kind of relationship. Jeffrey Wells, author of [Hollywood Elsewhere](#), is a former columnist on the *LA Times* who has been blogging inside stories about movies for 15 years. For the last couple of years his gossip and commentary has been dogged by the invective of a character called LexG, whose 200-odd self-loathing and wildly negative posts recently moved Wells to [address him directly](#): "The coarseness, the self-pity and the occasional eye-pokes and cruel dismissiveness have to be turned down. Way down. Arguments and genuine disdain for certain debaters can be entertaining, mind. I'm not trying to be Ms Manners. But there finally has to be an emphasis on perception and love and passion and the glories of good writing. There has to be an emphasis on letting in the light rather than damning the darkness of the trolls and vomiting on the floor and kicking this or that *Hollywood Elsewhere* contributor in the balls..."

When I spoke to Wells about LexG, he was philosophical. "Everybody on the site writes anonymously, except me," he says. "If they didn't I think it would cause them to dry up. This place is like a bubble in which you can explode, let the inner lava out. And, boy, is there a lot of lava."

He has resisted insisting that people write under their own name because that would kill the comments instantly. "Why would you take that one in 100 chance that your mother or a future employer will read what you were thinking late one

night a dozen years ago if you didn't have to?" For haters, Wells believes, anonymity makes for livelier writing. "It's a trick, really – the less you feel you will be identified, the more uninhibited you can be. At his best LexG really knows how to write well and hold a thought and keep it going. He is relatively sane but certainly not a happy guy. He's been doing this a couple of years now and he really has become a presence; he does it on all the Hollywood sites."

Have they ever met?

"Just once," Wells says. "I asked him to write a column of his own, give him a corner of the site, bring him out in the open." LexG didn't want to do it, he seemed horrified at the prospect. "He just wanted to comment on my stuff," Wells suggests. "He is a counter-puncher, I guess. The rules on my site remain simple, though. No ugly rancid personal comments directed against me. And no Tea Party bullshit."

The big problem he finds running the blog is that his anonymous commenters get a kind of pack mentality. And the comments quickly become a one-note invective. As a writer Wells feels he needs a range of emotion: "I also do personal confession or I can be really enthusiastic about something. But the comments tend to be one colour, and that becomes drab. It's tougher, I guess, to be enthusiastic, to really set out honestly why something means something to you. It takes maybe twice as long. I can run with disdain and nastiness for a while but you don't want to always be the guy banging a shoe on the table. Like LexG. I mean it's not healthy, for a start..."

Wells does his own marshalling of the debate, somewhat like the bartender of a western saloon. Other sites – including our own [Comment is Free](#) – employ moderators to try to keep trolls in line, and move the debate on. A young journalist called Sarah Bee was for three years the moderator on seminal techie news and chat forum [the Register](#). She started as a sub-editor but increasingly devoted her time to looking after the "very boisterous" chat on the site. She has no doubt that "anonymity makes people bolder and more arsey, of course it does. And it was quite a politically libertarian crowd, so you get people expressing things extremely stridently, people would disagree and there would often be a lot of real nastiness." She was very liberal as far as moderating went, she thinks, with no real hard and fast rules, except, perhaps, for "a ban on prison-rape jokes, which came up extremely often".

Every once in a while, however, the mood would get "very ugly" and she would try to calm things down and remonstrate with people. "I would occasionally email them – they had to give their email addresses when registering for the site – to say, 'Even though you are not writing under your real name, people can hear you.'" In those instances, strangely, she suggests, most people were incredibly contrite when contacted. It was like they had forgotten who they were. "They would send messages back saying, 'Oh, I'm so sorry', not even using the excuse of having a bad day or anything like that. It is so much to do with anonymity..."

Bee became known as the Moderatrix – "all moderators have an implicit sub-dom relationship with their site" – though she was just about the only person in the comment section who used her own name. "There was a lot of misogyny and casual sexism, some pretty off-colour stuff. I would get a few horrible emails calling me a cunt or whatever," she says, "but that didn't bother me as much as the day-to-day stuff, really."

The day-to-day stuff was, though, "like being in another world. It got really wearying. I would go home sometimes and just sigh and wonder about it all."

She is keen to say that the Register itself she thought a great thing, and loved the idea of working there, but being Moderatrix eventually got her down. "A hive mind sets in," she suggests. "Just occasionally good sense would prevail but then there is that fact that arguments on the internet are literally never over. You moderate a few hundred comments a day, and then you come in the next morning and there are a few hundred more waiting for you. It's Sisyphean."

In the end she needed a change. She's in another "community management" job now, dealing through Facebook, which is a relief because "it removes anonymity so people are a lot more polite". When she retired Moderatrix [she did a goodbye](#) and got 250 comments wishing her well. She doesn't miss it, though. "Just occasionally I would let a stream of the most offensive things through, just to let people know how those things looked in the world... People

would realise for a bit. But then the old behaviours would immediately set in. The thing any moderator will tell you is that every day is a new day and everything repeats itself every day. It is not about progress or continuity..."

There are many places, of course, on the internet where a utopian ideal of "here comes everybody" prevails, where the anonymous hive mind is fantastically curious and productive. A while ago I talked to Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, about some of this, and asked him who his perfect contributor was. "The ideal Wikipedian, in my mind, is someone who is really smart and really kind," he said, without irony. "Those are the people who are drawn into the centre of the group. When people get power in these communities, it is not through shouting loudest, it is through diplomacy and conflict resolution."

Within this "wikitopia" there were, too, though, plenty of *Lord of the Flies* moments. The benevolent Wiki community is plagued by "Wikitrolls" – vandals who set out to insert slander and nonsense into pages. A policing system has grown up to root out troll elements; there are well over 1,000 official volunteer "admins", working round the clock; they are supported in this work by the eyes and ears of the moral majority of "virtuous" Wikipedians.

"When we think about difficult users there are two kinds," Wales said, with the same kind of weariness as Moderatrix. "The easy kind is someone who comes in, calls everyone Nazis, starts wrecking articles. That is easy to deal with: you block them, and everyone moves on. The hard ones are people who are doing good work in some respects but are also really difficult characters and they annoy other people, so we end up with these long intractable situations where a community can't come to a decision. But I think that is probably true of any human community."

Wales, who has conducted perhaps the most hopeful experiment in human collective knowledge of all time, appears to have no doubt that the libertarian goals of the internet would benefit from some similar voluntary restraining authority. It was the case of the blogger Kathy Sierra that caused Wales and others to propose in 2007 an unofficial code of conduct on blog sites, part of which would outlaw anonymity. Kathy Sierra is a programming instructor based in California; after an online spat on a tech-site she was apparently randomly targeted by an anonymous mob that posted images of her as a sexually mutilated corpse on various websites and issued death threats. She wrote on her own blog: "I'm at home, with the doors locked, terrified. I am afraid to leave my yard, I will never feel the same. I will never be the same."

Among Wales's suggestions in response to this and other comparable horror stories of virtual bullying was that bloggers consider banning anonymous comments altogether, and that they be able to delete comments deemed abusive without facing accusations of censorship. Wales's proposals were quickly shot down by the libertarians, and the traffic-hungry, as unworkable and against the prevailing spirit of free-speech.

Other pioneering idealists of virtual reality have lately come to question some of those norms, though. Jaron Lanier is credited with being the inventor of virtual worlds. His was the first company to sell virtual reality gloves and goggles. He was a key adviser in the creation of avatar universe Second Life. His recent book, *You Are Not a Gadget*, is, in this sense, something of a mea culpa, an argument for the sanctity of the breathing human individual against the increasingly anonymous virtual crowd. "Trolling is not a string of isolated incidents," Lanier argued, "but the status quo in the online world." He suggested "drive-by anonymity", in which posters create a pseudonym in order to promote a particularly violent point of view, threatened to undermine human communication in general. "To have substantial exchange, you need to be fully present. That is why facing one's accuser is a fundamental right of the accused."

We rightly hear a great deal about the potential of social media and websites to spread individual freedom, as evidenced during the Arab spring and elsewhere. Less is written about their capacity to reinforce pack identities and mob rule, though clearly that is also part of that potential.

Social psychologist Tom Postmes has been disturbed by the coarsening of debate around issues such as racial integration in his native Netherlands, a polarisation that he suggests has grown directly from the fashionable political incorrectness of particular websites where anonymity is guaranteed. "There is some evidence to suggest that the mainstream conservative media even cuts politically correct or moderate posts from websites in favour of the extremes," he says. "The tone of the public debate around immigration has diminished enormously in these forums."

One effect of "deindividuation" is a polarisation within groups in which like-minded people typically end up in more extreme positions because they gain credibility by exaggerating loosely held prejudices. You can see that in the bloggers trying to outdo one another with pejoratives about Stewart Lee. This has the effect of shifting norms: extremism becomes acceptable. As Lanier argues: "I worry about the next generation of young people around the world growing up with internet-based technology that emphasises crowd aggregation... will they be more likely to succumb to pack dynamics when they come of age?" The utopian tendency is to believe that social media pluralises and diversifies opinion; most of the evidence suggests that it is just as likely, when combined with anonymity, to reinforce groupthink and extremism.

A lot of this comes down to the politics of anonymity, a subject likely to greatly exercise the minds of legislators as our media becomes increasingly digitised, and we rely more and more on mostly unaccountable and easily manipulated sources – from TripAdvisor to Twitter feeds to blog gossip – for our information.

One simple antidote to this seems to rest in the very old-fashioned idea of standing by your good name. Adopt a pseudonym and you are not putting much of yourself on the line. Put your name to something and your words are freighted with responsibility. Arthur Schopenhauer wrote well on the subject 160 years ago: "Anonymity is the refuge for all literary and journalistic rascality," he suggested. "It is a practice which must be completely stopped. Every article, even in a newspaper, should be accompanied by the name of its author; and the editor should be made strictly responsible for the accuracy of the signature. The freedom of the press should be thus far restricted; so that when a man publicly proclaims through the far-sounding trumpet of the newspaper, he should be answerable for it, at any rate with his honour, if he has any; and if he has none, let his name neutralise the effect of his words. And since even the most insignificant person is known in his own circle, the result of such a measure would be to put an end to two-thirds of the newspaper lies, and to restrain the audacity of many a poisonous tongue."

The internet amplifies Schopenhauer's trumpet many times over. Though there are repressive regimes when anonymity is a prerequisite of freedom, and occasions in democracies when anonymity must be preserved, it is clear when those reservations might apply. Generally, though, who should be afraid to stand up and put their name to their words? And why should anyone listen if they don't?