An End to Trolling: A New Etiquette for the Internet
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Social media has revolutionized how we speak to each other. However, our overwhelming focus on how we are connecting has obscured critical issues about the content of our conversations on social media. It is possible to acknowledge the many wonders of the digital revolution—the ease of finding friends, the delight in uncovering new sources of information, the humor in many cat videos—while still recognizing that much of what we say to each other is foul, profane, obnoxious, pornographic, threatening, and misogynistic. Anyone who has spent any time on the internet could add similar adjectives.

I had been concerned about what people are saying to each other on social media and the consequences since I started observing its effects on college students when I was an academic administrator. In particular, the social media platform Yik Yak has achieved great prominence on many college campuses and in some high schools. Yik Yak allows anonymous comments on threads but is designed so that only people within a five mile radius of a school can post. It was launched in November 2013 and soon became the ninth most downloaded social media app in the US.

Much of Yik Yak’s content is about what you expect from college students: how much I drank last night, where the best restaurant is, what is happening to the local athletic teams. However, much of it is also obnoxious and includes comments on other students’ appearance (who is “hot,” who is not is a perennial), sexual predilections, and

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popularity. It can be used as a platform for insulting, shaming, or ostracizing fellow students.

I was especially impressed by the hold that Yik Yak in particular and social media in general had on students during a sit-in that roughly 150 students held in the Admissions Office of Colgate University in 2014 while I was president. In the midst of students telling very emotional and difficult stories about the difficulties that they face in college due to their racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background or sexual orientation, an occasional student would shout out “Want to hear what they are saying about us on Yik Yak?” Inevitably, the comment was not very positive about the protesters. Finally, one of the students stated that they should tell their own stories and there were no further references to the social platform. However, it was a learning experience for me as to how much attention students paid to anonymous social media even in the midst of an action designed formally to provide their own narratives.

Eventually, Colgate faculty, in a wonderful reaction, took over Yik Yak for a few days by posting supportive and helpful messages like “Exams are in a few days. Get enough sleep.” And, importantly, they signed their name because they recognized their responsibility as educators. Of course, since the faculty are adults and had lives that did not heavily depend on social media, eventually they moved on and the platform reverted to what it was.

**Neither Libertarian nor Censor**

In addressing the issue of developing an etiquette for the internet, I want to occupy a difficult and tenuous space. Those who helped found and theorize about the web were fierce proponents of expression who deliberately chose to ignore what was
actually said on the internet. For instance, John Perry Barlow in his 1996 “A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace,” wrote, “In our world, all the sentiments and expressions of humanity, from the debasing to the angelic, are parts of a seamless whole, the global conversation of bits.”

On the other hand, many who are concerned about what is on the web want to block it perhaps by adopting censorious software. Or they want to create speech codes on college campuses or develop “safe spaces” where people are protected. I am opposed to these steps. I was asked to block access to Yik Yak on the college network (students could have still accessed it on their cell phones) but refused since I did not think that colleges should be taking that kind of action. I believe that the more speech, the better and that most obnoxious speech and even what others often call hate speech is usually protected, using the traditional tough tests set by the courts in this country.

Thus, I am a fierce proponent of free expression and I am really concerned about what is being said on the internet. I believe that there are things you can say on the internet that, nonetheless, you should not. In the age where there is an arms race to be the most shocking, this is not a particularly well occupied position, although it is probably the belief of a great number of Americans.

Put more baldly, and to situate myself in some great political traditions, with rights come responsibilities. We have not really thought through our responsibilities when it comes to the web.

The Problem with Cyberspace

It has been, from the start, obvious that there was a problem with the tone of cyberspace. Lawyer and author Mike Godwin’s law that, “As an online discussion
grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one” was published in 1990, practically prehistoric in internet terms.

That Playboy decided to stop publishing nude pictures because pornography is so ubiquitous that few will pay for it is a general indication of where we are today. Interestingly, the magazine’s owners decided that there was still scarcity value in well-written articles.

More scientific studies also indicate that the tone of social media is a great concern to many Americans. The 2013 study Civility in America sponsored by Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate, found that:

- 95% of respondents believe that here is a problem with civility in America. Of course, this poll was done before the deepening of the crisis of race relations in America and the 2016 election campaign.
- 70% believe that it is a crisis of civility.
- 50% believe that the tone on You Tube, Facebook and Blogs is uncivil and almost that many believe that of Twitter.

The study concludes: “The Internet may be a leading cause of incivility because of how frequently Americans are experiencing incivility online, which is reaching an average of nearly nine times a week.”

An even tougher point was put on what I believe may be the most important recent book on social media, Nancy Jo Sales, American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers. Sales makes an important argument that social media is really the first activity that most American girls do together. After all, 88% of girls have
access to cell phones; 73% have smart phones; and 24% report being on those phones “almost constantly.”

Sales’ documents how American girls are exposed to pornography, demeaning content, and ridicule online. As one girl said, “Social media is destroying our lives.” Yet when asked the inevitable question about getting off, another said, “Because then we would have no life.”

As an aside, much of what is written about young people as “digital natives” and the rest as “digital migrants” is nonsense. The tactile manipulation of devices does not obviate the fact that many young people are adrift in the digital world while many adults are quite satisfied with how they use the internet.

It is worth quoting Sales at length about the problem American girls face: “So much had changed in the lives of these girls compared with girls who came before them. And yet, as they often said, there were no rules for how to behave in this new social media landscape, no guide for them to know how to respond to the way others were behaving and treating them.”

Social media also has an effect on our national conversation. Digital natives have grown up in a world where you can defriend anyone who disagrees with you and use the most degratory language to shame others without sanction. Is it any surprise that when these students arrive on college campus they are not immediately gratified that others who disagree with them are now across the hall? The crisis of civility that we now see being played out on college campuses is a reflection of how young people have witnessed social interactions since they were young.
More generally, the coarseness of our national conversation, especially around the 2016 election, can be explained in part by politicians simply catching up to where the tone of the national conversation has been for some time.

Every generation decries the manners of the young. However, now the manners truly may be different. For example, men have always written things on bathroom stalls that are demeaning to women and sometimes to a particular woman. In the past, some others would have seen this graffiti before it was erased or covered over. However, social media allows these misogynistic utterances to be broadcast to a huge number of people instantly.

A War on Anonymity

How can we address the crisis of civility in our society that is driven by social media? Certainly, the tech community has not been particularly responsive. The strong libertarian vain that was apparent when the internet was created persists. Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen’s 2013 book, The New Digital Age—as compelling a discussion of the likely future of the internet as can be found—did not focus on the quality of conversation on the internet. Rather, they were, in this area, primarily concerned with privacy and security. And they continued to have a great deal of confidence that the internet would fix itself: “The best thing anyone can do to improve the quality of life around the world is to drive connectivity and technological opportunity.”

Schmidt by late 2015 had evolved. In a New York Times oped he argued sensibly that, “technology doesn’t work on its own” and importantly that “societies are built one value, and one bargain, at a time.” However, he does not take that very far, suggesting, somewhat contradictory, that there is a technological solution: “We should
build tools to help de-escalate tensions on social media---sort of like spell-checkers, but for hate and harassment.” That will probably have the same impact as the ubiquitous checkers have had on spelling and grammar on the internet.

Social media’s main characteristics are that it is faceless, fast, universally accessible, and scaleable. Of these, the only one that can really be challenged is anonymity. All of the others are driven by technology that once unleashed is not going to stop until everyone is connected all the time.

My major suggestion is that there should be an all-out offensive against anonymity. Posts, tweets, blogs, and pictures should only be taken seriously, should only be viewed, if the author is willing to take responsibility. I have a sneaking suspicion that there is still enough social capital in our society that people will not write things if there name is attached to them. And, if people shun anonymous speech, the bullies and misogynists will either slowly disappear because they can no longer provoke or simply endlessly insult one another.

Of course, anonymous speech is protected speech. I do not think that we want to stop whistle blowers from having avenues to report misdeeds or Russian dissidents who want to oppose Putin.

However, anonymity these days is much more likely to be associated with the student who circulates pictures taken when another student has passed out to everyone in high school than with noble dissident fighting oppression.

Our message should be incessantly to everyone, starting with young people, that it does not count unless you put your name on it.
Over time, there has been progress in fighting some forms of anonymity. There has been a gradual evolution of the comments section of newspapers to require names. Twitter has begun to offer verified accounts. Margaret Sullivan, as public editor of the New York Times, waged a somewhat successful war against anonymous sourcing that was sometimes little more than gossip.

However, more can and should be done. There should be constant messaging that anonymity is not acceptable on social media platforms where it is likely to do the most damage. Eventually, we should equate anonymity with hardcore pornography: something that our laws permit but which our society is not particularly proud of and which is not socially acceptable in a great many circumstances.

Venture capital has a particular role in delegitimizing anonymous content. The renowned firm Sequoia Capital led the $61 million B round of funding for Yik Yak. I believe that the very affluent men and women on Sandhill Road have more than enough opportunity to make money that they do not have to fund something which has been a terrible for so many people. If they were funding hardcore pornography, these venture capitalists would not be socially acceptable. Of course, if undergraduates want to build yet another anonymous social media app, they can but they might have different ideas if they did not have so much capital waiting.

In addition, we should constantly try to highlight positive examples of how people discuss controversial issues with each other. For instance, in 2016, the Newseum, in conjunction with the Knight Foundation, is sponsoring a project on civil discourse on college campuses. Certainly, there have been a large number of examples of uncivil conversations on campus where basic precepts of free expression have been
challenged, notably at Emory, University of Missouri, Yale, among others. However, there are four thousand colleges and universities in this country so any story can be told by sighting a handful of examples. The Newseum will be recruiting student teams from across the country to tell, via video (a preferred medium for young people), how their school handled a controversial issue in a civil manner.

There are other examples that can be highlighted. In a sad and pathetic election season, the brightest spot in civility was in September 2015 when Senator Bernie Sanders went to Liberty University, the school founded by Reverend Jerry Falwell. He made his case while acknowledging real disagreements with the audience on abortion and gay rights. I am not ideologically aligned with Senator Sanders but I respected him for going to a place where he was not going to get many votes. And the students, many of whom fervently believe that Sanders is an enabler for the mass murder of unborn children, listened respectfully and without interruption. They did not need safe spaces if any got upset with what Sanders said.

We Can Change the Future

Connectivity is a poorly used word. We have focused on the technical means of getting everyone on the web without nearly much as to what they are saying to each other.

However, I believe that it is possible to change the way we talk to each other. Social scientists use the term preference cascade to describe a process of sudden change when there are widespread attitudes against something but where it is not clear to each person what others think. Once they realize, as in East Germany when everyone suddenly understood that everyone else also viewed the Wall as illegitimate,
dramatic action is possible. Given the widespread unhappiness with social media, a compelling campaign that focuses on reversing the pathologies of anonymity could garner surprisingly strong support quickly.

In recent years, etiquette has changed in important ways. It is no longer acceptable in many parts of our society to make outright racist or sexist statements. That is different from saying that racism and sexism in our society has been eliminated. I don't know, frankly, how much has actually changed. But I do know that the way that many people speak to each other in public has transformed over time. We can similarly delegitimize anonymous postings that, while protected under the First Amendment, do not need to be read, much less given legitimacy and credibility.