Good manners do count - Time to end the invectives of anonymous Web users

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One of the more civilized ideas advanced in recent years is guidelines of civility for people who post comments online.

Anyone who has spent any amount of time on the Internet, especially when browsing what has come to be known as the blogosphere, knows that politeness often gets left by the wayside. Because the Internet allows people to hide behind anonymity, too many take that as license to bully, threaten and, generally, spew hatred.

The idea for civility on the Web comes from Tim O'Reilly, a conference promoter and book publisher, and Jimmy Wales, creator of the communal online encyclopedia Wikipedia. As reported Monday in The New York Times, the two have been working to create guidelines - common-sense ones - for online discussions and debate.

Anything that brings more civility to any part of the world should be embraced. Unfortunately, those who hide behind the anonymity of the Web claim they are exercising their free-speech rights. Robert Scoble, who blogs about technology, told The New York Times that the proposed civility rules make him uncomfortable: "As a writer, it makes me feel like I live in Iran."

The belief that the First Amendment guarantees people the right to unfettered speech results from the inability of too many people to understand the difference between freedoms and rights. People have the freedom to do what they want, but they do not have the right to do so without suffering consequences.

The easy illustration of this is the example cited by Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes.

"The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing panic," Holmes wrote in a 1919 majority opinion on free speech.

In other words, speech that can be uttered freely does not preclude the speaker from being punished if the words libel, slander or incite hatred that leads to violence.

The idea that anything goes not merely on the Internet, but in any speech, stems partly from the rise of talk radio. Most have never been forums for reasoned debate, but platforms for bullying, blustering and casting aspersions without ever touching on the issue at hand.

That type of speech spilled over in the public forum, with many on the right and left greeting arguments for or against a particular issue with the inane pronouncement, "That's just (insert political spectrum here) (insert favorite expletive deleted here)."

All such a comment shows is that those who must resort to it never had a viable argument to make in the first place.

Trying to instill civility on the Web or in the public forum also is not censorship - another concept most people don't fully understand. Censorship exists only when a ruling body prohibits speech, written or spoken, deemed objectionable from all forums. It is not censorship if your letter to the editor is not published. It is not censorship if a comment you posted online is removed. So many forums exist in this nation that allow people to express their views, being snubbed by one does not rise to the level of censorship.

Civility also doesn't exclude passionate and forceful speech. Listen to the speeches of Winston Churchill, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy. Passion comes from within, from a broad understanding of the power of language, from a willingness to speak directly to people's reason and emotions. Forcefulness comes from asserting one's position in strong, active terms - not merely the most profane.

Can civilized speech that embraces passion but rejects invectives, that allows for forceful arguments but rejects menacing talk actually be brought to the Web?

The guidelines put together by O'Reilly and Wales call for a voluntary application of the guidelines, not from the people who hide behind anonymity, but from those who host Web pages. It's much like inviting people into your home. They must abide by the rules of your household or they will be quickly shown the door.

David Weinberger, a blogger who also is a fellow for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School, supports the proposed code of conduct. He told The New York Times: "The aim of the code is not to homogenize the Web, but make clear the informal rules that are already in place."

Much like the Wild West era in American history, the Internet will be tamed. That won't get rid of those who won't abide by the rules, just as the taming of the West didn't get rid of all outlaws.

For those who still don't have a clue on how being civil online can embrace passionate argument and forceful speech without resorting to

profanity, may the almighty numinous condemn you into the eternal heat regions of the underworld.

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