

Introduction to Cyber Ethics, Security and Safety

Without driver's ed., you wouldn't know how to operate a car safely. For example, you might not know who has the right-of-way at a four-way stop or whether or not you can turn right at a red light. Because we know there are specific rules of the road and knowing them ensures that we drive safely, everyone on the road is better served when drivers are more knowledgeable and more competent. However, so many teenagers "drive" their way around the Internet without any information on how to navigate it safely. Learning more about cyber ethics, safety and security will help you conduct and protect yourself better online. This four-week project is designed to be a "driver's ed." for Internet users, helping you successfully navigate the speedbumps you can encounter online.

Lesson 1: Cyber Ethics

What is cyber ethics? Put simply, it is a code of conduct when using the Internet. Because of the nature of the Internet, however, there is no standard code of conduct. The individual user is able to choose what kind of websites or blogs to create, what comments post to on others' sites, how to treat other users, and what files or information to download. In fact, that is what many people love about the Internet; they find the "anything goes" mentality freeing. But that kind of free spirit comes with a price. Though many Internet users conduct themselves in respectful ways, others do not, and still others are actively seeking to steal from others or endanger users. And how do you draw that line?

Activity:

1. As a class, discuss how you feel and behave when posting comments or photos to your favorite social site (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, etc.). Do you treat others online the same way you would in person? Should there be rules governing behavior on the Internet? Why or why not?
2. Read the USA TODAY article *Rudeness, threats make the Web a cruel world*. What is your experience with rudeness on the Web?
3. As a class, list reasons why people feel free to be cruel on the Internet. Do you think Internet haters engage in similar hateful behavior in person? Why or why not? How do you draw the line between free speech, guaranteed by the First Amendment, and ensuring respect for other human beings?
4. Get into groups of three. Pretend that you are part of the ethics board of MySpace, and it is your job to ensure that MySpace does not promote unethical or hateful behavior on its site.
5. Brainstorm a list of between 5 and 10 rules of conduct that you'll require MySpace users to follow.
6. Then outline why the rules are necessary and how you will enforce the rules.
7. Share your list and plan with the class.

Discussion:

What rules did all the groups have in common? Do you choose to follow these rules when conducting yourself on the Internet? Why or why not?

Cyber Ethics

Rudeness, threats make the Web a cruel world

Sites wrestle with balancing free speech, civility

By Janet Kornblum
USA TODAY

Nearly two years ago, the person posted rude comments about a video she had posted on YouTube, says Brodack, 21, of San Francisco, whose videos show her lip-syncing and creating characters. "It was shocking to me. Why would someone want to be so mean for no reason?"

Why, indeed? Nasty comments, sometimes even death threats, have become ubiquitous on virtually any website that seeks to engage readers in discussion.

"Ur ugly u suk and u should die," says a typical comment beneath one of Brodack's many videos. Such vulgar messages have inspired heated discussions, and video responses, on YouTube.

The Internet always has had an anything-goes atmosphere where flame wars and harsh language are common. Now there are more places than ever for people to spout their thoughts — often with relative anonymity — thanks to the explosion in blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, and comments sections on nearly every news site.

But a series of incidents, including one involving a female technology blogger who briefly went into hiding after receiving sexually explicit death threats, has made online incivility an increasingly hot topic and fueled a debate over how to balance free speech with social etiquette.

"The information superhighway has become the mean streets of cyurbia," says Silicon Valley technology forecaster Paul Saffo. "It's just gotten steadily worse.

"If cocktail parties were like the Internet, half the people would come home every night dripping wet from glasses of Chardonnay tossed in their faces," Saffo says. "There are two ways to get famous in cyberspace: Say something clever and memorable, or say something outrageous. And unfortunately, it's a lot easier to be outrageous than clever and memorable."

On many online sites, people are kind and supportive and have formed virtual communities.

"People on the Net are overwhelmingly trustworthy and civil to each other," says Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist, the popular community bulletin board site. "But

there's always fanatic and crazy people out there."

Like many sites, Craigslist relies largely on readers to police behavior: If enough people flag an ad or comment as inappropriate, it's removed automatically or reviewed.

Many sites, including those operated by newspapers, remove offensive comments reported by readers or staff members.

"They want to allow free speech, but at the same time, they want to do it in a respectable way," says Ellyn Angelotti, interactivity editor at the Poynter Institute, which does continuing education for journalists. "They want to make sure it's not turning their other users away."

'It really crossed the line'

Several newspapers, wary of outrageous posts by readers, have banned all comments during major news events. That's what happened in April at The Roanoke Times in Virginia, which shut down a message board it had set up to discuss the deadly shootings at Virginia Tech.

Initial comments were "very civil," says online editor John Jackson, but

they quickly turned ugly. "All of a sudden, we started noticing the nastier comments."

He can't recall exactly what they said but remembers they were laced with profanity. "It was really a no-brainer decision to take it down because it really crossed the line so terribly," Jackson says.

At The Orange County Register, editors had to remind readers that the rules of discussion required civil conversation after several nasty and often profane comments were posted in response to a March story about an obese woman who had given birth to a baby she hadn't known she was carrying.

The newspaper now removes a comment after two — rather than three — complaints from readers. It also uses trained retirees to monitor the boards, says deputy website editor Jeff Light.

Although many of the comments were "horrible and unacceptable," Light says such feedback from readers — even when it's rude — can be enlightening to journalists.

"I was looking at it and said, 'Oh look, these people are enraged by the way we had looked at the story.' Unfortunately that was all lost because their rage was so ugly and inarticulate. But I still think there was value in there. Not everybody sees things the way a middle-of-the-road, liberal newspaper reporter sees things. They see things in many different ways, and that's why we have comments."

The *Sacramento Bee* recently decided to do away with anonymous comments and requires readers to use their real names.

Michael Bugeja, director of the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University, says that is the least newspapers should do. "If you want enlightened conversations on your site, people have to use their real names," he says, adding that news sites also should clearly differentiate comments from stories.

USA TODAY, which launched comments boards in March, requires people to register and provide a valid e-mail address before they are allowed to post comments. The newspaper also uses filters to catch profanity in postings and asks readers to report abuse. Repeat offenders may be blocked from posting on the site.

"We're in the infancy of this," says USA TODAY executive editor Kinsey Wilson.

"The hope is the intelligence of the crowd will help inform the news in the long run. Everybody's experimenting with this and trying to find how to make it more valuable, how to keep it civil and how to keep it more constructive."

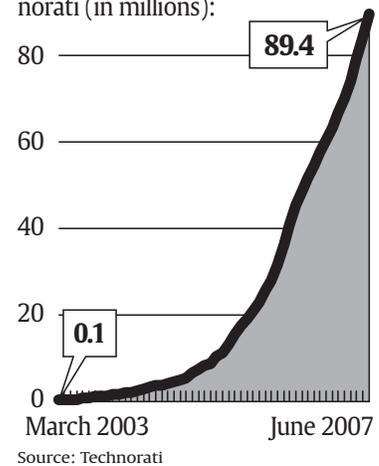
But sometimes, as Newmark says, people go a little crazy. On the Web, writing under pseudonyms can allow people to feel free to say whatever they want with little fear of retribution, says Judith Martin, who writes the syndicated Miss Manners column.

Anonymity on the Internet is relative, however.

People who use pseudonyms while posting on websites actually may be trackable through their Internet Protocol address, a unique designation that allows computers to communicate with others on the Internet. Still, most

Blogs take off

The blogosphere has grown from 100,000 blogs in March 2003 to nearly 73 million in March 2007, according to blog-tracker Technorati. Today the company says it counts some 93.8 million blogs worldwide. Blogs tracked by Technorati (in millions):



By Marcy E. Mullins, USA TODAY

sites won't try to track someone unless there's a legal reason, such as a subpoena.

Even when people use their real names, they don't always feel the ramifications of their words: The online world puts blinders on us.

"Without seeing the immediate consequences of rudeness on the recipient's face or in their voice, it is easier to cross boundaries," says Jeffrey Cole, director of the Center for the Digital Future at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication.

People "forget that there are real people reading what they write," Newmark says.

This month, several people, some of them anonymous, went to great pains to post online spoilers of the

new Harry Potter book before it was released.

Some said they did so because they hated Potter author J.K. Rowling's books and the publicity they generate. Others did it for kicks.

"It was fun for myself at the expense of others," one 17-year-old from Pittsburgh said when contacted by USA TODAY.

A 'frightening' level of hate

The spoilers were irritating, but they were harmless compared with some of the personal attacks that have popped up on blogs.

Kathy Sierra, an author and computer-game developer from Denver, kept a popular blog about designing software.

But after receiving a series of sexually graphic and threatening posts this year, including death threats and a picture of her neck next to a noose, Sierra was so shaken she suspended writing the blog in March. She also canceled a public appearance, saying she was afraid to leave home.

As a longtime blogger, she says, she had confronted "trolls," people who intentionally write provocative things to spark a reaction. But these threats "crossed the line to be frightening."

"Even if the chances are really low that it will carry over into real life, it's not worth the risk. It's frightening that people hate just based on visibility. There's a lot of hate out there. Why? Nobody really knows."

She did call local police but didn't have enough evidence to pursue charges. The poster was anonymous and, as she says, "any

halfway decent hacker can make themselves undiscoverable."

'People come out swinging'

Perhaps the Internet simply is reflecting an increasing rudeness in everyday life as displayed on talk radio, TV talk shows and in political discourse.

"Society has gotten very abrasive," Martin says. "In the slightest altercation, people come out swinging and swearing."

But the online world is markedly different from the offline one, Martin says. In real life, people have learned there are rules they dare not break. For instance, racism is now considered intolerable, she says, pointing out that radio shock jock Don Imus was fired in April for a racist comment about the Rutgers women's basketball team.

Online, people feel free to express all sorts of otherwise socially unacceptable thoughts — often without repercussions. "Civilization is about thinking before you express everything," Martin says.

She and others say online nastiness should be reined in. "When people find they are held accountable for what they say or write, then they tend to want to restrain themselves," she says.

Tim O'Reilly of O'Reilly Media, a technology book publisher in Sebastopol, Calif., responded to the threats to his friend Sierra by calling for a code of conduct for blogs. He has urged bloggers to ban anonymous comments and to delete threatening or libelous comments.

"There is a kind of ethic on the

Internet that says it's OK to be abusive, or to have to tolerate it, in the interest of free speech," O'Reilly says. "It's a mistake."

Recently, O'Reilly Media has "shifted our focus from a code of conduct to developing technology that will allow blog readers to participate in moderating comments," says O'Reilly spokeswoman Sara Winge. "We think that's more likely to get widely adopted than a written code that requires agreement from bloggers."

Saffo agrees the solution should be technological, "where the network becomes the nanny," he says. "My concern is that this is not a self-correcting phenomenon. The bad will drive out the good."

On YouTube, video posters can control who sees their work and who can comment on it. They can keep videos private, allowing only invited guests to see them. They also can moderate or shut down comments on public videos.

Brodack leaves her comment board alone because she values feedback and "to just remove things would be an endless battle."

She has decided the best thing to do is simply ignore the nastiness as much as possible.

"I get things like death threats or, 'If I ever see you I'm going to kill you,'" Brodack says. "There is always foul language included. It's very immature. For every 20 positive comments, I get one negative one. ... I just kind of ignore them. It's the same thing over and over. It's a waste of time, truthfully."

Contributing: Maria Puente