

The majority of us were taught the value of politeness from a very young age. Good manners were rewarded, while poor manners were cause for appropriate punishment. But with the advent of the Internet, it seems all those hard-learned lessons have gone out the window. Is the concept of civility on the Internet an oxymoron? I don't believe so, and I am not alone. In an adaptation of *Ventura County Star* writer Richard Larsen's article "Good Manners Do Count," Larsen says computer book publisher Tim O'Reilly and Wikipedia creator Jimmy Wales both call for a "voluntary application of common-sense guidelines," from those who maintain websites. But, Larsen says, having such guidelines in place does not mean that people cannot exercise their right to free speech, nor does it mean that civilized speech excludes passion or force-filled speech. It also doesn't mean that those who abuse their rights will go unpunished, any more than a child who forgets to say "Please" may not get what they desire.

Too many people with a poor grasp on Constitutional law believe that they can say whatever they want on the Internet, and they cannot be held liable, punished, or face consequences. After all, speech on the Internet is protected, is it not? Well, no, not completely. It took decades for commercial speech to receive the sort of protections it has today, so why should speech on the Internet, which has been around for only a fraction of the time that commercial speech has, be treated so differently? In fact, much of the speech on the Internet has the same rules applied to it as speech anywhere else-- if it libels or incites violence, it is not protected speech, and the person behind those words can be punished.

Recently, the popular journaling site that I am a member of, LiveJournal.com, caused quite a stir when it permanently suspended roughly 500 journals that they believed had a connection to pedophilia, or other "distasteful" activities. However, their sweeping action resulted in a dearth of innocent journals getting swept up in the chaos, including journals belonging to rape, abuse, or child molestation survivors, fiction communities, including a Spanish-speaking community devoted to discussing the novel *Lolita*.

Many people believed that LiveJournal was unfairly restricting their right to free speech, but what they didn't realize is that LiveJournal, as a privately-owned company, has the right to set its own rules regarding acceptable content. For the most part, LiveJournal has no restrictions regarding content other than what it may be held liable for, which includes anything libelous or that incites violence.

Nonetheless, many journals believed they had been libeled by LiveJournal's actions, causing a variety of groups to get labeled as pedophiles or "monsters" due to the nature of the content discussed in those groups. Those people came forward en masse, flooding the official LiveJournal news community's posts with comments, maxing out the three most recent posts with over 15,000 comments on the mass suspensions. These people spoke passionately and forcefully about their interests and their rights to discuss them, and did so by continuing what they had been doing in their journals prior to the suspensions. LiveJournal unsuspending a great deal of journals where speech had not been libelous or incitement to crime, and made clear that their efforts to promote a safe community for all, especially children, were not an attempt at censorship. Still, after the uproar caused by LiveJournal's suspensions-without-warning, many people felt LiveJournal wasn't establishing guidelines for civility, but was oppressing people's thoughts, ideas, and potentially controversial opinions.

Today, a number of the original 500 journals remain suspended, mostly due to clear violations of LiveJournal's Terms of Service, which all users must agree to prior to creating a journal. Those who knowingly broke those rules must come to the understanding that there is no all-encompassing "right" to say whatever you want, whenever you want, and not face consequences. This, of course, include those who paid LiveJournal.

As a journal and community owner, a website maintainer, and someone who was taught proper manners as a child, I feel that LiveJournal is well within legal boundaries if it establishes guidelines to promote civility and a sense of community. No one is being coerced into using LiveJournal, and if one feels LiveJournal's guidelines are too

restrictive, they can take their business elsewhere. However, I hope that more web hosts, whether they are individuals or large corporations, will see the benefit of establishing such guidelines, rather than worrying that their enforcement will drive business away. If more individuals are polite to one another in a particular online environment due to simple guidelines, they are likely to carry that polite attitude elsewhere, and influence others, even on sites without “politeness rules” or guidelines. It must be a personal choice how to behave in the presence of others, even online, because while there may be no mom to wash your mouth out with soap, your words will be preserved for as long as the Internet lives, for all to see.