Chapter 5

Civility or Censorship?
An Examination of the Reaction to a Proposed Code of Conduct for Bloggers

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ABSTRACT

When two high-profile social media evangelists proposed a code of conduct for bloggers in April of 2007, the idea triggered a heated debate in cyberspace. Critics charged that the draft code contradicted the principles of free speech and expression that make blogs ideal spaces for uncensored discussion. However, proponents of the Internet self-regulation argued that formally adopted rules of conduct are necessary for bloggers to serve as a step towards a virtual civil society. The present analysis, grounded in a civil society theoretical framework and the U.S. tradition of media self-regulation, documents how Web users can routinely take advantage of the Internet’s open architecture for self-expression. Rather than attempting to enforce a blanket code of conduct, the author maintains that bloggers’ self-moderation based on generally acceptable content policies can foster inclusivity on blog pages and can help move the blogosphere to a virtual civil society.

INTRODUCTION

Constant uncensored social interaction is among the characteristics that distinguish social media from traditional mass media such as print, radio and television. On these platforms of traditional mass media, the conversation is mostly linear. By contrast, social media are uniquely interactive, allowing readers to generate responses nearly simultaneously as they retrieve content. Due to its built-in interactivity, the second generation Internet or Web 2.0 provides a limitless space for people to share diverse opinions and to engage in often-heated discourse. If the ideal virtual civil

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society were to be realized, digital citizens would transcend their own personal interests for the sake of the common good. In reality, however, the anonymous nature of modern cyberculture tempts some Internet users, particularly bloggers, to abandon the rules of civility they typically follow offline. Technology book writer and videogame designer Kathy Sierra, who maintained a blog called *Creating Passionate Users*, learned this through first-hand experience when she began receiving threats and disturbing anonymous comments on her blog. In April 2007, Sierra discovered someone posting to another blog a photoshopped picture of her with a noose (BBC News, 2007; Rawlinson, 2007; Sierra, 2007a). The image was followed by a comment from “Joey,” who wrote that “the only thing Kathy has to offer me is that noose in her neck size.” These and other similar disturbing images and comments with veiled threats were posted and reposted multiple times in the blogosphere.

As a blogger, Sierra was accustomed to dealing with cyberbullying and anonymous trolls—that is, users who post inflammatory anonymous comments in hopes of baiting others into responding (Webopedia, 2007). Still, violent threats and their apparent coordination frightened Sierra enough that she reported online harassment to local police in Boulder, Colorado. Furthermore, subsequent to national and international news media reports of Sierra’s ordeal, someone disclosed her home address and social security number online (Schwartz, 2008). In response to harassment, Sierra discontinued her blog and called off public appearances including the 2007 O’Reilly Emerging Technology Conference. In the wake of the online threats, Sierra cancelled all speaking engagements and commented, “I am afraid to leave my yard… I will never be the same” (BBC News, 2007). Consequently, defendants of unrestricted Internet freedoms and proponents of greater personal accountability began debating the limits of free speech on the Internet and the blogosphere.

Two high-profile technologists concluded that this episode of online harassment warranted a far-reaching response. Tim O’Reilly, a technology promoter and publisher credited with coining the term “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly, 2005), and Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales proposed a 7-point Blogger’s Code of Conduct meant to filter abusive and threatening comments that characterize some online discourse. Wales and O’Reilly (2007a) introduced the guidelines this way:

*We celebrate the blogosphere because it embraces frank and open conversation. But frankness does not have to mean lack of civility. We present this Blogger Code of Conduct in hopes that it helps create a culture that encourages both personal expression and constructive conversation. One can disagree without being disagreeable.*

A primary goal was to convince bloggers that they should not accept behavior “that they wouldn’t tolerate in the physical world” (O’Reilly, 2007a). The reaction from the blogosphere was swift and, characteristically, intense. While a small minority of bloggers welcomed the call for respect and common courtesy on the Internet, many more commentators condemned the notion of codifying ethics for bloggers and expressed resentment over the implication that the blogosphere is “broken and misguided” (Furrier, 2007). With 184 million blogs on the Internet (Technorati, 2008) around that time, regulation would have had an impact on billions of online conversations daily.

This chapter explores the inherent tension between preserving the principles of free speech that make blogs ideal forums for deliberation and debate, and the blogosphere’s parallel goal of providing a virtual civil society. The study examines reactions to the proposed blogger’s code of conduct and, by drawing on civil society and public sphere literature, takes a theoretically grounded approach to analyzing these responses. The author concludes that community moderation and terms of audience engagement established by individual