

# **Disintermediation of News & Comment**

*Essays Published in Various Newsletters*

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# 1 Introduction to Disintermediation

One of the battlespaces of information warfare is the cognitive domain: knowledge, perception, attitudes and mood. For example, military campaigns have long used propaganda and misinformation to influence both the military decisions of the enemy and to discourage soldiers and civilians. In the Second World War, for example, the Nazis used radio broadcasts into Britain to spread false information about the progress of the war; conversely, the Allies broadcast to the peoples of the Axis powers to blame the governments, but not the population, for the war, thus attempting to drive a wedge between civilians and their regimes.

In more recent years, there was a scandal in the USA in October 1986 about a reputed disinformation campaign during the Reagan administration in which government officials were accused of misleading the press to convey false information to Libyan dictator Qaddafi about an imminent attack. And of course currently there's a major division in the USA between those who argue that the administration deliberately misled the American people into a pre-emptive attack on Iraq versus those who suggest that the decision was based on incorrect information (or, for that matter, was correct despite the failure to find corroborative evidence of weapons of mass destruction).

Prof. Daniel Kuehl, PhD, is the distinguished Professor and Director of the Information Strategies Concentration Program at the Information Resources Management College of National Defense University in Fort McNair, Washington DC. A frequent contributor to scholarly analysis of information warfare, Dr Kuehl was the keynote speaker on Thursday the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2004 at the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Federal Information Systems Security Educators' Association at the University of Maryland University College. After his lecture, we got into a discussion about the information warfare implications of a couple of trends in modern society: disintermediation and the lack of critical thinking in the population at large.

Disintermediation in general is defined by the Webopedia as "Removing the middleman. The term is a popular buzzword used to describe many Internet -based businesses that use the World Wide Web to sell products directly to customers rather than going through traditional retail channels. By eliminating the middlemen, companies can sell their products cheaper and faster. Many people believe that the Internet will revolutionize the way products are bought and sold, and disintermediation is the driving force behind this revolution."

Disintermediation in the distribution of news is the phenomenon of reducing gate-keepers in the flow of information from provider to user. For example, Matt Drudge is free to spread unsubstantiated rumors to a huge audience without having to bother with the fact-checking that is customary in responsible news media such as reputable newspapers or magazines and some television or radio programs.

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze information skeptically rather than gullibly. For example, people who open unexpected attachments in e-mail from friends are failing to distinguish among different targets of trust:

- Trust in the authenticity of the FROM line of an e-mail message (which may not, in fact, correctly identify the source);
- Trust in the technical competence of the sender to evaluate the quality of the attachment (which may not, in fact, correlate with how loveable and friendly Aunt Gladys is);
- Trust in the authenticity of the labeling of the attachment (which may not, in fact, really be a document at all but may be an executable);
- Trust in the description and safety of an attachment (which may not, in fact, be a screen saver with frogs).

Now couple disintermediation with a lack of critical thinking. Consider the likely effects of a concerted campaign to, say, spread a number of rumors about major publicly-traded companies. We know that pump 'n' dump schemes have successfully manipulated stock values to the benefit of criminals; why not expect terrorists to apply the same techniques to manipulating the entire stock market? If people are willing to believe and act upon stock tips e-mailed to them by total strangers using spam (even though tiny print clearly states that the junk mailer has been paid to distribute the information), why wouldn't uncritical thinkers cheerfully act on "advice" spread by enemies of the nation?

Similarly, the phenomenon of flash crowds worries me: training people to assemble on command in large numbers at, say, shoe stores, piano showrooms or restaurants for no good reason other than the fun of being part of a huge crowd is a perfect setup for creating an army of willing, mindless drones who will congregate on command at the site of a terrorist attack or at places where their presence will interfere with response to criminal or terrorist activities. Want to rob a bank in peace and quiet? Set up a conflict between two instant crowds to draw the police to an instant riot.

I think that all of us in the IT, network and security fields are used to critical thinking. We have to be to keep up with the flood of technical information and distinguish marketing exaggerations from realistic information. We are used to writing and reading product comparisons, strategy evaluations and management recommendations as part of our work. Let's use our skills to foster critical thinking throughout the educational system. Let's work as volunteers on school boards, in the classroom and in social organizations to introduce critical thinking to children and adults who haven't learned how to distinguish reality from propaganda. Push for curriculum changes to accompany lessons on how to use the Internet with lessons on how to weigh the information found through e-mail and on the Web.

Let's make sure that we're not patsies for an information warfare attack rooted in disintermediated propaganda.

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## 2 Iran, Disintermediation, and Cyberwar

With some justification, skeptics have questioned whether cyberwar is a realistic scenario for concern or merely a scary story to earn funding for security companies and writers. Unfortunately, there are many cases in which journalists and others have leaped to the conclusion that security breaches are examples of cyberwar; recent examples include the Estonian “cyberwar” of 2007 and the attacks on the Church of Scientology in early 2009. <

<http://www.newscientist.com/blog/technology/2008/01/scientology-hacks-cyberwar-or-street.html> >

We may be seeing an illustration of one kind of cyberwar in June 2009 as many readers follow news of the post-election events in Iran with interest and concern. Following a vigorous election campaign in which Mir Hossein Mousavi appeared to have a majority of the voters’ support but not a majority of the reported votes < <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/mousavis-aides-fear-dirty-tricks-could-swing-result-1703226.html> >, the situation after the balloting quickly degenerated into claims and counterclaims of ballot-rigging < <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/15/iran.elections.qa/index.html> > and demonstrations that turned into violent confrontations.<

[http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2009/06/irans\\_disputed\\_election.html](http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2009/06/irans_disputed_election.html) >

Throughout the conflict, electronic communications have been central to the organization of protests and to the attempts of the dictatorial regime to suppress dissent. In particular, the tiny-message network Twitter < <http://twitter.com/> > has been central to the coordination of mass action. Canadian writer Brett Annington has a summary of Twitter’s role in the protests < <http://timestranscript.canadaeast.com/opinion/article/706779> > in which he comments, “Iranian Twitterers, many writing in English, posted photos of huge demonstrations and bloodied protesters throughout the weekend, detailing crackdowns on students at Tehran University and giving out proxy web addresses that let users bypass the Islamic Republic’s censors. | By Monday evening, it had become such a movement that Twitter postponed maintenance scheduled for the wee hours of the morning, California time -- midday Tuesday in Iran. | The maintenance was rescheduled to be between 2-3 p.m. in California which happens to be 1:30 a.m. in Iran. | A couple of Twitter feeds have become virtual media offices for the supporters of Moussavi. One feed, mousavi1388 (1388 is the year in the Persian calendar), is filled with news of protests and exhortations to keep up the fight, in Persian and in English. It has more than 15,000 followers.” He adds that the social networking site Facebook < <http://www.facebook.com/> > has over 50,000 members in the Moussavi fan group.

The government has been fighting back: “Access to networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter and the photography site Flickr have been blocked in Iran, where the government has also been accused of blocking text-messaging, launching denial of service attacks and spreading misinformation to protest communities online.” <

<http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/rizkhan/2009/06/200962281940160238.html> >

Iranians have been bypassing these attempts to shut down their communications; countermeasures include using proxy servers to evade Iranian government Internet blocks.<

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/06/17/MN75188C6K.DTL> > Supporters of the protests have posted lists of suggested countermeasures <

<http://boingboing.net/2009/06/16/cyberwar-guide-for-i.html> >; e.g., they advise Twitter users not to publicize the location of proxy servers, not to rebroadcast information without verifying its origin and authenticity (to circumvent Iranian government propaganda), and to switch Twitter settings to match the geographical location of Tehran and thus make it harder for the government agents to identify local protesters (the “I AM SPARTACUS” defense<

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054331/> >).

So it seems that Professor Phil Agre's emphasis on the importance of disintermediation<  
[http://www.mekabay.com/opinion/critical\\_thinking.pdf](http://www.mekabay.com/opinion/critical_thinking.pdf) > – the removal of institutional barriers to  
mass communications – and the widespread availability of electronic networks really has brought the  
world of cyberwar to reality.

And I don't think that this is as far as cyberwar will go. Keep your attention focused on that screen /  
cell phone / neural implant. . . .

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### 3 Journalistic Responsibility in the Age of the Internet Telephone Game

Information security professionals are concerned with preserving the six fundamental properties of information: confidentiality, control, integrity, authenticity, availability and utility of information. < [http://www.mekabay.com/overviews/hexad\\_ppt.zip](http://www.mekabay.com/overviews/hexad_ppt.zip) > One of the issues we must watch carefully is the publication of inaccurate information in corporate publications that have an Internet presence. Publishing misinformation on the Internet contributes to the global children's game of telephone < <http://wondertime.go.com/create-and-play/article/telephone-game.html> > that now characterizes much of what passes for intelligent discourse on the Web.

Andrew Shapiro, in his book *The Control Revolution: How The Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know* (2000) < <http://www.amazon.com/Control-Revolution-Internet-Individuals-Changing/dp/189162086X> >, wrote in a section about Matt Drudge < <http://www.mediachannel.org/originals/shapiro-drudge.shtml> > as follows:

>Yet misinformation is only really dangerous when there is both an unreliable source and a credulous audience. As the amount of questionable material increases, then, we need to be ever more cautious and skeptical. Indeed, the control revolution is blurring the distinction between news professionals and audiences, forcing us all to deal with the same predicaments. The common challenge is one of exercising self-restraint to prevent the spread of inaccuracies. On the one hand, that means not being the originators of flawed information (though obviously, few of us intend to do that). On the other hand, it means exercising caution as information consumers. Do we blindly believe what we read? Do we weigh the accuracy of different content providers? Do we pass along, without warning, information that we know comes from dubious sources? <

The examples of misinformation spread uncritically among Web sites are uncountable. For example, right-wing extremists < <http://motherjones.com/mojo/2010/10/palin-death-panels-newsmax-health-care> > invented non-existent “death panels” as fear-mongering technique to frighten voters < <http://mediamatters.org/blog/201009210062> >; by November 2010 there were over 12 million hits in GOOGLE for “death panels.” Anyone wanting more examples of media distortion – now spread worldwide instantly through the Web – will find more than they can stomach at Media Matters for America < <http://mediamatters.org/> > and On the Media < <http://www.onthemedial.org/> >.

One of the articles that prompted me to write this column is a review of growing resistance to vaccination in developing nations, in which reporter Vivienne Parry of the Guardian newspaper in England writes that “Rumours about vaccines quickly gain credence in the [I]nternet hothouse, with sites feeding off each other.” < <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/oct/11/vaccination-fears-developing-world-deaths> > As a result of rapidly disseminated misinformation about vaccine safety, increasing numbers of people in poor nations are refusing to allow their children to be vaccinated, “threatening to derail global vaccination programs” and “putting the lives of thousands of children at risk.” However, meta-analysis of extensive research < <http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/?p=7807> > consistently debunks the anti-vaccination rubbish being promulgated by the rumor-mongers attacking public-health programs that use vaccines. These rumor-fueled attacks have resulted in sickness and death for thousands of children worldwide.

The spread of almost instantaneous spread of inaccurate information is one consequence of growing disintermediation in the control of information, as discussed in the 1990s < <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/political.html> > by Professor Phil Agre < <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/> > of the Department of Information Studies at University of California at Los Angeles. Much as the use of movable type in 15<sup>th</sup> century caused a revolution in the availability of information (see for example *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge technology in the first age of print* edited by Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday, 2000 (Routledge, ISBN 0-203-46330-7) < <http://www.amazon.com/Renaissance-Computer-Knowledge-Technology-First/dp/0415220637> >

>). In Chapter 3, “Towards the Renaissance Computer,” Sawday writes, “The book, too, once seemed to help humans to understand their world; and yet, once books had begun to multiply, that world began to appear more uncertain, more unknowable, than ever.”

Ironically, the interconnectedness of the Web and the disintermediation of information flow may be resulting in increasing uncertainty about the accuracy of what we encounter in cyberspace. In addition to doubts about the veracity of pictorial information (see the series on photo manipulation in this column < <http://www.networkworld.com/newsletters/sec/2010/053110sec2.html> >) we must question what we read.

On the whole, such skepticism may not be a bad thing! Questioning is good!

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#### 4 Freedom of Speech Has Nothing To Do With It: Regulating Content in Private Forums

Recently there was a flurry of excitement at my university about a front-page article in the student newspaper written by a student who interviewed three close friends and proceeded to generalize the results of her inquiry to make demeaning comments about a large proportion of the student body. I won't even discuss the comments about faculty that were included in this farcical near-satire of college journalism. As I saw it, the quotations in the article either (1) made the student speakers and the writer look like immature fools or (2) revealed that they really are immature fools. In either case, their inane self-immolations were immediately available online for the world to read. You'll forgive me for choosing not to provide a link here.

The upshot was a wave of anger among some students (I don't know what proportion or how many), some of whom told me in my classes that they felt that their university and they themselves were being cast in a false light. An anonymous leaflet went up on bulletin boards in our building telling students not to give interviews to writers for the school newspaper.

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Discussions of whether the article should have been published generated ritual cries of "Freedom of speech!" by supporters of publication of the students' self-demolishing comments. However, in US law, First Amendment rights refer to *government* interference in speech.<  
<http://topics.law.cornell.edu/constitution/billofrights> > There are no constraints on limitations of content by the *owners* of publications.

Back in the early 1990s, I was the WizOp of the Security Forum on the value-added network CompuServe. The forum was established under contract with the VAN by my employer, the National Computer Security Association, for whom I served as Director of Education from 1991 through 1999. I established and posted rules in the Forum including restrictions on content, language (no vulgarity), and style (no ad hominem attacks, no slurs). The SysOps (over a dozen, each with assigned responsibility for specific sections) tracked postings, moved off-topic postings into more appropriate sections (e.g., from the PC security section into the LAN security section) and removed those that violated the standards of professionalism; we sent a polite explanation to the member concerned suggesting how the posting could (usually easily) be changed to conform to our rules. If someone repeatedly violated our standards, we'd ban them from the Forum.

Every now and then we would get a furious response from someone who claimed that we were violating his (rarely her) First Amendment rights.

My response was pretty simple: you *have* no First Amendment rights in our *private* forum. If we had



decided – insanely – to restrict all postings to prevent the use of the letter “e,” we surely wouldn’t have had many postings, but we wouldn’t have been violating any laws (other than those of common sense). The NCSA was not part of any form of government and was not supported by funding from any government agency; therefore, our regulation of our Forum was not constrained by the First Amendment guarantee of speech free from government controls.

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## 6 Freedom of Speech versus Monomaniacs & Spammers: Imposing Moderation and Ending Anonymity

Have you noticed that inconsiderate people post repeated off-topic comments, rumors, insults and other forms of *comment spam* in the discussion sections on blogs or publication Web sites you used to enjoy? You can sometimes find the same rant or obscenity-filled nonsense from some nut-case repeated in multiple sections of the blog and even in different blogs. The problem is so severe that some high-traffic blogs are changing their comments policies. For example, the *Huffington Post* Website published this explanation < <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/11/12/sarah-palins-unfavorability-numbers-hit-new-high-survey-finds/> >:

“In an effort to encourage the same level of civil dialogue among Politics Daily’s readers that we expect of our writers – a “civilogue,” to use the term coined by PD’s Jeffrey Weiss – we are requiring commenters to use their AOL or AIM screen names to submit a comment, and we are reading all comments before publishing them. Personal attacks (on writers, other readers, Nancy Pelosi, George W. Bush, or anyone at all) and comments that are not productive additions to the conversation will not be published, period, to make room for a discussion among those with ideas to kick around.”

As I was researching the problem, I ran across a sad little valedictory to unrestricted commenting in November 2009 when a literary agent called Kristin explained that she had decided to start moderating her forum < <http://pubrants.blogspot.com/2009/11/dirty-word-comment-moderation.html> >. What interested me was that the response from her readers on that page was overwhelmingly positive: I counted 58 of the 62 comments as supportive of her decision; many expressed regrets for the extra work it would impose on Kristin.

Here at *Network World*, some cretin has been posting illiterate maunderings about handbags and shoes on our commentary section in the “Security Strategies” pages, causing extra work for staff members at *Network World* as they have to get their cat-litter-box scoops out to clean up the section. Surely few readers would doubt that *Network World* has the right to remove such *comment spam* from any comments section it chooses to clean up.

Network World Editor Ryan Francis adds, “An option is to use a *Completely Automated Public Turing Test To Tell Computers and Humans Apart* (CAPTCHA) < <http://www.captcha.net/> >. However, hackers have found ways around many types of CAPTCHAs < <http://www.networkworld.com/news/2008/050208-breaking-googles-audio.html> >. So the only thing left to do is to authenticate users before comments can be made – including even asking for payment to allow comments. < <http://www.networkworld.com/community/blog/newspaper-readers-comments-now-cost-99-cents-> > And the question remains whether people would register to commenter just leave a site.”

Google Blog has an interesting note from 2005 about automatically tagging postings that include hyperlinks with the “nofollow” attribute so that the link doesn’t get included in computations of referral frequency by search engines. < <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2005/01/preventing-comment-spam.html> > Comment spammers are merely irritating the people who see their nonsense in the blogs; the spammers derive no additional visibility in Google, MSN Search or Yahoo! for their Web sites.

As the amount of rubbish increases in comments sections all over the Web, I think we will see increasing control being exerted by owners of blogs and other Websites.

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## 7 Comment Spam: Ending Anonymity?

No forum has a legal obligation to support comments; however, providing such a venue for free and intelligent discussion has long been a contribution to civil discourse. Although newspapers today generally require and check the identity of correspondents, anonymity and pseudonymity have been accepted at times. For example, letters to the editors of the *London Journal* and the *British Journal* by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, writing under the pseudonym “Cato” <<http://classicaliberal.tripod.com/cato/>>” 1720 through 1723 played a role in the development of a liberal ideology that later became a foundation for the American Revolution.<  
<http://mises.org/daily/1355> >

The times they are a’changin’.< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rh1ppL-xjw&feature=related> >. [By the way, the obscene comments on the YouTube page for this cut illustrate the very problem about which I’ve been writing in recent columns. Sensitive souls be warned....]

Richard Perez-Pena of *The New York Times*, in an April 11, 2010 article entitled “News Sites Rethink Anonymous Online Comments,”<  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/12/technology/12comments.html> > writes, “When news sites, after years of hanging back, embraced the idea of allowing readers to post comments, the near-universal assumption was that anyone could weigh in and remain anonymous. But now, that idea is under attack from several directions, and journalists, more than ever, are questioning whether anonymity should be a given on news sites.”

Perez-Pena points out that nasty, crude comments can annoy readers, reduce the likelihood of thoughtful postings, and drive advertisers away. The journalist reports on moves by *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, and the *Plain Dealer of Cleveland* in particular to limit abuse on their comment boards.

The *Huffington Post*< <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/11/12/sarah-palins-unfavorability-numbers-hit-new-high-survey-finds/> > notice on posting comments about its stories includes a ban on anonymous postings: everyone has “to use their AOL or AIM screen names to submit a comment”.

Perez-Pena’s article provides a useful review of different methods being considered or used to limit abuse. In summary, the approaches include the following:

- Require some form of reliable identification such as login IDs; these may not be real names, but they are at least likely to be relatively stable (unless the comment spammers just generate new throw-away IDs);
- Rate contributors by the consensus of readers’ evaluations (but watch out for clagues<  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/clague> >);
- Let viewers see only a subset of comments such as those of paying subscribers;
- Moderate in advance: review every comment before allowing it to be viewed by the public;
- Moderate after the fact: remove objectionable postings either in routine review by a staff member or by letting readers flag the drivel;
- Shut down commenting altogether (“Some sites and prominent bloggers ... simply do not allow comments.”)

For more about anonymity, you can read a white paper called “Anonymity and Pseudonymity in Cyberspace”< <http://www.mekabay.com/overviews/anonpseudo.pdf> > that I wrote for a conference in 1998 and that ended up with updates in the *Computer Security Handbook*, Fifth Edition<  
<http://www.amazon.com/Computer-Security-Handbook-2-Set/dp/0471716529/> >.

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## 8 Controlling Content in College Newspapers

If a corporation – or a university – owns a newspaper or a newsletter in which students are invited to write, nothing in law inhibits the exercise of complete control over what is published. In a corporate context, such total control makes a great deal of sense. Corporate reputation and brand image are important issues that reasonably take precedence over personal expression. However, to be fair, it makes sense to publish clear guidelines, to the degree possible, governing the nature of acceptable writing or postings. Employees responsible for creating and publishing corporate content must know what to aim for and what to avoid to the best of their ability; and it makes sense to have the drafts reviewed by the marketing and legal departments before they go to press and to the Web.

The situation is not so clear in a college newspaper. A major purpose of such publications is to offer students opportunities to express their interest in journalism, to exercise their creativity and imagination, and to use their enthusiasm. Strong, well-written opinions should be welcome, even if they attack university policies or specific actions by named individuals. But in my opinion, encouraging or even allowing students to publish sloppy research and poorly written work does not contribute positively to their growth. Writing articles that are more appropriate for a supermarket tabloid (“Hillary Clinton Adopts Alien Baby;” “Dick Cheney is a Robot!”< <http://weeklyworldnews.com/area51/3075/five-classic-weekly-world-news-covers/> >) than for a serious publication – and having them published on the Web for the world to read – is a pretty brutal growth experience: the writer and the quoted students will be suffering the consequences of their unflattering self-portrayals for years when potential employers search for information about them on the Web.

If students feel strongly that a University administration is clamping down too strongly on their ability to speak freely, they can always organize an independent outlet for their thoughts. For example, at my doctoral alma mater, Dartmouth College, the College publishes several newsletters< <http://www.dartmouth.edu/home/about/publications.html> > under the control of the institution. However, students dissatisfied with College control formed an independent newspaper, *The Dartmouth Review*< <http://dartreview.com/> >, in which to express their opinions without interference from faculty and administrators. The publication lists several similar independent student publications< <http://dartreview1.squarespace.com/about-us/> > at Stanford< <http://stanfordreview.org/> >, Cornell< <http://www.cornellreview.org/> >, Princeton< <http://theprincetonitory.com/main/> >, and College of William and Mary< <http://www.vainformer.com/> >.

Creating a Web site is no longer an expensive proposition; for example, InMotion Hosting< <http://inmotionhosting.com/> > has provided excellent service for my personal Website< <http://www.mekabay.com> > for about \$7 a month, including registering my domain name. The only issue students might have to watch out for is that university names and logos are protected intellectual property, so no one can just stick them on unofficial Web pages or newspapers without permission.

But returning to the content and style of publications, all organizations offering a venue for the expression of opinion should ensure that opinions are clearly demarcated from supposedly factual reporting. Both can be justified, but muddling the two categories can lead to unfortunate results. For example, interviewing three close buddies and then making wild generalizations about an entire student body is a classic example of what *not* to do with non-random sample data.< [http://www.mekabay.com/methodology/crime\\_stats\\_methods.pdf](http://www.mekabay.com/methodology/crime_stats_methods.pdf) >

And that's *my* opinion!

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## 9 Engaging the Prefrontal Cortex: Speech May Be Free, but It Isn't Always Wise

In recent columns, I've been discussing issues of free speech in blogs and college newspapers. Today I am completing the series with some advice that I hope security and network experts will pass on to young people in their families and to teachers that they may know.<

<http://napps.networkworld.com/newsletters/sec/2010/060710sec1.html> >

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Regardless of whether specific comments fall within editorial guidelines or not, everyone should think carefully about anything they say or write that will be made public.

Comments that might be perfectly appropriate in private conversation – funny, satirical, sarcastic, exaggerated – can be time bombs once they reach the public sphere. Speaking to reporters can be a wonderful opportunity for an organization or for an individual; however, not all reporters have the best interests of the people the interview in mind when they publish or broadcast quotations. Sometimes, quotations can be taken out of context and result in misrepresentation of the speaker's position. But sometimes, direct, accurate quotation of thoughtless comments can cause serious harm to the speaker, especially if they are young people.

The prefrontal cortex of the human brain is largely responsible for planning, judgment, and control of impulse. These frontal lobes are incompletely myelinated until the late teens or early 20s and most people. Hypo-myelination results in weaker control of impulse, poor judgment, and inadequate planning. Anyone who has raised children will instantly recognize the effects of changing patterns of myelination on behavior. Interestingly, alcohol depresses frontal lobe activity, resulting in disinhibition that can be expressed in childish behavior, exaggerated emotionality, suggestibility, and disorganization. Have you ever noticed that drunks can sometimes act like children – and vice versa? For an entertaining review of the most famous case of damage to the prefrontal cortex, see an article about Phineas Gage, who got a crowbar through his head in 1848.<

[http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive\\_home.cfm/volumeID\\_21-editionID\\_164-ArticleID\\_1399-getfile\\_getPDF/thepsychologist%5C0908look.pdf](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive_home.cfm/volumeID_21-editionID_164-ArticleID_1399-getfile_getPDF/thepsychologist%5C0908look.pdf) >

Young people with incompletely matured frontal lobes are susceptible to blurting out comments with little or no regard for their effects on others or the consequences for their own reputation. Personally, I remember to this day with horror that when I was 14, I casually told a girl in my high school class that she looked like an ostrich; I cannot imagine doing something horrible like that today, but my immaturity made this hurtful comment seemed perfectly ordinary. I think about my own unthinking cruelty to that poor girl when I contemplate the years of persecution I suffered at the hands of other children in my high school and put their behavior in perspective: our frontal lobes weren't mature!

As adults, we can help young people avoid blunders that could damage their prospects for entry into college or the job market. Freedom of speech or no freedom of speech, casually confessing that one finds professors so boring that one is compelled to text friends extensively during class time may sound like a harmless joke to the speakers, and it's harmless in a private conversation. However, when such a comment is published on the Web, the unintended consequences can include viewing by an admissions committee in a graduate program or by an employment officer in an organization thinking of hiring the student – not to speak of the anger of fellow students and of professors. It's true that some adults looking at the candidate might simply dismiss the comment as unimportant; the problem is that others might look at the date and ask whether enough time has elapsed to overcome the obvious immaturity of the speaker at the time of the quotation. With dozens or hundreds of applicants applying for each opening, why would anyone want to lower their rank in the list?

Here are some suggestions to discuss with young people you know:

- If you are being interviewed, think before you answer a question. You don't have to answer instantly just because the interviewer seems to be in a hurry.
- As you consider your answer remember that complete strangers will be seeing or hearing it.
- Before making a comment that criticizes yourself or someone else, think carefully about what benefits or harm there might be to you in saying that in public and for a permanent record.
- If you are writing an article or creating a documentary clip, consider the consequences to the human beings you are representing if you distort what they say or deliberately give a false impression of their meaning.
- To the degree possible, check your final quotations in context with the people you are quoting. It may be difficult if you are under deadline, but it's worth trying even if it means phoning somebody to read them your text.
- Unprofessional behavior as a writer or other producer of public communications will harm you, not just your subjects and your readers or viewers.

My final thought for today is that if these rules were followed in the political sphere, an entire industry devoted to creating political propaganda would collapse.

Hey, there's an idea!

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## 10 The Politics of Cyberspace (3): Disintermediation versus Confidentiality

The completely revised IS407 “Politics of Cyberspace” < <http://www.mekabay.com/courses/academic/norwich/is407/index.htm> > course that started in January 2011 included a module of references about WikiLeaks < <http://wikileaks.info/> > and the role of disintermediated news gathering and distribution < [http://www.mekabay.com/courses/academic/norwich/is407/is407\\_resources/is407\\_week\\_08\\_link\\_s.htm](http://www.mekabay.com/courses/academic/norwich/is407/is407_resources/is407_week_08_link_s.htm) > that may interest readers who are thinking about confidentiality of business affairs in the age of the Internet.

For historical perspective, the students were able to read a 2003 interview with Daniel Ellsberg discussing a report in *The Observer* of London < <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/mar/02/usa.iraq> > about what *On the Media* (OTM) director Brooke Gladstone described as “the scoops that the U.S. National Security Agency had wiretapped several officials at the U.N. whose nations would be crucial votes on whether to support an invasion of Iraq. A leaked report suggest that Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Bulgaria, Guinea, and Pakistan were bugged, presumably the give the U.S. a leg up in precarious negotiations where few votes for war can be entirely relied upon.” < <http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2003/03/14/03> > Gladstone commented that the story was ignored by the established news media in the US.

In 2006, OTM co-host Bob Garfield discussed pressures by the Sunlight Foundation < <http://sunlightfoundation.com/> > to make “government transparent & accountable.” In that year, the House of Representatives in the US Congress “approved two measures to combat so-called earmarks, the pet projects slipped into spending legislation.... One rule change requires House members to put their names on the earmarks they propose. The other is a bill, already approved in the Senate, that would create a public, searchable Web database of all federal grants and contracts. That bill was introduced in the spring but then was secretly put on hold by a couple of senators, preventing it from a full vote.” < <http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2006/09/15/07> > Citizen action removed the secret hold: “In a rare show of unity, a coalition of liberal and conservative blogs asked readers to call their senators and find out if they had imposed the hold. Volunteers managed to narrow it down to four possible culprits, at which point Republican Ted Stevens stepped forward and claimed responsibility.” Garfield noted that the pressures for openness by politicians “change the behavior of citizens in this what-does-one-vote-do culture. The idea of actually holding representatives accountable seems to suggest opportunities for actually an engaged electorate[.]”

The Sunlight Foundation also participated in a movement to track how members of Congress spend their time. < <http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2007/03/09/05> > Another project was an organized database of government contracts showing exactly which organizations receive how much money from US taxpayers. < <http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2009/01/16/07> >

A March 2009 interview with WikiLeaks principal Julian Assange < <http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2009/03/13/04> > challenged Assange on “if hypothetically he would publish information sent to his website that could lead to the deaths of innocents, such as, for instance, how to release anthrax into a town’s water supply.” Assange replied, “Yes, even if there is a possibility that it would lead to loss of life. It’s hard to imagine a circumstance where we would get a document and us not publishing it would be helpful. If they were ill motivated, then they could send that in private to terrorist groups, to neo-Nazi organizations, and those organizations could then develop their plans out of the sunlight. And that’s the greatest harm.” Bob Garfield pointed out that Assange “declined to provide your telephone number to our producers, or your whereabouts, for that matter.” Assange explained, “We are a bit cagey about some of our communications. The reason is that we deal with intelligence forces every

day. If too much is known about the journalists that are working with us, their telephone can be tapped and monitored, and forces that are communicating with them can be monitored. The results of a slip-up on our behalf could be fatal to some of the people that we work with, so we're very cautious to make sure that people can't get at our sources by obtaining our telecommunications records.” Students in IS407 commented on the irony of secrecy by an organization touting openness.

In a May 2010 show, Bob Garfield interviewed Gabriel Schoenfeld, author of *Necessary Secrets: National Security, the Media, and the Rule of Law* < <http://www.amazon.com/Necessary-Secrets-National-Security-Media/dp/0393339939/> >, who argues strongly for limits on the publication of state secrets. Schoenfeld summarized his position at the end of the interview as follows: “I think the government can and should prosecute journalists who trespass on the public’s right not to know. And the public’s right not to know is something that’s rarely spoken about, let alone defended, but it’s perfectly obvious why we don't want to know certain things that our government is doing. It’s because if we know those things, our adversaries know them as well.”

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