

Cyberethics and Civil Discourse

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In one of the many interesting presentations at the annual Securing the eCampus conference < <http://www.ists.dartmouth.edu/events/ecampus/> > organized by the the Institute for Security, Technology, and Society (ISTS) < <http://www.ists.dartmouth.edu/about/> > at Dartmouth College in July 2012, Edward Pittman, EdD < http://alanimages.vassar.edu/issue/0405/article/spotlight_with_ed_pittman__82 >, Associate Dean of the College for Campus Life and Diversity < <http://campuslifeanddiversity.vassar.edu/> > at Vassar College < <http://www.vassar.edu/> > discussed “Cyberethics, Discourse and Campus Community.” < Dr Pittman’s career includes 28 years of experience in university affairs, including diversity education. Some of his work concerned consequences of increasing diversity on campus. Comments in [square brackets] are MK’s alone.

Dr Pittman presented a fascinating overview and case study of how one college has tried to encourage environments for civil discourse in cyber world; he sparked discussion about opportunities and challenges for higher education in this arena. He defined *cyberethics* as a code of behavior that governs the Internet and other forms of electronic communication in the cyberworld. One form of defining moral or ethical behavior is to see if a proposed course of action would be doing more good than harm; however, the Internet is usually viewed as supporting generally positive results (e.g., getting information quickly [unless you are a Chinese or Syrian dictator]).

College students can see and contribute to a wide range of sites on the Web to post their opinions; e.g., b@b < <http://boredat.com/> >, Facebook postings, MadsVassar blog < <http://www.madsvassarblog.com/> >, RateMyProfessor < <http://blog.ratemyprofessors.com/> >, and Collegiate ACB (Anonymous Communication Board) < <http://collegiateacb.com/> >. “Gossip servers” have become a source of distress for many students: there is no way of identifying the source of scurrilous and offensive comments. [For an extensive collection of chapters discussing many aspects of social media, see Noor Al-Deen, H. S. & J. A. Hendricks (eds). *Social Media: Usage and Impact*. Lexington Books (ISBN 978-0-7391-6729-8 paper or 978-0-7391-6730-4 electronic). AMAZON < <http://www.amazon.com/Social-Media-Usage-Impact-ebook/dp/B0062ZQZBA> >. In particular, Chapter Fourteen, “Legal Pitfalls of Social Media Usage” by L. B. Lidsky & D. C. Friedel discusses legal redress for online defamation and harassment.]

The proliferation of Websites and social-networking sites that can be used to support political activity has generated debate on college campuses. [For example, the *Campaign to Stop Killer Coke* < <http://killercoke.org/> > has spawned many college clubs such as those at Vassar < <http://killercoke.org/downloads/kccvassar.pdf> >, Swarthmore’s group < <http://www.swarthmore.edu/news-and-events/news-archive-2006-2007/swarthmore-removes-coca-cola-products-from-campus.xml> >, University of Vermont < <http://www.7dvt.com/2006/students-campaign-kick-coke-campus> >, New York University < <http://socialistworker.org/2010/05/03/nyu-campaign-against-coke> >, and University of Michigan < <http://www.organicconsumers.org/school/mi.cfm> > among others. Naturally, these campaigns have led to vigorous debate < <http://www.madsvassarblog.com/2008/10/sound-off-should-we-kick-coke.html> > that has sometimes led to escalation of hostility through electronic communications. For example, anonymous commentators in the *Mads Vassar Blog* cited here wrote,

- “i wish these kids would STFU.”
- “Before 7:01[posting-time is being used as an identifier for the anonymous post], this comments page reads like an Asshats For Palin forum. Shame on you apathetic, self-important douchebags.”

- “Open your eyes. Read a book. You fucking privileged, entitled children, you don't even realize or give a damn what other people spend their lives suffering through and fighting against, and what kind of a CHOICE do you think they have?”]

In another case, the Vassar student publication *The Imperialist* published unedited commentary in 2005 that offended many students on campus.< <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2005/09/26/vassar> > The article challenged the very concept of diversity programs on college campuses and included disparaging comments about various communities. Student activists were offended, and non-campus people and Websites were able to repost the conversations from the campus community. Nazi and other racist groups published excerpts and included threats and defamation; however, it was not possible to force takedown of these materials or to suppress such speech in *The Imperialist*.

The students and administration at Vassar responded to the fundamental question of how to cope with these issues. Although campus regulations on harassment can be applied to behavior using computers and the computer regulations section in the *Student Handbook* forbid the use of College computers for criminal activities or business, few students were thought to be reading those regulations.

The *Student Handbook* was updated and a Committee on College Life< <http://committees.vassar.edu/> >set up by the Governors of the College and including five elected faculty members, seven student representatives as functions of their position in student government, and administrators related to student life. They formed a subcommittee to supplement computer regulations to educate students and issued a statement adopted the Spring 2012 semester that included this major prohibition: “Behaviors that create harmful effects include illegal activities, offensive and defaming language, hate speech, postings of private information such as phone numbers and addresses, posting private photos, and anonymous messages that target individual or groups.”

Dr Pittman ended his talk with questions for higher education:

- What is our responsibility toward creating environments for civil discourse?
- Where is the line between free speech or expression and self- and community responsibility?

[I think that all of us need to think about these questions and to provoke constructive discussions in our institutions and in society at large.]

My thanks to Dr Pittman for an animated and thought-provoking presentation.

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