

April 26, 2007

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID POGUE

Is It Time for An Online Code of Conduct?

By DAVID POGUE

When I was just out of college in the late 1980's, I made a lot of computer house calls in New York (all right, apartment calls). During those years, I learned an awful lot about people and the dichotomy between their public and private personalities.

One client in particular has never left my mind. She was a wealthy woman with an astonishingly huge apartment -- and an astonishingly sour personality.

Whenever menials like me were around, she played a game whose name, I now realize, was "You're Wrong."

It began the moment she answered the doorbell. "Well, don't just stand there like a mannequin. I'm not paying you \$25 an hour to just stand there. Go inside."

So, mumbling apologies, I entered the apartment and set down my bag next to the computer desk.

"Not there, not there!" she shrieked. "You'll get dirt on the carpet! Put it out there in the pantry. Have some respect for people's things!"

If I then reached to turn on the computer, it was, "Don't do it yourself! How do you expect me to learn if you do everything for me? Don't treat me like I'm some kind of idiot!"

But if, on the next visit, I invited her to turn on the machine herself, she shot back, "How should I know how to turn it on? If I knew how to use the computer already, I wouldn't be paying you \$25 an hour, now would I?"

No matter what you said, on any subject, no matter how neutral, Mrs. Cronkwitz could find fault with it. (Yes, this was the same woman who [berated me for suggesting that her daisy-wheel printer couldn't print graphics](#).) Her simple rule was: "If you can't say something negative, don't say it at all."

I think about Mrs. Cronkwitz's game every time I read the comments on any online forum that accepts anonymous postings, like Digg.com or YouTube. It's all a big contest to see who can spit with the most venom on any product, any idea, any topic.

Just once, I'd love to see how many products, ideas and topics these people come up with themselves. (Actually, I already know: None, because most of 'em are still in high school.)

All of which brings me to the Kathy Sierra story, which [The Times recently covered here](#).

In short, a computer-book author named Kathy Sierra wrote, on her blog, about whether it's OK to delete nasty comments left by your readers. Anonymous commenters descended on her with vicious, violent and even sexual comments and threats, complete with vulgar Photoshopped images of Ms. Sierra.

Anyway, Tim O'Reilly, the publisher of her computer books (and mine, by the way), responded with a proposal on his own blog: a voluntary, seven-step blogger code of conduct. You can read the [full draft here](#).

There's room for argument over some of his points -- true to form, most bloggers' first reaction was to criticize it -- but one point, I think, is unassailable:

"3. Consider eliminating anonymous comments."

That's it, baby. People don't go to psychotic extremes when their names or e-mail addresses are visible.

Just look at the reviews for books and products on Amazon.com. They prove that it's perfectly possible to express dislike of something without spewing hatred. And if you've signed your name, you're a *heck* of a lot less likely to do that.

For the record, my assistant and I moderate the comments on my own blog. Criticism, snarkiness and anti-Pogue comments are all permitted. The only things we delete are off-topic political diatribes, vulgar language, and spam. Yes, spam; you have no idea how many spammers seem to think that a tech blog is the place to find customers for Cialis and Viagra.

(OK, Amazon deletes vulgar and abusive comments, too. But I'll bet that it amounts to only a small percentage of submissions, just as we delete only about 1 in 1,000 Pogue's Posts comments for offensiveness.)

The quality of the discussion at nytimes.com/pogue is very, very high, as a number of readers have noted with delight. I think the biggest reason is that on this blog, readers don't feel anonymous. Your comment is posted under a nickname, but you're nonetheless aware that we know who you are; after all, you've signed up for free nytimes.com registration. Plenty of Pogue's Post readers even use their real names as their nicknames.

And why not? If you're proud of your thoughts, why would you be afraid to be associated with them?

Yes, I know, there are exceptions; certain blog topics have good reasons for offering anonymity (spouse-abuse forums, HIV sites and so on). I'm not suggesting that *all* blogs eliminate anonymity.

Nor am I suggesting censorship. As Tim O'Reilly put it: "I'm not suggesting that every blog will want to delete such comments, but I am suggesting that blogs that do want to keep the level of dialog at a higher level not be censored for doing so."

"There are many real-world analogies. Shock radio hosts encourage abusive callers; a mainstream talk radio show like NPR's Talk of the Nation wouldn't hesitate to cut someone off who started spewing hatred and abuse. Frat parties might encourage drunken lewdness, but a party at a tech conference would not. Setting standards for acceptable behavior in a forum you control is conducive to free speech, not damaging to it."

I'm just observing that the blogs with the best and most intelligent discussion are the ones where postings aren't anonymous -- and vice versa. Over and over again, the sites that permit anonymous pot shots are the ones that seem populated solely by Mrs. Cronkwitz and her clones.

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(P.S.-- On a totally different, much cheerier subject, a number of readers have asked whatever became of "It's All Geek to Me," the six-episode TV series I wrote and hosted that was supposed to air in April.

The show has finally been blessed with a firm broadcast schedule: Friday nights at 8 p.m., beginning May 18.

Each week, they'll air one new episode and one re-run, on two channels: Discovery HD and The Science Channel. Both of these channels require either a digital cable box -- you can upgrade to one through your cable company, if you haven't

already -- or satellite. Whether the episodes will be available for Internet download hasn't yet been determined.)

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