

Mitchell's Musings 5-13-15: Micro on Campus and Macro Everywhere Else

Daniel J.B. Mitchell

Once upon a time, you could write a letter to the editor of a newspaper and, after a review process, it might be published. Most such letters, of course, ended up in the waste basket and never appeared in print. But when the web came along, newspapers started allowing comments to be posted on articles and what appeared in those comments was to put it politely – unfiltered. While some comments were thoughtful, what often appeared (and still often does appear) were (are) rants exhibiting poor grammar and spelling and a sense of paranoia.

Some newspapers tried to provide a level of filtering in response. Recently, for example, the *Sacramento Bee* has developed a system which attempts to deal with the rant problem. The *Bee's* guidelines for commenting are an attempt to reduce offensive ranting without having to employ editors to pre-screen every comment.¹ But there is one element in the guidelines that illustrates the problem: “*We do not screen comments before they post.*” So even if offensive comments are deleted eventually, they may appear on the *Bee* website for at least a time.

There are similar issues regarding other popular social media sites such as Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook. Eventually, items that don't meet whatever guidelines those sites have will be (or might be) deleted. But they will be posted for a period before the deletion occurs and persistent commenters may simply repost them repeatedly. Beyond reposting, web users can also create their own websites and blogs where even token filtering is absent. In short, the world of communication – while more accessible than ever before – has become a nasty place. Read what is there at your own risk.

While the norms of the outside world have become nastier, there seems to have been an opposing reaction on university campuses. Universities have increasingly attempted to prevent “micro-aggressions” that might offend someone at a time when the norms of the Internet rarely block far more insensitive macro-aggressions. You may recall the brouhaha in the past year or so when there was agitation for inclusion of “trigger warnings” on university syllabi just in case there were topics or readings that might offend.

More controversially, various commencement and other invited speakers have been effectively barred from campuses because of complaints that their views might be objectionable to somebody. These complaints came with threats of disruption. At a time when anyone could increasingly say anything on the Internet, in the university anyone could be a *de facto* censor.

All around the university there are external web services that carry far more offensive messages than anything likely to be found on a college syllabus or in a graduation speech. Indeed, some of these web services are specifically directed at universities – particularly students - and their very appeal is that they don't do much filtering and allow anonymous commentary. For example, there is a popular service called “Yik Yak” in which students can say just about anything using made-up names. As a result, Yik Yak tends to feature sexual references, racial and ethnic references, and whatever else flickers through the

¹<http://www.sacbee.com/site-services/article2583731.html>.

heads of young adults who are bored with doing their homework. And, of course, there are various outside professor-rating services with even less filtering than Yelp.

Note that when everyone is speaking loudly, the only way to be heard is to shout. Presumably, that principle is why restaurants have become progressively noisier. Similarly, if everyone is speaking offensively, the only way to be noticed is to be yet more offensive. University administrators can try to encourage everyone to play nice when untoward behavior strikes – a recent occurrence on my own UCLA campus.² But the ability of university officials to change the norms that are imported from the outside is limited.

Indeed, the recent UCLA event is in fact a repeat of an earlier episode four years ago.³ But there one big difference; in the earlier case the offender didn't act anonymously and ended up having to withdraw from the university. So the lesson really learned was that if you want to deliver an offensive missive, you should take care not to put your real name on it. Behave anonymously as is so often the case on the Internet.

Universities tend to display their problems publically so that the tensions that arise between outside norms and inside exhortations not to follow those outside norms receive publicity. However, students who are exposed to such conflicts will eventually graduate and go into the workplace where issues of norms and acceptable behaviors are handled more privately. Workplaces have rules about behavior on the job (and sometimes off the job) that do not accord with the *anything-goes* approach of the Internet.

A key difference between private workplaces and universities is that the former don't necessarily feature all of the due process procedures and other legal protections that university students are provided. And private sector employees seldom have the equivalent of the tenure protections that university faculty members enjoy. As more and more students flow from colleges and universities into employment, it will be interesting to see how the widening gap between internal workplace norms and external Internet norms plays out.

²In the UCLA episode, someone anonymously pasted stickers with offensive messages in university buildings. The result was a plea in the student newspaper from a senior administrator to avoid such behavior [see <http://dailybruin.com/2015/05/06/letter-to-the-editor-bruins-should-debate-complex-issues-with-empathy-sensitivity/>] which was followed by an email from the chancellor saying that “regardless of our politics or backgrounds, we are at our best when we acknowledge the humanity of others, appreciate diverse viewpoints and respond with empathy.”

³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6feGp0GQVJ8>.