

Mitchell's Musings 9-30-13: No Comment...Please!

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Recently, it was reported that Bill Gates admitted that forcing you to type “cntrl-alt-delete” to start your computer was a “mistake.”¹ Unfortunately, it’s a mistake that has yet to be corrected. The admission of a mistake does not necessarily result in a correction. However, some mistakes in the computer/internet world are apparently more difficult to correct than others. One of them is the practice of most news media nowadays to allow more or less unfiltered reader comments to appear on articles published on their websites.



Note that back in the day, when print was the main medium for detailed news, there was only letters to the editor, letters which somebody at the publication selected. Those older outlets for comments still exist and, of course, if you read such letters, you are only reading what someone thinks was worth publishing. But it is worth noting that the entire publication has been subject to some screening to provide “all the news that’s fit to print.”

With the arrival of the internet, however, it has become unfashionable to think that anyone should screen anyone else’s views. Notions of the “wisdom of crowds” (Google the phrase) are seen somehow to suggest that if many people opine, the net result will always be better. The problem is that while every opinion is “information,” some information is better than other information. In fact, some information is just wrong. Moreover, the idea of “the wisdom of crowds” does not override the basic statistical concept of having a representative sample. Those who chose to opine, say on a particular news item, may not be a representative sample of the larger population or even of readers of the item. Furthermore, absent control, false impressions can be generated about what the representative opinion actually is.

It is easy to “vote” more than once under different names using the comment option. And the process requires no identification of the author. In contrast, letters to the editors typically use real names and some indication of the writer’s location. Lack of verification and lack of representative sampling is a fundamental problem of websites such as Yelp and similar rating services. The fact that such services may be profitable, i.e., that people use them and rely on them, is an illustration of the problem, not an argument for their validity.

¹ <http://blog.sfgate.com/hottopics/2013/09/26/bill-gates-control-alt-delete-a-mistake/>

There is a difference, however, between Yelp and the comments from the often-anonymous authors which appear on news websites. You don't have to use Yelp. In contrast, the current practice of many news sites is simply to follow the news item with whatever comments appear. You have to avert your eyes to miss them in some cases. In others, you may have to click on a comment button under the news item, a better option, but one that nonetheless closely associates the comments with the article.

So why do news media have relatively unfiltered comment sections when they apply editorial discretion to everything else? I doubt that there have been careful marketing surveys that show that absent the comment option, readership and ad revenue will fall substantially. I doubt even more that any such study was done when the practice of unfiltered comments was first initiated. I suspect that the news media have unfiltered comments because everyone else does and it has become a standard practice. Once a norm is established, deviation from the norm can become difficult or at least it can be perceived as difficult. And there is the handy rationale for editors that since readers surely know that the comments are relatively unfiltered and unrepresentative, no harm is done.

Recently, however, one publication, *Popular Science*, decided that there was harm done and announced it would discontinue providing the comment option.² It noted some research indicating that reader views are influenced (unduly) by shrill, uninformed comments even though readers know that anyone can comment.

...A politically motivated, decades-long war on expertise has eroded the popular consensus on a wide variety of scientifically validated topics. Everything, from evolution to the origins of climate change, is mistakenly up for grabs again. Scientific certainty is just another thing for two people to "debate" on television. And because comments sections tend to be a grotesque reflection of the media culture surrounding them, the cynical work of undermining bedrock scientific doctrine is now being done beneath our own stories, within a website devoted to championing science...

You can hear a radio interview on this subject with the editor of *Popular Science* at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10151972910806522>

Note that anyone is free to establish a blog or other social media account, to link to articles on the web, and to make any unfiltered comment about the articles he or she wishes. There is no free speech issue here. You can say what you like and can do it anonymously if you want. But there is no entitlement to appear on someone else's website.

² <http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-09/why-were-shutting-our-comments>

Why am I putting this commentary on a blog for EPRN? Because the kinds of issues discussed here – employment policy, immigration, budget priorities, etc. – are inherently those which, when they appear in the news media, particularly attract angry discussion. For example, below are some comments that appeared attached to a *San Francisco Chronicle* article on the current Congressional budget stalemate:

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SayWhatIThink

11:33 AM on September 27, 2013

"Congratulations Democrats, you are turning 401Ks into 201Ks and the US a second-rate Country..YET AGAIN!!!!!"

My guess is that Mr. Logs does not understand that it was the republicans and their attempt to defund ACA that caused the economic uncertainties that resulted in the recent down turn in the stock market.

Almaviva

11:32 AM on September 27, 2013

Congratulations republicans, you are bringing instability to the free market economy. Investments are losing value because of your silly hissy fits.

gcg

11:25 AM on September 27, 2013

Republican governance oh crap, I'm laughing so hard at my phrasing that I can't even continue.

LincolnLogs

11:17 AM on September 27, 2013

The economic instability called the Obama Recession created by Democrat's obsession with "Social Justice" has been exacerbated with the Democrat's obsession with gov't control of the Health Industry , is already having an effect on the lives of all Americans. The stock market is down and millions of investments have already taken a hit, and millions are still out of work, only part time, or given up.

Congratulations Democrats, you are turning 401Ks into 201Ks and the US a second-rate Country..YET AGAIN!!!!

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Here are some comments from an article of September 26th in the *Sacramento Bee* dealing with a computer problem that delayed many unemployment benefit checks:

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Gretchen1

Try and FIND a job, buster. I've been looking for almost three years, and I have a Bachelor's degree. I take temp jobs whenever I can get them, but they're not permanent. Get a life, and grow UP. You need to.



Reader6789

Gretchen1 you are right. California has a tough labor market and it is beyond hard looking for and obtaining a job. You hang in there. Good luck on your job search.



iimki

Listen to you. You are so rude. Read your comment. People pick up on your attitude and do not want a person like you working for their company, that's for sure, that's why no one wants to hire you. You called Sociopathic001 buster, told him to get a life, and grow up. You would never last one minute where I have worked, no f ing way. HR never hires people that are not liked. Everyone sees this about you, you are the reason you don't have a permanent job. If you ever worked where I worked, as a temporary because you can never be anything else, you would be shown the door.



Sociopathic001

Hey, you're the one with the 4+ years of liberal education and an AS in computer networks.

You tell us why it's so hard to get a job.

I'm intimately familiar with the computer field, so don't have to "find" a job, I already have one.



Reader6789

Let's hope you never have to file a claim for benefits.



iimki

It's not hard to find a job. I never had any trouble finding excellent full time jobs. However, if a person rubs people the wrong way, like Grechy, they will NEVER get a full time position. People will not put up with this crap and downing and attacking people. All the comments I have read from Grechy attacking people for no reason, including myself, leads me to believe this person would be very insubordinate. End of story.

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Here are comments on a *Los Angeles Times* article on the effect of the Congressional immigration debate on Latino voters:

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gordongarlic at 12:40 PM September 27, 2013

non-latino voters are also monitoring their congresspeople to see if they support amnesty for illegal immigrants

gaiapj at 12:39 PM September 27, 2013

Maybe when the Latino's consider themselves Americans and not Hispanic/Latino I will actually care how they vote.

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Did you gain any knowledge after reading these remarks? Did they give you any insights on anything? On the issues themselves? On actual public opinion?

I rest my case. QED and hurray for *Popular Science*!