
The New York Times

Room for Debate: A Running Commentary on the News

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You're Mad! You're on YouTube!

Will the inability to remain invisible stop people from losing their tempers and inhibitions in public?

Practicing Self-Regulation

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Let's be clear: everything on the Internet is in the public domain, and it's permanent. Complicated passwords, privacy settings and screen names have given users a false sense of privacy. Hidden in the volumes of personal online data is enough information to destroy any illusions of privacy we may harbor.

Technology has given us the power to expose "anonymous" behavior -- a false Web persona, a scurrilous rant, a rock thrown during a riot, a kiss during its aftermath -- that previously would have remained a mystery. With the proliferation of embedded face recognition software and photo tagging capabilities on smartphones and social networks, it's not that difficult to put a name to a face.

Are outrageous instances, like the disrespectful chewing-out of a commuter train conductor, caught on a smartphone camera and posted on YouTube poetic justice? As anonymous voyeurs ourselves, it's so satisfying to see a smug, self-important person get his or her come-uppance. But wait, there's a fine line between taking a stand on uncivil behavior and invading someone's privacy.

And so we've arrived at a turning point in which we all need to take responsibility for our behavior. Being civil is being self-regulated.

With the many beneficial opportunities to connect with others and for individuals to find a voice comes the responsibility to do so civilly. Used wisely, these tools and forums can be powerful community-building instruments, fostering civil discourse, cooperation and positive outcomes. Civility and courtesy, honesty and respect are the outward expressions of human decency, qualities that are more important than ever in today's complex and wired world.

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Topics: Internet, Technology, privacy

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