



We're keeping anonymity

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One December day three years ago, about 60 University students gathered to campaign against comments made on The Daily Princetonian's website. The comments, which asserted that some minority groups are "prone to violence," were, by any measure, highly insensitive. But the students who gathered, among them the leaders of Sustained Dialogue and the Muslim Students Association, did not call for the comments to be removed. Instead, they said it is better to lay bare these views instead of censoring them. As you probably assumed, the commenters in question were anonymous.

Over the past month, the editors of the 'Prince' have heard from a variety of voices as we re-examined our comments policy. In constructing a new 'Prince' website, we are required to build a commenting system as well, and we saw this as an opportunity to seek community input. We have listened to students, faculty, alumni and administrators, including President Shirley Tilghman; we have evaluated policies at other Ivy League newspapers; and we have reviewed the history of our comment boards, such as the 2009 protest, which I covered as a reporter.

As editors, we have come to the following policy decision: We will still allow users to post anonymously on our website and not require user accounts. At the same time, we will implement several tools to improve the quality of dialogue on our website. We will maintain the current level of moderation, including allowing users to flag

inappropriate comments for review. As is standard on many popular commenting systems, users will be required to submit an email address to reduce spam, but this email address can be fake.

The new website will incorporate up-voting and down-voting and the nesting of comments. Voting allows users to express their approval or disapproval of another's comments; we think the role of directing and regulating the discussion is best crowdsourced in order to reflect the judgments of our community. The nesting of comments, which describes comments grouped into conversation threads, will facilitate a more productive discussion because commenters will be able to respond directly to one another.

While we acknowledge that some users hide behind anonymity to make mean-spirited or offensive comments, the benefits of anonymity far outweigh the perceived cost. On a small college campus, requiring names or log-ins that can be traced back to University accounts will stymie public dialogue. As the comments on coverage of the University's Greek ban or of the suicide of lecturer Antonio Calvo demonstrated, members of our community who are nervous about speaking out use the 'Prince' comments as a way to make their voices heard. More recently, the comments on the Love and Lust in the Bubble series show the value of an honest dialogue about sensitive issues of sex and relationships that would not happen without anonymity.

While we will continue to monitor the comments for egregious remarks, we believe our comment boards are a marketplace of ideas. They are not a class, and they are not a precept. Nor are they an avenue to ensure the projection of a positive view of the University.

There will always be trolls on comment boards, but they should be called out as such, not censored. The same applies to those who genuinely hold unpopular views.

Tilghman argued in her letter to the editor that this method of discussion is “antithetical” to the University’s Honor Code. I appreciate Tilghman’s contribution to the discussion, but I disagree with her linkage of the ‘Prince’ comments policy to the Honor Code for two reasons.

First, the Honor Code does not have purview or relevance when applied to discussions among students, faculty, administrators, community members and alumni in an online forum of an independent news organization. Second, the spirit of the Honor Code — to own one’s words — is not ours to enforce. Students who wish to “own their words” can do so by posting under their real names. In fact, our new system will easily integrate with Facebook and Twitter accounts.

That December 2009 gathering of students upset by the ‘Prince’ comments has been the largest public challenge to our comments during my class’s years here. The case reminds us of the common refrain among free speech advocates: We need not defend comments to defend people’s right to say them. As one anonymous commenter wrote in response to Tilghman’s letter, “A few nasty comments here and there is an infinitesimally small price to pay for truly free, unabridged speech.” We agree.

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