

# Should we eliminate anonymous comments online?

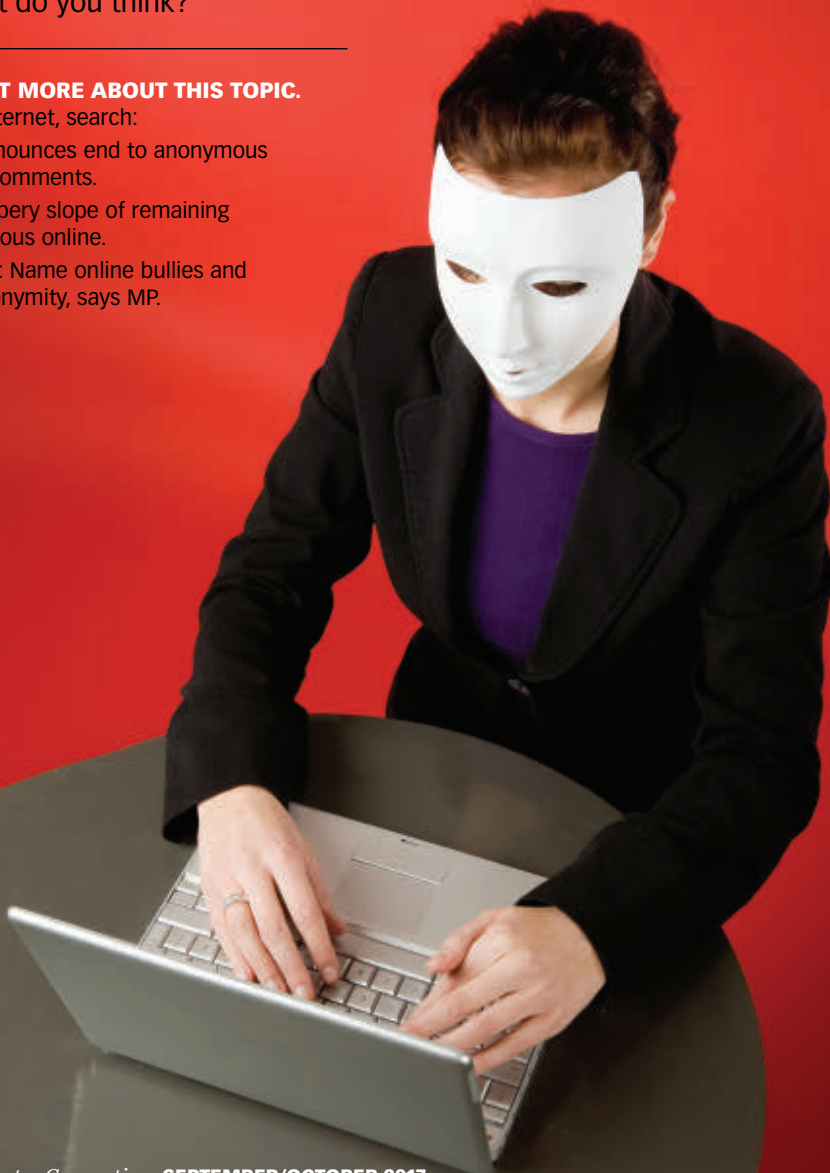
ANYBODY CAN POST remarks on social media or in the comments sections of newspaper and magazine articles without giving their name. Such online anonymity has been under attack by those who say that it encourages misinformation, rude comments, stalking and bullying. Others argue that requiring people to use their real names in these instances would curtail free speech and eliminate an important forum for activists, victims of abuse, whistle-blowers and others.

What do you think?

## FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THIS TOPIC.

On the internet, search:

- CBC announces end to anonymous online comments.
- The slippery slope of remaining anonymous online.
- Bullying: Name online bullies and ban anonymity, says MP.



## READER COMMENTS

*facebook.com/CostcoCanada*

A person should not make a comment that they would not be proud to have their parents or child read. Negative or positive, there is always a kind, graceful and purposeful way to get your point across!

—*Krissy Borque*

Anonymous comments allow timid people to tell the whole truth, no holds barred. ... There are always a few bad apples that spoil the bunch.

—*Tommy Everett*

Rude comments and bullying are everywhere, and we are trying to teach the next generation that this is not acceptable.

—*Karin Campbell-Gadd*

There is little or no value in anonymous comments, as there is no way to validate or challenge the authenticity of the comments.

—*Stephen Laurie*

There are two sides to the discussion. If you have a view contrary to many others and you use your real name, you can be excoriated publicly. Anonymous commentary protects freedom of speech (and fear of reprisal), but it also tends to degrade discussion. No right or wrong here.

—*Chris Twemlow*

I have no problem with anonymous commentary. Why is seeing someone's real name the only means by which to legitimize a comment?

—*Pat Myketa*

Anonymous comments should be considered non-starters. If you want to remain anonymous, then do so silently.

—*Susan Copley*

## YES FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



**Brian Maude**, a consumer protection lawyer in Saint John, New Brunswick, was recently involved in a campaign to end anonymous comments on the CBC website.

WHENEVER I HEAR people discuss the elimination of any editorial practice, one of the first cries in opposition is “Censorship!” It’s an easy retort. I tend to agree with the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when he said, “Censorship reflects a society’s lack of confidence in itself.” As a society, we need the courage of our convictions.

We do, however, censor every day. We keep our “inside voice” in check, and don’t always say exactly what we think, at least not out loud. We do this to avoid conflict, to avoid hurting the feelings of others, to be polite—except, however, online. Online, people abandon restraint, courtesy—not to mention grammar—and civility. Why? Because it’s not “them” talking. It’s anonymous.

Some hide behind anonymity to say what they really think, no matter how hurtful, rude or threatening. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote that people “demand freedom of speech as a compensation for the freedom of thought, which they seldom use.” That is all the more true when they hide behind the shield of anonymity. Why not? Who will know it’s you? You need no courage; you need only the confidence of a keyboard and an attitude. It’s bereft of consequences.

But we live in a society of consequences. We have responsibility. We have rules of civility that we embrace daily in order to live in harmony within our community. Why, then, would we not have those same rules when we choose to live in the global online community?

CBC, Radio-Canada, the *Toronto Star* and *The Huffington Post* have all moved to end anonymous comments on their websites. They did so because those comments reflected more a mob mentality than the considered thoughts of reflective readers. It was less frequently commentary than it was blind vitriol.

Requiring commenters to own their comments isn’t censorship; it’s simply challenging them to say—aloud—what they claim to believe. There’s nothing stopping those same people from choosing to make the same rude, hurtful comments they made before. All they need is the courage to make it. **C**

## NO FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



**Gabriella Coleman**, the Wolfe Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy at McGill University, is the author of *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (Verso, 2014).

IN RECENT YEARS, anonymous online comments have developed a poor reputation. Numerous editorials have called for their end. The worry: Allowing internet users to hide their identity will breed more hateful and harmful speech. The problem: The same anonymity used by bullies and harassers is also relied on by ordinary people, citizens and activists to express controversial political opinions and share sensitive information to support each other. While banning anonymity might curb some negative speech, it would also lead to detrimental social costs.

Forcing everyone to reveal their real names would create a speech monoculture, marginalizing the oppressed, voiceless and powerless who routinely rely on cloaking. Today, as more of us conduct all of our affairs online, it is imperative that anonymity remain a staple in our media diet. This does not mean every online forum is well served by cloaking. Communities should be empowered to decide whether anonymity serves them or not. Some organizations, including the BBC and *The Huffington Post*, have banned anonymous speech, while others, like *The New York Times* and *Jezebel*, still allow anonymous commenting.

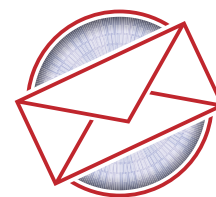
Prohibiting anonymous comments en masse will also stifle the search for innovative solutions that curtail harmful speech without sacrificing anonymity. Sites like *Jezebel*, for instance, minimize hateful speech with moderating—forms of intervention that can be applied automatically with technology or human judgment. These sorts of efforts, which strike a balance between anonymity and control—and not a universal call to end anonymous speech—deserve our support. **C**

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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See Member Comments for more Debate responses

## JULY/AUGUST DEBATE RESULTS

Is technology making us smarter?

23% YES  
77% NO

Percentage reflects votes received by July 17, 2017.

Results may reflect Debate being picked up by blogs.

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