

ANONYMOUSLY YOURS

ANONYMOUS POSTINGS DON'T AID DEMOCRACY. THEY THREATEN IT.

As print and online media battle for readers and advertising dollars, a ubiquitous new writer is hogging a lot of space – and influence.

Her – or his – name is Anonymous. He or she doesn't go by that name, though. Instead, she usually uses a made-up name or an e-mail address.

The more space Anonymous takes up, the more I'm bewildered by the judgment of editors who use space to print or post the writings of Anonymous.

It's true that many readers' letters and postings are thoughtful. Those people give real names and contact information. They make their cases, sometimes refuting a story, sometimes supporting it. That's a precious right in this society, and I hope that people aren't afraid to speak their minds. If this were a country where free speech was trampled, say China, Cuba or Iran, I'd support the words of Anonymous. But this is still America. Isn't it?

If that's the reason for anonymous postings, though – that people are afraid of being identified with their opinions – then we're already giving up our rights.

Regardless of why people choose anonymity, anonymous comments to online versions of periodicals are often peppered with slander, rage and general nastiness, not to mention misspellings, wacky grammar and lots of exclamation points. Wars of words break out among factions of anonymous opinion writers. Reading them is like watching a bar fight with the lights turned off: nobody knows who landed the punch.

Here's how this journalistic travesty works: A trained professional writes an article for a publication. The piece is researched, and vetted by numerous editors, including fact-checkers and copy editors, who make sure the basic rules of style and usage are followed.

The writer often uses multiple sources for the article. Occasionally, read-

ers, and even editors, don't know who the sources are, but the trust between the writer and editor allows the source to remain anonymous. Anonymity in those cases is earned.

The periodical prints the article, then posts it on the Internet. That's the legitimate part. The rumble begins when Anonymous takes over.

It wasn't always this way. In the old days of the 20th century, letters to the editor were signed with real names and credible contact information for purposes of verification. Periodicals once cared about such things as: Are you who you say you are? Did you actually write this? May we use your name? Sometimes the answer

was "no," but the periodicals made the decision to run the letter, saying, "name and address withheld by request." The editors, however, knew who the writer was, and simply exercised their option to withhold the name of someone who, for example, feared retribution.

We're now in the "democratic" new media, where a quick perusal through the comments section of many periodicals' websites offers a stark contrast to those quaint days of editorial responsibility. Anonymous yelping trails behind articles like hyenas behind a wounded zebra.

Where are the editors, those protectors of the Fourth Estate? Too many have passed off their editorial responsibility by posting phrases after Anonymous' comments, such as: "Is this comment inappropriate? Let us know."

Let us know? No, *you* let us know: That's your job.

Somewhere along the way down the information highway, editors opened the floodgates. I know readers who are confused by the crumbling barriers that separate legitimate journalism from the anonymous comments that follow it. They don't know who or what to



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believe. They don't know who the legitimate writers are.

Journalists who spent years preparing to present news are now simply the opening act for nameless critics who don't have the guts to put their names to their opinions. Terrified of losing readers, editors print nearly everything and anything on their websites. These websites are like New York City's subway system in the 1970s and '80s. You can't read the train numbers through the mess of graffiti.

There's a school of thought that says allowing anyone to post virtually anything is a move toward democratizing the media. But this is nonsense, and worse, dangerous. Democracy doesn't arrive by linguistic bricks-through-the-windows, thrown by Anonymous – anarchy does. From anarchy comes chaos. From chaos comes censorship. From censorship comes loss of freedom.

If editors and other content providers don't start doing their jobs and getting back to the work of ensuring editorial integrity – including that which comes from their readers – they might as well pack it in, because pandering to Anonymous will ultimately bring down the rest of us. ■

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