

From *Slings And Arrows*, In The Trenches

Style

Debating an issue on the Internet can be one of the most productive forms of discussion in the world. Both sides of an issue are on equal footing. One side can't simply "shout over" the other side, and generally there's no overbearing moderator to swing the debate over to a favored view.

Attempts to dominate the discussion by being long-winded are worthless as readers end up simply clicking a key a few times to skip over all the verbiage; while attempts to dominate by bullying through nasty attacks or by TYPING IN ALL CAPS – the Internet equivalent of shouting – also get skipped over. In both instances, the bully's arguments are generally downgraded in the minds of readers rather than being accepted.

Attempts to win an argument by ignoring your opposition's main points fail miserably, since your opponent can quickly and efficiently point right back up the page to the points that were ignored without having to waste valuable time repeating them. Attempts to use "Straw Men" by altering an opponent's argument to one more easily attacked also fail, since the alteration can be speedily and clearly pointed out and the scurrilousness of the trick rebounded upon the trickster as an illustration of the weakness of their position and their desire to avoid honest argument.

Likewise with "Appeals To Authority" or "Ad Hominems" or most other fallacious arguments. These tricks make for a good "sound show" in a TV debate but they fall flat when they can be calmly pointed out as fallacies and the audience clearly directed to examine their use in previous paragraphs on the same page.

The Internet is the one medium where facts can be instantly and efficiently cross-checked by the audience while the debate is put on hold, and where that audience can easily and effectively judge which side of an

argument was presented with the most merit and substance – as opposed to the simple volume and flashiness of style that typify televised verbal debate. On the Internet, brevity and accuracy rule. Reading posts on one’s computer monitor is different than reading pages in a book. Readers tend to compensate for the lack of professional editorial judgment on the net by rapidly skimming through posts to look for the meat of the argument. Anything longer than a few paragraphs is generally viewed as likely to be either boring or just full of cut-and-paste junk – so it largely gets skipped over.

When people read a book or an Op-Ed piece in a newspaper, they're generally prepared to be preached at to some extent. On the net, though, they simply don't have the patience for it. When skimming the Internet looking for new information, new ideas, scintillating bursts of insight, and maybe some fun blood 'n guts being spilled between two sides of an argument. If they really wanted to read in-depth arguments on one side of an issue, they'd either get a book on it or go to a dedicated website that specifically devotes pages upon pages to the presentation and analysis of that side. They want to applaud their side and boo the other, or, if they're fairly neutral on the subject, at least get a quick sense of whether one side is throwing better punches than the other.

There are three unfortunate aspects to net discussions, though: hate, obscenity, and censorship. I'll be discussing hate and censorship in a while, but as for obscenity, whether mild or nasty, it's something you'll just have to deal with when you're out prowling in the slums of cyberspace. Some “neighborhoods” (the better run and organized blogs and professional news boards for example) have built-in protections to shield the eyes of the innocent from offensive words, but their effectiveness is spotty and they can also be annoyingly overzealous. When you’re speaking about old school chums, you don’t want it to appear as stories about your cl***mates, and if you want to want to say “I thought its assumption was hit perfectly,” then you really don’t want it to appear as “I though* *** **umpton wa**** perfectly.” Beyond that, there's the whole realm of nasty but not outright obscene wordings. I've been called “McDouchebag” and “McFaggot” and other amusing

derivations by Antismokers on the net a whole sh*tload of times by various f*ckers!

But, as we've seen, there are good aspects to Internet debate as well. People can't easily run away from questions and challenges other than by changing anonymous identities (which reduces their ability to appear legitimate). And, when it comes to truly public figures – such as the heads of antismoking organizations or politicians who are pushing bans – such anonymity isn't an option. A wonderful example of such a situation can be seen in the back-and-forth battle I had with Mr. James Repace (the tornado chasing “Secondhand Smoke Consultant”) on the Greenbelt Patch website where Mr. Repace made the tactical error of “dropping in” to comment on a trial where he'd testified as an expert witness. The exchange is too long to include here, but it can be seen in all its glory at the referenced website.ⁱ

A major point of interest in that exchange of postings extending over several weeks was Mr. Repace's complete inability to provide even the most basic scientific evidence to back up his initial claim that levels of smoke from a neighboring apartment could cause endothelial dysfunction. Eventually, after thirteen specific requests (mixed in and through comments from many others who'd joined in the party) Mr. Repace simply disappeared after a botched censorship appeal to the editors of the Greenbelt Patch painting me as a “tobacco industry spammer.”ⁱⁱ Aside from another short-lived attempt to paint me as a “tobacco industry mole,”ⁱⁱⁱ he hasn't, to my knowledge, been active on the Internet since, at least as of January, 2013.¹

Such convenient offerings from the men behind the curtain aren't very common, though, so I try to create my own opportunities to pin antismoking advocates publicly to the wall by publicly calling them to

¹ Repace's charges stayed on SmokeFree DC's website for months, while my defense remained hidden. Eventually, the site's legal minds evidently decided discretion was the better part of valor and removed his message. Here is a segment, with the rest at the referenced iCyte: *“MOLE WARNING: [The Patch] has been attacked by semi-pro Tobacco Industry Spammers. ... McFadden, ... Mulvina, and Magnetic, among several others, invariably pollute the message boards ... with their fanatical flat-earth pseudo-science. ... some moderated sites have banned these industry moles.”*

task on their statements to the press. That effort has resulted in my creating a series of “Challenges” made to antismoking advocates and politicians in public forums. They’re similar to some of the challenges I’ve offered as letters to the editor, but on the Internet, there’s room to lay them out in more detail. There’s also the nice option of returning to them later and pointing out the lack of answers they’ve received from supposedly responsible public officials^{iv, v} or journalists^{vi, vii} who have been fully notified of their existence. They’re rarely answered, but the very lack of an answer serves as an answer in and of itself.

ⁱ <http://greenbelt.patch.com/articles/witness-testimony-ends-in-secondhand-smoke-trial>.

ⁱⁱ <http://icyte.com/saved/greenbelt.patch.com/544357> (Original page deleted September, 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://icyte.com/saved/www.smokefreedc.org/538500> (Original page deleted September, 2012).

^{iv} <http://icyte.com/saved/kansascity.com/616808> (Original page deleted September, 2012).

^v <http://icyte.com/saved/counselheal.com/611378>.

^{vi} <http://icyte.com/saved/galvestondailynews.com/616806> (Original page deleted September, 2012).

^{vii} <http://icyte.com/saved/columbian.com/605920>.