

We are in a new era of the power of the word. Anybody can be published - all you need is access to a computer. You can publish a blog on any topic under the sun. You can be published on the New York Times or Wall Street Journal web site, just by commenting on an article. TheRapidian.com, the newest newspaper in Grand Rapids, relies entirely on citizen journalists to report and comment on the news. We have a voice as we've never had before. We have the power to make a difference greater than at any other time in history.

Here's one striking example: A relatively unknown man wrote a column on his blog which resulted in the Prime Minister of England issuing a public apology just 10 weeks later. Here's the story:

Alan Turing was an English mathematician, logician, cryptanalyst, and computer scientist. In 1999, *Time Magazine* named Turing one of the 100 Most Important People of the 20th Century for his role in the creation of the modern computer. The Turing test, the idea that a computer could be said to "think" if it could fool an interrogator into thinking that the conversation was with a human, remains a significant and characteristically provocative contribution to the debate regarding artificial intelligence. He laid the foundations of computer science, and helped break the Nazi Enigma code. After WWII he created one of the first designs for a stored-program computer. At the age of 40 he was convicted for engaging in homosexual acts and sentenced to estrogen treatments. Two years later, he committed suicide and the world lost a genius.

At the end of June of this summer, a British computer programmer and blogger named John Graham-Cumming wrote a column about the injustice of Turing's arrest. By early August he had posted a petition for a formal apology by the British government on the web site of the Prime Minister. By early September, it had over 31,000 signatures. On September 10, Prime Minister Gordon Brown made an official public apology on behalf of the British government for the way in which Turing was treated after the war.

This could not have happened 10 years ago. The power of the internet to circulate information and bring people together is stunning. However, in the immortal words of Stan Lee: "With great power comes great responsibility."

The definition of web 2.0 is a website which is a medium of conversation, not merely a medium of publication. Web 2.0 is a public debate, rather than an electronic brochure. Here are some stories about where that conversation can lead:

New York Times, Summer, 2004: The fight started at school, when some eighth-grade girls stole a pencil case filled with makeup that belonged to a new classmate, Amanda Marcuson, and she reported them.

As soon as Amanda got home, the instant messages started popping up on her computer screen. She was a tattletale and a liar, they said. Shaken, she typed back, "You stole my stuff!" She was a "stuck-up [w]itch," came the instant response in the box on the screen, followed by a series of increasingly ugly epithets.

That evening, Amanda's mother tore her away from the computer to go to a basketball game with her family. But the barrage of electronic insults did not stop. Like a lot of other teenagers, Amanda has her Internet messages automatically forwarded to her cellphone, and by the end of the game she had received 50 - the limit of its capacity.

[New York Times, Internet Gives Teenage Bullies Weapons to Wound From Afar, Amy Harmon, Thursday, August 26, 2004]

Megan Meier was a teenager from Dardenne Prairie, Missouri who committed suicide by hanging in October, 2006. She was just shy of 14 years of age. Her suicide was attributed to cyber-bullying through MySpace. The mother of a former friend of Megan later admitted creating a fake MySpace account with her daughter using a false name to get information about Megan and humiliate her, in retribution for Megan's allegedly spreading gossip about her former friend.

Finally, Advertising blogs churn out some of the Web's more scathing, and personal, vitriol. Comments posted on two sharp-tongued blogs written by advertising industry insiders blamed the sites for contributing to the suicide in Spring, 2008, of Paul Tilley, the creative director of DDB Chicago. "We're certainly used to criticism in the agency business," said one industry insider. "But when blogs attack someone personally, without justification, and they do it anonymously, it's just wrong." [New York Times, After Suicide, Blog Insults Are Debated, Bob Tedeschi March 3, 2008]

Amanda Marcuson said, "It seems like people can say a lot worse things to someone online than when they're actually talking to them."

How do we explain this appalling behavior? Lynne Truss, author of *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today, or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door*, suggests that the root cause is the fact that the Internet gives us unlimited choice and control over what we see and hear, do and read. Surfing the web is almost a god-like experience of exercise of power to read and comment, make any tidbit of information we need appear on our screen at a whim, and disappear just as quickly.

Face to face human interaction gives us neither unlimited choice nor ultimate control. When we interact with a human being, live and in person, we can't press a delete key; we can't backspace to a more interesting part of the conversation; we can't let the current person drone on in the background while sending a message to someone more interesting; we can't hyperlink to another conversation at the click of a mouse; and in fact we ought to let the other person control the topic at least half of the time.

The increasing level of rudeness in our society can be directly tied to our expectations that we can have god-like control over everything in our life like we do online.

In Web 2.0, if we don't like what an author says, we we say so in a comment for the world to see. We can say whatever we like. In generally, no editor will review our response before publication. The responses are not always well-reasoned. The responders may not even have read the whole article. The responder may have his or her own agenda wholly apart from the content of the article. This method of comment is almost guaranteed to make reasonable conversation difficult. At least when responding by email, it is possible to think about the response for a few days before hitting the send button, although far too many people have itchy fingers and send without thinking. Responding to a blog post or an article almost demands an immediate response. You can't save the draft to think it over and send later - the conversation is happening NOW! - so you dash off a quick response and send it immediately.

When we are feeling powerless or helpless, when we are feeling out of control, which is frankly most of the time, the power of the internet, the immediacy of our ability to lash out and see our words appear on the screen for all to read, is seductive. The ability to feel anger and take action and write an email or send an instant message or post a response on a blog gives us a

measure of control. We are not longer being stomped on by our lives ... we are the ones doing the stomping. Anger feels good. Anger is power. The Torah and other Biblical teachings understand this and warn us:

לֹא־תִשְׁנָא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ...

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. [Leviticus 19:17]

Proverbs teaches, “An angry person provokes a quarrel; A hot-tempered person commits many offenses.” [29:22] Doesn’t that sound like what happens on an email listserv or in a discussion forum? Proverbs also teaches, “A harsh word provokes anger; a gentle response allays wrath.” [15:1, clauses reversed]

We need to pay closer attention to our use of speech, our tone, our consideration of those who will hear or read our words. The verbal, oral or written, communication between ourselves and another is fraught with miscues. 90% of an iceberg is underwater. What if we imagine that 90% of our communication is non-verbal, hidden between the lines, in our tone, in words we do not say, in our body language. Our tone might be distracted, our choice of vocabulary might miscommunicate, our failure to look the other in the eye might be misinterpreted. Our body language, our smile, the gentleness of our voice which moderates the severity of our language, is precisely what is missing in written communication.

We need to respect those with whom we disagree and consider their opinions, as in this story of Hillel and Shammai:

For three years the Academy of Shammai and the Academy of Hillel argued. Each said that the halakhah follows our [ruling]. A Divine voice came and said: ‘[The rulings of] both are the words of the living God, דְּבַר־י אֱלֹהִים הֵינִי, but the halakhah follows [the ruling of] the Academy of Hillel’. Since both of them are the words of the living God, why was the halakhah established like the Academy of Hillel? Because they were kind and modest, and taught both their opinion and the opinion of the Academy of Shammai. In addition, they taught the opinion of the Academy of Shammai before their own opinion. [Eiruvim 13b]

Rabbi Steven Wernick, the new executive director of the United Synagogue, wrote:

Maybe we should add a few new *Al Hets* to our list of sins:

*Al Het shehetanu l'faneha* – for the sins we have committed before You – for not reading our own message at least twice before sending or posting it.

- ... for posting a personal attack on a news story, blog, facebook page, Myspace, or Twitter.
- ... for sending an email message or instant message in anger.
- ... for not pondering how the recipient might react to our message.
- ... for cursing, flaming, sending spam or USING ALL CAPS.
- ... for not judiciously using the delete key rather than the forward key to stop the proliferation of inappropriate messages.
- ... for thinking that the privacy of email is actually private.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin told the story of a rabbi named Yaacov Yosef who was brought to America at the turn of the century from Vilna to be the Chief Rabbi of New York. His annual *Shabbat Shuvah* lecture before Yom Kippur was a major cultural and spiritual event for the whole community.

One year, the Rabbi had a stroke. He was in the hospital for most of the summer, unable to speak, unable to move. And no one believed that he would ever be able to speak or teach again.

But on Rosh Hashanah, as incapacitated as he was, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef sent word that he would teach once again on *Shabbat Shuvah*. Hundreds came to hear him, wondering how he would deliver his *derashah*.

He was brought into the synagogue and helped onto the *bimah*. He sat instead of standing, with the copies of the volumes of the Talmud that he intended to cite piled up in front of him. There was a hush in the room as the rabbi started to speak. “The Talmud says...” he began, but could not finish the sentence. The crowd waited, hoping against hope that the Rabbi would somehow find the ability to speak. He tried once more: “The Talmud says...,” he began, but could go no further.

Finally, after what seemed like an interminable delay, he mustered the strength to say: “Look, my children, at what can happen to a human being. A year ago I could speak and quote and teach without a note, and now look at what has become of me. Know, my children, that the ability to speak is a gift, a loan. If you can speak well, do not boast, for the gift is not yours, it is a loan. As it is written in Ohila la’El in the Musaf service: “The desire to pray comes from inside us, וּמֵהָ לְשׁוֹן מְעֵנָה - but the ability to speak is the gift of God.” [Shabbat Shuvah d’var Torah, several years ago]

The ability to communicate in any way is a gift from God. May we be like the Academy of Hillel, kind and modest, loving and respecting the words of those with whom we disagree, even as we differ with them; בְּצִדְקָה כָּל־אִמְרֵי־פִינוּ, may all our words be just and righteous [Prov. 8:8]; and הִ' צוּרֵינוּ וְגֹאֲלֵינוּ ... הִ' לְרִצּוֹן אִמְרֵי־פִינוּ, may the words of our mouth, our pen, our keyboard, and our fingers be always acceptable to God, our Rock and Redeemer [based on Psalms 19:15].