

The web has become a bizarre synthesis of toilet wall and Thomas Paine

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When [Martin Luther](#) triggered the Reformation by nailing his [Ninety-Five Theses](#) to the door of a Wittenberg church, he didn't sign it [GloomyGripe65](#). He put his name to the document. Centuries later, when his namesake publicly declared his support for the Memphis strikers, he didn't sign it [HaveADream1963](#). If it was worth saying, it was worth putting your name to it.

Yet take a glance at any comment thread on the Guardian site, YouTube or even on the government-recommended website Mumsnet, and you'll find discussion boards littered with gruesome and, crucially, anonymous mud-slinging. This isn't about trolls (their viciousness is merely a symptom of something more serious); this is about people who would never class themselves as abusers or hecklers, let alone "nasty". And yet, liberated by user-name anonymity, ordinary citizens – work colleagues, your school-gate fellow parents, your son, your mother – will type statements they would never dream of saying to the subject's face. They probably wouldn't even gossip it to mates in the pub – the mates would look away, shocked by this needless vitriol.

So who exactly decided that pseudonymity is a crucial brick in the wall of free speech, whether on the web or elsewhere? Maybe user names once boasted a valid internet purpose. But any such justification is now thoroughly subverted, and we are left with the queasy ethics of the untended playground, where the nastiest bully wins out simply because he knows he can.

When [South Korea](#) recently introduced a law demanding all online users identify themselves before posting to message boards, a [Carnegie Mellon study](#) of the effects showed that online participation did not drop in the long term but "uninhibited behaviours" certainly did: "swear words and anti-normative expressions" were significantly reduced. In spite of this, last week the law was overturned by a constitutional court on the grounds that it was violating freedom of speech. (...) Introducing the law, a national assembly member declared that "internet space in our country has become the wall of a public toilet". Toilet walls have existed almost since the beginning of time, but few have ever granted those walls the status of an unalienable democratic right. Once counter-cultural, the web has now created this bizarre synthesis of toilet wall and Tom Paine – calling on human rights to justify human unkindness, to allow full rein to the worst side of us.

But imagine (as I have done for a new play) if all user names magically reverted to the individuals' real names. Go on, think about it – what would actually be different? What, most importantly, would be lost? What have you ever posted – on a discussion board, or Twitter or elsewhere – to which you are not willing to put your name? If user names had never been invented, would you have not still wanted to participate? How can any of us stand for the right to say something that we dare not own? Because this isn't idle chatter lost in the air. The internet isn't written in pencil, or even ink or even ink – it's carved in stone. Much of this character assassination remains visible forever – or certainly decades. Further, this abuse often squeezes out passionately argued commentary, and the absence of true debate debases and devalues the national dialogue. Without a name to stand behind it, free speech too easily slides into verbal delinquency. It has become too easy to be unkind, and we have lost something as a result.