Web forums show best and worst of discourse

By Dan Sheehan
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Our story begins with a clash between strangers, a cyberspace shoving match that in real life might have ended with someone nursing a shiner.

"You bring nothing to the table," says one. "Put up or shut up."

"Don't mess with me, boy," the other replies. "I can tear you apart and leave a sniveling little wimp lying on the floor of his computer room crying for his mommy. . . ."

Welcome to the West Shore Forum, a section of PennLive.com designed to allow the free exchange of ideas, recipes or anything else that tickles a resident's fancy in this suburb of Harrisburg, Pa.

The forum was hijacked months ago by anonymous school district partisans who have filled it with hundreds of bilious exchanges ostensibly regarding the quality of schools.

The forum symbolizes everything good and bad about public discourse in the Information Age, demonstrating how the World Wide Web can function simultaneously as electronic public square and lavatory wall.

Welcome to the new American graffiti.

Since late January, the West Shore Forum has logged more than 1,400 posts. Most appear to be written by adults — but not, alas, by grown-ups.

People of every stripe use forums designed for them

One writer asks if the school director is "an Aryan or a Nazi." Another says of the director: "You need brain surgery — if they can locate your brain."

Online forums and chat rooms allow Internet users to talk to each other as a wider group "listens." Typically they are free, and many, including PennLive, allow participants to remain anonymous.

People of every stripe — fox hunters, Bible scholars, amateur chefs, politicos, metalheads, environmentalists, UFO chasers, bookworms, coin collectors — have forums of their own. A Web site called http://www.voy.com offers forums ranging from "The Albino Priestesses' Altar" to "Brother Harry's Bible Study." The bluntly titled "Forum for Crazy People" invites users to post bizarre messages, and users have obliged. "Hate your mum and her knitted jumpers," says a typical post.

Experts say there is no way of knowing how many people use Web forums, but there are more than 30 million top-level domains — dot.coms, dot.orgs and so on — according to http://www.NetFactual.com. Assuming just 1 percent host forums, that would mean at least 300,000 places where users can make themselves heard. The number is probably far higher.

The acid-tongued outbursts do not surprise David Woolley, a Minnesota software designer who developed one of the first programs that made Internet bulletin boards possible. Woolley serves on the board of Minneapolis-based Minnesota E-Democracy, whose Web forum draws journalists and legislators.

"Forums are useful for a pretty good airing of a lot of different viewpoints," he says. "Everyone has an equal voice, and a lot of different opinions can be expressed without the time constraints [of a chat room.]"

Unfortunately, users often revert to sniping and name-calling.

"It's extremely common," Woolley says. "I think the reason is the social distance that the medium provides. It makes it easy to say things you probably wouldn't say face to face. Plus, there is less immediacy than in face-to-face conversations, where you can correct misunderstandings more quickly."

Perhaps the most important ingredient of a successful forum, Woolley says, is a host who can warn about offensive language and banish repeat offenders. Users can also be required to register by providing a name and e-mail address. But not every Web site can afford a host, and savvy computer users can fake an online identity.

Registration probably does help to discourage "flamers" — users who enter a forum simply to post nasty messages — says Steve Jones, communications professor at the University of Illinois in Chicago and founder of the Association of Internet Researchers. Like Woolley, Jones believes anonymity gives rise to online surliness.

"When you lose those inhibitions, it can veer into a free-for-all," he says. That dismays Internet pioneers who envisioned the technology as a democratizing force, Jones adds.

It's "becoming a classic dilemma for the Net," he says. "When everybody has a voice, how do you prevent it from becoming a mob?"

Is it desirable — or even possible — to police Web forums by requiring identification?

Woolley argues that Internet sites should respect the privacy of users. At the same time, he sums up the dilemma of graffiti in cyberspace:

"If you measure success merely in terms of the number of messages posted, well, why not let people go at each other's throats?" he says. "But you're not really going to get much useful dialogue going that way."