

# Culture Clash on the Net Ethical Issues

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[The following is a case from real life]

Disclaimer: This problem was originally posed many years ago, when Utah had only one ISP, and it was comparatively expensive and not a choice many students could take. Nowadays telling the student to "just go somewhere else" is not the painful choice that it was at that time. There are still the issues, but they are now somewhat moot.

We have a user here who is from some tribe in a small African country. He has an antagonist out on the network from another tribe in that country. There was a war going on at the time, and the antagonists are from tribes on opposite sides of the war (and they weren't known for getting along before that.)

They were both using a network newsgroup (soc.culture.[that-country-name]) as a forum for their views.

However, both of them are choosing the vilest, most offensive, crude, threatening language possible for this "dialog."

Every time our user posts one of these we get 20 or so complaints about our user's language and tone and, often, appropriateness. I assume that the other side gets the same when their guy posts. Since this happens every day, we get 20 or so complaints every day, which ties up someone's morning every day.

The messages unquestionably violate the published rules for the accounts, and the user even admits this.

We told him if he didn't cease these violations, we would yank his account. He continued, and we yanked his account. (Four times now, with a lecture from a different person here every time before he got it back.)

His point of view in all of this is actually quite defensible:

1. He is only replying to things directed at him, and replying in exactly the same language and tone as that which was used against him.
2. His family honor, his personal honor, and his tribal honor have been dragged thorough the mud, and he feels he has a right to defend himself and his family and tribe.
3. Since they are both doing this, he feels that it is unfair to have his account terminated and not that of the other person also.

4. We are effectively allowing someone else to insult him and lie about him publicly, worldwide (and therefore in his homeland), while denying him any chance to respond.

Our view is close to:

1. He is causing us extra work, and is violating the rules to do so.
2. He can defend himself. He just can't do it in an obscene objectionable way. [Even if that might be culturally accepted in his country as the appropriate response to an attack that is obscene and objectionable.]
3. We can't terminate the other person since we have no control over any other site. And that person may not, in fact, be violating the rules of the site he is on.
4. We can't afford to keep dealing with the complaints, as long as they are valid, we have a responsibility to fix that part of the problem we have access to. If he continues to use objectionable language, we can't let him continue.

There are a number of interesting problems here, with many tied up in our forcing him to comply with our cultural norms, in a manner that is offensive to his.

Please note that being a "tribesman" does *\*NOT\** mean primitive. He was a student here at a University. He was well educated, and very articulate. His being a member of a tribe is a cultural fact, relevant to the conflict, not a statement of anything else. I only say this because some students have assumed all kinds of insulting things based on his being a tribesman.

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