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# Swearing, moral order, and online communication

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This paper addresses problems with swearing on the internet. The opening section of the paper defines swearing (uttering offensive emotional speech) as a ubiquitous form of impolite human behavior. Swearing can occur wherever humans communicate with each other and that it appears in computer-mediated communication (CMC) is not surprising. The second section documents how swearwords appear in email, blogs, Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube and in other practices and sites (trolling, 4chan). Swearword use is situated in the context of emerging research on impoliteness and moral order (politeness norms and standards that govern internet behavior). Online swearword use is a function of moral order, as well as users' interpersonal characteristics such as age (younger more likely than older users), gender (men more likely than women), the time of day (later in the day and evening), and a website's social composition (adversarial and male dominated more than homogeneous friendly sites). The paper concludes with suggestions for dealing with internet swearword use where regulation is desirable and feasible. Websites and communities should develop moral order norms that at a minimum restrict illegal forms of speech (e.g., credible threats of violence, workplace sexual harassment).

**Keywords:** swearing, moral order, trolling, impoliteness, e-bile, pragmatics, morality

## 1. Introduction

*Swearing* defined broadly is the use of offensive or taboo words to express our emotions and communicate our emotions to others (Jay 2009a). This type of emotional expression has proven to be problematic in public places and online sites. Not all types of swearword use are problematic. Swearwords can be used for purposes that are not obviously offensive or emotional. Everyday speech is filled with examples of communicating using swearwords without trying to

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express or convey deep emotions. Speakers with the aim of fitting in with the ongoing norms for communication will use swearwords after others have done so. This inconsequential style of swearing is used in order to be compatible with others who are using swearwords; in this form, swearword use is a normative behavior (Jay 2009a, 2009b; Jay and Janschewitz 2007, 2008). All competent speakers know how to use swearwords in their native language, but whether they do or not depends on their personalities and the social-physical contexts they inhabit. Swearword use in colloquial speech is now generally regarded as normal behavior, not abnormal (Jay 2000, 2009a, 2009b; Jay and Jay 2013).

Whether online swearword use is polite or impolite is a pertinent question. Within recent impoliteness research, the impetus for swearing is explored and it is important to draw the connection between public swearing research and studies of impoliteness, especially impoliteness in computer-mediated communication (CMC). With that stated, Miriam Locher (2010) argued that rudeness or impoliteness is often the norm in CMC settings which has important implications for addressing moral order in online communities. Instances of normal swearing include those where impoliteness can be justified and the use of offensive language is deemed appropriate (Jay and Janschewitz 2008). Approaches to politeness that encompass this type of impoliteness and rudeness (Arndt and Janney 1985; Beebe 1995; Bousfield 2007; Culpeper 1996; Culpeper et al. 2003; Kasper 1990; Lakoff 1989; Locher 2010; Locher and Watts 2005; Thomas 1983) incorporate situations where speakers intentionally or unintentionally use offensive speech for purposes other than social harmony. Here, explaining the various means and motivations for swearing is essential. For example, Lakoff (1989) and Archer (2014) have explained why intentional verbal aggression is necessary in courtroom discourse. Similarly, Beebe (1995) described how people are intentionally rude in order to obtain power or vent negative feelings. Importantly, Locher and Watts (2005) argued that what is impolite cannot be universally construed, since impoliteness depends on the relationship between speaker and listener. Politeness and impoliteness norms are negotiated in online interactions and these interpersonal issues are tied to identity constructions in those communities. The specific aim of this paper is to look at instances of swearword use in CMC and determine when it is acceptable or normative behavior versus where it is impolite and abusive.

One goal here is to document swearword use in online communication. What are the ways in which swearwords are used in online communication and social networks? How frequently are swearwords used? A second goal is to examine the norms or moral order over online swearword use. What variables contribute to the use of swearwords or restrictions on swearword use as internet communities continue to evolve? How do user gender, user age, online community norms, and

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governmental restraints affect swearword use? Where can rudeness be expected or normative?

First, we ask what kinds of swearwords are used when people emote, that is, what should we expect to see on the internet. Swearwords comprise several semantic categories: taboo words, sex acts, body parts, disgusting body products, religion, name-calling, slurs, animal references, ancestral allusions, and slang. Language researchers have attempted to categorize swearwords comprehensively into mutually exclusive categories based on their meaning or reference (e.g., sex, religion); however, these attempts have proven less than satisfactory (see Adams 2016; Bergen 2016; Jay and Jay 2015). Obvious complications arise when trying to corral all forms of taboo word use into coherent semantic categories because many taboo words are ambiguous and will not fit within a single coherent semantic category. The word "shit", for example, can refer to a bodily process, illegal drugs, a body product, or an expression of disgust.

What binds swearwords as a category of words is not their semantic meanings but their emotional intensity and their emotional offensiveness or negative valence (Jay, Caldwell-Harris, and King 2005). Therefore, an alternative way to categorize swearwords is not based on their meanings but on how swearing functions as a behavior, that is, how people want to use swearwords in communication. Here, the focus is on *why* speakers choose to utter swearwords, what their purpose is. Behavioral or functional communication categories are more in line with the definition of swearing earlier, one that it is based on what speakers *are trying to accomplish* with swearwords (express emotions and convey them to others, or fit in with other speakers). A functional analysis of swearing interprets swearword use as a tool to achieve personal and social goals (see Clark 1996). Functional categorization of swearwords overcomes the limitations of sorting words into categories based on meaning. Functionality focuses directly on what purpose (goals) swearwords serve in online communication and what kinds of politeness/impoliteness standards emerge through interpersonal interaction in a given online community.

The goals of offensive word use in online communication are similar to those in spoken discourse. In online communication research, offensive/impolite (not inconsequential) swearword use has been termed "e-bile" (see also Chretien, Greysen, Chretien, and Kind 2009; Hardaker 2010, 2013; Jane 2014; Levmore and Nussbaum 2010; Maia and Rezende 2016). Not all swearword use can be categorized as e-bile, but the kind of offensive speech that people complain about usually is e-bile. E-bile functions to accomplish several personal and social goals: personal attacks (ad hominem), attacks on groups, aspersions, name-calling, trolling, pejorative hyperbole, vulgarity, attacking others' arguments, ranting where there is no clear target (venting with vulgarity), and the

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use of foul language with justification for its use (justified hostility). These goals are achieved in face to face discourse too but online communication is different than face to face communication. What differentiates swearing in online communication from swearing in face to face discourse is: (1) the powerful effect of online users' anonymity or hidden identity, and (2) the lack of a shared physical context or social presence (both users in the same place) where forms of social status usually operate (authority, social economic class, physical size, and eye contact). Anonymity and lack of a shared physical presence or context work to promote the use of offensive behaviors and swearing, as we see in research addressing online swearword use.

## 2. Previous research reporting online swearword use

As the research on swearing online shows, swearwords have cropped up just about everywhere online: in email messages, chat rooms, MySpace, Twitter, blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and 4chan.

### Email

Reports of swearword use in early computer-mediated communication in the form of email messages predate swearword use in very recently evolved social media such as Facebook (circa 2004) or Twitter (circa 2006). For example, in 1997 Spertus developed computer software (*Smokey*) designed to identify email "flames" which are insulting messages delivered through email messages. Spertus categorized flames as messages with: strong obscenities, imperatives (e.g., "get lost!" or "fuck you!"), condescending comments, insults, and epithets. The occurrence of email flaming has not abated much in the last 20 years as Turnage (2008) discovered. Turnage asked email users to rate whether sample email messages contained flaming or not. The messages that were rated highly for flaming were those that contained profanity, but not all instances of profanity were flames, for example: *"Damn! You're not a lot of help today are you? JUST KIDDING, LOL!"* was not perceived as a flame. High correlates of flaming are the use of all capital letters and excessive exclamation points or question marks. Email readers may interpret messages with flaming characteristics as impolite or aggressive whether the sender intended them to be impolite, offensive or not. Keep in mind that some people are more sensitive to, or offended by, swearword use than other people (Jay 1992, 2000).

While many email messages are sent from one person to another person, other email messages with flames are sent to *groups* of receivers or sent as email

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*spam* messages (unsolicited or undesired). Group email messages take on the qualities similar to social media network swearword use on Twitter or Facebook in the sense that they affect a large number of readers. The larger number of email readers could be offended by swearword use or alternatively, could agree with the offensive message sent to readers. In this way, the offensive group email with swearwords would have a "ripple effect" on its audience, a shared offended reaction or a shared positive reaction to the insulting language similar to what happens on shared social networks (Jay 2009b). Rather than just affecting a single reader, group email can affect many.

Sometimes the ripple effect is not desirable at all, for example, US college students' offensive email messaging has been the target of college administrators. Salacious American student athlete email comments in the fall 2016 resulted in the suspension of men's athletic teams at Amherst College and Harvard University (see Dwyer 2016). Amherst's men's cross-country team was suspended when a number of email messages sent to incoming recruits were determined by college administrators to be misogynistic, racist and homophobic. The emails and messages were sent between 2013 and 2015 and included photographs and descriptions of female students, referring to some women as "meat slabs" or "a walking STD." Harvard University cancelled the men's soccer season after its administration found that the soccer team continued to write vulgar and explicit documents numerically rating Harvard women soccer recruits in terms of their sex appeal, their hypothetical preferred sexual position, and their physical appearance on the team's Google Group (Duehren, Fahs, and Thompson 2016). Two additional Ivy League teams were suspended in 2016 for vulgar and misogynistic speech (see Mele 2016). Princeton University suspended its men's swimming and diving team for vulgar and sexist material on its email list. Columbia University suspended its wrestling team for language on its team chat site due to the use of offensive terms such as "fish pussy," "awkward cunt," and "nigs." The college administrators found that the speech was at odds with the core values of the university community.

## Chat rooms and MySpace

Subrahmanyam, Smahel, and Greenfield (2006) reported that swearing in chat room conversations occurred in 3% of online conversations, that is a rate of about one swearword every two minutes. For comparison purposes, studies of spoken English indicate that swearwords occur at a rate of .3% to .7% of all words spoken in the samples studied (Jay 2009a). In another of the early studies of swearing rates in online communication in the US and UK, Thelwall (2008) reported a .2% swearword rate in his UK MySpace study. Most of the UK young users' (16- to 19-year-olds) MySpace communication contained swearing compared to

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roughly only one-half of middle aged UK users' communications. Thelwall found no gender differences in swearing in his UK sample but noted that in a US sample, US males' communications contained significantly more strong swearing than females' MySpace communications.

In a related analysis Patchin and Hinduja (2010) compared swearword use in 2006 ($N = 2423$ profiles) samples of MySpace communications from 2007 ($N = 2181$ profiles). The 2007 sample evidenced a relatively small proportion of user profiles that included swearwords (7.6%) or in comments left by visitors (15.5%). There was a difference between 2006 and 2007 swearword data, however, on the number of swearwords used by occasional users versus active users. Active users showed a significant *decrease* in the number of swearwords on profiles between 2006 and 2007 (20 versus 12.9, respectively) and in comments (35.1 and 29.9, respectively). However, occasional users' rates stayed about the same between 2006 and 2007 in both words on profiles (11.4 and 10.9, respectively) and in comments (20.4 and 22.3, respectively). The authors interpreted the trend for active users as one that indicated that users were exercising more discretion on their MySpace accounts.

Even though MySpace data indicate more discretion, adults are concerned about what children are doing on line. Parents all along have voiced concerns about their children's online activity and swearing (Jay, King, and Duncan 2006). They have been concerned about the amount of time teens spend on computers due to lack of supervision, privacy, and the chance of risky behaviors (e.g., cyberbullying and sexting) and seeing inappropriate content (see Herring and Kapidzic 2015). Patchin and Hinduja acknowledged that there were efforts to inform adolescents about potential risks of posting too much personal information and noted that there were increased safety measures to protect users of MySpace (Patchin and Hinduja 2010).

Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts (2010) in their study of social media use found that adolescents are avid social media users: 95% of US teens are online compared to 78% of US adults. Teenagers in this study spent an average of over 90 minutes per day using a computer and 27 minutes a day using social media sites which is one fourth of their daily computer use. Currently, as would be predicted, online usage has changed significantly with the advent of teens accessing social media via mobile devices. Lenhart (2015) in a Pew Research Center report found that three-quarters of teens (13- to 17-year-olds) have access to smart phones and 56% go online several times a day, most frequently to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Twenty-four percent of teens reported that they use the internet "almost constantly." One-third of all teens used Twitter with older teens more likely to do so than younger ones. Eighty-seven percent of American teens also have access to a laptop or desktop computer. Gender differences emerged in online use as girls

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were more likely than boys to use texting while boys were more likely than girls to play video games.

As for gender effects on social networks, Herring (1994) noted that the gender balance of the group of people communicating with each other on MySpace also affected discussion content. Groups that had more men contributors used coarser language and had more augmentative discourse than groups that had a more balanced gender composition. Herring and Kapidzic (2015) noted gender differences in the use of sexualized language online. Boys communicated about sexuality more explicitly compared to girls who used more implicit sexual references. Roughly one-third of the profiles on teenage dating sites contained descriptions of risky behavior related to drugs, alcohol, violence, or sex.

## Twitter

To delineate gendered uses of swearwords on Twitter, Gauthier, Guille, Rico, and Deseille (2015, 2016) examined data gathered from a corpus of one million tweets. They reduced an original set of 788 possible swearwords to a set of 26 swearwords used to swear in their Twitter corpus; this smaller set accounted for 90% of all swearwords in the corpus. Most of the tweets, based on recorded user data characteristics, were from 12- to 30-year-old users. In their corpus, 5.8% of the men's tweets contained at least one swearword compared to 4.8% of the women's tweets. In descending order, the most common swearwords used by men were: *fuck, shit, hell, cunt, piss, tit, bloody, dick*, *bitch, damn* and *bastard*. The most common words used by women (in descending order) were: *fuck, shit, hell, bitch, piss, bloody, damn, dick, tit, crap* and *cunt.* Women used the words *bitch, bloody,* and *hell* significantly more frequently than men; men used *cunt, tit*, and *fuck* significantly more frequently than women. Gauthier et al., noted that time of day is an important variable for swearword use on Twitter. People start swearing on Twitter between 6am and 7am and the rate gradually increases through the day; there is a lull around 7pm to 8pm after which the rate dramatically increases.

## Blogs

Swearword use also appears in authors' blogs (Fullwood, Melrose, Morris, and Floyd 2012). Fullwood et al. found that men are more likely than women to use swearwords and attack others on their blogs. Age of the blogger was also an influence: younger bloggers used more swearing, and expressed more negative emotions and divulged more personal information about other people than older bloggers. The study showed that younger women bloggers disclosed more personal information and swore more regularly than older women, exposing a generational

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shift in online indiscretion away from women's previous concerns about privacy and personal disclosure.

## 3. Additional practices and sites associated with swearword use

At present there are a healthy number of scholarly references on impoliteness, conflict, and aggression in CMC. Especially troubling is the degree to which women are the targets of online abuse. Bou-Franch and Blitvich (2014), for example, examined comments about violence against women in response to public service advertisements posted on YouTube. The Bou-Franch and Blitvich analysis revealed three patriarchal strategies of abuse that relied on: minimizing the nature of abuse (41%), denying the existence of abuse (9%), and mostly blaming the women for abuse in the first place (50%). The abused women were portrayed as a group of aggressive, dumb, masochistic women to be judged in terms of their physical attributes; and if women refused to accept a submissive role, they deserved to be battered. To see related gender focused research, consult *Journal of Language Conflict and Aggression* (2014 Volume 2, Issue 2), a special issue on language and the abuse of women (also see Finn and Banach 2000).

Jane (2014) noted that scholarship on offensive internet language lags behind the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, and also that such scholarship has not been explicit about the offensive words that are used. Expurgated references to swearword use misrepresent the severity of attacks on other users by deleting the offensive threats, rape fantasies, and cyber mob attacks on victims. Expurgated scholarship comes off as generic, predictable, and tedious as opposed to being and informative and providing a realistic account of what is being written online. Jane's interpretation of the cyber-attacks on women is that the attacks are representative of a broader cultural attitude belittling women and they are not just representative of computer-mediated communication. Men were also the targets of abuse according to Jane as offensive postings attack men for: lack of masculinity, such as having a micro penis, or accusations of incestuous behaviors. Jane attributed attacks on both women and men as due in part to the anonymity afforded by social media which is not like public communication.

Following Jane's (2014) observations about anonymity, Maia and Rezende (2016) noted that internet swearing depends on nature of medium; there was more swearing on anonymous sites than personal sites. There was also more swearing on sites where there was a "we versus them mentality" that fosters outgroup disrespect but an in-group like mindedness where swearing represents a form of solidarity within a group. In a similar manner, Maia and Rezende noted that there was more respectful communication in homogenous forums

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than those populated by users representing opposing viewpoints on YouTube, blog, and Facebook sites. The notion that swearing is in part a product of user anonymity has been echoed throughout scholarship on offensive CMC as it was here.

## Trolling

Hardaker (2010, 2013) referred to trolling as being deliberately deceptive, aggressive, or antagonistic in online communication, usually for amusement's sake. There are different types of trolling strategies according to Hardaker (2013), which she categorized as digression, (hypo)criticize, antipathies (antagonistic), shock, and deliberate aggression. The term "trolling" appeared in public use by the early 1990s in reference to tricking, pranking or fooling users under fake pretenses in order to make fun of them. The troll lures other internet users into engaging in conversation in order to trick, belittle, or embarrass them. A good example of trolling (Jay 2017: 383) would be deceiving users into believing something is true when it is not. A troll can pretend to be stupid as a way to get a user to spend a lot of effort explaining something that the troll already understands. Other trolls use swearwords, sexist or racist language as a means of annoying others who respond by explaining how offensive the post is or how offended they are. There is also a troll who accuses other internet users of being trolls, knowing that they are not trolls; the accused then must spend time arguing that they are not trolls. A common response to curb trolling on the internet is apparent in the phrase, "Don't feed the trolls."

## 4chan

Christopher Poole started and administered 4chan as a means for anime lovers to post and discuss anime images (see Stryker 2011). 4chan soon morphed into a site where people anonymously began to upload other art, porn, and horrific or disgusting images along with swearwords, sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic comments on the "Random" board, for example, "Get with the times you fucking retards." 4chan does not have strict rules against swearwords or offensive content but nonetheless Poole did establish some moral order on 4chan: users had to be over 18 years of age and they were not to post personal information or spam.

## Cuckservative

A recent example of offensive e-bile Twitter attacks came from attorney and writer David French in a *National Review* article (October 21, 2016) entitled, "The Price

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I've Paid for Opposing Donald Trump." After calling out Ann Coulter, a Trump ally, French received a flood of tweets from alt-right (white supremacist) advocates. Pictures of French's daughter, who is African-American, were posted with images of gas chambers. Parenting an adopted African-American in alt-right circles is regarded negatively and is referred to as "race cucking" and "raising the enemy." French's daughter in online attacks was referred to as a "niglet" and a "dindu." French's wife, Nancy, was described as having sex with "black bucks" and claims were made that she had slept with black men while David French was deployed to Iraq. Grotesque, grisly images were posted on Nancy's *Patheos* blog. David French noted that if anyone attacked Donald Trump, the attacker's life might change for the worse. He reported several accounts of other bloggers and tweeters who received "a staggering amount of hate" in the form of anti-Semitic tweets. The harassment of the French family continues to this day. According to David French this is an example of a world "where 'feeding' the trolls only makes them stronger, admitting that they've hurt you *at all* represents a victory of the worst." The alt-right conservatives referred to people like David French as a "Cuckservative," a slur coined during the 2016 US election to refer to a conservative who sold out. The slur was coined from the word "cuckold," referring to a man who is weak and emasculated.

## 4. Moral order and online swearing

Given the documentation of extensive swearword use in online communication, what are the consequences? One aim of the current research is to situate swearword use in the scholarship on moral order. *Moral order* refers to a system of unwritten norms and conventions used to govern proper, civil, or good conduct between individuals within a community. Americans since colonial times have experienced a long history of restrictions on free expression in public places through moral order and laws. Some of these age-old laws and language restrictions will apply in emerging forms of electronic communication and some will not (Heins 2007; Jay 2017). Restrictions on swearword use in online communities can be understood to be governed by the form of moral order that evolves in online communities. Online communication is globally based and is conducted in communities or countries that may have laws that restrict forms of criminal speech on the internet and in public places (threats of violence, fraud, slander, libel, child pornography, sexual harassment). These restrictions form a legal basis for moral order, especially where users that break the laws can be identified and punished.

In addition to governments' legal restrictions on speech, moral order over speech evolves as a function of a community's politeness standards. There are

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no global standards for language politeness and probably never will be because cultures are too diverse in terms of their tolerance for deviant behavior (Locher and Watts 2005). Online communities evolve their own formalized style of politeness or "netiquette" which differs from spoken discourse politeness. Computer-mediated communities can and do encourage more frequent use of uninhibited comments and aggressive messages online than what occurs when communicating face to face. Internet sites compared to face to face interactions have different rules for civility depending on the nature of online discourse therein. Some online groups are homogenous and polite, others are polarized and antagonistic. The demeanor of the site attracts different kinds of users. Online users are assumed to self-select participation in social media groups based on the amount and nature of swearing in the group; in other words, one participates or refuses to participate depending on the moral order of a particular site. Additionally, politeness is not universally appealing to all online users. For some people, norms against using swearwords can be viewed as a form of class-based discrimination. In this view, politeness rules against swearing are perceived as a form of upper class elitism under the guise of civility (pluralism and mutual respect) that in the end has effect of excluding lower class moral order that views swearing as a legitimate form of social protest (see White 2002).

Internet problems with swearwords are ubiquitous and have been reported from English and non-English speaking countries alike. Moral order over internet swearword use varies from country to country depending on the social and political climate of each country. For example, Gelfand et al. (2011) made the distinction between "tight" and "loose" cultures with respect to moral order. Tight cultures (Pakistan, Malaysia, and Singapore) have strong norms and low tolerance for deviant behavior while loose cultures (Netherlands, Hungary) have weaker social norms and a higher tolerance of deviant behavior. Tight cultures tend to be more religious, autocratic, and they create more laws, regulations, political control, and control over communication technologies. The tightness of a culture is related to the range of restrictions placed on offensive or threatening speech and the degree to which individuals will exhibit self-regulation of deviant behaviors in everyday situations such as public parks, banking, workplaces, and restaurants. The moral order that emerges within a culture depends on its tightness-looseness and the degree to which electronic communications are monitored and regulated by government. It has been noted, for example, that the People's Republic of China places many more restrictions on computer-mediated communication and social media than does the US (Massingdale 2009).

Moral order has recently become a key concept in impoliteness research (see Kádár 2017; Kádár and Márquez-Reiter 2015; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2016). From these studies it is important to recognize that cultures are not monolithic

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entities and they are not limited to national cultures. Members of a culture, who are all themselves moralizing beings, often engage in debates about what are acceptable forms of online behavior and these debates work out what is acceptable and what is not. This interactive, working out of morality, can been seen in the work of Kádár and Márquez-Reiter (2015) who explored the relationship between impoliteness and people's perceptions and understandings of moral principles by looking at situations involving bystanders' interventions into abusive public behavior. Kádár and Márquez-Reiter found that morality emerged through participants' socially-based expectations of public behavior; the intervener acted on what was perceived to be a violation of the victim's rights. Bouts of moralizing about instances of abusive online language often end up with claims of the moral upper-hand in these kinds of interactions. Kádár (2017) examined cases of ritual online bullying where people who had bullied others with obviously inappropriate language and possibly illegal behavior argued that their offensive behavior was indeed highly moral!

Many scholars in the field of impoliteness who study language-based interaction would argue that interactional behavior and moral order in some communities cannot be described in global terms such as "tight" and "loose" cultures. A finer grained analysis is needed such as that offered by scholars working in social justice and moral psychology who have offered valuable insights into impoliteness across cultures that should be adopted by sociolinguists and they also can be applied to the problem of abusive speech in CMC. For example, according to a seminal study by Schwartz (1994), cultures' values are mapped with regard to the moral universe of their members; therefore, scholars need not attempt to generalize individuals' behavior in particular cultures. The emergent values structure allows us to relate systems of community's value priorities to other variables such as abusive online language. From a values point of view we might predict that younger rather than older members and men rather than women members of an online community place less value on upholding polite speech standards than other users.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues (see Graham and Haidt 2010; Haidt 2012) propose that there are five universal foundations to moral behavior: ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, and purity/sanctity. We might deem abusive swearwords to be inappropriate in Haidt's framework because they cause suffering to others or because abusive swearwords indicate the speaker's lack of respect for others. The point in both Schwartz's and Haidt's moral order frameworks would be to try to understand online participants' expectations and moral values/foundations in abusive situations rather than just relying on the recognition of a culture's tightness or looseness perspective. Using a values/framework approach to moral order along with a functionalist's view of

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language, scholars can examine what online users' purposes are for using abusive speech; what are they trying to do with impolite speech?

Language researchers can consider addressing abusive online speech in scholarship on moral order and politeness, asking what norms and standards guide the use of impolite and abusive online speech? Consider how Kádár (2017) pointed out that in impoliteness studies, according to the pragmaticist's point of view, the distinction often is made between *ethicalized* behavior and that behavior of *interactional* morality. Ethicalized behavior refers to formalized behavior such as netiquette-type restrictions on speech mentioned earlier, as opposed to interactional morality which refers to interpersonal interactions in which issues of morality emerge. Psycholinguists who are interested in the function of speech should be drawn to the question of how abusive speech unfolds in the context of interpersonal interaction (see Clark 1996; Jay 2003). Going further, consider the point Kádár (2017) makes: to locate the question of swearing in CMC within broader discussions of the concept of moral order as the notion is interpreted in scholarship from cultural and intercultural studies. Along this line of thinking, Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2016) considered impoliteness from an interdisciplinary perspective on moral order and argued that Haidt's moral foundations framework along with Schwartz's basic values theories offered valuable insights into impoliteness evaluations. Along with understanding a community's or a culture's overarching ethical guidelines, researchers must also understand what participants are trying to achieve through the use of swearwords in CMC in the same manner as we would ask what people are trying to achieve by using swearwords in face to face interactions. Spencer-Oatey and Kádár's conclusions regarding interdisciplinary collaboration are appropriate here: pragmaticists and psychologists are urged to engage more fully with each other to address challenges to the study of impoliteness.

## 5. When should we censor? Can we have free expression free from harm?

The evaluation of what are appropriate moral standards for language in CMC will continue to develop with emerging scholarship on the issue and ultimately the problem to be addressed will remain where to draw the line? The issue regarding what is and what is not appropriate speech on the internet raises a fundamental dilemma regarding offensive speech: the freedom to write offensive words (freedom for speech) and the freedom to not be exposed to offensive words (freedom from speech). It might be most reasonable to draw the line with offensive speech that is proven to be harmful or illegal. We have the right to express our emotions with offensive words but only to the extent that our speech does not violate the

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law or *legally harm* others. Legally restricted speech is that speech which damages another's reputation or results in another's loss of income or reduces their psychological well-being as defined in legal concepts such as fraud, slander, threats, obscenity, indecency, harassment, or imminent danger (Jay 2009b, 2017). These forms of speech are legally restricted in the US but exactly how they will be applied more widely in anonymous CMC is debatable.

It remains to be seen how laws restricting harmful speech on the internet will be adjudicated, since problems already exist when trying to restrict pubic speech (Jay 2009b). For example, evidence of harm has not been required for restrictions to be placed on offensive speech in court cases involving *indecent* speech (patently offensive references to sexual and excretory functions). US federal indecency laws over the years were established without courtroom evidence of harm (Heins 2007; Jay 2009b). The question remains in public and online contexts, how do we demonstrate harm? Will we need to demonstrate harm to restrict abusive speech on the internet? Judges in US obscenity and indecency cases assumed that their own common sense perceptions of speech offensiveness were sufficient to establish the need for restrictions on offensive speech in public places. These legal rulings established restrictions on offensive speech without evidence that indecent speech and obscene speech (with the exception of child pornography) cause psychological or physical harm (Heins 2007; Jay 2009b). The result of using subjective perceptions of harmful offensive speech creates a large gray area between what is appropriate and what is not appropriate in both public and online contexts. Besides, moral order should not be based solely on one judge's subjective perceptions. A highly educated and affluent judge sits on the *outside* of many communities he or she adjudicates (drug dealers, prostitutes, runaways, the homeless) without a thorough knowledge of what impoliteness language standards exist *in* those communities.

As internet users, we are left with a myriad of questions associated with offensive speech. How can we establish moral order when a global standard for internet language is not possible (Heins 2007; Locher and Watts 2005)? At this time, the internet is filled with offensive words and images however access to this kind of offensive information can be restricted on the basis of user age (over 18 years). The age restriction, however, has not proven to be an effective method of keeping minors from access to offensive speech or pornographic images (Heins 2007). How this form of age-related censorship situation with CMC can be improved is not clear.

Some adults and children enjoy participating in online communication where they are free to use a variety of forms of offensive speech and swearwords. A persistent problem with online swearword use is how to keep the internet as free as possible for open discussions without infringing on people's right

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to use offensive language. Another vexing problem involves where to draw the line between offensive speech and harmful speech, especially speech that is not proven to be harmful. The problem remains about how to restrict abusive speech and police it where that policing is desirable. Finally, who would do the policing? Users? Internet providers? Governments?

## 6. Conclusion and suggestions

Swearing is a normative behavior that has found its way into all forms of human communication technology. It comes as no surprise that swearwords and impoliteness occur in online communication; in fact, sometimes the pragmatics of the situation necessitate that a user is impolite. One realistic assumption about language, until we learn otherwise, is that where humans go, swearing will follow. This has been true throughout recorded history, swearing appears everywhere humans go. In the kinds of electronic media that evolve in the future, swearing will appear there too.

Another assumption regarding human communication is that where humans go, online or elsewhere, the language laws and moral order that governs language will go also. One cannot commit libel, fraud, threats, sexual harassment without consequences. This is not to say that all language laws and norms will directly transfer to new CMC contexts but many will. In addition, new laws and norms will be created in emerging CMC contexts, as communication law has in the past evolved with the invention of radio, television, and motion picture technologies (Jay 1992, 2017). Online communication as it exists today in the form of social networks and instant messaging did not exist until the early twenty-first century and how these media will be regulated in the future remains to be determined. The goal in this paper was to address the current state of swearing in online communication and acknowledge what kinds of restrictions and norms (moral order) exist to govern swearing in online communication. A final chore is to make some suggestions for regulating online swearing.

First, communities and workplaces that use CMC need to develop their own norms and guidelines for communication in order to reduce offenses and misunderstandings. Local control is preferable to governmental interventions in most situations. Not all local standards will be the same; some communities/organizations will have more conservative rules than others. If a community goal or standard is to foster less offensive communication and less swearword use, the organization should ask its users, or train them, to be as polite as possible (netiquette). Examples of what is and is not appropriate should be provided to users. In addition, it is important to include all members of an organization when

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developing a code of conduct; otherwise, some users will feel that they are being told what to do by bosses who themselves do not have to follow the rules they created (Jay 1997). Organizations can set standards for online communication that exclude the use of profanity, insults, personal attacks, and the use of all capital letters or excessive punctuation marks if they believe that users will follow these kinds of standards. Organizations have also been plagued by misunderstandings of email communications and other online postings, especially those that contain sarcasm, irony, or attempts at humor. Misunderstandings about online content may need to be resolved face to face or through telephone conversations, as opposed to an ineffective chain of online statements and corrections about the offending speech in question.

Second, internet companies also bear some responsibility for what appears on their sites. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube will need to develop minimal standards for what kinds of speech cannot be used. These internet companies in the past have been responsive to users' problematic language use and offensive tactics. These kinds of companies will need to be vigilant and continue to update moral order norms on their sites in the future.

Thirdly, people need to complain when they encounter harmful speech. Currently websites are plagued with handling a rash of offensive misinformation and "fake" news in social media sites. One method of refining language standards in social media is for frequent users to complain about what they do not like to read or see on social network sites. Social media executives need to continue to be sensitive to what their users find repugnant without being overly censorial. As mentioned earlier, drawing the line between the *freedom for* expression versus the *freedom from* expression has been a long standing First Amendment problem and it will not be resolved easily in online communities (Heins 2007; Jay 2009b). Where swearing crosses the line may not always be apparent in social media, especially with a mixed audience of users that vary in terms of age, gender, political views, and religiosity.

Lastly, how moral order will be developed on an international level remains to be seen, if it can be agreed upon at all. At present it is best to study moral order as it develops through interpersonal interaction within a community, studying what value structures or frameworks evolve there to curb abusive speech. Moral order cannot be completely understood at the level of nations or governments which adopt broad restrictions on speech which may or may not be adopted by any given community. It is unlikely in the current political climate that there will be universal standards for internet speech; there are just too many different standards for acceptability to reach agreement about what is and what is not appropriate. There will be no "one size fits all" solution for abusive internet speech (Heins 2007). It is probably wise, especially in the US, for

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internet communities and internet companies to develop their own standards for speech in order to avoid governmental interventions.

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