

You Go, Oprah

✘ I have long thought that whatever else the wondrous worldwide Web is it is a lunatic asylum, where mean-spirited cretins roam its dark halls and smash against padded walls spewing hate all over the place pretty much for just one reason: They disagree with you.

I speak from first-hand experience.

If you honestly believe there's a liberal bias in the so-called mainstream media, as I do, the reaction by the anonymous critics on the Web is not that I'm simply wrong, it's that I'm a freaking fill in the blank – and they're not so polite as to use the word “freaking.”

Jon Stewart is a smart guy who thinks deeply about important issues, but a lot of his most passionate fans apparently have vocabularies that consist of just two words: the first starts with F and the second is You! I discovered this one night when I (politely) noted that Jon wasn't nearly as cutting edge and courageous as his unsophisticated fans thought since he gave his liberal friends a much easier ride than his conservative foes.

I think it was the word “unsophisticated” that touched them off. Within minutes, the F bombs were flying.

Anyone who has ever written anything even vaguely controversial knows what I'm talking about and has encountered these profiles in cowardice.

“We're braver when we type. We don't have to look someone in their eyes. It's easier to be vicious, to cross the line between funny and cruel,” according to Parry Aftab, a cybersecurity lawyer who spoke to the Wall Street Journal last year for a piece entitled, “Surviving the Age of Humiliation.”

Humiliation pre-dates the Internet, of course. There has always been a dark need for some troubled souls to humiliate and embarrass others. But in the Internet age, as the Journal put it, "All of us now live under the threat of easy and instant humiliation."

In the old days we used to say nasty things about someone we didn't like over the backyard fence. Today, all we need is a modem and a computer and we can humiliate and embarrass anyone we want and our potential audience is the whole wide world. And here's the "best" part: we can do it while wearing a mask so no one knows who we are. I'm not sure if technology made us meaner. But it certainly made the dirty work of cowards easier.

I'm also not sure why the culture got so crummy. But I know it happened slowly, in tiny increments, so that we hardly noticed the change. Imagine that you slid into a coma back in 1963, right after JFK was shot, and woke up today. You would think you were on a different planet, let alone a different country; that's how much the culture has changed.

And over the years, while we were becoming tolerant of all the right things – like civil rights and women's rights and gay rights – I think we became *indiscriminately* tolerant. We started to tolerate everything, including the crap that was sliming our culture.

Enter Oprah Winfrey.

Oprah began her new cable television network – OWN – at noon on New Year's Day, a network dedicated to the total and complete absence of mean-spiritedness. "OWN is a place where cynicism takes a holiday and mockery hasn't yet been invented," as the New York Times television writer Allesandra Stanley put it.

"There is no Chelsea Handler baring her big, sharp teeth on OWN; no Kathy Griffin or Joan Rivers standing up to take a

crack at other people's appearances or ages," Ms. Stanley tells us.

But there will be Rosie O'Donnell. Hmm!

I never watched the old Oprah show. I wasn't part of Oprah's target audience. But, boy, do I wish her well. I hope her idealism, her desire for more civility in our culture, is contagious. I hope it spreads – to other cable channels, to the guy walking down the street dropping F bombs while shouting into his cell phone, and also to the dark halls of the worldwide Web.

Hey, it's a brand new year. A guy can hope, can't he? Sooner or later, I suspect, reality with smack me in the face. Until then, You go, Oprah!

