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FROM THE EDITOR

By [Michael Stone](#) [Email the author](#) | October 5, 2011

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From Typewriter to Mouse: The Privilege of Online Commenting

The medium provides a forum for citizens to discuss the issues important to them—but don't base your vote solely on anonymous posters.

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There's no doubt it's election season in Powder Springs.

Candidates are updating their campaign websites. Yard signs inform voters of the Nov. 8 election date and offer suggestions of who to vote for. The front page of the [Marietta Daily Journal](#) reads: "[Incumbent faces challengers.](#)"

But there's something new thrown into the mix this election season, and that's the website you're reading right now.

The articles and columns published by Patch thus far on the candidates for mayor and the two at-large council seats don't seem to be what people are talking about around town. Rather, it's the comments posted by site users.

When commenters begin back-and-forth attacks and defenses—as they continue to do on [a column by mayoral candidate L. Rick Richardson](#)—the same question always seems to come up: Should a news website allow anonymous comments?

During my school days at Middle Tennessee State, anonymous commenting was one of the hottest of hot topics—just as it is at journalism schools across the country.

Everyone weighs the pros (free speech) and cons (ability to unabashedly bash). And with valid rationale on both sides, not many seem to be taking a definite stand.

Before the endless expanse that is the Internet, average citizens had just the physical newspaper to write out their 2 cents and have it reach a wide audience. Then, as is true now, the authors of these "letters to the editor" attach their first and last names, which the paper verifies.

But with websites, all you need is an email address and a funny fake name—e.g., Justine Case.

There are a couple reasons why folks are allowed to post without their real name. One, it'd be impossible to verify all the visitors coming to and

engaging with the site. Two, people might feel more comfortable participating in a forum with an online name—just as some tipsters feel more comfortable talking with police anonymously.

Because we're not watching the site 24/7, there may be a time when a comment on an article uses foul language or says something mean that doesn't add substance to the discussion: "John Doe smells funny."

If you feel it's offensive, you can help us by clicking the "Flag as Inappropriate" option above the comment. That way, the next time we're at a computer, we'll be able to check the comment and consider removing it.

Otherwise, comments are here to stay. They are meant to establish a community forum in which citizens can gather and discuss the issues important to them.

One thing to keep in mind this election season is that just because someone leaves a comment doesn't make it true. But our hope is that the collection of comments, along with news articles, opinion columns and letters to the editor, will lead to a more informed electorate and the election of the legislative body that best represents the city's citizens.

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