

San Jose Mercury News (CA)

MEDIA FOLKS WHO SPREAD VENOM DO SO AT OUR REQUEST

January 13, 2011

Section: Editorial

Edition: Valley Final

Page: 10A

Patrick Ross, Special to the Mercury News

Memo: **PATRICK ROSS** is the founder of iCivility. com, a movement to improve online rhetoric, and has won journalism awards for covering Capitol Hill and the White House. He wrote this article for this newspaper.

Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik got it wrong.

In denouncing polarizing rhetoric following the tragic shooting of U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and others, the Arizona sheriff blamed the media, saying, "I think it's the vitriolic rhetoric that we hear day in and day out from people in the radio business and some in the TV business."

Actually, we are all to blame.

Electronic media are all about ratings. We watch and listen to Rush Limbaugh and Keith Olbermann because we seek out extremist rhetoric. Those voices reinforce our own biases and make us feel good about ourselves. Until we, individually and collectively, acknowledge that fact, the incivility in our national discourse will only grow.

We have chosen to live in digital hollows. In a physical hollows -- often pronounced "hollers" -- isolation leads to spotty knowledge, facts become unclear without outside checks, and petty disputes erupt without larger perspectives to keep them in check.

That's a pretty good description of everyday life in Washington.

When Dupnik waxed nostalgic for the "nice United States of America that most of us grew up in," he most likely meant the age of Walter Cronkite, when media elites operating in a world of fact-checking and objectivity served as our information filters.

No one could have imagined how much information would be out there. Last

year the Internet saw the addition of more than 1,000 exabytes of data -- the equivalent of 7,851,400 Library of Congress book collections. How can we be expected to process so much data?

"A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention," as Nobel Prize-winning economist and technologist Herbert Simon put it.

A decade ago, University of Chicago professor Cass Sunstein found a correlation between growth in technology and increased self-editing. He wrote that increased polarization could be harmful to public discourse and democracy, but he failed to predict the breadth of polarization we have today.

Some welcomed a self-editing era. Fifteen years ago Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Nicholas Negroponte proclaimed the dawn of "The Daily Me," in which we'd filter out news stories to our own tastes. He didn't anticipate unreliable information in that feed, however, such as mass-forwarded e-mails or anonymously posted YouTube videos.

Recognizing we can't rationally process such massive information flow, Simon found that we limit access to information that upsets our own point of view. He called that process "satisficing."

When we "satisfice," we reinforce our biases. That unbalanced information processing leads to what sociologists call group polarization. As that polarization spreads, a "social cascade" results. That's when we pass on our bias and misinformation to others.

Whenever I articulate this digital hollows thesis, I get a lot of nodding of heads and enthusiastic support -- until I say that it applies to all of us, regardless of party or ideological affiliation.

No, I'm told, now with vigorous shaking of heads. The other side is completely isolated from the facts, they say. This response only reinforces the argument that we are unaware of our own information isolation.

It also serves no purpose to simply rail against those talking heads, as TV comedian Jon Stewart did last year at his "Rally to Restore Sanity," without recognizing that those spreading vitriol are doing so at our request.

To his credit, Dupnik appeared to grasp this point. In his harangue, he said, "I think it's time that we do the soul-searching." On that he is absolutely correct.