Netiquette and online ethics raises many questions such as: What is the relationship between the internet and civility? Has incivility in America increased due to social media and what are its effects on democratic public discourse? Are we living in the cyber wild west? Is online incivility part of greater democratic participating and changing norms? How can we measure the effects of online incivility by objective scientific criteria? Does online anonymity encourage harassment or does online anonymity protect marginalized groups? How do we attempt to curb the epidemic of cyberbullying amongst students? What limits should or should not be set on trying to establish laws enforceable by secular courts to fight cyberbullying? Are anti-cyberbullying laws a threat to free speech? How can schools and teachers take action to combat cyberbullying? What are the etiquette and ethics of online relationships? How does good netiquette make online dating work or are traditional live matchmakers a better way to find a marriage partner? Is there evidence that online dating works? What are its benefits? What are its risks? How can irresponsible use of the internet destroy careers and relationships? What are the etiquette and ethics of social media? How can social media practice good netiquette in dealing with spam? How can using bots and automation be akin to spamming? Should employees accept the growing use of social media background checks? Should employers be cautious about using social media background checks that may infringe on privacy and confidentiality? How can filters be put in place for children? What does Jewish law have to say about responsible use of the internet? How can one avoid being the victim of "trolls" or individuals who harass others online or "astrotufers" or people online concealing that they are paid advocates for a particular position? Are there objective criteria [i.e. (1) insulting language, (2) name calling, (3) verbal fighting, (4) character assassination, (5) conflagration, (6) belittling, (7) obscene language, (8) ad hominen attack, etc.] by which to monitor "proper tone" that people should use in exchanges with one another on the internet? Is using comment boards to vent, bloviate, and blow off steam o.k. and what objective criteria constitute identifying blowing off steam from crossing the line? When do comments cross the line? Or does spirited verbal exchange within limits enhance deliberative conversation essential to citizens being informed in a democracy as per Alex DeToqueville’s statement, "that a democracy will fall unless opposing views can be exchanged amongst citizens, and citizens can stay informed, and critically assess pressing political current issues vital to the survival of the Republic."

If we filter all vulgar, boorish, uncivil dialogue assuming it does not harm anyone, then are we on our way to a slippery slope of a George Orwellian 1984 oppressive environment of big brother watching and examining areas that should be private and confidential? Does over censorship unjustifiably chill free speech? If the Orwellian "thought police" only allows "civil discourse" are we on our way of a slippery slope to unfair censorship of whatever views the reigning power regime finds offensive and dislikes thereby invalidating free speech that does no harm but may be opinionated? Is there a healthy balance and medium between ensuring first amendment rights to free speech and censoring internet speech that crosses the line? The Supreme Court of the U.S. has held often that the mere fact that someone might take offense at the content of speech is often not sufficient justification for prohibiting it unless it can cause tangible harm. Does the bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself
offensive or disagreeable? Is the American Civil Liberties Organization correct that anti-cyber bullying laws are the greatest threat to student free speech because they seek to censor it everywhere and anytime it occurs, using "substantial disruption" of school activities as justification when it is only based on mere suspicion of potential disruption. Does demonstrating "substantial disruption" often succeed to unproven "suspicion of disruption"? While all would agree that libel, defamation, slander, hate-speech, and intimidation should have no place on the internet, should internet laws curtail all "opposing views." Should persons be censored for expressing strong views on X or Y? The CDT (Center for Democracy and Technology) works to ensure regulations concerning current and emerging forms of technology to be in accordance with free expression and privacy so that civil liberties issues arising from advancements in computer-based communications media not spawn litigation that does not preserve, protect, and extend First Amendment rights in computing and telecommunications technologies.

Why is cyberbullying a serious problem from the standpoint of Jewish ethics? In Jewish law what crosses the line of free speech and becomes a source of possible harm by words used as a sword? Jewish ethics also has important contributions to make when evaluating online ethics. For example what does Jewish law have to say about the dangers and risks made possible on the internet: (1) mixing private and public inappropriately, (2) voyeurism, (3) risky behaviors inculcated and made more easily accessible, (4) cyberbullying and intimidation by overly aggressive bullies, (5) cyberstalking, (6) flaming, (7) trolling, (8) lurking, (9) cyber harassment, (10) desensitizing Jews to the moral and ethical standards and principles which Judaism urges us to put into practice, (11) wasting time (bitul zeman) that detracts from for instance family time at home, (12) sparking curiosity to run wild without any restraints, (13) using technology as a means to damage persons reputations, (14) computer hacking, (15) identity theft, (16) causing harm psychologically of persons by "mean speak", (17) embarassing person in public via the internet, (18) causing harm to individuals whereby a loshon ha-rah on the internet can kill a reputation or career opportunity or shidduch. What does the case of cyber bullying that apparently caused a teenage suicide of a 12 year old Lakeland Florida Jewish girl who had been tormented by online postings such as "drink bleach and die" teach us about the Chofetz Chaim's laws of considering one's words that can be used as a sword to harm or used to promote life, happiness, health, and constructive good?

The above questions are of utmost timely importance. Different people will have different opinions in responding to the above questions, so that there are "grey areas" and answers to these questions are not always binary but a spectrum. Yet there is a difference between right and wrong, and these questions ultimately require critical thinking to distinguish and set ethical standards regarding how one should or ought or should not or ought not to behave online. Not everything on the internet is innocuous, welcome, or helpful and thus the implementation of filters, particularly for children may be crucial to skim off potentially harmful effects in exposure to certain aspects of the online environment. Yet we must respect the difference of opinions regarding how individuals may look at the questions above. Thomas Jefferson once said that "difference of opinion leads to inquiry, and inquiry to truth." If we do not pose these questions and seek to arrive at the right responses, we cannot pretend to know
how to deal with navigating the online environment from ethical perspectives. In a Jeffersonian enlightenment modality is it true, “that those who do not know their opponent’s arguments do not completely understand their own?”. If the internet kitchen is hot, and one can’t stand it, should one not enter like some fundamentalists who avoid use of technology including the internet? If the genie is already out of the bottle and were that the internet genie able to grant a wish: Perhaps we should all wish for responsible ethical and moral use of this new technology so that all persons rights are respected in a civil way [politeness, care, capacious, words etc.] that affirms the dignity of each person in the image of G-d. Would not the internet be a safer and more convivial place if frightening, intimidating, ranting and language that causes emotional distress were eliminated by showing more respect towards other human beings. Should not ethical principles inform and inculcate respect and appreciation for not only free speech and diverse opinions as the bedrocks of freedoms in a democratic society while at the same time perhaps more importantly guide online moral behavior by injunctions that would make the internet a more human place such as Hillel’s dictum: "Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you." If the rest is "commentary that we should go and learn" are not the questions raised regarding responsible and ethical online behaviors of the most compelling, timely, and important examination as social networking sites and other social media present new and thorny problems? Like many new technological developments social media can be an incredibly powerful tool in both a positive and negative sense, and beyond these binary categories, we can see that grey areas make these issues quite complex. The ethical questions posed by the rise of the internet are not simple and there are no slick answers. That is to say to arrive at a true ethical position with regards to these substantial moral dilemmas one must examine and critically analyse and think them through beyond rhetoric, in the attempt to strive to arrive at solid moral ground and justified ethical praxis. Religious law holds that while there are grey areas in treating ethical dilemmas there is also a difference between right and wrong. To agree with Marx and Engels that every morality is the morality of some particular social and economic order and that every moral philosophy articulates and makes explicit the judgments, arguments, and presuppositions of some particular economic class morality is moral relativism. For Marx and Engels defending a moral position is no more than defending a social and economic order of which it is an expression. Plato and various ethical monotheistic religions reject this moral relativism that can lead to nihilism. The brutal and corrupting ethics of Stalinism’s Marxism perhaps reveals that Marxism as a form of practice too often suffered from the same lack of moral resources as the social order that it aspired to replace.

Further to assert with Hampshire and Austin that there is nothing as the “good life for human beings” or to deny “the human good” is to deny the policy of political philosophy as revived by Leo Strauss from Plato’s Socrates who chose to be a martyr for philosophy for the philosopher cared about the common good of the city or as Diogenes Laertus remarks in the lives of Eminent philosophers, “Socrates brought philosophy down from the stars so that it might dwell amongst men.” The potential uses and abuses of the internet is one of this generations most pressing ethical questions. To ignore these questions is to turn one’s back on the common good as conceived by political philosophy at least since Plato.

If we examine what is at stake with regards to online ethics we see that we dare not ignore the ethical and moral dilemmas posed by the internet. Moral philosophy has traditionally outlined four categories of
grounding behavior in moral theory based on the positions of (1) virtue ethics of Aristotle, (2) character ethics of Plato (See Terence Erwin on Plato’s Moral theory), (3) deontological ethics of Maimonides and Kant, and (4) Utilitarian ethics after Machiavelli, Mills, and Bentham. What is clear is that utilitarianism ethics is extremely dangerous with regards to new technologies such as the internet. If everything is orientated towards the end as defined by profit and cost, then the means to arrive at this dubious end would undermine ethical behaviors that are called into question by the online environment. The Hedenistic calculus of Bentham and Mills will perhaps not sustain a Republic faced with pressing moral issues posed by the internet.

Organizations such as the Alliance against Fraud can perhaps help to curb internet abuses. AAF members promote efforts to educate the public about telemarketing and Internet fraud, as well as how to shop safely by phone and online. The Harvard University Perkman Center for Interent and Society may also play a key role in curbing internet ethical infractions by conducting research on legal, technical, and social developments in cyberspace as well as assesses the need or lack thereof for laws and sanctions. The Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT) seeks to ensure free expression and privacy which can be threatened on the online environment. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) fosters awareness of civil liberties issues, arising from and advancements in computer-based communications mediat and supports litigation to preserve, protect and extend first amendment rights in computing and telecommunications technologies. The Federal Trade Commission can be drawn upon to fight back against identity theft as a consumer protection agency of the government. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration can be sought out for advising the president on telecommunications and information policies. The Pew Internet and American Life Project explores the impact of the Internet on children, families, communities, the workplace, schools, health care, and civil political life. Wired Safety is an internet patrol organization that not only monitors the web for safety violations but also provides education on all aspects of Internet safety. Besides such public and govt. organizations online ethics must start with each individual who uses the internet responsibly and in an ethical manner.

David B Levy