The Irony of Craigslist

By Charles Day

"The Internet was supposed to set us free, democratize us, but all it’s really given us is Howard Dean’s aborted candidacy and 24-hour-a-day access to kiddie porn. People ... they don’t write anymore, they blog; instead of talking, they text. No punctuation, no grammar. LOL this and LMFAO that. You know, it just seems to me it’s just a bunch of stupid people pseudo communicating with a bunch of other stupid people in a protolanguage that resembles more what cavemen used to speak than the King’s English."

Thus rails Hank Moody, the central character of Showtime’s TV series Californication. Hank writes novels—or used to write them. Having moved from New York to Los Angeles, he suffers through the first season unable to write a sequel to the novels that earned him critical acclaim. Ironically, the occasion of the rant, an interview on a radio show, was prompted by Hank’s recent success as a blogger. His interviewer points out the seeming hypocrisy: “Yet you’re part of the problem, I mean you’re out there blogging with the best of them.” “Hence my self-loathing,” replies Hank.

But are Instant Messenger, Twitter, and other modes of modern communication really impoverishing our language and weakening our powers of expression? I don’t think so—in fact, quite the opposite. Novels, editorial cartoons, stage plays, and other old forms have survived the advent of radio, TV, and the Internet. Far from stifling or impairing established forms, new media provide new opportunities.

Consider, for example, the literary output of Johanna Gattinella, a 31-year-old writer from Santa Rosa, California. Somewhere on Gattinella’s body is a heart-shaped tattoo featuring the name of her husband, Roy. Gattinella photographed the tattoo and posted the picture to Craigslist along with a fake personal ad. “Calling all Roys or Troys or Leroys,” the ad began, “I was with a Roy before, but it didn’t last as long as my tattoo. Getting the tattoo removed is not something I want to do, plus I’m so accustomed to bellowing ‘Roy’ out in bed.”

Gattinella recounted the heartfelt responses her ad elicited in an interview with The New York Times: “A lot of men took the photo of the tattoo and put it in Photoshop and then altered it with their names or different variations of it.”

It turns out Craigslist is a fertile new outlet for aspiring writers. The ease of posting and its large readership make for a cheap, ready platform. But Craigslist, like other means of telecommunication, has another, more subtle attraction: its lack of irony.

The messages that appear on the screens of our computers and phones nearly always mean what they say. It’s as if the involvement of sophisticated engineering in delivering and displaying messages imparts an engineer’s penchant for talking straight. Why else append ;-) to an email message, if not to make sure your recipient really understands that you’re joking? Evidently, the risk of a misunderstanding—one that could provoke anger in a coworker or a boss, perhaps—is too great.

But if your message is a joke, as Gattinella’s was, and if you don’t flag it as such, your readers’ expectation of earnestness, heightened by the medium, is ripe for artistic appropriation. Craigslist served not only as her satire’s target, but also as the satire’s means of prosecution and the site of its publication.

Gattinella posted her fake ad for more than her own amusement. The replies form the basis of My Year on Craigslist. It’s not a podcast, blog, or YouTube video, but a book. ;-)