Digital Civility

Understanding, Anticipating and Proactively Managing Conflict Online

Andrea Weckerle

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Civility in the Digital Age

How Companies and People Can Triumph over Haters, Trolls, Bullies, and Other Jerks

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Civility in the Digital Age: How Companies and People Can Triumph over Haters, Trolls, Bullies, and Other Jerks

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Foreword

In today's hyper-connected world, maintaining and sustaining a civil online culture is incredibly important because it serves as the ethical foundation for the best the Internet has to offer today and in the future.

Unfortunately, it's easy to hear stories of horrible online abuse and throw up our hands in despair thinking that nothing can be done.

That's a big mistake. Of course there is difficulty in balancing the demands of freedom of expression and prevention of abuse. This challenge exists at both the level of private website rules and at the level of legislation. Still, a civil online culture is achievable, with the right mindset, willingness, and tools.

We live in an era where billions of people are already online, and billions more are coming online. Citizens can communicate with each other, share knowledge, debate issues, and become better human beings in the process. Citizens can also engage in horrible abuse, idiotic commentary, and the spread of falsehoods. We have a choice about how to behave ourselves, but we also have a choice about what kinds of systems and social norms we create. That's why we can and must choose wisely.

I hardly need to tell you about the incredible success of Wikipedia. Today, nearly 500 million people per month access the website in hundreds of languages. Academic studies of the quality of Wikipedia show that it is comparable to the quality of traditional encyclopedias—with notable strengths and some equally notable weaknesses. It is common for people to assume that this came about automatically through the "magic" of "crowdsourcing" but that wasn't the case.

Wikipedia became a success in no small part through the fundamental social rules that are the bedrock principles of its community. Entire books could be written about how and why Wikipedia works (and, of course, how and why it sometimes doesn't work as well as I would want!). But let me single out just two of the most important principles that have helped Wikipedia to thrive.

First, we have a policy of neutrality, which our neutrality policy defines as "representing fairly, proportionately, and as far as possible without bias, all significant views that have been published by reliable sources." Essentially the concept here is that in any controversy, Wikipedia itself should not take a stand, but should instead describe thoughtfully to the reader what the controversy is.

This is a fundamental principle of human respect: I am not telling you what to think nor am I telling you what position to take on a controversial issue; I'm giving you the facts you need to begin to make up your own mind.

Neutrality at Wikipedia is always a goal. We do not kid ourselves that we have always achieved it. Achieving as much neutrality as we can is a long, hard process of discussion and debate, and it is only possible to make progress towards it when we do so in a collegial and respectful atmosphere.

This brings me to a second important principle of Wikipedia: No personal attacks. Without this rule, the discussion and debate at Wikipedia would be like that at so many thousands of other web forums and newspapers: hateful vitriol spewed by people who have no interest in working together to seek the truth.

Implementing a rule against personal attacks is tricky and complex. The process of getting to and implementing those rules is a very messy and human thing, even if it is done well. People are people, and sometimes they lose their cool or don't phrase a comment in an elegant, well understood way. The majority of the time, an apology is made and everyone moves on. If Wikipedia implemented a draconian police state where every little rough remark resulted in a lifetime ban, we'd end up excessively restraining an interesting and important debate.

But even though drawing the appropriate line online is tricky and complex, it must never be an excuse not to set parameters or to allow all manner of ongoing harassment, insults, and abuse. To abdicate moral responsibility in the face of bullies is to hand society over to the most vicious among us. We can be both understanding about the human propensity to outbursts, while at the same time insisting on norms requiring apology and a generally good behavioral track record over time by the organizations and the individuals representing them.

All of us understand this intuitively from our interactions with other people offline. If a friend insults you and then gives a genuine apology, you find a way to move past it. But if someone is obnoxious and abusive, people quite rightly stop inviting them to social occasions. This is not rocket science, and moving the problem online doesn't change human nature.

We can look across the Internet landscape and find examples of thousands of communities with either better and worse track records of protecting their community members from obnoxious people. There are a lot of cautionary tales out there, and a lot of lessons to be learned.

Andrea Weckerle's book is a valuable and important starting point for us to read and thoughtfully consider. A survivor of online abuse herself, and a person who embodies the qualities of thoughtfulness and forgivingness that exemplify some of the best human traits, she brings to the issue a wit and wisdom that we should all heed. I'm sure you're going to find *Civility in the Digital Age* incredibly useful both professionally and personally!

—**Jimmy Wales**, Founder of Wikipedia

About the Author

Andrea Weckerle, an attorney, founded and leads CiviliNation, a nonprofit dedicated to reducing online hostility and character assassination. She previously worked at the Legal Management Services division of a global professional services firm, helping to design, develop, and implement comprehensive alternative dispute resolution systems for Fortune® 500 firms. She also underwent extensive mediation training, earning certificates in Commercial Mediation and Conflict Resolution Processes. Her work has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, CNN.com, *NY Daily News*, and *Advertising Age*. In addition to a JD, she holds an MA in Public Relations/Conflict Analysis and Resolution.

Dedication

To Grayson and Maddox, with love and admiration

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I am thankful to the people who have shared with me their personal stories of being the targets of online attacks and defamation. Some have gone public, whereas others have chosen to remain private, but in every case, they've inspired me with their courage and resilience.

Finally, I want to express sincere thanks to all the anti-cyberbullying advocates, conflict resolution professionals, and civility champions who devote every day working to make the online world become a more positive and embracing environment.

We Want to Hear from You!

As the reader of this book, *you* are our most important critic and commentator. We value your opinion and want to know what we're doing right, what we could do better, what areas you'd like to see us publish in, and any other words of wisdom you're willing to pass our way.

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Who Are the Troublemakers?

A Pathetic Loser and Coward

Danny Brown, an award-winning blogger, marketer, and VP of Partner Strategy at Jugnoo, Inc., was having a leisurely Saturday with his wife and children. They went furniture shopping and afterward enjoyed a dinner out. But upon his return, Brown was inundated with emails and Facebook alerts about the most recent posts on his Facebook page and private messages he'd sent to friends. The information ranged from inferences that Jugnoo was having problems and that he was interested in finding other employment, to accusations that his wife had an affair with a colleague at the company and that they were getting divorced. The problem was that Brown hadn't written any of this. His Facebook account had been hacked.

The incident left Brown fuming (see Figure 4.1). "I'm big and ugly enough to come after and say what you want about me when you want to try and damage me personally and professionally. But going after my family and using them to get my friends to open up on their emotions, too? That just makes you a pathetic loser and coward...."[1] Brown's recommendations for dealing with situations like this? "Don't take stuff like this lying down—fight back and work with the network or platform in question to make sure they don't get away with it, where possible."[2] He contacted both the police and Facebook[3] and vowed to take legal action[4] against the perpetrator. Sadly, Brown believes the attack wasn't random and also has suspicions about the imposter's real identity.[5]

What makes Brown's story interesting is that he's an Internet veteran and well versed in social media and networking safety. Even so, this didn't protect him when the perpetrator bypassed his security settings on Facebook. As Brown notes, "As this weekend has shown to me, we're all at risk from idiots wanting our private information, or assholes trying to damage our reputation. Don't make it easy for them.... So if someone who is very active in this space can be caught out, it shows the dangers for all of us."[6]

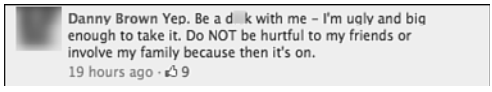


Figure 4.1 *Comment by Danny Brown on his Facebook page, July 14, 2012*

Troublemakers Come in All Sorts of Shapes and Sizes

Online troublemakers come in a wide variety of types, as the word cloud in Figure 4.2 shows. There are *trolls*, who attack others online for fun and sport, and *sockpuppets*, who assume fake identities with the intention of misleading others. There are *cyberbullies*, who misuse technology to tease and bully others, and *harassers* and *defamers* who up the ante with their frequently illegal attacks. There are a host of difficult people online who range from the power-hungry and the aggressive who leave victims in their wake, to those whose cluelessness creates all sorts of problems online. And there are dangerous people like online stalkers who become so obsessed that their victims often fear for their and their families' safety and lives.

The big question you need to ask here is what kind of people would do this? What motivates them? What makes them tick?

Anatomy of a Troll

If you grew up hearing fairy tales or mythological stories, the famous Norwegian tale "Three Billy Goats Gruff" may be familiar to you. In the story, three goats want to cross the bridge over the river to get to fresh green grass on the other side. But before they can do so, they encounter a troll who threatens to kill and eat them. Through quick thinking and cunning, the goats trick the troll, who eventually is thrown off the bridge, never to be seen again. As the story illustrates, trolls are nasty creatures, pretty much always up to no good, and ugly to boot.

Figure 4.2 *Word Cloud made with ABCya! Word Clouds for Kids*

Like their mythological counterparts, Internet trolls are also dreadful. Unfortunately, they are quite real. Internet trolls are attention-seekers whose sole goal is to wreak havoc online for the purpose of fun and pleasure. Moreover, they thrive on the perceived weakness, naiveté, and emotional reactions of their victims.

They delight in insulting, shocking, upsetting, and provoking others. They do this in a variety of ways. They write attacking and inflammatory content. They bring irrelevant and extraneous information to online exchanges to throw discussions off course. They post offensive and shocking images, often doctored to serve their purposes. No topic is off limits for them, and the more controversial, the better because outrageous actions are more likely to elicit strong responses from those targeted. According to Derek Wood, a board certified psychiatric nurse who also holds a Master's degree in psychology, trolls "often see their own self-worth in relation to how much reaction they can provoke."[7]

Trolls favor operating in full view on public message boards, forums, and comment sections of articles. After all, only if someone sees their destructive handiwork is it worth their effort. Entire posts provide pointers on how to be a successful troll. "The Subtle Art of Trolling" offers the following suggestion:

> Outwardly you need to appear sincere, but at the same time you have to tell your *real* audience that this is blatant flamebait. Your skill is shown in the easy way that you manipulate large areas of the Usenet community into making public fools of themselves.[8] [Note: Usenet is an early online communication system that's still in use.]

Although trolls are interested in going for lulz, which is shorthand for obtaining laughter at someone's expense,[9] they're not interested in having to be accountable for their actions. That's why the overwhelming majority of the time they are anonymous online or use pseudonyms. This makes it easy for them to avoid responsibility.

There are many different kinds of trolls. Wood breaks them into the following groups:[10]

- **Spamming troll:** Posts to many newsgroups with the same verbatim post
- **Kooks:** A regular member of a forum who habitually drops comments that have no basis on the topic or even in reality
- **Flamer:** Does not contribute to the group except by making inflammatory comments
- **Hit-and-runner:** Stops in, make [sic] one or two posts, and move [sic] on
- **Psycho trolls:** Has a psychological need to feel good by making others feel bad

Netlingo, meanwhile, classifies them into other categories:[11]

- **Playtime Trolls:** an individual plays a simple, short game. Such trolls are relatively easy to spot because their attack or provocation is fairly blatant, and the persona is faily two-dimensional.
- **Tactical Trolls:** This is where the troller takes the game more seriously, creates a credible persona to gain confidence of others, and provokes strife in a subtle and invidious way.
- **Strategic Trolls:** A serious form of game, involving the production of an overall strategy that can take months or years to develop. It can also involve a number of people acting together to invade a list.
- **Domination Trolls:** This is where the trollers' strategy extends to the creation and running of apparently bona-fide mailing lists.

Sometimes trolls act alone. John Lindsey is the creator of DontEvenReply.com, a website where he publishes email replies he sends to people posting classified ads. In his own words, his aim is "to mess with them, confuse them, and/or piss them off,"[12] and he succeeds in doing so on a regular basis. Here's an example:[13] The original ad stated, "hi there i am a 22 year old female babysitter looking for a job. i am available pretty much all the time so if you need someone to look after your kid, let me know!" Here's his reply, written under the fake name Timmy Tucker:

"Hey, I saw your ad about babysitting and am very interested. My grandmother is in the hospital and is probably going to die. She is never awake when I am there, and the doctors say she is only awake for about 5 minutes every couple of days. The problem is, I need her to sign a re-drafted will I wrote so I can get all of her stuff when she dies. Right now she has all of her money going to my bitch sister and her family. I don't have the time to sit there and watch her all day because I have better things to do. I need you to sit at the hospital and watch her in case she wakes up, and then make her sign the will. I will pay you $10 an hour for this job. Thanks, Tim." Timmy received the brief reply, "no thanks that is sick! show some sympathy you prick!" and the conversation escalates to more money being offered in exchange for turning off the grandmother's life support. The exasperated young woman finally responds with a "F**K OFF."[14]

Other times trolls band together to inflict pain. Such was the case after 7th grader Mitchell Henderson committed suicide in 2006. After the boy's death was mentioned on MyDeathSpace.com, a website that archives the profiles of deceased MySpace and Facebook users, members of the /b/ board on 4chan.org took note.[15] 4chan.org is well known for harboring "the rude, raunchy underbelly of the Internet,"[16] so the fact that trolls zeroed in on Henderson's death wasn't surprising in itself. But the torment they inflicted on the boy's parents was over the top. Mark Henderson, Mitchell's father, says that for a year and a half, he and his wife received calls at their home saying things like, "Hi, this is Mitchell, I'm at the cemetery" and "Hi, I'm Mitchell's ghost, the front door is locked. Can you come down and let me in?"[17] Bridget Agar suffered similar anguish when trolls sent up a fake Facebook page within 24 hours after her son Jordan died in a moped accident a day after his 16th birthday. Agar was sent a message from the site that said, "Mum, I'm not really dead. I'm sat [sic] at the computer, I just ran away" and also invited her to a birthday party for her son.[18]

Regardless of their preferred method of operation, as Figure 4.3 reminds us, it's important to remember one thing: Do Not Feed The Trolls.

Figure 4.3 *Always remember, Do Not Feed The Trolls! Photo by Patrick Africanus in the public domain via Wikimedia Common*

How to Deal with Trolls

Trolls delight in getting a reaction and will keep attacking a target as long as it gets them the outcome they want, which is recognition by their fellow trolls and an emotionally laden response by their victims. The reactions trolls receive empower them more and give them extra motivation to continue.

Keep in mind that trying to reason with trolls won't work either. Any attempt to approach them rationally will be a waste of time and will most likely backfire as well. Trolls will mock your reasonable request to consider additional viewpoints, to look at information objectively, and to stop personal attacks against you, your family, or your employer and use it as further ammunition down the road.

So what will work? "Do not feed the trolls" or DNFTT is the single most important thing to remember when dealing with trolls. Do not engage them in any way! The DNFTT approach entails two parts, ignoring them and disempowering them.

Ignoring trolls is easier said than done. After all, when someone says something that's ludicrous and not based in reality, or when they come after you, your natural inclination is to want to set them straight and defend yourself or your company. But this counterintuitive step is what you need to take if you want to get rid of a troll. Don't engage them in conversation, whether publicly or behind the scenes. And, if possible, don't let them see that they've gotten to you either because that will simply give them added credibility among their peers and encourage them to stick with you as a good victim.

Disempowering them involves having their comments removed or having them entirely blocked from participating on a particular site. If a discussion forum has a moderator, you can report the troll's actions to him. Make sure to do so in a fair and constructive way, detailing the examples of what's occurred, preferably pointing out that the troll isn't adding any value to the conversation and is undermining the discussion's continuation or group's cohesiveness.

But be careful. Trolls may be quiet for a while and then reengage, once again going after you, your business, or your website.

Dealing with Sockpuppets

Once upon a time, sockpuppets were made out of old socks adorned with a pair of buttons as eyes and decorated with additional features such as a nose and hair. Although the sockpuppets of yesteryear still exist, as the parents of young children can attest to, Internet sockpuppets are hardly innocent and happy playthings.

Today, sockpuppets are better known as the false identities used by individuals online. The reason for using a sockpuppet is to be intentionally deceptive, whether for purposes of entertainment, to undermine or attack an opponent, or to gain

social, political, or business advantage. Unlike pseudonyms, which are the names that people use to represent themselves online, sockpuppets claim to be the real identities of people.

Wikipedia, the fifth largest website in the world and therefore undeniably influential, is sometimes the victim of sockpuppets. The site has an entire article that discusses sockpuppetry in relation to the online encyclopedia. The site defines sockpuppetry as "the use of multiple Wikipedia user accounts for an improper purpose such as attempts to deceive or mislead other editors, disrupt discussions, distort consensus, avoid sanctions, or otherwise violate community standards and policies."[19] Sockpuppetry can take on many forms on Wikipedia:[20]

- Creating new accounts to avoid detection
- Using another person's account
- Logging out to make problematic edits as an IP address
- Reviving old unused accounts and presenting them as different users
- Persuading friends or acquaintances to create accounts for the purpose of supporting one side of a dispute

However, it's not just Wikipedia that's subject to misuse and deceit through sockpuppets. Unfortunately, it's a widespread phenomenon, as a 28-year-old Bloomington, Minnesota high school teacher found out after being impersonated on Facebook. A fake account was set up under the instructor's name, and former and current students were sent questionable messages such as "Happy birthday, you have my permission to get intoxicated."[21] A few years earlier, in 2006, U.S. Congressman Charles F. Bass's (R-NH) policy director Tad Furtado posted damaging messages under the names "IndyHM" and "IndiNH" against rivals on political websites. As these sockpuppets, Furtado claimed to support Bass's democratic opponent but expressed uncertainly about his chances of winning the next election,[22] thus trying to create doubt in the minds of other readers about the wisdom of supporting the candidate.

In 2012, fast-food Chick-fil-A's president Dan Cathy publicly stated that the company supports the biblical definition of the family unit. Some, such as the president of the Family Research Council, agreed with its position: "Chick-fil-A is a bible-based, Christian-based business...and I commend them for what they are doing."[23] Others, such as the Jim Henson Company, which supports gay marriage and which provided Muppet toys for the Chick-fil-A kids meals, announced on its Facebook page that it had "notified Chick-Fil-A that we do not wish to partner with them on any future endeavors."[24] Shortly thereafter, Chick-Fil-A began a product recall due to a "possible safety issue," claiming that it was "a decision completely separate from the Jim Henson Company's Facebook announcement."[25] Critics considered the timing of these two events too convenient and Chick-Fil-A's

action disingenuous. They were especially suspicious when two Facebook accounts popped up that appeared to solely focus on defending Chick-Fil-A.[26] One of the accounts, operating under the name Abby Farle, was labeled as a fake after the Avatar image was identified as a stock photo,[27] feeding into critics' suspicion that the fast-food company was operating unethically. However, it's possible that the sockpuppet was the creation of an overexuberant fan; Chick-Fil-A vehemently denied it was behind the creation[28] and wrote on its Facebook page that "There is a lot of misinformation out there. The latest is we have neen [sic] accused of impersonating a teenager with a fake Facebook profile. We want you to know we would never do anything like that and this claim is 100% false."[29]

Meanwhile, Scott Adams, the creator of the long-running comic strip Dilbert, created a sockpuppet to come to his own aid after writing some things that readers took issue with. First, Adams wrote a controversial blog post about gender inequality that concluded with "I realize I might take some heat for lumping women, children and the mentally handicapped in the same group. So I want to be perfectly clear. I'm not saying women are similar to either group. I'm saying that a man's best strategy for dealing with each group is disturbingly similar. If he's smart, he takes the path of least resistance most of the time, which involves considering the emotional realities of other people."[30] (Note that Adams later deleted the post, but that it was republished by others elsewhere.[31]) A few weeks later he wrote a thought-provoking *Wall Street Journal* article on "How to Get a Real Education"[32] that some readers criticized. Adams isn't the only person online to later regret having written and posted something, but most people either silently weather the storm, have friends come to their aid, ask a spokesperson to release a statement on their behalf, or directly explain their actions. Adams chose a different route, pretending to be a fan named PlannedChaos[33] who actively defended the artist on message boards such as MetaFilter [34] and Reddit.[35] When his real identity was later revealed, Adams unapologetically stated, "I am Scott Adams"[36] and "I'm sorry I peed in your cesspool. For what it's worth, the smart people were on to me after the first post. That made it funnier."[37]

At times the intentions behind using a sockpuppet are not outright self-serving or evil, but the end result still hurts innocent people. "Amina Abdallan Araf," a lesbian Syrian-American, launched the blog "A Gay Girl in Damascus"[38] in February 2011 to draw attention to political issues in the Middle East and the crackdown on protesters during the Arab Spring. In June, a post written by her cousin "Rania Ismail" said, "Amina was seized by three men in their early 20s. According to the witness (who does not want her identity known), the men were armed.... The men are assumed to be members of one of the security services or the Baath Party militia. Amina's present location is unknown and it is unclear if she is in a jail or being held elsewhere in Damascus."[39] Her kidnapping became an international event. A Facebook page in support of Araf was set up, readers were encouraged to contact

the Syrian Consulate in Washington D.C., and the U.S. State Department began an investigation into her disappearance.[40]

After photos of Araf were discovered to have been impermissibly taken from the Facebook page of Jelena Lecic, a woman living in London,[41] the hoax was soon revealed.[42] Araf was in reality Tom MacMaster, a married American and Middle East activist studying at Edinburgh University.[43] MacMaster explained that he wrote the "kidnapping" post to explain Araf's absence from the blog while he and his wife were on vacation in Istanbul.[44] After his identity was discovered, MacMaster posted an apology on the "A Gay Girl in Damascus" blog: "While the narrative voice may have been fictional, the facts on this blog are true and not misleading as to the situation on the ground. I do not believe that I have harmed anyone—I feel that I have created an important voice for issues that I feel strongly about."[45] Nevertheless supporters of "Amina" were angry and felt that that the plight of legitimate bloggers, as well as gays and lesbians in the Arab world, was compromised.

How to Identify a Sockpuppet

The first thing you should do is figure out whether people are sockpuppets. Sometimes simply knowing they are fake is sufficient for you to decide to ban them from a community or block their access to a website.

Sometimes it's extremely easy. If the person uses a stock photo or an image of someone else, chances are good that the account is a fake, as mentioned in the previous "A Gay Girl in Damascus" and the Chick-fil-A examples. Next, see if there are any topics that the person talks about on a regular basis, subjects that set him off, or people she either attacks or defends. That can help identify the topics the sockpuppet is tasked to represent. It can also help narrow the possibility of backgrounds that the person comes from. For example, if someone criticizes a pro-gun position, it's unlikely that they're a member of the NRA.

Is the same or a similar comment posted on different threads by different usernames? This is a strong indication that it's the same sockpuppet. Or is there a pattern of the same members within a community always agreeing with each other? This may suggest that a single person is behind several sockpuppet aliases, and that he is having an online conversation with himself to support a particular position or point he wants to make.

Do an online search to see where else the sockpuppet is active. Is there a common thread of interest? Are there overlapping connections and friends? Often other people know the true identity of the person behind the sockpuppet, and seeing the social connections between the puppet and others is a big clue.

Determining the gender of the person is also helpful to narrow down identity. Does the writer use more pronouns, suggesting she is a woman? Or does the writer use more determiners (for example, "a," "the," "that," "these") and numbers and quantifiers such as "more" and "some"), suggesting he is a man?[46]

Are the individuals well-versed in a certain subject that requires specialized knowledge? If they seem to know about medicine, that may indicate that they are a laboratory technician, emergency medical technician, nurse, doctor. If they have legal expertise, then they may be a legal assistant or an attorney. The same, of course, applies to any other work that requires specific knowledge and expertise that most members of the public would not have.

Narrowing down geography can be done by seeing what time of day the person posts online. Is it the same time every weekday? This might indicate that they have a set schedule that revolves around work hours. Or it might help determine what time zone they write from. Does the person mention any geographical markers? How about weather patterns or events?

Analyze and track their word choices, phrasings, grammatical tendencies, and spellings to see if they match that of another person active in the community or forum. For example, some American English spellings are "catalog" and "criticize," whereas "catalogue" and "criticise" are British English. In the United States, someone is called an "ass," whereas in the United Kingdom, the more common term is "arse." An American "guy" is an English "bloke," whereas "soccer" is "football." This may point to a similar background, or perhaps even the same identity, between the sockpuppet and someone else in the group.

Of course, if you are a community moderator or otherwise have access to a website's infrastructure, looking at people's IP addresses is extremely useful in determining whether someone is a sockpuppet. The IP address can help you figure out where the person is located, whether multiple accounts are being accessed from the same IP address (this on its own isn't proof that it is the same person but can provide a useful hint), and whether accounts from the same IP address share different usernames but the same or a similar password.

Dealing with Difficult People

The largest number of online troublemakers fall within the "difficult people" category. Difficult people are those who make your online experience unpleasant or problematic in one way or another. Often arguing for the sake of arguing is what keeps them going. These people can range from those who act thoughtlessly, stupidly, or obnoxiously, to the intentionally mean, overtly aggressive, and power-hungry who want to put you in your place.

When James Holmes opened fire in an Aurora, Colorado movie theater at 12:38 a.m. on July 20, 2012, he injured 58 people and murdered 12, among them a 6-year-old girl, and caused unspeakable pain for their families. In the wake of mass shootings like the 1999 Columbine, Colorado massacre by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold that killed 12 people; the 2007 Virginia Tech murders by Cho Seung-Hui that took 32 lives; the 2011 Tuscon, Arizona attack by Jared Loughner that killed 6 people and seriously injured U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords; and the 2012 Oak Creek, Wisconsin Sikh temple shooting by Michael Page that killed 6 people and injured 4, the debate about private gun ownership and American gun laws has been a frequently occurring one. What made Holmes's actions relevant to the debate about guns, personal safety, and self-defense wasn't just the extent of the carnage, but also the proximity of his actions to people's everyday lives. Holmes planned and committed the mass murder in a location, a movie theater, which made everyone feel like they could have been a potential target.

The same day of the shooting, the media and social networks lit up with heated and angry discussions about the need for stricter gun laws, on the one hand, and the inability to have prevented the murders even with stricter background checks and gun laws, on the other hand. (Holmes had no prior criminal record or visible mental health issues that would have precluded him, under current law, from purchasing the .40 Smith & Wesson Glock handgun, the 12-gauge Remington Model 870 shotgun, or the Smith & Wesson AR-15 semi-automatic rifle with a 100-round drum magazine that he used to execute his victims).

Hours after reports first surfaced about the killings, the National Rifle Association committed a highly embarrassing error. The powerful lobbying organization's official Twitter account posted a message that said, "Good morning, shooters. Happy Friday! Weekend plans?" The offensive Tweet was subsequently removed and spokesman Andrew Arulanandam said, "A single individual, unaware of events in Colorado, tweeted a comment that is being completely taken out of context."[47]

The NRA wasn't the only entity that acted carelessly that day. CelebBoutique, a U.K. online retailer with "a vision of bringing everyone celebrity style at highstreet prices," merrily tweeted "#Aurora is trending, clearly about our Kim K inspired #Aurora dress;)" early afternoon of July 20, as seen in Figure 4.4. The message immediately received a widespread negative response, and CelebBoutique realized that #Aurora was trending due to a mass shooting in the United States and not events on its website. The company issued an apology on its website saying, "We were extremely careless and sloppy in not checking the details of the trending article and wrongly assumed that it related to something entirely different."[48]

Figure 4.4 *CelebBoutique's Tweet on July 20, 2012 (since removed from CelebBoutique's Twitter stream)*

As the hours and days went by and the public was still reeling from the tragedy, the arguments between the pro-gun and anti-gun camps became more insulting. Laura R. Charron tweeted, "#LiberalBumperStickers Only drug dealers should have guns!"[49] Cutter Mills said, "if GUNS killed people, then SPOONS have made the majority of the united states FAT! #OutlawSpoons!"[50] SnoopRoc24, disagreeing with an opponent's position, responded with "guns don't kill people it's the idiot pulling the trigger but don't worry if a guy pulls a gun on you I won't use mine to save you."[51] Meanwhile, Andy Reed wrote, "You members of the @nra really are intellectually stunted troglodytes with an inferiority complex,"[52] and author Salman Rushdie went for the absurd with "Msg to gun fans (M.Python), part 3: Go and boil your bottoms, you sons of silly persons! Now go away or I shall taunt you a second time."[53] Comedian Wanda Sykes tried a bit of humor with "Sumthin's wrong, this mentally ill man was able to buy guns and explosives, and I get carded just for a box of ClaritinD. #needasinuslobby."[54]

What not enough people were doing, however, was having a serious conversation with people from all sides of the issue to find common ground. Dr. Joel Dvoskin is a clinical psychologist who conducted a community mental health forum in Tucson after the 2011 Arizona shooting. Although noting that he felt it would be better if there were not 300 million guns on U.S. streets, he also said it's unrealistic to believe the country would be disarmed. "Instead of having an absurd conversation about whether or not to withhold guns from citizens, we should be having a conversation about living safely among 300 million guns."[55] But having this discussion requires a different approach than we've historically seen, certainly online.

The New York Times bestselling horror novelist Scott Sigler had enough of the online fighting the afternoon after the shootings, as show in Figure 4.5. He wrote, "Watching people use the Aurora tragedy to promote their various political beliefs is sickening. It's not about you."[56]

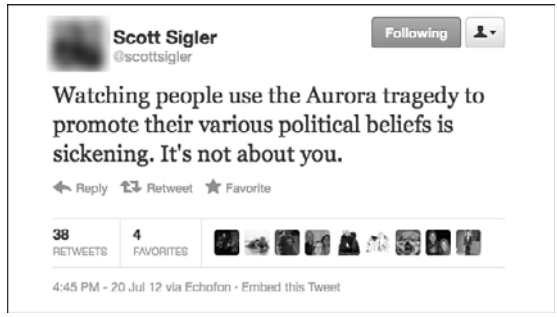


Figure 4.5 *Scott Sigler's Tweet on July 20, 2012*

On a much smaller scale than the Aurora killings, but nevertheless disturbing in its own right, is what happened to a Minnesota teenager. On December 30, 2011, Minnesota high school student and gifted ice hockey player Jack Jablonski became paralyzed due to an injury suffered in a hockey game.[57] Despite the severity of his injuries and the challenges he is facing, his positive outlook on life and spirit were immediately noticeable. Jablonski tweeted messages like "The road to success is always under construction, or reconstruction #optimism"[58] and showed a sense of humor when he described how his electric wheelchair lost power, "#thatawkwardmoment when ur mom turns off ur chair in the middle of the street in the rain w/ every1 is watchin & then ur chair losses power."[59] As an inspiration to many and now known worldwide, it was surprising that anyone would want to attack the boy. But unfortunately someone did, for weeks on end. The hateful tweets included "#4 words 1.Can. Still Walk. #jabs #he wishes" and "the olympics are coming, gonna watch all the track events and laugh because #jabs cant [sic] do anything in them."[60] The public response was strong, with statements like "To the kids posting tweets making fun of Jack Jablonski #WaychYourF**kinBack [sic]"[61] and "Heard horrible tale of Twitter bully making fun of Jack Jablonski. So pissed."[62] But it was Jabonski who reacted beautifully and addressed one of his attackers directly with a public refusal to engage in an online hate-fest, as seen in Figure 4.6: "@jabsjokes not gonna play this game buddy."[63]

Here's another example, this time from the world of entertainment, which is explained in greater detail because it's illustrative of the different ways in which people can be careless online, act without completely thinking through all of the possible consequences, and allow their tempers to get out of control. American nerdcore hip hop rapper Christopher Ward, who goes by the stage name mc chris (all lowercase), performed in Philadelphia in July 2012. Richie Branson was the opening act. As music goes, everyone has their own tastes and one person's favorite is another person's headache. In this case, a concertgoer named Mike Taylor didn't appreciate Branson's music and tweeted, "Dear nerd rapper opening for

Powerglove/mc chris. You're not good enough to pander to me. Better luck next time."[64] That tweet set off a series of events which continued to reverberate days later.

Figure 4.6 *Jack Jablonski's Tweet on July 17, 2012*

On his blog, Branson described what happened: "The crowd in Philly were totally being good to me. Well...except one person in the audience. Apparently, he took to twitter to criticize my performance. No biggie to me, although I don't see why he just didn't go grab a drink from the bar or something during my set if he wasn't feeling it.... During my set, acting as a friend, MC Chris asked the man to leave the building for talking about me. Given that this is my first tour, Chris is working extremely hard to make sure that each show isn't a nervous experience for me...so when he saw that tweet, emotions ran high and he acted in my defense."[65]

mc chris's decision to evict Taylor from the concert quickly spread online after Taylor complained about his experience on Reddit. "I realize my tweet is snarky, but I'm a smartass and I can understand a guy being mad and protective of his opener. However, publicly kicking out a long-time paying fan because they tweeted a negative response about the opener of your show? Are you serious? I realize what I said was petty, but how immature is it to publicly humiliate someone for something tweeted to just my hundred (which are mostly bots) or so followers? Am I not allowed to have a negative opinion?...mc chris definitely came off as a dick...."[66]

Taylor apologized to Branson on Twitter for any negative fallout he might receive from the situation,[67] yet clearly saw himself as the victim and mc chris as the villain of the situation, and made sure people knew it. mc chris repeatedly apologized. As seen in Figure 4.7, he also posted a YouTube video titled, "I'm sorry,"[68] and sent numerous Tweets from his Twitter account.[69] Nevertheless, the story was picked up by MTV, E-online, *Forbes*, *Huffington Post*, and numerous blogs.

Figure 4.7 *Screenshot of mc chris's "I'm sorry" YouTube video*

Branson, the performer who attracted the original criticism, was unfortunately targeted as a result of the backlash. In addition, he was repeatedly called the N-word, prompting him to write about it on his blog[70] and on Facebook, where he asked people to refrain from using such ugly language.

Taylor, meanwhile, gave several interviews, changed his twitter profile to read, "One-day internet celebrity due to getting kicked out of a concert because of a tweet,"[71] and admitted enjoying the attention placed upon him.[72] He also took a final jab at mc chris[73] by linking to an article that mentioned how heavy metal band Iron Maiden positively dealt with a disruptive concertgoer.[74]

So what would have been a better way to have dealt with this situation? To start with, while Taylor certainly had the right to express his dislike of the opening act, he nevertheless could have chosen not to insult Branson publicly on Twitter while stating his preference. His dislike of Branson's performance could have been expressed more productively instead of in a snide and demeaning way. Even though at the time when he wrote it he had only a few hundred followers on the social networking site, everything on the Internet is visible and amplified. He must have known that his Tweet would be seen by someone, as it clearly was by mc chris. For his part, mc chris could have chosen to ignore Taylor's insult and continue on with the show, thus saving himself the grief of having the situation

escalate publicly online, having others who claimed they'd attended his shows share their own stories of examples of his unrestrained and unfriendly behavior, and having to go into emergency reputation repair mode. Branson, meanwhile, is the one who came out looking the best.

Dealing with Online Defamers

Online defamers are those who make a false and unprivileged statement of fact about an individual that's harmful to the person's reputation. Defamation, which is a legal term and has a specific meaning under the law, includes libel, which is defamation that's in writing, or slander, which is defamation that's spoken. To be defamatory, the statement must have been made due to negligence or with actual malice, and must be more than simply an opinion. Proving harm to one's reputation is not as simple as it might sound. However, it can include things such as showing that a person either lost a client or didn't land a new account because of the false claims someone made about them.

A defense against defamation is that the statement is true. In other words, even if a statement is harmful to someone's reputation, because it is true means that a defamation action will likely fail. For example, posting online that a woman is old and ugly and therefore won't make as many sales as her younger and more attractive counterpart is an opinion that, although perhaps untrue and even injurious to the woman's reputation, isn't illegal. However, posting online that this same women is embezzling funds from her employer is harmful to her reputation and, if proven false, actionable in a court of law.

Fighting online defamation can be complicated. Often those posting attacking and defamatory statements are made anonymously, so one of the issues is trying to pinpoint the true identity of an anonymous author or commenter. According to attorney Colette Vogele, co-founder of Without My Consent, a nonprofit organization that assists victims of online harassment, it can cost a minimum of $10,000 in legal fees to issue a subpeona to an online company to get them to reveal someone's IP address so that the person behind a statement can be identified.[75] Furthermore, because defamers often claim they are protected under First Amendment Freedom of Speech grounds, it makes innocent victims appear as though they are opposed to freedom of speech, when actually they are opposed to lies and injury.

Carla Franklin, a former model and Columbia Business School graduate, decided to pursue legal action to reveal the identities of "JoeBloom08," JimmyJean008," and "greyspector09" who called her a "whore" and posted other nasty and untrue statements about her on YouTube.[76] It took her months to get search engine Google

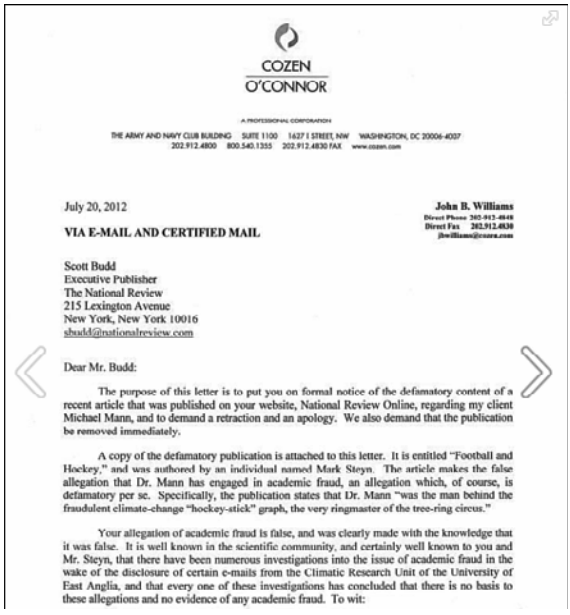
to remove the content and reveal information linking her attacker to the posts in question.[77] Three years later her case still isn't fully resolved.[78]

If they know the person's identity, victims of defamation can try to contact the attacker privately and ask him to please stop saying and writing things that are hurtful and injurious. Sometimes this approach works, especially if the attacker isn't a mean-spirited individual and instead made the statement more due to negligence than to malice. The victim can also try to contact the website where the statement is posted and politely request that it be removed, along with the indexing of that page so that it won't appear in online searches for the person's name. As shown in Figure 4.8, Google receives requests to remove items from the search engine every year. However, in most cases the request will fall on deaf ears. Websites aggressively compete for readers, and anything that increases their readership, even if it's hurtful or injurious to someone, is seen as a means to an end.

Product	Court Orders	Executive, Police, etc.	Items Requested To Be Removed
Web Search	**92**	**7**	**777**
Copyright	2	–	12
Defamation	46	1	659
Privacy and Security	36	4	67
Impersonation	1	2	3
Other	7	–	36

Figure 4.8 *Google Transparency Report for the United States between July–December 2011 showing the number of requests made for the removal of defamatory items*

Getting an attorney involved may be necessary. Climate scientist Michael Mann, whom we mentioned in Chapter 3, took a direct route against those he believed defamed him. When National Review Online published the article "Football and Hockey" by Mark Steyn[79] which stated, "Michael Mann was the man behind the fraudulent climate-change 'hockey-stick' graph," Mann fought back publicly. A few days later, as shown in Figure 4.9, Mann's lawyer sent a letter to Scott Budd, the executive publisher of *The National Review*: "The purpose of this letter is to put you on formal notice of the defamatory content of a recent article that was published on your website, National Review Online, regarding my client Michael Mann, and to demand a retraction and apology. We also demand that the publication be removed immediately....The article makes the false allegation that Dr. Mann has engaged in academic fraud, an allegation which, of course, is defamatory per se."[80]



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July 20, 2012

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VIA E-MAIL AND CERTIFIED MAIL

Scott Budd
Executive Publisher
The National Review
215 Lexington Avenue
New York, New York 10016
sbudd@nationalreview.com

Dear Mr. Budd:

The purpose of this letter is to put you on formal notice of the defamatory content of a recent article that was published on your website, National Review Online, regarding my client Michael Mann, and to demand a retraction and an apology. We also demand that the publication be removed immediately.

A copy of the defamatory publication is attached to this letter. It is entitled "Football and Hockey," and was authored by an individual named Mark Steyn. The article makes the false allegation that Dr. Mann has engaged in academic fraud, an allegation which, of course, is defamatory per se. Specifically, the publication states that Dr. Mann "was the man behind the fraudulent climate-change "hockey-stick" graph, the very ringmaster of the tree-ring circus."

Your allegation of academic fraud is false, and was clearly made with the knowledge that it was false. It is well known in the scientific community, and certainly well known to you and Mr. Steyn, that there have been numerous investigations into the issue of academic fraud in the wake of the disclosure of certain e-mails from the Climatic Research Unit of the University of East Anglia, and that every one of these investigations has concluded that there is no basis to these allegations and no evidence of any academic fraud. To wit:

Figure 4.9 *Letter from Michael Mann's attorney to The National Review*

Furthermore, an important thing to keep in mind is that winning a defamation suit works only for statements made in the past. These suits don't prevent an individual or online gossip site, which gets its revenue from advertisements dependent on large readerships, from continuing to attack someone in the future and make their life miserable for entertainment and money. Victims of such attacks therefore need to think long and hard whether they are up to the challenge of pursuing their legal rights, and what it will cost them emotionally and financially.

Cyberbullies, Cyberharassers, and Cyberstalkers

Unfortunately there are no uniform definitions for cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking. However, cyberbullies and cyberharassers generally refer to people who use technology to purposefully and repeatedly hurt others. Cyberbullying is most commonly thought of in connection with children and teenagers, but, as this book shows, it's something that frequently happens to adults as well. Many U.S. states have enacted anti-cyberbullying laws to protect children and teenagers, whereas laws that specifically protect adults from the same harms aren't as prevalent. Instead, the law tends to rely on existing antiharassment or antistalking statutes, many of which don't specifically address or sufficiently protect against Internet-based attacks that don't include actual threats of physical harm.

Cyberstalking, meanwhile, is generally defined as using electronic means to harass, frighten, and stalk a victim. Targets can feel very unsettled and frightened not only for their own safety, but their family's safety as well. Cyberstalkers are often obsessed with their targets and have a strong emotional desire to control them. They follow their targets around online, appearing and frequenting places their targets are active, and often leave them intrusive or harassing messages via email, website comments, or social networks. Sometimes they attempt to become friends with a target's inner circle, posing as someone close to the target and trying to gain entry that way. Other times they install spyware on their computers and infiltrate their target's personal files and email accounts, and activate computers' own video cameras to observe their victims in private activities and compromising positions.

Sandra L. Brown, M.A., is the CEO of The Institute for Relational Harm Reduction & Public Pathology Education and the author of *Counseling Victims of Violence: A Handbook for Helping Professionals* (1991, 2006), *How to Spot a Dangerous Man Before You Get Involved Book and Workbook* (2005), and *Women Who Love Psychopaths* (2008). She argues that cyberstalkers fall within "Cluster B Personality Disorders" as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which is used by mental health professionals in the United States to classify mental disorders. They usually suffer from low empathy, which is concerning because "without empathy, pathologicals find pleasure in harming others and enjoy seeing the physical or emotional destruction of others."[81]

What to Do If You Are Being Harassed or Stalked

Make sure to check out the Stalking Resource Center at www.victimsofcrime.org, which offers detailed information about what people can do to try to protect themselves against stalkers and what they can do if they're already a target. The site also provides a downloadable "Stalking Incident and Behavior Log."

But once you're being stalked, the action you take against attackers will depend on the severity and frequency of what they've done. Let's say you receive a strange message from someone, for example an email sent to your public email account that says they like the neighborhood where you live, which they say they found when they looked up your home address via online search records. Although it can be disconcerting, without additional action or escalation on their part, there is often no further action to take. Keep a copy of the message, note the circumstances surrounding its receipt (time, place, whether it was in response to something you said or did, who the person is, whether you have a prior connection to the individual, and whether they are known to you), and then file it away. If you feel particularly unsettled, you can go to your local police department and leave a report with them about the incident. In many cases, however, the message will likely be an isolated one, and you won't hear from the person again.

However, if you receive a threatening message or email online, or one that puts you in fear of imminent harm, please immediately seek help from law enforcement and contact an attorney to determine if you have a case that can be pursued legally.

Online and Offline Can Overlap

Although we're taking about what happens in the online environment, you need to understand that the online and offline environments sometimes overlap or blend together. For example, the unwanted behavior may start online and then go offline when the attacker decides to send letters, packages, or other items to the targets' home or office, or publishes their address, phone number, and email online and encourages other people to contact them in those ways. The stalking or harassment may start in people's neighborhood or at their office and then move online. Or it may simply start and remain online.

Endnotes

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