



TROLLS, THE CYBERBULLY, AND HATERS: THE NEW GENERATION OF CRITICS?

👤 Julie R. Bryan 🕒 March 3, 2016 📁 In The Know

Recently, I listened to a podcast of Chicago Public Radio's *This American Life*, where a blogger named Lindy West shared her story about confronting one of her "trolls" or her "cyberbully"—a commenter who regularly criticizes and comments on a blogger's posts. Lindy's experience was mortifying. The troll was angry at Lindy's posts where she talked about accepting herself as a fat woman (her words) and being proud of who she is and where she was going in her life. This somehow tapped into the troll's own self-image problems and he decided to take it out on Lindy. He created fake Gmail and Twitter accounts in the name of Lindy's recently-deceased father, and tweeted abhorrent insults to Lindy, so it would seem as if her father was sending her hateful messages from the grave. It was cruel and unforgivable by anyone's standards. Lindy is not naïve and knows that as an Internet blogger, she has to tolerate comments and criticisms that are personal, negative and sometimes ugly and downright mean. But this troll crossed the line, preying on her grief and bringing her father into the conversation. She therefore confronted him, and he apologized and explained the insecurities and anger that drove him to such atrocious behavior. The story is an interesting glimpse into a confrontation between a bully and victim. I encourage you to listen to the whole story on Episode 545 of *This American Life*, which can be found at www.thisamericanlife.org.

Lindy's confrontation of her troll was compelling, but what really gave me pause was her tolerance of the negative commentary she regularly receives. I know that most bloggers and online journalists share her view, and it made me angry. We, as a society, have allowed the proliferation of social media and anonymous commentary to raise the bar of our collective tolerance for bullying, hatred, and venomous comments far too high. Public figures should not be required to tolerate such cruelty merely because they are in the public eye. Unfortunately for anyone posting on social media, news sites, blogs, and reviewing sites, unfettered access and relative anonymity afforded by the Internet allows commenters to say things no reasonable human would ever have the courage to say to anyone in person. Typing on a keyboard and sending venom through cyberspace allows for an impersonal attack with no human reaction or direct response, as if playing a video game. Removing the human element, and couching such hatred as "free speech" has allowed bullying and hate speech to become the norm.

There is no clear path to changing the dialogue. Companies that operate social media websites and news outlets have little to no control over the content of the comments, and although most have policies against hate speech or harassment, free speech protections, and the sheer volume of commentary limits the ability of any website to police what people post. And when the sites are alerted to an inappropriate comment, it has already

likely had the desired effect on the target. There is also little to do from a legal angle. If a particular commenter can be identified, which isn't always easy, it takes a lot for any commenter's posts to rise to the level of criminal harassment or stalking, such that law enforcement may intervene. On the civil side, there may be recourse through a lawsuit for disparagement, libel, or harassment, but without quantifiable damages, these lawsuits will cost the victim more time, money and energy than the bully, with little to no satisfactory result. Laws may continue to change to address something less than defamation or harassment, but given the number of lawsuits already clogging out Court dockets in an ever more litigious society, more laws are not what we need. Instead there must be more self-policing, and a stronger stance from website hosts against bullying and hateful comments. Only a collective shift in values surrounding this relatively new medium for discussion can make a change.

We should stop allowing our peers, our children, and our journalists, from being attacked from afar with rude, demeaning and hateful comments. Instead, discourse and debate, whether face to face or through online comment strings, should reflect our respect for differing ideas and opinions without resorting to personal attacks. No one is immune from feeling the power of harassment, bullying, insults. It is up to us to collectively stop tolerating anything less than mutual respect. Now that tech is becoming less a novelty and more a way of life, perhaps the tide will turn away from this type of cyberattacks, because people will stop allowing it to happen. Cyberbullying has resulted in tragedy, can be defamatory, exposing the poster to legal action, harassment, etc.

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