CIVILITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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

Worst Ever

Heads Should Roll

Better Watch Out

IDIOTS!!

Waste of time

I HATE YOU

Completely terrible!

%@#!

Buyer Beware

Would never go back

STFU

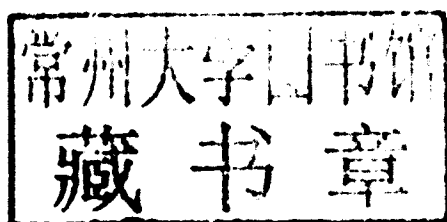I will destroy you

lulz

Horrible Customer Service

ANDREA WECKERLE

Foreword by Jimmy Wales, Founder of Wikipedia

Civility in the Digital Age

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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.

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If It Happened to Them, It Can Happen to You

As an outspoken critic of social oppression and inequality, feminist pop culture media critic Anita Sarkeesian[1] has had her share of detractors, but it was her Kickstarter video project that caused the proverbial s**t to hit the fan. In May 2012, Sarkeesian launched her project "Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games" on the fundraising platform to raise money for the creation of a video series examining the most common stereotypes of female characters in video games, stereotypes such as *Damsel in Distress*, *The Fighting F#@k Toy*, *The Sexy Sidekick*, and *The Sexy Villainess*.[2] Despite its positive purpose, her project rubbed some people the wrong way, and Sarkeesian found herself the target of the most vicious online attacks imaginable.

Her harassers tried to hack into her email and social media accounts and post her address and telephone number online,[3] putting her safety at risk. Her Wikipedia page was vandalized to read "[she] is an entitled [n-word]" and "holds the world record for maximum amount of toys in the posterior."[4] Numerous vile and hateful technologically manipulated images of her were also posted online, including two rape drawings featuring her likeness and a photograph of her face with a cartoon-drawn penis ejaculating over it.[5] Her YouTube video asking viewers to support her Kickstarter project received more than 4,000 comments, among them ones like tri-AceFanboy's "I want to put my d**k into you"[6] and Blutteufel's "Typical feminazi

ignorance and [unwarranted] self-importance. Get back to the kitchen and hurry up with the f**king sandwich, c**t."[7] Even an interactive *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian* game was created, complete with bruises and welts appearing on her face when the screen was clicked.[8]

You may think that Anita Sarkeesian's story is unique, but in terms of severity, unfortunately it's not. Just ask Sue Scheff, who became the target of an online smear campaign that started when one person went after her for work related to her organization, Parents' Universal Resource Experts, which helps families with at-risk teens.[9] As Scheff describes it, this individual "had others join them as part of a 'gang mentality' approach...in a systematic attempt to emotionally destroy me, my organization, my career, my family and anything else that meant something to me. My life was being ruined one keystroke at a time."[10] Scheff ultimately sued her attacker and in 2006 won the largest defamation jury award in American legal history, $11.3M.

Michael Roberts, too, understands how easily the Internet can be used as a weapon against someone. Shortly after Roberts filed for divorce in 2004, his ex-wife began an aggressive Internet smear campaign against him, his business, and individuals who tried to lend him any kind of support. The attacks against his reputation and his business crippled his company and forced him to sell it for considerably less than it was worth.[11] According to Roberts, these attacks continued until July 2011, when his ex-wife was arrested on charges of first-degree murder in the death of Dustin Wehde. She is now in prison serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

Today Roberts admits, "Had I not gone through this fiery trial, I would've been like so many other people and considered the issue of online attacks and character assassination a mere trifle not worthy of serious attention. I would probably have also dismissed the victims who issue anguished cries for help as thin-skinned weaklings, as seems to be the reaction by most people who have not experienced this tragedy firsthand and simply refuse to see what is happening online."[12] As a result of his ordeal, Roberts founded Rexxfield, a company that helps and supports individuals who've been the victims of online lies, defamation, and privacy invasion. It offers assistance in retracting or hiding deceptive materials from the public domain and restoring victims' good name and reputation.[13]

Janice Duffy, Ph.D., is another victim who knows that online attacks can have life-altering consequences.[14] As part of an online support group that posted about scam artists taking advantage of vulnerable people, she registered on what she thought was a legitimate complaint site. However, Duffy says that unbeknown to her at the time, the website directly passed on the identities of people who wrote complaints to the businesses and individuals that they were concerned about. As a result, she was cyberbullied and also received threatening phone calls. Duffy claims