

The Ruin of the Digital Town Square

Making Friends of Trolls

Caitrin Keiper

For Lindy West, it was an ordinary day on the Internet: graphic death threats, weight-related bullying, “thirty rape threats for breakfast.” As an outspoken female social commentator, she fields more than her share (is there a right share?) of this material all the time. But one message came in that cut through the fog.

It was a tweet seemingly from her father, the kindest man she’d ever known, her biggest supporter, who had died not long ago. Since he whispered his last words, West remembers, “I would give anything for one more sentence. I would give anything for 140 more characters.” But these 140 characters were to express his crude disappointment in her. Some anonymous troll had put intensive effort into researching her family, gathering real photos, and creating an impersonation to wound her with. All for the purpose of—what?

The first rule for dealing with trolls, West knew, was *do not feed them*. Disengage and rise above where they have no power to hurt you. But she *was* hurt, and chose to lay it bare in her next column. That was when her strange week on the Internet became even more surreal. The next morning, she got an email from the troll.

He apologized for harassing her and said it didn’t hit him until he read the column that “there is a living, breathing human being who is reading this sh**. I’m attacking someone who never harmed me in any way and for no reason whatsoever.” He deleted the fake account and made a donation to the hospital where her father had been treated.

West mustered a brief, stunned acknowledgement, but the exchange haunted her long after that. What would inspire the same person to be so callous and then so responsive? Was it something special about her, or about him? “If I could get through to one troll—the meanest one I ever had—couldn’t I feasibly get through to any of them? All of them?” Eventually she asked him if he would be willing to follow up—and record their conversation for the radio show *This American Life*, where it aired in 2015.

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Eighteen months after their fateful interaction, they both nervously get on the phone. The reformed troll displays a surprising amount of introspection. He says that he was struggling with his weight at the time, and West's writings about accepting her own size unnerved him. He admits to feeling threatened by outspoken women, although he never would have copped to this in his personal life. "But you can't claim to be okay with women and then you go online and insult them. You know?" he comments. West is gratified to hear him recognize this, as she's found that a hallmark of misogynist behavior is to always point to other explanations for itself.

He continues that everything in his life had gone wrong, and he would secretly go online to pour out the pain onto someone else. He says everything you'd want your ideal pet troll to say. "Usually, I would put out all this Internet hate, and oftentimes I would just forget about it. This one would not leave me. It would not leave me. I started thinking about you because I know you had read it. And I'm thinking, how would she feel?"

"This was the meanest thing anyone's ever done to me," says West. "I mean, it was really fresh. [My father] had just died. But you're also—you're the only troll who has *ever* apologized. Not just to me. I've never heard of this happening before."

"I didn't mean to forgive him, but I did," she wrote later in the *Guardian*. Is there any kind of lesson in this if it's the only time it's ever happened? It apparently contained a lesson for corporate Twitter. After the story first aired, Twitter CEO Dick Costolo offered a mea culpa in an internal discussion that was leaked to the *Verge*: "We suck at dealing with abuse and trolls on the platform and we've sucked at it for years....It's nobody else's fault but mine." Two months later, the company unveiled new tools and policies to deal with abuse and bullying.

But the trolls will always be with us; West herself is still eating rape threats for breakfast. "Honestly, I don't wish them any pain," she says. "Their pain is what got us here in the first place. That's what I learned from my troll. If what he said is true—that he just needed to find some meaning in his life—then what a heartbreaking diagnosis for all the people who are still at it."

But does the insight that trolls are acting from their own pain imply they should be mollified? To know all is to forgive all? Is, say, an ego of howling insecurity that manifests as boorish arrogance supposed to be fed and placated? Surely not.

A key distinction in this case is that West's troll showed remorse of his own initiative—not because she responded first to his pain, but

because he responded to hers. Some element of his humanity rose to the surface at just the right moment, one that isn't necessarily accessible for all trolls at all times (some of which, where bots are involved, aren't even human at all). It's easy to imagine that for most trolls, West's admission of vulnerability would simply open her up to further abuse.

When she was born, her dad, a jazz musician, wrote a song about her: "You got a lot of nerve, little girl. Bundles of nerve, little girl. To come here in a season full of doubt and tattered reason. In a world you don't deserve. You got a lot of nerve, little girl."

With that tender courage, she found, "Humans can be reached. I have proof. Empathy, boldness, kindness—those are things I learned from my dad, though he never knew how much I'd need them. Or maybe he did."

As for the troll, who turned his life around in every way, "It's so difficult to believe that anyone ever really changes. And he did it. I found immense comfort in that," West goes on. "It felt really easy—comfortable, even—to talk to my troll. I liked him and I didn't know what to do with that. It's frightening to discover that he's so normal."

At one point they are chatting about their shared history, previous interactions he had with her under a different alias. "Oh my God, I remember you!" she squeals. They're laughing and comparing notes when the producer cuts in to say, "Hearing you guys, you sound like you're like, 'oh, you went to that high school? I went to that high school, too! Holy cow!'"

"It's kind of a relief to talk to someone who really knows what I'm talking about," West explains. "I never told a single living human being until now that I did this," the troll says. They bond through an experience that, at some level, only the other one can comprehend.

This weird symmetry between the injured and the injurer pops up in many other instances of online harassment. In her recent *First Things* essay "Shame Storm," Helen Andrews reflects on the viral video that ravaged her life nearly a decade ago, when an ex-boyfriend made lurid accusations about her at a book event on C-SPAN. Changing her name and moving to the other side of the world did not put her past the reach of the gawking Internet. Years on, in trying to make sense of the experience, she reached out to the one person she knew would understand what she had been through: the ex-boyfriend. "He had, after all, suffered quite as much [from the fallout] as I had."

A similar shared punishment appears in Jon Ronson's 2015 book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*. A software developer made a vulgar joke

at a conference that a woman sitting near him tweeted to immortalize, which immediately led to the loss of his job. He published an apology for his actions along with his dismay at the harsh consequence. His post was picked up by the Internet forum 4chan, which (without his participation) went to war on his behalf, aiming death threats at her and a cyber attack at her employer, which acquiesced to the demand to fire her.

“I felt betrayed. I felt abandoned. I felt ashamed. I felt rejected. I felt alone,” she said of her sudden unemployment—lonely feelings shared by the man she had gotten fired. Ronson asked each of them how they felt about what happened to the other. “I think that nobody deserves what she went through,” the man said. The woman expressed no regret and strongly implied she would do the same again.

This and other stories in *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed* inspired the 2016 *Black Mirror* episode “Hated in the Nation” (spoilers ahead), in which robotic bees are programmed to track and kill one person a day chosen by a Twitter mob. The #DeathTo hashtag crowdsources final judgment for such infelicitous actions as peeing on a memorial or being a jerk to a young fan, and even when it becomes clear that the death nominations are literally being carried out, people continue to vote. The killer twist is that when a switch is pulled to stop the process, the bees turn around and target everyone who took part in the voting: the sinners with the planks in their own eyes whacking at others’ specks.

Unlike Andrews and her ex, the mutually-assured-destruction software developers, and West and her troll, these bee victims never have the opportunity to ponder their connection with their antagonists. But such connections are a hidden irony of social media technology with its anti-social effects.

It’s no secret that depression, anxiety, even “diseases of despair” like addiction and suicide are up across the board, and (among other factors) have been widely linked to overuse of digital tech—despair fueled by the isolating sorcery of screens. But of course, these tools are meant to serve not isolation but connection; this is why we all have them. They are often our principal means of contact with the people we need and want to reach: co-workers, friends, family. But not only that, they can help you find your tribe when something sets you apart from the people immediately around you, another kind of loneliness seeking familiar faces in the black mirror.

This is how I met one of my best friends, through a moment of friction turned unexpectedly to grace. In the interest of privacy I won’t say what it was that we both sought support for in an anonymous online forum, but

her opening remarks to me made clear I wasn't welcome. I recognized her comments as a symptom of hurt, the same hurt that sent both of us to look for solace among ghosts in the machine.

I only had to act on this recognition just a little bit to turn around the whole interaction. We made up, had a moment, then moved on; but, like for West, the exchange stayed with both of us for months and we ultimately reconnected. We laugh about it now. We learned that there were any number of eerie overlaps between our lives, our families, our love stories, our hopes and fears, our tastes, our perspectives on the world. We saw each other through our shared secret ordeal, the thing that almost nobody else knew about us or would understand. But it was more than that—in so many ways we were kindred spirits, brought together by some bizarre stroke of digital destiny.

We talk every day.