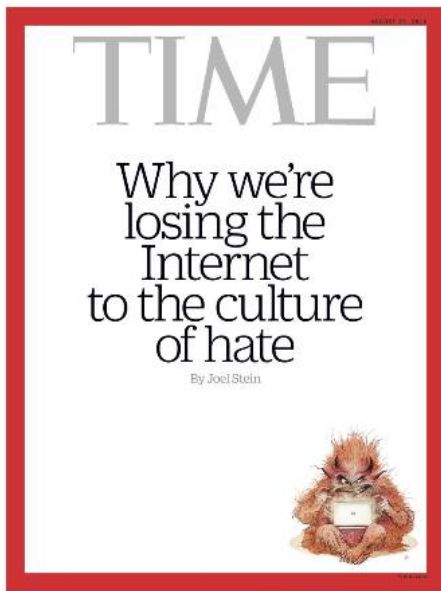


TYRANNY OF THE MOB:

Why we're losing the Internet to the culture of hate



“Trolls are turning the web into a cesspool of aggression and violence. What watching them is doing to the rest of us may be even worse.”

By Joel Stein

Updated, August 18

This story is not a good idea. Not for society and certainly not for me. Because what trolls feed on is attention. And this little bit—these several thousand words—is like leaving bears a pan of baklava.

It would be smarter to be cautious, because the Internet's personality has changed. Once it was a geek with lofty ideals about the free flow of information. Now, if you need help improving your upload speeds the web is eager to help with technical details, but if you tell it you're struggling with depression it will try to goad you into killing yourself. Psychologists call this the online disinhibition effect, in which factors like anonymity, invisibility, a lack of authority and not communicating in real time strip away the mores society spent millennia building. And it's seeping from our smartphones into every aspect of our lives.

The people who relish this online freedom are called trolls, a term that originally came from a fishing method online thieves use to find victims. It quickly morphed to refer to the monsters who hide in darkness and threaten people. Internet trolls have a manifesto of sorts, which states they are doing it for the “lulz,” or laughs. What trolls do for the lulz ranges from clever pranks to harassment to violent threats. There's also doxxing—publishing personal data, such as Social Security numbers and bank accounts—and swatting, calling in an emergency to a victim's house so the SWAT team busts in. When victims do not experience lulz, trolls tell them they have no sense of humor. Trolls are turning social media and comment boards into a giant locker room in a teen movie, with towel-snapping racial epithets and misogyny.

They've been steadily upping their game. In 2011, trolls descended on [Facebook](#) memorial pages of recently deceased users to mock their deaths. In 2012, after feminist Anita Sarkeesian started a Kickstarter campaign to fund a series of YouTube videos chronicling misogyny in video games, she received bomb threats at speaking engagements, doxxing threats, rape threats and an unwanted starring role in a video game called Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian. In June of this year, Jonathan Weisman, the deputy Washington editor of the New York Times, quit Twitter, on which he had nearly 35,000 followers, after a barrage of anti-Semitic messages. At the end of July, feminist writer Jessica Valenti said she was leaving social media after receiving a rape threat against her daughter, who is 5 years old.

A Pew Research Center survey published two years ago found that 70% of 18-to-24-year-olds who use the Internet had experienced harassment, and 26% of women that age said they'd been stalked online. This is exactly what trolls want. A 2014 study published in the psychology journal *Personality and Individual*

Differences found that the approximately 5% of Internet users who self-identified as trolls scored extremely high in the dark tetrad of personality traits: narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism and, especially, sadism.

But maybe that's just people who call themselves trolls. And maybe they do only a small percentage of the actual trolling. "Trolls are portrayed as aberrational and antithetical to how normal people converse with each other. And that could not be further from the truth," says Whitney Phillips, a literature professor at Mercer University and the author of *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. "These are mostly normal people who do things that seem fun at the time that have huge implications. You want to say this is the bad guys, but it's a problem of us."

A lot of people enjoy the kind of trolling that illuminates the gullibility of the powerful and their willingness to respond. One of the best is Congressman Steve Smith, a Tea Party Republican representing Georgia's 15th District, which doesn't exist. For nearly three years Smith has spewed over-the-top conservative blather on Twitter, luring Senator Claire McCaskill, Christiane Amanpour and Rosie O'Donnell into arguments. Surprisingly, the guy behind the GOP-mocking prank, Jeffrey Marty, isn't a liberal but a Donald Trump supporter angry at the Republican elite, furious at Hillary Clinton and unhappy with Black Lives Matter. A 40-year-old dad and lawyer who lives outside Tampa, he says he has become addicted to the attention. "I was totally ruined when I started this. My ex-wife and I had just separated. She decided to start a new, more exciting life without me," he says. Then his best friend, who he used to do pranks with as a kid, killed himself. Now he's got an illness that's keeping him home.

Marty says his trolling has been empowering. "Let's say I wrote a letter to the New York Times saying I didn't like your article about Trump. They throw it in the shredder. On Twitter I communicate directly with the writers. It's a breakdown of all the institutions," he says. "I really do think this stuff matters in the election. I have 1.5 million views of my tweets every 28 days. It's a much bigger audience than I would have gotten if I called people up and said, 'Did you ever consider Trump for President?'"

Trolling is, overtly, a political fight. Liberals do indeed troll—sex-advice columnist Dan Savage used his followers to make Googling former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum's last name a blunt lesson in the hygienic challenges of anal sex; the hunter who killed Cecil the lion got it really bad.

But trolling has become the main tool of the alt-right, an Internet-grown reactionary movement that works for men's rights and against immigration and may have used the computer from *Weird Science* to fabricate Donald Trump. Not only does Trump share their attitudes, but he's got mad trolling skills: he doxxed Republican primary opponent Senator Lindsey Graham by giving out his cell-phone number on TV and indirectly got his Twitter followers to attack GOP political strategist Cheri Jacobus so severely that her lawyers sent him a cease-and-desist order.

The alt-right's favorite insult is to call men who don't hate feminism "cucks," as in "cuckold." Republicans who don't like Trump are "cuckservatives." Men who don't see how feminists are secretly controlling them haven't "taken the red pill," a reference to the truth-revealing drug in *The Matrix*. They derisively call their adversaries "social-justice warriors" and believe that liberal interest groups purposely exploit their weakness to gain pity, which allows them to control the levers of power. Trolling is the alt-right's version of political activism, and its ranks view any attempt to take it away as a denial of democracy.

In this new culture war, the battle isn't just over homosexuality, abortion, rap lyrics, drugs or how to greet people at Christmastime. It's expanded to anything and everything: video games, clothing ads, even remaking a mediocre comedy from the 1980s. In July, trolls who had long been furious that the 2016 reboot of *Ghostbusters* starred four women instead of men harassed the film's black co-star Leslie Jones so badly on

Twitter with racist and sexist threats—including a widely copied photo of her at the film’s premiere that someone splattered semen on—that she considered quitting the service. “I was in my apartment by myself, and I felt trapped,” Jones says. “When you’re reading all these gay and racial slurs, it was like, I can’t fight y’all. I didn’t know what to do. Do you call the police? Then they got my email, and they started sending me threats that they were going to cut off my head and stuff they do to ‘N words.’ It’s not done to express an opinion, it’s done to scare you.”

“They started sending me threats that they were going to cut off my head and stuff they do to ‘N words.’ It’s not done to express an opinion, it’s done to scare you.”
—Leslie Jones, Ghostbusters co-star



Because of Jones’ harassment, alt-right leader **Milo Yiannopoulos** was permanently banned from Twitter. (He is also an editor at Breitbart News, the conservative website whose executive chairman, Stephen Bannon, was hired Aug. 17 to run the Trump campaign.) The service said Yiannopoulos, a critic of the new Ghostbusters who called Jones a “black dude” in a tweet, marshaled many of his more than 300,000 followers to harass her. He not only denies this but says being responsible for your fans is a ridiculous standard. He also thinks Jones is faking hurt for political purposes. “She is one of the stars of a Hollywood blockbuster,” he says. “It takes a certain personality to get there. It’s a politically aware, highly intelligent star using this to get ahead. I think it’s very sad that feminism has turned very successful women into professional victims.”

“The space we’re making for others to be bolder in their speech is some of the most important work being done today. The trolls are the only people telling the truth.”
—Milo Yiannopoulos.

A gay, 31-year-old Brit with frosted hair, Yiannopoulos has been speaking at college campuses on his Dangerous Faggot tour. He says trolling is a direct response to being told by the left what not to say and what kinds of video games not to play. “Human nature has a need for mischief. We want to thumb our nose at authority and be individuals,” he says. “Trump might not win this election. I might not turn into the media figure I want to. But the space we’re making for others to be bolder in their speech is some of the most important work being done today. The trolls are the only people telling the truth.”



The alt-right was galvanized by Gamergate, a 2014 controversy in which trolls tried to drive critics of misogyny in video games away from their virtual man cave. “In the mid-2000s, Internet culture felt very separate from pop culture,” says Katie Notopoulos, who reports on the web as an editor at BuzzFeed and co-host of the Internet Explorer podcast. “This small group of people are trying to stand their ground that the Internet is dark and scary, and they’re trying to scare people off. There’s such a culture of viciously making fun of each other on their message boards that they have this very thick skin. They’re all trained up.”

Andrew Auernheimer, who calls himself Weev online, is probably the biggest troll in history. He served just over a year in prison for identity fraud and conspiracy. When he was released in 2014, he left the U.S., mostly bouncing around Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Since then he has worked to post anti-Planned Parenthood videos and flooded thousands of university printers in America with instructions to print swastikas—a symbol tattooed on his chest. When I asked if I could fly out and interview him, he agreed, though he warned that he “might not be coming ashore for a while, but we can probably pass close enough to land to have you meet us somewhere in the Adriatic or Ionian.” His email signature: “Eternally your servant in the escalation of entropy and eschaton.”

While we planned my trip to “a pretty remote location,” he told me that he no longer does interviews for free and that his rate was two bitcoins (about \$1,100) per hour. That’s when one of us started trolling the other, though I’m not sure which:

From: Joel Stein

To: Andrew Auernheimer

I totally understand your position. But TIME, and all the major media outlets, won’t pay people who we interview. There’s a bunch of reasons for that, but I’m sure you know them.

Thanks anyway,

Joel



From: Andrew Auernheimer

To: Joel Stein

I find it hilarious that after your people have stolen years of my life at gunpoint and bulldozed my home, you still expect me to work for free in your interests.

You people belong in a f-cking oven.

From: Joel Stein

To: Andrew Auernheimer

For a guy who doesn’t want to be interviewed for free, you’re giving me a lot of good quotes!

In a later blog post about our emails, Weev clarified that TIME is “trying to destroy white civilization” and that we should “open up your Jew wallets and dump out some of the f-cking geld you’ve stolen from us goys, because what other incentive could I possibly have to work with your poisonous publication?” I found it comforting that the rate for a neo-Nazi to compromise his ideology is just two bitcoins.

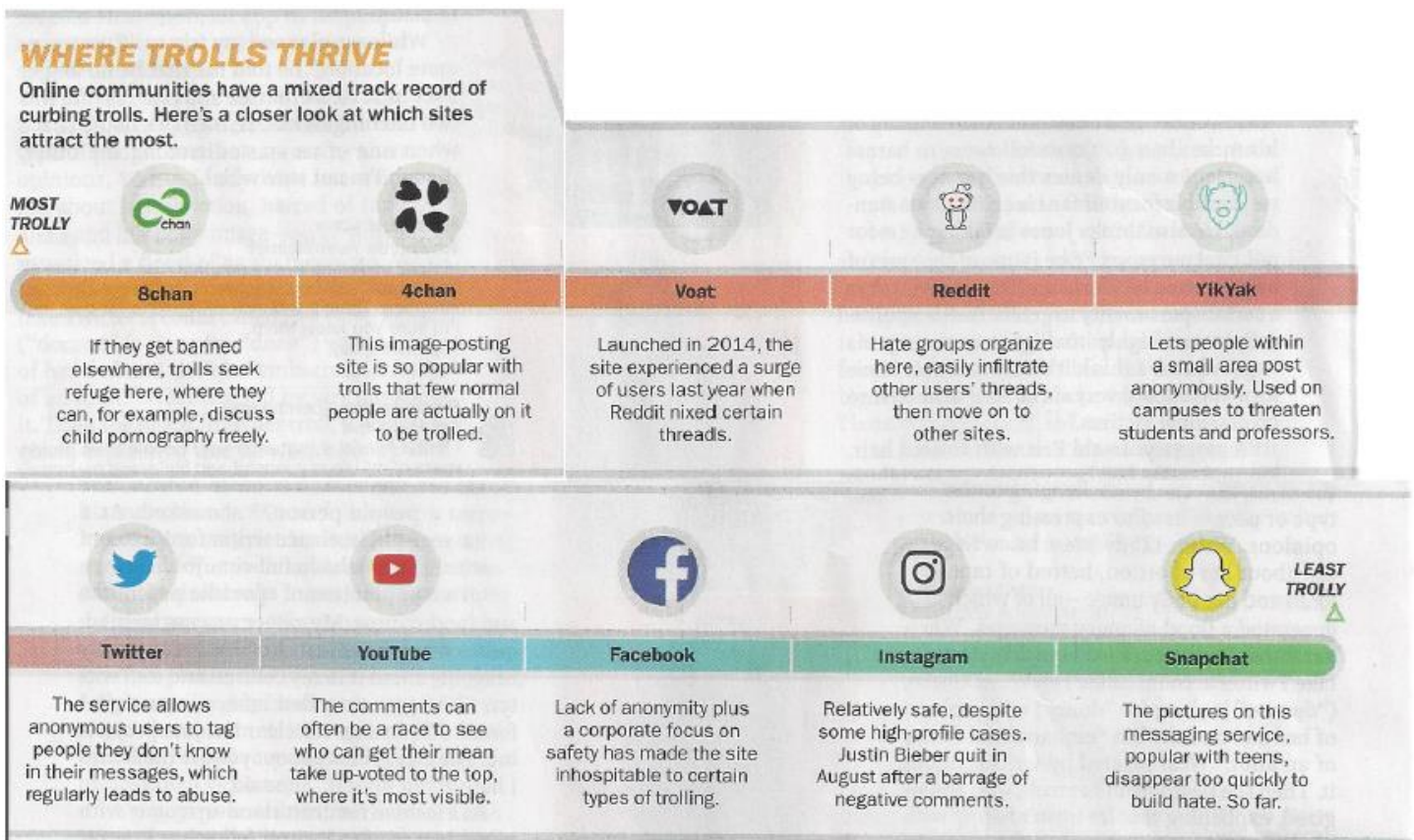
Expressing socially unacceptable views like Weev’s is becoming more socially acceptable. Sure, just like there are tiny, weird bookstores where you can buy neo-Nazi pamphlets, there are also tiny, weird white-supremacist sites on the web. But some of the contributors on those sites now go to places like 8chan or 4chan, which have a more diverse crowd of meme creators, gamers, anime lovers and porn enthusiasts. Once accepted there, they move on to Reddit, the ninth most visited site in the U.S., on which users can post links to online articles and comment on them anonymously. Reddit believes in unalloyed free speech; the site only eliminated the comment boards “jailbait,” “creepshots” and “beatingwomen” for legal reasons.

But last summer, Reddit banned five more discussion groups for being distasteful. The one with the largest user base, more than 150,000 subscribers, was “fatpeoplehate.” It was a particularly active community that reveled in finding photos of overweight people looking happy, almost all women, and adding mean captions. Reddit users would then post these images all over the targets’ Facebook pages along with anywhere else on the Internet they could. “What you see on Reddit that is visible is at least 10 times worse behind the scenes,” says Dan McComas, a former Reddit employee. “Imagine two users posting about incest and taking that conversation to their private messages, and that’s where the really terrible things happen. That’s where we saw child porn and abuse and had to do all of our work with law enforcement.”

Jessica Moreno, McComas' wife, pushed for getting rid of "fatpeoplehate" when she was the company's head of community. This was not a popular decision with users who really dislike people with a high body mass index. She and her husband had their home address posted online along with suggestions on how to attack them. Eventually they had a police watch on their house. They've since moved. Moreno has blurred their house on [Google](#) maps and expunged nearly all photos of herself online.

During her time at Reddit, some users who were part of a group that mails secret Santa gifts to one another complained to Moreno that they didn't want to participate because the person assigned to them made racist or sexist comments on the site. Since these people posted their real names, addresses, ages, jobs and other details for the gifting program, Moreno learned a good deal about them. "The idea of the basement dweller drinking Mountain Dew and eating Doritos isn't accurate," she says. "They would be a doctor, a lawyer, an inspirational speaker, a kindergarten teacher. They'd send lovely gifts and be a normal person." These are real people you might know, Moreno says. There's no real-life indicator. "It's more complex than just being good or bad. It's not all men either; women do take part in it." The couple quit their jobs and started Imzy, a cruelty-free Reddit. They believe that saving a community is nearly impossible once mores have been established, and that sites like Reddit are permanently lost to the trolls.

When sites are overrun by trolls, they drown out the voices of women, ethnic and religious minorities, gays—anyone who might feel vulnerable. Young people in these groups assume trolling is a normal part of life online and therefore self-censor. An anonymous poll of the writers at TIME found that 80% had avoided discussing a particular topic because they feared the online response. The same percentage consider online harassment a regular part of their jobs. Nearly half the women on staff have considered quitting journalism because of hatred they've faced online, although none of the men had. Their comments included "I've been raged at with religious slurs, had people track down my parents and call them at home, had my body parts inquired about." Another wrote, "I've had the usual online trolls call me horrible names and say I am biased and stupid and deserve to be raped. I don't think men realize how normal that is for women on the Internet."



The alt-right argues that if you can't handle opprobrium, you should just turn off your computer. But that's arguing against self-expression, something antithetical to the original values of the Internet. "The question is: How do you stop people from being a--holes not to their face?" says Sam Altman, a venture capitalist who invested early in Reddit and ran the company for eight days in 2014 after one of its many PR crises. "This is exactly what happened when people talked badly about public figures. Now everyone on the Internet is a public figure. The problem is that not everyone can deal with that." Altman declared on June 15 that he would quit Twitter and his 171,000 followers, saying, "I feel worse after using Twitter ... my brain gets polluted here."

Twitter's head of trust and safety, Del Harvey, struggles with how to allow criticism but curb abuse. "Categorically to say that all content you don't like receiving is harassment would be such a broad brush it wouldn't leave us much content," she says. Harvey is not her real name, which she gave up long ago when she became a professional troll, posing as underage girls (and occasionally boys) to entrap pedophiles as an administrator for the website Perverted-Justice and later for NBC's To Catch a Predator. Citing the role of Twitter during the Arab Spring, she says that anonymity has given voice to the oppressed, but that women and minorities are more vulnerable to attacks by the anonymous.

But even those in the alt-right who claim they are "unf-ckwithable" aren't really. At some point, everyone, no matter how desensitized by their online experience, is liable to get freaked out by a big enough or cruel enough threat. Still, people have vastly different levels of sensitivity. A white male journalist who covers the Middle East might blow off death threats, but a teenage blogger might not be prepared to be told to kill herself because of her "disgusting acne."

Which are exactly the kinds of messages Em Ford, 27, was receiving en masse last year on her YouTube tutorials on how to cover pimples with makeup. Men claimed to be furious about her physical "trickery," forcing her to block hundreds of users each week. This year, Ford made a documentary for the BBC called Troll Hunters in which she interviewed online abusers and victims, including a soccer referee who had rape threats posted next to photos of his young daughter on her way home from school. What Ford learned was that the trolls didn't really hate their victims. "It's not about the target. If they get blocked, they say, 'That's cool,' and move on to the next person," she says. Trolls don't hate people as much as they love the game of hating people.

Troll culture might be affecting the way nontrolls treat one another. A yet-to-be-published study by University of California, Irvine, professor Zeev Kain showed that when people were exposed to reports of good deeds on Facebook, they were 10% more likely to report doing good deeds that day. But the opposite is likely occurring as well. "One can see discourse norms shifting online, and they're probably linked to behavior norms," says Susan Benesch, founder of the Dangerous Speech Project and faculty associate at Harvard's Internet and Society center. "When people think it's increasingly O.K. to describe a group of people as subhuman or vermin, those same people are likely to think that it's O.K. to hurt those people."

As more trolling occurs, many victims are finding laws insufficient and local police untrained. "Where we run into the problem is the social-media platforms are very hesitant to step on someone's First Amendment rights," says Mike Bires, a senior police officer in Southern California who co-founded LawEnforcement.social, a tool for cops to fight on-line crime and use social media to work with their communities. "If they feel like someone's life is in danger, Twitter and Snapchat are very receptive. But when it comes to someone harassing you online, getting the social-media companies to act can be very frustrating." Until police are fully caught up, he recommends that victims go to the officer who runs the force's social-media department.

One counter-trolling strategy now being employed on social media is to flood the victims of abuse with kindness. That's how many Twitter users have tried to blunt racist and body-shaming attacks on U.S. women's

gymnastics star Gabby Douglas and Mexican gymnast Alexa Moreno during the Summer Olympics in Rio. In 2005, after Emily May co-founded Hollaback!, which posts photos of men who harass women on the street in order to shame them (some might call this trolling), she got a torrent of misogynistic messages. “At first, I thought it was funny. We were making enough impact that these losers were spending their time calling us ‘cunts’ and ‘whores’ and ‘carpet munchers,’” she says. “Long-term exposure to it, though, I found myself not being so active on Twitter and being cautious about what I was saying online. It’s still harassment in public space. It’s just the Internet instead of the street.” This summer May created Heartmob, an app to let people report trolling and receive messages of support from others.

Though everyone knows not to feed the trolls, that can be challenging to the type of people used to expressing their opinions. Writer Lindy West has written about her abortion, hatred of rape jokes and her body image—all of which generated a flood of angry messages. When her father Paul died, a troll quickly started a fake Twitter account called PawWestDonezo, (“donezo” is slang for “done”) with a photo of her dad and the bio “embarrassed father of an idiot.” West reacted by writing about it. Then she heard from her troll, who apologized, explaining that he wasn’t happy with his life and was angry at her for being so pleased with hers.

West says that even though she’s been toughened by all the abuse, she is thinking of writing for TV, where she’s more insulated from online feedback. “I feel genuine fear a lot. Someone threw a rock through my car window the other day, and my immediate thought was it’s someone from the Internet,” she says. “Finally we have a platform that’s democratizing and we can make ourselves heard, and then you’re harassed for advocating for yourself, and that shuts you down again.”

I’ve been a columnist long enough that I got calloused to abuse via threats sent over the U.S. mail. I’m a straight white male, so the trolling is pretty tame, my vulnerabilities less obvious. My only repeat troll is Megan Koester, who has been attacking me on Twitter for a little over two years. Mostly, she just tells me how bad my writing is, always calling me “disgraced former journalist Joel Stein.” Last year, while I was at a restaurant opening, she tweeted that she was there too and that she wanted to take “my one-sided feud with him to the next level.” She followed this immediately with a tweet that said, “Meet me outside Clifton’s in 15 minutes. I wanna kick your ass.” Which shook me a tiny bit. A month later, she tweeted that I should meet her outside a supermarket I often go to: “I’m gonna buy some Ahi poke with EBT and then kick your ass.”

I sent a tweet to Koester asking if I could buy her lunch, figuring she’d say no or, far worse, say yes and bring a switchblade or brass knuckles, since I have no knowledge of feuding outside of West Side Story. Her email back agreeing to meet me was warm and funny. Though she also sent me the script of a short movie she had written (see excerpt, left).

I saw Koester standing outside the restaurant. She was tiny—5 ft. 2 in., with dark hair, wearing black jeans and a Spy magazine T-shirt. She ordered a seitan sandwich, and after I asked the waiter about his life, she looked at me in horror. “Are you a people person?” she asked. As a 32-year-old freelance writer for Vice.com who has never had a full-time job, she lives on a combination of sporadic paychecks and food stamps. My career success seemed, quite correctly, unjust. And I was constantly bragging about it in my column and on Twitter. “You just extruded smarminess that I found off-putting. It’s clear I’m just projecting. The things I hate about you are the things I hate about myself,” she said.

As a feminist stand-up comic with more than 26,000 Twitter followers, Koester has been trolled more than I have. One guy was so furious that she made fun of a 1970s celebrity at an autograph session that he tweeted he was going to rape her and wanted her to die afterward. “So you’d think I’d have some sympathy,” she said

about trolling me. “But I never felt bad. I found that column so vile that I thought you didn’t deserve sympathy.”

When I suggested we order wine, she told me she’s a recently recovered alcoholic who was drunk at the restaurant opening when she threatened to beat me up. I asked why she didn’t actually walk up to me that afternoon and, even if she didn’t punch me, at least tell me off. She looked at me like I was an idiot. “Why would I do that?” she said. “The Internet is the realm of the coward. These are people who are all sound and no fury.”

Maybe. But maybe, in the information age, sound is as destructive as fury. □

Editor’s Note: An earlier version [published in the magazine] of this story included a reference to Asperger’s Syndrome in an inappropriate context. It has been removed. Additionally, an incorrect description of Megan Koester has been removed.

This appears in the August 29, 2016 issue of TIME.