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Comment Culture Must Be Stopped

Comment sections do nothing but derail meaningful conversations.



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A child yelling into a microphone. Photo by Jason Rosewell on Unsplash

The internet was not always a minefield of comment sections, pointless fights, and hate speech. It used to be a quieter, more contemplative place.

When I was a kid using AOL for the first time, I had to do a lot of serious digging in order to find anywhere remotely social. Most sites were made to be passively consumed, or engaged with in a slow, plodding kind of way: articles about current events, articles about sports statistics, a few glitchy,

simplistic games that had no social aspect, and thus no players calling other players slurs.

Eventually I found a social hub, a place called ANT Games, which had several chat rooms and weekly caption contests. The hub was devoted to video game news and gossip, but it was slow moving and calm, like so much of the internet was in those days. Each week I submitted an entry to the caption contest via a form, waited seven days, and then checked back to see how I'd done. I made friends in those places, after weeks and weeks of caption submissions. Even the chat rooms were glacial and peaceful.

In the early years of the web, you had to really put effort into finding a platform for your ideas. Most sites were made to be read or browsed through. The reader was not constantly being asked to chime in with an emoji reaction or a comment. If you wanted to put your thoughts out into the world, you had to craft a blog, or sign up for a Geocities site or a Livejournal, set it up with HTML so that it looked presentable, and then email it to all your friends. And all your work might be for nothing — you might never receive a single reader. No one was guaranteed an audience.

The internet stopped being that way a long, long time ago, though. With each passing year it has become a louder, more reactive, more comment-filled place. For over a decade, the internet has been replete with comment fields, emoji reaction options, and social media integration that encourages consumers to engage with information in an active, vocal, personal way. No topic — from celebrity gossip to climate change — is immune from public comment. No activity — from sharing photos of vacation trips, to buying makeup, to reading scientific journals — is exempt from the loud din of comment sections. Social media sites are virtually nothing *but* big, unending comment sections.

I wish I could say that the proliferation of comment sections had made the internet a more democratic, fair-minded place. But the opposite has sadly been the case. The modern internet has created a massive social problem that I'm calling "Comment Culture", where all people are invited to weigh in on all issues at all times, where expertise is devalued, and where people are moved to speak before they think. Comment Culture has infected our public discourse, and troubled our hearts, and impaired our minds. Here are just a

Top highlight

few of the many negative consequences of Comment Culture:

It Makes Us Think Reactively

We've all been there. A friend posts an article with a headline that gets your blood boiling, so you hastily fire off an incensed comment without reading the piece itself. Someone else reads your comment, interprets it in the least charitable way possible, and shoots back an angry response. An entire fight ensues, with each party refreshing their Facebook every two minutes… until some kind soul enters the conversation and tells everyone that actually, if we read the article we were fighting about, we'd see it says the exact opposite of what we assumed.

I've been guilty of this several times. The most recent instance was in April. When Chicago's new mayor Lori Lightfoot got elected, I tweeted angrily about the queer women's magazine Autostraddle because they seemed to have published an article celebrating Lightfoot as a progressive candidate. The headline of the article was very positive, despite the fact that Lightfoot has a complicated and troubling track record when it comes to police shootings. It pissed me off to see non-Chicagoans cheering about Lightfoot's election, not knowing a thing about her politics. So I reacted.

And then Autostaddle's Editor-in-Chief tweeted back asking me if I'd read the article.



In the full article, I did find critiques of Lightfoot's policies. They were brief, and most of the article was still pretty positive, and I do believe Autostraddle could have done a more thorough job exploring the candidate's complexity. I do think the headline of the article needed to be more clear that Lightfoot is not beloved in the city. But that doesn't change the fact that I reacted quickly and thoughtlessly to a headline, rather than engaging deeply with the full content of the piece.

I'm absolutely to blame for my own actions. But it's also true that this kind of thoughtless spouting-off is more common today than it was decades ago, thanks to Comment Culture. Comment sections and social media sites encourage us to issue a response to every passing incident, to every article and meme, all as quickly as possible. Conversations move rapidly, and many of us feel an implicit social pressure to "get in" on the dialogue before it has died out. A hot take has to be hot, after all — there is no time for cool, calm reflection.

Social media sites are engineered to create that illusion of urgency, that invitation to sound off. On Facebook or Twitter, the ability to reply is right below the headline and the link — so commenting on the headline rather

than clicking through to the article feels *natural*. Once an active, heated conversation gets flowing, it feels even more natural to just plunge in. We make big assumptions about the content of an article based on what everyone else is saying. We assume a headline (which is typically written by an editor rather than the author of the piece) reflects the position of the piece itself. And we fight, and fight and fight, instead of listening, learning, and reflecting. That is Comment Culture in a nutshell.

It Devalues Expertise



A lecture hall filled with people. Photo by Miguel Henriques on Unsplash

The internet has democratized communication and art in amazing ways. With the right app or online platform, anyone with drive and potential can become a filmmaker, book critic, or political commentator. Issues that mainstream news publications ignored or downplayed for decades, such as police shootings of Black people, are more easily amplified today. People who have been closed out of public conversations for centuries — such as nonverbal Autistic people — are able to share their experiences online and enlighten a willing and curious audience. All of this leads to better, fairer conversations and more diverse creative works.

But the internet also provides a platform and a means of amplification to voices that don't belong in certain conversations. Science, for example, is not

democratic. Talking about scientific research often requires having a lot of familiarity with the existing literature, and a degree of statistical and methodological expertise. Fully understanding a topic as complex as climate change, for example, requires that you deeply understand the fields of meteorology, geology, atmospheric physics, and even economics.

Search Write

The average person doesn't have a place in conversations about climate change. They can't understand everything that's being discussed. They don't have the relevant expertise. But within Comment Culture, the average, uninformed person is *given* a place in the conversation, and encouraged to use it.

When we place a comment section in the same place as a heavily-researched piece by an expert, we conflate the authority of experts with that of average people, and imply that all voices deserve a say in all matters. A person who has never read a single scientific study related to climate change can put his thoughts on the New York Times website, right below the words of a climatologist who has devoted his life to the subject. And the commenter can walk away feeling that he is informed, engaged, and authoritative for having done so. He's wrong, of course — but he doesn't know that, and neither do that hundreds of readers who upvote his comment and walk away believing that climate change is a matter of personal belief.

Comment Culture encourages us to see ourselves as the experts, and to act as jack-of-all-trade pundits who deserve a say on everything from the risks of vaccines to the odds of Elizabeth Warren winning the Democratic primary. By inviting readers to share their opinions on all matters, including ones they do not understand, social media sites discourage humility, and actively make it more difficult for people to distinguish a reliable source from an untrustworthy one.

While some conversations have been revolutionized by the internet, others have been destroyed by it. The truth is, not everyone is an expert on the legal definition of collusion. Or what sexual coercion and rape look and feel like. Or why abortions are necessary. Some people have high levels of expertise, and deserve to be listened to and treated as authorities. But Comment Culture keeps us from listening to anyone at all. Instead, it encourages us to talk, and talk, and talk, as much as possible.

It Distracts and Enrages Us



Two birds fighting. Photo by Jonatan Pie on Unsplash

I have a friend who speaks and writes with care and precision, but always ends up getting pulled into long online battles. I really admire this person, especially how deftly and gently they communicate. They have this knack for explaining why a claim is wrong, using reason, emotion, and historical context in perfect blend. Their talents and considerable patience often end up being pearls cast before swine, though, because my friend deploys them so often in comment threads.

Comment threads are not productive places for meaningful discourse. Nearly everyone approaches them poised to attack. Comment Culture has taught us that the point is to be heard, to nail a particularly vicious and quotable zinger, and then disappear, under a hail of applause and heart-reacts. You cannot reach a person whose ears and heart are closed off, and very few people come to comment sections ready to listen and learn.

My friend has fought a lot of noble battles in the comment sections of Facebook posts, advice columns, and feminist websites. I am certain that they have educated a few passive bystanders along the way. But in the process, my friend has also elevated their own blood pressure hundreds of times, and spent hours upon hours articulating points that are completely

ignored. They take pains to write in a neutral, calm tone, but still get branded as reactionary and "angry" by people who don't want to engage with their criticisms.

I've done the same thing countless times myself, and I've always walked away from the conversation feeling agitated and dismayed. Sometimes this even happens when I engage with commenters on my own essays, people who often seem genuinely curious or benignly confused. After one or two rounds of interaction, that facade often drops, and I find that in the place of the curious, harmless person who initially commented, there is someone argumentative and willfully missing the point. If you've followed me here on Medium for any amount of time, you've probably observed bad-faith comments on my posts. Especially the ones about transphobia and sexual assault.

Comment Culture makes it very difficult to have productive discussions. Disagreements and misunderstandings that could be slowly, carefully parsed in private become gladiatorial battles, with everyone's pride on the line. Sometimes I tailor my own responses to make them more witty, more deserving of claps and applause. But if I'm being honest with myself, doing that detracts from the quality of the conversation.

My essays have sometimes changed people's minds on a topic. Particularly this one about Trigger Warnings and this one about Laziness not being real. In the comments of these essays, dozens of people express genuine humility and gratitude; they say that my carefully outlined positions and my body of evidence have helped them open their minds to a new point of view. I am certain I couldn't have accomplished that in a Twitter thread or a Facebook comment section. It took a careful essay, and a *willing* reader, for a meaningful change to be made.

My friend often laments that they are wasting their time, fighting people in comment sections. They say that their time would be better spent penning essays on the topics instead. I completely agree. Yet I understand why they get caught in a loop, replying to hateful and ignorant comments over and over, trying desperately to be heard.

Comment Culture has left many of us overwhelmed by the din of other people's bad opinions. Ill-informed and outright bigoted people are

everywhere, roaring with racism, sexism, fatphobia, transphobia, ableism and so much more. It is genuinely painful to be surrounded by a chorus of ignorance and hate. How can we just sit and take it? We have to defend ourselves, the truth, and the people we love!

But it never goes anywhere. It's a fight you can only lose. It's much better to mute the cacophony altogether, to find a quiet place to write a thoughtful essay that can reach those who are ready for it.

It Exploits Emotion for Profit



Dozens of people in shadow, back lit in red. They appear to be holding swords. Photo by Hasan Almasi, courtesy of Unsplash.

Comment Culture exists because "engagement" is profitable. Let's first take the example of a reputable news site or online magazine. It is very difficult to make money publishing content online; nearly every site (except for Medium!) resorts to advertiser revenue as a way to stay afloat. And thus the reader becomes the product rather than the consumer, and their attention and eyeballs are sold to advertisers at a competitive price.

Generally speaking, the more readers visit a site, the more "eyeballs" there are for the advertisements, and the more the advertiser will pay. One way to get a ton of views on a piece is to write something with a confusing or

provocative title. This contributes to the problem of headlines not always being accurate. It's often better, in terms of views received, to have a headline that is bold and challenging than to have one that is nuanced and accurate. People read my essay on Laziness because its title was declarative and bold. But some bold, declarative titles are inaccurate on *purpose*.

Another way to generate more page views (and more ad revenue) is to have an active, contentious comment section. Think of it this way. If I read a single Gawker article and then move on to something else entirely, I've only given Gawker one page view. But if I get into a war with some jackass in the Gawker comments, and keep returning to the site several times an hour all day long, and other people keep refreshing the comments to *watch* the fight I'm involved in, well, suddenly Gawker has a lot more ad revenue in their pocket.

Comments also increase the odds that a post will appear in people's social media feeds. I follow a lot of ASMR Instagram accounts, and nearly every big account puts a "question of the day" into their posts. These questions range from the political to the completely mundane. The substance of the comments is irrelevant. It doesn't matter whether people are talking about homophobia or about their favorite drink at Sonic; what matters is that they *are* talking.

Posts with high "engagement" are put at the top of people's social media feeds. When sponsors offer deals to popular Instagram and Youtube channels, they often take into account how engaged that channel's base is. The assumption is that vocal followers who comment a lot are more likely to take the advice of their favorite channels — they might actually go ahead and buy that detox tea or those hair vitamins that their idol has recommended. Passive observers seem more suspect. They might not care at all about what they are viewing, they might show no commitment, and cough up no money.

This financial incentive created Comment Culture, and all its negative effects. Today, advertisers and sponsors don't just want to reach a ton of silent viewers, they want to start a *conversation*. When Gillette released a feminist short film a few months ago, they did so knowing that it would inspire fights as well as praise. They wanted both those things. The more people were talking about their ad, the more their brand was being shared

with the world.

Within Comment Culture, ideas need not have any substance. Facts are irrelevant, persuasive techniques accomplish nothing, and hate is granted as much right to exist as gentle critique. The point of comments is to raise the volume. A brand or personality is *winning*, under Comment Culture, when they are surrounded by a chorus of voices, all shouting and disorganized and active, never listening.

This is true whether you're looking at a fashion-centric Youtube channel, or reading an essay on Jezebel. Platforms run on money. That money comes almost always from advertisers. The only way to stay alive is to start a fire.

How to Resist Comment Culture

Comment Culture was built gradually over the course of many years. Social media sites helped it proliferate. Smartphones made engaging in that culture more and more of a norm. Almost all of us have unhealthy media habits that feed into Comment Culture. But there are steps we can take, right now, to resist its influence on our lives.



Calm, still water. Photo by manu schwendener on Unsplash

Stop Reading Comment Sections

I'm serious. We all talk about wanting to avoid comment sections, but we often find ourselves pulled in, whether out of outrage or the fear of missing out. The time for that has got to stop. When we visit comments sections, we guarantee that we will find something that enrages or distracts us. And then we jump into the fray, hoping to score points in an argument that will actually never end. We have to stop feeding this beast.

If you can't resist the allure of comment sections, find a way to outsource your willpower. Comment blocking apps exist for this very purpose.

Support Sites That Don't Rely on Ad Revenue

When sites and content creators are funded by their fans, they have less of an incentive to encourage Comment Culture. Medium is a wonderful example of this, I think: users pay to have access to the site's wide array of essays and articles, writers get paid based on how many people read and enjoy their work, and comments are optional.

Another great example is Youtubers who rely on Patreon to fund their creative work. If you have monthly donations from a small but mighty group of devoted fans, you don't have to sell your integrity hocking detox tea. But the only way for that model to remain viable is if fans buy into it. Whenever you support a writer or creative type with your hard-earned money, you are fighting Comment Culture and helping keep things ad-free.

Write an Essay, Not a Comment

A lot of people waste some of their best writing on comment sections, which are barely read or taken seriously by anyone. Don't devalue your time and energy like that! If something makes you angry, write an essay about it! If you have a point to make, it deserves to be made carefully, and given its own platform. If a writer incenses you with their bad take, write your own essay explaining why it is bad. Don't line the pockets of that writer by wasting your time in the comment section.

Avoid Social Media Sites That Make You Angry

I really enjoy Medium because it's helped me reach a ton of interested readers, and it's introduced me to some great writers as well. I also love spending time on Tumblr, where ridiculous absurdist posts rub elbows with long, multilayered dialogues about gender studies and analyses of which characters in Metal Gear Solid are gay.

Conversely, I don't really like Twitter that much. It seems to be a place where people go to be angry and self-promote. I have a Twitter, but I use it sparingly. I know myself and my limits — Twitter fights have never made my life any better. They bring me nothing but grief.

Carefully study your own social media habits, and figure out which ones are compulsive and unhealthy. Do you always fight with your aunt on Facebook? Block her. Do the commenters on Slate make your head explode? Don't read Slate's comments ever again. Do anti-feminist Youtube videos take advantage of your attention and outrage, and provoke comments from you? Unfollow, block, unsubscribe, stop using Youtube, whatever it takes.

Your time is worth so much more than all that. You can feel so much more at peace than you currently do. All you have to do is stop taking the bait. Together, we can work to fight Comment Culture, unlearn our bad habits, and stop incentivizing fights. We can put our energy into deep, intentional conversations. We can make the internet a peaceful place once more.

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