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Conclusion: “Commenterrible”?

The Internet took commentary and made it commenterrible.

—@AvoidComments (Shane Liesegang), Twitter

Amanda Brennan describes herself as “a complete nerd” who is passionate about absorbing information and sharing it with others. She even has managed to make a career of it and served as a “meme librarian” at the Website Know Your Meme and, more recently, a “Tumblarian” at the popular microblogging site. She also has an interesting piece of jewelry: a “never read the comments” necklace. However, is comment really so “commenterrible” (as Shane Liesegang jests in the epigraph above) that we should never read it? For those with maxificer tendencies or anyone else who reads an online review, comments that inform have obvious utility; it can be thrilling to have so much information available. Yet the bonanza of information and choice can also become a glut that paralyzes people who worry about purchasing a \$5 item without first checking its online reviews. Online shoppers call the moment that their anxious ruminations finally break as “pulling the trigger” for good reason: whatever the hesitations or consequences, the deal is done. Even putting aside the utility of reviews, those who stylishly repudiate comments are still likely to read them. After all, Brennan’s job is to read the comments. So the maxim is not really a prohibition but a comment on the sometimes sorry state of comment in an otherwise compelling medium. The usefulness of the Web is demonstrated by where Brennan first saw the “never read the comments” necklace (on Instagram) and where she bought it (on Etsy). She says that for her, the necklace means that the Web can still be a place of thoughtfulness and creativity: “Knowing that other people out there get that is a reminder that not everyone wants to use the internet in its darkest ways.”¹

One way of thinking about reading online comment is that it is like watching the television game show *Family Feud*, where two families compete to

answer questions quickly. The goal of the game is not to give a correct answer but to provide an answer that corresponds with what others have said, what the “survey says.” A contestant who is asked to “name a U.S. president whose face appears on money” might answer “Benjamin Franklin,” and although Franklin never was president, enough people think so as to make it a winning response. Similarly, insight and wisdom might not always be found at the bottom half of the Web, but it does have a sample of what some people are thinking, right or wrong, offensive or trite. As much as we may dislike or wish to distance ourselves from comment, I often think of Walt Kelly’s decades old *Pogo* comic strip: we have met the commenter, and he is us.

Just as in the experiments in which participants who are exposed to a mirror feel a little worse about themselves, we sometimes prefer not to look into the online reflecting glass of humanity. Some people disable or restrict comment on their sites. The popular blog *Boing Boing* has long wrestled with comments. It disabled discussion altogether in 2003 and reintroduced it in 2007 with the hiring of a community manager. Its new philosophy was captured in a 2008 essay by *Boing Boing* contributor Xeni Jardin, who wrote that “Online Communities Rot without Daily Tending by Human Hands.” And those human hands had a new tool: the “disemvoweller” removed all the vowels from the screeds of those misbehaving. Jardin wrote that “The dialogue stays, but the misanthrope looks ridiculous, and the emotional sting is neutralized.”² Yet this technique was a passing fad: it did not last, and unruly comment did. Although such pillory can be appealing, it can backfire. In a study of millions of comments across four sites, including CNN, researchers found that commenters who were down-voted subsequently posted more and lower-quality comments. Those who were down-voted also were more likely to reciprocate in kind, “percolating these undesired effects through the community.”³

Boing Boing’s comments continued to be problematic, and in early 2013, Rob Beschizza, the blog’s managing editor, tweeted that he might disable comments permanently. Instead, later in the summer they tried again and adopted a platform that “acts as a neat hybrid of forums and comments. It’s designed to offer the most useful features of a modern discussion platform, yet remain simple to read and easy to use for everyday readers.”⁴ With the new Discourse system, comments can be made off the main page, and a moderator can promote select comments to the story’s page. Many other sites are adopting this model by featuring curated comments below a story. At sites like the *New York Times*,

comments are accepted on select articles for a limited duration. Since the switch to the new comment policy at *Boing Boing*, each post only provokes a few comments and a larger discussion rarely has more than a dozen. Moderators rarely, if ever, feature any “promoted” comments below a story. As one *Boing Boing* commenter noted: “Rob’s been quite open in the past about not liking the commenters. I think this is just a bridge-step to remove them from the site, disassociate if you will. Having used Discourse for a little while now it should be incredibly effective at silencing conversation.”⁵

As hard a nut as it is to crack, people are still trying to solve the comment problem. Lawrence Lessig, who in 2009 temporarily abandoned his blog because of link spammers, recently enthused about the Website Medium.com, where comments are like annotations, short and specific to a paragraph. He hoped that this would support the “beginning of a conversation with readers, much more seamlessly and effectively than the standard post+with+flamewar+in+comment+section pattern of blogs.” This was “in theory, at least” because “some bug is blocking my ability to comment back.” As evidence of his dedication, he wrote about his experience with Medium.com (perhaps blog #3?) on Lessig.org (blog #1) via a reblog from his Tumblr (blog #2) and a parallel tweet.

More generally (and like Discourse), Gawker Media (including blogs such as *Gizmodo*, *Lifehacker*, and *Jezebel*) is experimenting with a hybrid system. With Kinja, users are given their own Tumblr-like blog that collects all of their comments, responses, and posts on Gawker-affiliated sites: “readers will then be able to use Kinja as a central hub for discussion on these stories, almost like their own chat room protected from the commenting maelstrom.”⁶ Similarly, those behind Discourse, which silenced much of the raucous conversation that once existed at *Boing Boing*, seek to quiet the maelstrom. Jeff Atwood, the cofounder of Discourse, has a surprising take on online discussion based on his earlier successes at Stack Exchange, a popular informational Q&A site:

At Stack Exchange, one of the tricky things we learned about Q&A is that if your goal is to have an excellent signal to noise ratio, you must suppress discussion. Stack Exchange only supports the absolute minimum amount of discussion necessary to produce great questions and great answers. That’s why answers get

constantly re-ordered by votes, that's why comments have limited formatting and length and only a few display, and so forth. Almost every design decision we made was informed by our desire to push discussion down, to inhibit it in every way we could. Spare us the long-winded diatribe, just answer the damn question already.⁷

While Atwood does not need to be quite so severe at Discourse, the notion that less is more persists. In a separate post entitled "Please Read the Comments," Atwood wrote that "if you are unwilling to moderate your online community, you don't deserve to have an online community. There's no end of websites recreating the glorious 'no stupid rules' libertarian paradise documented in the *Lord of the Flies* in their comment sections." He concluded that such a site ends up "exactly as you would expect it to."⁸ Although Kathy Sierra was harassed in 2007 for recommending that bloggers should moderate their comments (harassment that began at the *Mean Kids* blog, an example of a "no stupid rules" blog), moderation is now a central tenant of successful blogs. In a talk at MIT's Center for Civic Media, Ta-Nehisi Coates (a senior editor of and blogger at *The Atlantic*) said that seeing the following below a story was inimical to creating a community: "5,000 comments. Join the conversation." Instead, limiting comment should be thought of as cultivating a garden: "Once you take out the rubbish and clear away the weeds, flowers begin to grow."⁹

Beyond the new hybrid systems and a philosophy of pruning the weeds, We could be even more imaginative. Judith Donath's recent book, *The Social Machine: Designs for Living Online*, details a decade's worth of research aimed at understanding the workings of online interaction. It includes visualizations of online conversations that show the health of a community and who is playing what role (for example, leaders, contributors, and cranks). This approach could help us better understand online discussion as something organic rather than as an experimental "libertarian paradise." Or imagine that in the place of a profile picture, a comment section instead showed a "data portrait" that represented a commenter's most salient or frequently used words.¹⁰ (Such portraits or a display of the number and average rating of an Amazon reviewer would be useful.) Time will tell if such ideas could help, but many large sites are pursuing a different path.

Despite Clay Shirky's insight that "comment systems can good, big, cheap—pick two," the larger sites are still trying to have it all. They hope to achieve this via identifiable users, single sign-ons, and the social graph. Although such efforts *might* improve online discussion, they certainly benefit their proprietors (and advertisers) with much richer information about users. And it is by no means certain that such efforts will yield Shirky's triple crown. In late 2013, YouTube launched a new initiative at "turning comments into conversations that matter to you." How would they accomplish this? They would integrate Google+ into YouTube. (I imagine they also hoped that this would make Google+ more competitive with Facebook.) On the commenters' side, Google linked YouTube comments to an identifiable Google+ profile. Also, because YouTube comments were now Google+ comments, they lacked some of the restrictions that YouTube had previously used to limit abuse: comments now could contain links and were no longer limited in size. On the reader's side, they would be more likely to see comments from people who were in their Google+ circles, from known "YouTube personalities," and from those comments receiving the most engagement. Google was borrowing Facebook's approach wherein Facebook decides how many friends see a post. Google seemed confident that identifiable comments from those who were embedded within a social network would improve YouTube's notorious comment culture.

Under the new system, however, comments with high engagement tended to be the most inflammatory, making it a target for trolls. The ability to include links yielded an influx of spammers, and the change annoyed many, especially YouTube users who resented having Google+ forced on them. Worse yet, Google's push to integrate users' accounts ended up "outing" some who previously had relied on pseudonymity for safety. In borrowing Facebook's approach to engagement, Google alienated many of its YouTube users. Over 200,000 people signed a petition in protest. Even YouTube's cofounder, Jawed Karim, asked "why the fuck do i need a google+ account to comment on a video?"¹¹ The hundreds of comments below Google's announcement were illustrative of the reaction. The top comment asked, "Who the fuck are YOU to decide who's comment I want to see? This condescending attitude is extremely annoying." Another noted, "that's nice your fixing up spam" but "I don't want youtube to be a social network! If I wanted to go on a social network, I would join facebook!"¹² In a fit of pique, YouTubers took advantage of the fact that there were no character limits for comments and posted massive renditions of ASCII-

art; textual penises proliferated. Embarrassed, Google promised that it would fix the new system with “better recognition of bad links and impersonation attempts,” “improved ASCII art detection,” and “changing how long comments are displayed.”¹³ The worst abuses eventually abated, but in April 2014, the head of Google+ announced his departure, and it appeared that Google would be relocating many of its employees away from Google+ integration.

A more deeply felt disappointment of 2014 was that MetaFilter, the long-lived example of successful online discussion, announced that it was laying off three of its eight staff, including a long-time moderator. Its skillful human moderation, a one-time \$5 membership fee, and strong community norms had continued to foster a successful comment culture. Yet the revenue it depended on from advertisements placed in its informational Q&A section “Ask MetaFilter” was declining. These pages had long been prominent in Google search results, but something changed in October 2012, and traffic abruptly dropped by 40 percent. Many suspected that Google’s continuing battle against link spammers led to an algorithm change that resulted in MetaFilter’s many hypertextual comments being seen as spam.¹⁴

I fear that the future of online comment will continue to move toward large commercial platforms in which people have little privacy and see mainly the posts of the likeminded, the popular, and those who pay to reach us—a neutered filter bubble that serves the ads rather than the users.

I began this book with stories of those who were fleeing filtered sludge—that is, online discussion that failed to scale in the face of scammers and haters. I argued that this implies two things. First, commenting systems will forever be attempting to fortify themselves against abuse. Second, new commenting platforms will continue to appear as people will move in search of intimate serendipity, a place where they can express an authentic sense of self without fear of attack, manipulation, or unusual exposure while remaining open to things that will surprise and delight them. A third option is that even if the comment system is enabled, some people will simply pull back. *Boing Boing* contributor Xeni Jardin, who “Instagram[ed] my mammogram,” later wrote that although she found it comforting to share her distress she now appreciated a need for balance: “that just as there is value in connecting, there can also be value in disconnecting and just dealing with what’s going on inside our bodies and inside our minds.”¹⁵ Mark

Frauenfelder, who began the *Boing Boing* blog with his wife, Carla Sinclair, almost twenty years ago, told me that “my view of online community has changed over time”:

I’m no longer interested in responding to comments to my posts. The subtleties of face-to-face communication are lost. Most people are not polite online, including me. I get upset with myself when I become snarky. The purpose of my posts on *Boing Boing* isn’t to create a conversation online. It is to point to things that interest me. If people are compelled to make remarks about my posts, they are free to do so in our comments section, their own blog, or on a 3 x 5 index card pinned to a laundromat corkboard. I stopped participating in the comments section of *Boing Boing* a couple of months ago. I feel better because of it.¹⁶

In 2012, Dave Winer, the person who often is credited with first deploying blog comments, disabled them, and it seems that many long-time bloggers have come to share Winer’s sentiment that comments are sometimes valuable but, on balance, “they’re not worth the trouble.”¹⁷ Even so, a new generation of people and platforms is always on the horizon. When Twitter first launched, it seemed like a high-signal and low-noise sort of place that could afford its members intimate serendipity. In the face of success, however, this achievement rarely lasts. As Trent Reznor of the band Nine Inch Nails learned, intimate serendipity can soon turn to wading through “sludge,” and he now restricts himself to a few tweets a month about his work. Other celebrities swing between manic engagement and quitting. Miley Cyrus’s first quit (among many) was in 2009, when she was sixteen. Reznor’s disillusionment from 2009 persists:

I was excited about Twitter when we went out on our own because it felt like the most direct way to penetrate people’s attention. I also got a charge out of people realizing that I wasn’t a recluse sleeping in a coffin. But in hindsight, my experimenting with Twitter was a mistake. Oversharing feels vulgar to me now. I know we’ve been fooled into thinking it’s okay to show dick pics and that the Kardashians’ behavior is normal, but it’s not. I’ve tuned out in the last couple years. Everybody’s got a fucking opinion. It

takes courage to put something out creatively into the world, and then to see it get trampled on by cunts? It's destructive.¹⁸

Reznor's words are crude, but it does take courage to put one's self and creative works out there for judgment, which leads to the question of how to best exchange feedback (comment that is intended to help others improve).

Many people find it worthwhile to receive feedback on their creative endeavors, even though they might receive harsh criticism. Giving critical feedback also can be difficult, as was the case for the Toastmasters' participant who felt nervous about evaluating a brilliant speaker. As has been shown in the cases of authors and their readers, even skillful feedback sometimes prompts angry responses. Purposeful parody of amateur fiction by way of *sporking* (reviewing work that is so bad that reviewers want to spoon their eyes out) is almost guaranteed to hurt feelings if it gets back to the author. (The author of what has been called "the worst fanfiction ever" actually might be pleased. *My Immortal* was widely suspected to have been a purposefully awful story of a teenage vampire who attends Harry Potter's alma mater, Hogwarts.) The scope and scale of comment also have changed online. In the past, feedback's scope was relatively local. In a public speaking group, candid feedback from members is shared with the speaker or at least remains within the confines of the room. Online, comment is *hypotextual*, and unsolicited comment can easily find its way to the subject—and to everyone else.

Additionally, online communication lends itself to what I call *drama genres* of comment. In a lecture about television in the 1970s, media theorist Raymond Williams observed that "We never have as a society acted so much or watched so many others acting." To our ancestors, drama was periodic, as experienced in the celebration of a religious festival or the occasional "taking in a show." According to Williams, in the age of television, drama "is built-in to the rhythms of everyday life. What we have now is drama as habitual experience: more in a week, in many cases, than most human beings would previously have seen in a lifetime."¹⁹ Online, people can see more drama in a week than Williams could see in a lifetime of watching television. And I use the word *drama* in two senses—scholars' notion of performance and teenagers' sense of histrionics. In the age of comment, people are always performing front of stage, and much of it is sensational.

Specific *drama genres* of comment include personal Q&A sites and online lists. Who would've imagined that being able to make a list of books at Goodreads would be so contentious? Since the *Whole Earth Catalog* of the 1960s, people (that is, likers) have shared their lists and recommendations for the benefit of others: "Here are some things that I've enjoyed or that have improved my life. Perhaps they can do so for you too." The blog *Cool Tools*, a successor to the *Whole Earth Catalog*, recently featured an "invisible glove" lotion that protects the skin. Painters and mechanics use it to easily wash off paint and oil, but the commenter noted that it also was useful for protecting skin from poison oak while hiking.²⁰ Handy! People similarly like to share their favorite authors and books, but at Goodreads, they also circulated "do not read" lists of out-of-favor authors. Some authors felt that the lists were a form of bullying and compiled their own lists of "Goodreads bullies," which was also rather bullying. These *bully battles*, in which factions compile reciprocating lists of bullies, also have appeared on Twitter with the sharing of automated block lists. Of course, "kill files" were used on Internet discussion fora long before the Web. Back then, to publicly state that you were adding someone to your kill-file or bozo-filter was a public insult, but one which tended to tamp down on the flames because they hid others' postings, including their angry responses. Today, the use of lists seems much more factionary and inflaming.

Similarly, the Q&A genre is ripe for drama and abuse, especially when questions can be posted anonymously. Casey Newton, senior reporter for *The Verge*, addressed this topic in an article with the sadly clever title "Killer App: Why Do Anonymous Q&A Networks Keep Leading to Suicides?" The article recounted Formspring's initial popularity, its struggles to deal with abusive anonymous content, and its eventual eclipse by Ask.fm, which also has had its share of teenage suicides. When Formspring shut down in March 2013, its lead designer, Cap Watkins, reflected on these struggles and concluded that although anonymous Q&A was responsible for the site's initial success they had had "protected anonymous content to a fault":

On the one hand, anonymity was a really popular feature (duh). On the other hand, we saw a lot of bad and abusive content come through that channel (double duh). A fact that we wound up being pretty infamous for. But man was it hard to let go of anonymity as a core feature. We tried workaround after workaround. We

prompted for sign-up after asking an anonymous question. We started pushing privacy settings for users into our on-boarding (which they never changed, of course). We started setting up elaborate filters to catch bad or abusive questions and put them behind a “Flagged Questions” link in users’ inboxes.²¹

Formspring tried to hold onto the Q&A feature because it was a source of the site’s popularity, but as it attempted to curb abuse, teens moved to its Latvia-based competitor, Ask.fm. As a former Formspring executive concluded in the “Killer App” article, “When you took out the nasty, salacious, anonymous part of Formspring, it became a lot less interesting to people.”²²

There is a lot of nasty comment out there, and it tends to be surprising in two ways. First is the extent of the awfulness, in severity and scale. In July 2013, the Bank of England announced that Jane Austen’s portrait would be replacing that of Charles Darwin on the back of the £10 note. Caroline Criado-Perez, who had campaigned for increased female representation on the currency, received much of the credit for the change, and she also received a torrent of hate via Twitter. She and other advocates received what is now (unfortunately) to be expected: graphic death and rape threats. It was reported that the women received as many as fifty threats per hour. (She also received support, and a petition with over a hundred thousand signatures prompted Twitter to apologize for the abuse and to deploy a new abuse report system.) Comment can be used to express hate or support, but I suspect the deluge of hate leaves a much stronger impression than even the kindest expressions of encouragement. The police followed up with arrests, but Criado-Perez found their procedures (and possible loss of evidence) to be frustrating and traumatic: “They were now asking me to go through all the threats I’d received—and relive all the psychological trauma involved—to look for three specific usernames, to see what evidence I had of their abuse.”²³ Despite the actions of Twitter and the police, a new round of threats led her to delete her Twitter account. This case also reflects the inescapable gender dimension of online alienation and hate, which has been popularly recognized in a number of aphorisms, including one I coined myself. In response to the attacks on Anita Sarkeesian for her *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* project, I noted that “Online discussion of sexism or misogyny quickly results in disproportionate displays of sexism and misogyny.”²⁴

The second surprising thing about embarrassing or nasty comments is that they often are made in the open and beyond the cover of anonymity. The shortness and ease of online comment often prompt people to make stupid mistakes and reveal implicit biases. Anthony Weiner surely regrets his mistake of failing to prepend his infamous tweet with the letter *d* to make the photo of his privates private. But why take such risks in the first place? And those who complained that *The Hunger Games* was ruined because a female character (who is described in the book as having dark skin) was played by a black actor revealed their bias. They might have thought that their opinions were being expressed only to their peers, forgetting that Twitter is public. To return to Goffman's metaphor of the stage, we are always in the presence of and performing for others in the age of ubiquitous comment. Keeping this in mind is a challenge for some people, who when they fail, can only claim "I was hacked!"

The legal system and lawyers are slowly recognizing the substance and import of online comment, but this is happening in fits and starts. In one case, former New Orleans police officers were accused of shooting unarmed civilians as they fled across a bridge to escape the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. As jury selection for the trial was beginning, an online commenter expressed his outrage toward the police on a newspaper's Website: "NONE of these guys should have ever been given a badge." This commenter was in fact a top federal prosecutor and was joined in the sockpuppetry by two other Department of Justice officials. When this came to light, the judge was forced to dismiss the convictions of the former cops, pointing out the sad irony of the "accusers becoming the accused" in such "grotesque prosecutorial misconduct."²⁵ The prosecutors recognized the ability of online comment to influence public opinion but did so in an inappropriate, if not illegal, way.

Courts themselves have been uncertain about the meaning and protections that should be afforded to comment. During a 2009 sheriff election, employees of the Hampton, Virginia, sheriff's office *liked* the Facebook page of their boss's opponent and were subsequently fired, which led to a court case in which the judge ruled that "merely 'liking' a Facebook page is insufficient speech to merit constitutional protection." The employees would not be reinstated. A number of media savvy lawyers questioned the ruling by asking why wearing a black armband is substantive and protected speech but Facebook liking is not. The U.S.

Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit eventually reversed the ruling, writing that “On the most basic level, clicking on the ‘like’ button literally causes to be published the statement that the User ‘likes’ something, which is itself a substantive statement.” Additionally, a *like* is a “symbolic expression” that “is the Internet equivalent of displaying a political sign in one’s front yard, which the Supreme Court has held is substantive speech.”²⁶

In the realm of online reviews, the law is starting to take notice as well. In September 2013, the New York State attorney general’s office announced that it had compelled nineteen companies to stop writing fake online reviews and to pay more than \$350,000 in penalties. Posing as a yogurt shop with some negative online reviews, the office contacted search engine optimization firms that offered to post fake reviews through manufactured and obscured identities. “Operation Clean Turf” found that many companies were willing to post fake reviews on Yelp, Google Local, and Citysearch by way of “freelance writers from as far away as the Philippines, Bangladesh and Eastern Europe for \$1 to \$10 per review.”²⁷

Perhaps the most important aspect of online comment is much more modest than eye-catching headlines and closely watched court cases: it is comment’s seemingly innocuous ubiquity. We live in a world in which everything can be commented on, and these data can be easily tallied. This is part of what I call *quantification*. As sociologist George Ritzer notes, people who live in contemporary “rational” societies are driven toward quantifiable measures, in part, because they rely on computers, which also make it easy to make difficult decisions when assessing subjective and qualitative phenomena. Additionally, in a winner-take-all society, it is no longer sufficient to be good enough and to be appreciated as such.²⁸ Instead, we are presented with a proliferation of identities to choose from, to perform, and to be judged on relative to world-class successes and beauties. Feedback (identifying what works well and what can be improved) is replaced by rankings of standing relative to others.

This preoccupation with identity, attractiveness, and relative standing was present at the birth of social media. “HOT or NOT” brought the Web to popular attention and inspired the developers of YouTube, which now hosts “Am I ugly?” videos. Facemash, Facebook’s predecessor, was created by Zuckerberg as a way for Harvard students to judge the attractiveness of fellow students. In Katherine

Losse's memoir of her time as an early employee of Facebook, she described her low status as a female customer support representative relative to the "boy king" engineers who had a fondness for quantification. She wrote that the launch of the 2007 Facebook Platform app was accompanied by an internal example app named "JudgeBook": "never judge a {face}book by her cover." Her colleagues even acquired the domain names JudgeBook.com and PrettyOrWitty.com, which echoed a comment she had heard Zuckerberg make about having to choose between women who were pretty or witty. She felt that "in either case, you would definitely be judged, scored, and rated":

It was at moments like these that I realized it was the great and twisted genius of Facebook for anyone who is interested in rating things constantly, as Mark and the engineers who made these type of applications seem to love doing. Facebook made it possible for men to have endless photographs of women available for judging, and women simply by being on Facebook became fodder for the judging, like so many swimsuit models at a Miss America pageant. Because, with JudgeBook, like all Facebook platform applications, women did not have to consent to have their photographs used by the application. The application would alight upon your data and feed it into its database whether you wanted to be judged or not.²⁹

Inescapable judgment is a consequence of ubiquitous comment, which becomes ever more pervasive with the spread of mobile devices. The Jotly app parodies the notion of being able to "rate everything" with a phone. With a device like Google Glass, which is a mobile computer and display built into eyeglass frames, the wearer's perspective on the world is augmented with online comment: people and locations can be decorated with informative pop-ups. Perhaps one day, people's online presence will be annotated with their media influence or dateability scores. People who wear such devices will also need new ways to comment, perhaps with hand signals. Liking something could be as simple as framing something within a heart-shaped hand gesture, as proposed in a recent patent from Google.³⁰ Billions of comments are posted online today, but this is just the beginning.

One question that this book asks is if we really are better off avoiding comment. Despite the fact that some sites are disabling comment, it is not easily escaped. Comment is a characteristic of contemporary life: it can inform, improve, and shape people for the better, and it can alienate, manipulate, and shape people for the worse. The negatives can seem more potent than the positives, but there are many benefits to today's comment. I like to read comments (if they are well tended), love reviews (if I can trust them), enjoy constructive feedback (although it can be difficult to hear), and am delighted that some people are able to maintain a sense of humor about it. Broad polemics about the wonders and perils of technology miss the point. Comment is with us, and we must find ways to use it effectively. Can we encourage policies and technologies that are supportive of our highest ideals? Can we not become beholden to commercial interests for our interactions with others? Can we mature into a sense of self-esteem that is not predicated on flattery, but on the ability to improve and move forward? Can we learn to occasionally step away from it all? These are not rhetorical questions, though they are difficult ones.

Difficult questions sometimes are best asked of ourselves first. Just as a good community requires moderation, individuals are at their best when mindful. I used to ask students to experiment with being offline for a weekend and to reflect on the experience, which seems like an increasingly implausible task given the pervasiveness of gadgets and the connectedness of youth. In its place, I have adopted an exercise from author Howard Rheingold in which students are asked to set an intention before going online.³¹ They write the intention down and set a timer: "In the next 20 minutes, I'll write a reading response for class." I ask them to reflect on what they were doing when the alarm sounds. Many students find their way to their favorite Website without completing the task, as if sleepwalking online. Although I still recommend that students try to go offline (or at least not sleep with their phones under their pillows), they now are online far more often than they are off. Consequently, we need to understand what is happening online. What insights are gleaned from sifting through the muck? Cultivate a comment community. What examples can we learn from? Beta readers. What examples should not be followed? Mean kids. What dangers are revealed beneath the silt? Manipulation. Comment is as "commenterrible" as we let it be, and it can be understood only by reading the comments at the bottom of the Web.

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[[Figure 8.1]]

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{notes begin}

Chapter 8: Conclusion

1. Amanda Brennan, “Interview about Comments,” September 2013.
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