

Rules of engagement: seven lessons from communicating above and below the line

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*Social media offers academics a wonderful opportunity to get their message “out there”, to connect with, educate and inform a broad, new online audience. And universities encourage them to do so, to actively market and disseminate their research. Yet although this shouldn’t be a one-way process, the standard mantra for engaging online is: don’t read the comments. Based on his own experiences, and at a time when academics are not always held in the highest regard by the general public, **Philip Moriarty** has some cautionary advice for those eager to embark on their own online public engagement activities.*



For years I engaged, publicly and frequently. Blog posts were written, YouTube videos were made, comments were exchanged, ideas were “debated”. And arguments were had.

I’m a publicly-funded academic. The way I saw it, I had an obligation to connect with those “out there”. For one thing, they pay the bills. From a rather less venal perspective, however, debate and discussion are what universities should be all about: the free exchange of ideas; the dissemination of knowledge; the development of critical thinking skills. We should be willing to venture beyond the confines of our [dreaming ivory spires](#) and connect with non-academics both online and in [rather more communal environments](#). We owe it to society. And it may even [be fun sometimes](#).



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So I became [the xkcd guy](#). I engaged online so much that my YouTube username appeared in a [wordle](#) (remember those?) of the very many thousands of comments that had been posted at the time under the videos for [the Sixty Symbols channel](#) to which my colleagues and I contribute. I spent a great deal of time there clarifying what I had said

in one video or the, apologising for when I'd screwed up an explanation of the physics, or pointing out that, no, [the momentum of the character in the video game Portal really isn't conserved](#). (And, no, that's not up for debate*.)

I subsequently set up a personal channel and started to make videos for the Nottingham undergrads. I also made those publicly available. I started to blog. And I started to tweet. I was regularly engaged, if not always engaging.

Over the years, I estimate that I racked up more than half a million words of comments and responses. *Half a million words*. That's five or six books' worth. (And I should be clear here: I mean just comments and replies. Blog posts aren't included in that total).

And for what?

Let's be honest. Nothing. Or, at best, virtually nothing.

Students, postdoctoral researchers, friends and colleagues repeatedly told me that I must be unhinged to engage online as much as I did. For one thing, didn't I know that [YouTube comments sections](#) just represented the collective, condensed, soul-crushing stupidity of humanity? Wasn't I familiar with [John Gabriel's Greater Internet Theory](#)? Didn't I know [just how toxic](#) it could get?

I'd instead point them to a rare productive exchange and say, "no, look, it works; don't believe the hype (and the stereotypes)". We have a powerful tool for outreach and public engagement here; we can get involved in genuine debate with those outside academia. So I didn't block, I didn't moderate, I didn't mute. I engaged. Publicly.

But they were, of course, completely right. I was delusional. Vast swathes of social media are toxic, as many companies [are belatedly realising](#). Yes, there are islands of intelligence, wit and constructive criticism out there but that's exactly what they are: islands in a sea of bile. New Statesman has [pointed out](#) the extent of the online toxicity. ([Repeatedly](#)). As have [The Guardian](#) (again, [repeatedly](#)), [The Times](#), [The Irish Times](#), [Vice](#), and [Time](#), among so very many others. The bottom line is this: when the [Daily Mail comments sections](#) are more readable than the YouTube threads to which you're contributing, it's time to step back and reconsider your public engagement activity (and, more broadly, question just what the heck it is you're doing with your life).



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I therefore decided that, in true BuzzFeed style, I'd use this post to list (in no particular order) my seven rules of engagement when it comes to the "online experience". These are mostly an *aide memoire* for yours truly should I somehow ever delude myself again into thinking that anything good can ever come of wading into a comments section. But just in case there are those reading who may be considering starting up a YouTube channel or otherwise diving headlong into public engagement online, I hope that one or more of the following might be of some use.

7. "Skeptic" doesn't mean what you think it means. There's a large online clique that [rather quaintly](#) lays claim to being ever so more rational, sceptical, free-thinking and grounded in pure reason than the rest of us mere mortals. If your social media activity involves discussion of social justice, feminism, minorities, gender, progressive politics (however that might be defined), or just about any aspect of social science, there is a finite probability that you've already tangled with, or will eventually end up tangling with, one or more of this crowd.

This so-called "Skeptic" community collectively boasts well over a million subscribers/followers, the more committed of whom signal their allegiance to the cause – namely, the annihilation of that most vile of species, the [social justice warrior](#) (SJW) – via clichéd avatars, pseudonyms, memes, and their tediously "edgy" vernacular. Arbitrary and angry capitalisation; an apparently pathological inability to distinguish between "your" and "you're"; a penchant for frogs and other cartoon animals; deep-seated obsessions with cuckoldry and karma; and [a remarkable degree of credulousness](#) are just some of the aspects of the in-group behaviour here.

Do not make the mistake I made. Do not attempt to engage with this clique. That way madness lies.

6. Follow the money. Anti-SJW punditry/activism is a big money spinner. A certain Hank Green pithily pointed this out last year:

Some of the leading figures in the SkepticsTM in-group have hundreds of thousands of subscribers or more and can therefore make thousands of pounds per video (via Patreon income). Anti-feminism and, in particular, [videos targeting the media critic Anita Sarkeesian](#) have traditionally always been [nice little earners](#). "Content" of that type has steadily normalised and fostered a toxic online culture which has reached its nadir in the disturbing targeting of teenage girls, who are driven off the internet following torrents of abuse. [This Twitter thread](#) highlights just how popular (and, therefore, lucrative) that hate-fuelled "business model" can be.

Something as innocuous as [the trailer for the revamped Ghostbusters movie](#) can be exploited to wind up an already overwrought audience and thus secure next month's rent. ([Even the appearance of female superheroes on tins of pasta](#) can be a tipping point for some of these hypersensitive souls, who signal their outrage via Twitter and other social media channels).

Video-makers of this persuasion have a vested financial interest in stirring up and normalising as much in-group vs. out-group conflict as possible. It's best to bear that in mind. By engaging you may well be contributing to the cost of their (or their parents') new kitchen or basement refurbishment.

And all the while [Google turns a blind eye](#).

5. They don't need no education. We academics have got to come to terms with the troublesome issue that our comforting "education, education, education" mantra is hopelessly naïve when it comes to influencing opinion online. Formal education and expertise are now regularly dismissed out of hand and [confidence in universities is steadily falling](#). The general public has heard more than enough from experts, apparently. Academics who present unpalatable material need to be [named and shamed](#) or, better, shut down for good.

Evidence is dismissed if it fails to conform to a particular ideology. Alternatively, why bother with evidence if something is just, well, *obvious*? For example, the [gender balance in physics](#) is clearly due to [fixed, innate](#),

[immutable sexual dimorphism, right?](#) Women and men are simply *different*; it's clear as day. Sure, there's not been any type of study that normalises out, via appropriate controls, the societal and environmental contributions to learning (and applying) physics, so as to confirm that the 80:20 M:F balance in physics has a genetic/biological component. But even if they did normalise the data (somehow), those SJW feminazi "expert" scientists [can't be trusted](#) in any case, can they? Women just aren't cut out for science the way men are. It's a fact.

(You'll excuse the sledgehammer sarcasm. Subtlety and nuance tend to be in fairly short supply online).

Remember that we now live in a universe where [the Mandela Effect](#) and [Pizzagate](#) are taken seriously, where [Flat-Earthers abound](#), and where the President of the United States has claimed that [climate change is a Chinese conspiracy](#). And what's worse, not only is education not enough to tackle this beyond-bonkers lunacy, [it can backfire](#).

4. Lowest common denominator "for the win". YouTube, in particular, is no place for good-faith debate, where opposing opinions might be considered carefully and their relative merits weighed up in a reasoned and reasonable manner. Instead, clickbait titles scream REKT! PWNED! DESTROYED! BUSTED! It's all about building that subscriber/follower base, after all, and ensuring that the clicks keep rolling in. This means that the in-group dynamic must be fostered and encouraged, particularly if one's income depends on it. As many tabloid newspaper editors know very well, playing to the gallery can pay dividends. On YouTube, the bar can be set very low indeed; audiences of approaching a million can be depressingly built on the back of [the most appalling content](#), lurid thumbnails and all.

3. "Never wrestle with a pig... you get dirty, and, besides, the pig likes it". Some may recognise the (apparently apocryphal) George Bernard Shaw quote. Apocryphal or not, it remains especially good advice nearly 70 years after Shaw passed away (and is particularly apposite if our porcine foe is also profiting from the exchange). Misrepresentation, quote-mining, character assassination, threats, harassment, the appropriation of the [Gish Gallop](#) (from the creationist community, of all places), and a strong mob mentality are now the norm in some online communities, established via a combination of clickbait culture, a cult of "personality", and the [online disinhibition effect](#).

2. They are anonymous. They are legion. On the subject of the online disinhibition effect, anonymity contributes to online norms in both non-academic and academic settings. As I've stated elsewhere, [removal of anonymity is clearly not an option](#). But there is a major difference between using anonymity to protect one's identity and exploiting anonymity to threaten and abuse others.

What's rather remarkable is that those who hide behind anonymity to threaten or fling out abuse are generally among the first to complain of "cowardice" when their target shuts down their comments section, and/or removes their channel, because the threats/abuse become intolerable. (Indeed, [as Sarkeesian has pointed out](#), they often treat this as a game). In other words, those hiding behind anonymity to abuse and threaten see fit to accuse of cowardice those who have put their head above the parapet, shown their face, and openly stated their views. This requires a rather flexible definition of the term "cowardice".

1. Everything in moderation. Two great posts, by [Hank Green](#) (yes, him again) and [Chuck Wendig](#) respectively, [Stop Screaming In My Home](#) and [Don't Read The Comments: Comment Sections Are Our Own Fault](#), brought home to me just how much we have to reclaim comments sections. As I said above, my initial (rock-stupid) stance on this was that I thought it much better to expose the hate so I simply didn't moderate or block anything (including, remarkably, libellous abuse and threats). But as Wendig puts it so very, very well:

"Truth is, you can go to most comments sections and find enlightening, illuminating commentary. You just have to wade through a toxic slurry to get to it. That slurry represents the worst the Internet has to offer, and there you are, crawling through it on your belly like someone trying to find his watch in a gymnasium full of medical waste.

And it's our own fault.

It's our own damn fault.

We have failed to tend the field and now that shit's all thick with weeds.

We own this problem. Collectively."

Wendig also goes on to anticipate the response to the draconian, Orwellian, terrifying nightmare of a suggestion that comments sections be moderated:

"And here you might say, 'Buh-buh-wuh!' And you'll stammer out something about democracy and freedom of speech and censorship. But I'd ask you shift your POV a little bit. Look at a comments section like it's the letter section of a newspaper... The letter section was not a free-for-all. They did not print the rantings of every froth-mouthed cuckootrousers who wanted to air his conspiratorial, hate-fuelled grievances with the world. They moderated those letter sections."

Within the last few days, Ulrich Baer has made very similar arguments about freedom of speech in the pages and pixels of the New York Times: [What 'Snowflakes' Get Right About Free Speech](#) . (Hat-tip to [Steve Shives](#) for [highlighting the article](#) in his usual informative and engaging style.)

Those seven messages, as you may have noticed, are resolutely downbeat. (As Yeats put it, "*Being Irish, he had an abiding sense of tragedy, which sustained him through temporary periods of joy*".) Does this mean that I am suggesting we academics shouldn't engage online? No, not at all. There are of course genuine and rewarding instances of connection, discussion, and debate to be had. As one personal example, an undergraduate project here at Nottingham (the results of which we'll finally get round to submitting for publication this summer) had its origins in a crowd-sourcing [Sixty Symbols video on correlations in drumming patterns](#) and subsequent discussions in, *whisper it*, YouTube comments sections.

Similarly, my colleagues and I have received many kind messages from Sixty Symbols (and [Numberphile](#), [Computerphile](#), [Periodic Videos](#), [Deep Sky Videos](#) etc.) viewers across the world telling us that the videos have (re)kindled their love of physics and/or astronomy, mathematics, computing etc. (even, remarkably*, chemistry). Indeed, [one of those correspondents](#) is now in the second year of his PhD in the Nottingham Nanoscience Group.

So it *can* work. Productive engagement online is possible. But be acutely aware of the many pitfalls and pratfalls that can befall you, not least those listed above. To engage as productively as possible, follow Wendig's advice and regularly tend to those weeds.

And don't be surprised if many of those who publicly "critique" your efforts [don't even read past the title of your post/video/article](#) before they vent their spleen. You'll find that nothing is quite as irritating as those who want to engage without engaging.

***Joke. One thing that often makes engaging online rather tiresome is the extreme literal-mindedness that is regularly encountered.**

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Philip Moriarty is Professor of Physics in the School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Nottingham. His *research interests* span a number of topical themes in nanometre scale science with a particular current focus on *single atom/molecule manipulation using scanning probes*. He has a keen interest in *public engagement via both traditional and 'non-traditional' media*, and is a member of the Sixty Symbols team that last year was awarded the *Institute of Physics' Kelvin Medal* for "innovative and effective promotion of the public understanding of physics". His ORCID profile (<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9926-9004>) includes a full list of publications and grant awards.

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