Imagine if everything in the world around you existed only in theory but didn’t really exist at all. How much would you have to worry about the consequences of your actions? This kind of nihilism isn’t practical when you go out in public, but computation and social connectivity may be the closest thing, in the real world, to the construction of an actual nihilistic landscape. When you go online, you often won’t have to worry about tarnishing your identity and reputation because, with anonymity, it never really existed to your audience in the first place. There are many places where you don’t have to worry about saying the wrong things because there aren’t any authority figures to effectively enforce them. The internet doesn’t so much have to be a living, breathing world full of people who have feelings; rather it can be a giant sandbox for you to build sandcastles and then jump on them. Obviously only certain kinds of people would gravitate towards computers to act upon their own nihilistic impulses. But there are a few select people who actually do adopt similar behavioral tendencies without using computers, and they’re called psychopaths. So just how dangerous and psychopathic does an internet without authority have the potential to be?

The New York Times published an article on December 9, 2015 called “The Internet’s Loop of Action and Reaction Is Worsening.” The first concrete events mentioned are the suggestions of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, “that we should think about shutting down parts of the Internet to stop terrorist groups from inspiring” anyone else (Manjoo). Here you have two major American political candidates from both the Democratic and Republican parties emphasizing the need for authority and moderation for the dangerous aspects of the World Wide Web. In one sense, it’s easy for people to mock just how vague, naïve, and impractical this idea
sounds, as shutting something down online doesn’t necessarily prevent it from being built up again. In another sense, it’s long overdue for politicians to start taking the issue of toxicity in global internet activity and reactivity very seriously.

This issue is not so much about terrorism itself. Fundamentally speaking, it is about the downsides of the internet’s global reach and the lack of exclusivity that dangerous ideas have because of social media’s accessibility. In can be argued by the social contract theory that people, in general, will submit to their governments under a common law to live in a civil society. In other words, the authority of the law, and its ability to dish out consequences for actions, is what can ensure communal peace and security among people. But legislation has a notorious lag time in its ability to properly keep up with technology and its sociological uses. There arguably isn’t a clearly defined social contract on the internet. Overall, this is an issue about how internet rhetoric seems to be fueling a contagious toxic culture, and it’s a subject that affects everyone in the world. But most importantly, it affects the stakeholders in leadership roles: social media sites, their executives, politicians, and the governments.

Before I get into the stakeholders for this issue, I want to illustrate the general psychology in how this affects everyone at once. There is something called the “online disinhibition effect” in which a person will lose common inhibitions by interacting with people and/or content on the web. A psychologist named John Suler has named six primary factors to why people would act differently online than in public (Wikipedia). Number one, anonymity prevents a person from having to worry about the reputation of their identity; two, the lack of face-to-face contact forces people to create methods of interaction that are distinct from communicating in someone’s physical presence; three, the timing of communication on the web isn’t always immediate, and this removes much of the spontaneity natural with actual human conversation; four, the lack of
physical presence on the web leaves a lot to the imagination; five, it’s possible to regard your interactions online is being kind of a game without any real consequences; and six, rules of authority don’t apply as much on the internet as they do in the real world (all of these taken from Online Disinhibition Effect on Wikipedia).

Very recently, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, along with his wife Priscilla Chan, publicly spoke about their intentions to donate $45 billion to charity in order to celebrate the birth of their daughter (Manjoo, from the New York Times Article). The internet erupted shortly afterwards with people questioning Zuckerberg’s motive behind this inherently generous act. Without full accountability for one’s credentials online, so many people can pretend to be experts in philanthropic causes (and this is an example of the online disinhibition effect in play).

Why would people be so knee-jerk in questioning charitable motives? I can only guess, by my own gut feeling, that it’s rooted in base human emotions like jealousy and envy. Giving away $45 billion dollars is such a socially powerful act that some people can have a difficult time resolving the cognitive dissonance between respecting charitable goodwill, and being viscerally aggravated by the wealthy and advantaged. There’s another example of a recent knee-jerk reaction online; the New York Times published a piece supporting gun control, and a man named Erick Erickson, who disagreed with the piece, offered his own commentary: he posted an online picture of the article with bullet holes on it. And this is supposed to be outrageous and cute, and it received numerous “likes” on Twitter. The online disinhibition effect too frequently allows the internet to drown in a pool of pathos (emotion) without much room for logos (logic) and ethos (ethics).

Now the stakeholders, for this issue, have the potential to do things about it. The politicians, regardless of who they are, will probably want to demand more regulation to quell
the social ills of the internet. Social media sites generally wouldn’t want to assume roles as regulators (especially of dangerous and controversial ideologies) because it’s naturally laborious and inefficient, and there doesn’t seem to be any explicit formula for doing it either. There is a double-edged sword in forcing companies to regulate themselves because, while it may have potential (theoretically speaking) to protect the public (who will “benefit”) from dangerous online content, it can also reduce freedom and prosperity within companies (who will heed the “risks”). The most prominent social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are American, and America has a government protocol of protecting our 1st Amendment Rights and to not enact laws that have a chilling effect on free speech (“legal considerations”). Title V of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 states that, “no provider or users of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider.” Social media can’t necessarily be held accountable for the activities of its users, and the politicians have to only enact laws that are constitutional in protecting free speech. So what should happen to help break the cycle of hostile internet reactivity? Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the politicians and social media sites together to make sure the common people are ones who will benefit more than anyone else.

One option to help address the issue of disinhibited online conduct is to make social media into a public utility the same way water, natural gas, and electricity are public utilities. This would result in government regulation and give the politicians significantly more power to address the problems of social media as they see fit. However, it would also have the potential to stifle innovation and adaptability within the social media companies (remember legislative lag time), and these are both essential qualities in keeping up with the changes of the modern world. And social media, per se, probably shouldn’t be regarded as a public utility because it isn’t
exactly required for survival the same way that water, natural gas, and electricity are. This action is probably prohibited.

Another possible option is for any user of social media have his or her actual identity be confirmed upon signing up. For celebrities and people with viable public influences, Twitter will reach out to their accounts and make sure they are the actual people they claim to be (marking them as a “verified account”). This prevents anyone from copycatting a public figure online and potentially slandering them in the process. The challenge in today’s internet climate is that anyone, regardless of who they are, has the potential to be a public influence. So in having the people opt in to submitting their identities (upon signup), the social media sites will know who the people are for sure and be able to hold them accountable more effectively. And the privacy of the user (in terms of the rest of the public) would remain up to him or her to a degree. The problem with this idea is that social media executives will probably detest the notion of sacrificing privacy for security for the common public because of its inevitable chilling effect, and it would also greatly worsen business by consequence. This action is probably prohibited too.

There really is no good solution here that I can confidentially sell (Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton aren’t selling good solutions either). All I can do is to start thinking wishfully in my conclusion. If the people don’t like any of the government’s/politician’s ideas to have social media regulated, then the best they can do is to combat the reactive hostility through a special kind of online activism. In the landscape of the World Wide Web, fighting fire with fire will only serve to perpetuate the situation. Albert Einstein said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” If the people still want to hold on to their online freedoms, they have to rally together and take the power back by refusing to use the same
hostility their enemies use. Is this possible? Well, you have to believe in something because that’s what keeps you going.

At the huge risk of being hopelessly optimistic, maybe a movement could be started for people to pledge never to engage in hostile rhetoric online, but still be allowed to do so offline. If an online stranger trolls you, then kill his or her purpose with kindness. If a friend berates you online, then address that person by phone, or face-to-face. If you have to write something critical on the web, make sure you make it purely constructive and never personal. And don’t ever take anything personally or engage in *ad hominem* attacks. Then when you’re offline, you can flip someone the bird while you’re driving, or get into a bar fight for all I care. This pledge is about rallying people to regulate their online behavior, but regulating yourself offline is asking way too much for the time being. The pledge has to be able to be taken by anybody regardless of his/her race, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or political leaning. The extremely difficult part is that if any stranger online engages in racism, sexism, homophobia, then everyone who was taken the pledge must rally behind the victim (if there is a specific one) and politely suggest to the aggressor that it’s not good for him/her or anyone else to be engaging in that kind of vicious conduct; and they must notify the moderators if necessary. If someone of a particular ideology is being nasty, then it’s possible to rest assured that others of the same ideology may be have taken the pledge, and those people would be able to politely dissuade the attacker. Those who have taken the pledge must never advocate serious criminal acts like violence and pedophilia, and they must always report those who do to the appropriate authorities whether it would be the social media moderators, or the police in some cases; and they must never communicate anything to people who advocate criminal acts. This part is extremely important: you must never be smug or self-righteous about taking the pledge. You should tell people about
the pledge and delicately invite them, but you should never coerce them because there will be people who simply aren’t ready. Some people will mock and try to provoke you, and you must never take it personally. You also must accept that there will be some people online who have ideologies inherently incompatible with the nature of the pledge, and you must not encourage them by attacking them. You must be careful in discussing the pledge with people you don’t know or trust when you are offline: the pledge doesn’t prohibit your behavior offline but you may want to avoid altercations and a personal conflict of interest. If someone online who has taken the pledge says something that violates its purpose, then don’t accuse him or her of hypocrisy, because that’s what enemies of the pledge will do; instead, expect things like this to happen and gently point out the person’s error without taking it personally. Lastly, if someone innocently asks a question that looks stupid/confusing to you, then ignore it if you feel like it, but try not to say anything that conveys contempt. I think one of the reasons that Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” was so powerful because it acknowledged that the nastiness of racism wasn’t entirely about the rivalries between white and colored people, but rather it was symptomatic of a systemic sickness in American culture for that point in history. If we can rally the people who dream of a better internet among their peers regardless of backgrounds and ideologies, can maybe we can start to extinguish one of the worst social epidemics of our time.

Bibliography


