

Don't Let Trolls Set Your Boundaries

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

Recently, at precisely 6:10 p.m. on a weekday, I opened Twitter and flipped over to my troll-trapper.

"Troll-trapper" is the word I use to refer to the "Requests" section of my direct messages (DMs) on Twitter. For those of you unfamiliar with Twitter, you can use the platform to send DMs, which are like text messages, to other users. Some Twitter users only allow DMs from people they are friends with. However, other Twitter users, like me, allow DMs from anyone on Twitter.

When you allow DMs from anyone, you have what is called "open DMs." If you have open DMs, Twitter sorts any messages you receive into two separate groups: Your "Inbox," which contains messages from those you follow on Twitter (these are people you have a relationship with), and your "Requests," which contains messages from those you don't follow on Twitter (these people are strangers).

Online Attacks

When I opened my troll-trapper (the Requests, which are from strangers), I found what I expected—with one important exception. I found lots of messages from men who think Twitter is a dating platform. I found lots of messages from men (always men) who were angry about something I'd written and wanted to cuss at me about it. And I found one or two normal human messages from people who liked something I'd written and wanted to ask me a question or share an idea. I deleted the first two kinds, answered the last kind and moved on.

Because the troll-trapper takes an emotional toll, I only open it once or twice a month. I keep my DMs open because every once in a while, an important voice comes through. Otherwise, it's too hard to deal with the abuse. And yet, working hard to avoid trolls and other abusive people online can have consequences, including lost opportunities. I know because I lost an important opportunity recently.

Missed Opportunity

So, this time, as I moved through my troll-trapper, I had received a message I didn't expect to receive: An editor from *The New Yorker* magazine requested that I write a Letter to the Editor about a recent story in the magazine, based on a tweet thread I had written about mental illness and one of the story's subtopics I thought deserved some extra airtime.

The problem is, because her message went to my troll-trapper, I missed the filing deadline. I wrote the letter as quickly as I could—in 20 minutes—and shot it off to her, and then I texted her (per her request). She accepted the letter and tried to get it filed in time for publication. But I was too late. My letter didn't get published in the magazine, and I was so disappointed.

I was also angry. The reason I don't check my DM

requests is because I don't want to deal with the awful messages I get from men who harass me. I have to wade through the muck of humanity to find one message offering me a wonderful opportunity.

I wondered: Why had she DM'd me on Twitter instead of emailing me? To find out, I hopped over to my website—and saw that I directed members of the media to DM me on Twitter. And I remembered when I set that up. It was when I'd written a viral piece on campus rape and quite literally couldn't bear all of the emails I was receiving from trolls. So, I'd removed my email address from my website.

Once again, I realized, I'd allowed trolls to dictate my boundaries.

I needed a better solution. After talking this problem through with a friend who often ends up in similar situations—she writes something that attracts attention, both positive and negative—I worked out a plan.

Implementing a Plan

My web host (the company I pay to host my website) allows me to set up as many email-forwarding addresses as I want, for free—and yours likely does, too. How does this work? Say the URL (the web address) for your website is `firstname.com`. You can set up as many email addresses you want for that URL, like this: `Contact@firstname.com`, `Info@firstname.com`, `Email@firstname.com` and so on.

Also note that many, if not most, institutions allow users to create what are called email "aliases" that forward to your main email account. These function in the same way as what I describe above—ask your university IT department to help you set one up.

So, the first thing I did was create the email address `contact@` (my URL), and I put that email address on my website as my contact email. I took down the "send me a Twitter DM" message on my website. The `contact@` email address forwards to my real email. But here's the important thing: Once that email address gets trashed—once it makes it onto the bad parts of the internet as a way to reach me, for example, or once I start receiving too many awful emails at that address, I can delete it and create another. There's always `info@`. Or `email@`. Or the next, and the next.

You can also use a form on your website to allow people to contact you. Many people use that option. I don't love it, personally, because as a user I am turned off by them. My goal is to allow opportunities to come my way without letting trolls control my boundaries.

After making these changes, I can rest assured that *The New Yorker* editors won't be stuck in my troll-trapper, and that I have a way to eject trolls from my inbox if the emails from them get overwhelming. If things get too bad, I'll start using a contact form, but right now, the throwaway forwarding email address is doing the trick.

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