Combating Trolls in the Age of Trump

First up: wow. It's been rough. It seems any of us with family or friends we hold dear have been traumatized by the recent events in El Paso and Dayton, caused by hateful rhetoric, non-sensical gun laws and unsafe spaces. Those of us who have lived through mass shootings, or represent the very communities targeted have been especially heavy-hearted this week, trying to forget, wanting to honor and just slowly moving on with our day-to-day lives, out of survival.

We are media professionals, so it is our job to intimately understand and combat harmful rhetoric. Unfortunately, it's all around us. We often work with clients to launch their social media platforms, chats, ads, and organic content on issues ranging from energy efficiency to orca whales. While we realize these are not necessarily the front lines for hate groups, we also work on issues such as factory farms and immigrant rights, so we want to provide all of our partners with guidelines for how to find and root out trolls and other abusive or distracting content to protect their communities, as well as their brand.

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RESOURCE MEDIA

We all have the opportunity and responsibility to create safe spaces for our communities. That could mean flagging and blocking bots and trolls, or simply helping to keep your organization's conversation on course.

BELOW ARE SOME TIPS THAT WE HOPE YOU FIND HELPFUL:

- **Create your community guidelines.**
  If someone starts saying abusive or hurtful things on your online community, you want to be able to explain to them why it's not ok. Even if they say this is freedom of speech, you have the right to establish the rules of communication within your own social media community. So, write up some community guidelines that prohibit hate speech, spamming, phishing, bots, commercial solicitations, etc. and put them in the about section of your Facebook page, or in a pinned tweet. Refer violators to this and you'll be standing on solid ground if you have to block or report them.

- **Think in advance about what warrants a response—and be fair and even-handed about it.**
  Some likely categories include just some misinformed folks who need a correction with the right source. Or, someone who wants to rant and rave (not so interested in a two-way); in that case you could monitor their activity and remind them of the community guidelines. If they're unhappy specifically because of something you did, you could reach out personally (and away from the group thread) to try to repair the relationship.

- **Recognize the difference between debate and trolling.**
  Social media is all about hearing other people's opinions, even those who disagree with you. Just because someone disagrees with your organization's official stance doesn't mean that they should be iced out of the conversation entirely. Use this as an education point and try to address the comment with an open mind. If it seems their sole purpose is really just to take you down (and in a single-minded way), gradually reduce your communications with them and block them if they are violating your community guidelines.

- **Know when to delete and hide comments, and when not to.**
  You have a not-so-nice comment on your Facebook page. Your boss would like you to take it down. Know that deleting or hiding comments is not something to be taken lightly. People can screen-shot the history of their comment, and deleting or hiding comments is generally seen as wanting to shut down a conversation. Ask yourself: Does this comment violate our community agreements (if yes, take it down and send a note to the commenter, pointing to community guidelines) Is there anything that I can do to respond helpfully to this comment? (if yes, take this tact first). Is anyone else in my community being negatively affected by this comment? (if yes, consider taking it down,

using this as your justification.) If you need to hide comments on a particularly controversial post, you can note, "this conversation was getting very heated and running the risk of offending or undermining certain community members and their efforts. In the interest of keeping this a productive and positive space to discuss XYZ, please reach out to us directly if you have concerns about this topic."

- **Find the right people to engage in conversation.**
  You've placed your first Facebook ad, and have pushed out some new content to an audience that you haven't reached before. You're excited to grow your following and expose a new group of people to your brand. However, instead you see a bunch of negative and snarky comments, a far cry from what your usual engagement looks like with your core group of page followers. What to do? Well, first it's important to remember that this audience is not your page following. And, not all of your page followers have seen your content just because you've posted it, since [Facebook's algorithm is now asking users to rank pages usefulness](#) as it decides what to serve up to whom. So, if you're seeing low engagement on your posts, it probably has more to do with math than your memes. When creating your target audience sets, think about who is on your side already, but not engaged with your brand. What are the qualities of this audience, what issues are they interested in, what are their behaviors, where are they located? Engage them first with your advertising, to help protect your content from attacks. Later, if you want to venture out into more "swing" audiences, at least you'll know that you'll have some positive reactions to your post already apparent.

- **Anticipate and Practice.**
  Before going out with a new initiative or piece of content that is designed to elicit conversation with a new set of folks, think through: what's the worst thing someone could say? And, what would we say back to them? Come up with a few "red alert" comments and questions and get responses to them vetted and approved in advance. That way, you'll be ready to go if this happens, and you won't have to spend a lot of time getting responses approved and can respond right away.

- **Make their first experience with you a great one.**
  If you're pushing new audiences to a specific experience, make sure it's easy for them to partake and you're giving them the best possible experience. For example, test websites (including third-party ones, like surveys) for mobile responsiveness and image formatting on every page. Make sure the call-to-action link is clear and prominent. If they comment on any problems or glitches with your online assets, consider this a gift because it allows you to improve your operations. Address each person personally with a helpful, problem-solving message.

- **Know your roles and responsibilities.**
  Your team may be somewhat large, or it may be just you. In any case, there are several roles and responsibilities when it comes to deciding how to respond and actually

responding, depending on the type of organization you work for, and your brand. Here are just a few:

- o **Flagger:** This person regularly monitors social media posts and flags for when any comments or negative comments are showing up.
- o **Responder:** This person knows the most about the messaging that should be used for responses and gives input on whether and how to respond to negative comments.
- o **Advertiser:** This person has controls over how the content is promoted, to which audiences, over which period of time and with what budget.
- o **Translator:** If you are serving up content in a language other than English, you may get comments in another language too. So, your translator's job is not done once your meme or post language is up. Keep them engaged to be able to flag and recommend a response to any comments in Spanish, Chinese, Somali, etc.!

- **Decide in advance how much control you want to have and how much you're willing to relinquish.**
  Is this meant to be a back and forth online conversation, and are you willing to have your social media manager or contractor be able to respond to people in real-time? Or do you want to review every response before it goes out? Different people have different preferences but be clear with your team up-front. If you do require more control, set up tools for easy collaboration (for example, shared spreadsheets) and be comfortable with a slower response rate.

- **Don't forget about your village.**
  While it may seem like you're facing an army of trolls, don't forget that you may have a village of hard-working elves (your supporters) who can be activated to step in and defend you when the going gets rough. If you have good relationships with a few key influencers within your online community (your super users), reach out to them in advance of launching a potentially controversial campaign, and ask them to be on the lookout for detractors, and to speak up if they're hearing misinformation or damaging messages.

BEST PRACTICES FOR RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE COMMENTS:

- Remove the hashtag, if you're using one.
- Acknowledge the poster and their question/comment. @mention the person in question, so that they're able to see your comment;
- Thread comments under a specific post, so that your conversation doesn't dominate your feed

- If it is turning into a tit-for-tat, gradually reduce your response content to end the conversation
- Personalize each statement (rather than copy and paste jobs)
- Work within the confines of each platform (Twitter/Facebook/Instagram)
- If you need more time to answer, tell them that and that you will get back to them.

SAMPLE COMMUNITY GUIDELINES

This page is the official page for xyz organization or cause. This page promotes content and information regarding xyz. We encourage engagement in this community however admins will hide, block, or ban anyone who posts or engages with the page in the following manners:

- Using profane, defamatory, offensive, sexually explicit or violent language, or linking to this content
- Attacks on specific groups or any comments meant to harass, threaten or abuse an individual
- Hateful or discriminatory comments regarding race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, or sexual orientation
- Spam, link baiting or infected files
- Acknowledgement of intent to stalk an individual or collect private information without disclosure
- Commercial solicitations
- Content determined to be inappropriate, in poor taste, or otherwise contrary to the purposes of the page

We hope these guidelines and tips help you all in your day-to-day battles to fight for good over evil! It's our goal to provide protection and security to those who are actively working to fight injustice and build up the infrastructure we all need for healthy, safe and fulfilled lives.
Need more? Please feel free to reach out to us to discuss your specific online engagement and/or crisis communications needs. info@resource-media.org

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