



To Criticize Is To Publicize



*Make The Best Of Bad Words!
Torley*

A Fresh Path

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”

— Clichéd schoolyard proverb

And yet, words often do hurt—or at least, they feel as if they do.

Why do we care so much about what others are saying about us?

There are many overlapping reasons, chief among them that humans are a gregarious species. And, in an era where the “social media” floodgates are wide open, we can not only find immeasurable sources which validate or reject our experiences, we can respond to those in just a few seconds, too.

This staggering quantity coupled with lack of quality is enough to do our heads in! At the bottom of the barrel is the so-called “YouTube comment culture:” unpleasant digital scribbles consisting of little more than 3- or 4-letter obscenities, proclamations that a commenter was “First!” or in response to more visual media, cries that something remarkable is “fake” or “Photoshopped.” While the sheer onslaught may be overwhelming, there are thankfully just a few basic variations which are redundantly repeated.

On the other end of the scale but still lacking in quality are long tirades and wordy paragraphs which seem intellectually sound, but ultimately equate to what could be said much briefer and better—or not at all. Some kooks and cranks have been using this since the early Usenet days as a time-wasting

technique to bait others into what appears to be a sensible discussion, but is actually barbed wire beneath blankets.

Various Internet forums are also polluted with such mindjunk, which doesn't add value to the discussion. From Penny Arcade to high academia, numerous theories have been posited as to why being relatively anonymous is a breeding ground for "flame wars" and "trolls." To combat the crap, tools like disemvowelers and community rating systems (as featured on Reddit and Digg) can help sift the "good stuff" to the top.

"Good stuff" includes critiques which are worthwhile. And they are comparatively few and far between, as we'll see.

Nevertheless, if you're the target of vicious attacks, you're going to feel it. Contrary to a popular, mistaken approach, I'm *not* going to tritely admonish you by saying "don't take it personally."

Instead, here's a fresh path I'd like to take you on, and by the end of our journey, you'll have a revitalized outlook on how to make the best of bad words.

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A Wii Story

“Wii sounds like ‘we,’ which emphasizes that the console is for everyone. Wii can easily be remembered by people around the world, no matter what language they speak. No confusion. No need to abbreviate. Just Wii.” — Nintendo

In recent years, Nintendo has regained its crown, after emerging from a dark period where Sony and Microsoft clobbered them. Nintendo did it with the Wii, which didn't try to pump processor power. Rather, it filled the bountiful blue ocean of casual gaming, inviting families to get involved (as they originally did in the '80s) and introducing control innovations that simply made their system more fun.

Nintendo didn't do this without enduring a gauntlet of attacks, and one of the most brutal was the battering of the name “Wii” when it was announced. Hardcore fanboys leapt to their feet, decrying what a horrible and silly name “Wii” was compared to the original code-name of “Revolution.” Numerous tech and gadget blogs also mocked the title, making a big deal out of something so little. Never before had a game system's name been so scrutinized.

Nintendo never admitted if this was an intended side-effect, but whether someone liked or hated the “Wii” name (before even seeing or playing it!), they couldn't criticize it without mentioning—*publicizing*—it.

As a result, thanks to those masses, Wii buzz got out and brand awareness soared. Repeatedly saying “Wii” led to familiarization and trust, what many marketers hope for but find difficult to achieve. It couldn’t have been better timing, a triumphant maximization of actions out of 3 little letters. Nintendo’s then-VP of Corporate Affairs, Perrin Kaplan, prophetically declared: “Live with it, sleep with it, eat with it, move along with it and hopefully they’ll arrive at the same place.”

He was right, and since launch, sales have been hot. While no name will help if the product sucks, in this case “Wii” was the perfect name for an unassuming, “underpowered” (claimed the critics) video game console which has since dominated the industry and enlivened excitement in millions of homes around the globe.

Clearly here, *to criticize did publicize!*

People Can't Criticize Without Publicizing You

“If my critics saw me walking over the Thames they would say it was because I couldn't swim.” — Margaret Thatcher

Polarized word-of-mouth is a key fundamental of many Internet phenomena. You know how some personalities, like controversial comedians, are called out as “You'll either love him or hate him?” (This applies to women too; shame on not having better pronouns.) Such divided opinion is far more likely to result in publicity, attention, and word of mouth than someone who fits into the “You won't care about him” box. (Being ignored is the worst place to be.)

Before we go on, I mean “criticize” in the general sense: making a change-focused judgment about someone or something else. This includes so-called constructive criticism, which I'll expand on a little later.

If your aim is to be more popular, don't try to silence the critics. Especially on the Internet, it won't work. (Look up the [“Streisand Effect”](#).) Realize (even if your critics don't) that by bringing you up, they're keeping you—and the ideas you stand for—*alive*. It's so strange that people would rather blabber on about someone they dislike than doom them to obscurity, but it's true.

Instead, it's more important that you express yourself. Be vibrant and responsive to valid criticisms. Be earnest, tell your side of the story, and you can certainly correct inaccuracies and politely-yet-firmly clarify when others are wrong. Don't be defensive, effectively meaning, don't act as if you did something wrong. All too often, persistent critics will use this to snare you into a trap, where they can say “See! I told you so!” and proceed to verbally assail you further. Keep in mind: you can't defend what isn't there. You can't even relate to it, so walk on.

An example: you're an artist who's got a blog. Every few days, you share a painting you've done. The latest painting is that of a baby and the family dog. As you browse some art message boards you frequent, you come across a thread started by a stranger you don't know, but you can already tell what a jerk they are. They've called your masterpiece "kitschy" and "lame" and have even nominated it for the "museum of bad art." Maybe they've even linked directly to your blog, driving more traffic to you!

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What's the right thing to do?

There's not a single, absolute "correct" path. However, here are some experience-tested principles which have worked superbly for me:

- **Scan and size up what's being written and by whom.** If someone has a chronic history of bashing you and they've been unappreciative of past olive branches on your part, give priority to others.
- Common but underdone: **leave the trolls alone.** Don't feed them, don't pay them attention—let them devote their time & energy to you! You'll be better off.
- **Keep an eye out for patterns.** Often, especially when much discussion has already happened, many remarks overlap or reinforce ("+1") previous ones—they aren't new ideas. They can be of obvious use and may be the "wisdom of the crowds" that confirms what you *already* felt, but beware of the dark side: mob mentality, aka "dumbasses of the masses." More precious than those...
- **Zoom in to search for exceptionals you can make use of.** There may be a fan voicing their well-reasoned support of you or an eclectic insight you didn't expect to see. Really glimmering substance can be rare (hence why it's exceptional), but worth not missing.
- Given your finite time, **respond where it'll be seen the most.** If things heat up more hotly than you can stand and you're under pressure to respond (especially if there's a glaring error which can't go unspoken for), promptly reply via a post on your own site/blog, or respond online but link to your site. This is particularly important if you know your official presence will get more views than some forum out there, and a side benefit is that future people will link/

trackback to your source again—building trust and boosting search engine rankings. This is simply more publicity for the word straight from your fingertips.

→ **Always have a sense of humor.** Humor exposes the irrelevant non-issues and moot points, and diffuses the artificial tension brought upon by snobby critics. Plus, if you can parody yourself, you're instantly more likeable; you've awakened a sort of meta-awareness which is a rare character trait.

→ **Be pleasantly terse.** Say thank-you to useful critics. If there are one-liners and accusations which anger you and are hard to merely ignore, place the onus on the original poster to elucidate. I often ask, "Details please?" Don't get into a "tl;dr" (too long; didn't read) word war consisting of tedious paragraphs and nested quotes. Do your best not to misinterpret others; give them the good grace of clarifying their position. Fly-by jerks tend to not come back to read the discussion—another good reason to leave them alone.

A Torley Story

This wouldn't be complete without a personal anecdote: as of late 2008, I work as Resident Enlightenment Manager for Linden Lab, makers of the virtual world of Second Life. A really unique and awesome thing about my job is that I come to work as an avatar. That's right, a computer-generated character I can customize. Most of my avatars (I have humans, dinosaurs, robots, and more) are neon pink-and-green, because I have a knack (or obsession) with watermelon. It's a great icebreaker to conversation, and the loud colors are fun for introducing my friendly style of knowledge-spreading—I make video tutorials and share tips 'n' tools.

There are a few disgruntled folks who aren't pleased with this. They, because of their own limited—and that's what we each are, confined to what we've experienced—worldview, stereotype me as this ultra-happy guy who does nothing serious. It's amusing but incorrect, because I've done a lot of diverse things on the job that my vocal critics don't acknowledge. I talk about that serious business openly, but that doesn't get brought up by critics.

Do your best not to misinterpret others; give them the good grace of clarifying their position.

So what do I do? Drop the watermelon? Of course not! I've stuck with it, and as a result, have gotten 3+ million views for my personality-infused videos on YouTube, 1.75+ million views for my Flickr photos from Second Life, and most important: thousands of direct messages from customers praising me for my style and substance. The net result has benefited Linden Lab's relationship with our communities tremendously, and it made me a leader and celebrity in virtual worlds. I can't be content with glorifying myself, so I encourage fellow coworkers and Residents (customers) to "amplify their awesome" through avatar-centric promotion too.

I still help the critics if they come to me, not just because that's fair professional treatment, but because I really am an ultra-happy guy (who does serious stuff too). It doesn't stop them from destructively criticizing me—I see the same veiled insults from the same folk over and over again—but they're a "secret" of my success, because by talking about my surface attributes, they're exposing more people who'll come to love what I do. And for them, I even made a blog post addressing those "Torley myths" directly, and have received plenty of supportive comments in return.

Most Criticism is Useless

“Criticism always follows worthwhile action. The reverse is hardly true.” — Me

Take this to heart as you gain further experience. Here’s why: other people may think they have your best interests at heart, but they’re nonetheless looking at your world through an outsider’s perspective. Hence, even a lot of “constructive criticism” falls into the dead-end of “it’s the thought that counts.” That sounds nice, but it’s practically inapplicable, like an odd-shaped key that may help you open a door someday, but is most likely just a useless, odd-shaped key.

Did your parents ever try to give you romantic advice that didn’t relate to your relationship? Sure, you love ‘em, but they didn’t understand the innards of your situation. (Puberty tends to be tough for that, too.) But then again, when you were very young, I’m sure you learned valuable lessons when your parents scolded you, hoping you didn’t fall into the same mistakes they suffered.

So, how do you tell what’s useful? Shared experience based on actual got-it-done. As eccentric rich man Felix Dennis said “Ideas don’t make you rich. The correct execution of ideas does.”

You’ll often find that the only valid critics are ones who’ve been there and done the same, or similar, sorts of things you want to do. Just like a veteran gymnastics coach must’ve participated in the training of dozens of talents to understand how to lead, don’t count on someone who’s too far removed and not invested in your progress.

Pushing out theory sans action amounts to very little, and empirical knowledge—based on exploring possibilities—is what matters. This is incredibly true whether you’re on your own, being an entrepreneur, or working at a company. With everything else in your life, you simply can’t afford to be bogged down by extraneous opinions that ultimately don’t matter.

Only Trust Criticism (and Critics) After it Makes You Better

“Criticism is nothing more than other people’s opinion.” — Clint Eastwood

It’s that simple.

You can’t always judge someone’s intent, especially if the most you know about them is words on a screen. But you can look at each piece of criticism as it comes in, and you’ll become like a human spam filter, increasing accuracy. The non-spam is a tiny percentage of everything you’ll come across. As I’m fond of saying, “chop the slop” and concentrate on the very best.

An easy example of “slop” is someone who reacts without reading what you have to say. You can quick-filter that easily with minimal practice. It’s sad to see a “leaper who didn’t look,” who skipped the first sentence of something you wrote and glosses over the rest, then overreacts to it. Complete rubbish. Encourage people to stay away from foolish assumptions and approach those being curious and inquisitive. The sooner you realize many people are more interested in listening to themselves speak than being receptive in a heated discussion, the better off you’ll be. Keep cool.

Just like you might lose trust in a friend if they keep recommending restaurants you end up hating, critics—and consequentially, their value judgments—must earn worth and respect for them to carry weight.

Subject Your Critics to Psychological Tests

Ah! I'm certainly not advocating you to be cruel—quite the contrary. I want you to indulge in a few things to assist you in determining who's worth listening to. After you've used your quick-filter to sieve out the lot, to really determine “the measure of a critic,” ask them *directly*:

- **“Do you want to help me make progress on what you suggested?”** About 90% of the time (I've done this a lot), they won't commit, or will make an informal agreement but won't follow up. (Armchair word-slingers won't travel on life's journeys with you!)
- **“Can you give me a specific plan we can use?”** Common scenario in business: an upset (and perhaps justified) user says your customer service is lousy. Gives vague suggestions on how to make it better, but no shining path of action. Often, people can't articulate the finer points of improvement they feel inside, so this isn't surefire, but still worth mining for brilliant individuals—and extremely valuable customers who'll benefit many more by proxy. Plus, with motivated talkers, they'll feel extra-special you paid attention to listen and respond to them. They'll go on to give positive word of mouth about your care, and that's beloved publicity.
- **“How much of me/my history are you familiar with?”** Most critics are very shallow and don't bother to do their research (like lazy journalists). Use this one with criticism of a more personal nature. This also leaves room for mischief to say absurd stuff and be taken at face value, should you desire it. Average people have prejudice filters which can't perceive the entire “spectrum” of a complex personality, which is why we have typecasting in Hollywood from movie critics. Don't be average.
- **“Tell me more about something/someone you do like, and why?”** A handy question if someone trashes your taste in music/movies/books/etc., and a tidy delimiter of whether they're just being a jerk or open to further discussion.

These aren't all. Ponder your experiences and think of some questions of your own to ask!

Build a Collection of Prized Critics

Even with years, your collection will be small and rare. That's why you should treasure them. They may even become endearing, if at times dissenting friends.

There are some people who don't agree with everything I have to say. That's fine. They also explain why they disagree, and what I'm missing out on. That's even finer, because I can learn from them, then cite their differing opinion—and even try what they suggested. A funny historical example is when I was using the Internet Explorer-based Avant Browser, and was admonished by a caring-yet-abrasive few to try Firefox. I was skeptical and argued back, but my decision was soundly raked over the coals.

Years later, I'm a happy Firefox 3 surfer, but had I not the (eventual) humility to listen to my critics, who not only thought about their needs but mine, I wouldn't have benefited.

The “publicize” part of this comes in by thanking them openly: you win by getting an opportunity to champion something to others, and your critic also wins by being the influence of your improvement.

Quality criticism benefits both the critic and the criticized.

MORE PUBLICITY!

“All publicity is good publicity.” — P.T. Barnum

Bah! I don't agree with that oft-used quote, because it misses one big thing: what you do with the publicity. Words get said, but where's the action? Thoughts and feelings aren't enough—stuff needs to happen!

(Intriguingly true to form, Barnum's quote is a discussion-starter which has been publicized many times over.)

Remember what I said about being like a human spam filter: each thing said about you is different, and needs to be treated context-specifically. Most of it is mediocre, but the remaining handful of glistening treats needs to be kept close.

In Summary...

- The overwhelming majority of criticism, even when “constructive,” isn’t useful. But the diminutive minority is more precious than diamonds. Apply it and keep moving.
- Let people talk about you, even badly. They’re just getting the word out about you. Don’t get bothered by trolls, but do respond proactively if there are valid complaints, and make sure to set your story straight.
- Judge your critics, and insist on mutually beneficial relationships.

We’ve come a long way, haven’t we? Thanks for joining me on this journey. The next time you get criticized—it’s bound to happen if you’re doing anything meaningful—if you feel angry and hurt, that’s perfectly human.

Just remember what I’ve taught you—don’t wallow in sadness and get the most out of the stings you take, because *you* have a lot of greatness ahead! 📖

info

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Torley Wong amplifies your awesome with the useful and fun. He loves life, wife, and watermelons. You can learn more about his multimedia design and creative inspiration at torley.com.

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