

Creating & Managing desirable online communities

Jessamyn West - MetaFilter

<librarian.net/talks/mixmedias>

@jessamyn



Hi, thanks. My name's Jessamyn West and I'm the community manager for the website MetaFilter.com. I've been a community manager since 2004. My background is public librarianship. I'm here to talk about how we run our community and why we think it works when others fail. I'm a librarian so there are references and you can get them at this URL which is also in my twitter feed. My twitter feed is otherwise mostly about birdwatching and moss, so don't follow me for community management advice.

May 14

You may have heard that evil is returning to Sanctuary tonight. Your **Diablo 3 launch day preparation guide** includes **opening cinematics, a cartoon, the story so far, a primer on the new Auction House (now with real money), and build guides** for the **Demon Hunter, Barbarian, Monk, and Witch Doctor**. Since **no one at Blizzard beat Diablo 3's Inferno difficulty, death is guaranteed.**

posted by **Avenger50** at 3:00 PM - **0 comments**

Rare-wine collectors are savvy, competitive guys with a taste for impossible finds. The biggest hoax in history took place right under their noses. [\[more inside\]](#)

posted by **mreleganza** at 2:13 PM - **13 comments**

10 years ago it was considered impossible to build a prosthetic for an elephant.

What do you do when an **endangered elephant** steps on a land mine? If you're the **Friends of the Asian Elephant Hospital**, you make a prosthetic leg that can support 2000 pounds of moving pachyderm. [\[more inside\]](#)

posted by **endless_forms** at 1:26 PM - **13 comments**

Taiyo Matsumoto's original five volume manga Ping Pong was one of the most surprising and gripping experiences I've had this year. But a huge reason for that is the artwork: **he packs more kinetic energy into a single drawing of a shoe skidding across a floor than any real shoe has ever had.** So it was with some trepidation that I saw posters for this adaptation going up in stores around Japan. **Fumihiko Masuri** is a first time director (not that you'd know it), with a background in computer effects. He seems to have directed this mainly because he's a really big fan of the manga too. On **the film's website**, they've placed images from the manga next to photographs of the actors in the film, so you can see how obsessive compulsive they were in matching faces. Not only faces, but movements, playing styles, and shot composition is all straight from the book, as if they'd used the manga in lieu of storyboards. Even the occasional surreal touch; a boy growing butterfly wings, a dragonfly landing on the net, is right out of the page **onto the screen.** -- **Midnight Eye review**; subtitled movie in 12 parts: **1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12**

posted by **filthy light thief** at 12:36 PM - **8 comments**

The Dictator's practical internet guide to power retention. The Internet can be a real pain for a comfortable dictator. Here's how to turn it to your nefarious advantage.

posted by **bitmage** at 12:19 PM - **3 comments**

Most people know us as "that ugly blue site" We're a general purpose site for sharing links to interesting things you've found on the web. The site started as a way for the site owner Matt Haughey to share a blog and comments with his friends, and their friends and so on. No big deal nowadays but he made the first post to the site on July 14, 1999. We'll be thirteen this year. I'm employee number one, after Matt.

Monday, May 14, 2012 18:03

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[New Post](#) [My Profile](#) [Preferences](#) [Recent Activity](#) [Favorites](#)[Recent Posts](#)[My Favorites](#)[Popular Favorites](#)[My Comments](#)[Recent Comments](#)

80 links and 4011 comments posted since your last visit

May 14

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posted by [Avenger50](#) at 18:00 - [0 comments](#) - [Post a Comment](#) +

Rare-wine collectors are savvy, competitive guys with a taste for impossible finds. The biggest hoax in history took place right under their noses. [\[more inside\]](#)

posted by [mreleganza](#) at 17:13 - [12 comments \(12 new\)](#) +

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posted by [filthy light thief](#) at 15:36 - [8 comments \(8 new\)](#) +

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posted by [bitmage](#) at 15:19 - [3 comments \(3 new\)](#) +

Ads via The Daily

Contact Activity (

[MF](#) [Ionefrontran](#)
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[Singing Fish had](#)
with 20 favorites in
5 ¼ hours ago[★](#) [Miko had an a](#)
[14 favorites in Ask](#)
½ hours ago

We now have a staff of six. Matt, one dev [pb, he invented the permalink] and three other mods. Along the way we added a fairly popular Q&A site [we say "like Yahoo answers only populated by adults", or "like Quora without the creepy Bay area startup vibe"] which is now the bulk of our traffic, and a few other subsites like Music, Projects, Jobs. We do a podcast. Our most recent subsite is called IRL and it's for meetups. I'm personally big on "the conversion factor" using online tools and networked spaces to facilitate things in my offline life. In the lingua franca this is the "get laid or get paid" maxim. I want to trade my "whuffie" for beer and a couch to crash on when I travel.



The Blogfather

While there are many older web communities, Matt's MetaFilter was one of the first in the blog format. There are a lot of great things I could tell you about MetaFilter and heartwarming stories of users helping users, but I really want to focus on moderation today.

numbers



We have a staff of six full timers who have real jobs with 401Ks (retirement) and dental insurance (a big deal in the US!)

"about 17 or 18 million pages viewed by 7 million people around the world each month."

~36,000 users who have ever made a comment

~10,000 users visited in the last week

~4200 left a comment in the last week

~3 mil visits last week

- over a million comments per year

- about 175 flags per day

ANIL DASH

 A BLOG ABOUT MAKING CULTURE

IF YOUR WEBSITE'S FULL OF ASSHOLES, IT'S YOUR FAULT

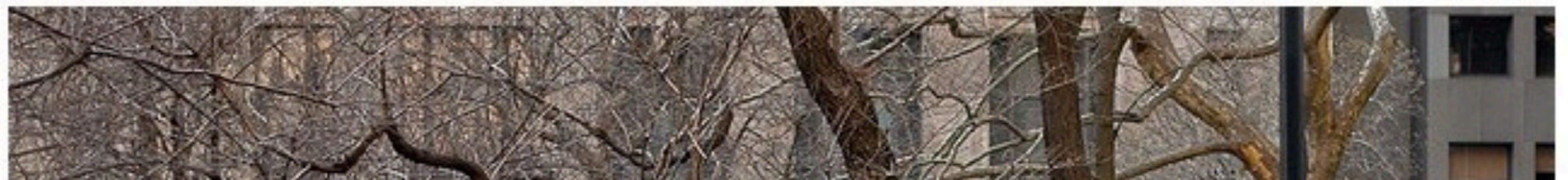
JULY 20, 2011

We're twenty years in to this world wide web thing. Today, I myself celebrate twelve years of writing this blog. And yet those who love this medium, who've had our lives changed by the possibility of publishing our words to the world without having permission, are constantly charged with defending this wonderful, expressive medium in a way that creators in every other pline seldom find themselves obligated to do.

Some of this is because the medium is new, of course. But in large part, it's because so many of the most visible, prominent popular places on the web are full of unkindness and hateful behavior.

The examples are already part of pop culture mythology: We can post a harmless video of a child's birthday party and be tr to profoundly racist non-sequiturs in the comments. We can read about a minor local traffic accident on a newspaper's web and see vicious personal attacks on the parties involved. A popular blog can write about harmless topics like real estate, res rants or sports and see dozens of vitriolic, hate-filled spewings within just a few hours.

But that's just the web, right? Shouldn't we just keep shrugging our shoulders and shaking our heads and being disappointed how terrible our fellow humans are?



The thing about community is that it comes naturally in real life (people tend to be around other people, most people like people) and is somewhat unnatural online. Sure, communities form and dissolve all the time on various sorts of discussion sites--find a hobby and there's an online community devoted to it--but the mechanics of how to manage and run a community well escape a lot of people. There are many aspects of managing community on which reasonable people disagree. I'll talk about our community and why I think what we do works. This was a popular article by Anil Dash last year. Everyone knows websites where the comments sections are awful *cough* YouTube *cough*

READ NOW

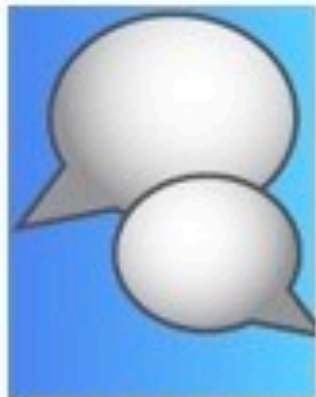
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If Your Comment Section Is Awesome, It's Your Community's Fault

from the *chaos-theory-at-work* dept

Meek Barbarian informed us that veteran blogger Anil Dash wrote a piece recently discussing websites having open and anonymous commenting on their sites. I'll preface this with a quick anecdote. I discovered Techdirt some three years back when my boss informed me that, as a technology consultant, it would be useful to follow a couple of technology related blogs to keep up on what is occurring in the industry. I came across Techdirt, found an article I was interested in, and dove in. I was immediately drawn in by the comments section and the community. There were anonymous cowards bravely trolling the threads. There were other anonymous cowards offering up valuable statistics, links, and points of view. There were folks using funny names and cartoon pictures as their avatars, while others used what were apparently their real names and real pictures. Even the author of the article was diving into the comments and responding to some.

I saw information. I saw jokes. I saw supporting views and dissenting opinions. I saw trolls, academics, lawyers, techs, etc. etc. etc. It was true **chaos theory** at work, with the article

Say That Again

by Timothy Geigner

Mon, Jul 25th 2011
12:12pm



Flattr

Filed Under:

[anonymity,](#)
[community,](#)
[enforcement,](#)

Which got this popular response from Tim Geigner. I assert that these two things are not mutually opposed. Now, everyone's got something different that they want to get from having a community. I'm not asserting that we do this the best, but that what we do works very well for us, for our budget, and for our users. I'll give you some things to think about from talking to our team and other moderators, so that you can see what might work for yours. I'll show off some of our tools at the end.



Get off the table!

YOU'RE NOT MY REAL MOM!!!

BURGER.COM 🍔 🍷 🍔

A brief mention about "internet people"... people who spend a lot of time online. There are a lot of reasons for this, good and bad, but it's worth understanding some of them because those people will make up a lot of your community. Time-shifted folks, parents, caregivers, expats, rural people, very verbal people, people with disabilities (we have a lot of deaf members, for example) and mobility issues, people with social skills issues, people with mental illnesses, people who, for whatever reason have challenges or troubles with face to face interaction. This can concentrate in online communities and work itself out in strange ways. Not everyone in your community will be there because they prefer the internet, but many will.

purpose



It seems obvious, but you need to think about why your doing this, first. For MetaFilter this is easy, our community IS the product, for most businesses this is not the case.

"Have a very clear picture of what you want to get out of the community before you design it. Not every site needs comment sections, not every product needs a forum."



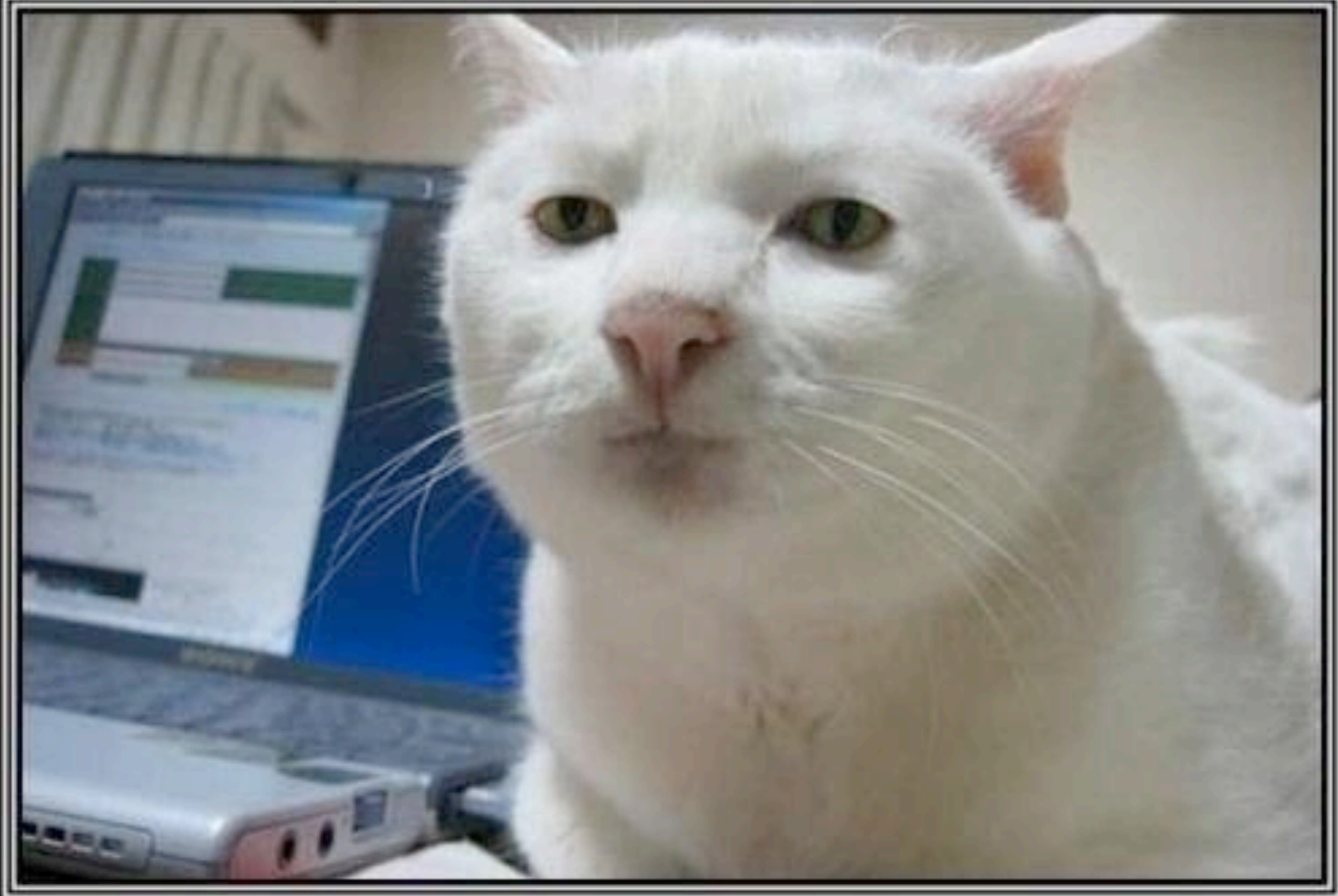
"...if you can't make the business case for it the staffing will get neglected and it will turn into a liability" In many cases, you have a business to run and you need to figure out how to get your community working there also. Realistically don't treat this like reinventing the wheel, other people have been there before, use their expertise [this is one of those "do as we say not as we do" things – we hired our first "experienced" moderator last year – she comes from the gaming forum world and is amazed at how polite our people are]

What are you doing?

- Support for products/services?
- Brand identity?
- Clicks/Eyeballs?
- Customers for other products?
- Value-add for existing customers?



I am just throwing out some suggestions here, I am not a strategist, but you should have this sorted. As we say on AskMetaFilter: What is the problem you are trying to solve? Think about your users. Why will they show up? What will they talk about once they do? What can they expect from the company in terms of responses to their discussion? How much time will they want to spend there? You can't plan for it until you know what it is; you can't budget for it until you have an actual plan.



MODERATOR

The internet is serious business. Now excuse me while I go delete stuff and ban people just because I can. We've got to please our advertisers, after all.

A brief mention about honesty: be honest about what you're up to. Everyone knows you're a business. Be as transparent as you can about what you're up to and why. The Markets are conversations line, from the Cluetrain Manifesto is extra-true in online spaces.

staffing



Once you know what you want, then you can figure out how it needs to be staffed. You can start small but you can't start unstaffed. Or you shouldn't. If there's one word I could send you home with it's consistency. Which means from the get go. "A good post to MetaFilter is something that meets the following criteria: most people haven't seen it before, there is something interesting about the content on the page, and it might warrant discussion from others."

"You can't just add a comment section, nominate a moderator, and have an instant community... An insufficiently-staffed comment section is worse than nothing."



Realistically people pretend like you just have a bunch of people talking, some people stand out as great community members and stewards and ... somehow ... they turn into moderators. In all but the smallest most cohesive communities, this does not happen. **Someone always has root.** Someone has to give other people the "keys to the site" You need to build a community and have moderation be a stabilizing force as it grows and matures.

Specifically

- Real humans, round the clock
- Dedicated to moderation/facilitation
- With tools *and* social skills
- Deputized to actually fix things
- **And Pay Them**



If you can not do this, you should think about what you are looking for in a community if you can't allocate resources effectively for it. You may have some sort of credits you can pay moderators in but at the very least the moderator managers need to be professional and actual employees. Burned out mods can be worse than burned out users as far as the damage they can inflict. Be careful. Don't take people off other jobs and put comment policing on top of their workload, it has to be something people have time in their day to devote time to.



A brief mention about staff: that whole NSFW thing, it's all SFW for your employees. Make sure you have a decent harassment policy up front, you will need it. And moderators with a sense of humor. [this is from moderation town, a promotional web series from ICUC, a canadian moderation services company]

personality



Just like in any job, making sure you hire the right people is a huge deal.

"Every community will have unreasonable people in it, but the folks in charge of keeping things in check need to not stir things up instead. Hire peacekeepers, not warriors."



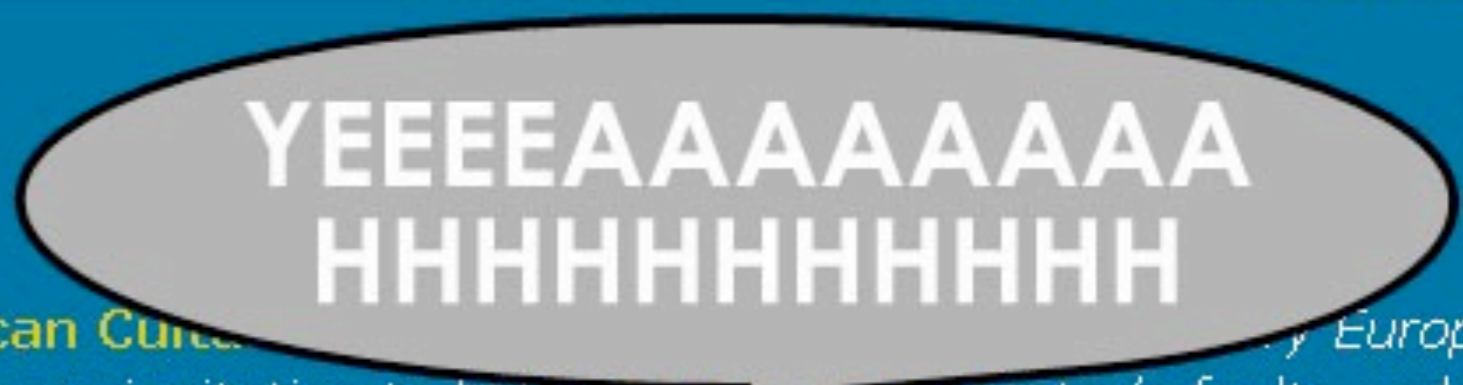
The goal isn't "no jerks" the goal is "no acting jerkish" however your community defines that. You have to give up one sort of community status for another when you become a moderator

moderator manifesto

- Mods are users, not just mods.
- Never score points at the expense of a user.
- Never lose your cool.
- Have each other's backs but don't "thin blue line" it.
- Be consistent but acknowledge mistakes.



good managers are similar to good moderators good moderators: personal investment in the company/work/product; pretty deep knowledge of same; investment and care for the people who are creating that; a knack for psychology... and add a huge amount of patience



December 20

A Foreigner's Guide to American Culture ... European sent
States has treated the posting as an invitation to help diagnose the country's faults and suggest what
might be fixed.

posted by **modernnomad** at 4:40 PM - 0 comments - Post a Comment

"We gathered our favorite cutting-edge content creators from across the internet and gave each of them a
deceptively simple mission -- tell a short story in a creative way." Showtime presents: **Short Stories**
inside]

posted by **zarq** at 4:27 PM - 17 comments - Post a Comment

Minimalist logos on the internet ... It realize this ... to eat Nutella even more

posted by **Leta** at 4:27 PM - 17 comments - Post a Comment

It's holiday time! Do your best to make your gifts. Let's make some "L
Tags." What will you do—say, **this one looks sp**
complete with mentions of "gaunt hum

po ...) +

A brief note about personality: Your users will, at some level, determine what they think the personalities of your mods are based on what they know of them..

policies



"Don't be an asshole" is sufficient if the staff all agrees on and can explain what asshole behavior is. We follow the wise path of Jay Smooth and talk a lot about what behavior isn't okay and not what PEOPLE aren't okay. It is our opinion that no matter what your politics or faith traditions, if you are willing to talk about them respectfully with a large group of disparate people (and not make the conversation all about you) you will be okay at MetaFilter.

"Rules need to be consistent and explicable, not necessarily detailed. Put legal/policy issues in specific terms and behavioral issues in general ones."



People who have spent a lot of time online are familiar with the terms "griefers" and "rules lawyers" Any policy you have in writing will be nitpicked to death. Any decision you make will be viewed as precedent-setting. Anything you write down will be perceived as a contract (aside: we do not have a terms of service, you can likely not get away with this). I suggest acceptable use and terms of service policies right off the bat, and specific to the community not just the general website.

levels of problematic

- Illegal (in your jurisdiction?)
- Immoral/ethically dubious (porn, warez, hacking)
- Will get you banned (or banned4lyfe)
- Will get you the night off (drunks)
- "Hey man not cool" (allowed, not totally ok)
- "We really don't have a problem with that"



Think about ways you will deal with things along these lines.... remember that there are guidelines between what is not allowed and what is actively encouraged, a lot of stuff falls in the middle.

specific concerns

- Suicidal people/deaths
- Ironic "I was just kidding" racist/sexist/homophobic commenters
- Threats against the site or members
- NSFW/triggers/spoilers/blinking?
- Unpopular opinions
- Trolling/stunts



We take some of our cues here from Wikipedia.

Note: Ask MetaFilter is as useful as you make it. Please limit comments to answers or help in finding an answer. Wisecracks don't help people find answers. Thanks.

Note: Help maintain a healthy, respectful discussion by focusing comments on the issues, topics, and facts at hand—not at other members of the site.

Note: You're going to see these people in real life.

Note: Everyone needs a hug.



A brief mention about repetition: These are written under the comment boxes, to remind people of what we think is important. You can write up a 75 page terms of service but people don't read/remember it, it's not worth much. The most important thing we have as far as moderation is MetaTalk, the part of the site devoted to hashing out policy issues and feature requests. Since we have this section, we can shuttle other policy/feature discussions there. Every time you can state and support your policies in a sensible way in public, it saves you one more email explaining it to people. Our rule of thumb is after two emails, we tell people to "take it to MetaTalk"

tech

MF

"Custom tools that streamline our process have saved us heaps of time and allows us to moderate a large site with a small staff."



It helps to have a strong IT staff that is available for custom programming. It's easy to just toss up a facebook page for your product and let whatever happens happen, but you can get a real granular feel for your community, and better usage statistics, if you can build your own tools.

MetaFilter Admin

<3 you are the smiling buddha

- [EDIT MALL](#) | [CHARTS](#)
- [last 100 flags](#)
- [charts](#)
- admin: [activity](#), [notes](#), [labs](#)
- post to: [sideblog/bestof](#), [music challenge](#)
- [MeMail search](#), [MeFi Mail is off](#)

Pending: [anon askmefi](#) (2), [projects](#) (0), [metatalk](#) (0)

FAQ: [Add a question](#) | [View submissions](#)

THINK SAFETY



flag hotspots [\(last 100\)](#) | [pop-out](#)

3	mefi	115949	[x]	double post, other
1	ask_c	3107919	[x]	noise
1	ask_c	3107914	[x]	noise
1	ask_c	3108003	[x]	noise
1	mefi	115955	[x]	other

filter: all | [ask](#) | [mefi](#) | [other](#)

good spots

4	askmefi_comment	3107878	[x]	fantastic comment
4	mefi_comment	4342761	[x]	fantastic comment
4	mefi_comment	4343144	[x]	fantastic comment

cf uptime: 17 days, 8 hours, 59 minutes.

main free: C: 36% | db free: C: 39%, D: 81%, E: 100%

current time: portland (7:10) austin (9:10) vermont (10:10) london (15:10) athens (17:10)



The admin panel. Users can flag posts and we see the top flags collated in the upper right. We can also dig down and see the last 100 flags and who made them. Useful if someone is going on a tear or has a grudge.

Morgan Freeman in 1971, [SLYT] wearing bell bottoms and teaching kids to read on "The Electric Company."

posted by **Fizz** at 9:53 - **3 comments (3 new)** +

— flagged 3 times

Flags [X]

- [redacted], breaks guidelines
- [redacted], other
- [redacted], double post
- jessamyn, other

The eight finger
1980. How he l
he fled commu
posted by **nordlys**

Andrej Nebb with his band, performing **Bo jo cie kochom** in Oslo in
guitar with a chainsaw. That's why he had to play bass instead. Basically
Here he is back in Poland in 2002, at **Przystanek Woodstock**.

who is flagging and why

Republican Butt Plugs (SFW)

posted by **backseatpilot** at 9:14 - **19 comments (19 new)**

— reason: Cute but pretty darned thin and I think we're feeling a lot of primaries fatigue still. -- **cortex**

— flagged 7 times

deleted

Gold drops as Greece batters global markets LONDON (Reuters) - Gold fell for a fourth straight day to its lowest since late December on Wednesday, sucked into a broad-based sell-off that dented global markets on the back of alarm over political turmoil in Greece.

posted by **raheelnajmi** at 7:43 - **0 comments** - **Post a Comment**

— reason: Another one of these Yahoo news things? Really? -- **taz**

— flagged 7 times

Last week was Teacher Appreciation Week. If you were too busy looking forward to have time to appreciate a teacher, it's still not too late to appreciate the **teachers behind the students**.

posted by **twoleftfeet** at 4:22 - **10 comments (10 new)** +



The admin view on a series of posts

user details



trust but verify – discretion is the better part of moderation

"Often users can handle some level of moderation as long as they feel it's fair and they are being understood."



track publicly

- Usernames = accountability
- User activity/contributions
- Who is in charge
- Methods of redress



Anonymity is a problem. Accountability fixes it. We have a firm one user one account policy and we enforce it (members sometimes have a second account for commenting more anonymously).

track privately

- IP addresses
- Name changes, if allowed
- History of user actions
- History of moderator actions
- History of moderator actions by user



This user is watched! (Other)

user_ID	user_name	user_email	verified?	web	real_name	join_date	ask_visit	pending?	backtagger?	update	reset pass
		@nwlink.com	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			12/1/2007	7/13/2010 12:08	paid	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="button" value="change"/>	<input type="button" value="send pass"/>

This was a gift account from [jessamyn](#).

Notes about this user:

dude's a fucking loon
 posted by [redacted] on March 26, 2008 at 11:05 [x]

Note About User:

This user is watched:

[Other](#) - Weirdy in askme.

Unwatch Note:

Ban Reason:

for 24 hours

Flag Activity:



Here is an example of a user page. Join date, last visit, moderator comments, watchlist ability, ban ability [we have three stock bans, day, week and indefinite] and sparklines to show flagging activity. We can drill down and see every deleted comment and post that user has ever made.

[MeFi First Post] Gold drops as Greece batters global markets +WATCHLIST!

Inbox x

*mf x

 posts@metafilter.com

7:43 AM (1

to mefi ▾

Gold drops as Greece batters global markets [1] LONDON (Reuters) - Gold fell for a fourth straight day t
December on Wednesday, sucked into a broad-based sell-off that dented global markets on the back of
in Greece.

+ posted to MeFi by raheelnajmi at 4:43 AM

[1] <http://news.yahoo.com/gold-hits-low-greece-turmoil-050352575--finance.html>

link: <http://www.metafilter.com/115990/Gold-drops-as-Greece-batters-global-markets>

edit: https://login.metafilter.com/admin/any_post_edit.cfm?link_ID=115990&sitetype_id=1

PayPal Info:

Email: 

Name: 

Home Country: GB



We get these user's posts emailed to us. We also get all MeTa threads and all user's first posts emailed to us. This is both useful for awareness as well as a good starter to group conversation about any of the posts since it's already in email.

homegrown
solutions

MF



MF

We have ugly money. It costs \$5 to join our site. This isn't something we make a lot of money from relatively speaking, but for two reasons 1. having users user paypal gives us more identifying info about them 2. having users invest even a small amount makes them less likely to spam or get themselves banned. It does, however, sometimes make them feel that they are our employers. Anyone who emails from another country or situation where \$5 is a lot of money can get a free account. We have been burned by this exactly once.



Trolls. You saw above how we can watchlist users. After a certain point, we require users to be able to prove they aren't trolls. Of course trolls never think they are trolls. However once the community has pointed out their trollish behavior [explicitly disallowed in the guidelines] their options are to stop doing that troll-y thing or be treated like against-the-rules trolls.



MF

And last, the Brand New Day. It's our opinion that there aren't bad users just people in bad situations or having a hard time adjusting. With few exceptions, any banned user is welcome to come back, they just have to not do that thing that got them banned before. Sometimes starting up fresh works for people. Rarely, it doesn't.



All I want is for online communities to be real. All a culture is are the things we share and reference together. Not like I never want to go to the Big Blue Room again, but I want people to treat them the same way they would treat their offline interactions. Having people facilitating and shepherding that process brings the online world better in line with what most people feel is reality.

merci * thank you

<librarian.net/talks/mixmedias>

MF