



Don't feed the troll!

“If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all...”



Twitter veteran **Eleanor Harris** offers real-life advice on how to avoid getting drawn into harmful angry disputes on social media.

I recently discovered Dave Gorman's show *Modern Life is Goodish*, a satire through the medium of powerpoint, all five series of which are on catch-up on *Dave* (Dave the TV channel, not Dave the comedian, obviously...). A recurring ploy of this very funny show is where Gorman constructs a 'found poem' from 'the bottom half of the internet', and performs it, improbably, to the accompaniment of Handel's Sarabande in D Minor.

But what is 'the bottom half of the internet'? Many an article on a news website has as least as much text again below it in the 'comments' section. Dave Gorman realised that these often angry and ill-informed arguments between readers about the horsemeat scandal, or metrification, or Prince William's decision not to wear a wedding ring, had tremendous comedy potential. The bottom half of the internet.

Our industry is full of people who are very intelligent and very passionate, which makes us vulnerable to being wound up by the pack of ignorance and prejudice we inevitably encounter as soon as we dip our toes into social media's murky waters, and sucked down into the depths. Working out how to send a tweet is easy. The challenge is to stay in the 'top half' of the Internet.

So as a (somewhat battered) Twitter veteran, I thought I'd write down my techniques for keeping my head above the surface, as I attempt to be an inspiring and informative voice for forestry and timber on-line.

Best practice to stay in the 'top half' of the Internet

1 Don't be judgemental
Resolve to stay gracious, good-humoured, and patient, and be strict with yourself, especially when it gets controversial. I suspect few of the people who repeat the cliché that 'city kids think milk comes from a supermarket' have ever have considered that their door frame, desk, book, cereal box, floorboards, or tissues, once grew in a forest. Coming from a non-forestry background, I'm acutely aware that when people say, 'I know this sounds stupid, but I'd never thought of trees as a crop before', they are only a few years behind me. It is not people's fault that no one has pointed this out to them before: this is why you are on social media, to explain it. But you need to be very, very patient. There are a lot of people.

2 Don't feed the 'trolls'
Trolls, on Facebook and Twitter, are people who, anonymously, fuel arguments for the sake of it, with off-topic, mean, personal and sarcastic comments. It is easy to get sucked into attempting to answer the trolls, to engage them in rational discussion, getting increasingly frustrated as you bring forward more and more evidence in favour of your point, while they just keep biting back until, reduced to 280 faceless characters, you become as angry, rude and irrational as they are. As soon as you realise you are getting into this situation, walk away and stop answering — mute the notifications if necessary. No-one is ever going to look at that conversation and conclude that you lost the argument because you didn't have the last word. Write a new tweet about something else.



If you want to see how to defuse serious trolls, google “JK Rowling responds to trolls”: she is the master of this art. As a last resort you can ‘block’ a troll, but I’ve never yet had to resort to this, which prevents them reading, and hopefully being influenced by, my tweets in future.

3 It’s not your responsibility to Fix The Internet

In the film *Bridge of Spies*, Mark Rylance plays Rudolf Abel, an unassuming little man who spends the entire film in a state of mortal danger while remaining disconcertingly calm. At various points, other characters ask him “aren’t you worried?” or “aren’t you frightened?” to which Abel replies, “Would it help?” Getting worried about it never helps. Instead ...

4 Do something else
You lose perspective when you are a workaholic focused all the time on one topic and one group of people, and foresters do seem prone to this. I can get completely absorbed in choral singing, which gives me a different social circle, and academic history, which gives me an unrelated intellectual challenge, and forget all about trees for a while. We all need a second vocation.

5 Be authentic
Some people have two Twitter accounts, one under their own name, and another where they can be ‘troll-ish’ under an anonymous persona. This became particularly popular around the Scottish independence referendum, when political passions ran sky-high. This approach from the land of Jekyll and Hyde seems to me a selfish trick which does the cause you are trying to support more harm than good, and I doubt does you any good either, but it’s interesting to think about why people do it.

6 Switch off
Our industry has been slow to tell its story in the past, and I would encourage every member

of it to help to change that, but social media is not the best way. So if we are encouraging you to join Twitter, and you would rather organise school events, put up on-site interpretation boards, run effective public consultations, or engage your local politicians instead, for heaven’s sake don’t let us stop you. These face-to-face encounters will be far more



effective. But do tell us so we can tweet about it, to share your good practice.

You have wisdom and passion worth sharing — and the trees need your voice — but look after yourself, and don’t fall into the ‘bottom half’ of the Internet.

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