

# Why do we argue online?

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The first time I heard about the internet was in 1995. A college classmate said, “Want to come watch me argue with American Christians?” He had discovered online message boards where he could argue with complete strangers.

Online discussion is made up of many things: jokes, useful information, delightful oddities, inane ephemera and Gifs of Ryan Gosling. But as long as there has been an internet, people have argued on it. This article isn’t about trolls – which the psychologist John Suler describes as “oppositional, passive-aggressive, narcissistic, paranoid, and sociopathic personality styles [that] just want to argue, to hurt, to cause trouble, to pump up their self-esteem with inflated opinions” – but about the many millions of less abusive, regular internet debaters.

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Cyberspace is an argumentative place. On social media you can see university professors arguing with climate deniers, politicians arguing with anti-austerity protesters, famous atheists arguing with anonymous Christians, Taylor Swift fans arguing with Nicki Minaj fans and the well-intentioned arguing with the malevolent.

People argue passionately. They argue creatively. They argue compulsively. There are misunderstandings and lapses of humour. Minor differences of opinion spiral into incivility – and, to be fair, pleasant arguments often stay pleasant. Nowadays, even the most debate-averse people find themselves engaging with online arguments vicariously, sucking up dubiously sourced opinions and counteropinions as if by osmosis.

When I ask internet arguers if they argue more now than they did in the past, they don’t hesitate: “Definitely.”

So is there a point to arguing with strangers? That’s a muddier issue.

“There was a lot of false hope in the 1990s that [the internet] would open up a new style of democracy,” says Dr Jonathan Bright, a research fellow at Oxford Internet Institute. He became interested in online discussion when he worked with a political website in the mid noughties. “We got this very aggressive and vitriolic debate going. It was definitely a corrective to the very optimistic view that the only thing preventing people engaging in politics was the lack of mass communications technology.”

Internet utopians had a “rational communicator” in mind, much like the rational consumer beloved of classical economists. This person was immersed in a world of ideas and argued

logically. But this, it turns out, isn't how or why people argue, and it's certainly not how or why they argue online. Suler, a professor of psychology at Rider University, in New Jersey, and the father of cyberpsychology, maintains that "argumentativeness has been around since the very beginning of cyberspace".

"In the 'old' days most of what people did online was to join some kind of discussion group, so ongoing discussions, sometimes leading to arguments, were inevitable and part of the online lifestyle," he tells me via email.

"There are just so many more people online now that it just seems like there is more argumentativeness. With many people striving for their 15 minutes of fame by pronouncing their viewpoints, we all have gotten used to online proclamations about something or other, proclamations easily disagreed with by someone."

There are a number of points to note about arguing on the internet. People don't argue for straightforward reasons. They aren't necessarily trying to convince the person they're arguing with to change their mind (although some are).

Sometimes they're trying to correct a narrative or right a perceived wrong for a silent audience. (This audience is potentially vast but often, in actuality, tiny.) And sometimes they're not interested in changing anyone's mind at all but are engaged in a "performance" for the like-minded.

"Cyberspace more easily allows birds of a feather to flock together," Suler says.

## **Online identities**

Conspicuous opining may be the new conspicuous consumption. Dr Ciarán Mc Mahon of the cyberpsychology research centre at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Institute of Leadership says that as people construct their online identities – and narcissism, he says, is rising alongside social media – they self-consciously align themselves to certain points of view.

People often argue to "mark their ideological territory", he says. "But the internet is a shared and communal space. While it's almost entirely privately owned, we treat it like a public sphere, like a commons or wilderness. We each try to mark out our own personal corners, as in our social-media profiles – though, unlike marking out our physical spaces, like a garden or allotment, we can't easily fence them off. When you realise that anyone can read what you put online, link to it and pass comment on it, you can only conclude that the internet is fundamentally a contested space."

How we argue online is as complicated as why. Social media's blend of public and private means that, on top of actual ideological disagreements, cyberspace abounds with misunderstandings and perceived slights.

Suler says that this is a result of “online disinhibition”. “When you cannot see or hear the other person, the lack of visual and auditory cues tends to make people more bold in what they say,” he says. “You can’t see a frown on someone’s face or hear anger in that person’s voice, which would otherwise cause you to tone down your argument. The arguer even forgets that another real, alive person exists at the other end of his or her words.”

Even more problematically, people have a tendency to fill the gap with their own projections. “The diminished sense of the ‘presence’ of the other person as a result of these in-person missing cues also causes people to project their own expectations and anxieties on to the person being debated,” says Suler.

## **Undeletable**

“The other person feels a bit anonymous, mysterious, unknown, so ‘transference reactions’ tend to occur, which means that the other person is unconsciously perceived as some other significant person in one’s life.”

He sums this up pretty starkly: “Persistent, emotional arguers in online debates are often really arguing with their mother, father, wife, husband or themselves.”

Discourse is confused even further by the fact that much online discussion is essentially private composition in a public space.

“If you put something on Twitter it can be seen by upwards of 250 million people,” says Mc Mahon, “but you probably wrote it in silence and in physical privacy. So there is quite a gulf between instantly public global communication and these very, very private thoughts. So a private thought – That guy is an idiot – can easily become an undeletable public announcement: You are an idiot. People have been calling each other idiots for a very long time but never before in such epic terms.”

Online you can argue at whatever speed you want: “If you say something nasty now, to my face, I might not have a quick comeback,” says McMahon. “On the internet I’ve time to word my response to you properly, edit it, research it and rewrite, perhaps even find an image of you and deface it. Online, the potential to choose and sharpen conversational weapons means arguments ramp up and become emotionally charged faster than face to face.”

And people also comment before they’ve had time to think. “In days gone by if someone got really angry about something they had read and wanted to speak on that anger publicly, they’d have to sit down, write a letter and post it to *The Irish Times*,” says Mc Mahon. “By that point the anger might have dissipated. But today those steps have been shortened drastically.”

Indeed, there’s evidence from research at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay that ranting online intensifies our anger rather than reducing it. And no matter how pure the original motivation for arguing, says Mc Mahon, at a certain point different priorities assert themselves.

“We’re not wired for rational thought. We’re wired for competing against each other. We’re not wired to find the truth. We’re wired to win.”

So, given all this, is there any real, practical reason to argue with strangers online? That depends on why you’re doing it in the first place. If you’re trying to assert your identity and feel a sense of belonging among like-minded well-wishers, then it may make sense. “But I’d be very surprised if any argument online is ever going to convince anyone of anything,” says Mc Mahon. “At best you’ll get public acceptance – you’ll beat someone into submission – but with private disagreement.

“To change anyone’s opinion takes longer. You can convince people with a straight, logical, clear argument, but that usually only happens in a minority of cases, when the other person has no opinion whatsoever, and when they are open to be persuaded. Presenting a person who already has an opinion with a list of facts about how they’re wrong is seldom effective.”

In Oxford, Bright, who has studied how information proliferates, agrees. “If people hear a view that’s not too far away from their own, that’s more likely to be influential than the diametric opposite.”

And, he says, arguing doesn’t necessarily alter the arguer’s perspective. “In fact it can reinforce their opinion . . . There are people who actively reinforce their own views by reading the opposite side of the argument.”

## **Adversarial**

If people are genuinely interested in changing minds, arguments need to be less adversarial. “There is a whole body of literature in psychology about persuasion, influence and attitude change,” Suler says. “For example, how do you convince someone to believe something? Those principles apply as much to online behaviour as they do to offline behaviour. ‘Joining and leading’ is one strategy: you join the other person’s point of view on some particular point in the argument, then slowly lead them from that point to something new you want them to believe.”

Yet such subtlety is rare among online arguers. Mc Mahon suspects that a desire to convince isn’t what drives many people to argue in the first place. Many argue because it’s fun. He compares it to gladiatorial combat.

“Steven Pinker has argued that violence is in decline in the developed world,” he says. “It’s not an everyday experience for most people, but it’s still within our genetic history as a species. Acting out aggressive urges is no longer socially acceptable within our civilisation, except perhaps voyeuristically – witness the popularity of mixed martial arts, for example. The rest of us make do with the virtual version of combat, acting out those ancient urges online.”

*Psychology of the Digital Age: Humans Become Electric*, by John Suler, is due from [Cambridge University Press](#) in 2016

## PUBLIC FIGURES AND THEIR PUBLIC SPATS

Five online debaters explain their motivation



### DAN BOYLE

Former Green Party senator

**Why argue online?** “I always had a thing in politics about regular engagement, but with Irish politics the rule of thumb was to keep the mouth shut. [SOCIAL MEDIA] was a mirror I mightn’t have otherwise had.”

**How do you conduct yourself?** “I like to think I’ve been civil. I know when I’m being trolled, and sometimes, mischievously, I try to out-troll the trolls.”

**Have you changed how you argue?** “I might have been more rapid-fire before, more knee-jerk. I’m probably more reflective now.”

**Do you think you have changed someone’s mind on a subject?** “I find a lot of people take part in debates on a religious basis: they either believe or they don’t. They’re not interested in challenging their beliefs. [For some] the need to engage and the level of engagement is an ego feed. People want to be known. People like to be liked.”

**Do you ever worry that arguing online isn’t a good use of your time?** “Yes, sometimes. But there are times when I’ve engaged with people and we’ve come to a consensus or agreed to disagree. I like the immediacy. I like the democracy of it. And I see huge potential with it, which is why I choose to engage still.”



**CONSTANTIN GURDGIEV**

Economist

**Why debate online?** “You meet people from around the world, serious analysts who give a perspective quite often which is very interesting.”

**Would you argue or debate with anybody?** “If someone asks me a question, especially if it is a constructive question, I would answer. I will engage with an anonymous person.”

**What are the negatives?** “Things flare up very quickly sometimes. People misunderstand you. Sometimes you misunderstand people.”

**Have you changed how you argue?** “Over the years I have moderated. I used to be much more ‘take no prisoners’, and now I’m much more, ‘Look, we can agree to disagree.’ ”

**Do you argue more than you used to because of the internet?** “Yes, definitely. One thing social media does is it traps quite a bit of your attention and time. So where you had more time to reflect and think, now you have far less.”

**Do things get heated?** “There is always emotion involved, and I don’t think anything’s wrong with that.”





**JOANNA TUFFY**

Labour Party TD

**Do you argue much online?** “Too much, I think.”

**Why?** “I would feel [the Labour party isn’t] getting our side of the argument across, and online argument is one way.”

**Do you think you have ever changed anyone’s mind?** “Some people might be taking what they’re saying from other people. If you provide alternative information you can shift their position.”

**Is the debate respectful?** “I got a bit of abuse online, but I don’t think I get too much of it now. Most people disagree respectfully on Twitter. There would have been times I’d be getting a lot of abuse from a certain quarter, maybe around water charges, but you’d have less of that.”

**How do you conduct yourself?** “I’m generally measured enough. I’d often say to people, ‘Don’t play the woman, play the ball,’ and sometimes you realise you’ve done it yourself. I would try not to be personal, and if I make an inaccurate statement I go back and try to correct it.”

**Are there negatives?** “You could be having an argument with someone on the internet you don’t know, and you’re ignoring the person beside you.”

**Is debating online compulsive?** “I have this compulsion to respond to people if I think they’ve said something incorrect or that I disagree with.”



**DR DAVID ROBERT GRIMES**

Physicist, cancer researcher and writer

**Why argue online?** “I was scientifically naive enough to believe that the simple problem with bad science in the media was that people had an information-deficit problem and that I could help people by putting information out there. Then I got my first screed of hate mail.”

**What’s the main problem with online debate?** “Some people aren’t arguing for the sake of the argument but to get kudos from peers.”

**Does it become uncivil?** “People will say things about you online that they would never say to your face.”

**So why argue at all?** “If you have someone who’s very receptive and very interested. The other reason is to counter a narrative, because narratives get built up very quickly.”

**Do you debate and argue more because of the internet?** “Yes. Absolutely. I do it less now. Now I’m only going to bother engaging if it’s constructive.”

**Do you find something cathartic about arguing?** “I kind of have. But I also moderate it a bit. If you’re beating the crap out of someone, and making them look foolish, you think, Am I just preaching to a choir of people following me?”





### MONGO SMELLYBEARD

Regular commenter on [irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com)

**Does the internet make us more argumentative?** I doubt it. I think it changes who we have to argue with. I wouldn't normally mix with people I don't know with the intention of arguing social issues, but that's exactly what I do on [irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com).

**Do you remember any time your mind was changed by an online argument?** If I learn something in a discussion I've had my mind changed, whether I know it at the time or not. I have certainly formed opinions based on discussions on the 'Irish Times' and 'Guardian' websites.

**Do you remember instances when you changed someone's mind?** I think I certainly have convinced people to think a bit more deeply about their own assertions.

**Does the existence of the internet mean you argue more than you might have done in the past?** Yes, I think it does. I have access to people who will argue about pretty much anything.

**Have there been times you've regretted getting involved in an online discussion?** Yes. Too many times; too many handbags.

**Do you enjoy it?** Yes, but not always. It's nice to score points and occasionally see the old foes stuck. However, with some people, it's like arguing with rain.

### MICHAEL EDWARDS

Regular commenter on [irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com)

**Why debate online?** I engage in online discussion because I want to influence debate. It also helps to hone my understanding of an issue if I bounce my ideas into the room.

**Have you ever changed anyone's mind on an issue?** I don't remember changing anyone's mind. The people I usually engage with hold entrenched views. I seem to like to take on the most obdurate. I suppose I am a bit of a masochist.

**Has your own mind ever been changed?** Yes. My views on feminism changed as a result of engagement in the IT forum. Generally though, my tone has become more sensitive to those whose opinions are different to mine.

**Does the existence of the internet mean you argue more than in the past?** Absolutely! It is just so easy to flip on the phone at a moment's notice to see if there are any fish on the lines . . . I used to take the arguments to heart and get really upset at people. Now I am more sanguine.

**Do you enjoy it?** It is akin to passing by a car crash sometimes. You promise yourself that this time you won't look but you can't help yourself. I do enjoy the writing bit though . . . It is like a social centre for the mildly deranged I think. People with wildly opposing views who have chummy moments and pet names. It's weird.