

Opinion: Furious trolls are everywhere

By Sara Scribner, Slate

A young poet, enough of a rising star to be profiled in the *New York Times* magazine, posts a poem called “The Rape Joke.” It begins, “The rape joke is that you were 19 years old. The rape joke is that he was your boyfriend.” It is about as intense and intimate as an online post can get. In the magazine article, the poet’s mother reads the poem, but it is the comment thread that makes the mother cry. “Do you see what these people were saying about you?” her mother asked. “Mom, it’s OK,” the writer, Patricia Lockwood, said. “It’s just the Internet.”

Internet cruelty is nothing new. It might only surprise children and the uninitiated, who dip into the public sphere for the first time and are shocked by what comes back at them. But Lockwood’s response reveals a generational shift. Her mother calls the commentators “people.” Lockwood identifies them as “the Internet,” a strange hybrid of human and computer, innately vicious but also ubiquitous, phenomena to be ignored.

Others have a more difficult time ignoring it.

After reaching out to her father’s mourning fans, Robin Williams’ daughter Zelda became a target of sadistic trolls – piling trauma upon trauma. She closed her Instagram account and shut down her Twitter feed. A budding journalist who had just had one of her first stories posted on her university newspaper’s website was so stunned by the comments that she decided to find another line of work. A young writer in New York City who was photographed trying to make ends meet by hauling his typewriter to the High Line and busking stories

was savaged online. (He ended up writing an article about his ordeal called "I Am an Object of Internet Ridicule, Ask Me Anything.")

The list of examples seems endless, and there doesn't seem to be a single space online that is free from overblown antagonistic invective. Once, when speaking to an almost impossibly sweet colleague, I voiced some concerns about my son's eating habits. She told me to post on an online forum for moms. Seemed like a good idea at the time. The flowing curlicues and sweet-pea-pink background of the site's design must have lulled me into some kind of trance, so the vitriol that came back was a shock. Internet moms are angry, too, real angry. And they just hate you.

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