Dear strangers,

From the moment I discovered the Internet at a young age, it has been a magical place to me. Growing up in a small town, relatively isolated from the larger world, it was a revelation how much more there was to discover – how many interesting people and ideas the world had to offer.

As a young teenager, I couldn't just waltz onto a college campus and tell a student: "Let's debate moral philosophy!" I couldn't walk up to a professor and say: "Tell me something interesting about microeconomics!" But online, I was able to meet those people, and have those conversations. I was also an avid Wikipedia editor; I contributed to open source software projects; and I often helped answer computer programming questions posed by people many years older than me.

In short, the Internet opened the door to a much larger, more diverse, and more vibrant world than I would have otherwise been able to experience; and enabled me to be an active participant in, and contributor to, that world. All of this helped me to learn, and to grow into a more well-rounded person.

Moreover, as a survivor of childhood rape, I was acutely aware that any time I interacted with someone in the physical world, I was risking my physical body. The Internet gave me a refuge from that fear. I was

under no illusion that only good people used the Internet; but I knew that, if I said "no" to someone online, they couldn't physically reach through the screen and hold a weapon to my head, or worse. I saw the miles of copper wires and fiber-optic cables between me and other people as a kind of shield – one that empowered me to be less isolated than my trauma and fear would have otherwise allowed.

I launched Omegle when I was 18 years old, and still living with my parents. It was meant to build on the things I loved about the Internet, while introducing a form of social spontaneity that I felt didn't exist elsewhere. If the Internet is a manifestation of the "global village", Omegle was meant to be a way of strolling down a street in that village, striking up conversations with the people you ran into along the way.

The premise was rather straightforward: when you used Omegle, it would randomly place you in a chat with someone else. These chats could be as long or as short as you chose. If you didn't want to talk to a particular person, for whatever reason, you could simply end the chat and – if desired – move onto another chat with someone else. It was the idea of "meeting new people" distilled down to almost its platonic ideal.

Building on what I saw as the intrinsic safety benefits of the Internet, users were anonymous to each other by default. This made chats more self-contained, and made it less likely that a malicious person would be able to track someone else down off-site after their chat ended.

I didn't really know what to expect when I launched Omegle. Would anyone even care about some Web site that an 18 year old kid made in his bedroom in his parents' house in Vermont, with no marketing budget? But it became popular almost instantly after launch, and grew organically from there, reaching millions of daily users. I believe this had something to do with meeting new people being a basic human need, and with Omegle being among the best ways to fulfill that need. As the saying goes: "If you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door."

Over the years, people have used Omegle to explore foreign cultures; to get advice about their lives from impartial third parties; and to help alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation. I've even heard stories of soulmates meeting on Omegle, and getting married. Those are only some of the highlights.

Unfortunately, there are also lowlights. Virtually every tool can be used for good or for evil, and that is especially true of communication tools, due to their innate flexibility. The telephone can be used to wish your grandmother "happy birthday", but it can also be used to call in a bomb threat. There can be no honest accounting of Omegle without acknowledging that some people misused it, including to commit unspeakably heinous crimes.

I believe in a responsibility to be a "good Samaritan", and to implement reasonable measures to fight crime and other misuse. That is exactly what Omegle did. In addition to the basic safety feature of anonymity, there was a great deal of moderation behind the scenes, including state-of-the-art AI operating in concert with a wonderful team of human moderators. Omegle punched above its weight in content moderation, and I'm proud of what we accomplished.

Omegle's moderation even had a positive impact beyond the site. Omegle worked with law enforcement agencies, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, to help put evildoers in prison where they belong. There are "people" rotting behind bars right now thanks in part to evidence that Omegle proactively collected against them, and tipped the authorities off to.

All that said, the fight against crime isn't one that can ever truly be won. It's a never-ending battle that must be fought and re-fought every day; and even if you do the very best job it is possible for you to do, you may make a sizable dent, but you won't "win" in any absolute sense of that word. That's heartbreaking, but it's also a basic lesson of criminology, and one that I think the vast majority of people understand on some level. Even superheroes, the fictional characters that our culture imbues with special powers as a form of wish fulfillment in the fight against crime, don't succeed at eliminating crime altogether.

In recent years, it seems like the whole world has become more ornery. Maybe that has something to do with the pandemic, or with political disagreements. Whatever the reason, people have become faster to attack, and slower to recognize each other's shared humanity. One aspect of this has been a constant barrage of attacks on communication services, Omegle included, based on the behavior of a malicious subset of users.

To an extent, it is reasonable to question the policies and practices of any place where crime has occurred. I have always welcomed constructive feedback; and indeed, Omegle implemented a number of improvements based on such feedback over the years. However, the recent attacks have felt anything but constructive. The only way to please these people is to stop offering the service. Sometimes they say so, explicitly and avowedly; other times, it can be inferred from their act of setting standards that are not humanly achievable. Either way, the net result is the same.

Omegle is the direct target of these attacks, but their ultimate victim is *you*: all of you out there who have used, or would have used, Omegle to improve your lives, and the lives of others. When they say Omegle shouldn't exist, they are really saying that you shouldn't be allowed to use it; that you shouldn't be allowed to meet random new people online. That idea is anathema to the ideals I cherish – specifically, to the bedrock principle of a free society that, when restrictions are imposed to prevent crime, the burden of those restrictions must not be targeted at innocent victims or potential victims of crime.

Consider the idea that society ought to force women to dress modestly in order to prevent rape. One counter-argument is that rapists don't really target women based on their clothing; but a more powerful counter-argument is that, irrespective of what rapists do, women's rights should remain intact. If society robs women of their rights to bodily autonomy and self-expression based on the actions of rapists – even if it does so with the best intentions in the world – then society is practically doing the work of rapists for them.

Fear can be a valuable tool, guiding us away from danger. However, fear can also be a mental cage that keeps us from all of the things that make life worth living. Individuals and families must be allowed to strike the right balance for themselves, based on their own unique circumstances and needs. A world of mandatory fear is a world ruled by fear – a dark place indeed.

I've done my best to weather the attacks, with the interests of Omegle's users – and the broader principle – in mind. If something as simple as meeting random new people is forbidden, what's next? That is far and away removed from anything that could be considered a reasonable compromise of the principle I outlined. Analogies are a limited tool, but a physical-world analogy might be shutting down Central Park because crime occurs there – or perhaps more provocatively, destroying the universe because it contains evil. A healthy, free society cannot endure when we are collectively afraid of each other to this extent.

Unfortunately, what is right doesn't always prevail. As much as I wish circumstances were different, the stress and expense of this fight – coupled with the existing stress and expense of operating Omegle, and fighting its misuse – are simply too much. Operating Omegle is no longer sustainable, financially nor psychologically. Frankly, I don't want to have a heart attack in my 30s.

The battle for Omegle has been lost, but the war against the Internet rages on. Virtually every online communication service has been subject to the same kinds of attack as Omegle; and while some of them are much larger companies with much greater resources, they all have their breaking point somewhere. I worry that, unless the tide turns soon, the Internet I fell in love with may cease to exist, and in its place, we will have something closer to a souped-up version of TV – focused largely on passive consumption, with much less opportunity for active participation and genuine human connection. If that sounds like a bad idea to you, please consider donating to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, an organization that fights for your rights online.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you to everyone who used Omegle for positive purposes, and to

everyone who contributed to the site's success in any way. I'm so sorry I couldn't keep fighting for you.

I thank A.M. for opening my eyes to the human cost of Omegle.

Sincerely,
Leif K-Brooks
Founder, Omegle.com LLC

To contact Omegle, please visit here for more information.