



The question facing Hacker News is whether the site's original tech-intellectual culture can be responsibly scaled up to make space for a more inclusive, wider-ranging vision of technology. Illustration by Scott Gelber

LETTER FROM SILICON VALLEY

THE LONELY WORK OF MODERATING HACKER NEWS

Can a human touch make Silicon Valley's biggest discussion forum a more thoughtful place?

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Open-plan offices offer few pleasures; one of them is snooping on other people's browsing habits. When, years ago, I began working for tech companies in San Francisco, I noticed that my co-workers were always scrolling through a beige, text-only Web site that resembled a nineteen-nineties Internet forum. They were reading Hacker News—a link aggregator and message board that is something of a Silicon Valley institution. Technologists in Silicon Valley assume familiarity with Hacker News, just as New Yorkers do with the *New York Post* and the *New York Times*. For some, it's the first Web site they pull up in the morning; it captures the mix of technical obsession, business ambition, and aspirational curiosity that's typical of the Valley. On any given day, its top links might include a Medium post about technical hiring; a 1997 article from *Outside* magazine about

freezing to death; an open-source virtual private network hosted on GitHub; an academic paper, from 2006, about compiler construction; an announcement from Facebook's corporate communications team; a personal blog post about Linux kernels, and another about selling Vidalia onions on the Internet. Nearly all the software engineers I know check it religiously. Not one of them has a neutral opinion about it.

Like many of the software products that have shaped the Valley, Hacker News began as a side project. In 2007, the venture capitalist Paul Graham, who was then the president of the startup accelerator Y Combinator—an early investor in Dropbox, Stripe, Reddit, Twitch, and other companies—built the site as a way to experiment with Arc, a new programming language that he was co-authoring. Originally, Graham named the site Startup News. He hoped that it would serve as a new home for the startup founders and “would-be founders” who had once gathered on Reddit, before that site grew too popular to feel like a community. Among other benefits, he imagined that Startup News might help him find worthy entrepreneurs. (“There are a number of Reddit users that I know only by their usernames, but I know must be smart from the things they’ve written,” he explained, in his launch announcement. “We’re counting on the same phenomenon to help us decide who to fund.”) Within a few months, though, Graham found that startup-centric conversation had its limits. He renamed the site Hacker News, and expanded its focus to include “anything that good hackers would find interesting . . . anything that gratifies one’s intellectual curiosity.” (Hacker News is still owned by Y Combinator.)

The site was intentionally simple. It offered a dynamic list of links, submitted by users, each of which could be expanded into its own unique comment thread. Readers could upvote or downvote links and comments, and the top thirty links would be featured on the front page. The guidelines specified that most non-tech-related news—political news, in particular—was off topic. Users discussed the merits of relational databases, the complexities of co-founder relationships, and the pros and cons of dropping out of college. They exchanged screenshots of their work environments and compared their results on a “nerd quiz” that asked them to name a programming language for every letter of the alphabet. They commented on Graham’s essays about programming and entrepreneurship—“Like chess or painting or writing novels,” he wrote, “making money is a very specialized skill”—and shared advice on how to get into Y Combinator.

At first, the site attracted about sixteen hundred daily visitors, and Graham moderated and maintained it himself. Today, around five million people read Hacker News each month, and it’s grown more difficult to moderate. The technical discussions remain varied and can be insightful. But social, cultural, and political conversations, which, despite the guidelines, have proliferated, tend to devolve. A recent comment thread about a Times article, “YouTube to Remove Thousands of Videos Pushing Extreme Views,” yielded a response likening journalism and propaganda; a muddled juxtaposition of pornography and Holocaust denial; a vague side conversation about the average I.Q. of Hacker News commenters; and confused analogies between white supremacists and Black Lives Matter activists. In April, when a story about Katie Bouman, an M.I.T. researcher who helped develop a technology that captured the first photo of a black hole, rose to the front page, users combed through her code on GitHub in an effort to undermine the weight of her contributions.

The site’s now characteristic tone of performative erudition—hyperrational, dispassionate, contrarian, authoritative—often masks a deeper recklessness. Ill-advised citations proliferate; thought experiments abound; humane arguments are dismissed as emotional or irrational. Logic, applied narrowly, is used to justify broad moral positions. The most admired arguments are made with data, but the origins, veracity, and malleability of those data tend to be ancillary concerns. The message-board intellectualism that might once have impressed V.C. observers like Graham has developed into an intellectual style all its own. Hacker News readers who

visit the site to learn how engineers and entrepreneurs talk, and what they talk about, can find themselves immersed in conversations that resemble the output of duelling Markov bots trained on libertarian economics blogs, “The Tim Ferriss Show,” and the work of Yuval Noah Harari.

People have been trying to outsmart one another on Internet forums for as long as there have been Internet forums. Still, Hacker News has an unusually wide influence. Landing a blog post or personal project on the front page is a badge of honor for many technologists, and the site has become a regional export: ninety per cent of its traffic comes from outside the Bay Area, and a third of its users are in Europe. The site is now a portal to tech culture for millions of people. At the same time, it has become a punch line and a punching bag for tech workers and engineers who see it as a locus of hubris, myopia, and exclusivity. A word that comes up frequently among its critics is “toxic.”

Picturing the moderators responsible for steering conversation on Hacker News, I imagined a team of men who proudly self-identify as neoliberals and are active in the effective-altruism movement. (I assumed they’d be white men; it never occurred to me that women, or people of color, could be behind the site.) Meeting them, I feared, would be like participating in a live-action comment thread about the merits of Amazon Web Services or whether women should be referred to as “females.” “Debate us!” I imagined them saying, in unison, from their Aeron chairs.

The site’s real-life moderators are Daniel Gackle and Scott Bell, two wildly polite old friends. On Facebook and [YouTube](#), moderation is often done reactively and anonymously, by teams of overworked contractors; on [Reddit](#), teams of employees purge whole user communities like surgeons removing tumors. Gackle and Bell, by contrast, practice a personal, focussed, and slow approach to moderation, which they see as a conversational act. They treat their community like an encounter group or Esalen workshop; often, they correspond with individual Hacker News readers over e-mail, coaching and encouraging them in long, heartfelt exchanges.

Gackle and Bell met in Calgary, in the early two-thousands, at a local user group for the rarefied programming language Lisp. (Arc, the language in which Hacker News is written, is a descendant of it.) Gackle, whose name is pronounced “Gack-lee” and who declined to share his age, is a muscular, bald, and loquacious father of two and a devoted fan of the Canadian sketch-comedy show “The Kids in the Hall.” Bell, who is thirty-four, is willowy and soft-spoken, with closely buzzed hair and tattoos that peek out from beneath his cardigans. The two often finish each other’s sentences; they sometimes dress, accidentally, in matching outfits. (Bell attributes this to office-wide “sartorial mimetics.”) Online and in person, Gackle is chatty, Bell reserved. They are reluctant, protective spokespeople. Pressed to describe Hacker News, they do so by means of extravagant, sometimes tender metaphors: the site is a “social ecosystem,” a “hall of mirrors,” a “public park or garden,” a “fractal tree.”

“Hacker News is quite a counterintuitive thing,” Gackle said, in a conference room in Y Combinator’s San Francisco office. “At least how we see it, from our perspective, it’s often pretty different from how it appears from the outside.”

“It doesn’t grab you right away, just on the surface,” Bell said, his hands cradling a mug of tea. “It takes a little bit to get a feel for what it is.”

“The Hacker News front page is a product of a certain tension,” Gackle said. “There’s multiple tug-of-wars going on over the types of stories people would like to see. The one consensus is that it’s not as good as it used to be. I feel bad when people say that, but I also realize that, in a way, it indicates a certain attachment.”

“There are some people who don’t realize Hacker News is moderated at all,” Bell continued. “There are some people with whom we’ve been e-mailing for four or five years. My guess is that the distribution is somewhat mostly in the middle. But I don’t know.” He turned to Gackle, looking grave. “I don’t have a strong sense of that. Do you, Dan?”

“I don’t think I can answer it,” Gackle said, intently. “One of the things I’ve learned is that almost all of the generalizations are wrong. And I’ve learned this because people love to post generalizations about Hacker News to Hacker News.”

In an Emacs file, Gackle collects a list of contradictory statements that people have used to describe Hacker News. (“SJW cesspool”; “a haven for alt-right and libertarian people”; “If you don’t support neoliberal fantasies, your comments probably aren’t welcome here”; “The only thing is left is to change Hacker News icon to Che Guevara emblem.”) He and Bell assert their own opinions in subtle ways. Recently, they made some small changes to the Hacker News guidelines, which have always hewed closely to those that Graham drafted in 2007. To one about throwaway accounts—acceptable for sensitive information but discouraged as a regular practice—they added the reminder “HN is a community.” In another—“Comments should get more civil and substantive, not less, as a topic becomes more divisive”—they changed the phrase “civil and substantive” to “thoughtful and substantive.”

Recently, an essay in the *New Atlantis* titled “Do Elephants Have Souls?,” from 2013, hit the front page. The piece generated immediate resistance. Commenters responded literally to the question posed in the title and bickered about the word “soul.” Conversation spiralled, with users making arguments about Cartesian metaphysics and quoting Socrates. “Why is such an unscientific question so high on HN?” one commenter asked. “Or to rephrase, if we don’t know what a soul is, how can we hope to answer it WRT elephants? So how and why should a reasoning person rate an article like this?”

“The article itself is just this wonderful exploration into the literature around elephants,” Gackle told me. “I don’t know how anybody could read that article and not just go, like, ‘Wow’—I mean, at least if you’re interested in elephants in any way.” Posting under his Hacker News username, dang, he staged a moderate intervention. “All: This article is not about souls,” he wrote. “It’s about elephants, humans, how we relate to elephants, how they relate to us, how humans relate to non-humans.” He continued:

It is erudite and beautiful. It uses the astonishing literature about elephants to ask about ourselves, them, and the world. “Soul” here is a trope for aspects of humanness that we may or may not have in common. Usually, we just edit titles that are triggering people. If I were to do that here, I might rename it “Elephants and Anthropomorphism.” But when an article is this rich, moving, even profound, taking away its title would maim it. It bears a much better discussion than the thread has given it so far, so please let’s talk about what’s interesting and stay off the metaphysics.

One reader, with the username solipsism, objected to Gackle’s claims about what was and wasn’t interesting. “Most would agree there’s a point at which moderation goes too far,” solipsism wrote. “I can’t tell if you’re making an appeal as a person, or making a decree as a moderator. I read the article, and it’s absolutely full of metaphysics. . . . These metaphysical topics interest me, and apparently they interested the writer, even if they don’t interest you.”

Gackle conceded that his dismissal was unfair. He removed the reference to metaphysics from his comment. “The point is simply that the article deserves a better discussion,” he wrote, with breezy, cheerful weariness. “I’m making an appeal as a moderator person.”

ell and Gackle didn't set out to become forum moderators. At Stanford, Gackle wrote a master's thesis on Pyotr Vyazemsky and Nikolay Karamzin, two nineteenth-century Russian poets; Bell studied network engineering, at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, after a stint performing in punk, hardcore, and metalcore bands. When they met, in the Lisp user group, they both were working as coders and unfulfilled by their office jobs. Gackle later told me that he sees frustration at work as part of the DNA of Hacker News. "The instinct that there simply has to be a better way to build systems, and the yearning to connect with it," he said. "If you can't do that at your job, and few can, then you can at least dream and read and argue about it on the Internet. Hacker News is the inverse image of many people's jobs, overlaid on top of each other—an escape valve for frustrated idealists."

Bell had discovered Lisp while staving off boredom in a college computer-science course (he read technical documentation to pass the time); Gackle learned about it as a child, in *Byte* magazine. "When I program in other languages, even ones I know well," he said, "I feel like I've flown to Jupiter. Gravity is so strong that every step is a struggle. In Lisp, you can dance." In the user group, they found they had overlapping intellectual interests and complementary programming skills. Gackle worked at what he calls "a sort of product factory" where he built "little Potemkin products that would mostly get killed." He had come to feel that he was helping to build software for users who didn't need it; what they needed, he believed, was a customizable spreadsheet that improved on Microsoft Excel. ("Excel was these users' Garden of Eden, where they could make their own spreadsheets and play with them in endless bliss, but they were cast out of Eden because their problems were too complex," he told me.) In 2008, he and Bell formed a startup, Skysheet, with the mission of building a Web-based spreadsheet. A few months later, they were accepted into Y Combinator, which they'd learned about through Graham's essays. They moved to Silicon Valley at the height of the recession.

Skysheet's Y Combinator "class" of sixteen companies included Heyzap, a mobile-ad network that was acquired in 2015, for forty-five million dollars, and a struggling travel startup that would go on to become Airbnb. At the end of the program, the other founders in the group voted Skysheet the third most likely to succeed. But, after Y Combinator, Bell and Gackle found it difficult to fund-raise. It was the spring of 2009, and the market was bottoming out. "We learned that fund-raising means presenting yourself as impressive, desirable, and just about to be huge, even if the person you're talking to is so mistaken as not to invest," Gackle recalled. (Hearing this, I thought of the rhetorical style so widely deployed on Hacker News.) "Perhaps it's partly the Canadianness, but this does not come naturally to either Scott or me." Eventually, they raised a hundred and eighty thousand dollars and moved back to Canada to build the software. Some of the technical challenges were more complex than they'd anticipated; there was no existing literature to guide them. As delays mounted, Gackle had panic attacks nightly.

By 2012, Skysheet had yet to launch a public product and had run out of money. Bell made the painful decision to leave the company, taking a job with a software consultancy. Gackle forged ahead. "My feeling was I would rather fail at this than succeed at anything else," he told me. Later that year, Graham reached out with an invitation to work on Hacker News, which, at that point, had nearly two million users. "I said no, because I knew it would mean no longer being able to think about spreadsheet software all day," Gackle said.

That August, Gackle went for a hike in the Rockies. He slipped and fell on a mountainside, tumbling downhill, bouncing off the rocks. Somehow, he rolled to a stop against a boulder. Shaken, he hiked home. "It jolted me deeply, and after that I admitted to myself that I also was out of money and needed a job," Gackle recalled. He reached out to Graham: "I told him yes, but with a feeling of unfinished business about this technical problem, which I still carry." He became a behind-the-scenes moderator of

Hacker News. A couple of years later, he hired Bell. In a way, they were perfectly prepared. Having briefly lived the dream and failed, they would now immerse themselves in a culture in which winning—an argument, a market—is a top priority.

Gackle and Bell are the only Y Combinator employees working on the site. In addition to moderating it, they maintain its technical infrastructure. (When I mentioned, at a party, that I was writing about Hacker News, an entrepreneur blurted, “It’s the fastest Web site I use!”) They post in comment threads, defending commenters who encounter combative or aggressive behavior and content that’s been downvoted, flagged, or misunderstood; they sometimes spend hours a day e-mailing with individual users, helping them use Hacker News more conscientiously and effectively. (“Present this not primarily as a moral appeal . . . but as an intellectual one,” Gackle wrote, over e-mail, to a user who was soliciting help for a man who had recently been exonerated after eleven years in prison for a crime he did not commit. “You should frame it as a puzzle or an engineering problem. That will engage the community’s curiosity, which is your only hope for getting a real discussion going.”)

“The only way to learn it is to get it wrong, and, when you get it wrong, you get flamed,” Gackle said, in the conference room. “And you get flamed so hard that it’s like being stung by a swarm of bees. It’s sort of like operant conditioning. If you put yourself in that position, where you’re getting stung on a daily basis, you’re soon going to start learning what makes the bees less likely. . . .” he paused. “Or, actually, I like bees. I would say ‘wasps’—what makes the wasps less likely to bite you.”

“The other way to learn is to let someone else get stung first,” Bell said, quietly.

In December, 2016—about a month after Donald Trump’s election—[an article](#) from the *Washington Post* hit Hacker News’ front page. The article covered a study of China’s “one child” policy, conducted by researchers at the University of Kansas and Shaanxi Normal University, that claimed that female children who were long believed to have been aborted or killed in infancy were simply not registered with the government at birth. The ensuing conversation rapidly devolved into arguments over whether or not institutional barriers exist; whether it was acceptable for users to correct the grammar of commenters whose first language was not English; whether sublimated testosterone was responsible for jihad and sexual assaults in Germany; the merits of Jill Stein; and voter fraud.

“Every single time poll restrictions have been proposed, it’s been for racist causes,” one user wrote, in response to a commenter with the username *rokosbasilisk*, who was advocating for a voter-identification system. “You yourself may not be a hooded member of the KKK, but you are pushing for the same things, and that’s all that matters.”

“so india wanted to voter id to prevent black people from voting?” *rokosbasilisk* responded. “seriously the race stuff just doesnt matter if we follow the indian model.”

“I have more faith in black people than you i guess, and think they are perfectly capable of getting an id,” a third user wrote.

“This has taken us into sociopolitical hell,” Bell posted, “and Hacker News isn’t that kind of site.” He “detached” some of the more inflammatory conversations from the main thread, hiding them from view.

That discussion, and also several others that emerged in the weeks after the election, prompted Gackle and Bell to experiment with an idea they called Political Detox Week. For seven days, political stories and threads would be considered off-topic and flagged by the moderators. The experiment was met with both relief and derision. “Political discourse is antithetical to rational, intelligent discussion,” one user wrote, in a comment that was upvoted to the top of the thread about the detox week.

“Technological topics are always interesting to me . . . I love that there’s this corner of the Internet where I can participate in a reasoned, interesting technical community. Please don’t ruin it with politics, especially the polarizing American variant.”

Down the page, another user expressed disdain for the experiment. “The idea that we can carve out a space that exists outside of politics and ideology is delusional,” the user wrote. “Squelching political discussion won’t cause us all to transcend ideology, it’ll just make it impossible to discuss or critique a dominant ideology whenever one shows up in someone’s unstated assumptions.”

“Of course it’s delusional,” Gackle replied. “And still we have to moderate this site.” Three days later, he announced that Political Detox Week would be coming to an end. They’d learned, among other things, that “it’s impossible to define ‘politics’ with any consensus because that question is itself highly political.”

The most ideologically motivated or extreme posts and comments on Hacker News—an interview piece from Quillette titled “Understanding Victimhood Culture”; a link to a video of James Damore and Jordan Peterson in conversation; one user telling another that all Jewish people should relocate to Israel—tend to get flagged by the community or the site’s anti-abuse systems, many of which Bell and Gackle have written themselves. (Flagged posts are removed from view, though they remain searchable by URL; flagged comments are rendered in pale gray text, and only visible to logged-in users who have chosen to see “dead” comments.) Still, as an occasional reader, I have noticed certain trends. When stories that focus on structural barriers faced by women in the workplace, or on diversity in tech, or on race or masculinity—stories, admittedly, that are more intriguing to me, a person interested in the humanities, than stories on technical topics—hit the front page, users often flag them, presumably for being off topic, so fast that hardly any comments accrue. When I shared these impressions with Gackle and Bell, they looked distressed. I asked if these were problems that they felt they could, or should, be controlling or trying to change on the site.

“From our perspective, the big surprise is how little control we actually have. We have to play our cards very carefully and very wisely, or even that control will sort of evaporate,” Gackle said. “There’s often a strong wish to solve these contentious problems by changing the software, and, to the extent that we’ve tried things like that, we haven’t found it to work. What does seem to work better is personal interaction, over and over and over again, with individual users. That, case by case by case, seems to move the needle. But it’s very slow.”

“If we’re trying to change something deep, the ingredient is time,” Bell said. “Patience allows us to be ambitious—to imagine people being more kind to each other, for example. It sounds kind of crazy.”

For Gackle and Bell, moderating Hacker News has presented an opportunity for self-work. Together, they have read up on nonviolent communication, sociology, and psychotherapy. (Bell found Carl Rogers’s “On Becoming a Person”—a 1961 book about personal growth that became a bible of the humanistic-psychology movement—particularly valuable.) Gackle is drawn to healing workshops; Bell, to Indian philosophy. They seem, at times, to be applying old, humanist techniques to a culture obsessed with the future.

“Something that’s deeply interesting, I think, to both of us,” Gackle said, “is the way in which one can arrive at a nonviolent reaction to somebody by having greater awareness of the—” He paused. “I’ll say violence in oneself. By which I mean the kind of agitation and activation that is causing people, including ourselves, to react in a kind of fight-or-flight way that leads to misunderstanding, conflict, and, ultimately, Internet flame wars. This seemingly trivial stuff, about people getting mad at other

people on the Internet, is actually tied to this much deeper and more fascinating process of what goes on between people and what goes on in oneself.”

“It’s another opportunity for us to influence the system, by exemplifying the kind of patterns of discussion that we would like to see,” Bell said. “We just want to constantly set an example.”

In April, the *Times* ran an essay by Sarah Lewis, a Harvard professor, titled “The Racial Bias Built Into Photography.” The essay was a historical inquiry, inspecting lens development and film-emulsion technology, and was written in the first person. When it landed on Hacker News, users immediately rushed to flag it as off topic. Gackle changed the title to “Photography and racial bias,” and turned off flagging, which restored the essay to its original position on the front page.

“I take issue with this article simply because photography isn’t a technology at all,” one user commented. “It is an art that uses technology. There are millions of pictures of people of all races that look perfectly fine. I take issue with stirring up people for no reason. If a maker of paints in the 1800s owned slaves does that mean that painting (then, now, in the future) is racist? How ridiculous can we get?” Another user posted the opening lines of Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden.” A third wrote, “The people who invented the tech (US/Europe/Japan) optimised it for consumers around them. Why hate on inventors who create something cool just because it doesn’t quite work as well for all groups of people? Surely this also left a gap in the market—someone could have optimized film for darker skin tones and made a lot of money?”

“‘Hating’ is much too strong a word to describe the article, so much so that invoking it in a thread like this is a big upping of the flamewar ante,” Gackle replied, in the thread. He pointed the user to the site guidelines, encouraging more constructive input. He acknowledged that it was “hard to resist” inflammatory language “when a topic stirs up powerful emotions”:

This creates a need for relief, and venting that energy in the form of extreme words is one way to get relief. Unfortunately, it doesn’t relieve anything at a community level. It just tosses the hot potato around in a way that only makes the potato hotter and more painful to the one who catches it next. What provides relief at a community level is when people find ability in themselves to acknowledge truth in what the other is saying.

Over the years, Gackle and Bell have come to recognize their own triggers—patterns of online discourse that enrage them, depress them, or make them want to walk away. “In terms of the psychological experience of doing this job, all of your buttons are being pushed on a regular basis,” Gackle said. He now knows that it will be hard for him to keep his composure when he is being falsely accused or completely misread. (“That’s pretty much what some of the users do all day—accuse the moderators of doing something that they didn’t,” he said.)

Bell, for his part, becomes soul-weary when exposed to the unceasing spectacle of “people treating other people poorly.” “My reaction for things that get me is depressive,” Bell said. “Rather than respond outwardly, I have that internal depressive response. The issue for me is that this thing I’m very sensitive to is present in nearly everything.”

Gackle looked on as Bell spoke, then turned to me. “The sheer quantity of it is so overwhelming that one does have a depressive reaction, a hopeless reaction to it, at times,” he said. “I realized at some point that my feelings about it were like the feelings of a child trying to keep the family together. When the family is five million people, that’s a pretty tall order. It isn’t something that’s achievable. One has to learn to let go of them.”

“Don’t worry, dang is not adding anything to the conversation,” a user wrote, in the thread about race and photography. “He just enjoys virtue signaling. Hard!”

As Hacker News has grown, it has become the subject of both scrutiny and parody. A Twitter account, @shit_hn_says, highlights standout quotes from the comments section. (“If you want to do business with Iran, why don’t you just use Bitcoin?”) A hashtag, #HNwatch, collects screenshots of racist, sexist, xenophobic, and otherwise offensive or bizarre Hacker News comments. (“As a white man, I have concerns that my ethnic/gender group is being persecuted.” “In a way, the brains of startup founders and those below poverty lines work in the same way.”) Detractors refer to it as “the orange Web site,” a way of demonstrating both insider familiarity and exasperation.

N-gate, a satirical Web site with the slogan “We can’t both be right” (a NAND gate is a kind of logic gate that only outputs “false” if all of its inputs read “true”), offers a weekly summary of Hacker News discussions, dubbed “webshit weekly.” The N-gate entry about a Hacker News discussion of a *Times* article on the crashes of two Boeing 737 airliners, in Indonesia and Ethiopia, is typical. “Discussing a pair of crashes that killed almost three hundred and fifty people,” it reads, “Hacker News can’t decide whether the failure was one of user experience or branding. Other Hackernews”—as it calls commenters—“think that this plane would have worked better if it were designed by programmers with a tendency to work late for free. A majority of the comments are Hackernews incorrecting one another about FAA regulations, avionics, and lift.”

The proprietor of N-gate is an engineer who grew up in Palo Alto and now lives in the Pacific Northwest, where he works in high-performance computing. He agreed to exchange e-mails on condition of anonymity. “Almost every post deals with the same topics: these are people who spend their lives trying to identify all the ways they can extract money from others without quite going to jail,” he wrote. “They’re people who are convinced that they are too special for rules, and too smart for education. They don’t regard themselves as inhabiting the world the way other people do; they’re secret royalty, detached from society’s expectations and unfailingly outraged when faced with normal consequences for bad decisions. Society, and especially economics, is a logic puzzle where you just have to find the right set of loopholes to win the game. Rules are made to be slipped past, never stopping to consider why someone might have made those rules to start with. Silicon Valley has an ethics problem, and ‘Hacker’ ‘News’ is where it’s easiest to see.”

For decades, the phrase “Eternal September” has been used to describe the tipping point for a message board or online community—the inclusion, or invasion, of new users who dramatically change the existing subculture. (The term originated in September, 1993, after America Online made Usenet, a decades-old message-board system, accessible to many of its members, who were new to the Internet.) The creation of Startup News was a response to Reddit’s Eternal September; some of the problems with which Gackle and Bell are grappling can be traced to a similar phenomenon at Hacker News. The question they face now is whether the site’s original culture can be responsibly scaled up, or adapted, to make space for a more inclusive, wider-ranging vision of technology.

Gackle and Bell continue to believe in the value of “intellectual curiosity” as a goal. They speak of it more as a relative state than a fixed condition, using terms like “freshness” and “excitement” and “surprise and delight.” They are hopeful that, as Hacker News continues to grow, it will become, simultaneously, more diverse, more interesting, and more humane, while remaining in some fundamental sense a single community with a common goal. “The much larger sites, like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, all scaled

by sharding,” Gackle told me, over e-mail. “HN has no shards. We have no social graph either. Everybody is in it together whether they like it or not.”

“Intellectual curiosity is everywhere, and it’s present in all demographics,” Bell said, in the conference room. “We want Hacker News to grow in all demographics, because there’s just intellectually interesting contributions from all of those communities—a greater diversity of content, of conversations, of topics, et cetera.” (He and Gackle have discussed diversifying their team, and adding a third moderator who is non-white, non-male, and, Bell joked, “non-balding.” Gackle clarified: “We’ve talked to each other about that. But we wouldn’t make it a requirement.”) And yet the influx of outsiders doesn’t just change a community; it exposes its assumptions. The tech industry as a whole is having its own Eternal September. The world, with all its experiences and opinions, has come flooding in, and technologists are now reassessing the consequences of the systems and structures they have built or inherited. Some of these systems are social, and include the general modes of thought and expression that Hacker News embodies.

Outside the conference room, it was early evening. Through the frosted glass, we could see the shapes of Y Combinator’s employees shrugging on their backpacks and depositing their mugs in the kitchen sink. “It might seem like ‘intellectual curiosity’ isn’t primarily an ethical concern,” Gackle said. “But it actually turns out that those things are deeply related. There’s something about the way that curiosity works: it needs a kind of gentleness.”

A few weeks after meeting with Gackle and Bell, I checked Hacker News to see what commenters were saying about a *Times* story on the Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes’s antitrust work with the Federal Trade Commission. Users speculated about Hughes’s personal motivations and asked whether he had the knowledge necessary to help the government break up Facebook. Elsewhere on the site, people discussed California’s housing crisis (“The whole problem could be solved if we gave people the choice of voting where they work rather than where they live”) and a new scripting language, ChaiScript (“There’s no inherent reason a header-only library should significantly impact compile times, aside from the fact that the authors usually don’t have the foresight to make it efficient”). Skipping from thread to thread felt a bit like arriving at a party where half the room was sipping non-alcoholic shrubs and the other half had spent the afternoon tailgating in a stadium parking lot.

In the comments for a research paper, on ScienceDaily, about the evolutionary factors that may have been responsible for making humans the only mammals prone to heart attacks, a user criticized the study for having been conducted on mice. “Another couch biologist, there’s one in every thread,” posted a second user. “Thanks for all the observations, we really hadn’t thought of any of that, you single-handedly salvaged modern biological research!”

Gackle stepped in to ask the user not to break the site guidelines, and to behave more in the intended spirit of Hacker News. “Fair enough,” the user wrote; I felt a small rush of triumph, and pride, on Gackle’s behalf. Then, from the user, a follow-up question: “Why is this low-effort criticism of biology allowed?”

“It’s allowed in the sense that people are allowed to be wrong and/or ignorant because that’s what most of us are on most topics,” Gackle replied. “We can’t stop that any more than King Canute”—the ancient king of the North Sea who demonstrated the limits of his power by trying, in an ironic spirit, to command the sea—“could stop the waves. The important question is, what’s the best way to handle it if we want to have an internet forum that doesn’t suck? Experience teaches that the answer is: the patient supply of correct information by people who do know about a topic.”

I thought about the relentless patience and good faith that this style of moderation work required. I pictured Bell and Gackle as swimmers in a resistance pool, doing slow crawls against the currents of online discourse. I hoped the project of Hacker News was worth the effort. I wondered if their work might show that tech really does need humanism—that better online communities can be built one relationship at a time. Then my eyes moved down the thread, where a third user had left a new comment. It read: “King Canute was supposed to stop the tide, you couch alluder.”



Anna Wiener is a contributing writer to The New Yorker, covering Silicon Valley, startup culture, and technology. She is the author of “Uncanny Valley.”

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