

# deluks917 on Online Communities

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November 20, 2018

This is part 1 of an interview with my fascinating friend [deluks917](#). It covers online communities, weirdos, freethinkers, and Uyghurs. Stay tuned for part 2 in which we talk about Buddhism, archetypes, superego poisoning, and Moana.

Since I have a face for radio and a voice for blogging, our conversation is transcribed for your pleasure and edited for readability. This is my second [transcribed interview](#); suggestions for other people to chat with are welcome!

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**Jacob: I met you through the [New York rationalist meetup](#), which now often takes place in your apartment. How did you even become part of this world?**

deluks917: I had sporadically attended the New York meetups in the past, and then I was away in Pennsylvania for three years. I had been reading [SlateStarCodex](#) and commented under a couple of different names there. Later I made the [SlateStarCodex Discord](#), and it took off around the time I came back to New York. The stars aligned. There was a room in a rationalist house that needed to be filled and no one else was going to take it.

**For me, rationality filled a hole that had always existed in my life. Being nerdy and a systematizing thinker I was always reading psychology books and the like, but nothing seemed quite right until I read [the Sequences](#).**

I tried reading the Sequences a couple of times, starting seriously about eight years ago. I found them pretty confusing. But then I came back later and they made more sense. It took some time for things to marinate and for my mood to change.

I have always been part of nerdy communities, either online or IRL. I feel like my intellectual interests change pretty regularly and I happened to come back to rationality at the right time. By 2013 or so ideas about AI suddenly seemed more profound. I don't know if I was wise or foolish not to be convinced about AI risk in 2010, maybe I was just too young. But by 2013 I was pretty convinced.

**You created the SSC Discord and you do a lot of moderation of online communities. What does that involve day to day? And why do you do it?**

When I first started it, it took a lot of my time. I wanted to get things on the right track. It has progressively taken less and less time. One thing that does that still takes time is [the rationality feed](#): a daily digest of recommended rationality articles. In addition to vetting the articles, I include a short review or summary quote. Originally I started the feed to encourage people to check the SSC discord. This takes a lot of time, even though

I do get something out of reading the articles themselves.

**So what do you get out of the Discord? I tried it a couple of times, but I have several rationalist friends I can talk to live in New York, and I can read articles. I don't feel like spending a lot of time just chatting with people online. You seem to find a lot more in it than I do.**

I like talking to people in real life, but the Discord is also a community. People spend a lot of time there; they find friends. There are certain channels in the SSC Discord that don't hold my attention at all but other people find valuable. For example, the "relationships" channel which is very friendly but not very interesting to me.

People like talking to people online. I have online friends that I talk about all sorts of things with. People want to share ideas and get feedback quickly.

**What percent of your communication with friends happens online?**

75%, maybe.

**What's different between your online friends and your IRL friends?**

There's not a ton that's systematically different. A lot of it has to do with the medium. If you're a relatively introverted person, the experience of talking to someone online and IRL is completely different. I think of myself as a relatively introverted person. If I'm talking to you online I can play any music I want, at any moment I can go take a walk for a few minutes and there's no expectation that I'll respond to your PM immediately. I can be watching YouTube videos or reading SSC and tabbing over. So for someone who's introverted, it doesn't feel as mentally draining.

Also if you're someone who requires conscious effort to have good body language and eye contact, none of this applies online. That's also freeing. So those are the biggest differences. And perhaps you just don't know many people you want to talk to IRL.

**I like to think of myself as someone with a high tolerance for weirdos. I try to maintain diversity in my social circles. I occasionally hang out with anti-Semites, I'm friends with extreme rationalists who only want to talk about AI and also people who hate rationalists and think that we're some weird cult.**

A sex cult.

**A sex cult without even that much sex! Or maybe the sex is all in Berkeley.**

**So I look for weirdos, but I feel like I'm not doing a good enough job of it. There are still strong filters that seem to apply to everyone I hang out with, filters on things like IQ and interests. I feel like you're doing a much better**

**job. The diversity of minds of the people you interact with, and their backgrounds, seems huge. Do you cultivate this on purpose? How do you know so many weirdos?**

This is hard to answer while respecting privacy, but I do know some really weird people.

One answer is that spaces that attract a lot of weirdos will push away “normies”, or less weird people. This is a fundamental problem for moderators to tackle.

There’s a Discord I spent a lot of time in that started out weird, but not super weird. It was based around a certain video game. Over time it got weirder and weirder, to the point where it became pretty out there.

People were posting about crazy politics. A person who posted there a decent amount used to identify as an incel and still identifies as a violent communist revolutionary. People openly chatted about sexual fetishes. They didn’t post porn but they openly talked about their sexual fetishes. There are a lot of running jokes, like #KillAllBoomers. That kind of thing.

**I’m surprised that’s not a mainstream meme yet, #KillAllBoomers.**

People started saying that because of some NIMBY politics that Boomers are blamed for. But if you want to attract less weird people, you don’t just casually post #KillAllBoomers.

Many spaces where weird people aren’t filtered out have these sorts of memes. It explains an affinity of some very weird people to the very crude right-wing politics. For example, open support for Trump and MAGA hats are posted by people who don’t seem like normal Trump supporters. They are very far demographically from the median Trump voter.

**You think they just hate normies and all the normies they know are mainstream Democrats?**

No. I just think less weird people won’t tolerate a chat that contains pictures of anime girls wearing MAGA hats. Right-wing politics claim that space in a sort of memetic battle.

In the mainstream, high IQ intellectual culture far-right politics are very taboo. Really weird people are less likely to feel revulsion at anime girls wearing MAGA hats, even if they are on the left. If the chat was authentically right-wing in the sense of Breitbart media then they would leave. But they don’t really care about the memes.

**We live among educated, middle-class New Yorkers, so we’re deep in the blue tribe. If you’re conservative or libertarian, or if you’re aligned with Trump on some esoteric issue that’s orthogonal to politics, you need to**

**escape online to talk about it. I wonder if there's a nerdy kid in, say, Alabama, who needs a safe online space to talk about socialism.**

I would guess that the Chapo Trap House community is probably pretty weird. Tankie communities of communist apologists are also very weird.

I don't mean to say that the only spaces where you see really weird stuff are right-wing. There are online spaces of rationalists that have sexually explicit channels, where people post naked pictures of themselves. That norm that is not going to attract low openness-to-experience people. I think you see the same effects in parts of Berkeley where there's sort of an implicit acceptance of BDSM. I think that the Berkeley community is certainly weirder than the New York one.

If you're going 85 on the highway when there are people going 100 you're not that afraid of getting a speeding ticket.

**All these communities probably share some things in common, they're all nerdy, they're into games and computers. Do you feel like it's one tribe that has something in common, even if it's made up of Trump supporters talking to tankies on an anime Discord?**

I wouldn't say it's the defining focus, but one thing I really appreciate about this group of people is what I refer to as "the will to think". The will to figure things out yourself.

I contrast this to taking the outside view, or trusting in experts. Though explicit outside view thinking can also get weird. In these communities you see a lot of people who are willing to just come to their own conclusions. I find this deeply attractive.

Scott Alexander wrote a story sort of about this. There's an earring you put on and it gives you amazing advice. The first thing it says is "it's better for you if you take me off", and after that, it never warns you again. Eventually, this earring is always telling you what to do, and it's always giving you great advice – not perfect but better than what you would have come up with. And by the end, the earring is fully interlaced with your nervous system. Your brain rots because you don't need it anymore.

Let's say you and I are having a conversation about the ongoing world chess championship, even if we're not betting any money. We could talk about chess and the two players and it would be very intellectually stimulating. Or, we could just try to find fair betting odds and say that the market has already integrated anything we could talk about. Doing the latter spiritually feels like putting on the earring.

**You feel like the earring represents expert knowledge and the efficient market? I would have thought that the usual earring is social pressure. Just doing what is the median course of action among your friend group and the celebrities you follow on Twitter, the five people you spend the most time with. Outsourcing decisions and opinions to your social network.**

That's one sort of earring, but something like the efficient market is *my* earring. I'm not saying that most people are looking up betting odds for everything. But a lot of people are saying to just trust the experts.

Here is a different example. Say you are looking for a TV show to watch. People often ask for recommendations. Robin Hanson would ask: why are they doing that? Major genres, like anime or western prestige TV, have rating sites. You can just take the highest recommended shows or you can just try to figure out how to do a regression on these ratings and your preferences. That seems like its more effective than taking recommendations.

**When I tell people I'm going to Paris and they tell me I just *have* to check out this or that restaurant, I just ignore it. We have Yelp now, and it consistently recommends good restaurants for me.**

Indeed it does, and I agree with you about restaurants. But doing that for intellectual topics would feel like jabbing a dagger into my own soul. Something would be lost that's not coming back.

**In the online communities, what percent of people are non-American? I instinctively assume that everyone I meet online in rationalist spaces is an American male in his thirties even though that's a stupid assumption.**

In the SSC Discord you see many people from around the world, and we have a reasonable number of women. There's probably a decent number of women who have reasons not to state that they're women online. Even if a space is sufficiently non-sexist being a woman draws a lot of attention. You don't necessarily want to be marked by gender when chatting about rationality.

There are definitely more women than is obvious in spaces that are nerdy.

**Almost every real-life space that I'm in is also, on some level, a mating market. It's very hard to avoid. And some communities that I joined turned out to be nothing besides a mating market.**

**When I was in Chapel Hill I went to Chabad, where they ask you to join them for Jewish prayer and then you get a Friday night meal. I'm an atheist, and in Israel I avoid the Chabad people who chase me with a tefillin on Fridays, but I won't say no to a free meal! It turned that Chabad is 95% a dating service for Jews, 5% food and prayer. I showed up with a Chinese girlfriend to a Chabad event and we were stink-eyed.**

**I feel like in social contexts some chunk of my mind is always preoccupied with executing sexual strategies, and this is worrying. I don't want to be doing that. How often do you notice this happening in online spaces? Is this another reason to prefer online to IRL?**

Even in those spaces, there is some level of sexuality. If there are people who are looking to date, even if they live across oceans – we invented planes, so there's always a possibility. Banishing sexual market dynamics completely is very challenging.

But yes, it's a much lower percentage. When I'm chatting with people on the Discord I don't consciously feel like it's a mating market for me.

**Does it bother you how much processing power everybody seems to be spending on mating strategies in in-person communities?**

Yes. I have a 'galaxy brain' hammer I like to spam on these sort of problems.

Say you have a parameter that often increases more than you want. Perhaps the elephant is pushing that parameter up. My strategy as the rider is to push it down. So at normal rationalist events I try to suppress elephant-approved status or sexual strategies. At parties, I think that sexier norms are ok.

My theory is that if the elephant will push me to do something more than I want, the rider has to push back. This is also true for material standards of living. The elephant wants a porcelain, elephant-sized bathtub. You as the rider have to go the other way.

**I just wrote a post about mandatory obsessions, about the value of not having the same priorities as everyone around you. You certainly have priorities that are far from mainstream even in the rationality community, in politics for example. What are some of them?**

People in other countries. There are all sorts of policies that Americans don't seem to care that much about, where the body count is high. If the body counts were American, even if they were a third as high, people would not defend the same policies.

**So right now we have Yemen, the Uyghurs in China, trouble in the Central African Republic. We just had to suffer months of midterm coverage, and these were basically never mentioned.**

The Uyghurs are a great example. As far as I can tell, the majority of true racist concentration camp style bullshit seems to be going on in China, leaving North Korea aside. And people just don't seem to care. This is truly shocking to me.

**It's funny that we're talking about a million Uyghurs in China. 250 years ago Adam Smith wrote in The Theory of Moral Sentiments that if someone finds out that a million Chinese perished in an earthquake they would say "Oh! That's terrible!" and not lose any sleep over it. But if their little finger is to be amputated tomorrow they wouldn't be able to sleep at all.**

**So there could be a million people in China in concentration camps. But for the last 250 years at least, and probably for the entire history of our species, there's just no way to get people to care about geographically**

**remote suffering. Even Effective Altruists are remarkably uninterested in this.**

The EA community certainly doesn't seem *overly* interested. I would maybe say that preventing certain wars doesn't seem all that tractable, at least using the obvious methods. But the EA community as a whole is involved in things that seem at least as intractable and lower impact.

There is interest in trying to influence US elections. This isn't very tractable because there is already so much money in most elections, even house elections, it's hard to change the balance. In addition, it is unclear how much money in politics even helps. So trying to influence elections via money seems both intractable and not particularly high-impact.

The best steelman is that the US international order is pretty good, and you gotta break some eggs to make the US omelet. I think that's people's felt sense even if they wouldn't articulate it that way.

**Really? Take somebody who doesn't spend one second of their day thinking about Yemen. If you tell them about it they'll agree that it's terrible. And then if you say that it's actually fine because overall this US-led world order is pretty good they'll ask what the fuck you're talking about, it's horrible!**

I agree, it's horrible!

**It's like the galaxy brain meme. Small brain is not knowing about Yemen, large brain is feeling bad for Yemen, and galaxy brain is "you've got to break some eggs".**

I've definitely run into the explicit version of the galaxy brain take. For some smart altruistic people maybe the rider is in the small brain but the elephant is galaxy brain. That's my model anyway.