

# OBSERVER

## Genius Web Annotator vs. One Young Woman With a Blog

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March 28, 2016

A young woman who blogs about being sexually active with a herpes simplex-1 diagnosis kicked off a conversation on Friday about the point where an idealistic vision of how the Internet could work runs aground upon the disappointing reality of human nature.

Orson Scott Card's novel *Ender's Game* came out in 1985, a book which managed to be both astoundingly prescient and dead wrong, all at once. It anticipated the Internet, with which Ender's older brother and sister become enormously powerful by writing thoughtful and strategic posts on something that looks a lot like newsgroups or blogs. Their clarity and persuasiveness on important issues earn them the power to move people and global policy. Cartoonist Randall Munroe would later skewer the naive faith the novel placed in well-thought-out ideas expressed clearly with [this XKCD comic strip](#).

The dream of the Internet was that it would bring humanity together, that it would sift and winnow ideas and make our thinking better, but the real world results have been more mixed. There's Wikipedia, but there's also Reddit. Both sites illustrate the power of the Internet as a force multiplier, to accelerate like-minded people finding each other and acting in concert.

On Friday, Ella Dawson wrote [a blog post](#) where she requested that Genius disable its Web Annotator for her site. A social media manager by day whose personal writing makes many people uncomfortable, she wrote, "My experience with comments has led me to make two choices: to write more often on my blog, where I have full editorial control, and to not allow comments to go live without my approval."

Yet Genius' annotator makes it possible for a user to highlight almost any sentence of text on the Internet and leave any comment they want alongside it.

"Currently, there isn't even a means for Genius users to report abusive annotations, and there is certainly no way for creators to do so," Ms. Dawson wrote in an email to the Observer. "The lack of a report function is a huge red flag."

A person has to take action to see Genius annotations on a page, but, having done so, a user can see that Ms. Dawson's post asking not to be annotated is plastered with annotations.

Ella Dawson's blog with the Genius Web Annotator treatment. Yellow highlights indicate a clickable annotation.

“There is also no understanding of or respect for consent in this context at all. In my post, I begged them to give me my blog back, and instead they annotated every detail,” Ms. Dawson wrote. “They heard me, but they did not listen.”

A Genius spokesperson wrote the Observer in an email that the ability to shut down annotations on any site would enable publishers to cut off conversations they disagree with, adding, “We’ve invited Ms. Dawson to meet with us to have a constructive conversation about all of this and we’d still appreciate the opportunity to do so.”

Overwhelmingly, the annotations (“tates,” in Genius parlance) on her post are editorial—many could be read fairly as dismissive. There are a few that add important information, such as historical context, additional sources or explaining unfamiliar terminology. Some even praise her work, yet do so with a medium she objects to.

Disclosure: I’ve been a user of the tool from its earliest days, when each user had to be approved by staff. I’ve used it both as a journalistic tool (such as for this license plate reader story, where I made notes on this Wikileaks file) and to make my own snarky comments.

Prior to the blog post, Ms. Dawson posted her request to block the service on Twitter:

Ella Dawson's tweets about Genius' Web Annotator on March 23, 2016.

Genius declined.

@NewsGenius replies to Ella Dawson's tweets on March 24.

Which is true. Ms. Dawson might not have much chance in court of winning this fight, but that's not a question driving this story (if you're interested, check out another take from one of The Wirecutter's editors, Glenn Fleishman). This story is compelled by the ethical question: what should a tech company with a mission to bring hordes of people into the business of making the web work better do when it's service makes regular people less likely to speak up online?

*'Don't color in the dark with a yellow crayon and call it criticism'*

As the writer Alana Massey said of the Web Annotator in a phone call with the Observer, “The difference between whether it should exist and whether it has a right to exist really gets muddled up.” Ms. Massey doesn't want web annotation to go away, but she would like to see it work better.

The plot thickens when we note that the Web Annotator isn't the only product that has quietly added a layer of annotations to Ms. Dawson's post. There are more annotations hidden there, made by the open-source, non-profit site, Hypothesis. It doesn't have Genius' large community, but it has been around longer.

Some believe that the web's natural inclination toward inanity could be held in check by universal annotation. That a layer could drop down over any web page and the digital equivalent

of your composition teacher's red pen could descend, circle the nonsense and jot: "Here there be nutcases."

For example, in January, the *Wall Street Journal* published "The Climate Snow Job," a lengthy op-ed ostensibly debunking historical temperature increases, written by Cato Institute researcher Patrick J. Michaels. Soon after, a crew of seven climate scientists got together online to pick it apart piece by piece. The scientists noted the spin, cherry-picked evidence and mischaracterizations of researchers' work.

It is hard to argue that this isn't annotation at its best. Each note deepens the conversation, leads to additional sources and provides meaningful context.

The scientists found each other through an organization called Climate Feedback, powered by Hypothesis. Only curated members of that community can make annotations, which illustrates a key difference between Hypothesis and Genius. Anyone can install Hypothesis software on their own servers and configure it as they like, limited to specifically chosen people or opening it up to everyone. There could be hundreds of Hypothesis layers one day, some from specific communities and some run by just one individual. A user could know precisely that layer's perspective when selecting any one.

*Fast Company* broke down this open source or not tension between the two companies and what it might mean for the future of the web.

Genius just has one layer, one overarching thread: its thread. Whether you want to go around providing links to relevant Wikipedia articles or flaming people who liked the *Batman v. Superman* movie, it all looks the same on Genius (there is a hierarchy to annotations on the site, but this point is a bit more fine than most web users will notice).

In its defense, the Genius community is having an active discussion now about best practices, a Genius spokesperson explained, writing, "The Web Annotator is a new product in active development and we welcome feedback. Its value is determined by how it's used and the people who use it."

Meanwhile, Hypothesis founder and creator Dan Whaley also made a Hypothesis annotation on Ms. Dawson's post about how she didn't want to be annotated that seems to say that annotation is how the world works now, one every writer online just needs to accept.

Dan Whaley's annotation using Hypothesis on Ms. Dawson's News Genius post.

Mr. Whaley told the Observer in a recent phone conversation that he finds the way humans reason to be fundamentally flawed, but that advances in how we organize information could help rectify that. He said, "I believe very strongly that this collaborative layer over knowledge could be a very good first step in that direction."

In other words, for him, it's urgent, and we can't deploy annotation at scale soon enough. The day is probably coming when it will be everywhere. During a recent interview with Ralph Swick, Chief Operating Officer of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the web's standards body, he expressed optimism that a web standard for annotation is coming, which would almost certainly mean that the feature would be built into every major browser.

When and if it does, users might see some sort of flag at the top of their screen showing if any given web page has been annotated. Clicking on that flag might reveal a multitude of layers of communities that have chimed in, perhaps everyone from political parties to 8Chan users.

Mr. Whaley takes it further. He described a futuristic vision called “persistent ambient search,” where a web user can always know if anyone anywhere is talking about something he or she is invested in. Like his or her own blog.

Which might be nice for attention hounds, like this reporter, but also might make other people reluctant to say what they want to say online.

For its part, Genius raised a \$40 million series B in 2014, and secured the backing of the guy who built the first browser and took a crack at annotating the web, Marc Andreessen. The company and its backers like to talk about how users of its service can get “Talmudic” as they unpack meaning. It is doing a lot to raise the profile of its superusers and increase the credibility of the product, giving an imprimatur of greater legitimacy to discourse that some would argue are really nothing more than typical web comments in a new form.

Or, as Ms. Massey put it, “Don’t color in the dark with a yellow crayon and call it criticism.”

Ms. Massey is a prominent writer who’s collection of essays, *All The Lives I Want*, is forthcoming from Grand Central. She came into this conversation because Ms. Dawson pointed to one of Ms. Massey’s recent pieces as another instance in which a staff member at the company had “concern-trolled” another woman’s work, leading to a piling on from the Genius community.

In fact, Ms. Massey only became aware of web annotation this week after one Genius’ Twitter identities, @NewsGenius, called her attention to a conversation taking place on one of her latest pieces for the *New York Magazine* blog, The Cut.

Ms. Massey had written about loneliness and once the Genius community found it, they couldn’t leave it alone. Indeed, News Genius’ new editor, Leah Finnegan, a *New York Times* and Gawker alum, took part in the line-by-line nitpicking on this very personal essay.

“I was the first to annotate it,” Ms. Finnegan confirmed, via an email from a spokesperson. “My questions on Alana’s piece brought a lot of other people to it and spurred a really interesting discussion about mental health on a national website.”

Ms. Massey expressed concern about the sort of material News Genius staff direct its community toward. “Of all the things that come out every day, why was this chosen? Why was Ella Dawson chosen?” Ms. Massey asked. “Why isn’t David Brooks chosen?”

Annotating a piece on major publication’s site, written by a writer with a book deal, is very different from doing the same on the personal WordPress blog of a young woman with a day job. Ms. Massey pays her rent baring her soul. She knows what she’s gotten herself into. Ms. Dawson, while brave and honest, is still testing those waters.

The default objection to Ms. Dawson’s critique of the Web Annotator has been to point out that she’s writing in public, and a reasonable person has to expect feedback when they don’t password protect their blog.

Is the Internet quite like that, though? Again, not in any legal sense. The law is what people who don't know how to behave themselves turn to in disputes. Grown-ups find ways to get along. It might be legal to talk unbelievably loudly in a public place or to interrupt strangers in the middle of conversations or even to use listening technology to eavesdrop on private talk, but that's all lousy behavior which we police not with laws but by being adults.

The Internet is still new. We are having a hard time working out what good manners are online, but it's something we all need to talk about. Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. We are all having a hard time figuring out what the lines are. That said, talking about appropriate ways to interact online isn't the same as censorship, and suggesting it is doesn't help any of us interact better.

The killer app we really need to un-muddle our collective reasoning is widespread civility, which include respecting appropriate boundaries.

I asked Ms. Dawson whether or not she thought services like Climate Feedback changed her opinion about annotation. What if, for example, an annotation web standard let communities like Politifact go out and start policing some of the nonsense that political leaders and corporate officials tell media sources every day, right on the same page where people read it?

“Even if these services are an Internet dream, there are real reasons they fail again and again,” Ms. Dawson wrote. “In a 2016 culture of rampant online violence, I don't have much faith in annotation tools playing out the way we would like them to.”

Ms. Dawson made two specific requests of Genius.

First, give users a link for reporting posts on each annotation. Twitter and Facebook both have that for every post.

A Genius spokesperson wrote, “Users can currently tag @genius-moderation to report any abusive content. So far, there have been no instances of abuse, but we recognize that this is an entirely valid concern as usage of the tool increases.”

Second, let sites opt out of annotation. If that sounds extreme, its worth noting that Google has let sites opt out of appearing in search results for a long time. It is tough to imagine a much more significant layer over the Internet than Google search results.

Genius already expressed its objection to this option in the above, but I submit that if annotation really does catch on, the major media and dominant personalities that need such correction won't fight annotation if it delivers eyeballs.

But writers online who are tentative about their voice and mainly want to find support from others who feel the way they do would appreciate the option to be a bit more circumspect.

Fortunately, it seems like members of the Genius community are bending. One poweruser and editor, DoyleOwl, wrote about the incident on the site and proposed that the community acknowledge that it made a mistake.

He argued that users of Web Annotator should respect a sites ground rules before annotating it. “This does *not* mean that Genius is being censored. It means that we have the maturity and the

wisdom to not attack people's personal and private pages—and by *private*, I mean one which disables or controls comment sections.”

This incident has been instructive for me, as a writer. I tend to treat everything I can see in real life and online as something I can use in reporting. By and large, that's not a horrible way for a journalist to look at the world, and yet as technology puts more and more sensors everywhere, there is just a lot more today that can be seen and a lot more ways to converse but also to overhear.

It's a conversation that will temper my thinking going forward. I can't get a lot more specific than that yet, but it's something for all of us taking up digital real estate to meditate on and discuss.