It's Free to Be Nice and to Comb Your Hair: Civil Discourse in Scholarly Publishing Social Media

Jennifer Regala

The thing I love most about our scholarly publishing world is the community we've built together. Our professional societies, including the Council of Science Editors, the Society for Society Publishing, the International Society of Managing and Technical Editors, and many more, are welcoming and inclusive. Diversity of thought and experience is not only encouraged, but championed. And the willingness to share knowledge and best practices is so special. Not only is our world one of intelligence and innovation, but its foundation is built on kindness. I have lifelong friends I never would have had without my beloved profession. My publishing friends are the ones I text first in good times and bad. I've performed in a scholarly publishing musical (only Heather Staines could get me to dance and sing in public when I've said loud and clear for my entire life that I don't do either of those things). Heck, I'm even the one that Chhavi Chauhan and Jason Roberts asked to co-lead the Wine & PJs event at the CSE Fall Symposium because they know my favorite thing is to vibe with our colleagues. The victories of our colleagues are all of ours to share, and when one of ours suffers, we suffer along with them.

I've learned a lot since 2020, when I began writing this *Science Editor* social media column. We've discussed all facets of social media, where it intersects with publishing, including: different platforms, using emojis, social media influencers, and more. And as long as Jonathan Schultz will let me, I believe we'll have social media topics to dissect and discuss together well into the future. I also know that social media is here to stay as a useful tool to remain connected. Although the world has opened back up since COVID, we can't possibly attend every conference. We need these various social media platforms to stay connected.

What Are We Really Here to Discuss?

That was a lengthy preamble à la Jennifer Regala leading to the topic I gathered you all here for today. Let's address the real reason I am sitting down at my computer to type this column: IT IS FREE TO BE NICE AND TO COMB YOUR HAIR. I coined this motto long ago, I think for my kids, to convey a very simple thought: BE KIND ALWAYS. And it's my fervent wish that this motto is followed in all aspects of life, including online.

Cyberbullying has long been a problem, with a Pew Research Center study[1] stating that nearly half of teenagers have been cyberbullied. It's horrifying to think of children being bullied on social media, and when I was thinking about this article, I learned many, many adults have been victims of cyberbullying, too. I have been considering writing this column for months, as I have been noticing alarming instances of individuals within our community receiving not-so-nice comments on their social media posts.

With the prevalence of social media as a communications tool in our industry growing and constantly evolving, I've seen a concerning trend. In the past, our scholarly publishing circle felt like a very safe space on social media. *I am sad to say that I don't feel the same vibes any longer.* People aren't always being nice to one another on social media within our own scholarly publishing community, which hurts. Hiding behind a screen and various social media platforms gives some people a confidence I don't believe they'd have in a face-to-face encounter.

I will use myself as an example. On X, when I was leaving a previous role, I was celebrating my last annual meeting and sharing some photos of cherished authors and editors. An individual began commenting countless mean messages remarking on my looks, my personality,

Jennifer Regala is Associate Director, Publications, at Wolters Kluwer Health.

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how I ran the journals, and more. It was not constructive criticism. It was cruel, targeted, evil, and the comments took my breath away. I blocked and reported this individual to X, alerted the organization I was leaving about what had happened, deleted the comments, and then tried hard to pretend none of it had ever happened. I am not going to lie, though. Even thinking about it now brings tears to my eyes and makes me feel embarrassed and ashamed. And I did nothing wrong! On LinkedIn, I've noticed the same sort of behavior increasing. I've had comments that are rude and baseless.

This article is not meant to ask for sympathy for me! I am totally fine and can take care of myself. I use myself as an example to raise awareness of the problem. I am a very confident person, and these instances sucked my soul straight out of my body. I struggle to think about anybody being treated like I was who was unable to handle this treatment. Even 5 years ago, I don't know if I would have been able to withstand these incidents. I speak out on behalf of all of us, who deserve a positive experience on social media and beyond.

What to Do If You're Being Cyberbullied

It is never okay to let anyone else treat you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines cyberbullying[2] as follows: "the electronic posting of mean-spirited messages about a person... often done anonymously."

If you believe you are being cyberbullied, do not hesitate to take action:

1. **Report the offender.** Take this step immediately. Every social media platform has a mechanism to report offensive behavior. And if this person is posting in a negative way to you in a professional capacity, report the incident(s) to their employer and your own. Start with HR and let others in leadership positions in the organizations know, too. If you don't know who this individual is, it's not your job to investigate, but report to as many as you are able to. And if you are very concerned, do not hesitate to report to the police. There is nothing more important than your safety.

2. **Block the offender.** It's that easy. Block this individual and try your best not to think about them.

3. **Evaluate the platform(s) you're using.** X has grown alarmingly toxic, and I've seen many of our scholarly publishing friends showing up on Bluesky in droves in recent weeks. The Scholarly Kitchen's Chefs shared their thoughts about this movement in a recent post.[3] Find the spot(s) where you feel good being there. If it doesn't feel good to you, it probably isn't good for you.

4. **Take a social media break.** Feel free to skip #3 altogether! Social media connectivity is not imperative to your career or your well-being. Disengage from social media platforms and don't return until you feel comfortable. This break can last from 1 hour to forever. Do what is best for YOU.

5. **Know it's not you.** As personal as an attack from an Internet troll may feel, you are not the problem. This troll has their own problems that you cannot begin to understand. It's not your job to figure out what's going on; rather, you must focus on yourself and your own well-being.

It's Okay to Disagree

There is a difference between being nasty and starting a respectful debate. I have engaged in so many of these conversations on social media that I couldn't begin to count them. I live for *civil* discourse on social media. Not everyone likes the color pink. Please explain to me why you don't like it! Not everyone agrees with my views on AI (work smarter, not harder). Tell me why you think I'm wrong! I don't think peer reviewers should be compensated financially for their work, but I do think reviewer incentives like reduced APCs and discounted meeting registrations are a great reward system. Do you vehemently object? Please, please tell me why. Our world is better because we all have our own opinions. It's okay to voice these opinions on social media, but it's important to do so respectfully.

What Can You Do Right Now to Make Someone Feel Seen and Included on Social Media?

The smallest gestures can make a scholarly publishing colleague feel important. If you want to make stronger connections and ensure that you are supporting and uplifting others, take these easy yet feel-good steps:

- Follow your favorite colleagues on your favorite platforms. I am here to tell you that some of us are on all the platforms. Wherever you feel comfortable, find our people and follow them—I promise they'll be delighted to have you on their journey.

- Like and comment! There is nothing better than engagement. Validate your colleagues. And yes, it's okay to disagree (politely). Some of the best friends I've ever met in publishing are the ones I disagree with spiritedly but always in a friendly way.

- Pursue a relationship outside of social media. Direct message your favorite follow to invite them to a virtual coffee. I promise you won't be sorry.

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- Keep an eye out for your colleagues. If you see someone treated badly, say something. Report, block, reach out!

What Are Some Recent Articles Written by Our Peers That Made Me Feel Better and Are Great Resources for You, Too?

These articles aren't related directly to cyberbullying, but they do pertain directly to workplace bullying and mental health. I've read them over and over myself and encourage you to keep these bookmarked on your own laptops.

James Butcher always says it best. I am NOT on his payroll. I haven't met him in person. But I tell you what, he knows what's what. Read his take[4] on the MDPI story please. And if you want the smartest take on everything always, subscribe to Journalology!

Randy Townsend never lets any of us down. His full commitment to the mental health of an entire industry is commendable. If you want a place to discuss mental health awareness in scholarly publishing and meet new people committed to this important growth, join us for this new initiative, the Mental Health Awareness and Action Community of Interest (CoIN) Group.[5]

And of course, our beloved Editor-in-Chief, Jonathan Schultz, wrote this amazing article[6] about bullying in the workplace. Although not directly applicable to social media, there are many important relevant takeaways.

Final Takeaway: It's Free to Be Nice and to Comb Your Hair

This article is clearly centered around my own opinions, but I hope I can encourage all of you to join me in being kind, not only on social media but everywhere you go. If you don't have something nice to say, please don't say it. And if someone has something nasty to say to you, please don't listen. They are struggling with their own demons. Block that person, report them as inappropriate, and remember you are beloved and important.

If you ever need someone to talk to, please email me (Jennifer.Regala@wolterskluwer.com) or reach out to me on social media (X: @JenniferARegala, Insta/Threads: @mommyjennyblog, Bluesky: @JenniferARegala, LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/jennifer-regala-02735812/).

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