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# Why Taking a Stand on the Internet Can Turn a Problem Into a Catastrophe

By *Claire Bond Potter* | AUGUST 24, 2018

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**B**ack in the 1970s, when I was leaving for college, my mother gave me a piece of advice: "Don't sign anything." Her skepticism was forged in the 1950s, when petitions that public figures had signed as students, and organizations they had belonged to, had sometimes destroyed their lives. In college, however, I discovered the thrill of signing a political document. It was how I could take a stand. It signaled my desire to join a network of like-minded thinkers.



James Yang for The Chronicle Review

Now that petitions and letters of various kinds arrive regularly by email, Facebook, and Twitter, my mother's voice is back in my ear: Is this something I really believe in? Enough to stand up for it a week, a year, five years from now? If it became public — *when it becomes public* — could I defend what this document says?

This is on my mind because of a now-notorious letter, signed by more than 50 prominent academics, written in support of the New York University professor Avital Ronell. The document is a classic case of professors inserting themselves into a controversy about which they have, at best, partial knowledge. This tendency may be an extension of what academics often do: use our expert knowledge to understand and resolve problems. Forgetting that we may not always have the information necessary to have an informed opinion may be an unwanted effect of life online, where we are constantly solicited for our views on matters great and small.

Either way, the Ronell letter is a perfect example of how taking a stand on the internet can transform a problem into a catastrophe.

Written and circulated over digital networks, the letter was sent to someone who disapproved of it and who leaked it (presumably by email) to Brian Leiter, a professor of law at the University of Chicago who specializes in pillorying theorists, feminists, and everyone else he thinks is absurd, on his popular blog.

Before June 10, 2018, when Leiter posted the letter, hardly anyone knew that Ronell was under investigation by the Title IX office at NYU; by June 11 *everyone* knew. They also knew that a clique of powerful academics, in making a case for their friend and colleague, had characterized her male accuser as "malicious," and had lodged their collective "objection to any judgment against" Ronell.

Whether this group should have written this letter is a separate question, but they should have known that a digital document, and their own signatures, could — and very likely would — circulate well beyond their intended audience.

Once that had happened, the rude democracy of the internet took over, exposing the signers to the scrutiny of the crowd. This is what the internet is designed to do. No digital document, even a letter in a tenure case, should ever be thought of as private today: Walter Benjamin, meet Wikileaks. This means that authors can never be entirely sure of their audience. The Ronell letter, for example, was intended for limited distribution: It was a message from the

powerful to the powerful. The president and provost of NYU were its primary audience, but as they drafted and redrafted the document, the signers were also their own audience, a closed and like-minded community creating a plausible narrative about one of their own.

Once the letter was posted to Leiter's blog, reposted to Twitter and Facebook, sent as an email attachment to friends, it traveled further from its original audience, from holders of distinguished chairs to adjuncts and graduate students, including those who see academic politics in a very different way.

This point goes well beyond the Ronell case. Digital technology, much like an organizer standing with a clipboard on a sidewalk, encourages participation by people who are ill-informed about the issues at stake. Petitions are often created on open Google docs, or on online platforms dedicated to political causes, where an impulsive signature is no different from an informed one. Petitions and letters proliferate through digital friendship networks, spread far beyond their original constituency, and gain the signatures of people more persuaded by prestigious names than by their knowledge of the situation.

**S**ome 25 years after most academics were introduced to the internet, we still underestimate its capacity to do real harm, and our own capacity to sign things — petitions intended for a broad audience, or letters intended for a specific audience — without regard to the consequences. These two genres are not the same, of course. The influence of a petition is driven by the weight of numbers, and this inevitably includes numerous people signing on principle, rather than having knowledge of or authority on a particular issue. But both genres share the same weakness: When organized over the internet they can never entirely control what public will form around them — or read them.

Publicity can be good for a cause, but it can also reflect poorly on the signers as their audience expands to include those who do not share their beliefs. In the spring of 2017, a group of scholars, most of whom were not famous, circulated a petition protesting the publication of an article in the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*. The piece

compared transgender to trans-racial identity, and it was written by an assistant professor who was neither queer nor of color. The petition was written in an open Google doc, and it exploded into a full-on exercise in internet shaming. Organizers of the petition later claimed that they had no idea that this could occur, and I believe them. But no one should ever use a technology for a sensitive or political purpose if they don't understand how it works.

Because your signature is forever on the internet, it should represent conviction, not a vague gesture of solidarity with a position you generally agree with or a scholar you admire. Tellingly, as Jon Weiner reported in the Los Angeles Review of Books, some signers of the Ronell letter say that they did not fully agree with the whole document or had signed an earlier draft. At least one did not seem to know facts about the case that are in the public record.

The internet is a valuable organizing tool. But it is a blunt instrument. Do I sign things? Sure. But I scrutinize documents that come my way. I want to know who sent them, and why. I try to stay out of disputes that don't impinge on my disciplinary, political, or institutional interests. I read manifestos for what they are telling me, and for what they aren't telling me. I do a little research. I ask myself: Who will be helped by this? Who will be hurt? For the right cause, you should be willing to take a stand. But often the best advice is: Close your laptop and walk away.

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