

## **“410 Gone” Infocide in Open Content Communities**

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### **Abstract**

Infocide, the purposeful retraction and deletion of an online identity, is accompanied by a confusing set of neologisms such as cybersuicide and information suicide. I distinguish and identify these variations as a form of cyberlanguage. I then explore the complexities of infocide in open content communities (e.g., Python, Wikipedia, Ruby, Debian and Ubuntu) with respect to reasons, enactment, and community reactions. I find that infocides are often prompted by the exhaustion of maintaining an online life, by discontent towards an online community, and over privacy concerns that one's real and online identities have intersected. While some infocide is concise and complete, infocide is occasionally graduated, such as when one removes aspects of one's identity including advanced status and capabilities (e.g., as an administrator). Because of the temptation to return to one's former identity, infocide is sometimes made irreversible, such as by changing one's account password to a random string. An equally interesting aspect of infocide is a community's reaction. I explore the responses of gratitude, sleuthing (attempting to identify more information, including motivation, about the exit), drama, and the preservation of contributions about the exit.

### **Keywords**

infocide; online communities; open content; online ethnography.

In October 2011 Mark Pilgrim, a well-known and widely respected Web developer, committed infocide by removing his online presence and contributions. Pilgrim was one of the most visible and respected persons in his community: he authored the famous *Dive into Python* book followed by other “dive into” books on Web technology. These books, his popular blog and columns, and his software contributions, were online, freely available, and introduced many technologists to Python and Web development. Hence, Pilgrim’s disappearance and removal of his many contributions from the Web was widely felt. (So much so that it was commented upon in *The Economist’s* (2011) science and technology blog.)

Some, no doubt, aspire to be as prolific, helpful, and respected as Pilgrim, but Mark turned away from his own sterling (but perhaps heavy) legacy by simply removing it. And while his removal was total, it was also concise. One might receive any number of responses to a request for a Webpage that are typified by numeric codes such as 200 OK (accompanied by the Webpage) or 404 Not Found (and one sees an error message). When the community attempted to understand what had happened to Pilgrim, they had little more than the server’s terse response: 410 Gone. The Web’s protocol specification states this means the resource is gone and will not be returning: it notifies “the recipient that the resource is intentionally unavailable and that the server owners desire that remote links to that resource be removed” (Fielding et al., 1999).

In this essay I explore the phenomenon of infocide through Mark Pilgrim's example and others. I show that while infocide has recently come to the fore of popular attention, the practice has existed online for decades. However, infocide’s present visibility is accompanied by a confusing set of neologisms; these terms – cybersuicide, information suicide, wiki mind wipe, etc. – are distinguished and identified as a form of cyberlanguage (Gibbs, 2006, p. 30). I then explore the complexities of infocide in open content communities with respect to reasons, enactment, and community reactions. I find that infocides are often prompted by the exhaustion of maintaining an online life, by discontent towards an online community, and over privacy concerns that one’s real and online identities have intersected. I also explore the responses of gratitude, sleuthing (attempting to identify more information, including motivation), drama, and preservation.

## Background and Terminology

In attempting to understand infocide one is confronted with what Donna Gibbs calls cyberlanguage, “a new language, with its own brand of quirky logic, which evolves with unprecedented speed and variety and is heavily dependent on ingenuity and humor” (Gibbs, 2006, p. 30). For example, one aspect of this logic is to borrow and adapt “real world” idioms, such as using “internet suicide” to refer to alienating behavior: “*Man, you can’t go around posting the f-word everywhere, that’s internet suicide!*”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, to understand this phenomenon we require a bit of lexicography. Two sources most useful for understanding online culture (and its language) are Urban Dictionary and Encyclopedia Dramatica -- two of the most storied and popular sites for documenting online and popular culture.

Urban Dictionary, launched in 1999, is a repository for (over 6 million) definitions of contemporary popular culture, slang, and internet memes (Urban Dictionary, 2012). Submissions, which include a definition and optional examples of usage, can be made by anyone providing an email address; other contributors then vote upon whether a definition ought to be accepted. One word can have multiple definitions; the term “Urban Dictionary” entry itself has nearly 400 at the time of writing (Urban Dictionary, 2012). Encyclopedia Dramatica, launched in 2004, can be thought of as Wikipedia’s doppelganger: an online collaborative encyclopedia focusing on the humorous, snarky, and often cruel side of internet culture. Like Wikipedia, users can edit pages and these edits persist or are reverted by other contributors. These online sources, and others, provide a means of distinguishing related phenomena.

### *Online suicide, cybercide, and infocide*

Ending one’s online presence and purposefully ending one’s life are not the same thing, though both have varied, and sometimes overlapping, behaviors and neologisms. Suicides enacted online garnered some popular attention with the reporting

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<sup>1</sup> Posted in <http://www.urbandictionary.com> as an example of the use of the expression by Yet Another Cool Dude, 2009.

of online suicide pacts in Japan in 2000 and 2003 (Ueno, 2000). A search of English-language journal articles reveals that the availability of materials and support for suicide became salient to mental health scholars in the late 90s, as seen in *Suicide on the Internet: a Focus for Nursing Intervention?* (Baume, Rolfe, & Clinton, 1998), *Cybersuicide: the Internet and Suicide* (Alao, Yolles, & Armenta, 1999), and other publications (Dobson, 1999, Thompson, 1999). Reports of online suicide, such as a woman killing herself by inhaling poisonous fumes while describing the process on Facebook, continue to today (Associated Press, 2012). Yet this is not the focus of this paper. Even when one puts aside mediated or facilitated death, other neologisms speak of (a) an attention seeking exit from a community, (b) getting oneself banned (intentionally or not), and (c) and the purposeful retraction of one's presence and contributions from the internet.

Attention seeking behavior is central to the Urban Dictionary's first definition of **internet suicide**: "*When someone in a forum, newsgroup, etc. says they are leaving (sometimes 'and never coming back'), but actually wants to see how people react to their leaving. Usually as the result of drama*"<sup>2</sup>. However, this dramatic aspect is more precisely identified as a *flounce* at Encyclopedia Dramatica:

A *flounce* post is when one must proclaim that they are leaving a community forever. These attention whores are nearly as amusing as those who use "deleting your LiveJournal" for attention. Rather than quietly leaving an LJ community, they feel they must leave a long ass, boring, nonsensical post explaining why they are so much more highly evolved than anyone else in the community. (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2011)

Neither of these definitions speaks of removing one's contributions, but this is captured in Urban Dictionary's definitions of *infocide* and *digital suicide*:

**infosuicide/infocide**: *Disengaging from the internet via the deletion of all your publicly available information*<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Posted in <http://www.urbandictionary.com> by Shawnyshawn, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Posted in <http://www.urbandictionary.com> by quadhome, 2011.

**digital suicide:** *Deleting all or most of your information from the internet namely social networking sites such as your facebook, twitter, xanga accounts.... “[For example, Frederick] committed digital suicide when he applied for a new job”.*<sup>4</sup>

Given the promiscuity of cyberlanguage, infocide has also been adapted to site-specific variations such as Twittercide<sup>5</sup>, removing one's twitter account, and Facebook kevorkian<sup>6</sup>, a person who helps another commit “Facebook suicide” by deleting an account and related information. Wikicide is the neologism in the collaborative wiki space (Encyclopedia Dramatica, 2006) wherein exit is characterized as a “Right to Leave” but the excision of one person’s contributions has been likened to a “Wiki Mind Wipe” (Meatball, 2012). Finally, one term not captured in these recent sources is “scribble”. This was a feature of The WELL, a seminal messaging forum from the late 80s and early 90s in which a user could easily remove their postings; in one infamous incident it preceded a member’s suicide (Hafner, 2001; Rheingold, 2000, p. 21; Turner, 2006, p. 145).

Hence, the practice of infocide has been around since the early years of online community; its present noteworthiness is simply a reflection of the Net’s pervasiveness today. In any case, I use the term **exit** to speak of leaving a community and **infocide** as the further removal of one’s presence and contributions. Any of these behaviors might be considered a **flounce** if done in a particularly dramatic and inflaming manner.

## Method

This analysis is based upon a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thomas & Jones, 2006) into exit and infocide from Web communities. I focus on the communities that are characterized by openness, voluntary contribution, and the production of free cultural products (Reagle, 2004). That is, as a researcher, user, and peripheral participant of Linux, Ubuntu, Debian, KDE, Python, Web development, and

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<sup>4</sup> Posted in <http://www.urbandictionary.com> by shitastic, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Posted in <http://www.urbandictionary.com> by rtil, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Posted in <http://www.urbandictionary.com> by beagle, 2011.

Wikipedia, I collected every instance I encountered of public discourse about exit in these communities since 2006. Collection and analysis was facilitated by Thunderdell and BusySponge, bibliographic and Web scraping complements to mind mapping software (Reagle 2009).

Venues of discourse include specific community related email lists and Web sites (e.g., Planet Ubuntu), broader fora (e.g., Reddit and Hacker News), and face-to-face meetings (e.g., Wikimania). Every-day encounters were complemented by targeted Web searches so as to extend my understanding, (e.g., in the Ruby community). My notes contain 100+ primary sources (e.g., email and blog postings) collected on this topic and these are the basis for the account I present. Most of the sources were encountered in my everyday involvement with these communities and I make significant use of authors' own words. Analysis consisted of iteratively coding (and recoding) the content of these sources into various categories, a type of 'theoretical sampling' or 'emergent design' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 72; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 209). Sources were first captured in a mindmap and categorized with BusySponge via keywords such as "exit" and "forking". At the start of analysis, I printed all the sources and labeled each source (or paragraph within the text) in a free-form manner. These labels were then analyzed and used to restructure the mind map. Subsequent sources were collected and placed within this structure until I repeated the process of analysis and restructuring. As a structure emerged I also updated the keywords available for initial capture. Drafts of this analysis were shared with members of the community for corrections and feedback: I announced the draft on my blog (which is syndicated by some aggregators) and emailed a handful of heavily featured sources with requests for feedback. My intention, following Clifford Geertz, is to "uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts" (1973, p. 27) and construct a (tentative) system of analysis for the interpretation of infocide in these communities.

### **Results: Motives and enactment**

There can be many, mixed, or even contradictory motives for infocide – like any human behavior. It can also be difficult to discern what those motives are as the subject

has (often) disappeared. However, I discern at least three types of (not necessarily exclusive) infocide: exhaustion, online discontent, and privacy concerns.

### *Real Exhaustion: Pulling the Plug*

Jon Dowland (2011), a computer enthusiast blogging about Pilgrim's infocide, wrote that the first "infocider" he came across was the "photographer, blogger and sometime software author Noah Grey" who departed the Web when his partner died in 2007. Hence, there are instances in which events in the "real" world prompt a change of focus away from online activity.

Mark Pilgrim's case is also, likely, an instance of this, and gained attention when Eric Meyer, another well-known Web developer, blogged about Pilgrim's absence. On October 4, 2011 Meyer (2011) wrote that Pilgrim's many "Dive Into ..." sites (Accessibility, HTML5, Greasemonkey, and Python) were gone, and his Github, Google+, Reddit, and Twitter accounts were deleted. Furthermore, Meyer's emails to Pilgrim bounced back without response. Pilgrim never chose to explain his departure and hence the community was left to sleuth out possible reasons. A number of commentators found compelling clues that Pilgrim had long considered his online presence to be burdensome. Meyer quoted a 2003 Buddhist-like quip from Pilgrim that "Embracing HTTP error code 410 means embracing the impermanence of all things." Jon Dowland wondered if Pilgrim was conducting "some grand experiment to see just how reliably valuable information can be preserved on the web". If not, Dowland suspected "real life" events trigger the infocide, as Pilgrim's blogging had "dried up" and his tweeting was becoming "increasingly erratic, irreverent and plain weird." A commentator on the Hacker News discussion, noted that Pilgrim had taken a hiatus in the past.

*In October 2004, Mark stopped blogging after a post titled "Every Exit" which read: "It's time for me to find a new hobby. Preferably one that doesn't involve angle brackets. Or computers. Or electricity." That post sat at the top of his previously very active weblog for 18 months until he returned in April 2006. Of course, that time he only stopped posting new*

*material; he didn't delete all his existing resources. But he did disappear from online life for a while*<sup>7</sup>.

Hence, it's reasonable to assume that Pilgrim had long wrestled with his online presence and for some reason wished to focus his energies elsewhere. By removing everything, Pilgrim made his intentions clear and the possibility of returning less likely. Indeed, Wikipedians who wish to exit permanently, but find it difficult to do so, have been known to "self-block" themselves or change their password to something they can't remember (Wikipedia, 2006<sup>8</sup>). People do sometimes take decisive action so as to resist the pull upon them demanded by their online identities.

#### *Community Discontent: Severing the Tie*

Wikipedia's massive size, decade of life, and transparency make its archives an excellent source for studying online behavior, including exit and infocide. For example, at Wikipedia one can decorate one's user page with a template that produces a banner indicating one is no longer as active: such that one is studying for exams, without electricity, or taking a "real world" holiday (Wikipedia, 2011a). There are nine purposeful absence templates and they have been used over five thousand times by Wikipedians. Of these, the most popular template is "Retired" (used 2177 times). The most intriguing category is "User EX-WP" (used 285 times) which indicates a decision to leave with a forfeiture of Wikipedian identity (Wikipedia, 2010, 2011b). Wikipedia collaboration, like any other, is also a source for discontent about group process and power. For example, one Wikipedian complained of the disrespect shown to users, especially anonymous ones, by administrators. After an airing of grievances, he or she wrote "*Put one of those dippy RETIRED banners up here if you like*"<sup>9</sup>.

Another user sent similar complaints to one of the mailing-lists: "I'm quitting wikipedia because I don't like what I've seen too many admins become. Self-righteous, arrogant, self-centered, conceited... jerks" (Peters, 2006). Interestingly, this exit message also displayed elements of a flounce. We see positive sentiments for some

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<sup>7</sup> Comment by mbrubeck in Rileyw, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Also mentioned in Hurr87's post in Wikipedia: User:Hurr87.113.86.207durr, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Posted in Wikipedia, User:Hurr87.113.86.207durr, by Hurr87, 2009.

fellow collaborators, an expressed sadness, and a fear that this last message will be suppressed by those “higher up”.

To those I’ve known at Wikipedia and worked well with, thanks for the good times. I used to believe in Wikipedia. It was worth a lot to me, it was fun, it was good to work on articles. But I’m quitting.... I know this message may never reach this list either, but I’m at least going to try. (Peters, 2006)

This email thread was followed up by someone else’s exit, this time over a concern that “Process is broken [and has] degraded over time” (Draicone, 2006). Indeed, exits from Wikipedia are frequently explained by complaints of bureaucracy and abuse of power (Dricot, 2011).

Another feature common to Wikipedia exits is the diminishment of involvement and identity: in a sense, gradual exit. For example, Wikipedians often declare a dimming of zeal and activity:

I said a while back that I was done with contributing content to Wikipedia. I’ll stand by this. But I’ve been at least willing to contribute typo fixes and clarifying text, as long as I could do it anonymously. Now I’m closer to being done with that too... (Massey, 2008)

I have lost all my belief in the wikimedia projects. On some projects I still have moderating bits, I hereby ask the stewards to take these bits away as I do not wish to spend too much time anymore on the projects, I might shout a bit from the sideline. (van Kalken, 2006)

While these Wikipedians have not completely abandoned their identity, the latter has significantly surrendered high-status aspects of it. And Wikipedia is not the only community in which people become discontented. Debian is a free software distribution that is known to be quarrelsome. One member wrote that he was exiting because of rancor and the way it was making *him* feel.

I resigned from Debian today.... Arguments erupt over whether something is a deeply held principle or an accident of phrasing on the website; whether we should release more often or less often; whether free software is more important than our users having functional hardware... But it’s got to the

point where social interaction with Debian-the-distribution makes me want to stab people, even though I've just spent a lovely weekend with Debian-the-people. Perhaps worse, I occasionally find mails I've sent that make me want to stab me. (Garrett, 2006)

This then prompted another (former) developer to reflect upon his "sabbatical" of putting aside his work on Debian over the past year. He noted that those who worked on Ubuntu (a distribution built upon Debian) were sometimes treated rudely at conferences. "Someone was attacked for wearing an Ubuntu t-shirt at the conference, while someone else was applauded for wearing a 'Fuck Ubuntu' t-shirt. That's where I realised that maybe I didn't have as much in common with these people as I thought I did" (James, 2006). Ubuntu is a Debian-based free software distribution named for the African ethic of interdependence. There are (now) many such Debian-derivations but Ubuntu was an early and prominent one which some criticized for free-riding on Debian's efforts. Ironically, both of the Debian exits above note that Ubuntu perhaps succeeds where Debian fails in terms of community spirit and codes of conduct. Yet even Ubuntu faces similar exits.

By now my launchpad, brainstorm, and Ubuntu forum accounts have been removed ... at my request. I have decided to completely unequivocally leave the Ubuntu community. This important step helps me accomplish my goal by removing my ability and ultimately my desire to comment and participate within the community. (Fewt, 2010)

Again, this exit enacted a surrendering of advanced capabilities/status and complained of the arrogance of those with power to make design decisions and the dismissal of community member's concerns.

However, compared to infocides prompted by "real" exhaustion, community discontent is often project specific and online activity may persist elsewhere.

### *Privacy: The Collision of the Real and Virtual*

If demands in the real world prompt one to "pull the plug", and discontent in the online realm leads one to sever one's ties with a community, there is another exit for

those who fear the intersection of these two realms. It is not uncommon for contributors in open content communities to use a pseudonym. This allows one to develop a reputation within the community while preserving one's "real life" identity, as one Wikipedian wrote: "*Given Wikipedia's sketchy reputation in some circles, I wanted to avoid any possible negative consequences in the 'real world'; and I did not want the less-than-friendly environment on Wikipedia to come back to haunt me off-line*"<sup>10</sup>.

Interestingly, this Wikipedian felt his or her pseudonymity then led to being treated poorly. However, it is also possible for pseudonyms to be regarded highly. Indeed, some participants' involvement in the community and their participation in meet-ups or conferences render their real identity a widely known secret. Yet, when this information is revealed outside of the community the contributor quickly retreats. For example, Newyorkbrad, a prominent Wikipedia administrator and Arbitration Committee member of many years, was infamously "outed" by an "anti-Wikipedia" critic on the basis of photos from such a meeting. Since he was a practicing attorney who did not wish the often contentious online realm to leak into his professional life, Brad wrote, "*For once I'll be brief. Due to some external events, which have the potential to affect not just me but many uninvolved people, I will not be able to continue editing*"<sup>11</sup>. (After a brief period, Brad returned to his Wikipedia activities.)

A similar, but much more widely known case of privacy-prompted infocide is that of `_why` the lucky stuff. Like Pilgrim, `_why` was a respected contributor to his community, in this case, developers using the Ruby programming language. Indeed, Pilgrim's later infocide was frequently compared to `_why`'s, with one commentator stating of Pilgrim: "*So he's gone and done a `_why`*"<sup>12</sup>. However, for reasons unstated, `_why` was fastidious in his desire to remain pseudonymous. Much like those introduced to Python via Pilgrim's *Dive Into* series, many new developers were introduced to Ruby by way of *Why's (Poignant) Guide to Ruby*, which "embodied all of its author's characteristics: an uneasy artistic mind with a different take on what programming is all about" (Terror, 2012). However, the reasons `_why` was beloved also made it unlikely

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<sup>10</sup> Posted in Wikipedia by User:172, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Posted in Wikipedia by Newyorkbrad, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Posted in Python: Reddit, Gone :( by shaurz, 2011.

that he would be able to keeping his identity private. \_why's geeky cartoons, his many blogs, code contributions, songs, and (semi-disguised) public presentations created many links from which his identity could be inferred.

Additionally, like Pilgrim, there is evidence that \_why found the maintenance of his contributions burdensome. One of the last tweets from \_why noted “programming is rather thankless. u see your works become replaced by superior ones in a year. unable to run at all in a few more” (Jeremysr, 2009). However, when an attempt to identify \_why also turned up likely family and friends \_why quickly withdrew. Interestingly, given that \_why's likely motive was his “outing” it is quite possible that, as Jon Dowland noted, “\_why is back in the community with an entirely new alias, operating under the radar. That's the flexibility that a distinct online persona gives you. It's less likely Mark Pilgrim is doing the same” (Dowland, 2011).

### **Results: Community responses**

An equally interesting complement to the reasons and performance of exit are community reaction. Some infocides are met with silence, and this is probably to the relief of those who wish to quickly and quietly disappear. Beyond this, there is a range of community response including drama, sleuthing (to determine the circumstances of someone's exit), and gratitude and preservation.

#### *Drama*

Those who share their discontent when leaving, after recounting their own history and contributions, often prompt snarky responses. For example, in response to a message entitled “Bye Ubuntu It Could Have Been Fun But...” an anonymous commentator responded “*Bye bye. Don't let the door hit you on the way out, you whining prima donna*”<sup>13</sup>. Or, after a Wikipedia contributor lamented that despite his thousands of edits and hundreds of articles over the years, the blocking of his account is

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<sup>13</sup> Comment by an anonymous user in *Linux Today's Bye Ubuntu*, 2010.

evidence that “it is time to go”, a Wikipedian responded “How many times has he left now? LOUDLY and PUBLICLY” (Gerard, 2007). The Meatball wiki, “a common space for wiki developers and proprietors from all over the internet to collaborate” (Meatball, 2006a) has an extensive page on “Goodbye” including exits resulting from conflict, insincere, sincere, and silent departures, and how best to respond. The insincere exit, related to Dramatica’s flounce, is described by Meatball as a self-centered and passive-aggressive act intending to seek emotional support. “Even if their original intent was to leave in anger, it’s not satisfying to go from such an emotional high to an immediate vacuum. Because we can lurk online, the person is going to come back to see the reaction of the community. It’s just so tempting” (Meatball, 2012b). If the community does not respond as desired, problems ensue:

This is the opposite of what the author wants. He or she wants the outpouring of emotion, which in any case would be wrong. The resulting dearth of suckers leaves the goodbye feeling empty, and more importantly, a confirmation of the poor standing of the author in the eyes of the community. And oh how the tempest storms when this is discovered. Now the only way to balance the emotional score is to wreck havoc, and make the community pay. (Meatball, 2012a)

One way to make the community pay is by a disruptive “Wiki Mind Wipe”: “The process of systematically erasing a large amount of contribution to the WikiWiki forum. The act is considered vandalism unless the erased contributions are one’s own” (Meatball, 2006b). More so than infocides on social sites like Facebook, infocide in open content communities may significantly affect the work of a larger project. Hence even if one developed content by one’s self (e.g., much of Pilgrim’s work) others are dependent upon it. When such contributions are removed, most accede that it was the infociders’ right, even if a few complain about the manner in which it happened (e.g., the community could’ve been warned). When one has actually collaborated with others, removing your own content necessarily entails removing others’ contributions. This latter act, as noted, can be considered vandalism and the ultimate form of drama.

### *Sleuthing*

In Eric Meyer's blog post about Mark Pilgrim, he asked the Web community that "If anyone is in direct contact with Mark, please let me know that he's okay via comment here or by direct e-mail, even if his internet presence has been erased. As much as I hate for the world to lose all of the incredible information he's created and shared, that would be as nothing compared to losing the man himself". The next day Meyer reported a tweet from Jason Scott, a friend of Pilgrim, that "*Mark Pilgrim is alive/annoyed we called the police. Please stand down and give the man privacy and space, and thanks everyone for caring*"<sup>14</sup>. Of course, many continued to ask about his motives and some even attempted to comment on the thread, masquerading as Pilgrim, to further confuse things.

Asking the larger online community for help is not uncommon. In 2010, law professor Lawrence Lessig referenced the mysterious illness of his Harvard colleague "JZ" (Jonathan Zittrain) in a tweet, drawing attention to a blog setup by a friend of Zittrain. As Zittrain later recounted, Lessig's tweet was noticed, and the popular blog BoingBoing then posted an entry "drawn from an intermediate source that had already put 2 and 2 together and turned Lessig's 'JZ' into ... me, no doubt without even thinking there was any difference. So then it became: 'Jonathan Zittrain is really sick and needs help finding out why!'" Unfortunately, any modicum of Zittrain's privacy was now gone. Furthermore, earlier discussion on a medical blog (the intended audience) had already provided a useful reference to a 1994 Korean medical article and "To be clear, the terrific doctors here have been methodically arriving at this diagnosis already" (Zittrain, 2010). Hence, as is often the case, a request for help became distorted and disproportionate to what was truly helpful.

The seminal case of the Net community attempting to sleuth a mystery is the disappearance of Phil Agre, a prominent member of the early internet community. In the 90s he published The Network Observer and The Red Rock Eater News Service, email lists which included items of interest and essays for "digerati". He also was a well respected academic, becoming an associate professor of information studies at UCLA.

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<sup>14</sup> Posted in Twitter by Jason Scott, @textfiles, 2011.

However, his online activity had ceased and in October 2009 Agre's sister filed a missing person report stating she had not seen her brother, who suffers from manic depression, since the spring of 2008. Furthermore, he had apparently abandoned his apartment and work in the beginning of 2009. This story was widely reported and many people made an effort to investigate and share information of Agre's whereabouts, as well as speculate about his motives for disappearing. On January 16, 2010, LA County Sheriff's Department noted that he had been contacted and was deemed in good health and self-sufficient (Carvin, 2010).

In the case of Pilgrim and Agre some community members were not content to be told that "the person is okay, please move on." This was especially so for \_why's infocide. Discussion and sleuthing continued in a number of Hacker News threads (Jeremysr, 2009). Similarly, Wikipedians discussed whether \_why's biography should be deleted, whether it should include his identity, and whether edits to his biography's discussion page that contained an alleged identity should be deleted and permanently purged from its history (Wikipedia, 2011c). Even after those deletions, presently, a name still appears on his biography's talk page, demonstrative of the *Streisand effect* in which an attempt to remove information leads to its further dissemination (Wikipedia, 2012). This sleuthing over \_why is reminiscent of the eternal debate over Shakespeare's identity; Web pages are dedicated to claims that \_why is "John Doe" (to use a placeholder name), but not "*that* John Doe", or not a "Doe" at all but "Joe Bloggs" (Wanstrath, 2009; sl33p3r, 2009). Yet, there is another type of post-infocide activity from the community that is more positive: to recover what had been tossed aside, to preserve this information, or even continue its development.

### *Gratitude and preservation*

While the term "infocide" is inspired by the notion of suicide, it is a distinct (though sometimes concurrent) practice. Similarly, while a community's response to infocide might share similarities with online grieving, it too is distinct. However, one area of overlap is in expressions of gratitude and memorialization (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011). In open content communities if one's contributions were thought to be of value,

people say as much. At Wikipedia contributors can place a “barnstar” on others’ user pages to acknowledge some Wikipedian virtue.

*I was going to give you a barnstar when I saw the note on your userpage and was disappointed to find that it was from last october. I saw a load of your edits and thought that you were active. You were as an outstanding contributor to wikipedia and you were always civil. If you read this (I know you were active recently), please return to wikipedia. If you don't want to then thanks for everything<sup>15</sup>.*

Many such examples of gratitude exist. Also, the infocider’s contributions might be recovered and preserved – and even become a collaborative community project. That is, content contributed under an open content license can be copied and modified. Hence, in Meyer’s blog posting about Pilgrim’s infocide he noted “Mirrors of Mark’s work have started appearing ... and so his legacy, if not his presence, will not be lost” (Meyer, 2011). Pilgrim's “Dive into HTML5” site is now maintained at <http://diveintohtml5.info/> and is attributed to “Mark Pilgrim, with contributions from the community”. Thirty eight of \_why’s projects are now mirrored at github (flip, 2009) – a collaborative Web site that enables easy copying, modification, and merging of decentralized development.

## Conclusion

In *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* Viktor Mayer-Schönberger laments that we have lost the ability to forget: “As we forget, we regain the freedom to generalize, conceptualize, and most importantly to act” (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009, p. 118). However, Mayer-Schönberger is motivated by stories of embarrassing information on social networks. The firing of the “Drunken Pirate”, a teacher who posted a photo of herself on MySpace wearing a pirate hat and drinking from a plastic cup, has elicited much comment and concern. And rightfully so: the individual gains much, and the public loses little if such a photo were to disappear.

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<sup>15</sup> Posted in Wikipedia, User Talk:Draicone, by Pheonix, 2011.

However, the practice of *infocide* includes more than removing an embarrassing MySpace page. It is a complex phenomena that includes a wide-range of behavior including as an antecedent to suicide, a consequence of online exhaustion and discontent, as a dramatic performance, or as a privacy-protecting measure. Additionally, infocide is occasionally graduated, such as when one removes aspects of one's identity including advanced status and capabilities (e.g., as an administrator). One might even take steps to enforce an infocide, such as setting a random password on one's account. Community responses are also varied: infocides might be ignored, lamented, sleuthed, and mitigated by preserving content that was taken down.

While I believe this is a relatively comprehensive (though tentative) categorization of infocide enactment and response, my approach also has a serious limitation: it does not include the voices of those who have enacted a successful infocide. (That is, those who really do disappear.) Complementary micro-level research might seek to find and interview people like Pilgrim and \_why so as to better understand their motives. Additionally, Wikipedia's (2011) thousands of user pages now decorated with Wikibreak-related templates could form a potential corpus for large-scale content analysis. In any case, I hesitate to conclude that the present work must necessarily contribute to preventing infocide. From a community point of view, it is worthwhile to identify and understand the reasons why members exit, and mitigate those reasons if possible. Yet people can and do leave communities. Fortunately, even if they take the action of renouncing their identity and rescinding their contributions, in the communities I focus on, at least, those contributions need not be lost.

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