

SUBMISSION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

to Joint Committee on Transport and Communications

Friday, 15 March 2013

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INTRODUCTION

We welcome the public consultation by the Joint Oireachtas Transport and Communications Committee on the subject of how "the irresponsible use of social media channels might be curbed".

The past twelve months in particular have seen the most extraordinary escalation of hate and venom directed at pro-life activists. This submission details some of that abuse - and explains that, while pro-life groups such as Youth Defence and Life Institute act responsibly in moderating forums, the same cannot be said for some groups advocating abortion.

We also point out that a Labour Party organiser and others have used social media to raise threats of physical violence against pro-life activists, and that this constitutes an abuse of free speech which is entirely unacceptable.

We call on the Labour party to confirm that this behaviour is not condoned by the party, and that they have measures in place to ensure party supporters understand that threatening behaviour on social media is not acceptable.

We ask the Committee to consider measures to ensure all citizens have the means to protect their good name and reputation against anonymous attacks on social media.

"CAN WE NOT JUST NAIL NIAMH UÍ BHRIAIN TO A CROSS IN THE MIDDLE OF O'CONNELL ST": ABUSE ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

The pro-life movement makes adept use of social media: Youth Defence, for example, has more than 70,000 followers on Facebook, and Irish pro-life videos have clocked up more than half a million views on You Tube and elsewhere.

This has also drawn the attention of abortion campaigners, some of whom have directed unacceptable venom and hatred at pro-life activists.

Much of the abuse has, of course, been written by anonymous commentators whose malice is spewed forth on blogs, on Twitter and Facebook, and, very often, even on the websites of major media publications, such as the Guardian newspaper.

Some of these comments beggar belief. They do not concentrate on the issue being debated but make personal attacks and threats against pro-life commentators.

It is very disturbing then to see that what happens on social media can spill into reality. Last month, the offices of the pro-life group, Youth Defence were subjected to what Senator Jim Walsh described as an 'appalling attack'.

Abortion supporters covered the doors and shutters in huge quantities of excrement and used faeces to stick photographs of Savita Halappanavar to the building. It was a vile and grotesque attack, and hugely disrespectful to the memory of Savita. Her husband Praveen was reported to be upset and distressed by the use of his wife's image in this manner. (i)

The attack was, no doubt, prompted by the unregulated and increasingly aggressive behaviour of abortion supporters on social media.

Sadly, some of that aggressive and threatening behaviour has emanated from members of the Labour Party, while at least one employee of a major media outlet has contributed to a hostile environment for dissenting opinion.

Recently, a former Director of Elections and Secretary of a Cork branch of the Labour Party, Keith Moynihan O'Brien, tweeted that he hoped Youth Defence members opening their mouths on abortion would be "punched out cold". LabourYouth were tagged in the comment on Twitter. (1) (2)

(A screenshot of his comment along with all others referred to in this submission are included in an appendix to this submission.)

Mr Moynihan O'Brien's aggression was shared by his social media friends - one of whom, Eoghan Beecher, tweeted that 'everybody in youth defence needs a kick in the face' tagging Keith Moynihan O'Brien in the tweet. (3)

Eoghan Beecher was previously Labour Youth's International Officer for Ireland. (4) Similar threats can also be found on Facebook and Twitter. "A shower of massive c***s who deserve to be shot", tweeted Gary O'Nuallain about pro-life activists. (5)

"Let burn down the Life Institute" Gaythoven [sic] posted on Twitter, while Cillian Murphy threatened that he would come in to give people a "f**kin dig" because he didn't like pro-life billboards and advertisements. (6) (7)

Grant Murphy wrote on Facebook to the Life Institute that pro-life people were a

"...shower of f***ing god foresaken c**ts. You can f**k off and get f***ed, in fact go get a baby, unwanted or otherwise." (8)

James Quirke wrote on Facebook : "If you want abuse then you'll get abuse, up to this you've got off light I'd tell ya if you keep up your hurtful campaigns I'd be surprised if someone didn't try some other means than rational debate over the issues to get uz to get out of Ireland soon. "

He then followed it up with this appalling message: "now have a nice day wont you and don't go having any abortions or anything like that...especially if you get raped....that's not a threat btw just an observation." (9)

Other abusive and threatening remarks name pro-life activists directly, such as the post by Paddy Malaga on the Guardian's website which asked : "Can we not just nail Niamh Uí Bhriain to a cross in the middle of O'Connell St'?" (10)

Mickey Harte, the GAA icon much admired and loved by the nation for his enormous courage in the face of terrible and tragic loss, was called a "c**t" by Niall C on Twitter because he spoke at a pro-life vigil. (11)

The Irish blogger who hides behind the pseudonym, Bock the Robber, wrote a piece attacking pro-life activists which was so venomous and defamatory that the people he attacked were obliged to seek the advice of a solicitor. (12)

The post has now been removed, but the blogger - and those who re-posted his diatribe - are open to being sued for libel.

The Life Institute recommends that the Committee establishes a process to assist those labelled by anonymous online posts to restore their good name.

It is noteworthy that much of the more extreme abuse on social media is directed by male abortion supporters against young pro-life women. Clearly an attempt to intimidate is intended.

Anonymous bullying is a threat off and online, but measures certainly could be designed to deal with some of the irresponsible and unacceptable abuse in social media.

FACTORS ESCALATING HOSTILITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

If the Committee wishes to tackle abusive and unacceptable behaviour on social media then they need to examine what drives abusive behaviour. Can an escalation in hostility on social media occur when establishment figures act to suggest intolerance of differing opinions or urge censorship of same?

For example, Labour TDs and Senators took the lead in calling for pro-life billboards to be censored in July of 2012, going so far as to join in a protest against the billboards outside the Dáil. The billboards are included in the appendix and, clearly, they could not be considered to be offensive to any reasonable person. (13)

A small number of those billboards were vandalised by abortion supporters, a response which is not just offensive but illegal. A meeting to organise the attack was publicised by Siren magazine, an online publication from Trinity College, which had liaised on Twitter with Labour Senator, Ivana Bacik, to orchestrate complaints about the billboards. (13)

Clearly, Ms Bacik was not encouraging anyone to vandalise billboards, but a rush to have pro-life messages censored can lead to mixed messaging on Twitter and elsewhere.

Likewise, aggression on social media does not happen in isolation. It emerges from an atmosphere sometimes brought on by the same commentators who profess to be shocked by these extremes.

The mainstream media, for example, does everything it can to portray pro-life activists as the kind of people who are deserving of abuse. Conor Pope of the Irish Times recently spent time on the phone to the young women in the Youth Defence office. He then tweeted that they "really are a ***** bunch of *****". (14)

Can such tweets, and the hostility they display towards pro-life organisations contribute to an atmosphere which produces the extreme language, aggression and threats detailed above? Do left-wing extremists read that pro-life volunteers "really are a ***** bunch of *****" and take it to mean that the offices of these volunteers can be attacked? Do these careless tweets contribute to an atmosphere of hostility where extremist abortion campaigners feel it is justifiable to intimidate the same young women by covering their office with faeces?

If one person tweets that pro-life people should be kicked in the face, does that encourage others to tweet that pro-life people should be punched in the mouth? Do those threats encourage others to think they can, in fact, violently attack and assault pro-life activists?

Perhaps the Committee would undertake further research to better understand the escalation of extremism and hate crimes caused by irresponsible tweeting and posting on social media.

Certainly, the hate and venom on social media doesn't come out of nowhere. And it seeks to intimidate, to bully and to deter people from standing up to protect the most vulnerable of all - the unborn child.

It will not succeed. But neither should it be acceptable.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MODERATING SOCIAL MEDIA

The Life Institute recognises that freedom of expression is an important right and that social media is a valuable forum for debate. We also recognise that moderators play a crucially important role in ensuring respectful debate on Facebook, websites and Twitter, and that moderators require clear guidelines.

Life Institute and Youth Defence moderators on Facebook have such clear guidelines and will remove any comments, which are abusive, threatening, or make personal attacks. The same cannot be said for pro-abortion pages, which seem to actively encourage abusive comments and posts.

Any parent who is faced with the terrible news that their baby may not live deserves to be treated with sensitivity and respect and any dialogue on legalising abortion for babies with a fatal disorder should be mindful of these losses.

That's why when one of the women leading the campaign to have abortion legalised in these circumstances contacted the Life Institute on our website forum, it was important that the discussion was courteous and often constructive.

Indeed, the blog of that campaign has acknowledged that Youth Defence ensured that any comments made by random visitors which may have been hurtful to women who have undergone abortions were deleted from any social media outlet under their control. (15)

It is our experience that abusive remarks are almost never made by pro-life advocates on the pages under our stewardship. If any comment is highly personalised, nasty or threatening, they are removed. In the rare instance where a comment or post is abusive

and is overlooked, it is immediately removed when brought to the attention of the social media moderator.

Pro-abortion pages such as 'Unlike Youth Defence' however seem to actively encourage abusive and threatening behaviour. This submission attaches two examples:

1. When an Alanna Kelly boasts that she 'knocked [a pro-life] table over and got arrested for it', her comments were applauded by the abortion supporters. (In an attempt to justify her attack, she claims that pro-life activists were 'protesting Galway Pride', although it is clearly evident from the video posted that what is taking place is a pro-life information stall, and nothing remotely connected to any other event) (16)

Bebhinn Farrell, a page administrator, then pitched-in to call pro-life people 'fascist scum'. (16)

2. Similarly, during the debate following the misreporting on the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar, a pro-life spokeswoman contributed to a debate on Indian TV - and was so well received that the program asked her to return the following day. Yet she was subjected to the most extraordinary abuse on the pro-abortion Facebook page regarding the same debate.

Clearly, some abortion campaigners do not understand that abusive name-calling, threats of physical violence and intimidating remarks are not an acceptable form of debate. (17)

CONCLUSION

- Abuse on social media is unacceptable in itself, but it becomes more disturbing when it spills over into physical violence and attacks against pro-life activists.
- Aggressive comments from Labour Party members and other abortion campaigners encouraging violence towards pro-life activists are unacceptable. Likewise, elected representatives and journalists need to be mindful of creating an intolerant climate, which may result in hostile and aggressive - and even unlawful - behaviour.
- Moderation of social media forums is key to respectful debate, and pro-life organisations such as Youth Defence and Life Institute have taken steps to ensure moderation guidelines are enforced.
- It is noteworthy that much of the more extreme abuse on social media is directed by male abortion supporters against young pro-life women. Clearly an attempt to intimidate is intended.
- We recommend that the Committee encourage abortion campaigners to draft and enforce guidelines regarding the responsible moderation of social media.

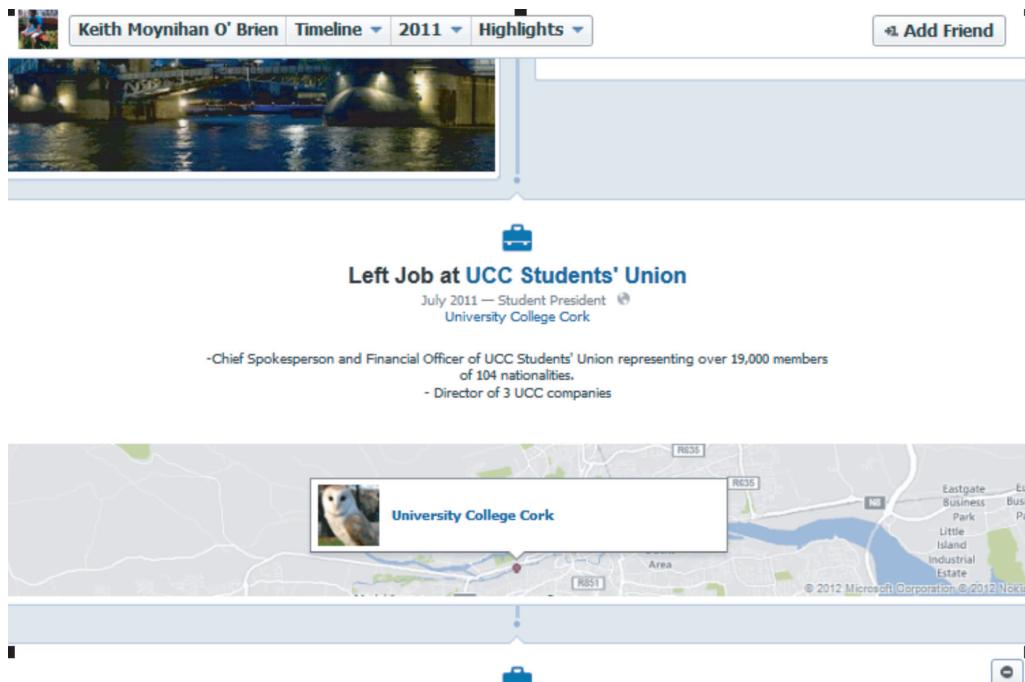
APPENDIX

(i) <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/keep-savitas-name-out-of-abortion-row-husband-29096789.html>

1. <https://twitter.com/keithmobrien/status/268521012914700288>



2.



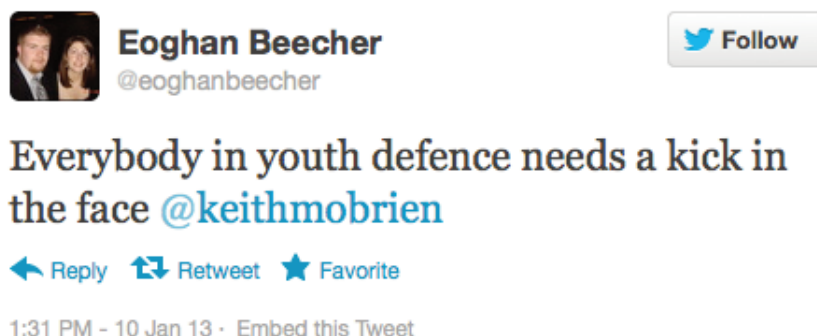
Left Job at Labour Party (Ireland)

March 2011 — Director of Elections

At the age of 23 I was the youngest DoE in Ireland, responsible for the election of a Dáil Candidate in the constituency of Cork North West. Responsible for researching issues in area, briefing the candidate, interacting with media, drafting press releases, use of social media, building party profile and coordinating election activities in CNW.

Olr. Martin Coughlan's vote was tripled in nearly all box tallies, compared with 2007 tallies.

3. <https://twitter.com/eoghanbeeher/status/289484545252798466>



4.

Eoghan Beecher's Experience

Managing Director

Affiliate Performance Ltd

February 2013 – Present (2 months) | London, United Kingdom

Affiliate Performance Ltd is multi-tiered agency, encompassing CPA network, Bespoke planning and buying and product development. Based in the UK but operating a network of publishers all over the world, we offer targeted traffic for advertisers and unique cross channel strategies for digital growth, as well as tie-ins with our own successful products.

General Manager - Affiliates

Lead Performance Ltd

Privately Held; 1-10 employees; Marketing and Advertising industry

May 2012 – Present (11 months) | Watford, United Kingdom

At Lead Performance Ltd, I oversee the operations of the affiliate network and media buying well as monetizing internal products through CPA strategies.

Senior Publishing Manager

Underground Elephant

Privately Held; 51-200 employees; Marketing and Advertising industry

January 2012 – May 2012 (5 months) | London, United Kingdom

Network Manager

Epic Direct Network (A division of Epic Media Group)

Online Media industry

January 2011 – January 2012 (1 year 1 month)

Responsible for managing a network of publishers as well as developing new business.

Account Manager

ServiceMagic Europe

Privately Held; 51-200 employees; Internet industry

November 2009 – April 2011 (1 year 6 months)

Overseeing accounts through strategic development.

Maintaining and expanding existing relationships.

Providing support to accounts team.

Product Specialist Government Services

Abtran

Privately Held; 1001-5000 employees; Outsourcing/Offshoring industry

January 2008 – October 2009 (1 year 10 months)

International Officer

Labour Youth Ireland

2005 – 2006 (1 year)

5. <https://twitter.com/GazzaONuallain/statuses/278615747763249153>



Gary Ó'Nualláin

@GazzaONuallain

Follow

No matter which stock photos Youth Defence use, the only important thing is that they're a shower of massive cunts who deserve to be shot.

Reply Retweet Favorite

1:42 PM - 11 Dec 12 · Embed this Tweet

6. <https://twitter.com/Gaythoven/status/268486308505206784>



Gaythoven

@Gaythoven

Follow

Lets have a "Zero Tolerance" policy on misinforming women: lets burn down The Life Institute;

Reply Retweet Favorite

1

RETWEET

1

FAVORITE



2:51 PM - 13 Nov 12 · Embed this Tweet

7.





Cillian Murphy


I see any of your guys on the streets supporting your horrendous, disgusting and vile billboard advertising, hes gettin a fuckin dig. you are all sick, sick people, did it ever occur to you what kind of an effect you might be having on women who have either had abortions or miscarriages? no, because your too fucking insensitive, and are blinded by the close minded views you hold. so while my mammy thought me not to hit a girl, any of your guys i see will get a faceful of my fist shaped opinion

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) · 17 hours ago

8.


 Life Institute Messages ▾


 **Grant Murphy** ◀ Messages


 **Grant Murphy** M:

Do tell me where you get your funding for all of this please. Please do. If you want to keep this country ass backwards with american funding then FUCK OFF! I'M SICK OF YOU ASSHOLES POLLUTING THE AIRWAYS! STREETS AND OTHER SUCH PLACES AS WELL WITH YOUR LIES AND BULLSHIT! YOU SHOWER FO FUCKING GOD FORSAKEN CUNTS! YOU CAN ALL FUCK OFF AND GET FUCKED, IN FACT GO GET A BABY UNWANTED PREGNANCY OR OTHERWISE!

9.

 Youth Defence Messages ▾

 **James Quirke** ◀ Search

 **James Quirke**

If you want abuse then you'll get abuse, up to this you've got off light.

Your organisation is a disgrace to humanity, the fact that you still think you can dictate how people should to live their lives, we're no longer in the 1970's Catholic Ireland you know. With most your funding coming from american evangelical christian organisations you should just go back there and spout your rubbish. No one like you, no one wants you here and you do not represent the vast majority of people of Ireland. You cause more offence than any other group of this kind, it's well know you have links to those crazy people in the American Tea Party as well. I'd tell ya if you keep up your hurtful campaigns I'd be surprised if someone didn't try some other means than rational debate over the issues to get uz to get out of Ireland soon. 😊

10.



paddymalaga

6 July 2012 4:40PM

Can we not just nail Niamh Ui Bhriain to a cross in the middle of O'Connell street? Catholics are an embarrassment to humanity, wake the f*ck up, its 2012 and i think we are old enough to make decisions for ourselves.

11. <https://twitter.com/Nialler67/statuses/292959895693705216>



Niall C

@Nialler67

 Follow

I see Mickey Harte spoke at the Youth Defence rally yesterday. Not long ago he was speaking at the Quinn protests. What a cu*t!!

 Reply  Retweet  Favorite  More

3:33 AM - 20 Jan 13

12.



BocktheRobber

@BocktheRobber

Always annoying. Sometimes right. Occasionally funny. All opinions are mine. If you don't like them, sue me.

13. <https://twitter.com/LisaOree/statuses/214985718643179520>



Siren Magazine
@Siren_Magazine

Follow

Meeting to discuss direct action against
Youth Defence posters at 6.30pm in Seomra
Spraoi tomorrow (info via @mmilodo)

Reply Retweet Favorite

11:04 AM - 18 Jun 12 via web · Embed this Tweet

<https://twitter.com/ivanabacik/status/224864848796844032>

<https://twitter.com/ivanabacik/status/217590540726845442>

Tweets



Ivana Bacik @ivanabacik

1h

@Siren_Magazine my comment about YD ads has provoked predictable reaction - some senators defend the ads- apologists for youth defence

Expand Reply Retweet Favorite



Ivana Bacik @ivanabacik

2h

Have just raised concern about youth defence ads in Seanad chamber, called for remit of ASAI to be extended to cover these appalling ads

Expand



Ivana Bacik @ivanabacik

2h

Have just raised concern about Youth defence

Expand



Ivana Bacik @ivanabacik

16h

@Siren_Magazine I suggest complaints to National Consumer Agency, Comreg and Communications Minister Rabbitte

View conversation



Ivana Bacik @ivanabacik

23h

@Siren_Magazine i welcome page to complain at Youth Defence ads, i have already made personal complaints -

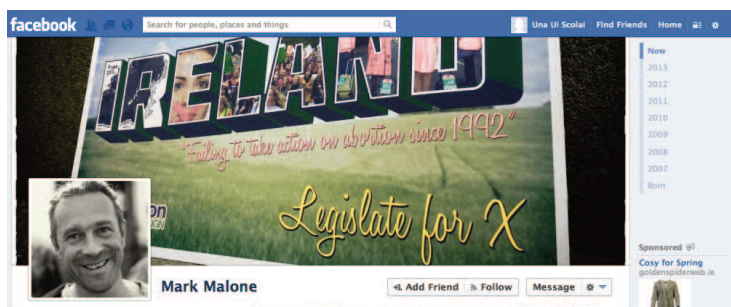
facebook.com/notalwaysabett...

View conversation

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Video on youtube uploaded by Mark Malone showing illegal damage being carried out on property: <http://youtu.be/UmArFH3F398>



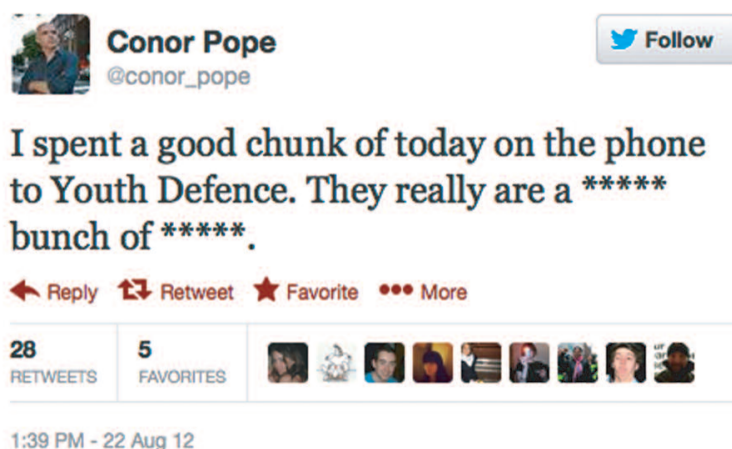
One of the Anti Abortion posters ripped down on Lombard St, Dublin
pic.twitter.com/M8I66lp6

Reply Retweet Favorite

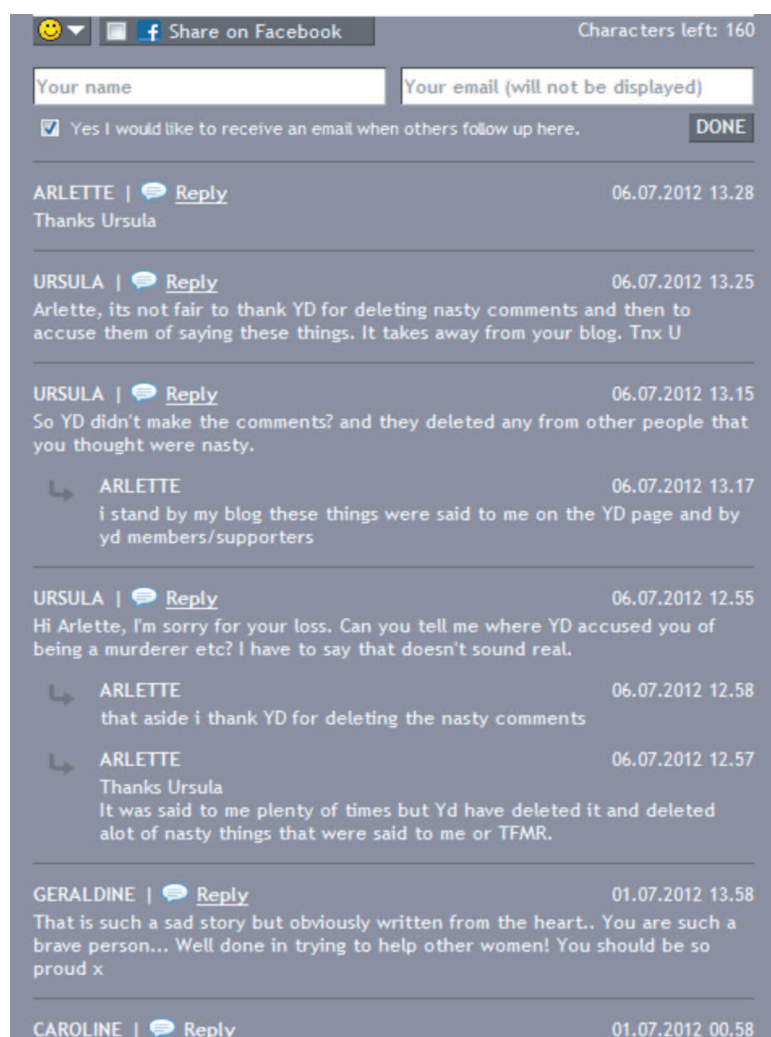


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14. https://twitter.com/conor_pope/status/238374894117732352




15.



SUBMISSION ON SOCIAL MEDIA


16.


 **Alanna Kelly**
<http://youtu.be/91vLRYvmkU4>

 **Youth Defence Protesting Galway Pride and Counter Protest**
www.youtube.com


Like · Comment · Share · 15 hours ago


👍 2 people like this.


 **Bebhinn Farrell** Fascist scum is correct. how DARE they. Pro-life, but we will tell you how to live it.
11 hours ago · Like


 **Ciara Ní Mhurchú** So YD dont like anyone born, adults, children, gays.....
11 hours ago via mobile · Like

 **Bebhinn Farrell** Sure why would they care about gays? Especially gays wanting to adopt parentless babies. SOUND.
11 hours ago · Like · 🗨 1


 **Ciara Ní Mhurchú** Theyd rather kids were in care than adopted by gay people.
11 hours ago via mobile · Like


 **Bebhinn Farrell** They're horrible horrible horrible people.
11 hours ago · Like


 **Ciara Ní Mhurchú** They do not see the utter hypocrisy in their 'cause'.
11 hours ago via mobile · Like

 **Bebhinn Farrell** That's because they are brainwashed. It's the only explanation for ignoring facts and science. Good luck to them. A life filled with hate and bitterness? They can keep it! Anyway, can't even be arsed talking about them tonight. They're fools.
11 hours ago · Like

 **Ciara Ní Mhurchú** Their hate filled unscientifically correct nonsense impacts on the lifes of people who are rational thinkers with no religious beliefs. Its wrong.
11 hours ago via mobile · Like

 **Bebhinn Farrell** Totally.
11 hours ago · Like

 **Bebhinn Farrell** They've got Lord of the Ring quotes. Who needs science.
11 hours ago · Like · 🗨 1

 **Alanna Kelly** I knocked their table over and got arrested for it. Cops gave me a lecture.
11 hours ago via mobile · Like · 🗨 7

17.

www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=427786427288090&id=465176890159311



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