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# Is it Possible to Change Someone's Mind Online? A Graphic Design Thesis

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# *Laurel Benson*

Is it possible to change someone's mind online?

*A Graphic Design Thesis*

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores whether or not it is possible to change someone's mind on the internet. Using an examination of traditional argument resolution techniques as a foundation, this paper builds upon that foundation and questions whether or not such techniques are appropriate on the internet. A mixture of primary and secondary research led to a surprising conclusion. It is in fact possible to change someone's mind on the internet, but to do so often involves techniques that are diametrically opposed to the traditional argument resolution techniques that were examined in the first part of the paper. This paper proposes that the techniques used to change someone's mind on the internet are often brash and aggressive. Our social media platforms connect us not only to the world, but our family and friends — and while using brash language may change someone's mind, it may also bring on a negative experience.

# *Part 1*

Is it possible to change someone's mind online?

*Initial research and conclusion*

## INTRODUCTION

It has become nearly impossible to voice your true opinions on social media platforms online for fear of retribution. Family and classmates and friends twice removed all have access to your opinions and unlimited ways in which they can come out of the woodwork and express their reactions. Social media platforms on the internet such as Facebook, Reddit, and the comments section on websites like YouTube have now come to represent a great catch-22 for my millennial peers. We're opinionated, we're brash, and we aren't changing anyone's minds, including our own. On web platforms meant for discussion and discovery, my peers and I feel more pigeon-holed than ever.

These online social media platforms were made for community, not chaos — to bring people closer together into the same realm of understanding. Facebook started out as a way to connect with people local to you, and YouTube has always been populated with valuable videos that teach you skills, or provide free entertainment. Of course, these social media platforms online are also businesses that exist to make a profit, and the way that we use them shapes the way that they serve us. It's important to create an atmosphere in which disagreement is possible on these online social media platforms. Without it, contrary ideas could never be presented and weighed for their merit in online communications. And since the use of communicating online through these social media platforms is continuing into the next generations, disagreements on these platforms should be able to take place productively.

## RESEARCH

“How do you change someone’s mind online?” One of the pioneers on this subject is Sally Kohn, a talking head on Fox News, which is a notoriously conservative news network. Ms. Kohn is gay and oftentimes when she gives her opinions honestly she receives backlash from the network’s viewers. She has received everything from disgust to pure vitriol, all just for expressing her opinion and doing her job. In a Ted Talk performed in New York City, Ms. Kohn introduces the concept of “emotional correctness.” This is in contrast to political correctness, and means that instead of being concerned with neutralizing everything, we should be more concerned with asking questions with honesty and actual compassion and intent to listen. Too often a politically correct response will be emotionally incorrect, — similar to taking two steps forward and then one step back. “Emotional correctness” uses compassion and active listening as a technique to resolve arguments and change someone’s preconceived notions in a polite way. Ms. Kohn’s idea of emotional correctness was supported in a different Ted Talk by William Ury, entitled “The Walk from No to Yes.” In this talk he backs up the idea of emotional correctness and adds that in order to form a connection with someone that surpasses the current argument a group of people needs a common narrative to bind them together. Professor Ury uses the example of the Middle East, and explains that while each region is incredibly different, the whole area shares the story of the prophet Muhammad. By creating a pilgrimage that traces the prophet’s ancient journey through the region, people are brought together who never believed compromise to be possible. A common narrative allows individuals to see their commonalities as more encompassing than their differences. Mr. Ury’s technique to solve arguments and change someone’s mind involves empathy, and the establishment of common ground between two opposite ideas.

These ideas make a lot of sense. Finding a common narrative, and using emotional correctness are expected, and somewhat obvious solutions to the problem of how to change someone’s mind. However, interactions online on social media platforms can be very different due to the cover of anonymity and lack of face-to-face contact, even if the other person is known. Would Ms. Kohn’s and Mr. Ury’s philosophies apply to social media? Wouldn’t the conditions of compromise between two adverse parties be different when separated by anonymity and/or distance? Professor Robb Willer is a giant in this discourse community, and there is great value in two social media studies he did. In the first, Professor Willer discovers through sampling “ego-networks” of Twitter that more conservative individuals are more homophilious than liberals or moderates. In the second study, Professor Willer and a different colleague apply this information practically. They analysed politically divisive arguments and figured out that each person grounds their political

argument in their own moral values. Thus, someone who was trying to convince someone of a political point would be more successful if they reframed their argument to suit the moral values of the recipient. This does not mean to change the argument, but to change the course of action to suit what would satisfy the recipient. The positive outcomes of a course of action are presented in a way that suits the recipients moral values and allows them to see the benefits. Notice that there was no significant finding on if tone or general attitude led to a higher likelihood of a polite conversation or successful conversation on social media.

This secondary research prompted the search for some real-life examples of emotional correctness and moral reframing in action. I chose to focus solely on Facebook and perused conversations that were hotly debated. After analyzing several “threads” it became apparent that there wasn’t “good” and “bad” examples, but instead “effective” or “ineffective” examples. The secondary research had led me into a bias that “good” examples existed in which someone convinced another user of their point by being emotionally and politically correct. However, the actual examples of polite disagreement were, while enlightening, not actually examples of anyone being persuaded. For instance, there was one thread on Facebook where someone posed the question “White people with dreads, how do we feel about it?” The responses to this question were a mixed bag of short phrases, such as “gross”, “[S]ome can rock it”, and “never trust.” These phrases were met without any rebuttal. However, one comment was more thoughtful, and more detailed, and voiced the opinion that dreads are not appropriate for white people because “[T]here’s a racial history of workplace discrimination for culturally Black hairstyles...” This comment stood out in it’s length, and utilized some of the traditional argument resolution techniques that are effective in real life. In response to this thoughtful comment, a different poster chimed in with an opposing viewpoint, and voiced their opinion in a similar, respectful manner. The point of their post was that “...if someone likes something & they’re wearing it ‘respectfully’ it shouldn’t be an issue...” This respectful disagreement also started with the phrase “[W]hile I understand & agree with this, I think...”, which employs the traditional argument resolution techniques of emotional correctness and finding a common narrative. As the thread continued, these two posters exchanged their ideas in a respectful way, but had no apparent affect on changing the mind of the other. The conclusion drawn from this example is that there is a higher likelihood of polite disagreement when the traditional argument resolution techniques were utilized. However, the mildness of this approach did not make any lasting change on the opposing viewpoint.

This is in contrast to examples in which the users were not actually emotionally or politically correct, but instead quite vocal and brash. In these instances there were actually more people be-

ing persuaded. For example, one hotly contested thread on Facebook had to do with whether or not the elephant in a certain video was coerced into painting a portrait of itself, or whether it was fine and enjoyed painting. One poster immediately got my attention by using incredibly abrasive language. To quote the poster: “BITCH you are an IDIOT if you believe...” Just as my attention was piqued, I saw that the response to the poster’s aggressive language actually prompted some incredulous followers of the thread to research what the poster included as evidence, and have their opinions changed. The elephant was indeed coerced. In response to the aggressive comment, one poster said “I stand corrected. I actually looked this up and you are completely right.” This was interesting because it completely flipped the way these arguments were being categorized. Suddenly, the “bad” label needed to be changed into “successful.” Instead of simply yelling, a vocal and brash character in an argument that also provides research and the dedication to follow-up and back up their point is usually disruptive enough to cause other actors in the argument to do their own research and look at what the original poster provided. Instead of creating a passive aggressive “politically correct” environment, or a passion-less “emotionally correct” environment, matching the tone of the online argument is more appropriate, and is more effective in persuading another person to your point.



## RESEARCH SUMMARY

Throughout the course of my research, I began to understand that my underlying bias had predisposed me into a certain way of thinking. Instead of being “bad” or “good,” online persuasion techniques were either “effective” or “ineffective,” and it was possible for effective techniques to include such tactics as yelling and cursing — and for ineffective techniques to include such tactics like empathy and listening. This realization allowed me to conduct more effective research, where I began looking for evidence of persuasion in online arguments as opposed to evidence of polite disagreement.

After this surprising conclusion, it became apparent that despite the effectiveness of persuading someone to a new opinion, these examples of “effective” methods usually involved aggressive techniques. Online posters would use all capitals, curse words, insults, etc. to get a reaction out of the discussion that would lead to increased awareness of their opinion. Indeed, the more inflammatory the language, the greater chance that there would be a strong reaction. Specifically, in the example in which an elephant painting a portrait was hotly contested, the poster with the aggressive language was able to persuade the group to their point by using a combination of all capitals, yelling, and insults. The brashness of their language drew eyes to their point, and prompted other people in the discussion, either out of curiosity or spite, to check this poster’s facts and eventually end up being persuaded to a different conclusion. This primary research was valuable in illuminating the bias of the researcher, but it came at the dismay of the researcher as well. While the initial research question was answered resoundingly, the conclusion that aggressive behavior is the key to persuading online posters to a point was distinctly unpleasant. Since it has become so difficult to post opinions online, the hope of the research was to find examples in which polite disagreement was the catalyst for a changed opinion. It should be acknowledged that this hope formed the bias for categorizing the effective, aggressive behavior seen in the primary research as “bad.” Since the findings of the research eventually clarified this bias, the new question was how to portray this information into a graphic design thesis. It was morally repulsive to think of encouraging people to act in an aggressive way, using insults, all-capitals, and curse words to prove their point. This aggressive, online behavior was the inspiration for the research question, and it would be detrimental to create anything promoting the use of such techniques. The challenge of representing this research in an honest and compelling graphic design thesis is the basis for part 2 of this paper.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The conclusion of this research brought up another question, which is “how sustainable is the aggressive behavior that does allow you to change someone’s mind on social media?” This question would require further secondary and primary research, and would be interesting to explore in the future. The aggressive behavior that changes someone’s mind online would be a detriment to the poster if it negatively affected any of their relationships. No one likes aggressive behavior. And this aggressive behavior would negatively effect their relationships with those they are using it on. However, this is a subjective measurement, and would be more interesting to hear from the internet users who engage in aggressive, effective persuasion techniques, and from their recipients.

One other significant limitation to this research is the fact that not all aggressive communications online are successful. Some aggressive and brash comments serve no purpose whatsoever. This is due to the fact that someone who uses aggressive and brash comments may do so just to derail a conversation or for no reason at all. The use of aggressive and brash comments is not always utilized for the purpose of changing someone’s mind online.

# *Part 2*

Is it possible to change someone's mind online?

*Representing the research*

## INTRODUCTION

Part I of this paper leaves off with the question of how to portray the research in an honest, compelling graphic design thesis. The message from the research being that in order to persuade someone to your opinion online, aggressive tactics such as cursing, insults, and all capitals were more effective than traditional argument resolution techniques like emotional correctness and finding commonalities. It simply wasn't an option to create a graphic design thesis encouraging people to use these tactics, since I find them morally repugnant. However, it is my responsibility as a researcher to portray the results of the research in an honest way. And it is my responsibility of a graphic designer to do so clearly and compellingly.

With these responsibilities in mind, I designed and then coded a website. This website takes a user through the discoveries of the project with an interesting user interaction. Then, after presenting the research and its results, the user is asked to react to the findings in a similar way like on Facebook. The user is able to react with a simple icon, like a smiley face or thumbs up for example, and is also able to leave a comment as an anonymous user. If the user doesn't want to react, or is done doing so, a button exists to take them back to the first web page. This website portrays the research in a simple, but knowledgeable way. With the ending call to action of "reacting" to the research, the website accomplishes two goals. One of which is to engage the user and reward them for participating, and the second of which is to continue public discourse about this topic.

SCREENGRABS FROM WEBSITE



*Landing page of website*

*[http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code\\_2/index.html](http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code_2/index.html)*

When a user first loads the website, an engaging animation displays the question and introduces a neutral robot character for the user to identify with. In order to move to additional pages with information, the user must click on the “next” button. If the user clicks on the “next” button, the corresponding page in the narration of the site will appear, and the navigation on the left-hand side of the page will illuminate which page the user is currently on.

For the navigation of the site, the user will always have two options readily available for them to navigate through the various pages. The “next” button is located on each page along with a related “back” button, and the combination of these buttons allows the user to move through each page of the website. However, to make navigation even more clear, a secondary mode of moving through the website is contained in the navigation that remains constant on the left hand side. The two ways of navigating this site allow control over the narrative, and what information is being presented in what order.

SCREENGRABS FROM WEBSITE

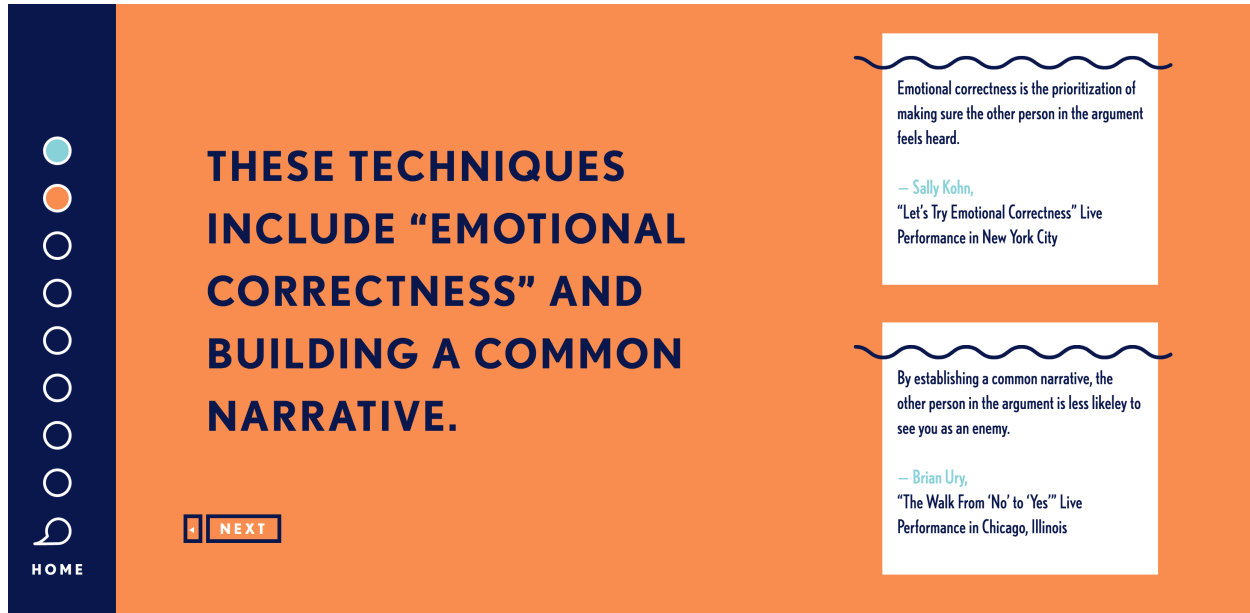


*Introduction page*

[http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code\\_2/index.html#page2](http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code_2/index.html#page2)

After the user clicks the “next” button on the landing page of the website, they are then introduced to the subject through the introduction page [pictured above.] This introduction page introduces a change of background-color which adds visual interest and engagement. The “next” button is joined by the related “back” button to its left, and a second way for the user to navigate to the home page of the website appears in the navigation. The neutral robot character undergoes its first emotional transformation on this page, and has a happy expression with heart icons around its head implying empathy and kindness. The robot, along with the text reading “usually, empathy techniques change people’s minds...” sets a comfortable and friendly tone for this website. Brightly colored backgrounds and illustrated characters add compelling visual interest which draw a user into the website and keeps them there to learn how to change someone’s mind online. On this page, the first background-color change, from purple to blue, sets the user’s expectations for what the experience will be like going through the rest of the website.

SCREENGRABS FROM WEBSITE



*Introduction explanation page*

*[http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code\\_2/index.html#page3](http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code_2/index.html#page3)*

The introduction page of the website tells the user that “usually, empathy techniques change people’s minds...” and this next page explains these techniques in more detail and provides references. “Emotional correctness” and finding a common narrative are the empathy techniques that discourse community experts say are effective in changing someone’s mind. In order to explain this in a condensed, engaging way to the viewer, this page loads in with interesting animations and incorporates another background-color change. The user is not forced to read the supporting facts on this page, but has the option to do so if they so choose after the main content loads.

The navigation on the left hand side of the page illuminates the pages that the user has already clicked through. In this case, since this is the second page the user has clicked through, the second dot on the left is illuminated with the corresponding background-color of the page. As the user continues through the pages, each page will illuminate it’s corresponding circle in the left hand navigation.

SCREENGRABS FROM WEBSITE



Example page

[http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code\\_2/index.html#page6](http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code_2/index.html#page6)

After taking the user through web pages which explain the topic and ground it in secondary research, the user is then introduced to the primary research done on this subject. This primary research consisted of actual Facebook conversations in which users were arguing and trying to change each other's minds. To keep these conversations private, the website only shows quotes from these conversations, not the context in which they were said, or more importantly, the names of the posters. These quotes are used to illustrate the abrasive tactics that actually change minds online.

Similar to the explanation page after the introduction, this page of the website explains the abrasive techniques actually used to change someone's mind online. As with the other pages, the background-color changes on this page, and the information animates onto the page in a compelling way. Since this information is most important for the user to take away, the examples of abrasive content are displayed at a large size, and all three examples take up 80% of the width of the page. The size of these examples make them easy to read, and the way they animate onto the page encourages the user to read each one.



SCREENGRABS FROM WEBSITE



*Example explanation page*

[http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code\\_2/index.html#page7](http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code_2/index.html#page7)

This page explains why the abrasive examples from the previous page are effective at changing someone’s mind online. Simply put, abrasive and brash messages inspire an emotional response, and this emotional response is sometimes strong enough to make someone look up an issue and read up on the facts. This page explains this in two sentences in order to minimize the amount of text the user has to read, and this makes the message of the site easier to understand. The use of highlighting certain portions of the text, such as “aggressive tactics” (as is pictured on this web page) allows the user to glance quickly at the text and still glean the most important points.

As with the preceding pages, this page also incorporates a background-color change, and uses engaging animations to reveal the information and keep the user interested. Because this page is seventh in the user’s click through path, the seven dots corresponding to the pages the user has seen already are illuminated in the left hand navigation.

SCREENGRABS FROM WEBSITE



*Call to action*

[http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code\\_2/index.html#page9](http://web.pdx.edu/~labenson/code_2/index.html#page9)

On the final page of the website, the user is prompted to either “like” the question or to comment. This user interaction is inspired by the Facebook environment that the research was collected in. By allowing the user the ability to react to the question, or to comment and voice their opinion, the website continues public discourse about this subject. Instead of creating a website that simply conveyed the research, or one that used the research as an opportunity to promote abrasive language, the website I created furthers my research by continuing public discourse about the subject and empowers the user with information.

On this last page, the call to action page, the user is rewarded for clicking through the site by having a chance to participate through the “like” and “comment” functionalities. In terms of navigation, the user is able to either flip back through the pages of the website individually by using the left hand navigation, or, by clicking the word “home,” the user is able to return to the beginning of the experience and begin again on the landing page of the website.

## **CONCLUSION**

Is it possible to change someone's mind online? The research says yes. However, the way to change someone's mind online isn't by using traditional argument resolution techniques. Instead, abrasive, brash, and rude language is actually effective at changing someone's mind. This language encourages an emotional response, and this emotional response can sometimes be strong enough to prompt another person to do outside research about an issue. This conclusion came as a surprise to me, and presented a serious issue in terms of representing the research. It simply was not an option to create a graphic design project that encouraged the use of abrasive language. However, I did have a goal of representing the research in a clear way that would share my knowledge with the public. It was also a goal to represent this research in a way that would continue public discourse about the subject. For these reasons, I created a website.

The website I created about my research into this subject accomplishes my goals. As the user uses the website the information I discovered throughout my research is communicated in a clear and engaging way. The use of bright colors, interesting animations, and adorable illustrations create a website that is engaging in its use, and friendly in its tone. The navigation and animations on the website encourage the user to read the entirety of the text on the website, which is a condensed version of the information presented in this paper. After reading through my research, the user is then rewarded for clicking through the site through the opportunity to impact their own feedback via "liking" or commenting their opinion on the question "how do you feel about using aggressive tactics to win online arguments?" This opportunity rewards the user for clicking through the site, but also continues public discourse about this subject by allowing the user to comment and answer the question with their opinion.

This research came to a surprising conclusion, and it was a challenge to represent the research in a graphic way. However, by using my website as an opportunity to share my research without recommending either tactic (emotional correctness or abrasive language) I found that I was able to actually continue the research by opening it up to the public.

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