

Should we stay or should we go?

Clashing on Stack Exchange and Stack Overflow

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Abstract

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The advent of Web 2.0 has opened the means of online collaboration, supporting the creation of digital platforms which, in turn, have enabled the creation and curation of knowledge commons that we sometimes take for granted. Since, researchers have revisited repertoires of contention related to digital activism, though less attention has been given to peer production and digitally native protests. This study examines the 2019–2020 crisis on the Stack Exchange network through a case study approach. Using the Governing Knowledge Commons framework, inspired by Elinor Ostrom, to structure data collection and Hirschman’s *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* framework to guide analysis, the case highlights the limitations of user agency in platform governance. Despite contributors employing various strategies to voice their concerns, their ability to make themselves heard and effect change ultimately depends on administrators’ willingness to engage and their willingness to uphold platform rules, leaving contributors with limited recourse. This study argues that the absence of legal protections for knowledge commons contributors threatens the long-term sustainability of these online ecosystems. Moreover, by providing a detailed account of the crisis, this research provides data to support revising current repertoires of contention to encompass peer production contexts better.

The author discloses her voluntary involvement as a Stack Exchange moderator since 2018, within a team of over 575 members at the time of the events.

Keywords: digitally native protests, online knowledge commons governance, peer production, digital repertoires of contention, Stack Exchange, Stack Overflow.

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A part of this work is woven from the words and actions of members deeply invested in the Stack Exchange network. It does not claim to speak for them, but I hope it does justice to their voices and the time they've invested in building and curating these knowledge commons for all. It was a privilege to have been entrusted with the time and perspectives of participants who have reviewed my summary of the crisis. While I have benefited from their insights, any remaining errors or oversights are my own.

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Background

Peer-produced online knowledge commons create value for society. These are often driven and curated by online communities of volunteers who collaborate with platform administrators to support their common goals. One such platform is the Stack Exchange network, the home of Stack Overflow and many more topic-based communities that have shared a long tradition of participatory policymaking with the mission of creating and curating high-quality Q&A artifacts.

In 2019, the network's most extended crisis was sparked by the abrupt dismissal of a popular volunteer moderator and subsequently prolonged by the termination of two veteran Community Managers (CMs). Members employed various methods to protest and make their voices heard during the events, which spanned several months. The crisis signalled a shift from the network's early mission and policymaking practices, leading to considerable attrition that undermined the sustainability of the community and the platform. Although the larger user base may have been unaware of the crisis, the break in trust with its members is still felt years later.

Stemming from a larger concern about the long-term viability of peer-produced knowledge commons, this crisis exposed platform governance weaknesses. It also provided an opportunity to explore the following research questions:

Q1: How have members of the Stack Exchange network attempted to make themselves heard during the protests of 2019–2020?

Q1A. Which were the means they used to organize and protest?

Q1B. What characteristics of the members and platform have shaped these actions?

This case was especially compelling due to the high level of digital literacy of many members of this community. I examine the case with the Governing Knowledge Commons framework (Frischmann et al., 2014, p. 14) and resource mobilization theory (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004) and structure emerging themes around Hirschman's work, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970). I conclude by outlining some lessons from the crisis that may inform the development of more ethical and sustainable commons.

A Brief History of Stack Exchange

Despite its seemingly simple Q&A format, the Stack Exchange network is a complex sociotechnical environment boasting both centralized and decentralized features. While the platform is owned and hosted by a for-profit company, it was shaped by participatory

policymaking practices and members' contributions. This section aims to provide an overview of the main platform features and their historical context.

Stack Overflow (SO), the famous programming Q&A, is a for-profit company founded in 2008 by Jeff Atwood and Joel Spolsky with the support of their blog followers. At the time, Web 2.0 provided opportunities for various decentralized collaborations shaped by increasingly complex activities such as sharing, cooperation, collaborative production, and collective action (Shirky, 2010, pp. 47–53). Moreover, it allowed platforms to engage in participatory policymaking and interoperability.

Stack Overflow aimed to create a library of high-quality programming knowledge and examples where programmers could find answers to their questions quickly. While the platform and its mechanisms are proprietary, members' contributions are licensed under Creative Commons. These contributions include Q&A artifacts and comments that get published, reviewed, edited, and voted on by community members.

Early on, the founders planned to build the network so that there “wouldn’t be any chance of lock-in” (Spolsky, 2010b). A repository of the data, the “data dump”, is regularly available for download. These repositories can be queried through the Stack Exchange Data Explorer. An API also allows members to write scripts and add functionality to the site.

We deliberately put the Stack Overflow community-generated content under Creative Commons and make data dumps of it available regularly as insurance... if Stack Overflow ever slips into the hands of an evil person who does evil things, the content of the site is freely available and someone else can set up a non-evil site. (Spolsky, 2010a)

The company initially generated revenue through a job board and a few ads. The site was built to be fast, reliable, public, and free of charge.

I’m extremely excited about Stack Overflow. It’s fast and clean. It costs us practically nothing to operate, so we won’t need to plaster it with punch-the-monkey ads; we plan to keep it free and open to the public forever. And it might make it a little bit easier to be a programmer. (Spolsky, 2008)

The Shape of a Q&A

Each Q&A community includes public Q&A pages, chat rooms, and a related per-site Meta Q&A where members discuss their rules and policies: “We don’t run Stack Overflow. *You do.*” (Atwood, 2009).

Building a high-quality library of Q&A involves a lot of curation and moderation. Members curate content by upvoting or downvoting, editing, tagging, reviewing, and flagging others' contributions. They aim for a high signal-to-noise ratio, and non-constructive discussion on Q&A is discouraged. There is no way to contact a member privately on the network; all non-moderator communications are public by default. While some members use their full names along with their credentials, many highly value their privacy.

When members' contributions earn them points, they gain "privileges" that grant them increased opportunities to communicate, curate, and moderate. Community members are left to self-organize for the most part, but they elect moderators to handle flags and exceptional cases. Moderators have access to private moderator chat rooms to coordinate their actions. Sanctions are typically graduated, starting with a warning, building up to a cooldown suspension, followed by longer suspensions. While the platform provides all Q&A communities with similar affordances, each has specific norms that are not always obvious, and new members often experience a high barrier to entry.

Mamykina et al. (2011) outlined three reasons for the platform's success: "1) founders' tight involvement with the community, 2) highly responsive and iterative approach to design, and 3) a system of incentives that promoted desirable user behavior." By 2010, Stack Overflow had 16,600,000 global monthly unique visitors and had raised 6,000,000 dollars in venture capital (Spolsky, 2011). Soon, the company allowed members to organize new Q&A communities revolving around different topics. Members made communities progress through definition, testing, and public launch phases. Thriving communities eventually earned a personalized design, and their most invested members were gifted themed merchandise.

These Q&A communities are part of a broader network, the Stack Exchange (SE) network. An overarching Meta Stack Exchange (MSE) site hosts discussions about network-wide challenges, policies, mechanisms, and bug reports. Up until 2018, MSE was moderated by a team of Community Managers (CMs) hired by the company, often directly from the community.

Every Stack Exchange site we launch has a meta from day one. We now know that meta participation is the source of all meaningful leadership and governance in a community, so it is cultivated and monitored closely. (Atwood, 2012)

As the flagship site, Stack Overflow quickly became a ubiquitous resource to programmers all over the world. For some users, contributing became a way to showcase their

skills and build personal capital. Network-wide community events would later become traditions, such as “Stack Gives Back”, where the company donates 100 dollars to charity on behalf of each of their moderators, and “Winter Bash”, a scavenger hunt where members attempt to earn virtual hats to add to their avatars.

Early Research Questions

In 2013, I started researching self-governance mechanisms of the platform. Like many others, I would encounter Stack Overflow while searching for answers to problems on Google. I created an account and became involved in the beta phase of the graphic design community, which facilitated my entry. I read MSE extensively to understand the norms better and started identifying some of the more invested members and CMs. It stood out to me that multiple mechanisms allowed members to make decisions on how the commons were administered.

What I learned building Stack Overflow, more than anything else, is this: **the only form of moderation that scales with the community is the community itself.** We became quite skilled at building systems for self governance of online communities, and one of the things I’m proudest of is that – if we did our jobs well – decades from now Stack Exchange will still be a network of viable, functioning, entirely self-governing communities.) (Atwood, 2014)

I explored how users of Stack Exchange managed the various communities through the lens of Elinor Ostrom’s (1990) work on commons governance.

Network Growth

By 2015, the Stack Exchange network had experienced tremendous growth. It hosted over 130 communities, spanning various topics, including 3,100,000 questions and 4,500,000 answers, which had been viewed 6,400,000,000 times (Stack Exchange, 2015). Srba and Bielikova (2016) would soon measure an increase in the proportion of new questions that were either dismissed or unanswered, as well as an increase in the population of “lurkers” or non-contributing members, outweighing active contributors.

The company had raised 68,000,000 dollars in four different venture capital rounds (Stack Exchange, 2015). At a 2015 meetup, the team of Community Managers would learn that “the company saw community trust as an untapped resource for generating income” (Ericson, 2020b). The public platform stagnated while leadership sought ways to profit: “For the next two

years, the company pursued a strategy intended to grow the business. In my opinion, it also wasted community social capital in the attempt.” (Ericson, 2020b)

While the user base and moderator team grew, the number of CMs shrank, and members were increasingly frustrated by the lack of investment in the platform. This was addressed in 2017, when the Developer Affinity and Growth Team, later known as the Community Team (CT), took on various tasks to improve onboarding, including an experiment where experienced users would help new users to improve their questions (Ford et al., 2018). However, four months later, 20% of employees would be laid off, significantly impacting this team and the resources dedicated to the community and public platform (Lunden, 2017). The company would restructure itself around a new paid enterprise Q&A product inspired by their public platform.

By 2018, Stack Overflow celebrated its 10th anniversary and the site would soon rank as one of the 50 most visited websites in the world (Alexa, 2019): “Including the Stack Exchange network of 174 sites, we have over 100 million monthly visitors. Every month, over 125,000 wonderful people write answers.” (Spolsky, 2019).

Veterans shared a decade of common history and platform knowledge. Although some platform features had evolved, new member onboarding remained problematic, with members having to guide users. The community was explicitly and implicitly labelled as toxic for its gatekeeping by users and the company itself, but community members felt they had contributed to the platform’s success. Controversies accumulated, members’ frustrations grew, and the Community Management Team lacked resources to support members properly. In March 2019, Joel Spolsky, the remaining founder and CEO, announced he would be stepping down (Spolsky, 2019).

In late September 2019, days before the arrival of a new CEO, a veteran moderator elected in multiple communities and appointed by the company to MSE saw her privileges revoked. The abrupt removal followed a discussion in the network’s private moderator chat room about an upcoming Code of Conduct (CoC) revision meant to protect LGBT+ members. Her dismissal, handled in such a way that cast her as an example in the media, and the mediocre implementation of the policy, greatly deviated from established network practices and significantly exacerbated existing tensions. Osborne (2023) has explored the challenges surrounding the implementation of this Code of Conduct on Stack Exchange during this crisis and how disputes between members and the platform took the spotlight away from striving

towards social justice. Members employed various means to protest and attempt to guide the company, but the company's responses were slow and often antagonized community members, exacerbating the situation. Community managers were not empowered to heal the rift, and multiple departments interfered with their work. The company unveiled new policies and changes seeking to gain control over the community and signalling their wish to cater to a larger audience. The dismissed moderator, funded by community members, sought legal recourse. This action led to a legal agreement which silenced both the moderator and the company, leaving community members in the dark.

As the crisis seemed to settle, it regained momentum when two veteran CMs were abruptly fired. They later helped members find some closure by revealing parts of what had been happening, hidden from members' view. A meeting between a community ambassador and the newly integrated CEO led to few concrete outcomes, and members planned network-wide strike. As decision-makers reassessed the importance of the MSE community, and a newly hired CTPO found the right words to appease members, they strike would be called off.

The five-month-long crisis documented in Appendix A (p.57) supports my thesis, which examines the means through which members have attempted to make themselves heard during the protests, and how characteristics of the members and the platform have shaped these means.

Literature Review

One of Web 2.0's defining characteristics is that it allowed for distributed collaboration (Reagle, 2010; Shirky, 2008, ch. 5; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). This important feature has supported the emergence of commons-based peer-production (Benkler, 2002, p. 375), the creation of large knowledge repositories such as Wikipedia and Stack Overflow, as well as many social networking platforms.

As a counterpoint to the ideals of digital communalism, Carr (2006) warned that this decentralized and democratic production powered by Web 2.0 would create a “system of exploitation rather than a system of emancipation” (para. 9) where a privileged few would extract value from the aggregation of the content created by the masses. This business model also benefits from the hidden labour of volunteer moderators who are often the first affected by platform deterioration and are more likely to guide company responses and product improvement (Centivany & Glushko, 2016).

The following section looks at how Web 2.0 has pushed scholars to revisit repertoires of contention. It also outlines notable cases where users have confronted platform administrators to understand how these interactions have influenced modern platforms.

Collective Action and Action Repertoires

Repertoires of contention are “the whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups” (Tilly, 1986, p. 4) and are often organized according to some variables (e.g. Milbrath, 1977; Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1983). For example, Tilly (1983, p. 10) emphasizes how action repertoires have evolved from local to national actions, driven in an increasingly autonomous manner. On the other hand, Milbrath’s framework of political participation (1977) categorizes political participation in three hierarchical tiers: spectator, transitional and gladiatorial activities (p. 21). These tiers are depicted as a pyramid, with spectator activities at its base, suggesting a larger crowd of participants involved in low effort and lower impact actions. The following tiers consist of transitional activities and gladiatorial activities, where a decreasing number of participants are involved in high-effort and high-impact actions.

Given its significant impact on collective action, Web 2.0 has transformed political activism. Multiple works have investigated how digital activism has impacted traditional political mobilization (e.g. Beyer, 2014; Castells, 2015; Lokot, 2021; MacKinnon, 2012) and

how it has extended the kind of actions activists and social movements may participate in (e.g. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Rolfe, 2005; Selander & Jarvenpaa, 2010). This transformation has led scholars to reassess repertoires of contention in this new context (e.g. Costanza-Chock, 2003; George & Leidner, 2019; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Based on the review of 84 articles related to digital activism, George and Leidner (2019) have presented an update to Milbrath's (1977) work, in which they include new activities such as clicktivism, e-funding, and exposure. They state that every tier of political participation can have significant impacts when it comes to digital activism. However, protesters' access to digital resources and skills grows more important with more involved tiers, such as exposure and hacktivism (George & Leidner, 2019, p. 10).

Digitally Native Revolutionary Action in Online Communities

Internet-supported protesting differs from internet-based protests, where online community members revolt against platform administrators (Silva & Pahani, 2017, p. 104). These internal crises are more often covered by the media than by academics, although scholars have been paying increased attention to the phenomenon. It is outside the scope of this review to cover every documented user revolt, but several notable crises stand out.

America Online

In the early days of the Web, AOL traded online time to Community Leaders who ensured harmony prevailed in chat rooms and even created content (Postigo, 2003). While these volunteers had various reasons to provide their time, the services they provided were essential, and the boundaries distinguishing Community Leaders from company staff were blurred. In 1999, a group of Community Leaders sought to clarify whether labour laws were being violated, but their request to investigate was dismissed. They eventually filed a class-action lawsuit against AOL. It took a decade before AOL settled with the group, which allegedly cost the company 15,000,000 dollars (Kirchner, 2011).

GeoCities

In 1999, Yahoo! acquired GeoCities and introduced new terms of service, which expanded its rights on user content. Members protested to retain their content rights by petitioning, recruiting support from other groups, asserting the value of their content through removal and disfiguration, and going to the media. Within a week, Yahoo! added limits to their claims, realizing that "encouraging users to keep generating and hosting content on its service

was more valuable than claiming control over the content that remained on GeoCities after the backlash.” (Reynolds & Hallinan, 2021, p. 3279)

Digg

Silva and Panahi (2017) have examined a Digg crisis where administrators retaliated against a user leaking an encryption key meant to limit the copying of HD-DVDs. In a response akin to a riot, users defied administrators by leveraging anonymous, low-effort and low-risk means available to them to provide content to propagate the leak and bog down the platform’s home page (Silva & Panahi, 2017). Digg received a cease-and-desist letter from AACs, and although their terms of service (2007) disallowed users from posting copyright-infringing material, Digg eventually stopped trying to discipline protesters.

Following a redesign which exacerbated tensions and shifted power away from users, traffic declined as many members moved to Reddit, and Digg’s value tanked before being sold (Silva & Panahi, 2017). In an anonymous interview hosted on Reddit, a former employee claims the end of Digg became obvious when the CEO was fired and “other key employees started jumping ship” (exdiggemployee, 2012). Silva and Panahi (2017) emphasize how responding to protests can escalate tensions and insist that administrators should be aware of user frustrations to prevent protests in the first place.

Instagram

In 2013, Instagram changed its terms of use following its acquisition by Facebook, which had already faced its share of controversies involving the use of the platform by minors. Again, the new terms sought to expand platform rights on users’ content and bound the use of the platform to these terms. Age and arbitration clauses were also put in place to protect the business; users were requested to waive their rights to participate in class-action lawsuits. Instead, arbitration was meant to be facilitated by organizations such as the American Arbitration Association (AAA). User concerns led the company to revert some of these terms (Ribeiro, 2013). A civil action suit filed against the platform was dismissed on the basis that, despite receiving advanced notice of the changes, the plaintiff had maintained her use of the platform and could not “prove that she suffered any harm from Instagram’s new terms of use because she failed to delete her account” (Cocozza, 2015, p. 379).

Reddit AMAgeddon

In 2015, Reddit's decision to dismiss a well-liked employee who was a cornerstone for the popular interview format Ask Me Anything (AMA) caught members off guard. The platform was already in turmoil, and members petitioning for the CEO's resignation increased their efforts. In a move that attracted media attention, volunteer moderators crippled the platform by locking over 2,000 subreddits to non-approved members. This action of sabotage, where "political actors halt the flow of resources, production, transportation, or information to make their demands visible" (Matias, 2016, para. 11), forced the company to negotiate. Moderators leveraged Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels to mobilize, and negotiations took place in private subreddits. In less than a day, the company voiced its intention to work with its moderators, who opened their subreddits back gradually. Community members made gains with the company introducing some changes. The Reddit CEO departed, as did many employees.

Matias (2016) investigated motivations to participate or not in the protests through participatory hypothesis testing in collaboration with Reddit moderators. The results are consistent with existing collective action theories. Subreddits that were more active or older, had more moderators, whose moderators were detached, more networked, or who engaged in meta-participation were more likely to protest, along with subreddits which had more grievances or a precarious standing with platform policies. Subreddits were less likely to engage in the conflict when they were isolated, outnumbered by their user base, or when their moderators had more internal participation.

During and after the crisis, Reddit users were motivated to exit to other platforms. Centivany and Glushko (2016) have observed that participatory policymaking practices nurture user loyalty, and that the lack thereof could undermine a platform's sustainability. Newell et al. (2016) claim that rumours of a Reddit exodus were overblown and that Reddit's large user base's ability to support specialized topics was a decisive factor for retention.

DeviantArt and ArtStation

In 2022, DeviantArt rolled out DreamUp, an AI image generation tool where members' works were opted into the dataset by default. The company soon reverted course after hearing members' concerns and agreed to opt out all works by default (Whiddington, 2022a).

The same year, ArtStation members protested the presence of AI-generated images on the platform and the platform's failure to address their concerns by flooding its home page with anti-

AI imagery (Edwards, 2022). In response, ArtStation removed protest images, stating that “spam or other bulk messages” (Weatherbed, 2022) go against their terms of use, which exacerbated tensions. The platform eventually added a tag that artists could use to exclude their work from AI training, but artworks were not opted out by default (Whiddington, 2022b). A filter to hide AI works from the home page was later made available.

Stack Exchange Moderation Strike

In late 2022, Stack Overflow moderators banned AI-generated content with support from staff. The company later reverted the policy without consulting moderators as it pivoted to adopt AI (Mithical, 2023a), and moderators were forced off-platform to coordinate a strike (Mithical, 2023b). Moreover, members found out through a former employee that the data dumps had been turned off without warning “and marked to not be re-enabled without approval of senior leadership.” (AMTwo, 2023). After a two-month moderator strike, the AI ban was eventually restored, as well as the data dumps (Makyen, 2023).

Reddit API Controversy

In 2023, Reddit decided to start charging for API access, which would support its preparation towards an initial public offering (IPO). However, this move threatened the existence of many third-party applications used by its communities. Members requested that the pricing be reduced or they would lock over 7,000 subreddits for two days. This threat was later enforced, impacting Reddit’s reliability as well as Google search results.

The company maintained its stance, antagonized its moderators, and employees were asked to avoid wearing Reddit gear in public for their own safety. Many moderators extended blackouts past the initial strike, with some marking their subreddit as Not Safe For Work (NSFW), which added hurdles to participation and monetization. Others polled their members and reopened under absurd rules.

Reddit threatened to remove moderators and to force subreddits back open, stating that locking subreddits was against the Reddit Content Policy and Moderator Code of Conduct. Many subreddits were reopened, considering that the resources they provide outweighed the value of the protest. The platform eventually made some concessions for accessibility apps but ignored most demands, which resulted in lost moderator tooling, member attrition, and loss of social capital. The crisis was covered by Peters (2023) and has also inspired two business case studies (Lawrence, 2023; Wright, 2024).

The Evolution of Crises

In a cross-case analysis of crises taking place on Reddit, Mozilla, and Skyrim, McRae, Bernard, and Cranefield (2016) look at how revolutionary activity unfolds online. They outline six distinct phases: incident, early responses and dissemination of information, movement mobilization and cohesion, protest actions, negotiation, power shift, and finally, the return to some balance. Other works have also investigated the migration patterns of disgruntled users who decide to take their participation elsewhere, or even create their own platforms (e.g. Jeong et al., 2023; Nunes, 2023; Zia et al., 2023).

Complying Under Constraints

This literature review highlights how early conflicts between users and companies have shaped what platforms allow in their terms of service. Although the introduction of Web 2.0 affordances has facilitated the flow of information and users' self-organization, members' protests are not guaranteed to lead to quick negotiations towards a resolution. When protests interfere with their goals, well-established platforms can sometimes afford to ignore their users and consolidate their control by redefining the terms of engagement.

Methodology

My presence on the site predated the incident, and the study began with participant observation as the revolt unfolded in real time, allowing me to compile a set of relevant links documenting the case, which are listed in Appendix B (p. 118). Platform links were scraped, and their timestamps extracted to aid in constructing a detailed chronology of events in a personal knowledge management software. The resulting timeline of documents was then summarized, and this summary was reviewed and validated by a few participants. During the writing of this summary, I wrote memos related to the components of the Governing Knowledge Commons (GKC) framework developed by Frischmann et al. (2014, p. 14, see Figure 1), focusing on actions. From these actions, I identified patterns of interaction and themes, through the lens of the Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Apathy (EVLA) framework. This was supplemented by additional research, as well as the resource mobilization theory. The following sections detail the methods used for each step of the work.

A Dual Role and a Crisis

In 2018, I wished to continue investigating platform self-governance mechanisms and set out to write a case study for my thesis. My activity on Stack Exchange had often happened in bursts with long pauses between each period, and the mood seemed much more tense than when I had initially joined. Elections were underway in the graphic design community, where I had been participating most. I decided to nominate myself and was subsequently appointed as a community moderator. This dual role of ethnographer as a researcher and participant created a potential conflict of interest, something which is often perceived as to be avoided or carefully managed (Bell, 2019). I was aware of community guidelines and understood the implications of proceeding correctly, both for myself and future researchers. In the past, researchers had sometimes proceeded without following members' expectations and had raised suspicions. Having access behind the scenes helped me form a clearer understanding of how the platform works and the challenges its communities faced.

In September 2019, moderators saw the abrupt dismissal of one of their own. A prolonged crisis ensued, where community members attempted various means to be heard and were mostly ignored. As I witnessed members' lack of agency and "the pressure of evidence" (Malinowski, 1922, p. 9), I questioned the relevance of exploring self-governance mechanisms of the network. I had been interested in how commons-based peer production had brought a radical

shift to knowledge creation and sharing (Bollier, 2007, pp. 34–35), and the very vulnerability of this seemingly ubiquitous online knowledge (Hess & Ostrom, 2007, p. 14). Given the importance of the commons hosted by the network and the scarcity of case studies on digitally native protests, documenting this crisis seemed important.

Participant Observation

My early observation was mostly naturalistic and synchronous, through my role as one of many moderators. Being present as much as I could during many critical events of the crisis allowed me to observe phenomena not captured as easily in asynchronous data, such as the number of people lurking in chat rooms, the speed of vote accumulation, and reactions that CMs or moderators would remove.

While many scholars have discussed how to conduct ethnography online (e.g. Hine, 2020; Kozinets, 2019; Pink et al., 2015), writings by Boellstorff et al. (2012) and Beyer (2014) resonate the most with the methods I have used. Being an insider helped me to build rapport by association with core members (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 95), and I got acquainted with moderators, prominent contributors, and staff members I had initially observed from afar. Knowing who had authority and who held influence helped me to navigate the crisis. By the time moderators and staff members had departed or even deleted their information from their accounts, there was no clear indicator to identify their posts from those of regular members of the platform.

I followed community members in other online spaces (e.g., Discord, Twitter, blogs, GitHub). I engaged in “deep holistic watching” (Beyer, 2014, p. 141): observing community members, gaining an understanding of community spaces, their rules, culture, and history.

Keeping up with events as these unfolded in many different places at once, at any time of the day, was challenging. Even if lurking was sufficient to observe naturally occurring events, it would not have been sufficient to earn members’ trust or to become fluent in their cultural norms. To stop being a disturbing element, the ethnographer’s presence must become normal (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 44). Also, in some cases, building rapport through extended contact influences participants’ perception of the researcher and can help to elicit more trustworthy data (Bell, 2019). I spent considerable time participating in discussions in private and main chat rooms of the network, often spanning multiple time zones. Norms of the platform dictated that regularly discussing my research could be construed as spam, but not mentioning it at all would

have been deceptive. Boellstorff et al. (2012, p. 135) explain that ethnographers must be transparent and forthcoming about their presence and purposes. Therefore, I mentioned my project only when it was relevant to the topic being discussed.

Having access to moderator chat rooms facilitated the naturalistic observation of public events happening all over the network. Although I did not collect any private data from the platform, having access to privileged data enabled me to more easily parse the available public data and produce an exhaustive list for future reference. Users' conversations were ongoing, and their interactions, preserved in transcripts, Q&A, and comments, allowed me to catch up with the events I had missed.

I was vigilant in abiding by the moderator's agreement, as that also meant preserving the trust I had been given. I was fortunate that Graphic Design Stack Exchange, the community I moderated was mostly unimpacted, which allowed me to keep some distance from events. I avoided questioning community members in a way that could elicit public data, since informally interviewing members without first gaining their informed consent could be considered deceptive (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 98).

I occasionally preserved public data that might quickly disappear. GoFullPage, a scrolling screen capture extension, was used when regular screen capture tools were not efficient enough. I also used the Internet Wayback Machine extension, which I learned about while reading a transcript involving community members who were concerned about information getting deleted.

[SR]: Did all the comments on "Why was the meta room frozen?" get wiped?

[Zt]: Comments are gone, so yes.

[JD]: Welp. So much for leaving a historical record.

[Ce]: Comments never have been a historical record though...

[JD]: Archeological research of this incident is bound to become a hot mess.

[Zt]: Archeological research will simply say "This is a mess. Run."

I made some contributions during the protest: I helped with the styling of the open letter, assisted in moderating the main MSE chat room during a leak and contributed a well-received Winter Bash knitting focused on departed moderators.

When I was sufficiently quick, I provided edits to crisis timelines. Finally, I contributed average-sized donations to crowdfunding campaigns for MC and S9. Overall, I carefully avoided

influencing important decisions and ensured not to jeopardize my position with community members and the platform. Although Boellstorff et al. (2012, p. 45) believe that an ethnographer is more likely to have a cultural impact in studies related to activism and policies, they explain that cultures are not likely to be compromised by a single influence.

Research Questions

Following the crisis, I had to revisit my intention to explore how users of Stack Exchange self-governed. I still believed that I had cast my ethnographic “nets in the right place” (Malinowski, 1922, p. 8). Drawing from my previous participant observation, I formed an interest in how protests are shaped by the affordances present in platforms and opted to explore the following question and sub-questions:

Q1: How have members of the Stack Exchange network attempted to make themselves heard during the protests of 2019–2020?

Q1A. Which were the means they used to organize and protest?

Q1B. What characteristics of the members and platform have shaped these actions?

Boellstorff et al. (2012, p. 57) advise clearly defining what is meant by “community” when that is the unit of study. Frey and Schneider (2021) define online communities as “peers who inhabit roughly comparable status and who self-manage aspects of their shared virtual spaces”. I studied a loosely bound community of members who are typically highly invested in the early vision for the network. The voices of moderators, power users, and curators were often present during protests on Meta Stack Exchange (MSE) and Meta Stack Overflow (MSO). Focusing on these questions and unit of study allowed me to leverage my privileged vantage point of the platform without including private data or breaking my moderator agreement.

Data Collection and Management

After settling on these research questions, I identified the necessary data to inform the writing of a summary and case study. My participant observation deepened my understanding of the crisis, and of what I should collect and analyze afterwards. As confirmed by Beyer (2014, p. 155), the nature of the online texts I engaged with was varied, ranging from ongoing conversations to stand-alone artifacts.

While conducting one-on-one interviews is important to complete participant observation in ethnographic research (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 105), this approach was impractical for the setting and context. The length of the crisis would likely have resulted in burdening participants

with lengthy interviews. Moreover, initiating private contact through the platform is generally considered undesirable behaviour.

Instead, I drew value from examining spontaneous discussions (Kratz, 2010, p. 806) in comments and chat, as well as the Q&A format, which often led users to check in with each other to find some consensus. This choice of methods meant exploring a daunting amount of data. I used over 770 sources (Q&A, blog posts, Twitter threads, and more), which are provided in Appendix B (p. 118) and sometimes consulted multiple versions of a single source, since these evolved through time. Moreover, I consulted months of transcripts from various chat rooms of the network. Understanding how the platform had been shaped by its history and the context in which events took place was important to situate my research (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It became necessary to write a detailed narrative of the chain of events, a within-case method based on process tracing which helps explain complex historical events (George & Bennett, 2005, ch. 10). I aimed to strengthen this summary through member checking and building a case study database (Baxter & Jack, 2008) so that it could be helpful for further research, as well as historical preservation (Mir, 2024).

For some time, the feasibility of my research was threatened by the lack of appropriate data management tools. I explored multiple options before simply settling for accessing the data online. Consulting the data in its original online format provided significant advantages in speed and richness. Given Stack Exchange's emphasis on efficiency, each post loads quickly and includes additional data such as post timelines, revisions, user profiles, and related posts. These details communicated much more nuance about context than any of my other attempts to rip the data from its environment. However, like Reynolds and Hallinan (2021), some of my work would not have been possible without resorting to the Internet Archive and other methods of preservation. While I was aware that some information may disappear from public view, I took an informed risk knowing that I had taken plenty of screenshots and that community members had archived much of the data on Wayback Machine and Archive.today. Sometimes, access to archived data was incomplete or jeopardized by other events, such as the exodus of members from X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, as well as the deplatforming of Kiwi Farms.

To create a database, I compiled a list of relevant data URLs in a spreadsheet. All Q&A URLs, their titles, their date, and Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) stamps were imported into individual markdown files using a custom web scraping tool built on Selenium WebDriver. This

process greatly facilitated data labelling and chronological sorting. Tracking all my sources also ensured I would not break my moderator agreement by inadvertently revealing private information. In January 2024, I stopped using this tool after an update to the Acceptable Use Policy requested users to get scrapers approved by platform administrators.

Markdown files were imported into Obsidian, a highly customizable personal knowledge management software combining features of word processing, databases, and more. When relevant, I extracted relevant quotes, linked to previous versions and backups, and added background information in individual files. This allowed me to isolate the raw public data while simultaneously keeping it nearby and highly accessible. The ability to link and tag files, along with the option to search through all my notes simultaneously, kept my data organized and targeted on what I needed to write the summary.

Accessing Data on the Discord Server

During the crisis, I joined community members who had mobilized on a Discord chat server. The link to the server was found in a public chat room, but was likely challenging to find for non-members. Some channels were put under higher expectations of privacy. Because I wanted to complete my summary with this semi-private data, it was important to regain access to the data as a researcher, since this status and the implications it brings are significantly different from those of a peer moderator (Gregory & Ruby, 2010). I approached a Discord moderator in private to enquire about the possibility of discussing my project with the Discord server moderators. The team agreed that I could access data on the server, including private channels, and describe aggregate behaviour. Any direct quote or paraphrase that could lead to a specific individual would require informed consent. We also agreed I would avoid including data from participants who did not wish to participate (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 78).

Next, we discussed how to announce the project to members of the Discord server. Following a public announcement, members had three weeks to signal their intention to opt out privately. Members under 18 years old were also asked to opt out. No member asked to opt out past this date. I was assigned a researcher role, visible to all members, and a channel was created where anyone with concerns or questions could discuss my research.

During my analysis, I collected links to messages for which I needed to obtain consent and wrote memos about aggregate behaviour. Consent forms were adapted to be transmitted and approved over Discord to avoid collecting unnecessary personal information such as emails.

Writing a Summary

The following section discusses the procedures I have employed to write a summary which supports the basis for my analysis.

Building Chronologies

Chronologies were still complex to build from chronological Q&A because each document aggregates contributions from various dates, which, in addition, may have been edited at different times. As Beyer (2014, p. 149) explains, the data-rich environment of the Internet facilitates but also hinders establishing chronologies and sometimes requires making decisions according to the credibility of information and sources. Examining chat transcripts facilitated this task since members often shared important posts as they were published. I investigated the main chat rooms of the network, such as The Meta Room and Tavern on the Meta, as well as chat rooms of communities that had been more strongly impacted and other chat rooms where I expected to encounter a plurality of viewpoints and dissenting voices.

I aimed to write a cohesive summary, which is provided in Appendix A (p. 117). Determining the moment when the protests markedly decreased was easy, but deciding when to stop collecting data was not. I struggled to stop following discussions even after the crisis settled, as new insights sometimes emerge from mundane conversations (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 81), and former employees still commented on what had been happening behind the scenes years after the initial incident.

Quoting Participants

Most member interactions on the network are “default open” and publicly accessible. However, data handling required extra caution, as my research revolved around various disputes.

My work combined both low and high-risk components to participants as they are outlined by Beyer (2014, p. 156). My unit of study is a somewhat large and stable population. Some members use their full names, and others use pseudonyms, which act as persistent identities. They have a good knowledge of the platform and its default open philosophy. They typically value their privacy, which is not surprising as some moderators have been harassed online and even had their physical safety threatened. Some members may no longer endorse past words and actions; they may have a duty to their community or fall under company scrutiny (Boellstorff et al., 2012, pp. 133–136). There was also some evidence that former staff members had been deceived or forced to act by their superiors.

There is not a single way to treat ethics, and ethical considerations are often a “balancing act” (Beyer, 2014, p. 157). People are not always conscious of what posting entails, and their expectations of privacy depend on multiple factors (Beyer, 2014, p. 156). When there are disputes internal to communities and with organizations, ethnographers must be careful when attributing sensitive information to an informant, as it may be difficult to predict who will read the work and what the consequences will be (Boellstorff et al., 2012, ch. 8).

I preferred to produce a summary of events aligned with the culture of the community I was studying, where explaining your process and respecting attribution is valued. To preserve authenticity, I used direct quotes from community members who were “eloquent commentators about their cultures” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 93).

In a stable population, screen names may have been used for years, allowing informants to be recognized and networked with others. Therefore, these should be handled carefully, even if they pose less of a concern than full names. With a nod to the attribution required by the license, I chose to identify participants with initials. This semi-anonymization is easy to pick apart for those familiar with the platform and situation, but keeps members’ chosen identity from being too closely associated with this work, for example, through online search results.

Validation

Envisioning potential risks and consequences and exercising restraint is sometimes more appropriate as “not everything is grist for the data mill, no matter how interesting it may be.” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 137). Looking at the data from various members’ viewpoints helped me to gain some distance from the crisis I had been immersed in. However, given the complexity and sensitive nature of events, I wanted to validate whether my description of events resonated with community members. Member checking is helpful when interacting with large groups that include a plurality of voices (Birt et al., 2016). I also hoped that consulting members from diverse backgrounds would reduce the likelihood that publishing such a summary could recreate the harm caused to community members. Through the Discord server, I sought volunteers to comment on the written summary. Six participants from various backgrounds returned nuances, comments, and some additions, which were stored in a local, encrypted folder. All feedback that required action was addressed.

Theoretical Framework

The following section gives an overview of the frameworks and theories used to structure and interpret the data.

Governing Knowledge Commons

Inspired by Ostrom's (1990) work on the governance of sustainable commons, scholars have shared their findings and thoughts on how we may govern knowledge commons (Frischmann et al., 2014; Hess & Ostrom, 2007). Namely, Ostrom's Institutional Analysis and Development framework (Ostrom, 2009, p. 15) has led to the creation of the Governing Knowledge Commons framework shown in Figure 1, which I have used to structure my investigation.

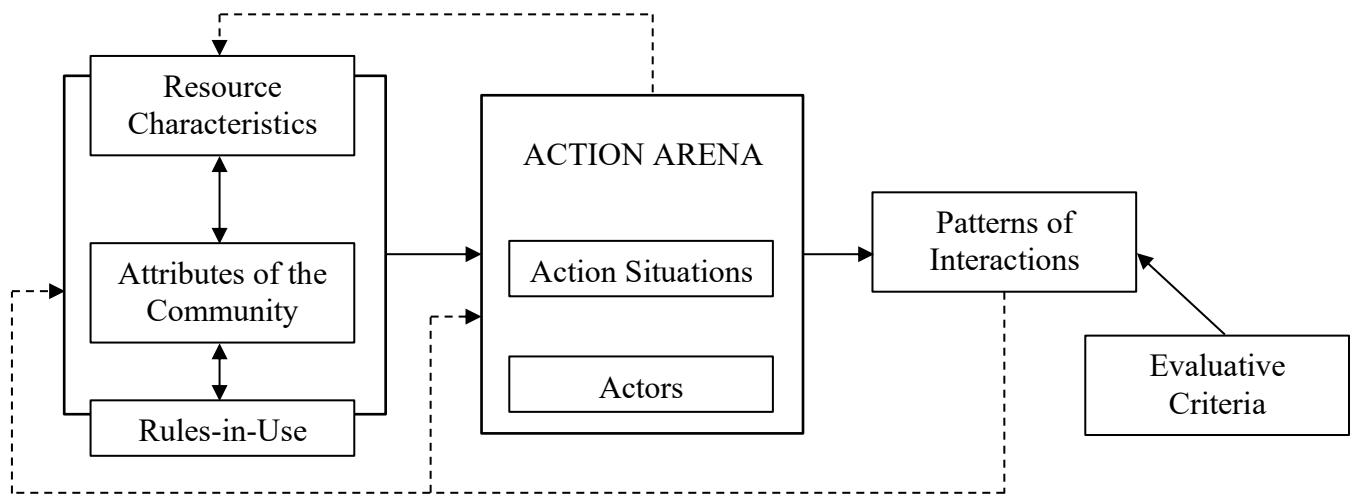


Figure 1. Governing Knowledge Commons framework (Frischmann et al., 2014, p. 14).

While I wrote the summary, I drafted multiple memos related to the components of the GKC framework where I included citations to the data. I focused on actions, examining how various components influenced actions taken and not taken, until I reached saturation and could not find new instances relating to this crisis. This approximately corresponded to February 2020, when the protests slowed down dramatically. From the different actions and company responses, I observed patterns of interactions from which themes emerged. I provide examples of a memo and pattern of interaction in Appendix D (p. 150)

I ensured a focus on potential actions instead of outcomes, by following the advice of Volkoff and Strong (2017) and using verb participles to identify actions. I compared actions taken to the tiers of digital political participation defined by George and Leidner (2019) and the

phases of a protest outlined by McRae et al. (2016). Since paying attention to both consensus and disagreements helps to highlight a breadth of opinions and potential actions (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 171), I considered Q&A votes as indicative of general positive and negative sentiment but also of polarizing issues.

Resource Mobilization Theory

Resource mobilization theory looks at how social actors leverage resources to reach their goals (Martin, 2015, p. 37). Edwards and McCarthy (2004, pp. 125–128) group these resources in four categories: moral, cultural, human, and material resources. In the specific context of this crisis, I was interested to see how members had leveraged their knowledge of the platform, their skills and varied expertise. I wondered how their loyalty and roles as custodians of the commons would influence the actions taken, and was curious to see if the means to avoid lock-in put in place by the founders (e.g. Creative Commons license, API, data dump) would be leveraged to create an alternative platform.

Exit, Voice, and Loyalty

Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice, and Loyalty (EVL) framework explores how dissatisfied individuals respond to organizations and how their commitment influences their decision to protest or disengage. Individuals who are firmly attached to a declining organization are more likely to attempt to make themselves heard and to use their voice to express their dissatisfaction, causing the organization to address their concerns. As loyalty decreases, an individual may decide to exit, whether this means halting participation or departing to a competing alternative. This framework helped support my analysis, as I examined how my research themes could relate to each type of response. My literature review revealed that scholars in the same field (Centivany & Glushko, 2016; Frey & Schneider, 2021) had used a similar theoretical framework.

While the simplicity of this framework supports its wide application, some responses were too nuanced to clearly fit into these categories (Laver, 1976). I would not have been able to make sense of the data I had collected if it had not been for other scholars' investigations of more granular responses. To resolve these issues, I considered literature which elaborated on this framework (Bajoit, 1988; Birch, 1975; Frey & Schneider, 2021; Gerken, 2013; Gofen, 2012; Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980; Rusbult et al., 1982).

A Missing Response, Apathy. Hirschman's definition of loyalty has been criticized for its vagueness and its overlap with protesting (Bajoit, 1988; Birch, 1975). Bajoit (1988) addresses

this shortcoming by introducing an additional response, apathy, where members are still in relation with the organization but lack active involvement. According to him, individuals' responses are strongly influenced by the context and system of interaction with an organization, whether it is one dominated by cooperation or social control. Individual's responses aim to address these dimensions and restore a satisfactory cost-to-benefit ratio for their participation (Bajoit, 1988). He maps these responses according to their contribution to these dimensions. In responses related to apathy, members are resigned but nurture mistrust, contributing to social control at the cost of cooperation (see Figure 2). Kolarska and Aldrich (1980) also touch on this concept of "doing nothing" (p. 44), which can be less constraining for administrators and thus desirable. However, neglect, where an individual stops contributing, also accelerates deterioration (Rusbult et al., 1982).

		Social control	
		Preserved or consolidated	Questioned or suppressed
Cooperation	Preserved or improved	Loyalty	Voice
	Deteriorated or suppressed	Apathy	Exit

Figure 2. Typology of individual reactions to discontent. Translated from Bajoit (1988).

Nuances of Voice. While voice can be a robust response, it is only effective if an organization is willing to listen (Frey & Schneider, 2021; Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980). Kolarska and Aldrich (1980) seek to correct Hirschman's assumption, which we can also see in the mapping by Bajoit (1988), that voice yields only positive outcomes. They explain that Hirschman draws from the assumption that organizations are listening and rational actors in a competitive market. Their investigation of nonmarket scenarios allows them to outline some contexts where an organization is likely to be unresponsive. For example, an organization may fail to respond if they do not perceive a problem; leaders may disbelieve that a decline is taking place or may be disconnected from employees on the ground. An organization may also be simply unwilling to address perceived problems, especially if members lack exit possibilities, can be manipulated, or their communication is restricted.

Organizations may respond only when members' voices are sufficiently disruptive to interfere with business operations. To that effect, Kolarska and Aldrich (1980) make an important distinction between direct voice, where members express their grievances directly to the organization, and indirect voice, which seeks to involve third parties able to pressure the deteriorating organization (e.g. mass media). Birch (1975) introduces the idea of agitation as a type of voice stirring up discontent. Gerken (2013) explores disloyalty as the overlap of loyalty and voice in democratic institutions and argues that dissenting bureaucrats driven by commitment can provide healthy challenges that nurture the responsiveness of an organization.

Nuances of Exit. Gofen (2012) enriches Hirschman's exit by introducing the concept of "entrepreneurial exit" (p. 1089), where dissatisfaction elicits a proactive response with individuals taking responsibility to address a gap left by deficiencies in public services by creating alternatives.

Themes emerging from Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Apathy

This chapter examines how SE members have explored a wide variety of means to be heard, confirming findings from a cross-case study of revolutionary action in self-regulating communities by McRae et al. (2016, p. 7), indicating that protests with long action phases explore a variety of means to trigger a response.

First, members' multiple attempts at recovery will be examined. The following section will highlight some of the quandaries limiting their ability to protest, and how they attempt to work around the rules and the platform as company leadership attempts to control the crisis. The third section will examine their overall lack of leverage. Finally, I will discuss their attempt to preserve the narrative and the struggle to exit.

To conclude, the literature will be explored to identify how scholars believe these problems may be addressed. I support my analysis with semi-anonymized quotes and citations from a summary of the crisis that has undergone member checks (see Appendix A, p. 57).

Constructive Guidance Gets Ignored or Unheard

Members who are most loyal to an organization use their influence to move it in a better direction (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 77–78), often by using their voice (Barry, 1974, p. 91). The efforts they exert to set things on the right track emphasize how much they care: “Having talked to owners of other community platforms, it’s rare to have that sort of passion. Having too much feedback isn’t really a problem most sites have to worry about” (Ericson, 2019b).

Early on, many members express their concerns and ask for responses through the standard channels, like posting on MSE and contacting staff. Some attempt to reach higher up to decision-makers, but claim their requests are dismissed or ignored.

Members' voices are divided (p. 64, p. 68, p. 72), as evidenced by leaked summaries and open letters, which gives the company leverage to cast members as the problem and ignore some of their concerns.

Influential members, some of whom use their full names publicly, outline how the company could do better, explain the next steps that should be considered, and even give examples of how apologies should be worded to be better received.

Others lead by example and make considerable efforts to reconcile members' divides: a member creates a script to add the possibility to display gender pronouns in chat, another revises the poorly received CoC with various stakeholders (p. 78), many are checking-in with each

other, a mediation meeting is held between MC and a LGBT+ member and inviting the company to join them (p. 80). MC will donate the leftover funds from her crowdfunded arbitration, almost 8,000 dollars, to an organization for LGBT+ advocacy (p. 26, p. 91). Efforts are also made in private moderator arenas.

As the crisis evolves, members begin to focus on the company's mistreatment of its members and staff, enabling a larger number of members to make a statement and helping the group achieve better cohesion. Shirky (2005) deems that this group effect studied by Bion also applies to online communities. However, this also causes LGBT+ interests to take a backseat (Osborne, 2023).

The crisis stands out in the literature for its duration and the quantity of opportunities towards recovery provided by its members, including a meeting arranged between a community ambassador, the new CEO, and a few other employees. Slow and inadequate company responses, or their sheer absence (p. 61, p. 62, p. 66, p. 98), lead members to wonder if the disruption is intentional to exacerbate tensions and part of a larger strategy (p. 70, p. 75). When members' suggestions are not ignored, they may be only partially implemented to appease them.

Former employees have alluded to internal divides, interference, frequent reorganizations, and an internal misunderstanding of the MSE community within the organization (p. 59, p. 104, p. 106, p. 108, p. 114). It will later be revealed that the company had planned to withdraw from MSE entirely by mid-January 2020, but this decision was ultimately revised. The company has lost alignment with their most loyal members; they are merely "guests in the home of a private company" (Dear Stack Exchange, Inc., 2019, para. 17).

There were so many cheap opportunities to save face for everyone involved, so many ways this could have ended without the massive collateral damage. Every step of the way I thought 'surely they're not actually going to do something so self defeating' right before they did it. It felt like living in the twilight zone. (Mag)

Disempowered Community Managers

Members' lack of influence is compounded by the fact that CMs are not allowed to engage with them and have lost their agency internally (p. 103). CMs had been aware that the company was changing but shielded members from it. Gradually, the company had increased its control over CMs. At some point, employees had opposed a company policy that would have forced them to share drafts with the company before posting about Stack Overflow to social

media or blogs. By the time the crisis hit, CMs had lost executive representation and their usual agency to intervene with community problems. JLE, a veteran CM, had sought to prevent MC's dismissal but was "told to disengage" (Ericson, 2020a). The day before MC's dismissal, on a popular blogging platform, JLE had published a parable about a rich man hosting lavish parties, who had to face the consequences of neglecting his genuine relationships in favour of superficial acceptance (Ericson, 2019a).

For most of the crisis, CMs lack their former agency and are forbidden to engage the way they typically would with the community. Members have known some CMs for years and understand that their silence hides internal issues. They are stuck between their wish to support community members and their duty to their employers and will occasionally indirectly confirm that their ability to manage events is compromised (p. 76, p. 93).

The former Director of Community Strategy later expressed regrets for being unable to "stop a horrible train of bad decisions" (Post, 2022) that "left a lasting scar on the Stack Overflow community" (Post, 2023) without endangering his livelihood: "I trusted that people would understand that something wasn't quite right with me, that'd I'd been compromised somehow, and would try to make amends later" (Post, 2022).

Constrained by their Double Duty, Moderators Work Around the Rules

Actions are limited by platform affordances as well as members' expectations (Tilly, 1978, ch. 4). Given that they are expected to uphold platform norms by the company, but also have a duty to the communities that have elected them, moderators are especially constrained in their protest. As such, they will often attempt to work around the rules. This disloyalty serves to force a dialogue through a selective interpretation of policy (Gerken, 2013, p. 1382). However, the company holds the power to override existing policies and processes. It will revise many of these to protect the company's interests, without resorting to the usual participatory governance the platform was known for.

Retaining Influence Requires Remaining in Position

Many moderators do not stand behind company actions at some point or another during the crisis, but their choice to remain in position varies (p. 69). Moderators' resignations often come in cascades, accompanied by various statements disavowing the company, and serve as a measure of discontent.

Resigning comes at the cost of decreased agency: “I am not ready to abandon all of my communities and I still feel I might be able to do more from within than from without” (t). Being a moderator permits access to private moderator spaces where privileged information is published (p. 71). There, moderators may be able to engage with some staff members, influence events, and ask for company responses. This information sometimes allows them to clue members as to what can be expected next.

Many moderators formally suspend their moderating activities for some time without resigning. Some who hold multiple positions sometimes resign from all but one of them. Rarely, communities are left without a single moderator. On such occasions, some moderation tasks may still be handled by members who have earned appropriate privileges, or by community bots.

The company would revise its moderator review and reinstatement processes, introducing a lack of transparency and possibility to audit (p. 77, p. 106). Some former moderators who wish to regain influence request to be reinstated, but not all of them succeed. Although MC was dismissed without due process, the company invites her to go through this reinstatement process instead of simply reverting its action and properly reviewing the dismissal. She refuses to submit to this new process (p. 79, p. 91), and the belief that the process would have been rigged against her will later be confirmed (p. 106).

Tensions Between Privacy and Transparency

Some staff members go against the well-established platform policy that requires keeping punitive actions private to safeguard individual dignity and prevent undue scrutiny when they admonish MC in moderator chat, in front of her peers (p. 105), and even more so when they reveal details to the media (p. 67, p. 105). However, once details are made public, this policy hinders the extent to which the company can be held accountable. When members ask for clarification, some staff members leverage the rule to avoid further discussion.

Some moderators expose information about MC’s dismissal to gain community members’ support. Their disclosures come with the risk of harming others as well as the risk of retaliation, which influences the extent to which they may voice their frustrations (Birch, 1975; Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980). Moderators’ revelations range from implying, hinting through subtext and hyperlinks, quoting and interpreting others, to summarizing events. In some cases, exit may be considered a necessary condition to protest (Birch, 1975). Resigning moderators

often disclose important details in their announcements, and members track these resignations over the network to shape their understanding of events (p. 60, p. 61, p. 63, p. 64).

Making the Crisis Visible without Disrupting Q&A

The speculation around the dismissal starts conversations on Q&A, challenging local norms which demand members remain on-topic. Many moderators route conversations about the crisis to MSE, where governance is typically discussed and traffic has dramatically increased. There, members sift through considerable noise to boost relevant information, use collaborative editing features to curate key information in posts, and express their concerns by asking and amplifying questions about events. This has the benefit of helping others catch up on the latest events and information, which can better guide their actions. However, MSE also acts as a silo from the rest of the network. Unless users of main Q&A sites specifically pay attention to the crisis, their typical activities are mostly undisturbed (p. 60).

To raise awareness on the network, some members change their usernames and avatars, leave notes in their profiles, and leverage community ads (p. 109). Members and staff occasionally engage in tug-of-wars when it comes to editing posts and deciding what may be featured (p. 66, p. 71, p. 78). While most of the content remains visible on MSE, the company suppresses some of this visibility on the network by regaining control over features previously given by members.

When members links to a crowdfunding initiative seeking justice for MC through legal action, staff start removing these links from the public platform, but also from members' profiles. Members respond by increasing their donations, and work around removal attempts using link shorteners and QR codes (p. 86).

Members engage in subversive humour and creation. Winter Bash provides a good excuse to make art related to the crisis. While the most popular pieces related to the crisis remain on MSE, a company blog post avoid these, and shows other pieces (p. 91).

Stack Overflow moderators eventually war with staff over the featuring and removing of a moderator's resignation in the sidebar, which raise visibility of the crisis on the flagship Q&A but also allows members to thank an exiting moderator. As moderators continue to defy staff, they are forced to introduce a formal rule that moderator resignations can only be featured for 24 hours, a significantly shorter duration than the usual norm. In response, moderators start featuring other posts related to the crisis (p. 95, p. 99).

Programmers are smart and know how to work around rules. The entire community will start writing questions that are smarmy but just legitimate enough to be featured. [...] If you want to try to out rules lawyer a programmer, you deserve what you get. They battle a system of rules every minute of every day. (GS)

Exploring Indirect Voice Leverage

The lack of impact of their direct protest pushes members to explore other leverage to get a response. Kolarska and Aldrich (1980) make an important distinction between direct voice, where members express their grievances directly to the organization, and indirect voice, which seeks to involve third parties able to pressure the deteriorating organization. This section will examine how members attempt to influence the company through media, financial, and legal channels, and ultimately resort to striking.

Social Leverage

The company places significant importance on maintaining a positive public reputation, which hinders it from engaging meaningfully with its discontented members. The crisis gets attention from trade media outlets, forums, and platforms such as Hacker News.

Involving the media is a double-edged sword. In an article published by *The Register*, an unnamed company spokesperson discloses the dismissed moderator's name and casts her as an example, greatly exacerbating tensions with members and setting the narrative to the company's advantage. As a result, MC is harassed and suffers reputational damage. On the other hand, when members request the resignation of staff involved in the dismissal, moderators request members to follow a CoC that some staff members have not always followed themselves.

The single thing that I am absolutely the most angry about from all this fiasco was the high-placed employee explicitly attacking a dedicated volunteer, by name, to the media.

We, as individuals, do not have the kind of clout to answer back against such attacks.

[Stack Overflow] used the clout that they got from volunteer labor to attack a volunteer, and the person who did so remains a part of the future here without any apparent consequence. It's hard to reconcile, hard to accept, and hard to trust a company that is comfortable with this state of affairs. (Ch)

The company invests considerable effort in publishing on its public blog, where it retains complete editorial control, including moderation. Its deliberate attempts to avoid mentioning the

crisis come across as disconnected and intentional, and even goes so far as to modify members' avatars in the seasonal contest leaderboard (p. 92).

Members had observed, months before, that people with influence on Twitter were able to make the company react much quicker than their own community (p. 57). While social media is much more accessible than mainstream media, members are protective of their privacy and often limit their presence on these platforms. However, social media platforms still help expose company misbehaviour. Some attempt to use staff posts on Twitter as a springboard to make their criticism heard, but their responses are easily blocked and feed the narrative that Stack Exchange members are toxic (p. 93). A former Stack Overflow moderator finds a better approach in writing multiple threads analyzing the crisis, which also provides opportunities for members to mobilize on Twitter (p. 93, p. 95, p. 102). Although the leak is quickly removed, a throwaway account on Reddit is used to post transcripts in response to staff claims to the media (p. 68). Moreover, MC gives her side of the story in an interview for a tech podcast hosted on YouTube (p. 81).

Financial Leverage

Acknowledging the change they perceive in company priorities, members believe that actions to impact revenue may draw attention more effectively (p. 77): "If they won't listen to our mouths, maybe they'll listen to our wallets" (N). Some advocate for ad blockers, while others contemplate using their influence to prevent their workplace from implementing Stack Overflow's paid products. Some fear any impact resulting from these measures would be delayed and go unnoticed.

Members' financial leverage can lead to legal leverage when money is used to access resources that would otherwise be out of reach. As MC escalates her concerns to reach a legal resolution, members quickly raise the funds she needs. Among their numerous grievances, MC's botched dismissal becomes a cultural symbol which galvanizes them. They seem motivated and apt to contribute financially, with some donations being over 500 dollars (p. 84).

Crowdfunding also serves to circumvent gag clauses included in a CM's severance agreement. When S9 is dismissed, members raise sufficient funds to replace the meagre severance package he is offered, suspecting it is conditional to his silence (p. 93). S9 would soon confirm that members' donations had made a difference: "Thanks to you & a bunch of other people, I was able to avoid signing anything that'd prevent me from sharing my opinions on this

stuff..." (S9). In 2023, a ruling by the National Labor Relations Board would prohibit employers from including non-disparagement clauses in severance packages (Strachan, 2023).

Legal Leverage

Members seek instances to help them in their cause and look for laws they may be able to leverage to file complaints. A member attempts to contact company lawyers about the forced content relicensing of community content, as well as other organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Free Software Foundation, and the Software Law Center, but he receives no response. His attempt to raise funds to consult an attorney fails to meet its goal.

Members also investigate whether for-profit companies can legally rely on unpaid volunteer moderators and explore the possibility of these volunteers unionizing under New York State labour laws.

When it comes to leveraging their legal options, members are hindered by the mandatory arbitration clause included in the platform's terms of service (p. 57). Some, such as MC, have opted out, and others may benefit from better protection depending on their local laws.

Deliberate Inaction as Leverage

Although members struggle to gain external leverage, their agitation gets noticed. When S9 signals that their protests endanger his remaining colleagues, a member attempts to convince others that they should reassess their strategy to spare those who remain:

Right now, what we're doing on meta is actively sabotaging our own goals. **I know this is not fair**, and I know that this situation is a kind of Kafkaesque trap, but if you're still here and still harbor some hope that the network, that our communities can still recover from this mess, it is time for a shift in strategy. [...] There are still employees in SE that believe in the people here, and we still have some support in the company. Right now, by acting out our (justified!) anger here, we're making their lives harder, and making their position harder to justify internally. (Mag)

Given that members' most important leverage seems to be the free labour they volunteer to the company, their powerlessness eventually motivates them to impact the commons, in a way that would demonstrate they are critical to the platform's success (p. 99).

Staying passive is so far ensuring that we can continue to do what we think is best for the site using the existing curation tools. If we do something drastic that the company can

interpret as “proof” of unreasonableness and not having the best interests of the site in mind, it risks us being able to continue using the tools we now have. (CG)

Boycotting is a temporary exit to prove a point (Hirschman, 1970, p. 86), and members believe that a coordinated, network-wide strike can help them renegotiate a relationship they perceive as symbiotic but unacknowledged. They hope that their coordinated absence and the shutdown of various processes and bots they have built over the years will allow spam and low-quality content to take over the platform and eventually attract attention. They plan how to handle members who may attempt to bypass the strike as well as means to repair the damage if they succeed (p. 100).

The company’s sudden realization that these members, 0,015% of their user base, do the bulk of the moderation tasks on the platform validates that they matter (p. 100). A newly hired CTPO, one without baggage from the crisis, finds the appropriate words to appease members who call off the strike (p. 102). When members engage in this sort of loyalist behaviour, they consider the possibility of a recovery, but may also be engaging in self-deception (Hirschman, 1970, p. 93).

Keeping Receipts

Members’ eroding trust in the company, combined with the volatility and complexity of the crisis, lead them to preserve events. After a staff member freezes a chat room to shut down discussion about pronouns, a few members move to a Discord server, leaving a trail where others may follow, including staff themselves (p. 69). Establishing a chat server on a different platform allows members to reclaim some authority and provides them with additional affordances, such as the possibility to direct message each other. They use similar usernames and avatars, proving their identity by posting in specific chat rooms on the SE network. They later organize themselves according to their roles on the platform.

Although most platform interactions are preserved and timestamped, including edits, increased moderation creates some information gaps (p. 66, p. 75, p. 79, p. 91). Members establish timelines of events and set up comment archives (p. 61). Some take screenshots while others leverage platforms like Wayback Machine and Archive.today (p. 69, p. 85). An examination of the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine shows intense activity for live web proxy crawls during the crisis, suggesting members were using the “Save Page Now” feature on many major threads (see Appendix C, p. 149). Some individuals write about events on their

profiles or personal blogs, while others are spotted editing events on the company's Wikipedia page.

Members' lack of visibility into internal matters and how others are interfering with CMs hinders their understanding of the crisis. They sometimes seek company context off-platform in what Shirky called "distributed detective moments" (2005, p. 205). Some have expressed a desire to identify those responsible for the crisis and to hold them accountable.

I've seen such an account, and devoted a *substantial* amount of time to its creation... And I hate to tell you this, but... I don't think it would help.

I had the same hope - that if I finally drag the truth out, I'll be able to separate fact from fiction, I'll know what to trust, I'll be able to move forward.

But... It was so, so, so much worse than I expected. (S9)

A Lack of Closure

After a series of poorly handled decisions, further legal involvement becomes inevitable. Nearing the end of 2019, MC and the company reach a legal agreement, which silences both parties (p. 91).

What was surprising to me was the person letting us know internally seemed to think it was good news. Maybe not a direct quote, but something along the lines of 'We can finally put this behind us.' Which is a little like awarding yourself a medal for accuracy after shooting yourself in the foot. (Ericson, 2020c)

Members are left with unresolved tensions but are forced to move on. They worry that MC may have been forced to settle for insufficient repair.

The fact that you agreed to this statement which accomplishes nothing for you (but helps SE cover their legal backside) implies to me one of two things: One, they paid you a cash settlement to get you to agree to letting them get away without apologizing, retracting statements, or admit wrongdoing -- or Two, they threatened to counter-sue you and you decided to cut your losses. I Hope it's the former, I fear it's the latter, and it frustrates me that the rest of us may never know which =^/. (LJ)

The company decides against setting the record straight and attempts to silence employees:

FWIW, while everything was on fire publicly (and... somewhat prior to that...) we were frantically compiling as much information as possible. Not just the timeline, but tools to

generate a complete archive of private messages, and ultimately a full post mortem report. (S9)

Former CMs help members find some closure in various tweets, blog posts and comments on the platform and Discord for the following months (p. 103).

The Struggle to Exit

In a non-market scenario, a context with no competing alternatives, members are more likely to protest and seek recovery (Hirschman, 1970, p. 33). However, administrators have more leeway to ignore their detractors. This lack of exit possibilities benefits the “lazy monopolist” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 60).

Hirschman (1970, pp. 98–104) discusses the challenges that are specific to exiting public goods. The most quality-sensitive members are among the first to consider an exit when witnessing signs of degradation. However, they still care about the organization deteriorating and consume its goods, regardless of stepping out, making a complete exit difficult. They may as well stay within the organization out of fear that their exit would exacerbate this deterioration. As every new incident increases members’ aggravation, they become less likely to forgive company lapses. When the costs of staying outweigh the benefits, members start leaving, often causing others to do the same. Garcia et al. (2013) explain that cascades of user departures are especially problematic if a large proportion of users have few social connections, causing a general exodus.

The crisis leads many to reduce their participation, sometimes by leaving dramatically, sometimes much more gradually. Some combine exit and voice: departing members may change their name and avatar to reflect their choice to leave, write a note in their profile serving as a testimonial to the past, or as a recruiting channel for alternatives. When they do so, they allow their voice to persist and argue for their case without their active presence (Barry, 1974, p. 92).

Many struggle to truly move on and get lured back in by their loyalty, former investment, network effects, sheer habit, platform mechanisms, and their own need to use Q&A. In some cases, requesting an account dissociation is a way to officially cut these ties, though some argue this amounts to “standing out of the way” (M13). It should be noted that requesting account deletion does not remove members’ contributions. At most, it anonymizes the value they have added through the years. Members’ right to be forgotten allows the deletion of their personal information, points and badges, and results in their contributions being associated with a user ID.

While some members' departure may ultimately lead to a better alignment (Frey & Schneider, 2021), the exit of veteran members and staff comes with a loss of institutional knowledge:

I'm aware that there's been a significant amount of attrition, both voluntary and involuntary, and it's often the folks most committed to the community, both in terms of employees, and community members. (And many are both, and some community members might aspire to work for a Stack Exchange they knew cared.)

There's also a handful of communities that drifted away. Many of them have chatrooms dedicated to keeping up with goings on here.

Every loss diminishes us. We probably lost a significant amount of expertise, both in terms of knowledge in the domains our sites serve and in terms of folks who know the Stack Exchange network intimately in recent times. (JMG)

Rebuilding the Commons

Early platform features conceived with interoperability in mind, such as the use of open licences, public API, and data dumps, meant that clones of SE sprouted up occasionally online. However, their lack of attractivity to community members kept them from posing a real threat to the platform, as a knowledge common without a community to tend to it will eventually degrade: "With all the people angry at Stack, there was suddenly a chance for an alternative site that none of the other copy-cat sites that had cropped up over the years had had: There was a community that wanted it" (M).

Supported by the diverse set of skills boasted by the group, including some who had leveraged their programming skills to recreate similar systems in the past, a group of members respond to the crisis by creating alternatives (p.78). Codidact and TopAnswers, the two alternatives born out of this crisis, aim at being non-profit from the start (p.109), "free from the politics and shenanigans of private, profit-focused companies" (Codidact, 2020). In the past, members had argued that the public platform should split from the company to become a non-profit (p.99).

Having an alternative increases the chance members' voices will be heard (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 82–83). As these alternatives progress and members use community ads to recruit members, the company adds restrictions which forbid advertising competing alternatives (p.116).

While exploring hurdles in growing and migrating communities is out of the scope of this research, a brief assessment shows that the ability to migrate content to a new platform is not a panacea, and the current level of interoperability of Stack Exchange seems somewhat insufficient to avoid lock-in. Changing from one platform to another takes effort, even if members can bring their content along. MC explains that members hit their point of no return at different times: “Communities don’t *move*; they *fragment*.” (Cellio, 2023). Switching costs (Doctorow, 2023b, Introduction, para. 17) and network effects (Tarnoff, 2022, ch. 5, para. 34) make it difficult for new alternatives to draw members from established platforms. Not so surprisingly, many members choose to be appeased following some investment from the company and a partial resolution of their grievances.

“We are not even the users. We are the used.” (hg)

Bajoit (1988) argues for the possibility of apathy, a third choice involving a form of “inner exile” (p.334). Barry (1974) emphasizes that a significant contributor to members staying within an organization is their belief in the possibility of improvement. While the early factors for the platforms’ success outlined by Mamykina et al. (2011) have seen a sharp decline, members’ lack of visibility in the organization keeps them wondering if improvements are coming, which may further delay their choice to exit.

Many who had claimed they would stop contributing are still active in some way at the time of writing. Some remain solely to guard their communities, given the increased difficulty in attracting serious candidates for moderator elections (p. 115). Alienating these remaining members poses a significant risk to the platform’s sustainability, as they handle most moderation tasks and can often predict how new features might be abused or interfere with other existing features.

In a study of the demise of the Friendster platform, Corry (2022) explains that the “death” of a platform is not a clearly marked event, but a socially negotiated phenomenon often rooted in a lack of alignment with community members and misguided feature releases, eventually leading to the decrease of existing network effects. This prolonged value extraction from volunteers bears the signs of a phenomenon Doctorow (2023a) has coined platform ‘enshittification.’ Members who stay must come to terms with the fact that the context of the platform they cared about has changed:

They mourn for what they lost. [B]ut more so than that, Stack Overflow went from being the cornerstone of the developer community to using and abusing the emotional capital expended by people to further its own aims. [Stack Overflow] now represents a betrayal of the original vision (GS)

From Commons to Commodity?

Much of the conflict covered in this case stems from the struggle to reconcile both parties' missions:

The company, which is in for the money, and the community, which is in for itself, need to find a way to profit from each other. Some kind of win-win is needed. Maybe the Stack Overflow mission can give some needed guidance... (Tr)

While members remain loyal to the original mission, it is unclear whether the company still aligns with the goal of creating a high-quality Q&A repository. An anonymous Glassdoor review from a Product Manager explains that company priorities have shifted over the years:

The company has changed from a developer-first mindset (“let’s build the greatest Q&A platform to help the world’s software developers level-up their skills and then somehow figure out how to make money”) to a money-first mindset (“let’s leverage the Stack Overflow brand name and web traffic to become a high-growth SaaS company while still paying lip-service to being developer-focused”). (Anonymous, 2020)

Public institutions and corporations often have different priorities (Helberger et al., 2018). In a for-profit internet, leaders make market-based decisions that affect the masses and where “rewards flow to the few, risks are borne by many.” (Tarnoff, 2022, preface, para. 12). Some members believe that raising venture capital is the reason for this shift, as venture capitalists rely on fast growth driven by speculation, not production-driven profit (Tarnoff, 2022, ch. 7, para. 66). Many initiatives launched by the company around the crisis aim to increase its popularity for the masses, increase its revenue and shield it from legal liability, possibly to make itself more attractive for venture capitalists and buyers.

Hansen et al. (2021) explain that most for-profit platforms aim to attract as many members as possible and do not necessarily provide personalized features for members with different goals. This “bigness” (Zuckerman, as cited in Tarnoff, 2022, ch. 9, para. 29) eventually interferes with participatory governance. Indeed, knowledge commons where a defined purpose drives community members are more likely to be able to sustain (Ostrom & Hess, 2007, p. 49).

While the existing Stack Exchange Q&A can serve the masses as a public good, members’ attention and their capacity to moderate, curate, and answer new questions are limited. Hill and Shaw (2019) argue that while peer production projects first thrive on openness, the introduction of formal rules to combat challenges like vandalism can hinder new member entry,

and decreasing contributors undermines the ability of the commons to sustain itself once it is past its peak. The company has wanted to attract more members but has failed to improve its public platform onboarding processes.

Objectively and critically, I can say that the experience for experienced users AND new users are both suboptimal. However, the experience for new users is *disproportionately* suboptimal. To go forward, we need to bring them into roughly the same space, and work on them together. (TP)

Members are often accused of gatekeeping, which supports short-term sustainability, but also tarnishes their reputation and that of the business. Leadership has worried about how these users are perceived, and the inadequacy of company responses suggested to some that the disruption was intended to get rid of them (Ericson, 2020e). JLE believes “a small group of executives [...] protected each other from criticism” (Ericson, 2020c).

“So who moderates the moderators? The answer is nobody.” (MC)

Companies reach a crossroads when exploiting members becomes more profitable than protecting them (Doctorow, 2023b, ch. 7, para. 96). This neglect of the platform has led to insufficient monitoring and a lack of tools within private moderators’ chat rooms (p. 58, p. 83). CMs not only lacked both the resources and authority to address members’ grievances, but internal interference further hindered their efforts. Conflicts were left to fester and harmed the very people the policy was meant to protect during a prolonged crisis that Osborne (2024) has aptly described as “a story about the intertwining of personal and institutional responsibilities” (p. 102). The heterogeneous community of moderators had to fend for themselves:

[I]t isn’t fair to expect hundreds of people from a dizzying variety of backgrounds and cultures, wielding an even larger variety of languages, interests and beliefs, to get along with one another 100% of the time. (S9)

Determining the boundary where the platform’s responsibility ends and where the members’ responsibilities begin is challenging. However, because platforms shape how users behave, these should minimally provide the means through which users can fulfill their responsibilities (Helberger et al., 2018).

A Feudal Model of Platform-User Relationships

Cases of tech companies exempting themselves from being accountable are common. Schneider (2022) traces the roots of platforms’ “implicit feudalism” (p. 1965) as a former

technical necessity inherited from early bulletin board systems that has now become a business model, whose promises of democracy often obscure how platforms steer and constrain their users. Implicit feudalism is characterized by communities governed by a small group of leaders, whose authority originates from the founders and subsequent appointees. Their decision-making and policy-making processes are opaque, and they can suppress users' voices. Given that platforms also exert control over dispute resolution mechanisms, users' primary means of dissent is to exit the platform (Schneider, 2022, p. 1978).

I personally think a benevolent dictatorship is the superior form of government, *except* for the difficulty in finding a competent benevolent dictator, and the extreme difficulty in getting rid of one that isn't competent and benevolent. [...] The decline in conditions can be reversed by changing how the sites are governed, or by getting a better dictator. (Pt)

Monopolies and the lack of alternatives allow organizations to remain in a "comfortable mediocrity" (Hirschman, 1970, p. 59). That the company is able to remain silent for most of the crisis highlights how the opacity of platform operations contributes to an unequal power relationship with its users. In a blog post, a former CM points out that "some of the secrecy has served to confuse observers" (Ericson, 2020g) and that management has had the privilege of not being accountable to the community they have hurt (Ericson, 2020f). He had wished that staff would be held accountable in a way that would bring reconciliation (Ericson, 2020d) and had specified that some of his colleagues may have been acting under internal tensions (Ericson, 2020d).

[I]magine hav[ing] the connections needed to ignore the advice of experts, alienate thousands of people and yet keep your position of authority over a community. That, my friend, is the epitome of privilege in a tangible sense. (Ericson, 2020f)

Empowering the Digital Sharecroppers

Zuckerman and Rajendra-Nicolucci (2023) argue that platforms face a crisis of legitimacy originating in top-down governance, and which can be partly remedied by revisiting community governance through increased transparency, decentralized approaches to power, and better consideration of ethics. The literature on platform governance provides multiple leads to better empower users with technological self-determination, or "the right not just to choose what your technology does, but whom it does it for and whom it does it to" (Doctorow, 2023b, ch. 7, para. 3).

Frey and Schneider (2021) draw an essential distinction between affective voice, meant to air frustrations, and effective voice, which is goal-oriented to achieve change. In a context where administrators are not listening, affective voice is insufficient to instigate change (Frey & Schneider, 2021). They suggest three categories of effective voice mechanisms focusing on the “consent of the governed” (p. 9). First, authority and accountability mechanisms should ensure community rules also apply to administrators, and participatory procedures should be in place for selecting and removing authority. Next, collective action mechanisms should include systems for gathering, responding, and enforcing user demands, allowing communities to form internal groups, and incorporating multiple channels for diverse user input. Last, they suggest implementing community change mechanisms to facilitate user participation in structural reforms.

Doctorow (2023b) advocates for users’ rights to interoperability, which would allow users to connect to data, services, and each other, dramatically lowering switching costs while preserving network effects (Doctorow, 2023b, 2025; Tarnoff, 2022, ch. 9, para. 32). Not only diversity and democracy would be better supported through decentralization (Tarnoff, 2022, ch. 9, para. 30), but allowing competition and alternatives to exist may lead to better collaborations.

The Need for Legal Frameworks

There is a period of improved community relations after the crisis, followed by the acquisition of the company by Prosus. By 2023, the platform faces yet another crisis sparked by the disabling of the data to prevent “misuse by organizations looking to profit from the work of our community” (JB).

The crisis would revive old wounds from 2019–2020. The former Director of Community Strategy would reveal: “I did what I did because it was my only option forward, and I buried a lot of wrongdoing that others were doing because I honestly believed it was chaos, not coordinated malice, at play” (Post, 2023). While he had been hopeful that the company had learned from its mistakes, he was appalled that history was repeating itself:

But then they did the same f*ing thing again, almost play-by-play.** [Stack Overflow] hadn’t learned anything — they’d just *pretended* to learn and told people what they wanted to hear. Not only were volunteers once again being slandered by the company, but leadership also thought that they could suddenly demand secret deals and

back-room shenanigans in a system we'd deliberately built with transparency in its DNA. (Post, 2023)

It seems overly optimistic to expect for-profit platforms to willingly support additional constraints that may conflict with their business goals. Are peer-production communities hosted by for-profit platforms doomed to be exploitative? Doctorow (2025) insists that 'enshittification' is not necessarily driven by profit-making but by a lack of regulation that could ensure 'enshittification' is unprofitable. Many scholars (Doctorow, 2023b; Hansen-Shapiro et al., 2021; Tarnoff, 2022; Zuckerman, 2020; Zuckerman et al., 2023) argue for a reassertion of public control of the Internet through various laws such as antitrust laws, labour laws, civil rights laws, privacy laws and fair dealing laws. Such regulation could involve taxing surveillant advertising, providing mandatory access to APIs (Zuckerman, 2020), stricter monitoring and audits (Hansen-Shapiro et al., 2021, p. 5) and preventing terms of service that impede users' ability to seek redress. This increased regulation becomes even more relevant when platforms hold significant influence and host large communities (Hansen-Shapiro et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how Stack Exchange members have sought to make themselves heard by leadership during the 2019–2020 crisis, which is inscribed in a larger period of organizational change for the platform. I have explored the breadth of actions members engaged in through the lens of exit, voice, loyalty, and apathy; how they attempted to guide towards a recovery, protested on the platform and sought multiple paths to gain external leverage, sometimes by using other platforms to strengthen their control and preserve evidence to hold the company accountable. Faced with unresponsive administrators and their lack of agency, some would go so far as to attempt the creation of exit alternatives, but many others remain captive for various reasons. In my analysis, I have showed that members had few means to effectively voice their concerns if administrators did not wish to hear them. This neglect of community members appears to stem from the organization’s diverging priorities and mission, which are beyond the control of its members. Because business interests often take precedence, there is a growing need for legal frameworks that safeguard online knowledge commons and guarantee fundamental rights to the volunteer contributors who make them possible.

Preserving a Community’s History

The summary of the crisis adds a case to the literature of digitally native protest actions taken by an online community involved in peer-production of knowledge on a for-profit platform. Some researchers (Matias, 2016; Silva & Panahi, 2017) have had the opportunity to directly observe the crisis they have studied, like I have, but others have had to rely on archives (Reynolds & Hallinan, 2021). Although there have been significant preservation efforts, events would now be difficult to parse for someone not familiar with community members and the platform. Some posts from former employees appear as if posted by regular members, while others are dissociated. The naturalistic approach I have employed involved following members across multiple sites and backchannels, with data scattered across various arenas and platforms, and some only archived on the Internet Archive.

Yahoo!’s infamous shutdown of GeoCities (Fletcher, 2009) left groups of online archivists scrambling to back up vast amounts of data to safeguard online history and raises questions about corporations’ responsibilities towards individuals and the public. Although expecting a failing platform to preserve the history of its departing users is unrealistic, understanding why people leave platforms allows us to understand the evolution of online

communities better (Mir, 2024). Researchers have a role to play in this preservation, as data decays and platforms die, and this work can be considered a part of this effort.

Safeguarding the Knowledge Commons

These findings have broader implications for the governance of sustainable knowledge commons hosted by for-profit entities. By highlighting the risks posed by unresponsive governance structures when communities tending to knowledge commons and the platforms that host them diverge, this research underscores the need for ongoing efforts to bridge the gap between administrators and community members. Ensuring that contributors to the commons have meaningful opportunities for influence, despite being outnumbered by less engaged users, is not only a matter of fairness but also essential to the ongoing success of digital knowledge ecosystems.

Limitations

This work is limited as it depicts events from the perspective of involved community members. Because of the intensity and extended length of the crisis, I may have missed events moderated out of view, as well as conversations happening in smaller groups or private arenas. In addition, a large part of the story remains privileged data kept behind corporate walls, where platform administrators work within their own motives and constraints. This lack of transparency and auditability, common issues encountered when researching platform data (Hansen-Shapiro et al., 2021), limit the extent to which a complete understanding of the crisis can be reached.

Leads for Future Work

While online revolts are highly constrained by platform governance and affordances, they can also inspire creative forms of resistance and organization. Future research could expand digital repertoires of contention to consider actions employed by online peer-production communities, such as coordinated strikes and the creation of alternative platforms to subvert administrators.

Beyond documenting such actions, future work might also explore how platforms could prevent the need for protest altogether. This includes investigating governance models or regulatory frameworks that encourage profit-driven platforms to support actively, rather than neglect, the knowledge commons they host, along with the volunteers who make them possible.

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Appendix A

Neglect

Communities had accumulated grievances for some time when, in 2018, two external incidents pushed the company to act swiftly. A blog post by a vocal critic prompted the company to launch the “Welcome Wagon”, an initiative aimed at enhancing user interactions on the platform. Shortly after, new terms of service were introduced, including a forced arbitration clause protecting the platform from class-action lawsuits.

Months later, a tweet mocking a question displayed on the Hot Network Questions (HNQ) drove an employee to disable HNQ from a small community, causing its traffic to plummet. On both occasions, the company had distanced itself from its members and even disparaged its own moderators.

In response, MC, a well-respected community moderator of the network, writes a public letter to the company where she sums up the issues. Her plea also requests some remediation: she asks that the company repudiate the disparaging public claims from its employees, apologize to the criticized moderators, and explain to the public that network moderation is “based on *evidence not assertions.*” (MC)

Moving forward, she wants the company to provide better training for employees “on when and how to represent the company in public venues” (MC), to establish a formal process when handling complaints about community members, and follow this process next time. .

She would not get all that she had asked for. However, the Director of Community Strategy had later published a blog post revisiting the company’s relationship and obligations to its moderators. In it, he had elaborated on principles the company owed their community of moderators: trust, support, agency, accountability, and autonomy, “to make sure these five points remain a core and active part of our commitment to our moderators going forward.” (TP)

Appointing MSE moderators

Regardless, the company seemed to distance itself from its members, and exchanges between staff and community members were much less common. MSE was effectively left unmoderated. In a departure from its typical electoral process, the company appointed moderators to MSE from its pool of community members. At the time, the Director of Community Strategy had provided the rationale behind hand-picking candidates as opposed to running an election, which is the standard for established communities on the network:

“However, we need people *with demonstrated experience* in navigating treacherous interpersonal dynamics and that’s something that we’re just going to have to select for based on observation” (TP).

One of the appointees is MC. She has been a veteran moderator of five communities and invested in smaller communities of the network. Among the community power users and moderators, she is known to be an observant Jew and a technical writer who advocates for better accessibility.

A new CEO

In March 2019, Joel Spolsky announced his departure and is looking for a new CEO. He explains that the public platform and the company have grown:

Today we are profitable. We have almost 300 amazing employees worldwide and booked \$70m in revenue last year. We have talent, advertising, and software products. The SaaS products (Stack Overflow for Teams and Enterprise) are growing at *200% a year*. That speaks to the fact that we’ve recruited an incredibly talented team that has produced such fantastic results.

But, we have a lot of work ahead of us, and it’s going to take a different type of leader to get us through that work.

The type of people Stack Overflow serves has changed, and now, as a part of the developer ecosystem, we have a responsibility to create an online community that is far more diverse, inclusive, and welcoming of newcomers. (Spolsky, 2019)

As the objective of building a high-quality library seems at odds with becoming a help desk for all, members wonder if the company’s mission still aligns with theirs.

Because in the end, the vision of a welcoming helpdesk for askers and the vision of a library for searchers just... don’t cohere. Nearly everything we’ve built that serves the latter ideal - not just our existing institutions and rules but even preserving the existing *content* we’ve created - undermines the ability to have a high throughput of people individually asking questions and having happy interactions (MA)

Few incentives exist for the gruelling work of manual content curation, and community members are often perceived as hostile. Members have resorted to creating scripts to remedy long-neglected moderation tools.

For years, you have been working on cleaning up an oil drip out of a beautiful lake with a spoon, but the small spoon you have is actually a fork. You've spent years asking for at least a spoon to work with, but have gotten nothing. (M)

A push to increase revenue had taken place: new ads were tested but deemed distracting and invasive, communities' custom designs had been homogenized, and Stack Overflow's front page leads towards paid products, away from the public Q&A.

Burying Meta

In July 2019, concerns surfaced about the future of Meta and its community members. The newly promoted Director of Public Q&A decides to remove Hot Meta Posts from showing on the sidebar of the main Q&A page without consulting community members. She explains that some employees are afraid of participating there, and she hopes to shield other people from experiencing the same. From now on, announcements would be made on the company blog, and staff participation on Meta would be optional. She emphasizes that the company had millions of users' needs to serve and had spent too much time on "Meta which has .015% of Stack Overflow's active users and is not representative of the community as a whole" (SC).

To compensate for this removal, moderators are granted exclusive access to the Featured tag, which allows them to draw attention to important posts in the sidebar but also increases their load.

Content License Change

In September 2019, the company upgraded all subscribers' content licenses from CC BY-SA 3.0 to CC BY-SA 4.0. Members, who had not been consulted, question whether this is legally possible. They had not received a response, and their concerns were still very much present.

2019–2020 Crisis

The following report conforms to the overall timeline of the crisis. However, because events often overlapped, some compromises were made to better synthesize findings for the reader.

Moderator Dismissal

In late September, two days before a new CEO would step in, the sudden dismissal of MC sparked a wave of moderator resignations. At the onset of the crisis, moderators of various

communities announce their resignation. Some go discreetly, but many announce in protest to their per-site Meta.

The first person to publicly announce his resignation states he cannot endorse the actions he saw the company take behind closed doors. These closed doors refer to the Teachers' Lounge (TL), a private chat room that moderators of the network use to coordinate. He explains that interacting with different cultures requires a combination of boundaries, openness, and compromise.

I have witnessed a disagreement between moderators where both sides made some good points. Both sides deserved and requested respect. [...] Stack Exchange intervened, did not try to calm spirits, came firmly on the uncompromising side, and fired the victim in a very hurtful manner. This is not an environment I feel safe in, and certainly not an environment I can or will help foster. (Gi)

Members sometimes probe moderators who express their sentiments for explanations, but they are typically cautious not to leak information. A moderator stresses that “[they] cannot offer much detail without leaving out even more and muddying the waters” (EC). They are bound by expectations of privacy of the TL and “out of respect for the people more directly involved who are unable to speak for themselves for one reason or another” (AoC).

None of the accounts from resigned moderators are purely statements of fact, they’re all heavily colored by the individual perception of each mod. I wouldn’t entirely agree with many of them, but I don’t think any of them are wrong. (MS)

People discuss things in the TL with the guarantee of confidentiality [...] So unless SE decides to release it themselves, we are bound to not disclose what was discussed. [...] And that line is weird. So weird we don’t quite know where it ends and begins [...]

Direct quotes are out, copy pasta and screenshots are out, paraphrases are out. (GS)

Among many moderators voicing their outrage, a handful of them who agree that MC’s removal was warranted also agree it was grossly mishandled. Members rely on their knowledge of moderators to assess where they stand. Community members piece their interpretation out of details and guesses from the moderators’ reactions, which drives them to speculate about the situation.

Increasing the Signal-to-Noise Ratio. Moderators often route their community members’ scattered conversations to specific chat rooms on MSE and MSO. While this keeps the

broader network on-topic and makes monitoring new information more manageable, it also silos the visibility of the crisis from a wider audience. Network users who are not as invested may have barely felt its ripples. The discussions are fast-paced and challenging to follow. The main chat rooms of MSO and MSE have seen a noticeable increase in both participation and lurking.

Standard signal boosting features, such as voting, asking questions, adding bounties, and starring, are intensively used throughout the crisis, and members often express that they have reached their daily limit. Votes serve as a general indicator of mobilization. MSE is bursting with activity, and there is not always a clear distinction between members who are sincerely concerned with the crisis, those who instrumentalize the crisis to score points, and those who just want to watch the drama unfold.

Members aggregate and curate key information and events. They mark important messages to add to a sidebar, the starboard, in each chat room. They collaboratively edit posts and timelines. A member sets up a script to be notified of new resignations. One of the most comprehensive threads, “Firing mods and forced relicensing: is Stack Exchange still interested in cooperating with the community?” will later serve as a reference to the crisis both in the community and externally.

Stepping Out of the Silence. Meanwhile, the company continues to communicate with a broader audience through blog posts and newsletters, creating a tone-deaf environment for members. They feel the company is slow to respond. While more interested members had heard of events from other moderators, they had yet to hear from MC, who had logged off for Shabbat minutes after facing her dismissal. Upon her return, she provides her version of events in a post titled “Stack Overflow Inc., sinat chinam, and the goat for Azazel”, which stands as a biblical reference to baseless hatred and being a scapegoat. She believes that she has been speculatively removed because staff think she “will in the *future* violate a thoughtcrime-style provision of a Code of Conduct change that hasn’t been made yet” (MC).

She claims she had requested clarifications about the planned change during a discussion in TL but had received no answer from staff until much later: “After a couple hours, the director responded, chastising me for raising issues and saying my values were out of alignment. I said I would leave the room to avoid causing problems, and did so” (MC).

Moderators continued the intense conversation in TL, and a CM eventually invited them to email their concerns before controversially shutting down the room for the weekend.

MC explains she wrote an email to CMs whose response seemed to misunderstand her concerns. She followed up with questions which went unanswered. Instead, her moderator status was revoked and she “briefly saw an announcement from a CM in TL that contained false allegations against [her]” (MC) before being booted from the room. She claims that the email she received firing her did not explain how she had violated policy.

She believes the company “need[s] a scapegoat to convince people that the CoC has teeth” (MC) and is offended that she is accused of being unwelcoming and insensitive. She claims that the company has violated, within a short period, all five core obligations towards moderators that the company had outlined following the HNQ controversy, less than a year before. From then on, MC also starts documenting how the situation is evolving on her blog.

Many members write words of support for her:

[MC] is my captain. There is no one else I would rather follow in this community - she is the perfect embodiment of ‘leading by example’. She has been a leading light and community builder on every community she’s led, and more than a few that she hasn’t.

The value that’s she’s added to the platform as a whole is incalculable. (Sn)

Doubling Down

In his resignation post, a veteran moderator of Stack Overflow explains that “[a] persistent pattern of corporate missteps, and a monumentally deplorable moderator dismissal, has compelled [him] to re-evaluate my relationship with Stack Exchange” (RH).

He adds the “featured” tag before posting, publishing his resignation to Stack Overflow’s Q&A sidebar for all to see.

The Director of Public Q&A will finally respond, implying the accusations and suggesting that they had attempted to resolve matters. She copies this response under the highly visible resignation and MC’s version of events:

We understand there are some folks upset about the decision made this week. We aren’t going to share specifics out of respect for all individuals involved but this is a site reaching millions of people and we have to do what we believe fosters a spirit of inclusion and respect. When a moderator violates that, we will always do our best to resolve it with them privately. When we can’t we must take action. This is always done based on what we believe is best for all SE users. (SC)

Flaring Tempers. The Director's copy-pasted response aggravates members who were already outraged. A moderator highlights the inappropriateness of the statement:

And when you say a moderator “violates [...] a spirit of inclusion and respect”, it’s like you’re asking people to assume the worst. [...] And all this about a user who participates here under her own name! A user who is now put in danger because SE seems to be running from one desperate, knee-jerk reaction to the next. In the past, SE reacted with more decorum and decency when a moderator had actually been arrested for one of the ugliest crimes a human is capable of. (t)

A member requests SC to address the recent resignation of a LGBT+ moderator. Some members now wondered if this resignation, which had happened days before, was related to the dismissal and the current crisis.

In her long and poignant resignation post which did not support the claims that staff fostered a “spirit of inclusion and respect” (SC), the former Literature.SE moderator had painted a bleak picture: “By other mods, by staff, and by the entrenched power structure of Stack Exchange, I have been made to feel unwelcome for my queerness” (A). She claims that CMs let moderators “argue against spoken human respect for our trans, [including] nonbinary, peers” (A) and use LGBT+ moderators as “expendable resources to retrain bigoted moderators” (A). LGBT+ moderators must defend their own rights, so long as they are not inconvenient. The company avoids acting on or discussing these problems in public to avoid upsetting other moderators and protect the network: “This problem has been allowed to fester, and queer moderators are the accepted sacrifice. The only remaining route is censure, and I no longer have confidence that Community Managers are capable of doing so” (A).

Her decision to resign stemmed from “a single incident” (A) that she did not wish to discuss: “In the spirit of ‘break systems, not people,’ I do not intend to share receipts at this time. Please do not ask for them” (A). Staff had not publicly addressed the resignation and would not respond to the confrontation.

Now faced with the statement from the Director of Public Q&A, MC clarifies her stance on her post:

In TL and now in answers here and elsewhere, Stack Exchange employees made vague statements implying that I oppose inclusion and respectful behavior, which is false and adds insult on top of the injury already done. I suspect a profound misunderstanding is at

the root of their behavior, but all of my attempts to resolve it have gone unanswered. (MC)

Members are concerned that the Community Team is allowing these issues to fester and would appreciate feedback from the new CEO or board members. Some previously departed veterans and former staff return to the platform to learn more. On Twitter, a former employee calls for current staff to intervene:

Community moderation is a large part of why @StackOverflow & @StackExchange have been successful. What are you doing? Have you forgotten what made you? That way will be the end of the platform. [Stack Overflow] employees - talk some sense into management. (OC)

Increasing Divides

Early resignations are skewed with vocal complaints about how MC was treated, and much less so towards supporting LGBT+ members. Many resigning moderators nuance that they agree with the spirit of the rules but that the guidance provided in private “is vague enough to be interpreted in a number of different ways” (R’T) and that “[s]ince heads are rolling in response to questioning of these rules which don’t formally exist yet, it seems safer to do nothing at all” (R’T).

Some are concerned with forced speech; a resigning moderator explains they have no problem using singular they, “[b]ut the *principle* that SE would force me to do so when there are other options (such as avoiding using pronouns at all) bothers me.” (a2)

MC’s egregious dismissal throws shade at the company’s initiative to include LGBT+ members and “seems to hand actual *opponents* of tolerance and acceptance of LGBTQI+ people ammunition with which to oppose the original aim” (G_b).

Moderators themselves cannot seem to agree on a common stance. A handful of moderators say MC clearly refused the terms of the upcoming policy, some state “her behavior unintentionally hurt LGBT+ users/moderators” (SB). Others say she was bullied and singled out as an example. A moderator explains that MC has exchanged emails with staff. Without a public release of an official policy and these private emails, having a clear picture of what happened is impossible.

Clarifications. In a lengthy resignation post, a Christianity.SE moderator explains that he has faced significant challenges in establishing a Q&A community with members from multiple

denominations who “believe many or most of the others to be heretics” (CA). He explains they were successful because they “allowed people to continue holding their own views and even articulating those views — and space was given for the other side to hold and articulate their views too” (CA).

The exact wording of the policy, which led to MC’s dismissal and seeks to protect LGBT+ members, is still unknown, and the details revealed by CA emphasize how its implementation could raise concerns:

Now, SE staff’s enforced interpretation is that if I deliberately avoid pronouns altogether, whether by carefully avoiding sentences that even need pronouns at all or by sticking to proper names or by disengaging from the individual — those are all being considered insults too if the other party says they are insulted. (CA)

He explains that he has engaged in heated debated with MC in the past but that she was always respectful, and that he cannot idly stand by and watch her being “being sacked (particularly in such an unceremonious manner) from sites where she was well respected over an issue [he is] far more guilty of” (CA). Parts of the post come across as caustic and dismissive of the LGBT+ community, which polarizes members, but many link to this post that discloses key information about the change, which enables MC to “feel safe in saying more” (MC).

She initially attempts to defend herself by providing a quick summary of the TL conversation from memory. Even moderators who have witnessed events in the TL struggle to find a common stance. While no names are provided, she claims others have labelled her as a transphobe. Given that members have been looking for someone to blame, some moderators react with concerns that the summary “bears the seed of a hunt” (A) and “may start all sorts of unnecessary fires, in particular ones on the wrong targets” (Wr).

MC soon removes this summary and edits her original post to avoid these connections. She states: “I **completely agree** that it is rude to call people what they don’t want to be called; knowingly misgendering someone is not ok. But the policy was about positive, not negative, use of pronouns” (MC). She explains the upcoming policy “requires us to use people’s preferred pronouns (when known)” but she believes it is still being refined since it “wasn’t polished language” (MC). She had sought to clarify if she could still write as she had been trained, “in a gender-neutral way specifically to *avoid* gender landmines” (MC), but explains that others had responded that “*not using (third-person singular) pronouns at all* is misgendering” (MC) while

staff had never clarified. In her email to staff, she explained she agreed to a policy stating “use preferred pronouns *when using pronouns*” but was soon fired without warning or further response: “I haven’t seen an actual policy, though I am being accused of violating it” (MC).

She had been blindsided by her dismissal, which broke away from many established norms of the network, including receiving an initial warning. She stated that the email dismissing her did not cite any violations, and that there had been “vague personal attacks against [her] both publicly and privately” (MC).

Testing Boundaries. Meanwhile, the conflict keeps unfolding on RH’s resignation as a CM removes the featured tag, pointing out that it is up to *current* moderators to decide what is featured. Stack Overflow moderators war over the post, which will be featured and unfeatured five times. The moderator removing the “featured” tag explains that it “only serves to raise tensions, and does not provide benefit for the community as a whole” (GS). He will also add:

I know the people that work at SE. I’ve known them for years. They aren’t agents of a soulless corporation to me. I’m not going to engage in civil disobedience against people I’ve known for years and respect and trust. If I ever feel like I can’t in good faith moderate due to their actions, I’ll step down. (GS)

Members criticize and ridicule the Director’s response, which increases the moderators’ burden. A moderator dealing with the fallout claims they have “done 13, 14, 15 hours on this today alone and got absolutely nothing else done” (BC).

Broken Windows. On MSE, a member calls for a strike in a post. Five minutes later, a staff member deletes the post and explains that the post “reaches the limit of the platform we’re willing to give you. If you want to organize this, you’re going to need to do it on your own blog or website” (TP).

A question asking why the post was deleted will provide an opportunity for a member to resurface the deleted post by providing a screenshot. The post reveals that holding a strike would create a dilemma:

For those of us who choose to stay active of return to moderation activities later, there will be a lot of cleanup and broken windows. However, I think that without showing how important we are to the quality of this network, the staff will not learn from their mistakes and nothing will change. (DK)

Bridging Divides. The growing divide between various groups makes for a hazardous atmosphere. Few LGBT+ members dare to speak up, lest they get caught in the crossfire and blamed for the dismissal.

Some members attempt to emphasize how the company handled MC's dismissal as opposed to the policy. A Writing.SE moderator who identifies as a queer cisgender woman and who has served alongside MC argues it is possible to "support the Lavender community of Stack Exchange *and* protest SE's treatment of [MC]" (Cy) and links to a long post written with her co-moderators.

The post explains that staff announced a policy which would "require the use of a user's pronouns (if stated)" (Cy). They claim there was intense debate where MC questioned details of the policy without violating it. The moderators emphasize that staff could have had a discussion with MC, warned her or suspended her instead of directly terminating her. They support the goal for a more inclusive space and believe that MC was singled out to be cast as an example:

To our knowledge, no other moderator has been punished, including those who actively oppose the new policy. [MC] has been made a scapegoat in the guise of supporting transgender moderators and users (while the policy addition may have been intended to support them, a goal we applaud, the way SE has treated [MC] does not make any moderator feel safe). We hold Stack Exchange staff solely accountable for this situation and do not condone any backlash against those moderators who have encouraged this policy change. (Cy)

Betrayed Trust and Leaks

On October 1st, the next day, the Director of Public Q&A and an unnamed Stack Exchange spokesperson hardened their position in statements to *The Register* about the wave of moderator resignations:

On Friday, we revoked privileges for one Stack Exchange moderator when they refused to abide by our Code of Conduct (CoC) after being asked to change their behavior multiple times. The disagreement stemmed from an interpretation of a certain policy, but our CoC is not up for debate. (SC)

Among the little media coverage of the crisis, this single article will have an enormous impact early on. Members are outraged that staff had provided the media with more information than members were given the day before, disregarded long-held community rules about keeping

violations confidential, and cast the former moderator as a bigot: “[MC] (she/her) would not use stated pronouns, which violates our current CoC. We are soon publishing an update to the CoC to even more explicitly cite misgendering users or moderators as a violation” (company spokesperson, as cited by Claburn, 2019).

In response, a throwaway Reddit account claiming to be a group of moderators leaks excerpts in response to statements made to *The Register*:

We are releasing these transcripts because this fight is being fought behind closed doors.

[...] We are also releasing this because public comments by the company have violated their own policies. They have spoken with the media. They have posted answers on their own platform that, at best, lower a respected user’s reputation in the real world. (TPR)

The leak includes screenshots of transcript from the private moderator chat and two summaries compiled by moderators and copied from the TL. On Twitter, the Director of Public Q&A leverages her network to see if any of her followers work at Reddit.

The first summary explains that there have been transphobic behaviours and debates about what constitutes misgendering in the TL, which has caused multiple moderators to step down. The quote also describes a conflict:

[MC] has had a few conversations with people trying to explain that she really doesn’t feel comfortable with singular *they* but is willing to use any other pronoun, including non-standard neo-pronouns like *xie* etc.. This came to a head this summer, when she flat out refused to use singular *they* for a trans moderator who explicitly asked her to (t, as cited by TPR)

The summary provides a broad overview of recent events in the TL, highlighting some of the divides among the moderators. Although most object to how MC’s dismissal was carried out, some still support her dismissal. Their support for the upcoming change to the CoC is mixed, with some moderators arguing that the focus should be on those who are being hurt.

A LGBT+ moderator provides the following summary. They explain that MC had suggested a policy which left trans people without protection and “stated specifically there was no requirement to use anyone’s pronouns” (dg, as cited by TPR). This policy had been discussed in TL recently. The moderator goes over various arguments brought up by MC to support her suggested policy, arguing that they are the same used by “people who reject trans identities” (dg, as cited by TPR) and that “[MC] being such a vocal and upstanding member of the community,

having written a heavily-supported policy, means her actions have more than private ramifications—they set the bar of what's acceptable from others as well" (dg, as cited by TPR). LGBT+ moderators feel disbelieved and unacknowledged by their peers who, ironically are "specifically here to protect others from suffering" (dg, as cited in TPR).

The leak is also found in the comments of *The Register* article, posted by someone with a Guy Fawkes mask avatar, a symbol adopted by the well-known hacktivist movement Anonymous. The crisis spills to other online arenas like Reddit, Hacker News, and Wikipedia.

A moderator warns his community to "be skeptical of every simple description or leak [they] may find. The amount of transcript you need to wade through to get an idea of the situation is almost of book-length, and every editing carries necessarily personal bias" (DN).

Keeping Receipts. Throughout the crisis, members resort to various archival tactics. Some preserve information by storing local copies (screenshots, PDFs), archiving on online services (Wayback Machine, Archive.today, Archive.ph or Archive.is) and using bots and scripts to aggregate comments and export pages to PDFs.

Moving Discussion to a Different Platform. In the main chat room of Meta Stack Overflow, discussions about the use and implementation concerns of enforcing pronouns get heated. A CM freezes the room for an hour, but some room owners feel their authority was overruled.

Following this event, a few members start Meta Discord, a Discord chat server where they have authority and the ability to slow down the conversation. The link to the Discord server gets pinned to SO's meta chat room starboard. Although it is initially well hidden from most platform users, anyone may join, including staff.

On Discord, members use similar avatars and screen names to those they use on the platform. They group by their roles on the public platform, which also signals the extent to which they have access to sensitive information. Inspired by SE's chat starboard, a channel is created to keep highlights.

Some members write their thoughts and analyses on other platforms, such as blogs and social media, including MC, who voices her wish that staff would discuss with her.

Resigning, Pausing Moderation and Moderating in Protest. Every new aggravating action from the company tends to push more moderators into resigning. However, moderators find themselves in a conundrum where they are elected by their community and expected to

uphold company policies. Some nuance that their resignation is related to how MC was treated and not related to the upcoming changes to the CoC. Those who occupy multiple positions sometimes hold on to a single position, allowing them to access private arenas and influence discussion behind the scenes. Those who do not resign sometimes pause their moderating activity. Many core members follow suit, as well as some of their community bots. There are few mentions of members attempting to delete their contributions, as this goes against their common goal, can be easily reverted, and leads to a suspension.

Others state they are moderating in protest: “This is my statement to StackExchange: I care about my community far more than you do, so I will continue to moderate in spite of you” (ES).

Pouring Oil on the Fire

The first official response is provided by the Director of Public Q&A six days after the dismissal. In her statement, she attempts to form an apology but reinforces the accusations against MC.

Friends,

Last week we made an important decision for our community. We removed a moderator for repeatedly violating our existing Code of Conduct and being unwilling to accept our CM’s repeated requests to change that behavior. We recognize it has caused concern in the community as a whole. We made a hard decision, and we stand by that decision. But we must also acknowledge the way in which we implemented it and our communications surrounding the decision could have been much better. (SC)

MC states on her blog that “[t]his accusation was linked prominently on the front page of every site on the network” (MC). In her statement, the Director also announces the creation of an official process to remove moderators. Although SC apologizes for the poor timing of the intervention, she spoils it with an insensitive analogy from the software industry: “We learned (or were painfully reminded, rather) to never ship at 6 PM (EDT) on a Friday” (SC).

Members are angry that the CoC does not seem to apply to staff and that a process they had themselves established for removing moderators seven years before has been overridden:

Something extreme enough that it couldn’t sit for a weekend (that the mod had to be inactive for anyway) would likely require the involvement of police. If *anyone* understands what it is to be part of a marginalized and abused minority, it’s [MC]. [...]

The assurances that they'd *do it better next time* really concern me, since it needs to be better *this time*. (G_b)

As the conflict escalated, some members battled with staff over the greeting of the post (as shown in Figure 3) and its featured tag.

The screenshot shows a Stack Overflow post with a single revision. The revision count is 7, and the comment is: "We're not." by ArtOfCode, edited 3 hours ago, with 19.3k views, 8 upvotes, 51 downvotes, and 94 comments. Below the comment are three viewing modes: inline, side-by-side, and side-by-side markdown. The comment text is as follows:

Friends,

Last week we made an important decision for our community. We removed a moderator for repeatedly violating our existing Code of Conduct and being unwilling to accept our CM's repeated requests to change the behavior. We recognize it has caused concern in the community as a whole. We made a hard decision, and we stand by that decision. But we must also acknowledge the way in which we implemented it and our communications surrounding the decision could have been much better.

Last week we made an important decision for our community. We removed a moderator for repeatedly violating our existing Code of Conduct and being unwilling to accept our CM's repeated requests to change the behavior. We recognize it has caused concern in the community as a whole. We made a hard decision, and we stand by that decision. But we must also acknowledge the way in which we implemented it and our communications surrounding the decision could have been much better.

Figure 3. Revision history and comment on the first official company response.

A Stack Overflow moderator explains that he and his colleagues “found out about that ‘apology’ 6 minutes before it was posted in public, and none of [their] feedback was heard” (GS). As a response, he provides the apology that he would have liked to see, which becomes the most popular response. The Director of Public Q&A responds that they “aren’t going to re-litigate the past” (SC), which members interpret as refusing to be held accountable.

Members are overwhelmed and struggle to stay updated, often reporting missing sleep or work to keep up. Many moderators are going through the same while simultaneously managing flaring tempers in their communities. One of them reports that there have been 3,000 messages a day posted in TL, non-stop, over more than a week, and traffic has tripled on MSE since September 28th.

Wasted Opportunities. There is very little communication with CMs, and no apparent attempt is made to calm the situation. Few defend LGBT+ members in the volatile conversations taking place.

As members face a lack of discussion with the company, they collectively attempt to define their next steps, sometimes looking for ways to heal their divides. For example, a moderator creates a script that enables members to display their pronouns in user cards and chat. Another member suggests involving a formal mediator to intervene between MC and the company. Some conversations aim to understand LGBT+ concerns better. However, a member emphasizes that these “put a heavy burden on marginalized users to continually justify

themselves, when the CM team could be helping to facilitate that discussion more productively” (ZL).

A Third Response

On October 6th, the CTO published a lengthy apology claiming responsibility for the mistakes. This statement was initially much better received than the first. He announces the company will be publishing an updated CoC and new processes for moderator removals and reinstatement. He also suggests the company will contact MC, who replies positively: “We’ll be reaching out to her directly to apologize for the lack of process, privacy, and to discuss next steps. We’ll keep those discussions completely private unless we both agree to share any of it with the community” (DF).

Open Letters. The statement is quickly followed by the moderators’ publication of two open letters, suggesting that all had been drafted around the same period. A moderator hosted the letters on a different domain, dearstackexchange.com. To prevent fraud, members wishing to add their names to the letters had to connect to Stack Exchange.

The first letter acknowledges a growing disconnect between the company and its communities. The company has become more reactive to individuals airing their grievances about the platform on social media. The moderators feel unprotected from public mistreatment. The CoC is becoming increasingly rigid and difficult to enforce for the massive, culturally heterogeneous user base. They support the initiative to ensure all members feel respected and welcome, and are upset that these high standards have not been upheld.

They want the company to acknowledge and resolve the incident, as well as to provide a plan to restore collaboration and trust between all stakeholders. They want the company to uphold its promise to be accountable, to support and trust its moderators, and to give them agency and autonomy. They want to be safe to disagree with the company and would like to contribute suggestions before public communications are made, based on their knowledge of the communities. They would like to return to being close contributors working towards a shared purpose. A note asks staff to share the letter within the company.

A second letter explains that the escalated discussions and backlash have hurt LGBT+ members. They have long felt unsafe. Now that their concerns are being addressed, they are being targeted. They want to be heard, respected, and consulted. They want consequences for

transphobic and homophobic misbehaviour to be explicit and enacted, and for sensitivity training to be provided to all moderators.

This first letter will eventually accumulate 855 signatures from over 180 current and former moderators, and the Lavender letter is signed by 191 members, including 54 moderators and former moderators. Users estimate there are approximately 600 moderator positions on the network, with some moderators holding many positions. Some interpret the two letters as competing, but many variables impact the gap in signatures. A moderator explains that the letters were separated for brevity and to add emphasis on LGBT+ concerns. This split also allowed moderators to formulate a stance that more people could agree with.

Given the announced next steps by the CTO, members wait to see how the situation develops before choosing their next move. Two days later, MC will edit the CTO's post to add the date on which she has received an email and links this annotation to her answer: "**I received email from [DF] on October 8 at 15:10 UTC. I am not satisfied and I have asked for a conversation.** (I won't share more about the content yet, in deference to [DF])" (MC).

The edit allows members to revert their vote. As members realize that they may have been fooled, the post gradually tumbles far into the negative.

According to some members, staff claimed it had been morally urgent to remove MC and may have believed MC was responsible for the resignation of a LGBT+ moderator closely preceding her dismissal. In her resignation post, the moderator had expressed frustration at staff inaction, citing a "single incident" as the reason for her decision. She had later published a clarification that while her resignation post alluded to several previous incidents, the decisive event she had referred to was the shutting down of a conversation where members were "discussing the legitimacy of trans people, by proxy of a pronoun issue" (A).

She did not believe the company would go any further and had been blindsided by MC's dismissal. She emphasizes the importance of being cautious, as seeking justice can have unpredictable impacts. She has feared that "speaking out for [MC] would lump [her] in with those who are against queer justice" (A), but states: "The actions taken to date are not justice, not for her, not for us" (A).

Invisible Lines

On October 10th, the staff publishes the updated CoC on the blog. Many members eagerly awaited the CoC to decide on their next steps. From the beginning, MC had claimed she

had not been told what the CoC violations were, but a source had informed her that staff affirmed the opposite to moderators internally.

The new policy states: “**Be inclusive and respectful.** Prefer gender-neutral language when uncertain. **No bigotry.** Use stated pronouns (when known). When in doubt, don’t use language that might offend or alienate” (SC).

A few moderators explain they offered feedback which contributed to softening the tone of the CoC:

[We] successfully requested the removal of the compelled speech (‘do not avoid using pronouns when requested’). This clause implies that people cannot address people by name or ‘The OP’ if they declare a pronoun. This makes a mockery of how to address them individually among a discussion group of many participants. (Sn)

However, moderators are “blindsided by the coercive and authoritarian FAQ that came with [the CoC]” (g), and which provides further guidance. Members ask multiple questions to understand the ramifications of the FAQ, in which they spot contradictions: “The FAQ is bewildering, confusing, and intimidating. The net effect is that the CoC is more divisive than inclusive, and damages our relationship with our trans and non-gendered users” (Sn).

In an answer, MC quotes an item of the FAQ: “We are asking everyone to use all stated pronouns **as you would naturally write.** You are not required to insert pronouns where you otherwise would not” (CeM). She points out that the policy she had questioned before her dismissal is different than the one being enacted:

I am glad to see that you have removed the compelled speech that was in the first draft. [...] Maybe there was a misunderstanding and this was the intent all along – great! Or maybe you took my and others’ feedback into account and changed the policy – also great! **Either way, we do not disagree about this policy. Please reinstate me now.** (MC)

A CM informs her in chat that the steps for reinstatement have been previously communicated to her by email, and that “advocating for that on SE and here is not the way to go” (CeM). A member responds:

With all due respect, the people that made this whole thing public were SE staff by publicly casting aspersions to the press, not [MC]. I find it a bit unfair you’re cautioning her to remain in private conversation yet do not afford her the same respect. (Mag)

MC's answer attracts attention, along with multiple problematic comments, and she will express that she felt pressured to delete her post. Many questions seek clarification on what was problematic in her stance. Given that she was brutally dismissed, understanding and applying the rules accurately seems particularly important.

Most of people, including me, have fear of being suspended or banned for crossing invisible lines due to some random unknown unfair accusation without realistic chance of getting defense. And SE is not doing a good job in reducing other people fear. In fact, the level of fear, anger, frustration and mistrust is just raising. (VS)

A few moderators have expressed that there have been instances of bigotry in the TL that have been ignored by staff. A moderator emphasizes the unfairness in how members are treated:

These are new rules and no one should be punished for either asking questions or not getting it quite right before the rules were official. It is also disingenuous to remove one moderator who agrees with the spirit of the rules, and indicated one area of difference with the practical aspects of them, while ignoring moderators who have outright said transphobic things and/or indicated that they would only use pronouns that they believe correspond with someone's gender assignment at birth. (Cy)

Echo Chambers. On Twitter, the CTO congratulates SC, the Director of Public Q&A, for her work on the CoC. SC suggests, through a retweet, that the CoC is effective and inciting problematic community members to leave. This statement further angers the community, and there is some evidence that she blocks multiple replies from members.

The CoC attracts bad-faith attention from online hate groups. A wave of transphobic and antisemitic posts will last multiple days and causes some members to fear for their safety. The numerous comments break an archival bot. In chat, some members and CMs collaborate to counter the backlash. A moderator repurposes a former bot to optimize the detection of potentially transphobic comments. The CoC enforcement is somewhat inconsistent across the network, and distinguishing between genuine concerns and attempts to escalate the conflict is challenging. Whole threads sometimes are deleted, which sends mixed signals to members:

I have seen my comments on Meta disappear. Some have fallen as victims of whole threads, some were carefully pruned. I have no idea if someone flagged them as rude or how close to potential suspension I might be. I have seen other people's comments that I

don't consider rude deleted. There is valid concern that some flags were not handled fairly. (RIF)

Members hold various theories that the crisis is manufactured to increase visibility or to signal virtue. They wonder if it was intentional, out of malice, or a mistake. A CM breaks the silence:

TBF, when you kick off your campaign to achieve good-faith results with a *really* unpopular action, it sorta pours a bucket of icewater on the whole endeavor [...] Acknowledging the elephant in the room and all. [...] doesn't have to *end* that way, but... Ain't gonna lie, we sorta shot ourselves in the foot, and then shot a few other feet just to be safe. (S9)

He also hints that there have been heated internal disagreements:

You know, everyone loves remote work, and loves to talk up its benefits. But there's one thing folks too often ignore, and I believe it is THE BIGGEST benefit: I walk two steps and hit a button, and my co-workers can't see OR hear me yelling at them. (S9)

In the hostile atmosphere of MSE, a few LGBT+ members act as unofficial ambassadors, as others watch from safer corners of the network.

The problem with avoiding MSE [...] is that there is no one to challenge the vitriol. Our voices are being scared off and MSE is turning into an echo chamber. Then people who genuinely are ill-informed get to only hear the narrative that is dialectically opposed to us. We need support to stand up to it. Not advice on how to hide from it. Trust me, we are all extremely good at hiding from it. (b)

One of these ambassadors expresses appreciation to staff fighting the backlash: “<3 I know it's hard, but these are growing pains. It'll get worse before it gets better, but I sincerely appreciate y'all holding the line like you are” (A).

Making a Martyr. MC feels her “reinstatement is a necessary first step toward clearing [her] name, here in the land of ‘guilty until proven innocent’” (MC). As a known figure of the larger network, she quickly becomes a symbol of the disconnect between the company and its community: “To me, the way she was treated represents the complete disregard that SE has for its users at this point and the alienation that exists between its userbase and the company” (el).

MC claims that she has been harassed and has received “recruiting pitches from hatemongers” (MC) following staff accusations, and her visibility was leveraged by others with unscrupulous intentions:

So... I've been keeping a close eye on pretty much everything that's been happening surrounding this. I've read upwards of 50,000 chat messages, a hundred meta posts, dozens of Reddit threads, and a swarm of comments on Hacker News. While [MC] most certainly did not *intend* for this to happen - heck, it was supposed to all be contained to a private room - there have definitely been outright bigots rallying around her position, using her as a standard to justify their own anti-transness. (M)

Leading the Way

On October 11th, the day following the CoC release, moderators are privately presented with new moderator processes. Three days later, a Stack Overflow moderator tweets about the lack of leadership manifested by the company. He points out that the company has lost its ability to persuade. They have not yet acknowledged the open letters, and their responses overall have been much too slow by community standards. They seem unable to leverage their community's readiness to help themselves, and their strategy has not been clear for some time:

Stack Overflow may believe it's just about the CoC and that everyone who is angry is worthy to lose -- it isn't, and they aren't. If you believe it is about the CoC, you really don't deserve to lead a community anyway, because you don't understand them. [...] We want to help. We don't know what you know @stackoverflow. We don't know what you want to be, and we don't know how you want to get there. All we know is we're being told what we think doesn't matter any more. You may think you're talking to a few of us, but all of us hear it. (GS)

He resigns the next day, citing that the new moderator processes, which were provided for moderator review, are opaque and appear to be designed for removal rather than to ensure justice. He also believes CMs are overworked and muzzled by the company.

Affecting Revenue Channels. Members seek to pressure the company through their revenue channels and suggest using ad blockers. An influential member, who has successfully implemented the private paid platform product at his workplaces before, recounts the story of his manager, Nancy, who ultimately ruined his business. He incites members to boycott and claims he “will not pay for a service backed by people [he] no longer can trust” (JH). Some members

perceive the manager in the story as an allusion to the Director of Public Q&A. Members and CMs engage in an intense edit war, changing the name multiple times.

Creating an Alternative. In a thread, members introspect on their reasons for staying; many have heavily invested in terms of effort, time, and emotions in their communities and creating a valuable resource for all. Some express that they face a form of addiction, whether it revolves around learning and helping or earning points.

In the comments under MC's response, she and a few other members connect to create a fork of Stack Exchange. They temporarily use QPixel, a clone of SE that a moderator had built previously. From then on, occasional attempts to recruit contributors to the project, later known as Codidact, will start appearing on the network.

A New CEO Emerges. On October 15th, the CEO introduces himself in a paywalled article on Business Insider and later in an interview on the company podcast. In the first, he shares his aims to grow the business by focusing on selling its enterprise products. He emphasizes the importance of the public platform's community members: “[i]f we did not have our community, we would not exist” (Chandrasekar, as cited by Chan, 2019). However, he has not introduced himself to MSE or intervened on the platform to calm the crisis.

Revising the Code of Conduct

To address the ongoing Code of Conduct (CoC) backlash, a member suggests a new FAQ that would address the issues in a way “that is a little less ambitious but that more of the users and moderators can sincerely endorse” (GMC). He seeks the input of various stakeholders: members who identify as trans and nonbinary, people concerned with compelled speech, and moderators. They, in turn, support his proposal.

A Partial Response. On October 17th, members begin to see results of their actions as staff provides a partial response to the open letter, acknowledging members' frustrations. A CM explains that moderators are currently giving feedback on new moderator processes, and that a revised FAQ based on the community initiative by GMC will be released in a few days.

They announce an internal policy to prevent employees from commenting on sensitive community matters to the media. A CM explains that a high internal turnover might explain why this policy, which would “have been obvious to certain people at certain times in the past” (S9), was not upheld. When questioned by members about retracting the statements to *The Register*, the CM states it is not in his hands. Members are frustrated by the lack of accountability of staff.

The response also announces measures to increase collaboration with moderators behind the scenes, and some moderators who had paused their activity will resume moderating.

Reinstatement and Removal

On October 21st, the former moderator removal processes defined by community members years ago are officially overridden when staff publish their new processes for reviewing and reinstating moderators. Members are frustrated at the lack of community oversight in the process, although moderators' feedback was incorporated. Given the lack of mutual trust, they ask for clarification, and will not get a response.

Staff invites resigned moderators and MC to go through these new processes if they wish to be reinstated. MC states she had not received a warning, her questions about the charges still have not been answered, and thus she has been removed improperly. She does not trust this new process and decides not to go through it. Some moderators request reinstatement successfully, while others fail.

A Revised FAQ. On October 23rd, the company offers a revised FAQ based on the previous community effort led by GMC. A section covers expectations for moderators and includes: "Using incorrect pronouns or conspicuously avoiding using pronouns is disrespectful. Telling them you refuse to use their pronouns is rude. If you think you will find using pronouns as stated difficult, please try." (Cat)

In an uncommon move, staff delete the previous FAQ. Members speculate about the company's reasons to do so. A member argues that it could have served as a testimony of "a sizable tech-oriented company trying to address social issues at a level rarely attempted" (SS) and that preserving and facilitating its study could be worthwhile. However, many members believe that the poor reception of the CoC stems from the lack of transparency from the company and its entanglement with the botched removal, which pitted members against each other. A CM clarifies that the harm caused by the FAQ "vastly outweighs the value of its short history at this point" (S9). The post and conversations around it have been flagged almost 1,000 times and would continue to attract problems if they remained published.

In an anonymous goodbye post, a member identifying as nonbinary states that there was an instance of recent interference by far-right groups where "someone posted pseudo-code for automatically going through the member database of SE and finding users who have listed their

pronouns in their ‘about me’ section. The pseudo-code then moved those users into a category for torture and extermination” (s).

Remediation

On October 24th, facing the company’s ongoing inaction, MC posts a formal request to retract the statements made to the press and to be reinstated. She lists how the company has wronged her and explains that her reputation, health, and safety have faced significant harm for weeks. She has “exhausted all known private communication channels available to [her] short of legal proceedings” (MC) but is willing to forgo legal proceedings if the company retracts their statements to the press.

To Reach Out. Later that day, an LGBT+ moderator identifying as queer and nonbinary holds a private meeting with MC on Discord to reconcile their differences. An MSE moderator mediates the meeting.

The next day, both participants seem to have reached a resolution and share some of their thoughts. The LGBT+ moderator expresses that “while there were problems with what [MC] said, she meant all the best, and that is a starting point for a conversation, not an ending point for a long and productive relationship with Stack Exchange” (h). They invite all parties to reconcile: “I post this today in an attempt to reach out a hand, and to ask all of you to do so as well, to ask Stack Exchange to do so as well” (h). MC explains that “[d]iversity means sometimes encountering perspectives we disagree with, that we might even find *deeply wrong or heretical*” which enriches communities, “[b]ut some conversations are too painful, too personal, and we need to be able to say ‘let’s not do this’” (MC).

The initiative is applauded by many members who feel the “post dispenses with the false dichotomy that [members] must choose between [MC] and the Lavender community” (SoSe) and that they can now turn their “full attention and support on how SE has hurt [MC] and how SE’s actions have empowered some users to act in ways designed to hurt lavender users.” (SB)

Some moderators wish to see a more eloquent apology from MC to support her reinstatement fully. However, they also consider it may be insensitive to hope for this, given how poorly the company has treated her and the threat of litigation. A discussion reveals that there were unaddressed violations by other moderators in the TL, and moderators suggest working to resolve these.

A CM expresses his respect to the LGBT+ moderator for their strength of character, but the company would not respond.

Radio Silence. Faced with yet another impasse, some members suggest involving lawyers to clear MC's name and volunteer to fund her legal procedures through a crowdfunding initiative. MC plans to donate any leftover funds to charity for LGBT+ education and support services, later elaborating that "SE can choose where a lot of that money goes: to lawyers, or to a charity supporting the LGBT community" (MC). The campaign quickly takes shape using the GoFundMe platform.

In an hour-long interview on a tech podcast, MC gives her side of the story and some personal context. She has long opted for gender-neutral writing as a professional writer and states this is partly to avoid misgendering or alienating people. Moreover, she has avoided the use of singular they, and explains that she has witnessed and experienced herself how the number mismatch confuses readers. She emphasizes her stance on transgender and nonbinary identity:

I absolutely don't want to question anybody's identity. [...] There's a spectrum of how you identify and how you behave and how you see yourself, all totally legitimate. Not my concern. I'm very much a 'live and let live' person. It's not my place to judge you. [...] I would never call somebody what that person doesn't want to be called. (MC)

According to her, a part of the problem stems from the nature of the TL, where events took place. People from all over the world, from all major religions, who also hold a wide breadth of perspectives and values, gather in the private chat room.

Everybody in the room is a moderator. So, who moderates the moderators? The answer is nobody. If this were a regular chatroom on the network, then the moderators would be able to actually shut down conversations and say 'We're done talking about this'. They would have both the moral authority and the technical ability to make that happen. (MC)

Given she cannot access the private transcript of the TL anymore, she retells the sequence of events from memory. On September 18th, someone had revived a debate around the use of preferred pronouns from prior months in which she was involved. The Director of Public Q&A had joined the room and announced an upcoming change to the CoC, which would require the use of people's preferred pronouns. MC sought to clarify if the stated rule was "You must use preferred pronouns." (MC) or "You must use preferred pronouns when using pronouns." (MC) and how this might impact her writing.

As moderators were informed that deliberately avoiding pronouns or disengaging from conversation would be against the rules, they requested additional clarification on how they could enforce this rule: how could they assess when a user purposefully avoided pronouns?

The Director had gone inactive while the conversation dragged on, involving strong opinions from both sides. When the Director had finally returned, she had stated that they had been as clear as they could be.

Given [MC]’s style of writing had not been questioned elsewhere than in the TL, and that participation there is optional, MC opted to stay out of the room, expecting further information. There, the vigorous conversation continued and was called to an end two days later. A CM asked members to email their concerns and exceptionally froze the room.

MC hurried to write an email before Shabbat, outlining her concerns and some personal context. An employee responded to her and explained the reasons for the change. He hoped she could support this and remain on the team, but that they should discuss a plan to step down if she expected to get into further conflicts about this. Not seeing a conflict, MC believed her stance had been misinterpreted and attempted to clarify. She had yet to receive a response days later.

Instead, MC discovered she had been fired by noticing changes in the UI, as her diamond and privileges had disappeared. Due to a caching issue, she was able to join the TL “where, completely uncharacteristically, one of the employees had pinned an announcement” (MC) of her dismissal.

That announcement was in Teacher’s Lounge. It’s not public on the network yet but they said it in front of 600 people which is going to kind of limit my ability to [gracefully step down]. [...] If they had not said anything, I could have at least written a farewell post to my communities talking about irreconcilable differences. (MC)

MC claims that the company did not follow due process, gave her no formal warnings, and even publicized her dismissal. In TL, just before Shabbat, MC posted one last message expressing her disbelief, only to be quickly kicked out by staff.

I have never been told why it was urgent. The email that I got firing me was brief but it sounded to me like they were saying ‘We can’t have a moderator who won’t follow the forthcoming Code of Conduct, therefore we’re booting you.’ (MC)

Word started getting out on the platform as MC was offline for Shabbat. Upon her return, she wrote her part of the story to one of her communities. The Director of Public Q&A

responded to her post and other resignations, spreading accusations that the moderator had “violated [a spirit of inclusion and respect]” (SC) on the network.

She believes these statements might have led *The Register* to contact SC directly, instead of contacting the company directly, where “they would have gotten somebody who would have said ‘No comment’, because that’s what any sane company does when dealing with the press, right?” (MC). She adds that the reporter also tried to contact her while she was offline, during Rosh Hashanah. By then, MC had written multiple emails and support requests to various people, including the CEO, who was about to step down.

The controversial apology provided by SC included even more severe accusations against MC, who had yet to receive a response and grew afraid of being stalked and harassed. A few days later, the improved apology written by the CTO brought MC hope that she could get clarification. She explains that the CTO later sent her an email, which repeated the claims without citing evidence or clear warnings, and concluded: “But we understand that people can change so we’re working on a reinstatement process and when we have it you can go through it” (MC). She explains that the CTO refused to have a conversation with her and did not respond to her request for clarification. Staff had later informed her she could apply for reinstatement when the process was announced, but the process was opaque.

They have smeared my name and dragged me through the mud, and have done nothing, nothing at all, to walk any of that back with a clearly false statement which is actionable.

When I first joined the network, Stack Exchange was a smaller company. They actually worked with the community, and they were ethical and they were good people and I actually wanted to go work for them. Something has changed, they are not behaving in a way an ethical company to behave. They are turning evil, and I don’t know why. (MC)

She had offered to negotiate a settlement but had gotten no response. She expresses that the story has drawn attention and comments, and that “this is the top hit for [her] name on Google” (MC). The situation has caused her unhealthy levels of stress, but the company does not seem to care. She explains that her next steps involve lawyers and that she is raising her crowdfunding goal, expecting costs to increase.

As members begin to realize that conflicts in the TL may have been overlooked by staff, a member pleads with the company to safeguard their moderators. A few days later, a CM

announces that they are testing the implementation of a new private moderator chat room with improved moderation tools:

Maybe a 400-person perpetual chatroom is just *a really bad idea*. [...] But if this does work out, we'll figure out how to provide these same options on an ongoing basis.

Because we care about these moderators too, and it's high time we did something to stop them from hurting. (S9)

Reinstate Monica. On GoFundMe, donations are numerous, and some are large; up to 1,024 dollars from a single individual. The initial goal of 5,000 dollars is met within 12 hours. Members bring visibility to the unresolved issues by changing their names and avatars, usually to request MC's reinstatement and provide links to the GoFundMe, both on the public platform and the company blog. They also make use of community promotion ads, which community members vote on. Some members describe their stance in their network profiles and ask questions about the issue in relevant communities (law, community management, etc.). Encouraged by the campaign's rapid progress, another community member initiates a crowdfunding effort to sue the company over its questionable license upgrade, but this effort stalls.

Many hold the Director of Public Q&A responsible for the botched dismissal and press statements. Members dig into her history and reveal she had been invited, earlier that year, on a podcast discussing “The Strategic Disruption of the Status Quo in Technical Organizations, Communities, and Events.” There, she mentions pronoun conflicts among Stack Exchange moderators. She explains she has reached out to LGBT+ members to discuss how the company should approach this “in a way that is making sure [LGBT+] needs are served, and not in a way that we think is the nice way to do it” (SC).

As members speculate about the Director's intentions, moderators warn those calling for her resignation. Comments suggest that the company has long ignored problematic behaviour against trans moderators and that MC's dismissal may have been inappropriately used to set an example. Given how staff is letting the situation fester, members question if the company has a legal responsibility to protect their volunteer moderators, or, at a minimum, to avoid violating their rights. A member pings the Director of Public Q&A to remind her that she still has not responded to the open letters published a month before and calls her out:

For being self-declared understaffed with over 250 employees, you're shockingly awful at strategizing your schedules to get the most out of it while handling the community in an efficient manner. [...] You're currently pushing away everyone with your actions - including the groups you wanted to 'protect' (and I'm saying 'protect' because the way you've done it has sure as hell not been protecting us). [...] You personally have time to go on podcasts, [...] have time to tweet and talk to the media, all of this fast, but you (the company) don't have time to respond to your own community? In case you haven't noticed, multiple sites in the network are falling apart [...] (Zt)

Catering to a Different Audience

On November 5th, a throwaway account leaked a post on MSE intended to warn moderators about a significant and retroactive adjustment to the point system. The company intends to increase points earned through question votes. This marks a departure from a decision made years before, which optimized incentives for answering rather than asking questions.

The post suggests the change will be framed so that the site is perceived as more inclusive, based on data that women ask more questions and that they enjoy a less competitive and speed-oriented way to build their reputation. The leaker explains that moderators have attempted to warn the company that this will not be well-received by the community and concludes: "Let us make the fight public before they once again push unannounced changes without discussing with [its community]" (Cu).

The leak is quickly deleted and archived to the Wayback Machine eight seconds after posting. Ten minutes later, a screenshot surfaces on r/programming Reddit. A member later hints the company has requested Wayback Machine to remove the leak, and that "[i]f you want to see a copy of that post, I'm afraid you'll just have to look for it elsewhere" (SAH). Searching for the URL on Archive.today reveals a copy of the post.

The CM who had authored the private post clarifies that moderators were asked for input on how to communicate the change, not on the change itself. The Director of Community Development responds to members frustrated that their feedback was not collected for this significant network-wide change:

I get it, but the system and expanding feature set is also getting too big and complex to try and outsource *every* decision a company has to make to keep moving forward. Even trying to do so *internally* was crippling us inexorably. I totally get (and love) the *default*

public philosophy, but you cannot live up to that for *everything*. And it's not really my call. (RC)

Moderators and room owners move the discussion about the leak to an isolated chat room on the network. Some are disappointed that the leak seems intended to create more drama, and others are angry that it endangers a still uncertain reconnection with the company, as staff finally seemed ready to listen to their concerns. Some wonder if the leaker will be removed. A former Stack Overflow moderator explains that a clever leaker will have “bounced [the post] off sixteen satellites and through a TOR account” (RH) before posting.

At this point, a member assesses that 119 members are bearing the user name “Reinstate Monica” (Wi), and another assesses that “88 out of about 670 moderator positions [have] gone inactive or resigned, for just over 13%. Additionally, that leaves eight sites with just one active moderator, and two with none active.” (Mar)

On November 13th, the change is announced with great fanfare by the Director of Public Q&A on the company blog. However, the post avoids explicitly positioning it as a measure to enhance inclusivity for women. It is worded in a way to avoid alienating veteran answerers and curators, and there is some evidence that moderator feedback had an impact on how the announcement was framed.

The post briefly announces new feedback mechanisms, which will be unveiled next week as “an exciting start to working hand in hand with the community to build a better Stack Overflow” (SC). Members speculate and inquire about the nature of these new mechanisms, but a member points out: “Don’t get your hopes up. The official SE feedback mechanism has been > /dev/null for a while” (ED).

Some members suspect that the company is looking to be acquired and wonder if this could explain the crisis.

Removing Links. Concerns and speculation remain, but the topic quickly shifts the next day when staff announces that they are removing links and community ads leading to MC’s GoFundMe. Some members now perceive the timing of the reputation change as a cover-up. They are distraught that staff have been editing their user profiles, and they find ways to complicate the task: links to the GoFundMe appear in shortened form, in requests for bounties, sometimes directly in usernames, and even as a QR code in an avatar:

For a few days my user name had been a broken-up URL to a short (22-line) text file on Pastebin that I have written. While that text file does include a GoFundMe URL, my user name only ‘linked’ to Pastebin, and I honestly do not understand how that can still be considered ‘linking to a legal fund campaign’. (user12205)

A moderator claims staff have informed moderators they “weren’t being directed to enforce the policy, but [they] could do so of [their] own volition...” (CV).

The incendiary action has revived donations, as evidenced by multiple doubled donations on the GoFundMe page. The crowdfunding campaign will eventually slow down a few days later, but only after increasing its goals to 10,000 dollars and then 30,000 dollars.

Earlier in the crisis, some had construed leaving the platform as “standing out of the way” (M13). However, as the company remains silent and members lack something to look forward to, discussions about leaving the platform are gaining momentum. Some write a note in their profile to leave a trace of events before logging off, sometimes choosing to invest their time in platform alternatives.

While members can hide their contributions when they fit specific requirements, contributions are very rarely removed, and there are safeguards in place to prevent this. When members request a profile deletion, their content remains tied to their original user number. Only their profile, screen names and avatar disappear. They lose agency to influence the conflict, but are less likely to be pulled in again:

My diamond [has] now been removed and I have scheduled the deletion of all of my accounts across the network. [...] Whatever the interpretation for my action, this wasn’t done out a sense of pettiness, attention-seeking, or of protesting against Stack Exchange. This is my protection from the self-harm that seems to be endemic in the community right now. [...] I really care about this community, and the amount of care is roughly equal to the amount of hurt I’m feeling in seeing it the way that it is. I feel impotent in the face of the community that seems like it has no wish to heal. [...] And so I’m leaving, and seeking closure in having my accounts deleted. (Sn)

Some members feel their community Q&A activity is decreasing. They use SEDE to find evidence and create graphs that show the voting, answering, and asking rates of their communities. This atmosphere makes it difficult for the company to run moderator elections. On CodeGolf.SE, a CM checks if the community has an interest in electing new moderators.

Members downvote the post, explaining that nominating themselves to replace their former resigned moderators would harm the cause.

Thrown for The Loop

The feedback mechanism fails to materialize by the planned date. A CM responds to probing members that “it became clear that more refinement was needed before releasing” (Cat). The following Monday, *The Loop*, a new series of posts to share research and planning, was introduced on the blog. The first post claims that there has been a quiet transition in how the company collects feedback for the past years; seeking members’ input on Meta has been replaced with “1:1 user interviews, as well as other methods like surveys and contextual research” (SC and JM). MSE’s usefulness has not scaled well, and the company plans to transition most of its functions off it in Q1 of 2020. Staff plans to remedy their accrued community debt through publishing research reports, working on specific initiatives with small groups of moderators, and creating moderator training.

Readers are invited to respond to the “Through the Loop” survey, the new feedback mechanism that was announced earlier. The survey requires respondents to answer multiple mandatory demographic questions, to name a thing they dislike and one they like about Stack Overflow and ends abruptly. On MSE, members point out numerous issues plaguing it. MSE members, who have shared a decade of history providing input on platform changes, are dismayed that MSE would be reduced to a brief survey, given the amount of effort and resources invested in assembling experts who care about the network. Some suggest boycotting the survey, but others incite people to make themselves heard, even if they disagree with the methods.

To a member pleading staff to consider MSE’s input before implementing changes to the platform, the Community Design Lead explains to members that: “[t]he reason that Meta isn’t our primary method for talking to our most engaged users is that it’s not representative of our most engaged users. For example, only about 10% of our most active answerers are on Meta” (DC). Another member points out this interpretation is flawed:

As a top 0.3% answerer on Stack Overflow, I’d say that a lack of visible participation on meta is not the same thing as a lack of interest. It just means that I think there is nothing I can add to the discussion because others made the points already I would make, and possibly did so even better than I could. I’m not sure what you expect? (f)

Given this recent development, members worry that MSE may be shut down. While this could affect the ability of members to mobilize, a complete shutdown seems unlikely since MSE is also “a cheap, almost perfect quarantine mechanism for disgruntled people in a place where SE has admin powers” (Hr). A former moderator stresses: “[i]f we can prove that as a community - in this case, the community of engaged users - we can provide structured, productive feedback without everything devolving, then maybe we’ll have a chance of having a say in things” (M).

A veteran member is concerned about the archival aspect; he sees value in preserving the thoughtful perspectives on gender and lessons for community building, as well as preventing the narrative from being manipulated. The blog suggests the feedback will become private, and there is some worry that the company could fake data to support their actions.

Anything Company decides and does will be backed up by some *imaginary* data collected through Surveys that can be vastly misinterpreted and manipulated. Anything they do will be because *we wanted it™* and anyone complaining anywhere else will be just some loser swimming upstream. (RiF)

In December, the Product Manager of Public Q&A and a Data Scientist resign. Community members had appreciated their consideration of members’ input and efforts to evolve platform features. In a personal blog post reflecting on her work at Stack Overflow, the Product Manager outlines some challenges faced by the platform: “[i]t’s hard to use for people who are not power users, it’s difficult to maintain for engineers, and it’s a challenge to design and build changes that work around tons of variants” (MR). She explains that her team has made progress by hearing from all types of users to ensure the platform works for everyone. She also mentions the importance of involving CMs and core users when developing major features as “[t]hey are experts on different types of user segments as well as the system and are critical to building Stack Overflow to better serve everyone” (MR).

Onward. The community soon finds itself at an impasse. Hundreds of members expressing their support for MC are being ignored. Although community members are vastly outnumbered by platform users unaware of the situation, multiple posts on MSE bear the scars of modified usernames and deleted accounts. Members are irritated, with some having been suspended and others walking on eggshells. They have been discussing the reasons that hold them back from leaving for weeks: not wanting to give up their communities, having invested

much time, being driven by habits, and having nowhere else to go. Some think a lack of competition allows the company to neglect the site.

Many members envision forking and migrating their content to the two alternative Q&As created during the crisis: Codidact and TopAnswers. In early December, many established members of Writing.SE port to Codidact. The community has been without moderators since early October. A moderator of a different SE community facilitates the migration:

I've imported everything that was in the Writers database as of the 2nd December 2019 (that's when Stack Exchange last released a data dump). [...] You can, as [MC] alluded to, claim the stuff you created on SE here too. [...] When you claim your content, *all* of your content is claimed... (AoC)

Seeking Those in Power. Reaching out to board members or showing up to company headquarters had been considered earlier in the crisis but was deemed too likely to backfire. This time, however, a board member reaches out to members and offers to pass along their concerns. He offers some good words for both sides:

I can say this as a user of the site, and someone who gets a narrow glimpse into how the company works: your words are absolutely heard, and people care deeply about doing the right thing. Addressing complex issues takes time, and I do understand that can be frustrating. [...] I've seen a lot of companies that are dismissive or uncaring about community, and this isn't one, and the fact that so many people are invested in advocating for their vision of the site is the best evidence of that. (AD)

Grieving. Winter Bash draws near as the year ends. Many signal their intention to avoid participating. The Winter Bash announcement inviting members to “celebrate the end of a *great year*...with *HATS!*” (Stack Overflow, 2019) offends members. YE, a Principal Software Engineer who has been increasingly visible on MSE, explains that he reused the content from the previous year because of a lack of resources. He attempts to reassure members that he “(along with many other SO employees) also genuinely care very much about the direction in which this platform is going to go” (YE) and argues that any copy changes would “end up being analyzed for hidden meaning” (YE). A former moderator thanks him for his support and reminds other members that they cannot afford to alienate an ally.

A drawing tool simulating knitting allows members to create images and share them on a thread on MSE. Many members create art related to the crisis and use the opportunity to pay tribute to MC and the LGBT+ community.

A Lack of Closure

On December 23rd, the Director of Public Q&A releases a carefully worded statement announcing that the company has reached a confidential legal agreement with MC. It avoids any admission of wrongdoing and concludes:

In recognition of the mistakes that led us here, we invited [MC] to apply for possible reinstatement on all six sites following our new reinstatement process. [MC] expressed concerns about the new process and has not applied. (SC)

Members want to know what the agreement involves, but neither party is free to comment anymore. MC responds: “I cannot comment. I’ve written previously on meta about removal and reinstatement.” For a brief moment, her avatar includes the “Reinstate Monica” badge that some members had adopted. Whether this was intentional or a mistake, it will soon be replaced with her standard avatar, but not before a member took note: “I notice that your avatar has changed from **Stop harming Monica** to **Reinstate Monica**. Are you calling to be reinstated or will that be removed?” (Wi)

Many members are still asking for MC’s reinstatement, while others point out the irony of granting moderator powers to someone who has threatened to litigate against the company. A few seem angry that she cannot carry their cause anymore. Some users request the resignation of the Director of Public Q&A, but these requests are shut down by moderators. The community has not moved on, and this lack of closure increases users’ misbehaviour, leading to an increase in suspensions.

Some hope MC has settled by choice; some fear she could not pursue a legal battle with a corporation of this size. As promised, MC provides budget details. She has spent 16,582.50 dollars for legal services and donated the remaining 7,996.67 dollars to The Trevor Project, an organization offering advocacy, education, and crisis services for LGBT+ youth.

The controversial initial apology, which held the sad record for the most downvoted post in MSE history, is deleted shortly after the publication of the agreement, along with a few other poorly received company responses. The crowdfunding page is stripped of its details, but not

before a member has archived them elsewhere. The statements to the press remain to this day, along with many crisis-related avatars and screennames.

The drama briefly fades during the holidays. As the New Year rolls out, members struggle to find balance and wonder where they should go from here. A CM posts yearly moderation stats, which members scrutinize to assess the impacts of the crisis. A blog post showcases art from the most recent Winter Bash, but it omits the most upvoted pieces, which relate to the crisis. The top contestants in the Winter Bash use avatars requesting MC's reinstatement. In official leaderboard archives on the company blog, their avatars are replaced.

Firing Community Managers

By mid-January, members learn through Twitter that one of their most experienced CMs is now unemployed. The Director of Community Development's profile is also missing a staff badge and has been updated to indicate he is looking for work. RC was the fifth employee hired by the company, as well as a driving force and esteemed guide behind the creation of most communities of the network, where he "essentially single-handedly moderat[ed] every new site until its public beta stage" (R'T). He had been less visible on MSE and would leave silently.

Members write tributes to celebrate these two pillars of the Community Team, who have been abruptly dismissed and not given time to say goodbye. The touching messages to S9 make it apparent that members had highly valued his guidance and that it would be difficult to imagine the platform without him:

You always operated on a different level than the rest of us. When even moderators were losing sight of the forest for the trees, you'd identify the *real* problem behind the symptoms we were so focused on. Not only that, you'd be able to explain it in a way that made it seem obvious all along. I don't know what we'll do without that kind of perspective. To say you'll be missed is a ridiculous understatement. (BL)

S9 later responds to members in the thread:

No... Thank you. My head's still spinning; nothing lasts forever, but... Sometimes we fool ourselves thinking it might. But one thing I know: I'm deeply, sincerely touched by this thread. I've always considered y'all - the people who make up Stack Overflow - to be my boss, my leader in this job. And... shit... y'all have been the best boss I've ever been privileged to work for. Quick with both praise and constructive criticism, never too busy to talk, knowledgeable on a seemingly infinite variety of topics but never too good to

educate. I've learned a lot from you over the years. Came into this as green as could be, but y'all were patient and understanding. You've taught me what true collaboration is. Thank you for allowing me to serve these past 9 years. Thank you, thank you, thank you. (S9)

“Yet another click of the ratchet” (S9). GS writes a series of tweets analyzing the situation and explains that firing S9 “is the Stack Overflow community equivalent of Steve Jobs getting fired from Apple” (GS). He initiates a crowdfunding campaign to support the former CM. He later explains that he “found out several things, but the relevant one was they were going to give [S9] 8 weeks severance with onerous conditions for 10 years work” (GS).

GS will continue to post his analysis of the situation on Twitter, occasionally reaching out to founders or other stakeholders. Members voice their appreciation for these threads, which also facilitate connecting on the social network. The GoFundMe to support S9 is progressing quickly, with members raising over 11,000 dollars in just four days. A member suspects the company is attempting to buy the former CM’s silence:

I donated because [S9 is] the Stack Overflow insider I trust the most of all, I want him to be free to comment on his time on the inside, and I won’t risk him being forced to sign that freedom away for money. (MA)

On Twitter, S9 will confirm that, for over a year, the company has been dictating CM’s actions and words:

You may think, in expressing your anger, that your words will reach and influence those behind the scenes, those calling the shots, writing the words that MUST, eliding those that MUST NOT. But know that the influence takes only one form: yet another click of the ratchet.

Your anger will be held up as evidence of toxicity. Your frustration as evidence of noncooperation. Just as it has been for so many months past. My dear ex-colleagues will be blamed for failing to control you, and another rock will be laid on their backs.

Please don’t do this to them. They didn’t sign up for it, they do not deserve it. Whatever this thing is that is happening, it has more momentum now than ever before; I do not wish to see it roll over them as it did me. (S9)

On the platform, the CMs manager shares a contrived response to the many members angry about the dismissal:

You all should know that this is very hard for us. This is what I am able to share: As you have seen, today there were some changes on the Community Team. Out of respect for their privacy, we aren't able to comment on any specific current or former employees. We're seeking to align the company so that it can continue growing in 2020 and we continue to be committed in investing in the community and ensuring that it has a seat at the table as we keep moving forward. These changes are a part of that process. (JM)

Members are insulted and baffled at the irony of the response:

I refuse to accept that someone would actually think that firing the people that could hold this community together after all that's happened would be the right move into *investing in the community*. [...] it feels to me that you're no longer interested in working with the community at all, that you're actually trying to dynamite whatever scraps of trust we had in you, and that you're going to get rid of us and see if you can keep the machine rolling after ditching the engineers. Now what I would like you to do is to stop lying to us, and tell us that you want to ditch us ASAP so everyone can move on from this endless tragedy. (DDPG)

Some members feel that leadership is hiding behind CMs and that they “don’t respect meta as the place to come under your own name” (L). Given the recent revelation that CMs are merely messengers, a member proposes that maintaining positive relations with employees who engage constructively with the community and utilize the company’s provided feedback mechanisms may yield better results. However, many members are harsh and hold employees responsible for harming CMs and exploiting members’ free labour.

More Resignations. The dismissals revive moderator resignations and the collaborative editing of a new timeline. Members have little hope left, and there is a renewed push to migrate to Codidact. In his resignation, a Stack Overflow moderator expresses:

These words are very hard for me to write — a decent chunk of my life was made here on Stack Overflow. My programming practices, my career, and a good chunk of my professional knowledge are overwhelmingly thanks to Stack Overflow, and the people who make it up. [...] I no longer believe that there's a good chance that the site and its ideals, for which I had joined all those years ago, can be saved.

I no longer believe that the company’s leadership is playing in good faith towards a common goal with its users, and in hindsight I conclude that it has never played in good

faith since the beginning of these recent events. I no longer believe that we are playing a positive sum game — in fact, I am no longer sure of the expected payoff of many of the players, nor their goals. (MG)

Less than a week after the most recent dismissals, a veteran CM announces his resignation in a farewell post. On his blog, he elaborates that he had decided to resign in the Fall, when it became clear that leadership did not trust its Community Team with community relations and that “their decisions repeatedly violated [his] standards for healthy community management” (JLE). According to him, the company’s structure is incompatible with that of the community, and the organization perceives its community members as an obstacle to change and a liability.

Rescinding the Featured Tag. On Stack Overflow’s main Q&A, moderator resignations are featured by those who remain. Staff remove the featured posts, but moderators take a stand and restore the post to its featured status. GS explains this action is significant because “moderators pride themselves on consensus and working with staff” and “have now made a bright red line” (GS), which could lead to their forced suspensions. The moderators’ defiance forces the company to publish a new policy stating that resignations can only be featured for 24 hours, effectively revoking moderators’ exclusive rights to manage featured posts. The CM’s manager claims that resignation posts have increasingly served “to host combative and hurtful words to attack Stack employees, other mods, and teammates” (JM), which members debate. In response to this new policy, moderators feature other questions related to the crisis.

In a single week, members had lost three of their most experienced and involved CMs in an already understaffed team. Community members, some colleagues and former colleagues acknowledge this hard loss, but company leadership remains silent. A wave of members joins Meta Discord, later followed by some former and current staff members.

“They betrayed us and their own vision” (GS). As members seek explanations for recent events, an interview with Joel Spolsky conducted before the crisis offers new insights. The founder and exiting CEO seeks a more appropriate person to lead Stack Overflow to meet its business goals, which include a ten-fold increase in yearly revenue and bringing the company to a successful IPO. He explains that aligning the interests of founders and venture capitalists who seek accelerated growth and expect companies to take risks is often difficult: “You need to get psychopath Silicon Valley executives who are just in it for themselves and their stock options” (JS).

The interview also reveals that the company makes much more revenue from its enterprise version of the platform than from its public platform. On Twitter, GS provides his analysis of the business' direction:

Joel either made a critical mistake; or a strategic play. [...] The money is in the software, not the community. So the line to walk is to be as non-committal as possible towards the community, and keep them just happy enough not to leave in droves. Even if the 1% that does the work leaves; then it won't matter ad-revenue wise. (GS)

He believes that the days of investing towards the original vision of a programmer knowledge base are over, and with it, the agency that members benefited from through their partnership with the company: "They betrayed us and their own vision" (GS). From now on, changes are driven by business and marketing decisions. He predicts there will be exceptional sales by the end of the year and "a graveyard where the community once stood; with everyone finally giving up the fight" (GS).

As their awareness of the broken social contract grows, members bitterly contemplate how much time they have invested in the platform. Given the mediocre state of moderation on some sites, some members worry about what would happen to their content if their communities were to shut down, and they express an interest in exporting their contributions. On MSE, a moderator reminisces about how employees and members "had the same goals: to make the internet a better place and to collect a library of knowledge on a diverse set of subjects" (t).

Many of these veteran employees have departed, and he explains that the only way forward for members who wish to remain active is to lower their expectations and disregard company directives they disagree with until they get kicked out:

Instead of partners, we are now considered adversaries. [...] We need to think of SO Inc. as the absentee landlord and not as the friendly parent we remember. [...] [M]any of us object to the idea of a company like this one profiting from our work, but that's the way it is: they own the infrastructure. If we don't like that, all we can do is leave. (t)

Seeking a Shared Vision

On January 21st, the CEO unexpectedly introduced himself to Meta Stack Overflow (MSO) for the first time since the beginning of the now four-month-long crisis that had exploded hours before he had joined the company. He shares a blog post expressing his vision for 2020 and asks members where they see the network in five years. Some highlights include that the

company wants to “serve all of the millions of people who use Stack Overflow, not just those who know the most about how the site has worked in the past” (PC). The company wishes to enhance its channels for power users to a more scalable platform than Meta. The CEO shares that they added a Community Team member to leadership, an internal team was formed to improve the relationship with the community, and a diverse moderator council will be created. He advertises the “Through the Loop” survey, stating that their experiments to improve the platform will be shared publicly on the blog, newsletter, and podcast.

Comments and answers are numerous as members pick apart the blog post, point out discrepancies and voice their concerns. In one of the responses, a Stack Overflow moderator empathizes with the CEO and the mess he was left to deal with in his first days. He offers his analysis of the situation from a business point of view, and tells the CEO that he needs to rebuild the community’s trust:

We all have invested much time and energy, for no pay, into us building together a community and material with immeasurable value to society. The company has provided the capital, the strategy, and the tools. But we, the users, provided the content. And we licensed it to you. We are partners, not employees that you can fire at will. We don’t just go away. We want to feel like partners. We want respect. We want patience and consideration. We want to signal our intent and carry through without being shut down or called trolls. We matter. We want to believe we matter to you. (AH)

He offers to meet the CEO in person at company headquarters, and the CEO soon responds positively. For the following days, community members relay their concerns to AH, who will represent them. These include resolving past grievances, better communication, and more transparency. They want the company to be accountable for its commitments. There is a lack of clarity about the company’s mission and its intentions with relicensing its members’ content. Community goals are jeopardized by the declining quality of questions, a lack of investment in tooling, and interference by legal advisors. Members also request reinstating MC and hiring S9 as a consultant.

Meanwhile, MC announces her departure from the network and invites members to follow her to Codidact, which stands out as the most viable alternative built in previous weeks.

Meeting the CEO. On February 4th, AH reports back. He assures members that he felt staff were engaged in discussing issues with him and provides a detailed report from their discussions.

A vision for the company's next era envisions utilizing new processes and focusing on community growth. The legal settlement prevents discussion about the potential reinstatement of MC, the company cannot comment on former employees and ignores members' request of hiring S9 as a consultant. Some responses related to content relicensing, communicating on MSE, and maintaining site quality seem positive, but do not provide a clear action plan.

A note that “[e]mployees [who] put community first will be rewarded” (AH) seems out of touch, given the recent dismissal of CMs. Members wonder if “[t]he community has to be renewed” (AH) refers to the need for a revival or a purge. While they are grateful for their colleague's report, members struggle to find enough substance in the responses to inspire them to trust again:

Unfortunately it seems that they have lived up to the community's low expectations, and met your honesty with a whole lot of nothing. Seriously, there is nothing in their so-called answers that is new, or concrete, or actually helpful in any way, shape or form. We are programmers, we live in the detail, and there is **zero** detail here. (IK)

In an analysis, GS explains how the CEO's statements that the company wants to serve all technical workers add pressure on curators but clarify the company's objectives. He claims that the community's perception of the company's erratic decisions stems from Public Q&A no longer being the core product.

It's Machiavellian because it subverts 11 years of history. [...] Those decisions subvert the expectations of the [Stack Overflow] community over years and years of building the trust and transparency and the operational atmosphere to the Stack Exchange network. (GS)

He outlines different stances held by the community: those who believe the company will respond and return to normal, those who will keep on curating so long as the company does not become an obstacle to their mission, and those who believe “Stack Overflow has become the amoral corporation that many [Silicon Valley] companies are in the pursuit of IPO/acquisition” (GS).

Making the Network Non-Profit. A longtime member suggests that making the network non-profit and semi-independent from the company could be beneficial for all: “Free contributions from usually highly paid professionals come at the price of providing a true sense of community and a trustworthy commitment to a higher goal. **Under the current setup, Stack Overflow is providing neither**” (P). He argues that the company’s focus on profit is alienating members whose participation is driven by the altruistic motives of the original mission. The network could be turned into a non-profit that would serve as a sales funnel to the company’s paid products.

Network-Wide Strike Plans

On February 9th, given the persistent lack of resolution, members start planning for a network-wide strike as an ultimate means to be heard and possibly gain media attention. A former moderator leads coordination efforts on Discord and GitHub and drafts a letter with tangible requests aiming to restore some trust and collaboration around a shared mission. YE commits to delivering the letter to the appropriate stakeholders within the company and asserts that there has been some progress internally.

On Meta Discord, former CMs reveal some of the events happening behind the scenes during the crisis, which helps members understand which obstacles lie in front of them and provides some degree of closure. By mid-February, many former and present staff members have joined the server, and some channels are put under higher expectations of privacy.

Members believe that pausing their activity will result in a gradual degradation of the content, but they are unsure of how strong their impact will be felt. Gaining the support of prominent network actors, Stack Overflow moderators, Stack Overflow Close Vote Reviewers (SOCVR), SOBotics, and Charcoal is deemed essential to make an impact. These instances are invited to meet to discuss and vote on an upcoming network-wide strike set to start on February 24th.

Revising the Featured Tag Policy. On February 10th, staff loosen the recently implemented featured tag restrictions, though CMs still retain the right to override moderators after working with them first. Members learn that staff have collected feedback from moderators in private. While it is not clear what their input was, and if it was included to the moderators’ satisfaction, members wish they had also been included, but are thankful that the moderators were at least consulted. A member edits this information in the policy post to “help ward off

more downvotes" (SAH). Some wonder why staff would not reveal this information, including details about how feedback was implemented, since that would have softened the community's reception. A moderator points out that this reviewed policy "is evidence of the very hard work the CMs are doing to advocate for the community" and that more transparency might backfire when trust is so low: "[i]n the current environment, people are willing to see malice in everything, even when it doesn't exist, and exposing all the steps exposes more surfaces to attack" (BK).

Mobilization. On February 12th, members of SOCVR assemble in their chat room, where staff members are lurking, to vote on their participation in the strike. Members discuss potential outcomes and goals, and the strike is confirmed through an anonymous vote using the chat starboard.

The group of curators wants to avoid being cast as troublemakers by the company. They discuss how to adjust their typical workflow so that non-striking members cannot bypass the strike. However, they aim to keep logs of non-curated content to assess the strike's impact and to facilitate a clean-up, if their demands are heard.

SOBotics and Charcoal hold discussions in private arenas and will also support the strike, along with a few Stack Overflow moderators who have provided early responses.

The 0,015%

On February 17th, a company blog post gives an overview of the current plans to mend the relationship with the community. The radically different tone of communications shows that things are clicking internally and provides members with a glimpse of the internal divide about the use of MSE among staff:

We've got a broad group of folks looking at the problem of how far out of alignment we've become with our meta community. The folks in this group have worked with us for the longest, and many have a long history of working both with and within our meta communities. [...] This project has unearthed a lot of very strong feelings and opinions, both internally and externally. Many in this group have close ties to people in the Meta community and feel strongly that we should be reaching out to them more and making them a bigger part of our decision making. Others have had experiences that cause them to fear the feedback they receive there. Some of them feel like they just can't succeed in

having conversations with our meta community and worry about how they'll get their jobs done. (The Community Team)

The Team also explains that important data on how MSE participation correlates with Q&A activity has been overlooked, which has led them to reassess their approach:

We're close to being done with a plan to move forward and we'll be sharing it with you soon. The key takeaway for now is that we've heard you, and we want to work our way to a place where all of us feel trust and cooperation again. (The Community Team)

Members probe for more details and the Director of Community Strategy explains that they changed they have nuanced their approach: "instead of asking 'Who are the engaged users on meta?' one should probably say 'Who are the engaged caretakers on the main site, and what do they have in common when it comes to meta?'" (TP).

The next day, an engineer on the Community Product team, "the one who had the eureka moment" (TP), provides his analysis. On MSE, YE explains it had been previously established that only 0,015% of users who answer questions on Stack Overflow also participate on MSE. However, even if a minority of members discuss on MSE, members who perform the majority of curation and moderation on Stack Overflow read MSO/MSE. The answer is detailed and contains multiple graphs. Community members receive the update very positively and praise the employee: "[YE] is a treasure to the community. Where the management has dropped the ball hard and fast, he's been trying to bridge the divide" (Mag).

The company's realization that MSE members are more significant than they had initially assessed brings hope for the future, but also rubs salt on the former CM's wounds. S9 explains that "[t]he data was... grease for the gears" (S9) and that "...this insight, this 'eureka' from a month ago... [RC] spent two months trying to convince the team. And they kicked him out the door for it" (S9).

In response to a member complaining that the company's shift in attitude is solely due to MSE members being more significant than initially assessed, S9 confirms the existence of an internal policy stating that "concerns from people with low measurable influence were *not* to get a response" (S9). The member laments the company's similar treatment of its own CMs and the subsequent dramatic loss of institutional knowledge:

My greatest sorrow is that you and [RC] failed as victims of the same algorithm (so it seems)... 10 years of deep knowledge and experience down the drain. This is what will

hurt everyone here the most, for years to come, including the company. There will be avoidable mistakes and reinventing hot water for nothing. (RIF)

Hope. On February 19th, five days before the planned network-wide strike, a new Chief Product and Technology Officer, reporting directly to the CEO, posts a response to the first open letter on MSE titled “The company’s commitment to rebuilding the relationship with you, our community”. She is newly employed, but is up to date on recent history, and her wording seems sincere. Although she offers no repair for past actions, she provides a fresh start, to which the community responds well overall.

I want to start by establishing transparency with the community, and I know that transparency is an easy word to say but harder to define and put into action. I believe that transparency comes down to two core actions: **expectation management** and **context setting**. We (the Community, Product and Engineering teams) will endeavor to clarify and reset when necessary what you can expect from the company. We will also provide as much context as we can for policy, decisions, and actions that we take within legal and regulatory constraints - we want you to understand *why* we’re making changes, not just *that* we’re making them. (TD)

In a Twitter thread, GS provides his analysis of the post and explains that the terms context management and expectation setting “are fancy words that basically mean: ‘There’s a plan, you may not like it, but I hope to share the what and why gently enough that you won’t get pissed’” (GS).

Members appreciate that the CPTO provides a schedule for upcoming actions. However, they remember how the CTO’s apology failed and are cautious:

[Y]ou don’t *eliminate* three good people and then turn around and ask everyone else ‘ok now that that’s over with, how do we rebuild trust’. the fact that you can and will destroy people you don’t like is basically the least trustful property you can have. the fact of the matter is, you will destroy people who get in your way. (DC)

TD responds to some early comments and invites LGBT+ members, who feel their concerns have just been pushed further from view, to be part of a conversation to understand their concerns better. A member asking about whether the mission is still building a knowledge library or “rather one on one teaching” (Tr) will not receive a response.

Many raise concerns around the CM's lack of autonomy and influence internally: "Trust the people who've been working hard to hold the community together and listen to them. They'll have an idea of what to do *if* they can speak freely and without fear" (JMG).

Former CMs express to community members that they hope the CTPO will have the required influence "to push back against legal, and restore enough autonomy to the CMs that they are once again empowered to develop processes that serve the people" (S9).

This event marks a decrease in protesting, and the strike is called off. Members look back on the crisis but have not necessarily moved on and struggle with the lack of transparency they have experienced.

So maybe, just maybe, somehow 'we' survived, and SE Inc. survived, too. And that experience alone (and the will to learn from it) is an essential outcome here. [...] [TD] set a very positive tune, now the next weeks and months have to show that SE Inc. is willing to follow up their bold claims. For me, it is mostly about transparency. Tell us what you intend to do, and why. And then be open for feedback. [...] Of course, it is on us to hold them accountable. They promised, now they better deliver. If not, then it is really time for the final step and walk out. (GC)

Where We Stand

As the crisis precariously settles and members seek some transparency to understand the past months better, former CMs write about the events to process their grief and provide members with some closure because "I don't want to keep writing about this, but it hurts the people who least deserve it when the truth is hidden" (JLE).

For the past 4 months, I've been waking up most days between 3-5am, my heart pounding through my chest. My actions contributed to events that hurt people; even asleep I can't stop searching for what I could have done differently. (S9)

The following section attempts to reconstruct some chronology of events behind the scenes, mostly from what former CMs wrote in various blog posts, Twitter threads, and chat replies related to the crisis.

Decreasing Agency. CMs had never had much authority within the company. However, they were trusted to handle user conflicts and communicated regularly with the founders. As the company grew, so did communication silos. The Community Team (CT) became isolated from company executives and faced complaints from other teams about blocking projects and

incurring costs: “When I started it was shocking how much agency CMs had. I regularly mentioned it in internal surveys as a reason I loved the job. Losing that because we didn’t play internal politics was equally shocking” (JLE).

At a company meetup in 2015, the CT was faced with the realization that “the company saw community trust as an untapped resource for generating income” (JLE) and that “both employee and community health came after profit” (S9). Given the recent crisis, S9 expressed regret for shielding members. At the time, the company focused on growing its business, but the approach would fail and result in a wave of layoffs.

A year before MC’s controversial dismissal, LGBT+ moderators had contacted staff by email to voice their concerns about incidents in private moderator spaces. The CT was understaffed and could not consistently monitor the room. They offered delayed and evasive responses with each renewed incident. Management eventually committed to providing diversity and inclusion training and guidance to update the CoC, but would not follow through despite repeated requests.

Months passed, and frustrations increased. In early 2019, employees expressed various ethical concerns in an open letter to management: “the company was very clearly abandoning its principles, and no matter who you were or what you were vulnerable to, expecting the company to have your back vs throw you under the bus wouldve been unbelievably naive” (S9).

While the company provided the team with much-needed resources, its leaders also wanted to control a community they did not fully understand. CMs were requested to decrease their interactions on MSE, where members had been labelled as ‘toxic’ but were again able to monitor moderator spaces.

The Incident. In the TL, a CM identified a conflict but was told to disengage from attempts at reconciliation as leadership stepped in to address the conflict. In the TL, a director aggressively communicated an ambiguous policy and logged off. Moderators requested clarifications, but CMs had no answers to provide and were left to deal with the confusion. As the conflict escalated and the room lacked adequate moderation tools, CMs instructed moderators to email their questions and subsequently closed the room for the weekend. This angered many and led a moderator to resign in protest, accusing staff of their inaction against transphobia:

They place us in positions where we must defend our right to be here, and then silence our ability to do so when we are too loud; when we are inconvenient. They say it is exhausting, that they need rest. Only the privileged party can rest. Only the privileged party can elect to pretend, for a while, that we do not exist. And when moratoria are placed on speaking of our transness among moderators, only the cisgender among us are relieved. (A)

Making an Example. Later, faced with the task of responding to multiple emails from moderators, a CM asked management for guidance:

...And then all hell broke loose. Unwilling to review over a year's worth of history, management opted to pick a name and make an example, perhaps thinking that a sufficiently 'strong' response would suffice to compensate for months of apathy. It did not. (S9)

Management ignored the CMs' recommendations and deceived one of them, less familiar with the conflict, into urgently removing MC's access privileges. The dismissal was then prominently announced in the TL, disregarding long-held privacy norms. While moderators resigned in protest, CMs were not informed of how the company would respond:

I pleaded with many people up and down the chain of command who ought to have had authority to step in. None were willing *and* able to do so. Both moderators and CMs were kept in the dark. While we were scrabbling for information and guidance, our leaders were talking to *The Register*. (JLE)

A request for comment from a journalist prompted a few departments to convene an emergency meeting to write a statement. The statement was provided to the CMs for fact-checking, but they were soon informed it had already been sent out.

After MC had been slandered in the press, S9 wrote a formal process to ensure staff would respect the long-held principle of "admonish in private, praise in public" (S9). This process later morphed into processes for moderator removal and moderator reinstatement.

Meanwhile, tensions were further exacerbated by the controversial apology published by the Director of Public Q&A. A moderator had provided an example of a more appropriate apology, which members much better received, but he had been brushed off. A board member would soon, however, reach out to him privately for advice.

As moderators were drafting the open letters, company leadership felt driven to act. Just before the letters were published, the CTO posted a well-received apology. However, contrary to what the CTO had suggested, the company did not intend to have a conversation with MC, and members would soon realize they had been deceived.

The moderator would later explain a board member had reached out privately for advice: “By telling Stack Overflow the words to say, but by not being able to have them ‘follow through’, I had just caused the community to get a false hope, and the company and community worse pain later” (GS).

A Lack of Guidance. The CoC rollout was rushed and suffered from the previous lack of guidance. The company seemed to be engaged in “social justice theater” (JLE). While the CTO and the Director of Public Q&A celebrated the new CoC on Twitter, LGBT+ members were left to defend themselves on the platform.

JLE explains that the network draws much value from community members who are under-represented on Stack Overflow, but that he “was repeatedly told that Stack Exchange sites cost too much and that interacting with the moderators of those sites was a waste of time” (JLE). He believes leadership’s actions were driven by a desire for profit and a fear of how the community is perceived.

An internal blameless post-mortem eventually allowed CMs to understand better what had happened. However, they were forbidden to discuss events and correct misconceptions held by community members. This secrecy ensured that those responsible could not be held accountable, but the ongoing speculation harmed all parties involved.

Black Boxing Processes. While moderator processes were elaborated, management interfered and ignored the CMs’ warnings that overly complex processes would raise suspicions: “[O]ur goal was to design processes that led to effective communication, while management’s goal was processes that ensured [MC] would not be allowed back as a moderator” (S9).

Once the processes were published, the CMs were told by their legal team and executives that MC “could not be allowed back as a moderator under any circumstances” (S9). This contradicted what CMs had told MC and community members. Before MC had even threatened to take legal action, their “efforts were doomed from the start by bad faith, and the public reaction to the processes reflected this” (S9).

“The last not ugly solution” (S9). While the community often blamed the Director of Public Q&A for the whole debacle, the crisis was exacerbated by interference and internal politics from marketing and legal teams, and “there were plenty of other folks with more history, more knowledge of the situation, and more positional power who either actively led the company down its disastrous path or stood by quietly when they could have spoken up” (S9).

The reconciliation involving an LGBT+ moderator and MC provided an opportunity for the company to do the same: “I was overjoyed when I read it. Here was a way for everyone to save face! But leadership never acknowledged it. The members of our community showed us the path forward and the company ignored it. I was heartbroken.” (JLE).

The same day, the firm’s legal advisor barred CMs from discussing the events with the community.

Dismissing MSE. MSE is a challenging space in which to participate, especially for staff, and internal debates around its use had been taking place for months. The former CM behind its inception, many years ago, explains that **“Meta users are difficult to deal with because they have fully bought into Stack Exchange [...] and are passionate about the project of bringing knowledge to the masses”** (JLE).

JLE believes the company preferred to dismiss the MSE community as toxic because fixing the culture would require too much effort. While he admits that MSE has not scaled well, he worries that MSE could be deprecated without having a suitable replacement for it. He explains that the “Through the Loop” survey was expedited, which led to feedback from various company experts to be ignored: “[t]he result was a flawed survey. Not only did it publicly display embarrassing oversights, the data collected was largely useless” (JLE).

Pride and Shame. Announcing retroactive rewards for question askers was not intended to hide that staff were removing links to MC’s GoFundMe campaign, like some members believed. After much wasted resources, the non-disclosure agreement prevented MC from telling her story and ensured the company could avoid discussing the topic with remaining members. The community would still be paying the price months later.

When S9 was fired, the company was two days away from announcing that staff were forbidden to interact on MSE without explicit permission. Public communications and development planning were to be directed by staff unfamiliar with the site and without incentive to learn. S9 suspects that there was already a push to make the CMs ineffective, likely so that

those who cared would quit, and that members' uprising following January's incidents might have changed the minds of staff and even ensured a CM team remained.

JLE had contemplated resigning in protest much earlier, but feared his skills would not be in demand. As he found a position as a CM for a different organization, he felt empowered:

The contrast between the company that had been all about community from the beginning and the company that suddenly found itself with a business unit that had a community component was stark. One seemed to have no interest in my experience and the other was eager to learn from me. (JLE)

Looking back, it seems like much of the crisis could have been averted if leadership had heeded its CMs' advice:

Consider a situation where you wanted to help a group of people on your site... The problems they face are rooted in a mixture of ignorance held by others and competition for limited resources. ...but you aren't allowed to provide solutions to either of those. (S9)

The only paths are to admit the problem cannot be solved, or to directly attack the majority, implicitly pitting them against the group you wanted to help. And you choose poorly... As does everyone else. Over, and over again. Results becomes indistinguishable from malice. (S9)

The company and its executives protected themselves by keeping events obscured, despite the harm caused to its community members. As they faced the consequences of their poor choices, they struggled to own their mistakes. The company seemed "incapable of letting go of the hubris that was destroying [it] from within" (S9).

JLE believes that some colleagues who have broken his trust "were acting out of what they thought was their duty rather than malice" (JLE) and "constrained by forces unseen which [he] can only guess at" (JLE). He wishes the people responsible would be made accountable to the community, in a way that would bring reconciliation, rather than retribution.

The former CMs still held much influence and would play an important role in helping members navigate the following months by providing advice and historical context during critical moments.

Exodus

Calling off the strike marked the end of the protests, but there is no marked capitulation from either side. On MSO, community promotion ads include ads for two alternatives built in response to the crisis. Both platforms are open source and committed to being registered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). The most popular community ad, by far, points members to Codidact, where MC stands as a leading figure. The alternative aims to provide a framework for communities to adapt to their needs. A tool allows new members to import their contributions from Stack Exchange.

Reconnecting with MSE

In the following *The Loop* blog post, the Director of Public Q&A explains that when she joined the company a year before, she had to decide how much effort would be deployed on MSE. Considering the data showed only 200–300 users were engaged on MSE and the friction employees would experience when interacting there, she told employees to pull back.

[O]nce you view people as numbers on paper, making decisions that affect large groups gets much easier. However, when you do that, it's easy to lose perspective and underestimate the impact individuals and smaller groups can have on the whole. [...] There were a bunch of people internally that thought this was a bad decision, and that we were abandoning some of our most valued community members. [...] In hindsight, it would have been preferable to reach consensus through more research earlier, given that many people in the company (and community) care deeply about these issues, it was a discussion that was front of mind. (SC)

Survey results from *The Loop* are discreetly published in the text of the March 2020 publication, and the survey will not be used again. The responses stand apart from typical site satisfaction surveys aimed at larger audiences and consist mainly of “negative feedback about Stack Overflow company/leadership, concerns around issues happening in the community, and lastly, general community concerns” (SC).

Sharing the post on MSE, YE expresses:

The goal here is to be more open (and vulnerable) than we have been in the past relating to a tough subject, and in so doing try to move forward together. That said, we know that this is a painful subject for many, and we realize that [SC]’s post here does not talk about every aspect of things that happened and every way that folks were affected. (YE)

Although the Director of Public Q&A accepts some responsibility for the communication breakdown with MSE during the crisis, many remain dissatisfied.

So why is it, and *how* is it that decisions about *the community* were made ignoring the advice of the *Community Managers* — the people hired to deal specifically with these people and who know how the sites function on a practical level? Do they have no voice within the company? (M)

The same day, the CTO resigns.

Easing Tensions, Increased Responses and Transparency

The rest of the year involves a slow return to some calm. Some members' priorities change as the world is also fighting a pandemic. Many processes and policies will become much more formalized. The massive loss of trust and institutional knowledge makes rebuilding difficult, and former CMs will often chime in on the platform with their insight and perspective. The Director of Public Q&A starts having some cautious interactions with community members again.

As part of their commitment to engage with MSE, the Community Team sets out to respond to half of the communities' escalated concerns, bugs, and requests for support and features. While this is a vast improvement from completely ignoring members, a former CM deems that it is still not sufficient to engage with the community, ignoring many issues that could impact quality.

The Loop is published monthly on the blog, along with quarterly roadmaps of changes. These posts help to re-establish some transparency on what the company is planning.

New Processes and Policies. In early April, the company sends a survey to moderators who have departed in the past months. The first pro-tempore moderator council of 11 moderators is established later that month. For the next six months, they will define the role of the future moderator council and serve as advisors for policymaking.

A new moderator agreement is unveiled. It has been revised multiple times internally and by moderators and seems appropriate given how much the company has grown. For the first time, the agreement spells out that moderators will not be punished when they speak out publicly about policies, so long as they follow the CoC. While there are still some adverse reactions, it seems to be a vast improvement from its first draft which was reportedly so inadequate, that “[i]t seemed almost *engineered* to force a good chunk of the rest of the moderators to quit” and could

have “put moderators in a position of violating contracts they’d signed with their actual employers” (S9).

Updates on the moderator review and reinstatement processes implemented during the crisis are published. Members receive these new processes poorly:

Given that SE last year royally screwed this up and ignored their own rules, *making better rules* seems like a joke. Your problem cannot be solved by new rules. Your problem could have been solved by actually apologizing and meaning it. So please don’t insult us with a marginally better process of handling people you screwed over in the first place. (nv)

While the moderator council is included in the processes, some believe it doesn’t hold enough power and that the council is “at best a very optimistically scoped institution” (Mag). A member of the council explains: “We have every desire to keep the company from shooting itself in the foot, but if they insist, there’s little we can do” (JMG).

Members are still advocating for a proper review of MC’s dismissal. A MSE moderator explains that he would like to get MC to appeal and reach a resolution, because “[t]here’s active, ongoing damage to the community - and nearly every decision gets second guessed cause ‘what about [MC]’” (JMG). YE explains that MC is still invited to apply for reinstatement through this new process, but members emphasize that it should not be necessary and that “stuffing someone into a brand new process, created after the old one was ignored, has shades of bureaucracy designed to avoid accountability” (fb). Another member attempts to sum up the collective sentiment: “[i]t’s that we’re at a point where the absolute rule of SE the company is no longer accepted, and people want rights and protections against their overreach” (Mag).

Many legal agreements and policies will be updated. A new policy lock is introduced for MSE. Locked policies are marked as official and can only be edited by staff to ensure the integrity of the wording.

By the end of the year, a requirement is added that moderators must be 18 years or older. This is met with some resistance, given that “[s]ome of the most active and influential moderators on the network started under 18; [...] three of whom are on the moderator council” (M). Some members are wary that lawyers are dictating platform rules again. A CM explains that “parts of the company were unaware that we allowed minors to be moderators, so there was an

assumption that we had a policy when we did not" (Cat). Moderators under 18 years old are asked to reach out and are assured that they will be reinstated when they are of age.

Members' concerns about licensing content, an important issue for which they had expected responses for months, will soon be satisfactorily resolved. YE will further explain the license "was updated as part of a process that was not led by the Community Team and there was no public announcement at [that] time due to an internal disconnect at the time of the release" (YE).

Layoffs and Reinvesting. In May 2020, 15% of staff are laid off or furloughed. Only five CMs remain part of the already previously understaffed Community Team, and they have a large backlog of escalations to handle. A month later, the company raises 85,000,000 dollars in venture capital. It will take some time before Community Team positions open again and all escalations are resolved.

YE will take on additional responsibilities as a community advocate and initiate various community projects. One of them is the first Community-a-thon, an event meant for staff to get better acquainted with the platform. A former CM claims that "not so long ago, suggestions that employees *should* participate on the sites which represent their employer's most well-known creation were met with derision and overt hostility; therefore, seeing this done *at all* is a large step forward" (S9).

Results show an increase in staff visits, engagement, and participation. A response to a member who still perceives these numbers as low reveals that "a very good portion of the company is involved in Sales and Operations" (YE).

The company restarts efforts in developing public platform features and sometimes provide opportunities for members to give feedback on what is under review or development. Development is focused mainly on Stack Overflow, the flagship community, sometimes with mixed results.

Hot Meta Posts are re-enabled following members' request for a re-evaluation. The initial disabling was intended to decrease controversy, but had the opposite effect; members observed a decrease in constructive Meta engagement. Controls are added so that posts' visibility can be limited by moderators or staff, if needed.

Mission Clarity. While the company becomes more vocal about supporting its community, members would like clarity about how it intends to evolve. A new company mission

statement, “[h]elping write the script of the future by serving developers and technical workers,” brings little clarification. Efforts often seem centred around growing the user base without regard for better onboarding. Communications usually revolve around Stack Overflow, neglecting the larger network of communities.

The biggest fear is that Stack Overflow is going to turn into a site/service in which everyone gets to ask a question, and all of the stuff about quality that we've been trying to tell people about and trying to share gets to be thrown out the window for the sake of - wait for it - **more users**. I'm not opposed to more users in the slightest, but I'm going to reject any kind of philosophy that turns my volunteer role into a tutoring or mentoring role without being able to set my own rate per hour so that I can bill for my time. [...] Given the right guidance and support system the site can stand on its own two feet. Given the *wrong* guidance and it'll turn into the thing that it was originally brought in this world to defeat: **forums**. (Mak)

Responding to the LGBT+ Community. In a resignation notice, a moderator looks back on events and the Lavender community's situation:

Stack Exchange staff finally introduced explicit protection against misgendering into the Code of Conduct, and although I don't like the circumstances around how those rules arrived, we have them and that's valuable. [...] We lost many good moderators last year, but we also saw some vocally transphobic ones leave. [...] Our moderator community is becoming more accepting and supportive, and I believe they're beginning to understand the serious human cost of transphobia and misgendering. (dg)

In one of her most polarizing interactions with community members, the CPTO finally responds to the Lavender letter, a year after its publication. In her response, she attempts to apologize for the company's inaction and its actions. She clarifies that discussing “the legitimacy of someone's race, gender, sexual orientation or religion” (TD), or the use of someone's pronouns, is also against the CoC.

The company announces support for moderators by providing diversity and inclusion training and new moderation tools for the TL. There are complaints that the training is not made available to members, with some members pointing out that it will be challenging to educate members without starting conversations that could lead to alienating LGBT+ members.

The CPTO also explains that a new procedure will make it more difficult for CMs to dismiss CoC violations investigation requests. S9 deems that the new procedure is insufficient to prevent what happened the year before:

[V]ery few people actually know what happened a year ago, what led up to it, or where the underlying problems lay. Even among those affected, visibility into the totality of the situation was severely limited; you weren't here at all, so expecting you to understand much less be equipped to prevent a repetition may be asking too much. [...] So let's set the record straight... [...] CMs didn't bury the complaints last year; your management team did, then flipped out and tried to pin blame on the CMs when nagged to respond. It appears they're still doing the same thing. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and that link was - and apparently remains - right in the middle of your chain. When the folks on the ground ask for help and get, instead, stricter rules... They're eventually going to learn not to bother asking for help... Or offering it. (S9)

The CPTO's last clarification touches a sore spot for many:

We have heard complaints about alleged Code of Conduct violations from 2019 and earlier where the public perception is that a thorough investigation was not carried out, or that the user may not have received a sufficient warning (or other consequence). As we said above, we are unable to comment on the specifics of any case. And while we understand and empathize with the pain involved in these issues, we are not going to reopen old cases at this time. We are optimistic that these types of events will not recur. That said, an investigation into a new Code of Conduct violation will also include an evaluation of any previous issues whether or not the user was officially warned, and these can influence the result of the investigation. (TD)

A former moderator strongly suggests that the CPTO initiate a discussion with MC. They explain that MC was treated disgracefully and that “[t]here are still people prejudiced against LGBTQ+ users because of a perception that LGBTQ+ users caused [MC] to be removed as a moderator” (M). They argue that a lack of a proper resolution with MC and the company’s refusal to review former violations by moderators hampers progress to provide a safe space for all.

While some members express their gratitude for TD’s follow-up, many LGBT+ members have expressed how difficult the crisis has been for them, and many will leave.

You have lost my faith a year ago and I have since stopped believing that you will be able to do what you promise. I deeply hope that I am wrong. That you are not just empty words and shiny sparkles. So I will sit here and wait and see, hoping for the best but not expecting anything at all. [...] It has been almost a year and I believe that a lot of people here are still deeply hurt. I know I still am. But I hope and believe that, today, a little of this hurt will go away. (BF)

Looking Back

Probed by the former CM S9, members look back on the past year. Many seem to agree that the most significant change was the company's realization of the disconnect with its core members and its attempts to mend it publicly.

We have a foundation for something better - but I am still uncertain to whether that's a foundation of sand or stone we are building on. In between then and now, SE's occasionally made a few community-hostile decisions - but on the whole, I'm not constantly resolving some monumental, fresh mess up. (JMG)

YE attempts to reassure members that leadership is now much more attuned with its Community Team.

By the end of 2020, after a few posts attracting divisive votes on MSE, the CEO fades from view without fulfilling his earlier commitment to post quarterly posts to MSE. He keeps posting on *The Overflow*, the company blog.

Apathy

In 2021, posts from *The Loop* become less frequent, published quarterly. Roadmaps are still shared, but they attract significantly fewer viewers. The moderator council struggles to find its purpose and fizzles after a few months. The CT is severely understaffed. While the company has continues to invest in their paid products and Stack Overflow, community members' requests and the larger network are neglected:

What I've observed from the sides is that the improvements the community has been asking for have been moving too slowly compared to the gains that the corporate product has been. I get it, the lights need to stay on, but it does feel like those lights shine just a bit brighter. (Mak)

After a year-long pause, many elections are held, and some face challenges in attracting and retaining nominees. Numerous Q&As currently in beta status are graduated, with fewer

privileges compared to past graduated sites. The future of Area51, the community-driven process for birthing new communities, is under review and remains unclear.

I think it's worth noting that the SO business model has now swung back to roughly what it was in 2009, [...] hosted Q&A. That stands in contrast to the model that motivated the creation of SE 2.0 (and Area 51), which was roughly 'build prestige sites that can double as portfolios for their membership'. (S9)

Codidact. While Codidact has grown and has received the support of former CMs, attracting community members has been a problem: “If you build it, they will come” is a nice sentiment, but it doesn’t work in reality: perhaps with a niche product it might, but when the market area has big players already, it’s much more difficult” (AoC). On her blog, MC explains that communities tend to fragment since “[p]eople reach their breaking points, when they’re ready to abandon sunk costs and overcome inertia, at different times” (MC).

The company adds restrictions on community promotion ads, historically defined by community members, to avoid advertising competitors.

Post-Prosus. By the middle of the year, a prominent EdTech investor, Prosus, buys the company, its private products, and the public platform for 1,800,000,000 dollars. Staff reassure members that the company will keep operating independently in the meantime.

A former CM warns members that the relationship with the new owner could “easily become more parasitic than symbiotic” (S9). He links to an early blog post published by Jeff Atwood, where the platform co-founder explains that “[t]here should always be a healthy, reciprocal relationship between you and any websites you’re contributing to” (JA).

[T]he site is now a Product. That's not a euphemism; someone bought it, it's a product, they bought it for a purpose and [t]he Product will serve its buyer's purpose. The site we saw spring into being 13 years ago, whose first and primary purpose was to facilitate communication between programmers... That's not what this is anymore. It might continue to serve that role - I sure hope so! - but that is officially, definitively not its defining reason for existence. (S9)

Collectives™ are launched on Stack Overflow. There, customer organizations can sponsor subcommunities and have their own space. While some welcome it, many express their frustration that community members were not consulted first.

The Director of Public Q&A leaves discreetly, and her role is upgraded to one that will get more executive-level visibility, a VP of Community. Some of the remaining CMs explain that “as rough as her beginnings were, she chose to listen, learn and grow and devote her energy to supporting us” (Cat) and that the person they have “come to work with internally is not the picture that is publicly painted from 2019” (CeM). The year will finish with a CT well over double the size it had started, including staff hired within the ranks of the community.

By 2022, posts and roadmaps from *The Loop* will be silently retired. Multiple employees will depart, some having benefited from the acquisition. Few of those publicly involved in the crisis remain.

Appendix B

Source	Link
Anil Dash Blog	https://anildash.com/2011/07/20/if_your_websites_full_of_assholes_its_your_fault-2
Cause a Scene Podcast	https://hashtagcauseascene.com/podcast/sara-chipps
Change.org Petition	https://www.change.org/p/stack-exchange-inc-call-for-a-formal-response-from-stack-exchange-inc-regarding-moderator-resignations
Coding Horror Blog	http://blog.codinghorror.com/farewell-stack-exchange
Coding Horror Blog	http://blog.codinghorror.com/introducing-stackoverflow-com
Coding Horror Blog	http://blog.codinghorror.com/are-you-a-digital-sharecropper
Coding Horror Blog	https://blog.codinghorror.com/stack-overflow-none-of-us-is-as-dumb-as-all-of-us
Dear Stack Exchange Lavender Letter	https://dearstack.artofcode.co.uk/lavender
Dear Stack Exchange Open Letter	https://dearstack.artofcode.co.uk
Forbes	https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrickcai/2020/07/28/stack-overflow-qa-website-raises-85-million-series-e
George Stocker Blog	https://georgestocker.com/2020/01/14/the-software-community-that-josh-heyer-built
George Stocker Blog	https://georgestocker.com/2020/01/15/support-and-thank-josh-heyer-for-his-work-building-stack-overflow
George Stocker Blog	https://georgestocker.com/2020/06/29/community-management-with-josh-heyer-and-jon-ericson
GitHub - Codidact	https://github.com/codidact
GitHub - rschrieken	https://gist.github.com/rschrieken/6821e30357d00422217049514547d555
GitHub - Superplane39	https://gist.github.com/superplane39/8139b4f60d946c7511c3f6f31ecd51a0
GitHub - Superplane39	https://gist.github.com/superplane39/ec64f99c8ed413ec75da4e61b666bf1b
Glassdoor Review	https://www.glassdoor.ca/Reviews/Employee-Review-Stack-Overflow-RVW34327310.htm
Glassdoor Review	https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Employee-Review-Stack-Overflow-E504626-RVW31603574.htm
Glassdoor Review	https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Employee-Review-Stack-Overflow-RVW31603574.htm
GoFundMe Campaign	https://www.gofundme.com/f/stack-exchange-relicensing
GoFundMe Campaign	https://www.gofundme.com/f/stop-stack-overflow-from-defaming-its-users
GoFundMe Campaign	https://www.gofundme.com/f/thanking-josh-heyer-for-shaping-stack-overflow
Hacker News	https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=21113344
Hacker News	https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=21118780
Hacker News	https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=23111523
Joel on Software Blog	https://www.joelonsoftware.com/2008/09/15/stack-overflow-launches
Joel on Software Blog	https://www.joelonsoftware.com/2010/02/14/raising-money-for-stackoverflow
Joel on Software Blog	https://www.joelonsoftware.com/2019/03/28/the-next-ceo-of-stack-overflow

Source	Link
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Meta Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/340512/this-star-on-the-warm-welcome-hat-looks-like-a-communist-symbol
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Meta Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/340868/why-are-there-a-lot-of-users-with-reinstate-monica-in-the-username
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Meta Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/340906/update-an-agreement-with-monica-cellio

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Meta Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/341005/why-was-an-update-to-our-community-and-an-apology-deleted
Meta Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/341022/checking-in-with-moderators-that-suspended-their-activity
Meta Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/341110/who-is-monica-cellio
Meta Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/341268/has-there-been-an-increase-in-suspensions-on-mse-lately
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Meta Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/79435/what-is-stack-overflows-business-model
Meta Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/9953/could-we-please-be-a-bit-nicer-to-new-users
Meta Stack Exchange Chat room	https://chat.meta.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/721/wizards-den
Meta Stack Exchange Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/transcript/99270/network-notification-room
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Reddit r/programming	https://www.reddit.com/r/programming/comments/dba98t/a_large_number_of_stack_exchange_mods_resigning
Reddit r/stackoverflow	https://www.reddit.com/r/stackoverflow/comments/ds29s2/weve_got_a_whistleblowing_moderator_folks_this
Reddit user TrashyPandaReader	https://www.reddit.com/user/TrashyPandaReader
Rentry link	https://rentry.co/44bxc
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SE Academia Q&A Meta	https://academia.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/4617/in-support-of-academias-moderator-on-hiatus-eykanal
SE Academia Q&A Meta	https://academia.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/4622/a-request-for-se-employees-and-cms
SE Academia Q&A Meta	https://academia.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/4630/resuming-activity
SE Academia Q&A Meta	https://academia.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/4645/resigning-and-leaving-se
SE Anime and Manga Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/6697/maid-cafe-
SE Arqade Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/35/the-bridge
SE Arqade Q&A Meta	https://gaming.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/13348/the-time-has-come-the-walrus-said-to-talk-of-many-things

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SE Ask Ubuntu Q&A Meta	https://meta.askubuntu.com/questions/18829/its-time-for-me-to-go
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SE Astronomy Q&A Meta	https://astronomy.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/557/returning-to-moderation
SE Biblical Hermeneutics Q&A Meta	https://hermeneutics.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3621/im-sorry-but-i-must-resign-as-moderator
SE Bioinformatics Q&A Meta	https://bioinformatics.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/256/2021-potential-moderator-election-community-interest-check
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SE Christianity Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1167/the-upper-room
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SE Christianity Q&A Meta	https://christianity.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/6717/resigning-as-moderator
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SE Code Golf Q&A Meta	https://codegolf.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/18133/im-stepping-down
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SE Dev Ops Q&A Meta	https://devops.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/308/time-to-step-down-and-let-this-be
SE E-books Q&A Meta	https://ebooks.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/295/why-i-resigned-as-a-moderator

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SE Emacs Q&A Meta	https://emacs.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/555/i-am-resigning-as-a-moderator
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SE Expatriates Q&A Meta	https://expatriates.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/392/stack-exchange-support-of-the-community
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SE French Language Q&A Meta	https://french.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/752/d%C3%A9mission-de-mon-poste-de-mod%C3%A9rateur
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SE Information Security Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/151/the-dmz
SE Internet of Things Q&A Meta	https://iot.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/390/goodbye-world-resignation-notice
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SE Interpersonal Relationships Q&A Meta	https://interpersonal.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2838/apologies-and-parting-notes
SE Interpersonal Relationships Q&A Meta	https://interpersonal.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3330/what-caused-this-site-to-be-excluded-from-hot-network-questions
SE Interpersonal Relationships Q&A Meta	https://interpersonal.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3336/does-ips-want-to-be-back-on-hnq
SE Interpersonal Relationships Q&A Meta	https://interpersonal.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3477/what-happened-in-october-2018
SE Interpersonal Relationships Q&A Meta	https://interpersonal.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3642/lets-go-back-to-hnq
SE Interpersonal Relationships Q&A Meta	https://interpersonal.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3830/why-are-questions-that-involve-langauge-being-shut-down
SE Interpersonal Relationships Q&A Meta	https://interpersonal.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3832/lets-team-up-work-together-moderate-together
SE Interpersonal Relationships Q&A Meta	https://interpersonal.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3840/a-taste-of-moderation
SE Interpersonal Relationships Q&A Meta	https://interpersonal.stackexchange.com/questions/23031/seeking-clarification-on-the-use-of-they-them-their-as-a-personal-gender-prono
SE Interpersonal Skills Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/61165/the-awkward-silence
SE Italian Q&A Meta	https://italian.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/1405/has-the-recent-mess-on-se-anything-to-do-with-our-site
SE Judaism Q&A Meta	https://judaism.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/5193/stack-overflow-inc-sinat-chinam-and-the-goat-for-azazel/
SE Judaism Q&A Meta	https://judaism.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/5277/in-sadness-it-is-time-for-me-to-go
SE Judaism Q&A Meta	https://judaism.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/5325/should-we-try-out-another-platform
SE Language Learning Q&A Meta	https://languagelearning.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/662/i-will-be-going-inactive-as-a-moderator
SE Language Learning Q&A Meta	https://languagelearning.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/669/goodbye-friends

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SE LaTex Q&A Meta	https://tex.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/8048/community-promotion-ads-2019
SE LaTex Q&A Meta	https://tex.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/8492/community-promotion-ads-2020
SE LaTex Q&A Meta	https://tex.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/8792/community-ads-for-2021
SE Latin Q&A Meta	https://latin.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/421/resigning-as-moderator
SE Latin Q&A Meta	https://latin.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/423/acta-diurna-latin-site-code-of-conduct-and-stack-exchange
SE Law Q&A Meta	https://law.stackexchange.com/questions/45296/legality-of-creating-a-se-replica-using-ses-content
SE Law Q&A Meta	https://law.stackexchange.com/questions/45952/what-is-the-recourse-for-defamation
SE Law Q&A Meta	https://law.stackexchange.com/questions/46492/can-a-website-incur-liability-for-linking-to-a-funding-campaign-for-a-lawsuit-ag
SE Linguistics Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1336/lgwstks
SE Literature Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1037/the-reading-room
SE Literature Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/58064/miths-desk
SE Literature Q&A Meta	https://literature.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/1195/resignation-notice
SE Literature Q&A Meta	https://literature.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/1200/i-no-longer-feel-safe-moderating-this-site
SE Literature Q&A Meta	https://literature.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/1594/picking-up-my-diamond-once-again
SE MathOverflow Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/10243/mo-editors-lounge
SE MathOverflow Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/9369/mathoverflow
SE Mi Yodeya Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/468/vdibarta-bam
SE Money Q&A Meta	https://money.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2774/goodbye-pfmso
SE Money Q&A Meta	https://money.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2788/disappointed-in-stackexchange-management
SE Movies and TV Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1888/the-screening-room
SE Movies and TV Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1888/the-screening-room
SE Open Source Q&A	https://opensource.stackexchange.com/questions/9276/relicensing-content-under-cc-by-sa
SE Parenting Q&A Meta	https://parenting.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/1371/the-time-has-come-for-me-to-resign
SE Pets Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/10964/the-litter-box
SE Pets Q&A Meta	https://pets.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2309/time-to-say-goodbye-one-less-moderator

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SE Philosophy Q&A Meta	https://philosophy.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/5067/i-will-be-leaving-as-a-moderator
SE Photography Q&A Meta	https://photo.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/7185/seems-i-am-not-welcome-back-here
SE Puzzling Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/14524/the-sphinxs-lair
SE Q&A Chat room	https://chat.meta.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1365/discussion-on-answer-by-monica-cellio-an-apology-to-our-community-and-next-step
SE Q&A Chat room	https://chat.meta.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1398/discussion-on-answer-by-heather-did-upper-management-ignore-the-growing-tension
SE Q&A Chat room	https://chat.meta.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1401/discussion-on-answer-by-strongbad-to-reach-out-on-monica-the-lavender-communit
SE Q&A Chat room	https://chat.meta.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1402/discussion-on-answer-by-monica-cellio-to-reach-out-on-monica-the-lavender-comm
SE Q&A Chat room	https://chat.meta.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1418/discussion-on-question-by-amon-firing-mods-and-forced-relicensing-is-stack-exch
SE Q&A Chat room	https://chat.meta.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1431/discussion-on-question-by-monica-cellio-stack-overflow-is-doing-me-ongoing-harm
SE Q&A Chat room	https://chat.meta.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/1448/discussion-on-question-by-sara-chipps-update-an-agreement-with-monica-cellio
SE Q&A Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/196949/discussion-on-answer-by-sara-chipps-were-removing-hot-meta-posts-from-stack-o
SE RPG Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/11/trpg-general-chat
SE RPG Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/13848/not-a-bar-but-plays-one-on-tv
SE RPG Q&A	https://rpg.stackexchange.com/election/5
SE RPG Q&A Meta	https://rpg.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/12090/officially-stepping-down-as-moderator
SE RPG Q&A Meta	https://rpg.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/9875/to-every-thing-there-is-a-season
SE RPG Q&A Meta	https://rpg.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/9915/in-which-a-doppelgreener-becomes-somewhat-less-shiny
SE Science fiction and Fantasy Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/58631/the-restaurant-at-the-end-of-the-universe
SE Science fiction and Fantasy Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/80712/sugarcube-corner
SE Science Fiction Q&A Meta	https://scifi.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/12754/what-is-the-status-of-our-moderator-team
SE Science Fiction Q&A Meta	https://scifi.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/13340/did-we-just-lose-another-moderator
SE Science Fiction Q&A Meta	https://scifi.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/13342/thanks-to-kevin-and-thaddeus-for-their-years-of-service-as-moderators
SE Search Results	https://meta.stackexchange.com/users?page=1&tab=reputation&filter=all&search=reinstate+monica
SE Seasoned Advice Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/16/the-frying-pan
SE Server Fault Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/127/the-comms-room

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SE Server Fault Q&A Meta	https://meta.serverfault.com/questions/8054/abrupt-change-in-moderation-staff
SE Server Fault Q&A Meta	https://meta.serverfault.com/questions/9569/part-1-what-is-all-the-drama-on-meta-se-about
SE Server Fault Q&A Meta	https://meta.serverfault.com/questions/9570/part-2-how-does-the-drama-on-meta-se-affect-server-fault
SE Skeptics Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/311/hub-of-reason
SE Skeptics Q&A Meta	https://skeptics.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/4448/im-resigning-as-a-moderator
SE Software Engineering Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/21/the-whiteboard
SE Software Engineering Q&A Meta	https://softwareengineering.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/9000/im-resigning-as-a-moderator-from-all-stack-exchange-sites
SE Software Engineering Q&A Meta	https://softwareengineering.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/9005/the-community-needs-your-support-can-you-provide-it
SE Space Q&A Meta	https://space.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/1390/space-se-moderator-resignation
SE Space Q&A Meta	https://space.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/1443/returning-to-moderation
SE Spanish Language Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/46061/la-tertulia
SE Spanish Language Q&A Meta	https://spanish.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3207/sobre-el-nuevo-c%C3%B3digo-de-conducta-y-otros-eventos-recientes-de-la-red
SE Spanish Language Q&A Meta	https://spanish.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3208/adi%C3%B3s-spanish-se
SE Spanish Language Q&A Meta	https://spanish.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3221/stepping-down-as-moderator-renunciando-como-moderador-diego
SE Spanish Language Q&A Meta	https://spanish.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/3241/this-is-it-gracias-por-todo-renuncio-al-cargo-de-moderador-fedorqui
SE Spanish Language Q&A Meta	https://spanish.stackexchange.com/posts/31604/timeline
SE Spanish Language Q&A Meta	https://spanish.stackexchange.com/questions/31604/translation-golf-xlviii-were-sorry-to-see-you-go
SE Stack Apps Q&A	https://stackapps.com/questions/8440/pronoun-assistant
SE Statistics Q&A Meta	https://stats.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/5779/i-am-resigning-as-a-moderator
SE Statistics Q&A Meta	https://stats.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/5783/reinstate-monica

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SE Statistics Q&A Meta	https://stats.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/5765/moderator-resignation
SE Super User Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/118/root-access
SE Workplace Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/3060/the-water-cooler
SE Workplace Q&A Meta	https://workplace.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/5754/should-the-workplace-opt-out-of-hot-network-questions-trial-run
SE Workplace Q&A Meta	https://workplace.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/6314/resigning-as-moderator
SE Workplace Q&A Meta	https://workplace.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/6316/resigning-as-moderator-from-workplace-se
SE Workplace Q&A Meta	https://workplace.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/6324/deciding-to-take-a-break
SE Workplace Q&A Meta	https://workplace.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/6331/resigning-as-moderator-from-twp
SE Workplace Q&A Meta	https://workplace.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/6333/no-more-active-moderators-how-should-we-keep-the-site-in-order
SE Workplace Q&A Meta	https://workplace.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/6362/what-does-the-return-of-the-mods-mean
SE Workplace Q&A Meta	https://workplace.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/6368/forward-to-the-future
SE Workplace Q&A Meta	https://workplace.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/6375/leaving-stack-exchange-community
SE World Building Q&A Meta	https://worldbuilding.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/7512/thoughts-from-worldbuilding-stack-exchange-moderators-on-the-dismissal-of-monica
SE World Building Q&A Meta	https://worldbuilding.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/7649/what-does-reinstate-monica-mean
SE World Building Q&A Meta	https://worldbuilding.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/7722/in-sadness-it-is-time-for-me-to-go
SE World Building Q&A Meta	https://worldbuilding.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/7729/love-you-worldbuilding-but-i-am-hanging-up-my-diamond
SE Worldbuilding Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/17213/the-factory-floor
SE Worldbuilding Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/27736/universe-factory
SE Writing Chat room	https://chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/168/the-overlook-hotel

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SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2228/se-has-removed-a-moderator
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2229/moderator-resignation
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2230/resigning-as-a-mod-effective-immediately
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2239/should-we-change-the-title-of-the-strong-opening-line-question
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2243/taking-a-personal-leave-of-absence
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2245/do-we-have-any-diamonds-left
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2252/what-are-we-supposed-to-do-now-about-discipline-issues
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2253/problem-solved
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2260/why-are-so-many-users-deleting-having-their-accounts-deleted
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2263/a-personal-hiatus
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2271/how-can-we-on-this-site-put-pressure-on-so-se-to-carry-out-monicas-requests
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2301/sadly-it-is-time-for-me-to-join-the-exodus
SE Writing Q&A Meta	https://writing.stackexchange.com/questions/48330/dear-stack-exchange-i-am-very-disappointed-in-you-how-to-construct-a-strong
Stack Exchange	https://meta.stackexchange.com/conduct
Stack Exchange Chat room	https://chat.meta.stackexchange.com/rooms/info/89/tavern-on-the-meta
Stack Exchange Timeline	https://stackexchange-timeline.webflow.io
Stack Overflow	https://stackoverflow.com/advertising/guidelines
Stack Overflow	https://stackoverflow.com/company/work-here
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2008/11/25/stack-overflow-is-you
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2009/03/06/new-10k-rep-tools-now-available
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2010/04/13/changes-to-stack-exchange
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Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2018/07/10/welcome-wagon-classifying-comments-on-stack-overflow
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2018/08/07/get-to-know-our-new-code-of-conduct
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2018/11/21/our-theory-of-moderation-re-visited
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2019/07/18/building-community-inclusivity-stack-overflow
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2019/09/24/announcing-stack-overflows-new-ceo-prashanth-chandrasekar
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2019/10/01/introducing-overflow-newsletter-cassidy-williams
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2019/11/25/introducing-the-loop-a-foundation-in-listening

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Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2020/01/21/scripting-the-future-of-stack-2020-plans-vision
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2020/02/17/community-working-group-updates-february-2020
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2021/06/02/prosus-acquires-stack-overflow
Stack Overflow Blog	https://stackoverflow.blog/2021/12/14/podcast-400-an-oral-history-of-stack-overflow-told-by-its-founding-team
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/10/loungec
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/11/php
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/111347/sobotics
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/139/java
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/15/android
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/17/javascript
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/197438/the-meta-room
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/41570/so-close-vote-reviewers
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/6/python
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/62927/rust
Stack Overflow Chat room	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/7/c
Stack Overflow Comment Archive	https://chat.stackoverflow.com/rooms/info/197298/meta-stack-overflow-comment-archive
Stack Overflow Podcast	https://stackoverflow.fogbugz.com/default.asp?W6
Stack Overflow Podcast	https://stackoverflow.fogbugz.com/default.asp?W87857
Stack Overflow Podcast	https://the-stack-overflow-podcast.simplecast.com/episodes/oral-history-of-stack-overflow-founders/transcript
Stack Overflow Portuguese Q&A Meta	https://pt.meta.stackoverflow.com/questions/7975/moderadores-renunciando-em-massa-na-rede-stack-exchange
Stack Overflow Russian Q&A Meta	https://ru.meta.stackoverflow.com/q/9559

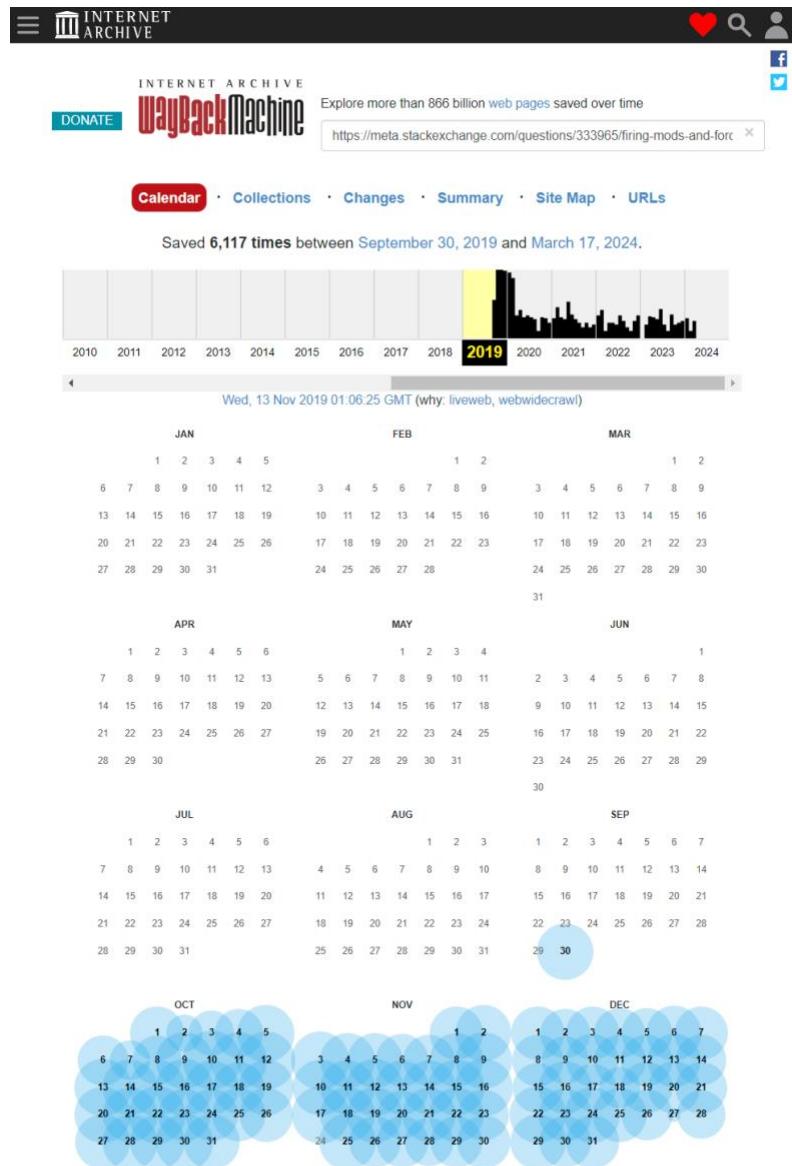
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Stack Overflow Spanish Q&A Meta	https://es.meta.stackoverflow.com/questions/4549/dejo-mi-puesto-de-moderador-diamantado
Tech Crunch	https://techcrunch.com/2015/01/20/stack-exchange-raises-40m-led-by-a16z-to-boost-its-programmer-forums
Tech Crunch	https://techcrunch.com/2017/11/02/stack-overflow-lays-off-staff
The Register	https://forums.theregister.com/forum/all/2019/10/01/stack_exchange_controversy
The Register	https://forums.theregister.com/forum/all/2019/10/08/stack_overflow_apology
The Register	https://forums.theregister.com/forum/all/2020/01/02/stack_overflow_settles
The Register	https://www.theregister.co.uk/2019/10/01/stack_exchange_controversy
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The Register	https://www.theregister.com/2020/01/02/stack_overflow_settles
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Twitter - MeganRisdal	https://twitter.com/MeganRisdal/status/1203000382806319104
Twitter - MonicaCellio	https://twitter.com/MonicaCellio/status/1053850846570651648
Twitter - MonicaCellio	https://twitter.com/MonicaCellio/status/1174844053390856192
Twitter - MonicaCellio	https://twitter.com/MonicaCellio/status/1187779293117603840
Twitter - OdedCoster	https://twitter.com/OdedCoster/status/1178710007937994752
Twitter - rerun_adam	https://twitter.com/rerun_adam/status/1217943523363717121
Twitter - SaraJChipps	https://twitter.com/SaraJChipps/status/1182650441882058752

Source	Link
Twitter - SaraJChipps	https://twitter.com/SaraJChipps/status/1230160131670888453
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1176650938003574785
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1176902280701857798
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1205554977311080448
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1216752358933184512
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1217245698908778497
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1217542885605662720
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1217557293518196736
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1220012616245923840
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1223660702809739265
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1224096604358991872
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1224098305489006594
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1224099283063828480
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1224101475762110464
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1226619456878596096
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1230668527738048512
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1233591329491283968
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1277290073545834496
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1334244090779582466
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1420525231685312515
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1481013584746278912
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1522394272401485824
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1522396254810296321
Twitter - Shog9	https://twitter.com/shog9/status/1522399167649263618
Twitter - tinkertim	https://twitter.com/tinkertim/status/1179637311526621184
Twitter - tinkertim	https://twitter.com/tinkertim/status/1326989993928237057
Wikipedia	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stack_Exchange
Wikipedia	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stack_Overflow
YouTube - This week in Startups	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMfxd9y0cMY
YouTube - TylerTech	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFiQPkdb5Qs
YouTube - Yvette	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqbbjaLIECM

Source	Link
YouTube - Yvette	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCST82Vkaio
YouTube - Yvette	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfQQ0x2uFdE

Appendix C



Note

This calendar view maps the number of times
<https://meta.stackexchange.com/questions/333965/firing-mods-and-forced-relicensing-is-stack-exchange-still-interested-in-cooper> was crawled by the Wayback Machine, *not* how many times the site was actually updated. More info in the [FAQ](#).

[FAQ](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Terms of Service](#) (Dec 31, 2014)

 The Wayback Machine is an initiative of the Internet Archive, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, building a digital library of Internet sites and other cultural artifacts in digital form. Other projects include Open Library & archive.org.

Your use of the Wayback Machine is subject to the Internet Archive's [Terms of Use](#).

Appendix D

Memo Example #1

Action - Starring chat messages

- Starring chat messages is used to draw and filter attention to a statement or an event
<https://chat.stackoverflow.com/transcript/197438?m=47459870#47459870>
 “Personally I think anything that's really relevant will be relayed and filtered through chat anyways.”
- Evidence of circumventing starring cap, star to draw attention, remove then reuse.
<https://chat.stackoverflow.com/transcript/197438?m=47439492#47439492>
 “i add them, hope someone else stars, then remove.”
<https://chat.stackoverflow.com/transcript/message/47452354#47452354>
 “@Cerbrus Not everyone _can_ look at starred messages. Mobile.”
- Users have complained that they run out of stars per day.
<https://chat.stackoverflow.com/transcript/message/47439483#47439483>
 “You have fully used your vote allowance for today” - Oh RIP all out of stars”
- Pressures public platform staff to respond.
<https://chat.stackoverflow.com/transcript/message/47439437#47439437>
 “[TP] Are you here? Why'd you remove featured? (message is starred 11 times)”

Memo Example #2

Patterns of interaction – Preserving data and history

Link to memo: Action - Screenshotting

Link to memo: Action - Pushing to Internet Archive

Link to memo: Action - Saving a PDF

Link to memo: Action - Creating a backup of the dump

Link to memo: Action - Building a timeline

Link to memo: Action - Archiving Meta comments

- Reviving a deleted question by asking why it was deleted and adding a screenshot
 Link to Q&A document: 2019-09-30 – 4:14 PM A very recent post asking people to go “on strike” was just deleted

Link to Q&A document: 2019-11-15 – 10:16 AM The Great Meta Tire Fire of 2019: is anybody keeping receipts?

Link to Q&A document: 2019-11-25 – 5:35 PM Will Meta Stack Exchange be removed now?

Link to George & Leidner (2018). Digital activism - a hierarchy of political commitment.pdf

3.3.1 Data activism. In data activism, volunteers rescue, preserve, and promote open data to protect open government [41]. It is triggered when closed governments refuse to share data or when open government is threatened by the removal of open data. It is enacted by building repositories, sharing data, copying open

datasets via scripts, screen scrapes, bots, or manually copying data. It often involves data cleaning and data wrangling into machine readable format and uploading to an open data repository [5].