Stirring the Hive

Surfing in the era of Social Media

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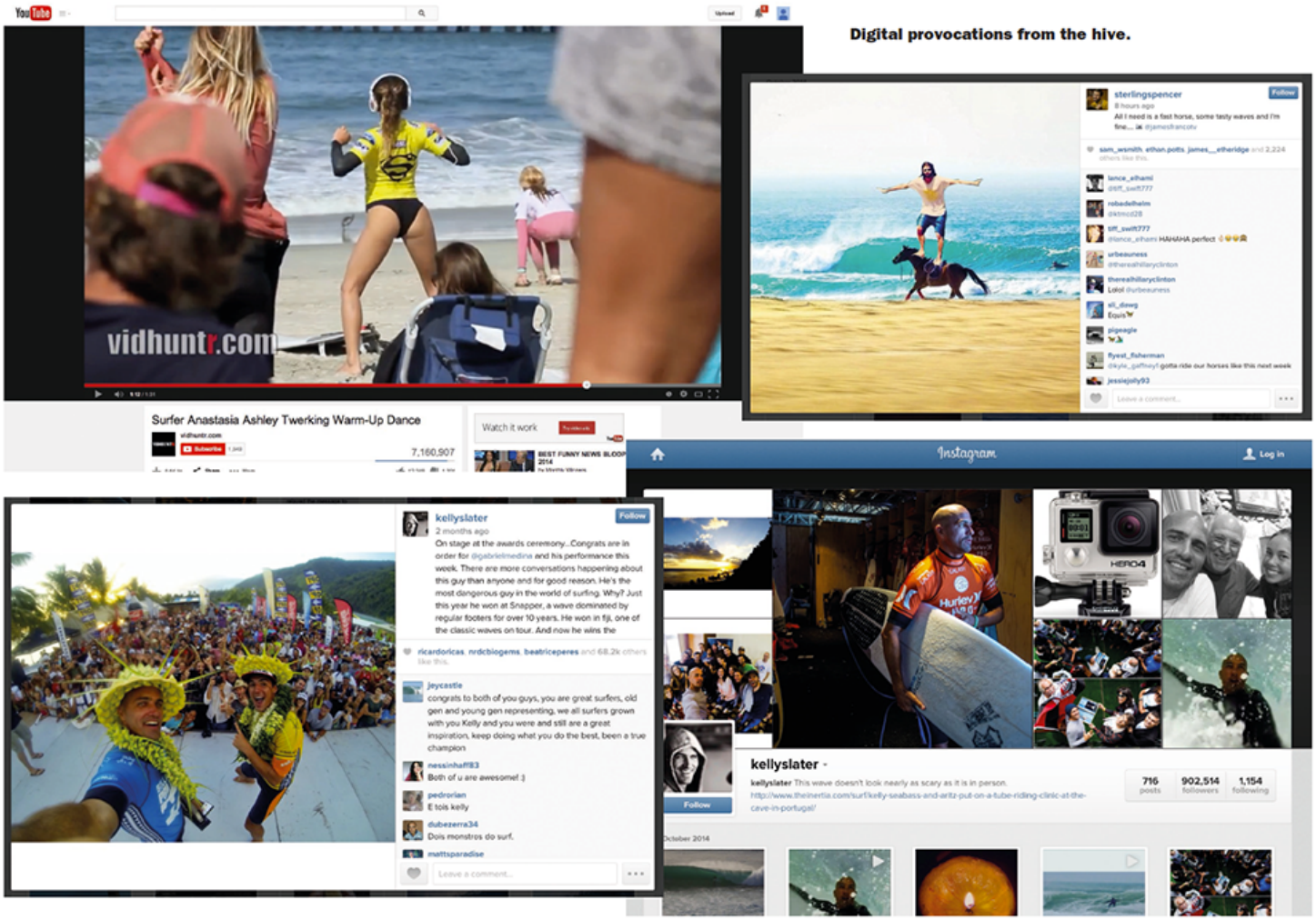
Soon after Kelly Slater lost to Gabriel Medina in the finals of the 2014 Billabong Pro Tahiti, Slater shared a photo on Instagram with his audience of 886,000 followers. In the caption, he thanked everyone involved with the event for an unforgettable experience, and applauded Owen Wright and John John Florence for their brash performances. Slater failed to specifically congratulate event-winner Gabriel Medina, however. This perceived snub triggered an avalanche of nasty remarks, snowballing into a 1,000-plus thread of warring comments from fans, friends, and haters.

Nothing new here, of course, when it comes to the cacophonous cesspool of response that burbles below almost all content posted online: the usual dark, toxic brew of human folly, a global melting pot of sycophantic fan worship, mockingbird's songs, troll-thrown knives, and frat boy sexual harassment. What seemed more noteworthy in this instance was the caption that accompanied Slater's next photo. "My next post was going to be dedicated to @gabrielmedina but I think I'll let you wait for that one since it doesn't sound like you're all done telling me off yet. So let me know when you're finished so we can...get back to being civil with one another."

Welcome to our Cowardly New World, a science fiction surfing future in which the best waves on earth are ridden to perfection by an elite few, while simultaneously the masses badger and bait their disposable heroes from behind iPhones. For the best competitive surfer in history, the best contest of the season was quickly followed by online introspection, a dousing of vitriolic remarks from thousands of people he's never met, and a futile attempt to herd this fickle audience toward some simulacrum of civil human behavior. So much for post-surf beers while contemplating the mysteries of nature's magnificence.

Given the gap between Kelly Slater's day-to-day life and ours, I can only imagine that tending to his hive of nearly a million followers requires the emotional equivalent of a beekeeper's suit. The audience makes the honey, after all, and it's the duty of a celebrity, surfer or otherwise, to collect some of those honey-dollars at checkout. Interacting directly with your hive is a necessary part of the job, fraught with risks: rile them up, and the bees will sting. Social media honey farmers are forced to stay calm, put on that thin-mesh helmet, and harvest. Sometimes they get stung anyway.



(http://www.surfersjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/stirring-the-hive.png)

Female pros, in particular, live with the attention of a million little pricks. Anastasia Ashley is a professional surfer/model who by now needs no introduction to any surfer with a wifi connection. In recent years, Ashley leveraged a pre-heat-twerking-video gone viral (over 7 million views) to mainstream fame and a starring role in the 2014 *Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Edition*. Subsequently, Ashley has more than twice the Instagram audience of Mick Fanning. Each time she posts a photo, her followers spew forth a torrent of comments in various languages. Some flatter and beg. Others punctuate their rapey threats with cheerful emoticons.

I asked Anastasia Ashley what it felt like to read these comments. “To be honest, it comes with the territory,” she told me. “It’s part of my job…and everyone on some level hates their job. But I get to do other things a lot of people don’t and I’m very blessed in that regard. There’s a cost for everything.”

But as the recipients of abuse become desensitized due to prolonged exposure, the abuse seems to be ramping up and changing in tone. “The thing that’s interesting is that it used to be a lot more anonymous,” Ashley says. “People used made-up names—they wouldn’t own up to it. But now, on Instagram and Facebook, people don’t care. They have no problem using their real name. When you get some level of fame or notoriety, people start treating you as more of a *thing* than an actual person. You get dehumanized. People forget they’re writing to a real person.”

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>
> **— Lewis Samuels**

Some of the disconnect comes from the misconception that surfers like Anastasia Ashley won’t ever read what’s written about them. Before surfers’ contract negotiations took into account number of followers, many pros did reside in a state of ignorant bliss. In 2009, I spoke about this with Andy Irons, who had just begun to dip his toe into the fetid waters of online surf forums. “I don’t try to read that stuff too often, ’cause it does wig me out,” Andy explained. “I got into it for my first time by myself and it’s fucking radical how mean people are, and how they think they have all the answers. I read a couple things from supporters, but most of ’em just talked about how I was spoiled, or unappreciative, or just some drugged out loser. I tried not to get mad when I read that stuff, but yeah, it fired me up pretty good. How wouldn’t it? Talking about my wife and shit?”

Now, it’s more than morbid curiosity that causes pro surfers to read the hate. Just like forum administrators, they feel an obligation to police their social media feeds. Most do it themselves, married to their phone, even if they have employees who could do it for them. “Some people will lie, but I know very well-known people who will sit there and read and delete the obnoxious comments, because they know they’re representing a brand, and those comments aren’t on-brand,” says Anastasia Ashley. “The weird comments might affect your business.”

Sure, pro-surfer problems can be dismissed as an even more entitled variation of "first world problems." Working-class surfers are hesitant to bust out tiny violins after hearing complaints about lukewarm beers in Fiji, or mean kids' insensitive remarks on Instagram. Free-surfer Sterling Spencer has leveraged this fact, creating videos that mock the humorless professionalism of his fellow pros. "Anyone who is getting paid to surf should be ripped a new asshole every day," Sterling notes, with trademark self-deprecation. Perhaps the more interesting question is whether internet bullying has been woven into the blanket of global surf culture, not just for the pros but for all participants? Have online comments simply replicated the sarcastic, caustic heckling once reserved for long road-trips and parking lot shit-talking? Or does the internet simply turn people into assholes?

Viewed through a charitable lens, the online heckling of surfers arguably has its roots in grom abuse, but is not a modern day equivalent. Matt Warshaw's *Encyclopedia of Surfing* defined the grommet experience of surfing's past by its hazing rituals. "At Sydney's North Narrabeen, young surfers have for decades been ritualistically stripped nude and lashed securely to a tall metal 'grommet pole' for public viewing and/or abuse," Warshaw explained. Even in 2001, *Surfer* magazine noted that groms should expect to be "punched, kicked, spit-on, Dutch-rubbed, pantsed, pink-bellied, head-shaved, tampon-nosed or otherwise humiliated by older surfers."

But now, as in many verticals, the internet has shifted the power dynamic, often putting the young and weak in control. The pimply grom, who in a previous era would have been disrobed and physically assaulted, is now protected by a thick shield of potential litigation, safely at home on his iPad, Mom there to protect him, commenting online about how old and washed up Slater is, or the unspeakable things he'd like to do to Anastasia Ashley if he ever got around to leaving the couch.

Grom abuse is different from internet heckling. But either way, surfers are used to taking shit from other surfers. It just goes over better in person—salt on the skin, smile on your face as you deliver venomous barbs. "I've always felt more comfortable with people ragging on me than saying something nice," C.J. Hobgood claims. Lucky thing.