

/dev/random

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The other day I ran across an online tribute to the late Dan Blocker, “Hoss” Cartwright from the television series *Bonanza*. Even though that show played a significant role in my childhood during its original run, the modern age has had its insidious effect on my imagination, and I immediately began visualizing not the sprawling Ponderosa and Virginia City, but rather browser plugins that block posts from people named “Dan.”

We have ad blockers, spam blockers, pornography blockers, opposing philosophy blockers, verbosity blockers like Twitter, and intelligence blockers (also known as the comments section of any news story or blog). Something about the anonymity and physical separation of the Web brings out the very, *very* worst in people. While it appears that a large segment of the population is responsible, maybe the same small group of malcontents is actually generating all of the commentary under different pseudonyms. Whatever the case, I wish they would take up some other hobby, like BASE jumping or free soloing.

If it’s this bad on Earth, imagine what the Interplanetary or Interstellar Internets connecting human colonies scattered across the galaxy would look like. *You* imagine it, because I’m going to pass on that one. As this is an election year here in the US, my overall opinion of humanity’s claim to sentience is already in the toilet.

Getting back to blockers, the one I want to see would be an idiocy blocker. While I already have a fairly effective version on my computer, known by the technical term “power button,” it has the considerable drawback of also blocking the (admittedly increasingly rare) content I actually *want* to see. I suppose I could simply stop reading the news, since any given day can be summed up by mixing and matching from the following headlines: Ceasefire Violated, Terrorist Bombing, Trade Union Strikes, Politician Bumbles, Climate Changes, Vehicle Crashes, Species Faces Extinction, and Media-Manufactured Personality Engages in Behavior that Would not Make the News if Anyone Else Did It.

How would an idiocy blocker work? Probably not very well, since blocking idiocy would be tantamount to blocking online contributions *in toto*, but presuming idiocy could indeed be distinguished with any reliability from non-idiotic commentary, the ideal blocker would either blank idiocy out entirely or replace it with something the developers or end user have deemed non-idiotic. That substituted text—the First Amendment, perhaps—is likely to be wholly irrelevant to the topic at hand, but in this it differs little from most idiotic commentary.

Filtering out idiocy will require some robust algorithms, naturally, because while idiocy is seldom subtle, it can be somewhat cryptic. As an aid to coders who might be considering such an app, I have grouped some of the more common and egregious idiots into broad categories.

1. **Focus-Pocus:** This person has one or a small number of pet topics, commentary concerning which they will place following absolutely any online post, from major disaster to slapstick comic. Often they don't even attempt to tie it into the subject matter of the original item, spewing their idiotic irrelevancies with no segue whatever. Popular topics for these sorts include political candidates, climate change, puzzling interpretations of the US Constitution, misanthropy, and conspiracy theories. (I do not, incidentally, favor that last term because it degrades the noble noun *theory*.) The worst examples of this species of idiot can work all of the above into one mind-numbing run-on sentence that can, if viewed without proper safety precautions, lead to debilitating neural trauma.
2. **The Clever Dan:** This idiot has some form of self-induced brain damage that convinces him of his own wholly illusionary sparkling wit. Moreover, it convinces him that it is his solemn duty to share said wit in any and all conceivable fora, especially those where crass humor is antithetical to the situation. Look for CDs below testimonials to the deceased, reports of horrific tragedies, heartwarming accounts of nice things done for those with terminal illnesses, and any piece that reminds us all of the capricious nature of fate.
3. **The Nonsequiturian:** The issue here is not so much the logic or nature of the commentary itself, but the choice of venue. These particular idiots simply drop their mission statements in wherever opportunity presents, as a form of philosophical spam. They in no way pass the Turing Test and are probably merely bots that take vaguely human form while putting the "artificial" in Artificial Intelligence.
4. **The Recycler:** This is really a subcategory of Type 1, but instead of simply launching into idiot spew right away, recyclers will pretend to be engaged in debate with some other commenter(s) over points at least marginally relevant to the subject matter before inevitably working the rhetoric around to their pet topic. The most talented of these idiots can keep up the illusion of relevancy for several posts before it becomes obvious that they're really only here to push some totally different agenda.
5. **The Angler:** While the other four types of idiots are mostly harmless, albeit annoying, anglers are quite simply evil. They want to steal your identity and thus your money. They accomplish this by posting some seriously spammy content you would think absolutely no one would fall for—and yet people regularly do. Let's be clear about something: if you could really make \$3,000 a week for 10 hours surfing the Internet, we'd all be doing it. Of course, they're probably telling the truth about how much they make, and that the Internet is involved. They just fib a little about the actual mechanism.

There are, of course, myriad other species and subspecies of idiot to be found on the Interwebs, but to filter them all out would be a Herculean task that would leave us with no one at all to talk to. If you truly wish to filter out idiots completely, I have found it quite effective to set one's firewall to disallow comments or email from any IP address that starts with "1" or "2."