

Craigslist users seem to have lost tolerance

by Jonathan Sidener

I think I'm giving up on Craigslist.

Most newspaper readers have no doubt heard of the online community/marketplace. It's been one of my favorite sites for about five years.

I bought my kayak there, and roof racks for my car. I found my dining-room table there.

I live in a house I found through a Craigslist rental ad. I've gone on dates with women I met through the site. I sold an old car that hadn't run in years. I could go on.

Now I'm thinking of giving up, moving on. Craigslist is losing some of its charm.

Started by Craig Newmark in San Francisco in 1995, it was originally a place for Newmark and his friends to list events and share other information. It grew by word of mouth to become the seventh-busiest site on the Web.

When I moved, I offered my empty moving boxes in the "free" section. They would have filled the recycling barrel for weeks, and I preferred to see them get reused.

Within minutes, I heard from a woman who was about to move across town. We exchanged a few pleasant e-mails. She came over to get the boxes. We chatted a bit. She went home with the boxes. It wasn't a lasting friendship, but it was a pleasant transaction between two members of the Craigslist community.

Early on, it was somehow more than just classified ads. But it seems to be losing that quality.

Recently, I lost a dog to cancer and started thinking about getting a puppy - a successor, not a replacement. I looked on Petfinder (www.petfinder.com) and 1-800-save-a-pet (www.1-800-save-a-pet.com), two searchable databases of deserving dogs, cats and other pets. I checked out the local pet shelter site. And I looked in the Pets section of Craigslist.

At times, the Pets section was like a war zone. Craigslist allows users to flag other people's posts if they think something is inappropriate or off topic. If enough people flag a post, it's removed. In the past, there was an ethic of tolerance, and little was flagged other than racist rants, spam or links to porn sites.

Now, out-of-control users are flagging anything they don't like. One woman complained after her post was flagged requesting advice about pet-friendly rentals. Another person complained because a post was deleted on the topic of parvo, a potentially fatal disease for puppies.

People plead at the beginning of their posts, "Please don't flag this."

Something's wrong when you can't write about parvo and pet rentals in the Craigslist Pets section, when you have to beg to use a service that's designed to be open to anyone.

Like others on the site, I've been known to occasionally write tongue-in-cheek posts for various sections. A couple of years ago, I wrote an ad for the Men Seeking Women section titled "Gold Digger Wanted" in which I described myself as an old, despicable rich guy looking for an attractive young woman with extremely low expectations.

Some people thought it was funny. Some didn't. It never got flagged.

Recently, I wrote a similar piece of satire. It was flagged in about an hour. Apparently humor, along with tolerance, is off topic now. That's a shame.

Despite the hassles, I found a pup on Craigslist that I was interested in. He was the spitting image of a dog I had when I was younger. While I was trying to make up my mind whether to go check him out, I went back to the site from time to time to look at his pictures. Half the time, the ad was gone. And then it would reappear.

When I went to look at him, his owners told me they received an e-mail asking whether he was neutered. When they responded that he wasn't, they got a lecture on neutering, and their ad started getting flagged.

I remember the conversation when I gave away my moving boxes. We talked about how Craigslist was great, how it connected people with complementary needs. It had a good energy.

The conversation with the puppy owners was different. We talked about Craigslist like it was a swamp to be waded through. These days, it seems as if it divides people as much as it connects them.

It does still work. I found my pup. But it isn't fun anymore.

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