

## **Twitter can be a mean place. Meet @TheNiceBot**

The Internet can be full of hateful comments and insults. To try to spread a little positivity, a little blue-faced robot wants you to know that you are "more amazing than fresh towels from the dryer."

On Twitter, "@TheNiceBot" is a cheerful spambot that blurts a small dose of positivity into the Twittersverse. To create tweets, it sends a randomly generated compliment to a randomly selected Twitter user.

### **Cruel Comments Appear Every Minute**

The NiceBot was created by anti-bullying organization Champions Against Bullying and the Deutsch advertising agency. The creators found out that a cruel or insulting comment is posted to Twitter every 60 seconds, so they designed the NiceBot. Every 36 seconds, it sends out messages filled with all the cheesy sweetness of an elementary school Valentine's Day card:

"@AmazingCinta I have a robot cavity, because you are so sweet.  
#TheNiceBot"

"@usa2016election Calculating how incredible you are would require mathematical equations far more advanced than my programming.  
#TheNiceBot"

"@OURHONEYFROOT Supernovas wish they were as bright as your smile.  
#TheNiceBot"

### **A Three-Century Twitter Task?**

Some even sound slightly ... more-than-friends.

"@Lili\_140803 My processors overheat when I think about how great you are. #TheNiceBot"

"@ERLNxx Just thinking about you sends a positive surge through my circuits. #TheNiceBot"

The NiceBot was launched on Oct. 1 with the mission to "make the world a nicer place, one tweet at a time." So far, it has sent 52,000 tweets and attracted about 4,200 followers. It's programmed to eventually reach all 300 million Twitter users, a task that would take more than three centuries to accomplish. Of course, this optimistically assumes that Twitter will still be a thing in the 2300s.

Alexandra Penn is the founder of Champions Against Bullying. She said that the organization, which works with kids, parents and educators in the U.S. and Canada, wanted to do something different to draw attention to online bullying.

"Last year, we created a public service announcement that called attention to teenagers who had been hurt by bullies," Penn said. "This year, we wanted to combat the negativity of bullying with something more positive."

### **Adding Awareness Of Cyberbullying**

At best, the NiceBot might be a helpful way to spread awareness of cyberbullying. At worst, it's a harmless, feel-good gimmick, said Sameer Hinduja, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center and a professor of criminology at Florida Atlantic University. Hinduja doubts the NiceBot will do much to get rid of hostile behavior online.

Nevertheless, he said he commends Champions Against Bullying at least a little for trying to spread positivity and make kindness go viral. The Internet can be a hateful place, and it could use more positivity.

Cyberbullying is devastating, particularly for kids and teens, because it feels so personal, Hinduja said. An insult, or a compliment, doesn't carry as much weight if it comes across as generic or insincere. This makes a spambot seem like a questionable choice for creating change online.

### **Bot's Tweets May Not Feel Real**

Hinduja explained that when somebody says something kind, it feels genuine, and not like spam, because it's personal. A person can smile and be warm. On the other hand, a tweet that comes from someone with a "bot" username does not feel personal. Those who get these tweets are likely to dismiss them without much thought because they don't feel genuine, he said.

David Weinberger is a researcher at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University and writes about the effects that technology has on ideas. Apparently, he agrees:

"Thank you, (@TheNiceBot)! That means so little coming from a bot!"

However, plenty of other people seem to appreciate the NiceBot: It's "a nice way to start the day," noted one pleased Twitter user. And even if the NiceBot can't possibly do much to make the digital landscape a safer or kinder place, it might inspire other, more effective ideas, said Hinduja.

"Instead of handing out a bracelet or a sticker, (Champions Against Bullying) is using programming to tap into social media networks in order to do

something creative," he said. "So I think that might be the take-home point. I don't know how much this is going to accomplish, but they tried, and there's something to be said about that."

Despite an uphill battle, the NiceBot tweets on in cyberspace. It is a relentless digital cheerleader, trying again every 36 seconds.

"@Xzeynep\_beyzaxx Thanks for just being you. #TheNiceBot"

<https://newsela.com/read/twitter-nicebot/id/13492/>