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SXSW May Put Online Harassment in the Spotlight

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SXSW Interactive might include a daylong event on combating online harassment, Re/code reported Tuesday.

The news followed SXSW's cancellation of two planned panels that were expected to focus on opposite ends of the Gamergate debate.

Threats of on-site violence spurred the decision to cancel both panels, according to SXSW officials.

Caroline Sinders of IBM Watson, Katherine Cross of the CUNY Graduate Center, and Randi Harper, founder of the Online Abuse Prevention Initiative, were slated to speak at SXSW in March during a session titled "Level Up: Overcoming Harassment in Games."

Even if the event organizers should reinstate "Level Up," the participants have not decided whether they would speak at SXSW, Harper told Re/code.

The other cancelled session, "SavePoint: A Discussion on the Gaming Community," was sponsored by the Open Gaming Society.

In the week following the announcement of the two sessions, "SXSW has received numerous threats of on-site violence related to this programming," said Hugh Forrest, the director of SXSW Interactive, in explaining the cancellation decision.

SXSW takes pride in offering a place for diverse ideas and people, but preserving the "sanctity of the big tent" requires keeping the dialogue "civil and respectful," he said.

"If people cannot agree, disagree and embrace new ways of thinking in a safe and secure place that is free of online and offline harassment, then this marketplace of ideas is inevitably compromised," said Forrest.

Fight or Flight

Canceling the panels was the wrong decision, according to Nicholas Brody, assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Puget Sound.

"Discussion of these controversies via online venues is often negatively affected by the anonymity of participants," he told TechNewsWorld.

"However, when we migrate these conversations to offline environments such as SXSW, we can have a more honest discussion of the issues in a locale where the participants are identifiable and less prone to outbursts or other antinormative behavior," Brody added.

Canceling the panels helps ensure that the conversation surrounding the issues "remains largely online and uncivil," he said.

"Although it is entirely possible to have respectful, civil conversations in online environments, events like SXSW provide an important public -- and well-publicized -- forum for considering the potential solutions for online harassment," Brody said.

SXSW could have made the threats public and let potential attendees decide for themselves whether the panels were worth attending, said April Masini, author of Ask April.

"Sadly, we live in a world where schools have metal detectors and drug-sniffing dogs more often than not," she told TechNewsWorld. "We're all used to long TSA lines at airports and having to relinquish our shoes at security because there had been bomb materials found in the heels of some terrorist shoes. Just another day?"

Yet, it's hard to fault anyone for choosing to avert violence, said Masini. We all walk a line, and we have to determine if the violence is real and if backing away would open us to more threats in the future.

"There are times when throwing a punch is the right thing to do -- and the recent French train attack on civilians, thwarted by three passengers who decided to fight down the shooters, saved lives," she pointed out.

On Online Harassment

While SXSW may have been an ideal venue to bring the Gamergate conflict to a peaceful resolution -- despite any threats -- there are some "promising solutions" for combating the complex problem of online harassment, said Brody.

For one, police departments' ability to deal with such issues could be improved, he said. "They need better training on both the technical and social implications of online harassment, so as to better assist victims and identify perpetrators."

Another tool for combating online harassment is normalizing bystander intervention -- developing the social expectation that it's great to be a Good Samaritan online. Online harassment takes place "semipublicly," though there could be hundreds and even thousands of witnesses, Brody noted.

"As a bystander, it is your responsibility to reach out and assist a victim of online harassment, even if you don't know them in person," he said. "The bullies and trolls are an incredibly vocal minority -- so if the victims and bystanders band together, we can start to effectively push back."

App creators and site administrators also have a responsibility to respond to cases of online harassment thoughtfully and promptly, Brody suggested.

"This includes developing new tools for the management of online conversations," he said, "but also means they need to be more proactive and responsive when their users are being targeted." ECT

Quinten Plummer is a longtime technology reporter and an avid PC gamer who explored local news for a few years, covering law enforcement and government beats, before returning to writing about things run by ones and zeros and the people who make them. If it pushes pixels or improves lives, he wants to learn all he can about it.

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