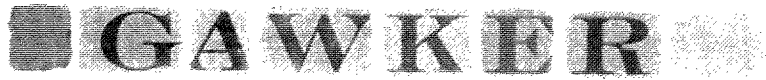


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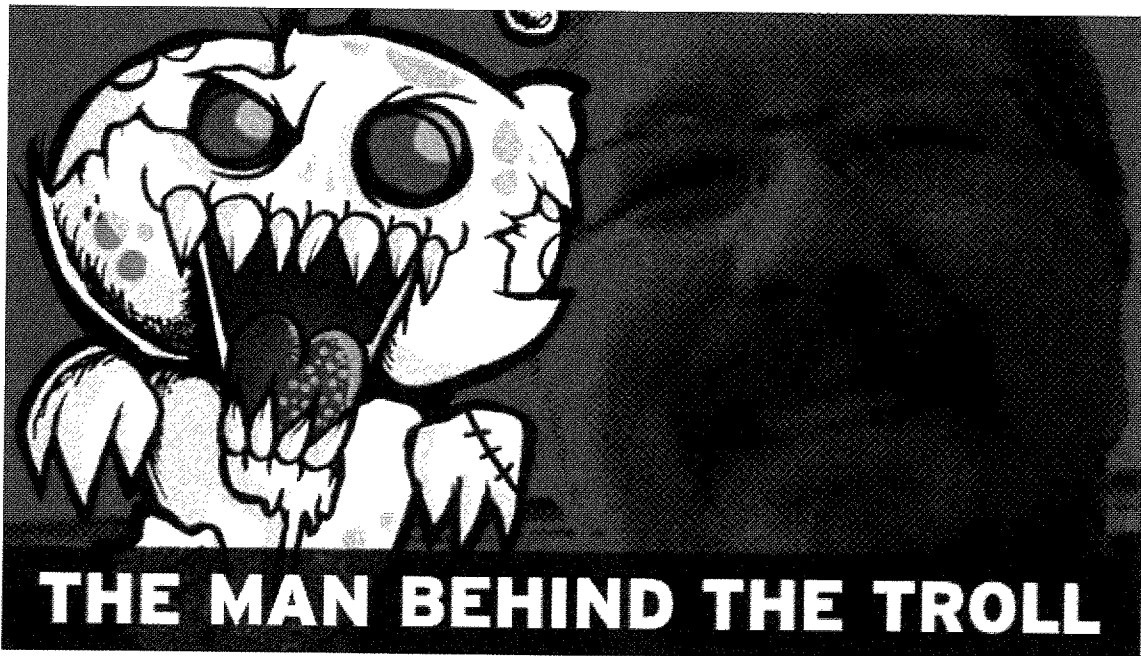


# Unmasking Reddit's Violentacrez, The Biggest Troll on the Web



Adrian Chen

Filed to: VIOLENTACREZ 10/12/12 5:00pm



Last Wednesday afternoon I called Michael Brutsch. He was at the office of the Texas financial services company where he works as a programmer and he was having a bad day. I had just told him, on Gchat, that I had uncovered his identity as the notorious internet troll Violentacrez (pronounced *Violent-Acres*).

"It's amazing how much you can sweat in a 60 degree office," he said with a nervous laugh.

Judging from his internet footprint, Brutsch, 49, has a lot to sweat over. If you are capable of being offended, Brutsch has almost certainly done something that would offend you, then did his best to rub your face in it. His speciality is distributing images of scantily-clad underage girls, but as Violentacrez he also issued an unending fountain of racism, porn, gore, misogyny, incest, and exotic abominations yet unnamed, all on the sprawling online community Reddit. At the time I called Brutsch, his latest project was moderating a new section of Reddit where users posted covert photos they had taken of women in public, usually close-ups of their asses or breasts, for a voyeuristic sexual thrill. It was called "Creepshots." Now Brutsch was the one feeling exposed and it didn't suit him very well.

But Michael Brutsch is more than a monster. Online, Violentacrez has been one of Reddit's most reviled characters but also one of its most beloved users. The self-described "creepy uncle of Reddit" has played a little-known but crucial role in Reddit's development into the online juggernaut it is today. In real life, Brutsch is a military father and cat-lover. He lives with his wife in the Dallas suburb of Arlington, Texas. There are many sides to Violentacrez, and now that I had Michael Brutsch on the phone I hoped to find out where the troll ended and the real person began.

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I first became aware of Violentacrez last year, when controversy erupted over a section, called "Jailbait," that Violentacrez had created on Reddit dedicated to sexualized images of underaged girls. (Brutsch adapted the name from "Violent Acres," a popular anonymous blogger he was fond of in the mid-2000s.) Reddit, for the uninitiated, is essentially a social news site; with a free username, anyone can submit and vote on content and can do so anonymously. And anyone can start a forum on Reddit dedicated to their interests, known as a subreddit. Today, there are about 10,000 active subreddits out of nearly 100,000 total, spanning a dizzying array of topics from funny pictures, to Power Rangers, to pooping. If a post gets enough "upvotes," as they're called, it can be propelled to the front page of Reddit and a massive audience.

The breadth of topics and dedication of users has made Reddit, which calls itself the "front page of the internet," the single dominant force in internet culture today, boasting over 3.4 billion pageviews this August. It reached a new level of legitimacy last month, when President Obama held a Q & A on Reddit. These days, Reddit is mentioned in the same breath as Twitter and Facebook by pundits expounding on the power of social media.

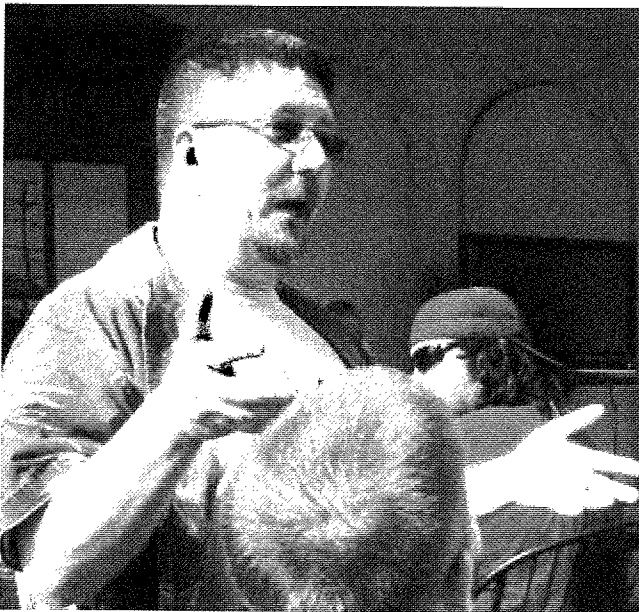
But Reddit's laissez-faire attitude towards offensive speech has led to a vast underbelly that rivals anything on the notorious cesspool 4chan. And with Jailbait, Violentacrez decided to create a safe space for people sexually attracted to underage girls to share their photo stashes. I would call these people pedophiles; the Jailbait subreddit called them "ephebophiles." Jailbait was the online equivalent of systematized street harassment. Users posted snapshots of tween and teenage girls, often in bikinis and skirts. Many of these were lifted from their Facebook accounts and thrown in front of Jailbait's 20,000 horny subscribers.

Violentacrez and his fellow moderators worked hard to make sure every girl on jailbait was underage, diligently deleting any photos whose subjects seemed older than 16 or 17. Violentacrez himself posted hundreds of photos. Jailbait became one of Reddit's most popular subreddits, generating millions of pageviews a month. "Jailbait" was for a time the second biggest search term bringing traffic to Reddit, after "Reddit." Eventually, Jailbait landed on CNN, where Anderson Cooper called out Reddit for hosting it, and Violentacrez for creating it. The ensuing outcry led Reddit administrators to reluctantly ban Jailbait, and all sexually suggestive content featuring minors.



### Reddit Reluctantly Bans Child Porn

Metastasized Xbox fan message board Reddit is a little less pervy this morning after it explicitly...



On the phone, Michael Brutsch insisted he is not a pedophile but was unapologetic about Jailbait. He compared the photos of underage girls he posted

Michael Brutsch at a Reddit meet-up.

to Britney Spears' sultry "Hit Me Baby One More Time" video. She was 16 at the time, he said—how was that different than what he was doing? Brutsch said he only reposted photos that he'd found elsewhere, mostly on 4chan, and that he promptly removed any outright child porn that was posted.

"I've always been upfront about the sorts of things that I find attractive," he said. Brutsch didn't create the creepshots subreddit which was launched earlier this year. But when it started to get heat after a teacher in Georgia was fired at the end of September for allegedly posting covert pictures of his underage students, it only made sense that the section's moderators would bring Violentacrez on to help deal with the newfound attention. He was a moderator until Creepshots was banned this week amid increasing controversy. (The circumstances surrounding Creepshots' ban is unclear, as Reddit's General Manager had told BuzzFeed they would not ban the subreddit because it wasn't breaking Reddit's rules.)



#### How to Shut Down Reddit's CreepShots Once and for All: Name Names

A 25-year-old female Redditor has finally come up with a way to beat Reddit's r/CreepShots...

Having his screenname mangled by Anderson Cooper on CNN for Jailbait was Violentacrez's biggest moment as a troll, but it wasn't his first time in the spotlight. Since Brutsch stumbled on Reddit from a link on the internet culture blog Boing Boing in 2007, he has pushed the boundaries of Reddit's free-speech culture. He has done this mostly through creating offensive subreddits to troll sensitive users. Some of the sections Violentacrez created or moderated were called:

- Chokeabitch
- Niggerjailbait
- Rapebait
- Hitler
- Jewmerica
- Misogyny
- Incest
- 

You can look those up on Reddit and visit them if you'd like to ruin your day, but the content is self-explanatory.

Unlike Jailbait, which apparently sprung from a sincere interest, many of Violentacrez's most offensive subreddits were created just to enrage other Reddit users. At this they were very effective. What happened was, some do-gooder would stumble upon one of his offensive subreddits and expose it to the rest of Reddit in an outraged post. Then thousands more would vote the thing to the front page of Reddit. Cries to censor it would sound out, to be almost inevitably beaten back by cries of "free speech!" The idea of free speech is sacred to many Reddit users, a product of the free-wheeling online message board culture from which Reddit springs. If you criticize someone else for posting something you don't like, you are a whiny fascist.

Violentacrez explained his trolling philosophy to the internet culture website the Daily Dot in August of 2011. He had sparked yet another controversy by posting a graphic image of a partially clothed woman being brutally beaten by a large man, in "beatingwomen," a subreddit dedicated to glorifying violence against women. A Redditor had called out the picture in a post, and it was voted to the front page.

"People take things way too seriously around here," Violentacrez said. "I was not surprised by the outrage of the person who made the post, because I see it all the time. What was surprising was the community support for it. Most posts that complain about these things never do very well, and are quickly buried or deleted. I think it's interesting how many people defend my right to act the way I do, while decrying my posts themselves."

A troll exploits social dynamics like computer hackers exploit security loopholes, and Violentacrez calmly exploited the Reddit hive mind's powerful outrage machine and free speech values at the same time.

It was this pattern, repeated to various degrees dozens of times, that made Violentacrez an unlikely hero to many of the white male geeks who make up Reddit's hard core. They saw Violentacrez as a champion in the fight against the oppressive schoolmarms: "He upheld a certain amount of freedom for the worst of us to ensure freedom for all of us," wrote one user in a post mourning his departure. Fans followed him wherever he went on the site.

As his fame grew, Brutsch began selling T-shirts with an illustration of a zombified version of Reddit's alien logo, designed by a professional illustrator, that he had adopted as Violentacrez's logo. He created a subreddit called Violentacrez,

dedicated to news and posts about himself. Last year, the Daily Dot named him the most important Redditor of the year. Violentacrez was the most influential user of one of the most influential websites on the internet.

All the while, Violentacrez's critics cried out the same refrain: "How does he get away with this?" One reason Violentacrez continued to occupy such a high-profile position on Reddit was of course his free speech rhetoric. But Violentacrez has historically had a close relationship with Reddit's staff, a fact far less well-known than his controversial behavior. Violentacrez was a troll, but he was a well-connected troll. He told me he was close with a number of early Reddit employees—many of whom have now moved on—chatting with them on IRC or sometimes even on the phone. A few years ago, while Jailbait was still going strong, Reddit's administrators gave him a special one-of-a-kind "pimp hat" badge to honor his contributions to the site, which he proudly displayed on his profile. Brutsch said he was even in the final running for a job as a customer support representative at Reddit last year.

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During the Jailbait controversy, Erik Martin, the site's General Manager, reached out to Violentacrez beforehand to warn him that they were going to have to shut down his prized possession, according to a chat conversation Violentacrez leaked at the time.

"Want to give you a heads up," Martin wrote. "We're making a policy change regarding jailbait type content. Don't really have a choice."

(Martin did not respond to requests for comment.)

Violentacrez's privileged position came from the fact that for years he had helped administrators deal with the massive seedy side of Reddit, acting almost as an unpaid staff member. Reddit administrators essentially handed off the oversight of the site's NSFW side to Violentacrez, according to former Reddit lead programmer Chris Slowe (a.k.a. Keysersosa), who worked at Reddit from 2005 to the end of 2010. When Violentacrez first joined the site and started filling it with filth,

administrators were wary and they often clashed. But eventually administrators and Violentacrez came to an uneasy truce, according to Slowe. For all his unpleasantness, they realized that Violentacrez was an excellent community moderator and could be counted on to keep the administrators abreast of any illegal content he came across.

"Once we came to terms he was actually pretty helpful. He would come to us with things that we hadn't noticed," said Slowe. "At the time there was only four of us working so that was a great resource for us to have."

Administrators realized it was easier to outsource the policing of questionable content to Violentacrez than to dirty their hands themselves, or ostracize him and risk even worse things happening without their knowledge. The devil you know. So even as Jailbait flourished and became an ever-more-integral part of Reddit's traffic and culture—in 2008 it won the most votes in a "subreddit of the year" poll—administrators looked the other way. "We just stayed out of there and let him do his thing and we knew at least he was getting rid of a lot of stuff that wasn't particularly legal," Slowe said. "I know I didn't want it to be my job."

Violentacrez's close relationship to administrators made him an elite member of Reddit's army of moderators, known as "mods" on the site. Though much is made of the millions of users who submit content to Reddit, it's Reddit's over 20,000 volunteer mods who are the real secret behind its success. They act as janitors and editors, keeping their subreddits clean and well-stocked with content. Reddit's main innovation has been to move these users up the food chain, from simple content-generators to management positions. This allows Reddit's mind-boggling breadth of content and users to be overseen by just a few paid employees. The downside is that it requires Reddit's official management to enter into uneasy symbiotic relationships with sketchy but effective moderators like Violentacrez.

And sometimes those relationships become more trouble than they're worth. After the Jailbait controversy, Violentacrez claimed repeatedly on Reddit, he was cut off from administrators who had been burned by the controversy. In fact, when I spoke to him, Brutsch said Reddit admins had been keeping their distance for a while. He suggested that the site wasn't what it used to be. In recent days, he has been posting less, stirring up less drama.



When it comes to mods, the political model of Reddit is not so much a vast digital democracy, as it's often framed by fans and users, as online feudalism. Moderators like Violentacrez are given absolute control over their turf in exchange for keeping the kingdom of Reddit strong. Moderators become more or less powerful in direct relation to the number and popularity of the subreddits they moderate, so they try to take over other subreddits to boost their profile in the community. Inevitably, Reddit's administrators develop relationships with the most influential moderators. Like feuding medieval lords vying for the king's favor, moderators form alliances or wage epic flame wars over power struggles.

This is how Violentacrez, Reddit's creepiest user, also became its most powerful. Sure, he was responsible for the absolute worst stuff on Reddit, and by extension, some of the worst stuff on the internet. But Violentacrez was also seen to be, as Chris Slowe put it to me, "a trustworthy and a positive member of the community." He moderated more than 400 subreddits and had many high-profile friends, amassed over many years. His stable at times included hundreds of popular mainstream subreddits, like Funny and WTF, that reach audiences of millions. Violentacrez further solidified his reach by becoming a mentor to other moderators. He created the first FAQ for Reddit's rather unintuitive moderator interface. He also helmed a number of subreddits dedicated to providing guidance and camaraderie for other moderators, including the essential modhelp.

So it was no surprise that when news got out earlier this week that I was working on a story that would expose Violentacrez's real identity, other moderators on Reddit rallied to defend him. The popular politics subreddit led the charge, by banning all Gawker links.

"As moderators, we feel that this type of behavior is completely intolerable," they wrote. "We volunteer our time on Reddit to make it a better place for the users, and should not be harassed and threatened for that. We should all be afraid of the threat of having our personal information investigated and spread around the internet if someone disagrees with you."

Some have taken this as an expression of Reddit's users' fondness of Violentacrez's pornographic generosity. In fact the ban was probably more an expression of friendship by the Politics subreddit moderators. Violentacrez probably trained some of them. They were mad that their buddy was going to be outed for simply, in their mind, exercising his free speech—his unalienable right to anonymously post stalker shots of women.

When I called Brutsch that Wednesday afternoon and told him I knew who he was, I was a little taken aback by how calm he remained during our intense but civil hour-long conversation. I had figured that a man whose hobby was saying horrible shit just to screw with people online would rise to some new horrible level when conditions on the ground actually called for it. Instead he pleaded with me in an affectless monotone not to reveal his name.

"My wife is disabled. I got a home and a mortgage, and if this hits the fan, I believe this will affect negatively on my employment," he said. "I do my job, go home watch TV, and go on the internet. I just like riling people up in my spare time."

I asked if he regretted anything he had posted, now that he'd be found out. No, he said. "I would stand by exactly what I've done." The problem was, he explained, that if his identity got out, his many enemies would start attaching lies to his name because they simply don't like his views. They would say he was a child pornographer, when all he had done was spearhead the distribution of thousands of *legal* photos of underage girls. They would say the fact that he created a subreddit dedicated to Hitler meant he was anti-Semitic, when really it was just trolling. (Brutsch says he's got Jewish blood himself: "If you see a picture of me, I'm about as Jewish looking as they get.") They would Google-bomb his name and the word "pedophile" along with his publicly-traded company's name.

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He needed to keep his anonymity to protect his ability to express things many people think but hardly anyone says. With Violentacrez, "I got the freedom to talk about my personal life, my personal feelings... I'm sure there's more than one person in this building who's a pervert," he said, referring his office building.

He asked a number of times if there was anything he could do to keep me from outing him. He offered to act as a mole for me, to be my "sockpuppet" on Reddit. "I'm like the spy who's found out," he said. "I'll do anything. If you want me to stop posting, delete whatever I

said. "I would stand by exactly what I've done."

posted, whatever. I am at your mercy because I really can't think of anything worse that could possibly happen. It's not like I do anything illegal."

I told him it wasn't my place to tell him what to do, that I was just reporting on what he'd already done, but this did shake me a bit. It didn't help that our phone call had been unplanned and I hadn't properly steeled myself

for a tough conversation. In the beginning it was just supposed to be a friendly gchat conversation with Violentacrez, not a confrontation with Brutsch himself.

I had initially told Violentacrez I was interested in profiling him in light of the new controversy surrounding creepshots. I arranged the Gchat interview without hinting that a former online friend had tipped me off to his real identity during the Jailbait scandal, after the friend had become disgusted with his obsession with underage girls. Since then, Violentacrez had recorded the geek podcast The Drill Down with other high-profile Reddit moderators, outing his voice. All I had to do was call up Michael Brutsch and match his voice to Violentacrez's. My plan that Wednesday was to have the chat with Violentacrez before calling Brutsch. I didn't want to risk calling Brutsch first, only to have him shut down completely once he realized he was outed.

Unfortunately, I've never been good at keeping secrets. My poker face is so bad it can be read even through a computer screen, apparently. In our Gchat, I pressed Violentacrez about his anonymity enough that he grew suspicious. We were chatting about why he feels comfortable attending IRL meet-ups of Redditors if his anonymity was so important to him when he caught on.

**me:** *it seems like you're not super careful about keeping your identity under wraps, if you meet people in real life. A lot of trolls I've talked to would never do that or give out as many details about themselves as they do.*

**violentacrez:** *have you been given my real name?*

**me:** *yeah*

**violentacrez:** *that's not good*

**me:** *it seems like you've told a lot of people. Are you surprised it would get out?*

**violentacrez:** *yes, I thought I could trust those who know. Are you going to out me?*

Panicking a bit, I quickly picked up the phone and dialed the number I had found on Brutsch's online resume so I could hear Brutsch's voice to see if it matched Violentacrez. It did.

"So, are you going to out me?" he said.

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One thing that Brutsch wasn't worried about when I talked to him on the phone was his immediate family finding out about his online habits.

"He won't really care," said Brutsch of his teenage son, the one about to join the Marines. "He thinks I'm creepy as it is."

The Violentacrez clan seems to have walked out of a Todd Solondz movie, and a significant part of Violentacrez's mythos on Reddit comes from the details he's shared about his family. In 2010, Violentacrez hosted a legendary "Ask Me Anything" thread—the same Q & A feature Barack Obama took part in last month. He was asked what was the creepiest thing he'd done "IRL" and delighted readers with a tale ripped out of Penthouse letters. "That'd be a tough call,"

Violentacrez wrote, "Perhaps oral sex with my 19-year-old stepdaughter." It was completely consensual, he claimed in the post, and went on to brag about how awesome it had been in graphic detail.

This happened over ten years ago, Violentacrez claimed. When his then-wife, the girl's mother, found out, she "got mad, then got over it," Violentacrez wrote. He says they were married for ten more years.

His current wife is similarly accepting of Brutsch's unsavory side, according to Brutsch. She is not only aware of his online habits, she's also a prolific Redditor under the handle `not_so_violentacrez`. She is a founder of the Fibromyalgia subreddit. She has diabetes and plays the online game Kingdom of Camelot. Violentacrez said that at home, the two would lie in bed together with their laptops, both on Reddit, him posting his porn, she posting cute animal videos and pictures of dolphins.

About a year ago, Violentacrez's teenage son did his own Ask Me Anything thread. His son uses the handle `Spawn_of_VA` and he is dad's biggest fan. Interspersed among talk of family game night, `Spawn_of_VA` regaled readers with more weird tidbits about his father, including the fact that he has a "suitcase full of dildos in his closet" and a "roller type thing with spikes on it, he uses that to roll on his balls."

When I first read Violentacrez's and his son's AMAs I, like many other readers, figured this was just some next-level trolling. Violentacrez's wife and his son were probably just sockpuppets, right? But on the phone, I asked Brutsch if `Spawn_of_VA` was really his son. He is, Brutsch said. I asked if everything he and his son had said in their AMAs were real. As far as he could remember, he said, it was.

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The extent to which trolls separate, or fail to separate, their online and IRL lives is as varied as people themselves. There's an idea of the troll as an information age Jekyll & Hyde, with the anonymity provided by the internet playing the role of Hyde's serum that transforms the mild-mannered geek into a monster. Observers often cite the psychological theory called deindividuation, which argues people literally lose themselves when granted anonymity.

But Violentacrez/Michael Brutsch upset this idea by blurring his online and offline lives. Brutsch adopted a new name for trolling, but he built his horrible character on many details from his real life. In real life, Brutsch is an unabashedly creepy old man with seven cats and two dogs and a disabled wife and a teenage son about to join the Marines. He was all of that online, too—only he was *famous* for it.

Both offline and online he could be either a creepy uncle, or a loyal friend and helpful guide. Violentacrez had a surprising number of friends on Reddit, for someone who once created an entire subreddit dedicated to pictures of dead teenage girls (Picsofdeadjailbait). He helped organize IRL meet-ups, where he showed up in a t-shirt with his zombie logo on it, and told everyone there to call him "VA." Attendees agreed to blur his face in any resulting pictures before posting them to Reddit. Brutsch is an internet minister, and he said he once married a pair of Redditors in real life, though they only knew him by his "clean" handle: mbrutsch.

One longtime Redditor I spoke to talked about Violentacrez with the warmth of an old college friend.

"He's a really a good guy," she said. This user was in the Arlington area for business once, and she stopped by Brutsch's house for lunch. "He has the manners of a Southern gentleman," she said. "A bunch of neighborhood kids were over playing at his house."

The only thing missing was joining the name Violentacrez to the name Michael Brutsch, and even that information he had given to many of his online friends. Reddit administrators have long known his real identity, Brutsch said, which he gave them in order to prove that he had nothing to hide. But Brutsch was still anonymous to the people he wanted to be, mainly his employers, and by unmasking him I am sure to get criticism for supposedly violating his privacy.

Even before I published this article, Reddit had already exploded in outrage. (Gawker sites are now banned from over 60 subreddits, and some pissed off user has signed me up for approximately two dozen mailing lists.) The irony of being upset that a noted custodian of "creepshots" is getting some unwanted attention himself is obvious. Jailbait defenders would often argue that if 14-year-olds didn't want their bikini pictures to be posted to Reddit, they should not have taken them and uploaded them to their Facebook accounts in the first place. If Brutsch did not

want his employers to know that he had become a minor internet celebrity through spending hours every day posting photos of 14-year-olds in bikinis to thousands of people on the internet, he should have stuck to posting cat videos.

But for Reddit, the stakes are higher than just one man having to answer for things he's done online. To them, the "doxing" of Violentacrez—"doxing" is hacker slang for publishing someone's personal information in order to intimidate or punish them—is an assault on the very structure of Reddit itself. The Daily Dot sums up their logic:

*At Web communities like Reddit, which thrive because users are free to say and do anything they want, doxing is a severe crime, both to users and the site's staff. It's far worse than offensive speech like racism and homophobia or, yes, even posting surreptitiously snapped photos of innocent women for creeps to perv over. Why? Because doxing undermines the community's structural integrity: Reddit simply would not exist as we know it if users weren't operating under the freedom of a flexible identity. So redditors aren't banning Gawker to protect violentacrez, they're doing it to protect themselves.*

Under Reddit logic, outing Violentacrez is worse than anonymously posting creepshots of innocent women, because doing so would undermine Reddit's role as a safe place for people to anonymously post creepshots of innocent women.

I am OK with that.

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Brutsch shut down the Violentacrez account abruptly this past Tuesday, six days after we spoke. When I Gchatted him that night, Brutsch told me, "I guess I just got tired of all the hassle." He said he was done with Reddit for good. "Reddit ceased being fun a while ago," he said.

Now he's going to spend the hours he used to lose to Reddit on work. "Oh, and possibly looking for a job will obviously keep me busy ;)"

I asked what he'll miss most about Reddit. "The people," he said. "Reddit is nothing without the community. I've already gotten a few cheery goodbyes from people: 'Keep in touch. You are still a good friend.'"

But he didn't stay away long. In the past couple days, he apparently popped up in a private subreddit called "modtalk," where moderators and administrators talk clear up some misconceptions about why he'd left. (Including one rumor that I had somehow "blackmailed" him into quitting.) In the ensuing discussion, a user named themanwithnname wrote, "VA, I don't know you personally, but I've appreciated some of your comments over the years. I hope your life rocks from here out."

To which Violentacrez replied, under the handle VA\_11102012: "I miss posting porn."

**Update, Monday 10/15:** Reddit's Biggest Troll Fired From His Real-World Job; Reddit Continues to Censor Gawker Articles



**Reddit's Biggest Troll Fired From His Real-World Job; Reddit Continues to Censor Gawker Articles**

Michael Brutsch, the Texas man behind the notorious Reddit troll Violentacrez, was fired this...

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