



9 MAY –
11 AUGUST 2024
Online

CURATED BY
REA MCNAMARA

ORGANIZED BY
THE MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT
CAT BLUEMKE AND JONATHAN CARROLL

WAKE WINDOWS: THE WITCHING HOUR

Daddit moderator Mike Crow with curator Rea McNamara

[r/Daddit](#) is a Reddit community for dads with over 1.2 million subscribers. Founded in 2010, it's one of the largest online forums focused on fathers' ever-evolving roles; popular threads include baby announcements, marital and custody issues, and praise for the Australian animated kids series *Bluey*.

Below is an edited and abridged interview I conducted in May 2023 over Zoom with Mike Crow, one of the moderators. He lives in Sacramento, California and is the father of two boys, 5 and 7 years old.

Rea McNamara (RM): Can you share how Daddit is a safe online space?

Mike Crow (MC): We still only have three to four active mods, but we do a lot more with automated moderation, which greatly helps. And we also, and maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, but as far as safe spacekeeping, several years ago, we opted out as a community of r/All, which is the aggregate forum/subreddit that pulls all of the subs in. Based on their algorithm, if you have a very popular thread in your sub, you'll get posted to r/All and you'll be seen. And we found that that was bringing in a lot of toxicity. As soon as you hit that front page of r/All, everyone, non-subscribers sees it, and things go poorly. We didn't want that, so we opted out. We're still public; it's not like we're exclusionary or exclusive, but we don't go to the place where anyone who isn't necessarily looking for parenting advice can find us as easily. Or unwittingly find us, would maybe be a better way to say it.

RM: I find it interesting how Daddit practices non-toxic masculinity, specifically through its community moderation and user base that collectively practices parental behaviour modelling. Does that resonate with your own experience?

MC: Like anything of this nature, it's multifactorial. Looking at those different factors, one is that I did not have an involved father, so I wanted to be that. I didn't necessarily have a model to go off of. I had a negative model, the opposite of what I wanted. But that's very hard to work off of in the human mind. It's hard to do the opposite of what you don't know.

That was part of it: looking for guidance and a place. I like helping people. I like being involved in things like that. When my [oldest] son was six months old, I started volunteering at a Kaiser hospital in San Jose, and that was a wonderful experience, but that also gave me some connections. And I started to work with them on setting up a support group for dads,

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just a community-based support group that ended up not going anywhere because we decided to leave the community and move to a more rural part of the state. But they were very amenable to it. They were open to it. They were willing to fund—like it was very positive. And there are some kinds of base formats that I found online. And it was like, dads bring your kid, they'll be a facilitator dad, hopefully, who has their kids there and we'll talk about it and like, how do you hold your kid? How do you deal with this? Moms have moms, and moms have aunts, and everyone expects moms to do these things naturally. And not many people are saying, here, hold my baby to a dad. So, getting those sorts of environments and knowing that things like that existed in the flesh but are not common and still needed for dads led me to the online environment because you can just reach so many more people.

RM: Hot-button topics in the community include circumcision and gun ownership. How do you approach moderation when these subjects come up?

MC: Harkening back to being a gamer and computer nerd my whole life, that nerd ethos is “let's look for data and find real answers that are empirically backed, using the medical evidence-based model.” That's how I've approached it. A big one that comes up, I mean, we recently prohibited it and provided resources on it, was discussions of circumcision, male circumcision, because it's incendiary. It's commonplace in the U.S. but

not as much in the rest of the world. There are two very heated sides to that, it's just too challenging to discuss. We're very pro-discussion, but we need to be respectful and polite because otherwise, it will deteriorate.

I look at the moderation job as I used to be a boxer and look at it very much like a referee in a boxing match. No one will know they're there if they're doing their job well. That's how moderation should be. You just step back and let people do their thing. And as with parenting, right? Let the kids do their thing and calmly and casually guide them along the right path if they start astray. Sometimes, you have to be more aggressive, and people need timeouts. I take this approach with some of the dads, too. Like, hey, are you behaving online like you'd want your kids to behave? Is this how you want your kids to interact with other people? Take a week off from Daddit; you're banned for a week. You can still read it; come back, and let's be kinder. Some people get that, and some people don't. And bans go on longer.

RM: COVID was brutal for parents. Given how online everyone was then, can you speak on how that period impacted the community, especially from a mental health standpoint?

MC: We added a flair option¹ that's “[support](#),” and we changed our rules to say in a support thread any time someone posts to “support,” an auto-mod post goes up. The first comment is sticky, and it says like, this is a support thread. It's strictly moderated. If you're not

¹ Typically, “flair” refers to the ways a Reddit user adds additional information about themselves next to their username. However, many subreddits also use “flair” to categorize posts submitted by users, similar to how tagging is used for blog posts.

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supportive, you will be banned without warning. Because we need a place to go like, man, this sucks. Like, yeah, a miscarriage, or a baby dying in the delivery room or the NICU, or in a car accident at 16. Like, it doesn't matter. But someone needs a place to go and not have someone coming in and going, you're baby killers. No one needs to hear that. Letting people know there's just no tolerance for it. That's a big part of moderation, too. We try not to be strict in the rule set but also go in like, yeah, there are rules, and they're blatant. They're here. And if you don't follow them, there are consequences. Our communities responded well to that.

COVID was [also] the impetus for us to move to more active moderation and more aggressively moderating in a way that values science and evidence-based discussion. Because we're a parenting forum with many users, we can't have—it's unethical to allow people to share things that are so visible that they could hurt children. And we got hate for that, not probably from the community, but some very vocal, angry people. And I'm okay with that. But that was the challenge we faced. And that's when we said, okay, this will stop, and we're just, you're being banned. This is not worth our time anymore because this is just BS.

COVID has been hard. It has, though I'd want to say it's benefited our modding. We've become better moderators and a better-moderated community because of it.

RM: How much does the anonymous nature of Reddit contribute to creating a safe online space for parents and other more vulnerable communities?

MC: I don't know that it's any different than anywhere else on the Internet regarding that anonymity. Maybe it is. I would [consider it more as a] perceived anonymity. Most of us are just like, well, it's the Internet. No one knows who I am! I might be a golden retriever on this keyboard, right? Anyone with some savvy could find out exactly who we are, regardless of our throw-away handle. That perceived anonymity carries so much for people, or like this is our community, Daddit. But it's international; it's a world community of people. This is not going down to the YMCA for a dads group. No one in this group knows my wife. I don't work with any of these people. They're not going to see me out at wherever the rock climbing gym or our local river. Even if you know me, you're not part of that local community. So I don't have to interact with you every day. I can just put it out there and then step away. It's an, I want to say, isolated space, but that's not the best verbiage there. But it is a dedicated space that has been removed from everyday life, as the Internet often is for most of us. But that's what it does. It's not specific to Reddit.

RM: Daddit has been frequently referred to as a "wholesome" place: you just have all these guys coming together who are really into being involved dads, but also involved dads who are co-parenting. And it's strange how relatively new that concept still is in this day and age.

MC: I think you hit on it, though. Mothering is as old as the species. Beyond, right? It's as old as sentient beings or animals. Whereas this idea that dads even matter is less than 100 years old from a scientific standpoint. Like, largely it was conception and then get out of the way. Mom has her mom and aunts and the rest of

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the village or tribal women, and dads go out and don't interact with children until they need to learn to hunt or they're women, and they probably don't interact until they're going to become partners. And we don't see that anymore. But even in a generation before us, like Gen Xers, there are plenty of them who, in the workplace, they'd say, I've never changed a diaper, like proudly. And you go like, I've heard people—men in my generation who go like, oh man, it's you're having twins. That's going to be tough. Do you have any plans for getting through it? And they go, yeah, earplugs. And I'm like, you're just going to put all that on your partner. That's miserable and unfair.

There are many really lousy dads and lousy male partners for whatever reason. But Daddit is, by and large, a self-selecting group of involved dads, fathers, and partners. We're here because we want to be involved. After all, we want to be better.

One interaction I had a couple of years ago was someone posted proudly and said my son was crying for the first time, and I got to tell him, stop that, or I'll give you something to cry about. And some of us chimed in, and we're like, what the hell are you doing here? Why? You're threatening to hurt him because he's showing emotion. And he says, well, that's just what my dad told me. That's it. That's the past. But look at this, let's talk about this. And we can talk it out to the point where this is mind-blowing after a handful of responses like that. Like, thank you so much. I'll never say that again. And that's one of those little things where you go, okay, this is worthwhile. We hope to change someone and someone's child's life forever. And I mean, that's toxic masculinity.

But that was so prevalent. Not having role models is a big reason why Daddit exists, as many of us didn't. Because it didn't exist.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Rea McNamara is a writer and curator based in Tkaronto/Toronto. Her curatorial work has long been shaped by networked counterpublics' participatory cultures, particularly the collaborative processes of transformative fandom, alongside a social practice shaped by organizing community-based art initiatives. In her research, she often focuses on the emergence of otherness and hybridity within digital identity formations, informing an on/offline curatorial approach that connects and capacity-builds.

McNamara has previously held curatorial and public programming positions with the Gardiner Museum and Drake Hotel, and been awarded grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. She has curated and organized a range of exhibitions and public projects, including *dis-ease* (Vector Festival, 2021), *Obsessive Pop Tendencies* (Pleasure Dome, 2019), *Community Arts Space* (Gardiner Museum, 2016-2019), and *Safe Space* (Scotiabank Nuit Blanche 2024). In 2011, she founded the art party series *Sheroes*, which engaged with female celebrity fandom through music, performance, installation, and internet-based art. Her work has been presented at The Art Gallery of Ontario and is in the Whitney Museum of American Art collection.

Additionally, McNamara has written about art, culture and the internet for *frieze*, *Art in America*, *The Globe and Mail*, and been commissioned to write exhibition texts for Trinity Square Video, the Remai Modern, and Daniel Faria Gallery. From 2020-2021, she was the Emily H. Tremaine Journalism Fellow for Curators with *Hyperallergic*. She also gives talks, moderates panels, and lead workshops on fandom, curatorial practice, and the labour of mothering for The Toronto Public Library, Toronto Metropolitan University, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and more.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Wake Windows: The Witching Hour

Led by a rebellious AI Chatbot, this interactive online exhibition guides viewers through interactive and time-based art by artists who are parents, caregivers, or educators who engage with public databases and “living archives.” In touching on maternal world building and our ever-evolving relationship with AI, *Wake Windows: The Witching Hour* intends to make visible the missing datasets in our collective understanding of the often invisible labour that is mothering. From animations to machinimas or virtual reality (VR) to interactive narratives, the digital exhibition traces how the artists' creative outputs have shifted since taking on this care work. Curated by Rea McNamara, participating artists and collaborators include Claudia Cornwall, Alejandra Higuera with Magnolia Higuera, Faith Holland with Ben Bogart and Hildegard Holland Watter, Wednesday Kim, Lauren Lee McCarthy, Rory Scott, Skawennati, and Rodell Warner. *Wake Windows* is part of a series of digital exhibitions created through the MacKenzie Art Gallery's Digital Exhibitions Toolkit and Art Installation Launcher (DETAIL)—a newly developed resource championing the development of art exhibitions for digital platforms.

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Lauren Lee McCarthy
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Skawennati
Rodell Warner

SPECIAL THANKS

Cat Bluemke
Jonathan Carroll
Iain Soder
Claudia Cornwall
Rodney LaTourelle and Louise Witthöft
Geoff Yuen and Lee Froese of The Hatcher
Crystal Mowry
Nicolle Nugent
Jayne Wilkinson
Lisa Karen Cox
Onika Powell
Sharn Peters
Natalie Haddad
Rosemary Heather
Linda Wilson
Tony Halmos and Quincy Lou McNamara-Halmos.

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