



WUDAN YAN

Roadblocks

An entrepreneur shares what happened when she set out to try to solve some of the problems she experienced firsthand in the tech industry.

In 2017, *MIT Technology Review* honored Tracy Chou as one of our 35 Innovators Under 35. At the time, Chou was working to expose Silicon Valley's diversity issues. As an engineer at Pinterest, she'd published a widely circulated blog post calling for tech companies to share data on how many women worked on their engineering teams. She collected their responses in a public database that revealed how homogeneous many technical teams at top companies still were.

About a year later, Chou started a company called Block Party that targets online harassment by giving Twitter users more control over which tweets appear in their feed and mentions. The service signed up its first paying customers in January.

With her new company, Chou wants to fix some of the problems she's experienced firsthand in the tech industry—including the sort of online harassment of which she has been a target. Here, we check in with Chou, who is based in San Francisco, to learn more about what it takes to make change in the tech sector and what entrepreneurs like her are up against.

When we last spoke, I had just left Pinterest. I've always been drawn to smaller companies: I joined Pinterest when it had about 10 employees and left when it had about 1,000. It felt like time for me to move on and do something new.

I've worked for so many startups and have come to recognize some of the structural issues around startups and funding and how those factors influence what problems get solved. A lot of founders naturally work on problems that directly affect them: it's easier to know

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what's important or what could be improved by technology.

In thinking about my next steps, I thought about products I've worked on and checked that against questions like, Do I care about this? Is there something to be made that can be commercially viable? There are lots of really important issues that will not be solved naturally through a startup.

I ended up on Block Party, which pulls together a few different threads from my background. I've worked as an engineer at various social platform companies, and I've worked on monitoring, moderating, and increasing the quality of content, and figuring out how product design influences community behavior. Not only did I build moderation tools at Quora that reviewed content quality, but I also took punitive actions against people who violated the site's policies.

I'd also spent a lot of time looking at how the lack of diversity and representation in teams meant that products were built in a skewed way. For instance, nondiverse teams of people who generally don't get targeted with abuse and harassment don't tend to build protections against that in their apps.

The last part of my background that led me to Block Party was just getting targeted more with harassment. Over the last year, I've definitely gotten more anti-Asian harassment online. Some of it was truly targeted at me by individuals, and other times I would attract trolls just by having a presence online.

I got online very young, and at first the internet was a fun way to connect with friends. I was on AOL Instant Messenger, which was a better way to chat with my friends in high school: I didn't have a cell phone, and I couldn't hog the



Tracy Chou on the cover of our 35 Innovators Under 35 issue in 2017.

phone line that I shared with my family. I was also on some of the blogging platforms, like Xanga and LiveJournal. They were nice outlets at the time.

Pretty early on, though, someone set up an anonymous Xanga page dedicated to hating me. I think it was someone from school, because it referenced things from high school. A lot of it was hating on me because I did well academically. It didn't bother me as much at the time as it did when I got older and looked back on it. Back then, I thought this person was just insecure and jealous. I thought it was a bit sad and messed up that someone would write full posts dedicated to trying to take me down.

I didn't report it. Who would I have reported it to? It didn't even cross my mind to go to my school and report it. And I didn't necessarily want my teachers or school administrators to see the page either, since it was pretty hateful content.

My parents didn't raise me to be someone who was outspoken and challenged the status quo. I definitely wasn't encouraged to speak up against the system in any way. Like many other children of Asian immigrants to the US, I grew up believing that this is not my country, and my parents and I are here trying to find opportunities for ourselves. We didn't have a safety net. I grew up more with a head-down mentality of do good work, work hard, and try to make it.

My dad, who's an engineer, gave me a philosophical thought experiment when I was quite young: If you could be reborn as anybody in the world tomorrow, how would you design the world today? You wouldn't want to design a world that's vastly unequal, where most

people are at the bottom, because that could very likely be you if you were born as anybody tomorrow. You'd want to design a much more equal world. That got me thinking I didn't like that the world was so unequal and so many people were much less lucky than me.

That feeling has made me take the privilege that I have and pay it forward to make the world a little more just. I went to Stanford; I've worked at companies that people within tech find credible. So I can try to amplify more voices or different perspectives.

When I decided to pursue Block Party, I did a bit of research and talked to others who have worked in anti-harassment, and to people who were building solutions, to understand what the market was like. Not a lot of companies understood the true user experience of dealing with harassment—it felt like many people were approaching this problem purely from a business angle, because they didn't know what it was like to experience it themselves. Some people were building machine-learning models to detect toxic content and thought that would solve the problem.

As someone who deals with this, I understand the emotional impact much more. There are certain things that are emotionally distressing to read even if they're unlikely to be flagged by an algorithm. For example, I once received a long message from a man which essentially said, "You should smile more and then you'll be more attractive."

That message bothered me for a few weeks before I realized how gaslighty and inappropriate it was. The impact was very emotional, and the meaning of the message—not to mention the anti-feminist and regressive point

of view within—goes deeper than what would be picked up by any algorithms.

My challenges in getting funding for Block Party started when I applied to be in the winter 2020 class for Y Combinator, an accelerator dedicated to funding early-stage startups. In Silicon Valley, if you're looking for a credential, Y Combinator is one of the better ones you can get. I applied, ironically, because I anticipated that YC—which is made up of mostly white men who wouldn't necessarily understand the problems I wanted to take on—would be very skeptical. My thinking was that if I had a YC stamp of approval, that could dispel some of the skepticism around my product.

I went to the YC campus in Mountain View, California, for my interview. They put applicants in different rooms with a panel of interviewers, and each room had a list of the interviewers printed outside. When I went to my room, I saw that list of names and thought, "This isn't going to be good." Of the four names, three were white men.

The interviews were only 10 minutes long, and my panel started by asking what I was building. I said, "Block Party is building consumer tools for dealing with online harassment and gives people more control over their online experience." And the question I got was "You said this is a consumer product, but consumer implies mass market, and this is a very niche problem. Right?"

The rest of the interview was pretty much like that: a strong assertion followed with "Right?" The whole tone of the interview was: online harassment was a small problem that's already being solved, so why are you working on this? I came out of the interview livid.

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After YC rejected me, I raised some follow-on funding to extend my pre-seed funding, about \$1.5 million. That might feel like a good chunk of money in some markets, but it's not enough to hire engineers, which means I had to be a lot more creative with how I built the product—I had to build it myself. There's no chance Block Party would have even gotten to where it is now if I were not myself a very strong engineer.

Last summer, as part of Mozilla's Fix the Internet incubator, I was asked to do a Reddit AMA in an effort to grow Block Party. I initially pushed back on that because my first reaction was: Reddit is the troll farm. At some point, I talked myself out of my initial instinct. I thought, maybe it won't be so bad! I've seen some good AMAs!

But within 10 or 15 minutes of the AMA starting, trolls took over the thread, presenting bad-faith arguments and burying all my answers. They were like, "Look, she's too afraid to answer the questions." I had answered, but my answers would just get buried or disappear. By the time the Reddit moderators locked the thread many, many hours later, there were thousands of comments, the majority of which were awful, terrible things. It was a really traumatic experience.

Then there were a couple of threads on 4Chan that referenced the Reddit AMA, which led 4Chan and Reddit trolls to launch an attack on Block Party. They submitted a bunch of applications for our waitlist through a sign-up form and created hundreds of accounts with my name and profile photo on Substack and posted racist, misogynistic content. For a couple of weeks, it was a nightmare everywhere I went online. I couldn't even log back on to Reddit because my Reddit

inbox was overflowing with harassment. It was ironic that if I build anti-harassment software, I just get harassed for it.

I have a stalker—an online harasser who has moved into real-world stalking—which made me more fearful. I wondered, will these trolls dox me or do something worse? When I've gone to file police reports on my stalker, I've felt gaslit. The police make notes like "Victim believes suspect is obsessed with her," which undercuts the truth: I get thousands of tweets from this person. He would fly to where I was. He has entry and exit records at the airport nearest to me, and told me what motel he stayed at when he was trying to find me in San Francisco.

Someone who works in private security once told me one of the best things you can do in that situation is to flip your mentality into one that's very proactive: think, if you were the stalker, what would you do? That helps you frame your defenses. Shifting your mentality to being proactive means you have agency and it's really helpful. Because if you feel like you're helpless and under attack, that's very debilitating.

As unpleasant as my experiences have been, I treat this all as user research for Block Party.

I want online harassment gone, and if I can be a part of solving this problem—whether that's with Block Party or not—I'm happy. I'm taking all the experiences that I've had in product engineering, working with Silicon Valley companies, working on platform companies, and my own experiences with harassment and hopefully turning it into something positive. ■

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