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Why We Share & Why It Matters

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Alfred_Hermida

Introduction

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT US. IT IS A STORY ABOUT HOW WE ARE making sense of the world at a time of remarkable change in the circulation of news, information and ideas. Our ability to share so much online, so often, so quickly with so many is rewriting the rules of the media game. Social media is transforming how we discover, learn and understand the world around us. But this is not a story about technology. People are not hooked on YouTube, Twitter or Facebook but on each other. Tools and services come and go; what is constant is our human urge to share.

Our enhanced capacity to share our experiences, emotions and opinions affects what we know and how we know it, requiring that we develop new skills to turn the rapid flow of information all around us into knowledge. Whenever I get asked to comment on how Facebook is making us lonelier or Twitter is full of falsehoods, I tend to spend the first ten minutes explaining that it isn't quite so black and white. For me, this is a dramatic illustration of the gulf between our view of social media and our understanding of it.

Every new form of communication brings with it a perennial angst about what it is doing to our brains. We are not the first to feel that everything is changing too quickly around us, and we won't be the last. Throughout history, communication technologies have been catalysts of societal and cultural change that upset the status quo. Even back in ancient Greece, Socrates was wary of books, as he feared they would undermine thinking and learning.

We can't help it. We are creatures of habit. We are comfortable in the cozy embrace of the familiar. Our views of a new form of communication tend to be shaped by personal history and experience. We fall back on tried and tested approaches that worked in the past. As Marshall McLuhan said, "We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future." I want us to be able to march forward into the future, equipped with the appropriate skills and expertise to make good decisions. New opportunities to create and share knowledge spark new ways of thinking and doing for those who are equipped with the skills and knowledge to take advantage of those new opportunities.

Social media is so easy to use from a technical point of view that it masks how radically it changes the way we communicate. In the space of a decade, the marketplace of ideas has been turned on its head. In the past, politicians and businesses would compete for the attention of journalists to try to get their message across to a mass audience. That audience was used to getting its news at set times of the day in neatly packaged formats, like newspapers produced by professionally trained journalists. Now politicians and businesses are reaching out directly to voters and consumers, bypassing the media. And the

news is a constant buzz in the background, available at any time, on any device, in just about any place, and is produced by both professionals and the audience itself.

Every generation that has lived through a period of media upheaval has faced the same issues. In the Middle Ages, it took about two hundred years for people to trust what was written on parchment over the oral recollection of witnesses. Before there was a written record of who owned property, villagers would turn to the elders to end disputes. When written records were first introduced, people treated them with suspicion. They asked some of the same questions we ask of what we read on Twitter: How do I know this document is accurate and reliable? How do I know it is not a forgery? It took a shift in mindset for communities to trust a piece of paper over the vague memory of the oldest person in the village.

The development of written records led to new ways of thinking and doing business in the Middle Ages, just as social media is doing in the twenty-first century. The marketplace of ideas is being reshaped by the volume, visibility, speed and reach of social media. It is easier to get a message out there, but also much harder to be noticed when so many are sharing so much so quickly. A hundred hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute, an average of 5,700 messages are sent on Twitter every second and more than a billion people are regularly sharing stories, links, photos and videos on Facebook.

For me, one of the most vivid examples of how social media has upended established ways of thinking about news and information was the Arab Spring of 2011. I felt a personal affinity with the revolutions, as I was based in Tunisia and Egypt in the early 1990s for BBC News. The contrast between now and

then starkly illustrated how social media helps to shift power away from the state and into the hands of its citizens.

THE POWER OF KNOWLEDGE

In the 1990s, Egypt banned street protests, and any such attempts were quickly repressed. I was reporting on one such incident when I was tear-gassed by accident. Lawyers had gathered at the headquarters of the bar association in Cairo, dressed in their black gowns with white bands around their necks. Despite the ban, they planned to march peacefully to the presidential palace in protest of the suspicious death—in custody—of a fellow lawyer.

The lawyers were depending on the media to get their message out. Back then, there were no cell phones in Egypt. Internet access was restricted, as well as slow and unreliable at the best of times. Together with a handful of other journalists, I was standing behind a wall of riot shields and batons outside the compound of the bar association. For safety reasons, journalists covering protests are advised to stay behind the police to avoid being caught between the two sides.

The moment the lawyers tried to set foot outside the compound, the security forces fired tear gas. There are no YouTube videos that captured the sight of gowned lawyers coughing as they retreated into the building. So many canisters were fired that some of the tear gas started wafting back towards a row of police equipped with batons but not gas masks. The first thing I noticed was an intense tingling sensation in my nostrils.

The next few moments are a vivid but fragmented memory. A sudden realization that the stinging sensation was tear gas.

The sight of police haphazardly running towards my colleagues and me. Pausing to help up a fellow journalist who had stumbled and was having trouble breathing. Kindly Egyptians who opened a storefront to let us in. Wet towels handed round to lessen the effect of the gas.

None of this was filmed on a cell phone. There were no tweets, no Facebook posts or images on Flickr. It took up a few column inches in the Western media, but Egyptians didn't hear about it. It remains a footnote in the thirty years of authoritarian rule in Egypt. As I followed the protests in Tahrir Square from Vancouver in 2011, I couldn't help but be amazed at the difference between now and then. The story of a people fed up with a corrupt president was being broadcast live on twenty-four-hour news channels and simultaneously unfolding across social media. The revolution was televised, tweeted and Facebooked.

As did so many in the West, I followed the ups and downs of the weeks of protest, often described by the people at the heart of it all. Social media was more than a megaphone for Egyptians denied a voice for so long. It helped to tip the scales away from the machinery of repression and in favour of disaffected Egyptians drawn together by a sense of injustice. Facebook, a service born in the dorms of Harvard as a way for college students to keep in touch, was an instrument of revolution. Twitter, named for its original meaning as a short burst of inconsequential information, was a channel of dissent.

Facebook was not intended to be a way for people to post links to news stories they consider worth reading. YouTube was not created to empower activists to broadcast videos of police beating up protesters. Twitter was not developed as a way to break news of devastating natural disasters. Yet social media

has turned into a collection of spaces to share stories of triumph or ignominy, of joy or sorrow, of delight or distraction. Spaces where a video featuring cute kids can make headlines or chasten a multinational corporation, where 140 characters can reveal the truth or propel a rumour at lightning speed.

These technologies have insinuated themselves into the fabric of everyday life as they tap into our innate nature as social animals. We love to talk, exchange views and argue. What we collectively call social media are a range of technologies, services and activities designed to enhance both communication and the formation of social ties on an unprecedented scale.

The renaissance in sharing harks back to an era when news was exchanged and discussed in marketplaces and coffee-houses, and then further spread by pamphlet, letter and word of mouth. Back then, sharing news would happen in private, in conversations at work or in the home; these acts of sharing were ephemeral and largely lost to future generations. Such conversations are now taking place in public on social networks, where they are recorded and archived and visible to all. The pulse of the planet is laid bare, revealing what has captured the attention of millions at any moment.

STRANGERS NO MORE

As I was researching this book, a gunman let loose in a packed movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado, killing twelve people. During that weekend in July 2012, I followed the news reports alongside the snippets coming through on social media. While researching how people got to hear the news of the tragedy,

I felt I got to know one of the victims better than others because of how much she shared publicly. Jessica Ghawi was an aspiring sports broadcaster who lived life out loud online. As with so many of her generation who have never known a world before the Internet, the red-headed self-declared Texan spitfire openly recorded the twists and turns of her life in digital social spaces.

The twenty-four-year-old was prolific on social media, writing about her odd love for both hockey and grammar on her Twitter account, where she described herself as "Southern. Sarcastic. Sass. Class. Crass. Grammar snob." She came across as a smart and sharp young woman. A few days before she was killed, she told everyone about her delight at being a godmother, playfully warning that the "poor kid doesn't know what he's in for." In another, she posted a photo of herself all dishevelled, mockingly adding, "This picture is proof I belong as number 1 on the *Maxim* Hot 100 list, right?" One video on YouTube, of her first interview in 2010 with a professional athlete, Chris Summers, shows her tottering onto the ice in high heels, struggling to keep her balance and falling down numerous times.

Being able to find out so much about a stranger so easily was unsettling. Even more disconcerting was to read her blog and learn that she had escaped unscathed during a shooting at the Eaton Centre shopping mall in Toronto a month earlier.

"I was reminded that we don't know when or where our time on Earth will end," she wrote. "Every second of every day is a gift. After Saturday evening, I know I truly understand how blessed I am for each second I am given." I had also researched the Eaton Centre shooting for this book, so reading her blog give me a chill.

That night in July, her Twitter account documented her final moments, conveying her excitement at making it to a

sold-out midnight premiere of the Batman epic, *The Dark Knight Rises.* In her last messages, posted minutes before the screening, she teased another friend about missing out on the movie. After her death, Jessica's family and friends connected online to express their sorrow and raise funds for a sports journalism scholarship in her name. The Jessica Redfield Ghawi Scholarship was launched in February 2013 to provide $10,000 to female journalism students who aspire to become sports journalists. "We know this scholarship will allow her dreams to live on through others who live life as vibrantly as she did," said Jessica's brother Jordan Ghawi.

Every loss of life is tragic. But the death of Jessica Ghawi was made even more poignant by all the traces she left behind online. Jessica was no longer a stranger to me or others who read about her in the news. Reading such personal details about her made her loss seem more terrible and vivid. It was a striking example of how social media can jolt the way we feel about something happening far away and make us care.

In less than a decade, social media is one of those things that has become part of the fabric of society. It is also something about which everyone has an opinion. At some point in a dinner party, someone tends to malign social media for being full of updates about lunch or photos of pets. Life is full of froth. It is the mundane that makes us human. The seemingly inconsequential tidbits we share help to forge social bonds and bring us closer together. Every day, minute and second, millions are sharing fragments that reflect the experiences, hopes and fears of us all. Together we are writing the story of us.

CHAPTER ONE

#The News Now

One Friday night, Morgan Jones was up late, lost in *Oblivion*. The eighteen-year-old was in his bedroom in Denver, immersed in the fantasy role-playing video game. He was pulled out of the magical realm when he noticed a Facebook update from a local TV station about a shooting at a movie the-atre. What Morgan did next, over the early hours of July 20, 2012, would propel him into the limelight, leading to inter-views in the *New York Times*, the *Denver Post,* on National Public Radio and many others. It also drew attention to how an online forum, where anyone could post just about anything, could rival the mainstream media as the go-to source for the latest about one of the worst shootings in recent U.S. history.

The website was Reddit, and the mass shooting took place at a sold-out midnight premiere of the Batman epic *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado. A man in a SWAT outfit, later identified by police as James Eagan Holmes, set off tear gas and started firing into the crowd. Twelve people were killed and fifty-eight were injured. Most of those who died were in their twenties. The youngest was six, a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl

named Veronica Moser-Sullivan. The oldest was fifty-one-year-old Texan businessman Gordon Cowden.

At his parents' home in Denver, Morgan tuned in to the Aurora police scanner and started posting updates under his username, Integ3r, on Reddit. At the time, the largest Internet message board in the world had thirty-five million monthly users, but it was still relatively unknown outside of tech-savvy circles. Morgan provided a meticulous and exhaustively detailed rundown of events that night, pulling in fragments of information from the police and online media and from messages and photos shared on social media by people at the cinema. His account ran to thousands of words, assaulting the reader with a vivid and at times upsetting timeline of the atrocity. "I stayed up all night, and I am exhausted now, but it feels like I'm helping out people who need to know this stuff," Morgan said the following day.

The way news of the Aurora tragedy emerged that night is emblematic of how information travels in our digital world. The rampage received wall-to-wall coverage that has become customary on twenty-four-hour cable news networks. Reporters and news anchors flocked to the town of Aurora to report on the victims, talk to survivors and find out more about the alleged gunman. Together with the news coming from the media was another layer of information coming from people caught up in the shooting—eyewitnesses at the scene, and friends and relatives of the victims. Hundreds of people were in the movie theatre at the time. Some captured the confusion on their cell phones as people emptied out onto the streets, not quite knowing what had happened. Some documented their wounds and posted the photos online. Some, like Morgan, tried to document what had just happened.

It has become commonplace for people to share their own experiences, photos, videos or opinions on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and a multitude of other spaces, alongside reports from journalists. The result is that more information from more people with more perspectives is constantly flowing at a faster pace than ever before. But it also means more confusion, more mistakes and more noise.

In the hours and days following the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, 2013, facts and falsehoods jostled for attention across broadcast, online and social media channels. The media made its fair share of mistakes, such as reporting an arrest when there was none. The *New York Post* was one of the worst offenders, mistakenly publishing a front-page photo of two men it said were wanted by law enforcement.

As tends to happen when big news breaks, a photograph of the bombing, taken by college student Dan Lampariello, appeared first on Twitter. So too did a string of false reports. There was chatter of another explosion at the JFK Library and speculation that the bombing was the work of right-wing supremacists or of Muslim terrorists. Reddit, a site feted for its role at the time of the Aurora shootings, was widely condemned. The forum FindBostonBombers turned into a space where speculation ran riot, even as seasoned users cautioned about jumping to conclusions. No one seemed to notice the disclaimer on the page that Reddit was "a discussion forum, not a journalistic outlet" and that it did "not strive, nor pretend, to release journalist-quality content."

Despite rules banning the posting of personal information, names of innocent people were tossed around in the frenzy following the bombings. Reddit users were accused of being

online vigilantes as they pored over photos and videos of the attack and speculated about the identity of the bombers. While the Aurora shooting demonstrated the wisdom of the crowd, the marathon bombings surfaced the madness of the mob. Reddit shut down the discussion on its site and general manager Erik Martin apologized for what had happened. "However, though it started with noble intentions, some of the activity on Reddit fueled online witch hunts and dangerous speculation which spiraled into very negative consequences for innocent parties. The Reddit staff and the millions of people on Reddit around the world deeply regret that this happened."

The Aurora shootings and the Boston Marathon bombings illustrate the best and worst of how our need to know is being met at a time when the most trusted name in news may be either a veteran journalist at the scene or a kid playing video games in his bedroom. They are symptoms of what happens when two worlds collide—the world of traditional media that has developed over the past two hundred years and the world of social media of the past few years. One is a familiar friend we've grown to know over the years; the other is a young upstart that doesn't seem to follow the house rules, yet strikes a chord.

NEWS AS WE KNOW IT

After paying a visit to the United States, Charles Dickens described how the boys selling newspapers greeted the newcomers landing at New York Harbor. "Here's the New York Sewer!" shouted the newsboys, Dickens wrote in his 1844 book *Martin Chuzzlewit*. "Here's this morning's New York Stabber!

Here's the New York Family Spy! Here's the New York Private Listener! Here's the New York Peeper! Here's the New York Plunderer!" The fictional titles convey the salacious tone of these early newspapers that competed to grab the attention of the working folk of a bustling New York.

Dickens was witnessing the creation of the American newspaper industry, when journalism became the business of packaging the day's events into a neat bundle that would appeal to the growing number of labourers, artisans and mechanics in New York. Newspapers had been around in Europe since the seventeenth century, made possible by the development of the printing press, the availability of cheap paper and the rise of a merchant class hungry for information. But the printed word was still largely shared by hand, often passed on from friend to friend. In the U.K., the early newspapers of the eighteenth century had small circulations. London papers such as the *Daily Courant* sold less than a thousand copies. Provincial titles such as the *Norwich Mercury* only had a weekly circulation of two hundred.

This was a time of innovation and entrepreneurship in a fast-growing New York, much like the present day in Silicon Valley. One such entrepreneur was twenty-three-year-old printer Benjamin Day. On September 3, 1833, he launched a revolutionary product, the *New York Sun*. The newspaper broke the rules in several ways and created a business model for newspapers to come. It sold for just a penny when other newspapers were priced at six cents. Instead of having people pay for the news, advertising subsidized the costs of producing the paper.

Day bet that a cheap daily paper for the common man would prove popular with the rising working class and with businesses

wanting to display their wares to reach them. "The object of this paper is to lay before the public, at a price within the means of everyone, all the news of the day, and at the same time offer an advantageous medium for advertisements," said Day in the first issue. He was also behind another innovation in how newspapers were distributed and sold, introducing the newsboys peddling "the New York Sewer" described in *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

The *New York Sun* not only changed the business of news, it changed the definition of news. In the past, newspapers would report and comment on politics or provide information useful for businesses, such as the shipping news. Day had a different idea of what people would be interested in. He packed his paper with stories about people—human-interest stories of triumph and tragedy. The paper carried talk of crime, sin and immorality. It was accused of lowering the standards of journalism with its seemingly vulgar sensationalism. But it resonated with a newly literate working class and it was a thundering success.

The *New York Sun* was the first successful daily newspaper that put news within reach of a growing number of labourers, artisans and mechanics in the city. Within two years, the cheap, tabloid-style *Sun* was selling fifteen thousand copies a day. More penny papers followed, such as the *New York Herald* in 1853 and the *New-York Daily Times* in 1851, whose name was later changed to the *New York Times*. The new wave of newspapers found a ready audience in the growing middle and working classes in America. The penny papers laid the foundation for the model of news that persists to this day: paid employees sent out to witness events, interview citizens, police and officials, and then write it all up in a straightforward, realistic and accurate style.

The news provides order by compressing the world into a neat daily bundle of need-to-know information. The front page of the newspaper makes sense, as it has a well-established structure and hierarchy. The size of headlines, the use of photos and the location of stories bring order to a messy world. By comparison, the front page of the Internet, as Reddit describes itself, seems gloriously messy and perplexing. Anyone can share anything, everyone decides everything and it changes all the time. On any given day, pop culture tidbits sit alongside stories about scientific discoveries, discussions about religion or Internet memes on "the front page of the Internet." It's news, but not as we know it. That's when things start to get confusing.

THE RULES OF THE MEDIA

The rules for different TV formats are so familiar that they require no thought on the part of the viewer. The differences between a TV sitcom and the local newscast are obvious. No one is going to mistake *How I Met Your Mother* for the evening news. Or, for that matter, *The Walking Dead* for a reality show. It seems silly even to mention it. Things get mixed up when the rules commonly used to make sense of one form of media no longer seem to apply.

Something like *The Daily Show* blurs the line between comedy and journalism. It satirizes the news, but it is also a source of information. When Pew Research studied the show in 2008, it found that the program covered much the same news as a cable talk show; it's just that the language was more blunt and direct. And when Americans were asked to name their most

admired journalist, *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart came fourth, tied with news veterans Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather and Anderson Cooper. It demonstrates how the genre of "fake news" shows has become a familiar ingredient in people's information diet, even though they know in the back of their minds that it is a comedy show.

Every form of communication has a particular logic, a set of rules that affect how information is organized, presented, recognized and interpreted. What is new, different and unsettling becomes tried, tested and everyday as people come to learn and understand the rules. For more than two centuries, there has been a set of rules that mass media operated by. Social habits changed as new communication technologies were invented, but the flow of information, from institutions to the masses, was a constant.

During World War II, people experienced tragedy and triumph together as they gathered by their radio sets to hear the latest from the front lines. In the 1960s, families gathered to watch the evening newscasts on the new technology of the time, television. By the start of the twenty-first century, office workers were visiting websites to catch up with the latest news, sport and gossip. What all of these have in common is a one-way flow of information. Only the packaging was different.

For the past two hundred years or so, news has been shaped like an hourglass. Large amounts of information filtered through a narrow neck of paid professionals who packaged the material into familiar formats for an audience. News was a spectator sport. No more. From the Aurora shootings to the Boston marathon bombings, news has become a

shared experience. Virtually every time there is a major news event, from protests in Manhattan or Kiev to bombings in Boston to the death of a prominent figure like Margaret Thatcher or Nelson Mandela, the reporting by journalists sits alongside the accounts, experiences, opinions and hopes of millions of others.

Social media seems so new, but it heralds a return to the past. News existed before journalism, before it was processed and packaged into products for the masses. News fulfills a basic human need to know what is happening around us, in our neighbourhood, town, country and around the world. Being aware of what we cannot see for ourselves provides a sense of security and control. It is impossible to make good decisions about what actions to take without having information. News affects what we know of events and how we interpret them, influencing our decisions and actions. It can sway who we vote for, which route we take to work in the morning or whether we leave home with an umbrella.

Through social media, news is resurfacing as a social experience, shared by word of mouth between friends, relative and strangers. Looking back, the era of mass media seems more like an anomaly in the history of news than the natural order. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the myriad of other services resonate with the basic human urge to be social. The tools have changed, but human behaviour remains consistent. What have changed are the rules of the game, when a piece of news or comment can spread quickly through close and distant social circles like a infectious airborne virus.

CHALLENGING THE OFFICIAL STORY

On the morning of July 7, 2005, Justin Howard was travelling on the London Underground when the unthinkable happened. As the train was entering a tunnel heading towards Paddington Station, he heard a loud bang. In his blog, *Pfff: A Response to Anything Negative,* Howard recalled how the train left the tracks and started to hurtle through the tunnel. "When the train came to a standstill people were screaming, but mainly due to panic as the carriage was rapidly filling with smoke and the smell of burning motors was giving clear clues of fire," he wrote four hours later. "As little as five seconds later we were unable to see and had all hit the ground for the precious air that remained. We were all literally choking to death."

Howard was caught up in a coordinated terrorist attack on London's public transport system that killed fifty-two people, including the four bombers, and injured more than seven hundred. He was also one of hundreds of people who recorded and shared their experience of the tragedy. Grainy cell phone photos of Londoners stumbling through dark, smoke-filled tunnels documented the horror of commuters trapped underground. Together, they created a vivid tapestry of the day within hours of the attacks, as seen through the eyes of those who experienced it.

July 7 marked a turning point in how the news was made. That night, TV newscasts led with video taken by ordinary people rather than professional journalists, and the next day's newspapers were full of photos taken by the commuters themselves. It is now common to see jerky video shot on a cell phone by an eyewitness on the news. But in 2005, this was a novelty. On that day, hundreds of such images and video were sent

directly to media outlets. The BBC alone received more than a thousand photographs, twenty video clips, four thousand text messages, and twenty thousand emails within six hours of the bombings, more than it ever had in the past.

Something else happened that day that pointed to the new realities of the media. Initially, transport authorities said the explosions on the subway had been caused by power surges. However, the official narrative was at odds with the stories and photos coming from the public. Something much bigger seemed to be going on. Within ninety minutes of the attacks, there were more than 1,300 online posts as London's blogging community shared what they knew and provided safety advice or travel tips.

At the BBC, an email from a viewer provided the first clue that this was much more than a power malfunction. The official story couldn't hold up against a steady stream of evidence from the public to the contrary, including photos of a blown-up double-decker bus. A little over two hours after the news first broke, the head of the police in London, Sir Ian Blair, formally announced that the capital had come under a coordinated terror attack.

The London bombings signalled how the flow of information is reshaped when hundreds of people can quickly spread the news as they see it. It is much harder for institutions to control public knowledge of an event when the official version doesn't match up with the story on social media. Since 2005, the pace has accelerated, with news now travelling at the speed of a tweet. Immediacy matters, because first impressions matter. The problem is that instant information encourages action rather than contemplation. In the confusion that follows a big news event, misinformation can just as quickly take hold, as it did with the misidentification of one of the Boston

bombing suspects. Twitter may seem like a jumble of different views, but not for long. Scientists have found that public opinion tends to coalesce quickly as more and more people endorse a particular perspective. The majority ends up drowning out minority views. And once Twitter has made up its mind, it is difficult to change.

HOW CONTEXT WORKS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Stephen Colbert has a reputation for skewering politicians, companies, celebrities and the media itself. Yet a tweet out of context thrust his show, *The Colbert Report,* into a Twitter tornado. The trigger was a message sent on Thursday March 27, 2014, from the show's account that read: "I am willing to show #Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever." The comment was taken from a segment on Wednesday night's show where Colbert poked fun at Dan Snyder, owner of the Washington Redskins football team, and his recently announced charitable foundation for Native Americans.

The joke wasn't funny for Suey Park, a twenty-three-year-old Korean-American writer and activist. She had previously made the news for her #NotYourAsianSidekick Twitter campaign. Park saw the tweet while she was having dinner and acted. That night, she tweeted to her thousands of followers: "The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals has decided to call for #CancelColbert. Trend it." A Twitter storm was born as thousands piled to berate Colbert, while some came to the show's defence.

Within twenty-four hours, there were more than 85,000 tweets bearing the hashtag, and most of them were negative. Just under half of the messages came from the U.S. but the hashtag ricocheted as far as Bahrain, Botswana and Bhutan. Comedy Central, the channel that airs *The Colbert Report,* clarified that the tweet, soon deleted, had come from the official corporate account for the show and not from the comedian himself, who goes by @StephenAtHome on Twitter. Colbert distanced himself from the fray, tweeting on his personal account: "#CancelColbert - I agree! Just saw @ColbertReport tweet. I share your rage. Who is that, though? I'm @StephenAtHome," with a link to a video of the segment. But the judgment of Twitter was that the comment was a crude racist joke, rather than a joke about racism. Media headlines followed that spoke of accusations of racism against Stephen Colbert and of a Twitter war on the comedian.

The uproar was understandable, given that the punchline was out of context. In the show on Wednesday night, Colbert assumed the part of a racist character to lampoon racism. Since many people who came across the tweet hadn't seen the segment, they took it at face value. There wasn't enough information in the 140 characters to correctly interpret the tweet. #CancelColbert turned out to be a storm in a tweet cup, as with so many Twitter tempests. By the Saturday, the number of hashtagged messages fell by 76 per cent to just under twenty-one thousand. But the flare-up was enough to skew the conversation away from why the Washington Redskins persisted in using an offensive term in its name. Colbert became the story, not Snyder.

Twitter makes it much harder to gain context. It breaks up information into atomic fragments that whiz past with little

time for consideration. The fleeting shelf life of the medium works against any inclination to pause before retweeting. It is a medium that lives in the now. Immediacy privileges reaction rather than reflection. It fosters ardour rather than nuance. The paradox is that context exists on Twitter, just not in the usual way. Each message exists within a broader conversation, as people jump in and add a little bit of background or opinion. It's just very hard to see the bigger picture.

When it comes to Twitter, we are all like the French artist Georges Seurat. The nineteenth-century neo-impressionist developed the technique of pointillism. He created timeless works of art using small strokes or dots of contrasting colour that blended together when seen from a distance. Reading tweets is like standing next to one of his most famous works, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Close up, it just looks like tiny, juxtaposed brushstrokes of random colour instead of people relaxing in a suburban park. Currently, it is hard to take a step back and see the overall context of each individual fragment of information on Twitter. Taken as a whole, there is background, context and meaning. It is a mistake to see any tweet as a lone fragment, isolated from wider context, as some prominent figures in the U.K. learnt to their cost over the McAlpine affair.

It started on a Friday, following a piece on the highly regarded BBC show *Newsnight* that wrongly suggested a senior Conservative from the Thatcher era was involved in child abuse. Ahead of the broadcast, there had been some speculation on Twitter on whether *Newsnight* would name the politician. "Are Newsnight still running their 'paedo politician' story? Also are Lord McAlpine's lawyers working overtime tonight? Just thinking aloud," said one message, since deleted.

In the end, the show didn't name the peer for fear of legal action. But it provided enough clues for viewers to figure out his identity for themselves. Anyone turning to Google for the name of a high-ranking Tory accused of being a pedophile would have found an article published in the early 1990 in *Scallywag* magazine. McAlpine didn't sue at the time, as the magazine went bankrupt and closed down soon after. But scans of the article have since been available online.

On Twitter, some openly mentioned the Tory politician, while others relied on innuendo. "Lord Mcalpine must not be happy with #newsnight then...," said journalist Asa Bennett in a tweet since deleted. High-profile figures such as Sally Bercow, the wife of the speaker of the House of Commons, tweeted, "Why is Lord McAlpine trending? *innocent face*." Author and *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot wrote: "I looked up Lord #McAlpine on t'internet. It says the strangest things." On Twitter, anyone searching for *Newsnight* at the time would have also received suggestions about related searches, including McAlpine.

The truth was that the *Newsnight* story was incorrect, based on a case of mistaken identity. Lord McAlpine was wrongly maligned, his character falsely assassinated. This time around, he took legal action against the more prominent of his tormentors, such as Sally Bercow. She said her tweet was meant to be "conversational and mischievous." Taken as a single message, out of context, Bercow might have had a point. But tweets always have context. Messages laden with innuendo were sent against the backdrop of the *Newsnight* allegations and speculation on Twitter. Anyone following the news would infer that such tweets were pointing to Lord McAlpine.

Social media interferes with fixed ideas of context. As *The Colbert Report* found, a few words taken from a satirical segment ended up disconnected from their original meaning. The McAlpine case showed how the meaning of individual comment is affected by the broader context. Author and researcher danah boyd calls the phenomenon "context collapse." In most situations, people know who they are addressing and tailor the message accordingly. They will behave differently depending on who they are talking to, in line with accepted norms and expectations. Politicians do this all the time. They will alter the tone, style and content of a speech to resonate with a particular audience. But social media flattens multiple audiences into one. The result is that a jokey aside, akin to what might be said between friends in a bar, can turn into a libellous remark when it is shared publicly on Twitter. Or worse.

THE PROBLEM OF INVISIBLE AUDIENCES

Paul Chambers never imagined that letting off steam on Twitter would result in the loss of his job and a lengthy legal battle. He was on his way to Belfast to see his girlfriend, Sarah Tonner. The U.K. was in the middle of an unusually harsh winter in 2010, with temperatures regularly dipping well below zero centigrade and snow blanketing the British Isles. Chambers arrived at Robin Hood Airport in South Yorkshire to find that snow had closed the single runway. He vented his frustration by tweeting, "Crap! Robin Hood Airport is closed. You've got a week and a bit to get your shit together otherwise I am blowing the airport sky high!!" The wisecrack went out to the six hundred people

following Chambers on Twitter. But his account was public, meaning that anyone could read his messages.

A week later, four officers from the South Yorkshire police turned up at Chambers's office in Doncaster, where he worked as a financial supervisor. He was arrested and accused of making a hoax bomb threat. Unbeknownst to him, an off-duty manager at Robin Hood Airport had stumbled across the tweet by chance. The airport didn't think the threat was credible, but under law was required to pass it on to South Yorkshire police. Chambers was later charged and initially found guilty of sending a menacing tweet in May 2010. He eventually won a high court challenge against his conviction two years later. Since then, the British authorities have drawn up new guidelines to distinguish between offensive or off-colour posts and those that credibly threaten violence.

What became known as the "Twitter joke trial" was one of the first high-profile examples of how off-colour banter intended for a few could backfire. Chambers never expected anyone to take his joke seriously, much less for it to be seen by the police. People might picture an intended audience for a comment or photo, but more often than not, they have to contend with invisible audiences. Invisible audiences are all those strangers who might stumble across a tweet that was not posted for them to read. But as a public message, it is there for all to see.

When a student at the University of California, Berkeley was offered a job by Cisco, she turned to Twitter to tell her friends. "Cisco just offered me a job! Now I have to weigh the utility of a fatty paycheck against the daily commute to San Jose and hating the work," tweeted Connor Riley. A Cisco employee came across the public message and Riley rose to Internet infamy for

tweeting her way out of a job. Similarly, Amanda Bonnen ended up being sued by her landlords for describing her Chicago apartment as mouldy. The case was eventually thrown out. In both cases, personal messages were sent out on a public network, though they were never intended to be seen by the public. The audience on social media is potentially both personal and public, full of familiar faces and an unknown mass.

Figures in the public eye, such as politicians and celebrities, have long had to contend with living life on the stage. It is little surprise when they get caught out for inappropriate behaviour on social media, as happened to U.S. congressman Anthony Weiner for sharing shots of his crotch and raunchy notes with women on Twitter. Stuart MacLennan, an aspiring British politician, torpedoed his chances during the 2010 general election with a series of ill-judged tweets, including one where he called elderly people "coffin-dodgers." No one is immune to the perils of inappropriate sharing—not even Olympic athletes. Voula Papachristou of Greece lost her chance to compete in the London 2012 games for an offensive message. As public figures, they can expect interest in what they share. On social media, everyone is potentially a public figure.

PRIVACY THROUGH OBSCURITY

Overnight, the life of Ashley Alexandra Dupré became public property. One day, she was an aspiring R&B singer, making ends meet by working as a call girl named Kristen; the next, she was identified as the woman at the centre of New York governor Eliot Spitzer's sex scandal in 2008. Within hours, photos

of her in a bikini and details of her troubled childhood were all over the news. It was easy for journalists to cull the material from the web, as Dupré lived much of her life online on social networking sites. She might never have expected journalists and bloggers to pore over everything she had ever uploaded and then share it with such a broad audience. Since then, it has become routine for journalists to scour social media whenever someone falls within the media spotlight.

With millions sharing so much, so often, traditional ideas of privacy are being rewritten. Privacy used to mean being able to do things without being observed by others and being able to control what others know about us. In the world of traditional media, it was easy to separate the public from the private. Participants on a TV quiz show knew that everything they said was being broadcast. Even the contestants in the reality show *Big Brother* are aware of what they signed up for. Social media can be like being on *Big Brother,* except that most of the time, no one is watching.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, all of social media is a stage. The difference is that the only people regularly turning up for performances are friends or relatives. Privacy comes through obscurity, rather than control. It's like being at a loud party where everyone is chatting. Personal conversations are taking place in public, but they remain private as they are lost in the general chatter. That sense of obscurity vanishes if everyone else stops talking all of a sudden. On social media, everyone is one of many. There is no reason to assume that anyone aside from those in close social circles is paying attention to a quip about a delayed flight, a jibe about a job offer or grumbles about an apartment. Exchanges on social media are often of the here and

now, seemingly ephemeral, like the spoken word. Yet the data persists beyond the moment. It is archived and searchable. Obscurity vanishes as soon as the media or others take an interest. In minutes, the personal becomes widely publicly visible.

SOCIAL MEDIA—IT'S COMPLICATED

The celebrated American sociologist Erving Goffman used the metaphor of the stage to talk about life as a continual performance. The "front stage" is where social interactions take place in public—for example, with office colleagues. The "back stage" is a more private space, reserved for time with spouses or close friends. What is shared, and with whom depends, on the stage. But social media can collapse the distinctions between front and back stages. It's like having tickets for one play and instead wandering into a different one.

One of the consequences is what tends to get labelled as oversharing—when people are seemingly divulging information online that makes others uncomfortable. The problem isn't that people are sharing too much information; rather, it is that an audience is seeing information not intended for them, and in the wrong context. As a result, they feel that social norms are being violated. The intended audience might feel differently. In the past, only the addressee would read a personal letter. Today, similar exchanges play out before a public eye on social media. As a result, what one person sees as a TMI (too much information) moment is an occasion to connect for another.

Facebook or Twitter may seem like nothing we've had before. But that would be oversimplifying things. People have

always found ways to exchange facts, gossip and rumour, be it face to face in the office or over long distances by writing a letter. Social media technologies bring to the surface patterns of sharing that have always existed in society. The difference is that sharing used to happen in private exchanges, in conversations at work or in the home, invisible to most and largely lost to future generations. Today, such conversations take place in public on social networks, where they are recorded and archived, making them visible to all.

Social media taps into an innate human desire to connect with others. It is why it resonates with so many. It is familiar, yet at the same time works in a different way from the traditional mass media. There is some overlap, though. The word *journalism* has its origins in the French word for day—*jour*—and refers to the practice of keeping a daily journal or diary. The renowned communications scholar James Carey talks of journalism as transferring the private habit of recording one's life into a communal account of key events of the life of a community. We are using social media to take the private habit of chronicling our life and make it public, producing a collective and shared account of society. Every day, millions of people are openly recounting their life stories on digital spaces, telling everyone about their lives, experiences and views. We can't help it. We are made to be social.