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Of Anger and Shame

"Being inoffensive, and being offended, are now the twin addictions of the culture"

Martin Amis, *The Sunday Times,* Mar. 17th, 1996

I am a relatively recent convert to social media. The choice of "convert" is a poor one perhaps since my adoption of Facebook and Twitter had nothing of the blinding insight of Saul on the Damascus Road. It was a nod to the communication preferences of family, friends and classmates, and further necessitated by a college module on digital marketing. My previous experience of online social interaction, which dates me, was in a number of CompuServe forums in the U.S. in the early to mid 1990s. Then the sound of dial-up modems successfully negotiating the handshake process evoked a visceral reaction akin to what I imagine an arriving locomotive must have occasioned in those waiting on a railway station platform in the glorious age of steam.

I confess that I care little for Facebook. It's not a strong aversion, more an indifference to the format and a reflection of how hard I find it sometimes to break through the clutter. For me that noise, punctuated by the occasional photo worth saving or snippet worth reading, is actually generated by a relatively small circle of family and friends. I could live, quite unaware of my deprivation, without the inane videos and the twin terrors of liking and sharing, but I would not be as coldly dismissive as Jonathan Franzen, who stated, in a *New York Times* op-ed (Franzen, 2012):

> "We like the mirror and the mirror likes us. To friend a person is merely to include the person in our private hall of flattering mirrors."

Cory Doctorow's entertaining *InformationWeek* article (2007), subsequently republished as "Facebook's Faceplant" in *Content*, a selection of his essays, has not aged that badly and echoes my feeling that:

> "Facebook has all the social graces of a nose-picking, hyperactive six-year-old, standing at the threshold of your attention and chanting, 'I know something, I know something, I know something, won't tell you what it is!' "

And then again I think that my own dislike may simply be a contrarian preference for the well-chosen word over the striking visual. Or an unwillingness to be pigeonholed by a Facebook busy "organizing people into multiple-choice identities" (Lanier, 2010).

Franzen is no fan of Twitter either. At a book reading (Flood, 2012) he labelled it as "unspeakably irritating" and added that it is "hard to cite facts or create an argument in 140 characters". Conversely my attitude to Twitter is best summarised by a remark the late David Carr, celebrated media columnist for the New York Times, made in an interview with NPR's *Fresh Air* (NPR.org, 2011):

> "It serves to edit what's going on in the world, and it puts a human curation on this huge fire hose of data that's washing over us all. The question becomes where to look, and it's nice to have some other people pointing the way."

So Twitter is preferred but I'm not sure that I'm the typical user in that, for me, it serves primarily as a news aggregator. If something of import has happened since I last checked in, I can be reasonably sure that one of the handful of journalists I follow will have already posted the salient details, if not a link to an extended piece elsewhere. And it is in linking to other content that Twitter works best I think. As Evgeny Morozov notes in a *Dissent Magazine* article (Morozov, 2009) about the dark side of Iran's 2009 Twitter revolution, "it's simply impossible to pack much context into its 140 characters". I follow very few and more than half of those that follow me I know outside of the Twitter bubble. I contribute little in the way of original content; most of my Tweets contain links to published articles I find interesting. The occasional photograph. My retweets are generally political or humorous in nature although I have found that humour can be highly subjective. That said my personal experience of Twitter, outside of being occasionally patronised by one side of the recent Irish referendum campaign and repeatedly lied to by the other, has been largely positive. But Twitter has a darker side.

I purchased the paperback of Andrew Keen's *The Internet Is Not The Answer* some time back but, absent a long and solitary train journey since, have not had the opportunity to read beyond the first couple of bridge-burning chapters. In a wide-

ranging interview in the *Guardian* (Henley, 2015) Keen states that "not much on social media is truly social" and bemoans the lack of diversity. I had thought to address this theme in detail; that we only meet people like ourselves and that "we're all clustering in these tighter and tighter little ideological and cultural networks". Halves (2015) echoes this in writing about hashtag activism, noting that:

> "The technology that supposedly erases the old divisive boundaries allows twitterers in a few clicks or taps to ensure that they only hear voices that echo their own unchallenged preconceptions."

In the preface to his book, Keen (2015) states his belief that an intolerant Internet has "unleashed such a distasteful war on women that many no longer feel welcome on the network." There is much evidence of this, as in the GamerGate controversy which I addressed elsewhere (Murray, 2015). The claim by certain gamers, that the #GamerGate hashtag was adopted to cover a discussion of ethics in game journalism rather than as a focal point for a particularly virulent strain of misogyny, is belied by the sheer volume of vitriolic tweets directed at Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, Anita Sarkeesian and others. The attacks, which included the publication of home addresses and phone numbers, and explicit threats of rape and death, were enough to force some of the women targeted to leave their homes out of concern for their own safety and that of their families.
Keen speaks to social media as a forum for the expression of hatred in the *Guardian* article (Henley, 2015):

> "It's not that the net made us angry but it has become the funnel for our anger. We're all now in the business of blaming someone else, we're all obsessed with the meaningless indiscretions of strangers, and we have a platform for it. The internet's a really great tool for persecuting people we don't know, who we're utterly indifferent to, about stuff that is essentially irrelevant. Stuff that, in a pub, we'd forget about in 30 seconds."

It is Keen's reference to persecution, and specifically his mention of Justine Sacco, which resonates, especially as it ties to a number of articles I've read on the notion of "Twitter shaming".

Shaming is not a new word but it does appear to have found new currency. A *Wired* article (Hudson, 2013) begins by detailing how a shaming backfired on a female

technical conference attendee, Adria Richards, who tweeted her discomfort at the jokes made by two male attendees seated near her. Thanks to the accompanying picture, one of the men was subsequently fired by his employer, triggering a Twitter backlash which ultimately resulted in the firing of Richards. The article goes on to discuss shaming at some length, labelling it a "core competency" of the Internet, and noting that:

> "At its best, social media has given a voice to the disenfranchised, allowing them to bypass the gatekeepers of power and publicize injustices that might otherwise remain invisible. At its worst, it’s a weapon of mass reputation destruction."

It is suggested that many shamers simply don't comprehend the power of the medium and that what might seem like a whisper to a small circle of friends can be amplified "on a scale never before possible". The question is posed as to the point at which shamers become bullies. Arguing that "a sense of proportion is crucial" the article notes that "too many Internet shame campaigns dole out punishment that is too brutal for the crime."
Justine Sacco's "crime", which was detailed in numerous publications in the event's immediate aftermath (Sargent, 2013) and later (Ronson, 2015), was to tweet what she claimed was an ironic joke about an impending trip to South Africa:

> "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm White!"

By the time she landed eleven hours later a Twitter firestorm had erupted with a trending hashtag of #HasJustineLandedYet. She was promptly fired from her job as global head of communications for IAC. Ronson (2015), after revisiting the timeline of Sacco's fall from grace, speaks of the sense of "collective fury" he had felt when he indulged in shaming in the early days of Twitter, as if "justice were being democratized." Ronson goes on to report other incidents of shaming, and provides a historical backdrop to public shaming in America, before detailing meetings with Sacco and with Sam Biddle, a *Gawker Valleywag* writer, who had retweeted Sacco's offending tweet to his 15,000 followers. Biddle (2014) recounts his reconciliation with Sacco in an excellent *Gawker* piece, in which he also details his own brush with shaming after tweeting what he presumed to be an ironic joke about GamerGate. Sacco's advice to him then was not to engage with the mob. Not to tweet, not to apologise. Nothing. He had to "let the world tear itself apart" around him.

A *Guardian* review (Cooke, 2015) of Jon Ronson's book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, essentially a catalogue of campaigns, including that of Sacco, is largely positive. After labelling the book as being about "the cruelty of social media", Cooke lists several of Ronson's case studies before going on to discuss the notion of shame. Along the way reference is made to "a scuttling crowd of people who want nothing more in life than to be offended". Cooke believes that for them offence "is not a straightforward emotional response, instinctive and heartfelt" but "a choice, something they actively seek."

Some writers are more critical of Ronson's treatment of the subject (Shine, 2015). Shine notes that the book describes itself as a history of the resurrection of public shaming which is "abetted by social media." There is a note of sarcasm in Shine's restatement of Ronson's belief that "Twitter has revived public shaming, nearly 200 years after the U.S. outlawed public punishments" and that the justice "meted out by anonymous social media mobs is harsher and more ruinous than anything the Puritans could have dreamed up." Shine's goes on to list some perceived flaws: that Ronson ignores social power dynamics in treating different kinds of shaming as equal; that his book reads as a defence of the privileged; and that he has discounted the fact that "people who have historically been powerless have a new means with which to fight back."

All of which makes Ronson's own experience as the target of a Twitter-shaming campaign more than a little ironic (Miller, 2015). A passage which was included in the advance reader's copy of his book, but removed from the final version, was made public, and interpreted by some - wilfully misread suggests Miller - as endorsing an equivalence between the the threat of a women being raped and that of a man being fired. A Twitter storm ensued. After reminding the reader that "it's only Twitter" Miller goes on to echo somewhat Andrew Keen's reference to the "meaningless indiscretions of strangers" (Henley, 2015) by concluding:

> "Anyone can say anything about anyone in that venue and, short of actual threats, their remarks, insults or accusations will remain online. That’s not going to stop. What *can* change is how seriously any of us takes this stuff, who we listen and respond to and who, ultimately, we decide does not deserve that consideration."

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