Forget whipping:
Log in to Twitter for ignominy

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‘Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!’

Three years ago, on 20 December 2013, these 53 characters were the only thing Justine Sacco needed to cause commotion on Twitter, gain unwanted fame on social media, appear in newspapers like The New York Times and The Guardian and, not surprisingly, lose her job the day after she tweeted that message. Just 10 years ago, it was hard to think that a text written on a platform as ephemeral and constantly updated as Twitter could have such consequences. Only few people had an account, even fewer knew how to use it and its function was not yet clear to everybody.

As any new technology, Twitter – and social media in general – has unseen consequences and uses, which have appeared and changed throughout the years. One of them, which has become increasingly popular during the last three years, comes directly from the sixteenth century: Public shaming as penalty for a crime. But in a world that is connected in real time every minute of every day, the consequences of the shaming might exceed the punishment that the offence warranted.

Although created virtually, online text has grown in power and lasting effect beyond the screen. As author Danah Boyd explains in her book It’s complicated: The social lives of networked teens, socializing within the Internet is no longer a practice reserved for ‘geeks and social outcasts’:

By the mid-2000s, with the mainstreaming of Internet access and the rise of social media—and especially MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter—sharing information and connecting to friends online became an integrated part of daily life for many people [...] Rather than being seen as a subcultural practice, participating in social media became normative.¹
That is exactly what Justine Sacco, who wrote the tasteless joke about getting AIDS in Africa, was doing: Sharing with her 170 followers that she was travelling to Cape Town from New York, making a stopover in London. Just before taking the 11-hour flight to South Africa, she wrote and published the joke that proved how the online and offline world are more connected than ever: Having no one to share it with in person, she went online and guessed some people would find it funny and some would not, while others would not even understand it at all. Just as it would have happened if she had told the joke to her colleagues in her office, behind closed doors.

In today’s hyper-connected world, writing those words online and publicly cost her thousands of negative comments (most of them offensive as well), a global reputation of being a racist and, ultimately, her job. Twitter users even created a hashtag regarding how surprised Sacco would be when she arrived in South Africa and checked her Twitter feed. The expression #HasJustineLandedYet, preceded with a pound key to make it searchable not only on Twitter, but on the World Wide Web as well, was the most commented hashtag of that day on a global scale. What helped to spread Sacco’s tweet easier and faster than printed text is, precisely, the inherent accessibility of the content posted online. As Boyd explains,

> Tweets and status updates aren’t just accessible to the audience who happens to be following the thread as it unfolds; they quickly become archived traces, accessible to viewers at a later time. These traces can be searched and are easily reposted and spread.

What followed the comment was expected: InterActiveCorp, the company for which Sacco worked (ironically) as the PR director, wrote a press release apologizing and saying they ‘parted ways with the employee in question’. Sacco also issued a public and formal apology and, as with most of the text published on Twitter, hers was quickly forgotten and replaced by the next polemic. Its consequences, though, were much more permanent than the lifespan of the words. Even after Sacco erased the tweet, she could not reverse its consequences. Thus, although volatile, texts posted online can become powerful to an unknown extent.

Sacco’s story is not the only example. In early 2013, a man in a conference for tech developers in California made a joke to a colleague sitting next to him about ‘dongles’, devices that are attachable to computers and mobile phones. Minutes later, a woman sitting right before them stood up, took a picture with the man at the forefront and tweeted it along with her interpretation of the man’s comment: ‘Not cool. Jokes about... “big” dongles right behind me.’ Adria Richards, the woman who took the photograph, had 9,209 followers and felt harassed by the jest, as she attributed to it a sexist content that, according to the man who made it, it was not intended to have.

Two days after the conference and the viral fuss the tweet created online, the man got fired. He wrote about it on Hacker News, a popular forum among developers, and the tables were turned: Richards started receiving death threats on Twitter and Facebook, someone published her home address and, fearing for her life, she spent a whole year living at friends’ houses. Her employer’s website went down, due to an overload of its servers caused by repeated requests deliberatively sent. The company, SendGrid, was told that the attack would stop when Richards was let go publicly. They fired her that same day.
A year later, she said in an interview with *The New York Times Magazine* that she ‘cried a lot during this time, journaled and escaped by watching movies.’

Another victim of public shaming, athlete Voula Papachristou, had a hard time sleeping after her Twitter scandal. She was the Greek triple jump champion, and about to debut at the Olympic Games of 2012 when she wrote a joke on the micro-blogging social media. After an outbreak of Nile-virus-carrying mosquitoes in Athens, she wrote on Twitter: ‘With so many Africans in Greece, at least the West Nile mosquitoes will be eating homemade food.’

Two days before the opening ceremony, the Hellenic Olympic Committee expelled Papachristou from the team. After the scandal, she took time off training and subsequently lost her financial benefits on April 2014, ‘because of improper preparation and abstinence from competing.’ Until the day this essay was finished, Papachristou’s name did not appear on the Hellenic Olympic Committee’s website.

What upset the athlete the most, as she explained in an interview, was ‘the excessive reaction and speed of the disciplinary decision.’ Sacco could have said the same about her case, as a journalist from *The New York Times* summarized that what happened to her ‘showed social media’s power to propel a story, turning a previously little-known executive into a figure of notoriety while raising issues of free speech and tolerance.’ The laxity with which written text can be interpreted does not help either, making social media a grey area in which it is hard to define what users may feel free to say and what could be reproachable and punishable in the offline world as well, either by losing a job or facing legal consequences, just to name two examples.

Public shaming – composed mainly of whippings and pillory – was strongly criticized in 1787 by Benjamin Rush, an American physician and a signer of the Declaration of Independence of the United States. Almost 230 years before Sacco, Richards and Papachristou, he wrote:

> It would seem strange that ignominy should ever have been adopted as a milder punishment than death, did we not know that the human mind seldom arrives at truth upon any subject till it has first reached the extremity of error.

After ignominy’s federal abolition in 1839, the American state of Delaware kept some forms of it until 1905. Some editorials from those years referred to the consequences of pillory in a way easily relatable to what can be seen in Twitter scandals triggered by less than 140 characters: ‘With [the convicted person’s] self-respect destroyed and the taunt and sneer of public disgrace branded upon his forehead, he feels himself lost and abandoned by his fellows.’

Although it is known that a crowd of well-meaning individuals does not necessarily translate to a well-meaning multitude, it is important to understand that the lesson learned from these scandals goes both ways: Online written words posted without much thought can have offline consequences, just as the public shaming can extend far beyond the online world and cause more damage than users are aware of. Interaction through screens is constantly changing, and as Danah Boyd accurately wrote, ‘the tensions between the technologies that help create networked publics and those said publics reveal how the nature of public-ness is actually being remade every day in people’s lives.’ Sadly, though, participating in social media sometimes looks more like a remake of shameful fads instead of a new way of interacting.
Notes.


2 In an email to *The New York Times* journalist Jon Ronson, who interviewed Sacco and others who suffered similar fates to understand the consequences of public shaming on individuals, Sacco explained what she originally intended to portray with her joke: ‘To put it simply, I wasn’t trying to raise awareness of AIDS or piss off the world or ruin my life. Living in America puts us in a bit of a bubble when it comes to what is going on in the third world. I was making fun of that bubble.’ See Ronson, J. ‘How one stupid tweet blew up Justine Sacco’s life’. *The New York Times*. 12 February 2015. Web. 12 December 2015.

3 Boyd. *It’s complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. 47.


5 Ronson. ‘How one stupid tweet blew up Justine Sacco’s life.’

6 Ronson. ‘How one stupid tweet blew up Justine Sacco’s life.’


11 Ronson. ‘How one stupid tweet blew up Justine Sacco’s life.’

12 Ibid.