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Has Social Media Shifted the Balance of Shame

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I've just completed a series of graphic paintings for a solo show entitled, 'I Think Therefore I Hashtag.' I have been painting about the news stories of the last year that were waking me up and coming to bed with me. Now, I am something of an armchair activist. I'm not unknown to be facebooking about some cause or other or be pushing petitions under people's noses. But painting these stories has really got my brain ticking about the hashtag - as a dangerous force which can ruin ordinary lives.

I deal with the matter of the hashtag very differently in my show but the train of thought has led me to believe that Twitter is turning us into a nasty surveillance state. We're shaming people without considering the consequences and the punishments are outweighing the crimes. Anyone caught blurting out bigotry or ignorance on a public forum will be tarred and feathered within hours. Take Justine Sacco, the PR executive who tweeted, 'Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white.'

The tweet was sent to 170 twitter followers before she boarded her flight from JFK to South Africa. By the time she'd landed, the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet had trended worldwide and a twitter user went to the airport to photograph her to post it online. In the meantime, she'd been sacked and had received thousands of angry messages and threats. 12 words had blown her life apart. The hotel workers at the hotel she'd booked were threatening to strike. Nobody could guarantee her safety at her destination and her family - who are active civil rights supporters in South Africa - were ashamed. Her only hope was a time machine.

More recently, we've seen another act of self-harm in the news. Nobel prize winning scientist Tim Hunt gave a keynote speech and said that women in the science lab were distracting because 'you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you and when you criticise them they cry'. His comments, semi-satirical I'm guessing, and probably intended to be humorous, went viral and were used as a weapon to 'hang him out to dry'. It was a flippant comment that launched a thousand op ed pieces all over the world. A journalist who probably wanted to boost her own twitter following started the hashtag #distractinglysexy, which fanned the flames beautifully. Before you know it, the savage vultures arrived to pick at the flesh of the 72 year old academic. Female scientists from all over the world posted images of themselves online, Hunt resigned from his post, his life and career in shreds. Professor Richard Dawkins came out in support of Hunt and said that his remark was "light-hearted banter against himself."

This cruel game of mob justice anytime someone says something stupid or mildly offensive runs the risk of creating a society of people who are terrified of saying anything that might shake things up. We are losing our sense of humour and displaying a remarkable lack of tolerance. The twittersphere is a practical thought police - conform or die. Ironic since social media purports to be a voice for all. Sacco made a ridiculous comment but I don't think she deserved to have her life ripped apart but this is the age that we live in now.

As Monica Lewinsky said recently, scandal is brought to us by the digital revolution. After being swept up in what she calls her 'improbable romance', aged 22 with the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, the news broke online. Lewinsky says, "It was the first time the traditional news was usurped by the internet for a major news story. I went from being a completely private figure to a publicly humiliated one worldwide." Lewinsky says that this was prior to social media but it moved an international community of shamers to comment online and brand her as international strumpet. In her recent Ted talk she said that since her affair exploded into world news 17 years ago, humiliation has become a commodity and shame is an industry. We're now in a cycle of clickability - she says, "the more we click on gossip, the more numb we get to the human lives behind it, the more numb we get, the more we click."

While I do still love Facebook and Instagram, I feel like Twitter is becoming this waiting room where opportunists bide their time until they can pounce on and get the bandwagon rolling over their next target. Hang around long enough in this toxic virtual cafeteria and you'll find someone to demonise and something to rant about. What's so shocking is that so many of them seem to be on the 'liberal' left, all fisticuffs and ready to cause trouble. The destruction of someone's life and livelihood as retribution for a daft comment does not fit the crime. Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. Lewinsky's Ted talk has given us food for thought, several courses in fact. I agree with her wholeheartedly when she says we need to be more compassionate. We should try to "imagine walking a mile in someone else's headline."

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