Intertext

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The Plight of the Angry Tweet

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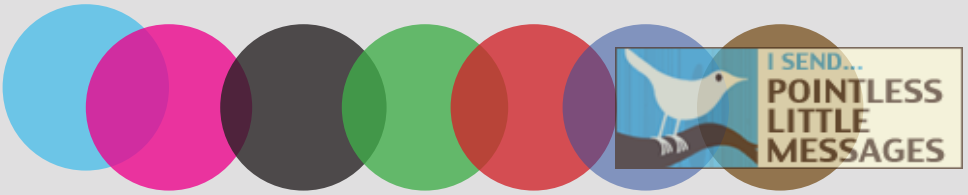
I have never interjected in an Internet war of sorts. I believe this mainly stems from my apprehension with the highly public and transparent forums of Twitter and Facebook. But I have often wondered if I am disadvantaging myself by not participating in the digital realm that we have now come to understand as our most public forum. Perhaps this is our critical space for public discourse today, like the courts of Athenian democracy or the public squares outside 15th century town halls. However, I conversely question whether an "Internet war" is really the only form of public discourse that our generation has been reduced to: the endless replies with hashtags attached to opposing views, the circulating of oversensationalized topics through multiple postings and inappropriate analogies, the taking of "sides" by condemning those who think differently. American journalist Conor Friedersdorf shares my concern in an article for *The Atlantic* by thoughtfully explaining how today's digital norms are worsening the culture wars.

In "Why a Shirt With Scantily Clad Women Caused an Internet Fight," Friedersdorf discusses the role of digital "collaborative journalism" in worsening the state of ongoing contemporary culture wars. In this short piece, he hones in on a controversial issue that focuses on Matt Taylor, a British scientist best known for his involvement in the Rosetta Mission, a project that saw the unprecedented landing of a space probe on a comet. While most of the world was likely occupied with watching the live-stream of such a historic scientific event, Friedersdorf notes that a significant number of people, including well-known tech writers such as Rose Eveleth and Ed Young, were considerably distracted by Taylor's choice of wardrobe during a televised interview. The talented scientist sported a garish shirt depicting scantily dressed women with firearms, an outfit choice that prompted a series of Internet debates between two groups of people: one that was indisputably offended by his unwarranted depiction of women and the other indubitably aggravated by the people who were offended by his choice of clothing.

Through a respectable attempt to understand and represent both sides of the argument, Friedersdorf cautiously explains that the controversy behind this controversy lies not so much in whether Taylor intentionally wore that shirt with misogynistic intent or not, but how contemporary digital debates, prompted by social media such as Twitter and Facebook, have, in fact, overshadowed the initial controversy and turned it into a leeway for amplifying ongoing culture wars on the Internet. The war here is between those digital groups who condemn Taylor for his unfortunate choice of clothing and those groups who condemn those that choose to criticize him. The point of the war essentially is to prove which group's opinion trumps the other. It is not about, as Friedersdorf ultimately expresses, having a critically informed conversation about a given issue. In this

Rose Eveleth's twitter post: 12 November 2014.



case, the issue involved one scientist's less than thoughtful decision to don an informal piece of clothing for an important worldwide event celebrating an important scientific achievement.

The article begins with Friedersdorf channeling a welcomed thought that I like to assume many of us have when viewing intense debates on the World Wide Web—"but what if behind those disrespectful words and phrases being thrown about are actually two people trying to have an honest and considerate discussion about a pressing issue?" While many writers have conveyed optimism for such a hopeful form of conversation to take place in public discourse, Friedersdorf takes it one step further by actually writing out a fictitious discussion he imagines to have taken place between persons with two opposing viewpoints on the Matt Taylor controversy. What follows is a series of conversations between person A and person B that situates an argument through level-headed discussion, one in which both parties are given the right to speak their mindsw, but never does so with the intent of condemning the other. The point that Friedersdorf is trying to make here is that such public discourse lacks a certain degree of understanding of differing views. Of course, this is neither a novel nor a substantial claim on its own.

Friedersdorf is careful when he explains that a prominent part of the Internet debate regarding Taylor's "sexist" attire was prompted by a tweet sent out by tech-writer and his colleague at *The Atlantic* Rose Eveleth. Her statement alongside a snapshot of Taylor in his shirt reads as, "No no women are toooootally welcome in our community, just ask the dude in this shirt." He repeatedly explains in parentheses throughout the article that he writes on behalf of no one but himself. He then goes on to say that his intention lies not in weighing in on the dispute regarding the proper/improper decision to wear that particular shirt, but rather how such an event becomes the platform for a larger unintended dispute.

Though I feel his notions regarding this come across as somewhat of a cop-out on the argument, he most definitely has an opinion, but undoubtedly tries to cover it up by choosing not to include in his discussion, at least not primarily, those writers who have been highly critical of the scientist's choice of a shirt. Instead, Friedersdorf decidedly takes an empathetic approach by writing about Taylor's position in connection to his own. He does so by comparing the scientist's ordeal of having to deal with the overwhelming negative posts about himself on the Internet with his own experiences confronting mass Internet spews about himself. He thoughtfully adds that it is not surprising that Taylor ultimately cried while giving his apologetic statement on television regarding his choice of attire that unfortunate day, because as a scientist he has never been exposed to such profane forms of public scrutiny, with some tweets rendering him a misogynist and others calling for his death. Even if Taylor knew that the angry tweets did not reflect the actual intentions of those who posted them, it nevertheless can take an exhaustive toll on one's emotional state.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this

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article lies in the inherent need for us, the audience, to take "sides" in arguments that are prevalent on the Internet, especially through the use of public forums such as Twitter. Of course, taking sides in an argument is not necessarily a wrong thing to do, but what is more critical to understand is the way we choose to convey our arguments.The grossly exaggerated lashes and assertions that are thrown about Internet forums every day are redolent of a society occupied with getting its way. This method of approaching arguments on the Internet is undoubtedly, in this case, just an end in itself rather than a means to better understand the situation so we can appropriately intervene.

It seems that we are so occupied with being right or what we perceive as the right thing to do that we no longer approach issues of public concern with a genuine interest in finding a coherent solution. We assert our own solution through hostile and hyperbolic language. Of course, such forms of language are not confined to arguments on Internet forums. It is seemingly becoming an everyday part of our lives and the way in which we approach public discourse, whether it be the media oversensationalizing certain news topics or when in a heated debate with a friend over even the most trivial of subjects.

Wayne Booth, in his book *The Rhetoric of RHETORIC*, expresses that it is ethically wrong to deliberately produce rhetoric that tries to convince or win the votes of an audience through mishandling or disproportioning of information. In the controversy regarding Matt Taylor's choice of clothing on international television, some viewers felt that his shirt belittled women who joined the science industry while others argued that his shirt could not possibly represent the entirety of his personal nature, especially towards women. The former argument is no doubt prompted by an inherent preoccupation our society has with issues of sexism and feminism and countless other -isms in contemporary culture, where any fragment of misrepresentation can be appropriated to unfathomably sized arguments. The latter opposing argument is prompted by people who take issue with the very concepts of sexism and feminism, citing their inappropriate assertion into all matters of everyday life. One can argue that the middlemen in this argument are those people who support and bring to light issues behind representation of females in society, but feel that this was not the opportune moment to do so. Perhaps I situate myself more within this category of people.

As a young woman pursuing a technical field in college, I empathize with the many young girls who are left feeling somewhat apprehensive about their career choices after watching a respectable man in science donning an apparently sexist piece of clothing. However, there is a contextual boundary for any reasonable argument, and as Friedersdorf goes on to explain in his piece, the hostile and exaggerated tones of language used by several people targeting Taylor on the Internet were certainly out of place and out of context.

Practicing empathetic journalism is perhaps a more successful way for a writer to convey his or her opinions in a sound manner that asks not for condemnation of a given subject but rather, an informed account of what it actually means to be the subject of a public controversy. Empathy in journalism can begin to allow journalists to transcend preconceived notions by following a pursuit of understanding. This does not mean one has to agree with

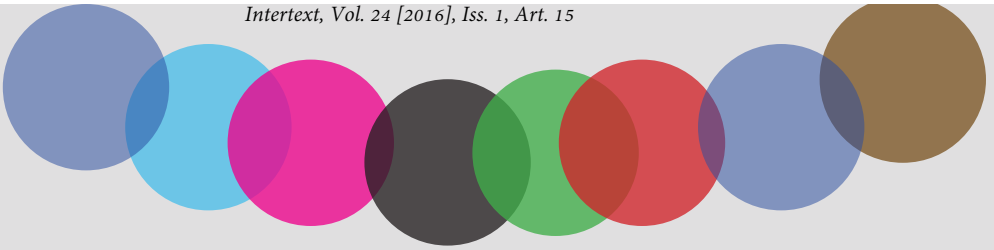
the way a subject behaves but, more so, understand why the subject behaves that way. In her article, "How Close Is Too Close? When Journalists Become Their Sources," Elizabeth Fakazis, professor of Media Studies at the University of Wisconsin, explores the value of empathy in journalism by explaining that practicing empathy will not only foster a greater understanding of a given issue, but also promote trust between journalist and audience. In this case, Friedersdorf conveys his position on the controversy at hand by choosing to understand the position of Matt Taylor. In doing so, Friedersdorf thoughtfully asserts that by all means, had he been there that day when Taylor decided to wear that shirt to the press event, he would have been the first to ask him to reconsider his choice of attire. Ultimately, Friedersdorf is expressing to us, his audience, that he, too, has found issues with the less than appropriate article of clothing. He is also telling us that there is more to the story than this man choosing to wear such an atrocious shirt, and those who choose to condemn him for his one misinformed decision are indeed acting inappropriately.

It is here, perhaps, that we begin to hear Friedersdorf's voice louder than ever before, and we undoubtedly understand his position regarding the controversy. He dutifully explains with emphatic intent that there are serious concerns not only when a subject of a controversy is unfairly scrutinized for his or her role, but especially so when the controversy itself becomes the subject of gross hyperbole. It is particularly here where Friedersdorf begins to showcase those writers who chose to do this—from blogger Rod Dreher comparing the Taylor oppression to Stalin's Gulag to Glenn Reynolds describing the feminist groups that criticized Taylor as "lynch mobs." Despite his clear subversions to the plethora of exaggerated accounts, Friedersdorf cautiously introduces Dreher as a "normally excellent" blogger and Reynolds as someone who "normally avoids hyperbole of this sort." While some may view the inclusion of writers who contest his article as a safe approach, it can also be argued that it further enhances his argument by showcasing that writers can inevitably convey only certain sides of arguments.

In her essay, "The Raw and the Half-Cooked," Patricia Williams, Professor of Law at Columbia University, writes about the detrimental conception of the humanities in terms of commodification rather than the value of relations. She is critical of the use and selected representation of language in public life and ultimately how our perceived conceptions become objectified and translated into determined laws that leave little room for vital interpretation. Surely Taylor's shirt conveys one facet of his story, and it seems reasonable enough for us to agree with Friedersdorf that this one caption does not explain the whole.

However, such hyperbole and over-sensationalization in journalism and writing is unethical for a variety of reasons. As Friedersdorf aptly explains through the relationship between figurative language and analogy, when, "Real-life lynch mobs are to being murdered as 'online feminist lynch mobs' are feeling pressure to say sorry," there is a critical exaggeration that asks readers to think a certain way. As Williams explains in her essay, such an amplified expression of one facet translates into quite an uninformed understanding of the larger issue at stake.

It is perhaps this exaggeration that Friedersdorf has the greatest problem with regarding



the Matt Taylor controversy. It is the exaggeration or particular captioning of the story that gives rise to a series of wars on the Internet. Friedersdorf asserts that over-sensationalization becomes the "driver of dysfunction," and that all at once, it becomes not about whether Matt Taylor intentionally or unintentionally wore a "misogynistic" shirt, but rather whether those "groups" criticizing his shirt are the victims or "lynch-mobs," or conversely, whether those who are opposed to the anti-Taylor group are the victims or the "lynch-mobs." Friedersdorf suitably adds here that it did not matter if, say, Taylor chose to wear a pro-abortion t-shirt or Che Guevara tank top. The outcome would have been the same: a crazed culture war with Internet groups unduly arguing for a position that looks to confirm their own while condemning the other.

Friedersdorf is well aware of the very social dynamics that hinder a civil exchange from taking place in public discourse on the Internet. He attempts to bring the issues to light by writing about the undue reactions to public controversies recorded on web forums, where one opinion from a member in a group can be translated into the opinion of the whole group. Such an understanding of public forum, as Friedersdorf explains, is precisely what is letting us down. The issue here lies in understanding that as human beings, we have the ability to reason instead of reacting to impulses; we retain a sense of rationality to determine the way we convey our arguments. Such rationality, however, is not to be looked at as solely through an external objective lens, but through a lens that duly combines intellect with understanding. But of course, to begin with, we have to look to understand and not simply to prove through malicious rhetoric. Such a way of approaching arguments in public discourse cannot be a chance event, but must be practiced in our everyday lives. Perhaps we should live with virtue, the Aristotelean way of life that simply requires that if one does not live with virtue, then one is not prepared for the logic of ethical arguments and hence cannot bring ethical principles into action.

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