

This week's Cyber Security Tip

How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up a Life

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[Editor's Note: this mailing is excerpted from a New York Times feature.]

Social Media—Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and the like—have become ubiquitous elements of American life, both at home and at work. A recent report proclaimed that more than 200 million Americans and Canadians alone are active Facebook users. Most users are drawn by the positive aspects of Social Media – sharing life events with family, keeping in touch with distant friends and acquaintances, staying abreast of current events, and offering their two cents' worth on everything from apple orchards to zealot foodies.

But have you ever thought about the down side of Social Media?

Consider a true Social Media horror story. Not so long ago, a 30-year old senior director of corporate communications began tweeting acerbic little jokes about the indignities of travel:

“Weird German Dude: You're in First Class. It's 2014. Get some deodorant.”

“Chilly — cucumber sandwiches — bad teeth. Back in London!”

And then, the bombshell:

“Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!”

She had only 170 Twitter followers. But then her phone exploded with texts and alerts. Her Twitter feed had become a horror show. Comments ranged from *“How did she get a PR job?!”* to *“Her level of racist ignorance [is appalling]”* and *“I'm [a fellow] employee and I don't want her doing any communications on our behalf ever again. Ever.”* And then one from her employer: *“This is an outrageous, offensive comment.”*

The audience's anger soon turned to excitement: *“We are about to watch [her] get fired. In REAL time. Before she even KNOWS she's getting fired.”* The furor over her tweet had become not just an ideological crusade against her perceived bigotry, but also a form of idle entertainment: *“Is there no one going to the airport to tweet her arrival? Come on, Twitter! I'd like pictures.”* A Twitter user did indeed go to the airport to tweet her arrival. He took her photograph and posted it online.

By the time she had touched down, tens of thousands of angry tweets had been sent in response to her joke. An acquaintance frantically deleted her friend's tweet and her

account, but it was far too late. One Twitter user accurately noted, “your tweet lives on forever.” Within minutes, it was everywhere.

Her extended family in South Africa were longtime activists for racial equality. When she arrived at the family home from the airport, one of the first things her aunt said to her was: *“This is not what our family stands for. And now, by association, you’ve almost tarnished the family.”*

It’s possible that her fate would have been different had an anonymous tip not led a writer to the offending tweet. He retweeted it to his 15,000 followers and eventually posted it [on his website].

As precarious as tweeting is, posting photos can be equally dangerous. One person posed for a photograph while mocking a sign at Arlington National Cemetery’s Tomb of the Unknowns. She had stood next to the sign, which asks for “Silence and Respect,” pretending to scream and making a profane gesture. She and her co-worker, who posted the picture on Facebook, had a personal running joke about disobeying signs — smoking in front of No Smoking signs, for example — and documenting it. But shorn of this context, her picture appeared to be a joke not about a sign but about the war dead. Worse, she didn’t realize that her mobile uploads were visible to the public.

Someone found the photo and brought it to the attention of hordes of online strangers. Soon there was a wildly popular “Fire [Her]” Facebook page. The next morning, there were news cameras outside her home; when she showed up to her job, she was told to hand over her keys. She barely left home for the year that followed. People unearthed personal information and sent her and her friends threatening messages. A friend was reportedly let go from her job, as well.

And believe it or not, it doesn’t take an act of self-outing to open the can of worms. At a professional conference, a stupid joke popped into a man’s head. He murmured the joke to his friend sitting next to him, it wasn’t even conversation-level volume. Just an innocent comment between friends, right?

He half-noticed when a woman one row in front of them stood up, turned around and took a photograph. The woman had, in fact, overheard the joke. She considered it to be offensive. She tweeted the picture to her 9,209 followers with a caption. Ten minutes later, he and his friend were taken into a quiet room at the conference and asked to explain themselves. A day later, his boss called him into his office, and he was fired.

Ironically, the woman who took the photograph soon felt the wrath of the crowd herself. The man responsible for the joke had posted about losing his job on an online forum popular with developers. This led to a backlash from the other end of the political spectrum, and she was bombarded with death threats on Twitter and Facebook. Someone tweeted her home address along with a photograph of a beheaded woman with duct tape over her mouth. Fearing for her life, she left her home, sleeping on friends’ couches for the remainder of the year.

Next, her employer's website went down. Someone had launched a DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attack, which overwhelms a site's servers with repeated requests. Her employer was told the attacks would stop if she was fired. That same day she was publicly let go. She remained a person of interest to the media. Websites had already ransacked her Twitter feed for more horrors. A *New York Post* photographer had been following her to the gym.

But despite her near invisibility on social media, she was still ridiculed and demonized across the Internet. But perhaps she had now come to understand that her shaming wasn't really about her at all. Social media is so perfectly designed to manipulate our desire for approval, and that is what led to her undoing. Her tormentors were instantly congratulated as they took her down, bit by bit, and so they continued to do so. Their motivation was a bid for the attention of strangers, hoping to amuse people she couldn't see.

The moral of these sorrowful stories? Take a tip from carpenters, who measure twice before cutting once. Think and re-think those seemingly pithy blurbs before hitting the "Send" button. Reconsider posting those "cute" pictures. The repercussions can be catastrophic. Perhaps the best advice is to stop posting online altogether – if you want to be entertained, follow the tweets of others and revel in the hijinks of Facebook friends. But don't expose yourself to the hostile rants or censure by others, typically by complete strangers. And remember: the internet is forever.

[The full story can be found at <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html?referrer=&r=3>]