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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Stephen Fry quits Twitter after online roasting shock: this is news, right?

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Parting is such tweet sorrow: Stephen Fry. Reuters/Kevork Djansezian

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Stephen Fry has been, give or take the odd sabbatical, a prolific and entertaining tweeter for a number of years. Last week, however, in the wake of the febrile online reception that greeted his BAFTA remarks about the appearance of his friend Jenny Beavan, Fry decided the time was right to quit for good.

This time there will be no reconciliation and the split appears to be permanent. Writing on his website, Fry proclaimed that for him the fun was over. Using an aquatic metaphor, he wrote that the secret bathing pool in a magical glade had become stagnant. It was:

frothy with scum, clogged with weeds and littered with broken glass, sharp rocks and slimy rubbish. If you don't watch yourself, with every move you'll end up being gashed, broken, bruised or contused. Even if you negotiate the sharp rocks you'll soon feel that too many people have peed in the pool for you to want to swim there any more.

To be fair, Fry is a regular high-profile target for those who presumably derive pleasure from relentlessly mocking his sexuality, celebrity profile or affliction with bipolar disorder.



Those of us unused to this kind of attention can only imagine the misery and frustration which must result from being continuously targeted.

Mob rule

Twitter is a dangerous playground for anyone in the public eye. Politicians are threatened with rape, sports stars are threatened with murder and women who have any opinions on anything are routinely subject to threats and ridicule. Yasmin Alibhai Brown, Laurie Penny and Charlotte Church are just three who seem to be perpetually firefighting.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Twitter was to be a vehicle whereby the great and the good could communicate with its public without the inconvenience of journalists or actual physical contact. It was to be the medium where the "brand" could be built. For some, such as pop star Katy Perry – who with 80m has the greatest number of followers – Twitter apparently is about maintaining an overwhelmingly one-way relationship with a fan base. For the fan, there is the illusion of closeness and the opportunity to gain insight into the day to day lives of their idols.



It's common for stars such as Perry to employ teams of people to manage their accounts. It's the modern day press office where stars can release any information directly to their followers. And in an era in which the appetite for celebrity gossip and information is seemingly unquenchable it is no wonder that journalists "take to Twitter" to search for material which will temporarily sate the demands of the 24-hour news cycle.

He said, she said

I've written before about the largely positive impact Twitter has had on journalism, and also the notion that it has had a trivialising effect: that it is lazy and convenient for journalists to rely on Twitter "outrages" for news. It is an inescapable fact that scores of commentators are now forced by their editors to pore over the inconsequential, partial and frequently absurd posturings of those capable of tweeting.



There is no question that writing copy on outrages is a relatively simple task – and it goes like this. A public figure posts or says something vaguely controversial. People then react on Twitter. The media then introduces the story, filling up the majority of the article with verbatim examples of what people have tweeted. For Stephen Fry, read Noel Edmonds or any number of other celebrities.

But we should obviously be very careful of overstating the importance of Twitter in terms of reflecting public opinion. When the Independent's Simon Kelner wrote that Fry had been the subject of "public opprobrium", one of the below-the-line comments remarked that just because someone had decided:

to have a whinge about someone on Twitter did NOT mean that the target of their criticism has in any way offended or upset the majority of normal, non-Twitter users.

In the US, 2013 findings by the PewResearchCentre indicated that reaction on Twitter to major political events and policy decisions often differs a great deal from public opinion as measured by surveys. In the UK, a recent report by Demos and Ipsos Mori attempted to get to grips with the complexities of social media research. In respect of the last general election, it concluded that, as highlighted by Mark Pack:

there was very little relationship between the online and offline datasets for politics. People were more satisfied with Cameron than Miliband when asked offline; on Twitter, Miliband received more support.

Haunt for hacks

But increasingly journalist's lives are lived online and stories are harvested from an endlessly yielding crop. Remote technology company Triggertrap, analysed more than 100,000 Twitter accounts and discovered that most of the verified accounts belonged to journalists. Indeed, the report found that journalists make up nearly a quarter (24.6%) of the service's authenticated users.

Equally as revealing (but hardly surprising) was the discovery that journalists and news organisations were the most prolific Twitter users. As Benjamin Muller of Poynter summarised:

News organisations and journalists tweet frequently about the content they produce and consume, and verified journalists follow more users on average compared to other verified groups in the Twitterverse.

In common with so many of my colleagues I fit neatly into the above bracket and am well aware that Twitter and social media in general will continue to provide content for news organisations. But not *all* content. That said, 24-hour news culture (and of course public appetite) mean that there will always be space for the transitory and lightweight.

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