

## **TANTRUMS ON A MASSIVE SCALE, OR: COULD ANYBODY BE A VICTIM OF SOCIAL MEDIA OUTRAGE?**

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One could have the best of intentions and still the opportunities for wrongdoing may be limitless. Not one day goes by without public outrage being expressed on the internet and thus without the spread of hate and verbal abuse. Even only a small proportion of internet users taking offense may have an impact and can result in wide-ranging protests. These events are (perhaps appropriately) referred to as "shitstorms" in Germany. Those who subscribe to ideologies are particularly excitable and prone to creating or participating in such events. Ideologies are necessary in cultures that have not yet stabilised (Swidler, 1986). Thus, when a group of people believes that their point of view is the only one that is true, anyone who has a different world view must be confronted and convinced.

Vulnerability to personal attack from complete strangers started to develop as a phenomenon in its current form when digitalisation came into the picture. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are the conduits for such events as they connect people over vast geographic distances.

### **Where can one go wrong?**

When one finds oneself the target of public outrage on the internet, the question at the forefront of one's mind is: what went wrong? Perhaps one did not consider that numerous groups with their own idiosyncrasies and affinities frolic around, both on and offline. These groups form their own cultures when they create their own world views and behaviours. Sociology defines them as microcultures (Fine, 1979) and they occur in relatively closed-off sections of the social web. When opinions are ideologically and morally charged, the potential for members of these cultures to digitally attack others increases. Moreover, when cultures change offense is sometimes caused

where historically there was none. The misconduct of celebrities, corporations or institutions that had hitherto been considered role models is seen as particularly reprehensible. Thanks to increased reach and visibility through digitalised media, those who were once powerless can now express their views prominently and as a collective.

### **Cultures build their own world views**

Scandalisation sets the stage, then angry reactions and a deluge of complaints follow. The social media outrage is complete, replete with its denigration, insults and threats. The attackers feel justified. They know they are right, because practically all those they interact with on this topic, in their closed internet fora, agree with them. On and off the web, they move through “bubbles” that display little variety in opinion. So-called “friends’ “ comments that portray a different view are hidden on their private profiles, and those who oppose their views are “unfriended”.

These cultures touch on multiple aspects: if somebody wanted to inform themselves about veganism in a public forum, not only would they learn about nutrition, they would also be exposed to the attitudes and ideologies of related specialised cultures. They would witness hunters, farmers and irresponsible carnivores being criticised. The right-wing margins tell the same story; the mission is to change society here too. This culture develops roughly as follows: essentially all announcements are accusations against asylum-seekers, foreigners and those with a different opinion. The purpose of such fora is almost exclusively to pillory strangers. Every action of wrongdoing is recorded and devalues the entire group. Such microcultures develop a special world view. Should any good news involving an asylum seeker make it through to such groups, the story is assimilated to fit their own world view. A newspaper article reporting on an asylum seeker finding a wallet and turning it over to the police is – from their perspective – too good to be true. Such a report must be a lie, it must have been fabricated by the “lying press”, the “Lügenpresse” (Stegbauer, 2018).

### **Diversity is forbidden**

Such an environment does not allow for a nuanced world view, which allows complex phenomena to be approached and debated from different perspectives: participants whose attitudes deviate from the dominant viewpoint within such a group can only assert themselves with difficulty and are often excluded. Anyone with a non-conforming opinion is often publicly threatened with eviction from the group. If the threat is followed through and a

person is indeed evicted, this can be ascribed to the group's political goals. However, there is also a long-standing social rule that supports such exclusion: "homophilia" or, in other words, people tend to socialize with those who are most like themselves.

The same social rules and behaviours that apply to public fora are equally valid for most personal social media profiles, and especially for personal Facebook profiles: people are most often exposed to their closest friends' posts and comments. Any news from Facebook "friends" that is not "liked" or commented on is filtered out of one's personal newsfeed over time. Algorithms thus spare people (Pariser, 2010) from information overload; only the important posts are displayed. While this seems beneficial, such algorithms come at a cost: diversity. Only those most like one another hear from one another. Thus, these algorithmic filters and homophilia have the same effect: they create cultural enclaves in which "each keeps to their own".

What's more, though only few participants actively express their opinions and dominate the newsfeeds, these few skew the perception of opinions within their circle of influence. This is because we see an effect similar to the Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1980): for fear of being socially excluded, the tendency of those who differ in opinion is to remain silent rather than to express an opinion that is in opposition to the majority view.

### **How only few people make big waves**

Some social media outrage episodes are orchestrated – especially those emanating from the far right. A small group of people coordinate to attack their adversary via numerous fake profiles. The biggest of outrages do not, however, rely on such coordination, even though they are fuelled by it. For example, as soon as an accusation is made, the address to send complaints to is made known as a "labour-saving measure". Interested parties prepare the "scandalous" information in such a manner that it can be easily shared on personal profiles. Attempts to instigate public outrage on social media are frequent. However, the information must hit a nerve in the general populace for the scandal to spread beyond a small circle of activists and create a call to action.

### **Disputes generate more disputes**

It is clear from how markedly the contributions from assailants and defenders differ, that cultures really do clash in social media outrage episodes.

Comments from different cultures differ in terms of content and terms used, and there are even differences in grammar and spelling. The social rule of tit-for-tat creates a dynamic of reciprocal taunting. Thus, the insolence takes hold of even the more peacefully inclined (Stegbauer, 2018). Such conflict divides those involved, and the more polarised the debate, the more difficult it is to resolve.

### How can one survive the storm?

If the conflict has become especially fierce, it could be useful to seek out broader public opinion. This is applicable especially if the attacking culture holds minority views within the bigger cultural picture. By doing so, companies that have found themselves under attack have in fact encountered customers who have explicitly defended them. Examples show that accusations can be converted into something positive by engaging with customers who support the company. Those supporters then co-create a “firewall” together with the company. This might strengthen customer loyalty as customers step in for the company and highlight its positive aspects. Germany’s green political party would love to see such support rally around them – in hopeful anticipation, this phenomenon was named “candy storm”, the antonym to “shitstorm”. However, masses of praise without any imminent threat in the air tend not to have the same effect or be as effective in garnering loyalty and highlighting positive aspects.

In some cases, concessions can weaken the opponents’ arguments, however most protesters are not interested in discussing the issues at hand, as their views are already set in stone. The duration of an outrage episode tends to be short. Additionally, protesters sometimes fight among themselves. This is not to say that such an event does not have the potential to wreak havoc.

Some emerge from an episode of social media outrage in better shape, such as when the yellow press builds a minor protest up to be more significant than it is, fuel social media outrage, and thereby keep public interest in celebrities alive. Such attention could then be transformed into fame and advertising contracts.

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