

Going viral: The good, the bad, and the food for thought

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A view of the Northwestern University campus in Evanston on Feb. 7, 2017. A professor at the university recently saw one of her tweets go viral. (Chris Walker / Chicago Tribune)

More than 25 million. That's how many people saw my joke on Twitter.

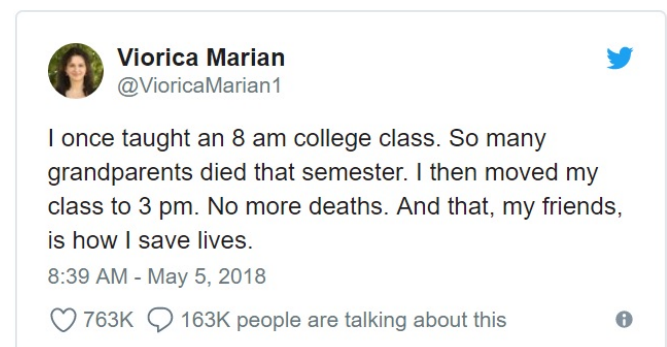
"I once taught an 8 a.m. college class. So many grandparents died that semester. I then moved my class to 3 p.m. No more deaths. And that, my friends, is how I save lives."

I expected a few likes from fellow professors on my sleepy Twitter account with barely 60 followers. Instead, the tweet went viral, with more than 920,000 combined retweets and likes. It crossed platforms to Instagram, where it became a meme, with many more millions of views. Reddit, Facebook — suddenly it was everywhere.

Thousands of comments and an endless stream of direct messages poured in. Most thought it was funny. Many tweeted pithy replies like "Teachers save lives" and "Not all heroes wear capes." The

Daily Mail wrote an article about it and Twitter spotlighted the tweet in its promotion materials.

The internet seemed to be having a collective laugh, and it was heartwarming to see young and old alike all over the world relate across countries, languages, cultures, and generations.



Power of a single tweet

As a scientist, I've written hundreds of research articles over the years and have spent two decades in the laboratory. Yet, if you combine all I have ever written, all my research put together, it still would not reach as many eyes as this one tweet.

The backlash, however, was just as swift. The following Monday, a Chronicle of Higher Education piece took aim at the tweet. Critics wrote that the tweet trivialized the challenges students face in college, that it was disrespectful to students whose relatives really did die, and that it lacked empathy for those who were facing hardships.

And although I posted a response to clarify that students who have extenuating circumstances are accommodated to meet their needs, and that those who have personal, family, or health difficulties should talk directly with their professors or contact the campus counseling, health, or students with disabilities offices for help, it wasn't long before the name-calling and threats began.

Such pushback is not only a demonstration of our collective tendency to find fault with, well, everything and look for the cloud in every silver lining, but is also a symptom of our increasing inability as a society to engage in conversation with those with whom we disagree.

The result is an online culture that often seems divided into "snowflakes" and "bullies," one in which it is becoming increasingly hard to find the middle ground between extremes and the commonality between different kinds of people. The dichotomy hurts everyone and is spilling into everyday life and influencing how we interact with each other.

The ugly side

In the Twitterverse, anything can, and probably will, get trolled. Knee-jerk reactions on social media can be like arming a toddler with a machete. Which is why the same good judgment we must use in our day-to-day lives is also required in our online lives. Because while social media can give rise and power to entire social movements and can expose abusers, it can also facilitate professional suicide and singlehandedly end careers.

If my fleeting internet fame as the Kardashian of academia for a day taught me anything, it's that social media can be incredibly powerful. Of course I had already witnessed its effects on politics, entertainment and society as an outside observer, but it was very different to experience it firsthand.

This culture of volatile discourse can have a disproportionate effect across genders and groups. Those likely to be more sensitive to the opinions of others, or to take things more personally and closer to heart, may become less likely to speak up and contribute what they have to say. And when voices that are more measured, more thoughtful, more tentative or from a different walk of life are less likely to participate in public discourse, what is lost is an accurate reflection of society.

This voice silencing matters. If enough voices are extinguished or otherwise opt out of public discourse, the narrative becomes skewed in favor of those who

are loudest, more extreme, more belligerent.

When is enough enough?

I received so many hostile messages, insults and threats that at one point I considered deleting the tweet. But not only were screenshots of the tweet already circulating outside my control on other platforms, removing the tweet would in essence be equivalent to stifling my voice, which was the very opposite of what I believe in.

As it is, not all voices are equally represented in public discourse. Social media provides a way to shift the balance to increase the representation of women and underrepresented groups. And the public discourse of the present becomes the history of tomorrow. Which means that those who have a voice get to write history.

And while tweeting a joke does not change the world, this joke is part of my voice. It reflects my sense of humor and my life. It may have a little bite to it, as jokes often do; but as far as bites go, this was barely a nibble. Any teacher who has taught teenagers or young adults long enough knows that students sometimes skip classes, especially the early morning ones. And if the joke contributed to promoting an honest discussion about the challenges students face and a way to address them fairly, even better.

The repercussions of this one tweet and of more people from all walks of life now following my Twitter account is that my voice can reach more people, and more diverse people, than ever before. Certainly more than I ever could inside the university classroom where I teach. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and the internet in general have become classrooms and town halls of their own for billions of people.

As a result, I can now use my voice to talk about things I have spent hundreds of thousands of hours studying — about language science and science in general. About bilingualism and the value of learning languages. About education and equal rights.

Which is precisely why I believe in the upside of social media. In using it to learn, connect, laugh, share, commiserate. To join our individual voices so their message is stronger and heard further.

My individual voice is that of a woman. A scientist. A teacher. A parent. An immigrant. Contrary to what the critics of my tweet may think, I understand hardship. I came to the United States alone, as a teenager, with \$2.41 in my pocket, and worked multiple jobs to put myself through college and graduate

school. And my beloved grandfather passed away while I was in college. I get it. I do.

A sense of humor was at times the only thing I felt I had.

At a time in which trolling is the norm and the choice is to suffer through it or opt out, a change is needed in how we interact with each other. If we pre-emptively silence ourselves due to consequences that might occur, only the loudest will have a share of voice, a seat at the table, and a contribution to the public narrative. Indeed, it's time to shift how we engage with those we don't necessarily agree with so that the results are not harmful, but constructive.

Yes, it can be scary to speak up in a public forum, to tweet, to post, to write publicly and to talk in front of an audience. But for every person who does not do it, someone else has the floor. So speak we must. That is something I believe in with all my heart. Because the alternative to saying something is saying nothing, and the alternative to consequences is to be inconsequential.