

Twitterhoea: Being in the Present

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

You might think that only a twit would tweet about her sex life. You might think it career suicide to enter into the type of slur-slinging, curse-fuelled twitter feuds that the erudite Demetri Lallas profiles in this month's guest essay, [The Velocity of Invective](#).

But if you think that, you're clearly (tone) deaf, (socially) blind, (dinosaur era) dumbtastic and probably don't know the difference between going viral (good!) and catching a virus (still bad). You obviously have been living in a cave or you're over 84 years old because it is NOT in bad taste to air your dirty laundry on the World Wide Web which is where twitter feeds live forever like undead zombies. In this cynical age, the more @scandalous and #insulting you can be, the mo' better because you will attract more followers and therefore you will be more popular and hence you will find yourself at the top of the trending digital pyramid and thus you will be a Virtual Queen. If you need to have a lot of followers for your career, sex/swearing/dissing do work and so by all means, have a tweetathon!

But be warned that you must be fast on the trigger: rapid fire rancor and breakneck revelations only. Whether you're a famous writer or a sophomore in high school, you know that you should not pause, reflect, investigate, research, fact check, check yourself, dwell in a momentary spell of reverie...No, you must respond to any given debate/news item/natural disaster/current event/national emergency/tragedy without a moment's thought. A minute is way too long because all those fickle followers - like all Moderns - get bored really, really, really fast. Instantaneous reactions are mandatory. In the information economy, the quicker you keep it coming, the mo' better. Thank goodness for Twitterhoea!

Twitter meets verbal diarrhoea ...voilà, Twitterhoea! And it may be contagious. The thing about modern technology is that it doesn't necessarily give us, the Moderns, new pathologies, it just provides us with myriad platforms to display our pathologies to the world at large. People always went to the pyramids and thought, "I can't wait to show off and tell So-and-So and her insufferable sister that I went to the pyramids!" But now, you don't have to wait. You can share every second, beginning with your ancient suitcase bursting at the zip, to the annoying cab ride on the way to the airport, to the overweight man in the plane who is breathing garlic and onions all over you, to the overpriced cappuccino at the seedy hotel etc. etc. ETC.

Every moment - from the banal to the nobody-cares-about-this - can be uploaded. If you have contracted Twitterhoea or Instagramitis, you will know that not a passing thought or random observation should go unmediated because we're all movie directors now, worrying about the best camera angle, the wittiest quip, the most flattering shot, the most quotable caption, because we're not just the director, we are the star of our own independent film about...us! And just like the stars we become dependent on our fans to like us, to comb through our Timelines, talk about our Newsfeeds, thumbs-up our comments, to re-tweet our lives, to make our posts rise to the peak of our Pinterest.

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.
 But if everyone is on the stage, who is left to sit in the audience?
 What is the line between a spectator and a voyeur?

No matter, we need the attention so badly that we must make a spectacle of ourselves, self-commodify, self-promote, just like the real stars (people who are actually famous and have real movie directors telling them what to do). And

everybody knows celebrities are notoriously insecure, so dependent are they on incessant external affirmation. They often develop addictions because they lose sight of the line between the self and the staging of self... This is a stereotype but isn't there something about Twitter that both feeds those suffering from a deficit of attention and those afflicted with Attention Deficit Disorder?

Ironically, those true blue celebrities pay underlings to tweet witty aphorisms on their behalf and they seem to shy away from the probing cameras of the paparazzi. At least they pretend to because they do have a symbiotic relationship with the media which they rely on to make them famous but yet, some of them do seem to value a measure of privacy. Privacy is defined as the state or condition of being free from being observed or being free of public attention. Dignified, mature people used to value (the freedoms of) privacy but that was in pre-historic times. They might not promote the kind of censorship of Twitter that the Iranian and Turkish government are trying to implement but they might believe in this really old-fashioned thing called self-censorship. More shocking: they even used to record their thoughts in a private journal!?!

But where is the added value in that? In the classic, *Brave New World*, wearing old clothes with holes was repugnant because capitalism requires capital to circulate and the faster the better so constant consumption was promoted. The population had to continually buy new clothes to keep the whole system afloat. In the information economy, we need constant public information circulating non-stop so why send a text message to one or two people when the whole Twitterverse can be privy to your droll banter? Twitter, like all the social media platforms, relies on user-generated content to create its value. It's just a shell and we stuff it full thus driving up its stock price. Bad luck for us: social media is not very socialist. When we're sharing our pithy thoughts, engaging in witty repartee, confessing our most intimate encounters and uploading our baby's first moments, we don't share in the profits generated.

We use the platforms but the platforms also use us.

M.T. Anderson's brilliant and prescient 2002 novel *Feed*, depicts a futuristic America in which information and knowledge have become completely indivisible and we have become so dependent on our information technology that we have a computer chip embedded in our brains when we're still toddlers. We never really learn to "voice" talk in fully-realized sentences because we're always sending chats telepathically. The internet controls all information and we're always getting spammed with the specs of the various products we want to buy because schools are now run by corporations that teach us how to be good consumers so we are shopping all the time thanks to the multiple websites in our heads that never let us do one single thing because we're always multitasking because the internet never turns off so the feed is feeding us and we're feeding it because it accesses everything in our brains including our dreams and it is recording every moment of our lives so our memories/feelings/choices become entangled with our consumer profiles. It no longer matters whether we're using the platform or the platform is using us because there is no ontological separation between us and the platform and that's the only way we can be in the world.

Except that not everybody can afford to have a chip. Actually it's only 73% of the population who has it. But the other 27% don't count for the novel's protagonist, just like we don't care about the digital apartheid that divides us Moderns from the 6.8 billion Dinosaurs who do not tweet not to mention the one billion people who don't even have electricity yet. It's our world and we, the Moderns, get bored very, very, very easily because we're used to a lot of stimulation. We're always super busy and we have to multitask because we can't miss anything so no matter what we're doing, we should also simultaneously be doing something else.

Last week, I was sitting at the back of an auditorium surveying the sea of undergrads before me. At the front was a famous history professor, renowned for his entertaining and illuminating lectures. His burnished nuggets of knowledge and the wisdom distilled in his power point slides was not enough entertainment for the students. Alas no flickering emoticons, catchy tunes, or pop-up ads.

One boy a few rows down was on e-bay. He shops on e-bay in every class. A girl to my right was watching YouTube clips, her headphones jammed into her ears. The kid in front of me was surrounded by devices: he had his laptop, his iPad and his cell. He typed about two lines into his laptop, did a Google search on his iPad and then picked up his phone. On his left were four attractive girls and on his right-hand side, five nubile undergrads dressed Cali-style i.e. quasi-naked. But on his phone, he was flipping through picture after picture of all the girls on the hook-up app Tinder, straight people's version of Grinder. Tinder locates him via his GPS and then shows him all the photos of girls nearby looking for guys. He would look at each one's photo for approximately three seconds and then like her, swipe right, or pass, swipe left.

Despite being surrounded by thousands of his fellow undergrads, he decided to spend the history lecture looking at the mediated selves of the adolescent girls staring out at him from the screen of his phone. Tinderitis? Or is it that we don't know any other way to be in the present now? Do we need to photograph it or narrate it or otherwise access it through one of our devices?

Social media has made us so sociable that we can never be satisfied just with the people in the room next to us. We have to play with our phone too. We can't listen to what the person in front of us is saying because there might be something more urgent on Facebook.

And even when we find ourselves getting depressed/competitive/nervous/insecure by looking at other peoples' happy staged lives when our latest ex has un-Friended us; or even when we know that we'll end up feeling like we are not keeping up with the Joneses when we see our childhood buddy's new car; even though we cynically note that engagements/promotions/births are heavily featured but not the divorces/lay-offs/miscarriages of our "friends" who are all, at the end of the day, just like us, doing their very best to brand themselves in the information economy...And then we think, this is rubbish, and we deactivate our profiles and declare that we're free!

But isn't it just a matter of time before we get sucked back in again. Do we know how to occupy the space of the unmediated present, full of silence and unquiet thoughts? Do we still possess the desire to just be in the fullness of time and unfiltered experience?

###