

1

BRAVEHEART

This story begins in early January 2012 when I noticed that another Jon Ronson had started posting on Twitter. His photograph was a photograph of my face. His Twitter name was @jon_ronson. His most recent tweet, which appeared as I stared in surprise at his timeline, read: *‘Going home. Gotta get the recipe for a huge plate of guarana and mussel in a bap with mayonnaise :D #yummy.’*

‘Who are you?’ I tweeted him.

‘Watching #Seinfeld. I would love a big plate of celeriac, grouper and sour cream kebab with lemongrass #foodie,’ he tweeted.

I didn’t know what to do.

The next morning I checked @jon_ronson’s timeline before I checked my own. In the night he had tweeted, *‘I’m dreaming something about #time and #cock.’*

He had twenty followers. Some were people I knew from real life, who were probably wondering why I’d suddenly become so passionate about fusion cooking and candid about dreaming about cock.

JON RONSON

I did some digging. I discovered that a young researcher, formerly of Warwick University, called Luke Robert Mason had a few weeks earlier posted a comment on the *Guardian* site. It was in response to a short video I had made about spambots. ‘We’ve built Jon his very own infomorph,’ he wrote. ‘You can follow him on Twitter here: @jon_ronson.’

‘Oh, so it’s some kind of *spambot*,’ I thought. ‘OK. This will be fine. Luke Robert Mason must have thought I would *like* the spambot. When he finds out that I don’t he’ll remove it.’

So I tweeted him: ‘*Hi!! Will you take down your spambot please?*’

Ten minutes passed. Then he replied, ‘*We prefer the term infomorph.*’

I frowned. ‘*But it’s taken my identity,*’ I wrote.

‘*The infomorph isn’t taking your identity,*’ he wrote back. ‘*It is repurposing social media data into an infomorphic aesthetic.*’

I felt tightness in my chest.

‘*#woohoo damn, I’m in the mood for a tidy plate of onion grill with crusty bread. #foodie,*’ @jon_ronson tweeted.

I was at war with a robot version of myself.

A month passed. @jon_ronson was tweeting twenty times a day about its whirlwind of social engagements, its ‘soirées’ and wide circle of friends. It now had fifty followers. They were getting a disastrously misrepresentative depiction of my views on soirées and friends.

The spambot left me feeling powerless and sullied. My

SO YOU'VE BEEN PUBLICLY SHAMED

identity had been redefined all wrong by strangers and I had no recourse.

I tweeted Luke Robert Mason. If he was adamant that he wouldn't take down his spambot, perhaps we could at least meet? I could film the encounter and put it on YouTube. He agreed, writing that he'd be glad to explain the philosophy behind the infomorph. I replied that I'd certainly be interested to learn the philosophy behind the spambot.

I rented a room in Central London. He arrived with two other men – the team behind the spambot. All three were academics. They had met at the University of Warwick. Luke was the youngest, handsome, in his twenties, a 'researcher in technology and Cyberculture and director of the Virtual Futures conference', according to his online CV. David Bausola looked like a rakish teacher, the sort of person who might speak at a conference on the literature of Aleister Crowley. He was a 'creative technologist' and the CEO of the digital agency, Philter Phactory. Dan O'Hara had a shaved head and eyes that were piercing and annoyed-looking. His jaw was clenched. He was in his late thirties, a lecturer in English and American Literature at the University of Cologne. Before that he'd been a lecturer at Oxford. He'd written a book about J. G. Ballard called *Extreme Metaphors* and another book called *Thomas Pynchon: Schizophrenia & Social Control*. As far as I understood it, David Bausola had done the actual building of the spambot, while the two other men provided 'research and consultancy'.

I suggested they sit in a row on the sofa so I could film

them all in a single shot. Dan O'Hara gave the others a glance.

'Let's play along,' he said to them. They all sat, with Dan in the middle.

'What do you mean by "play along"?' I asked him.

'It's about psychological control,' he said.

'Do you think my having you in a row on the sofa is my way of psychologically controlling you?' I asked.

'Absolutely,' said Dan.

'In what way?' I asked.

'I do that with students,' said Dan. 'I put myself in a separate chair and put the students in a row on the sofa.'

'Why would you want to psychologically control some students?' I asked.

Dan looked briefly worried that he'd been caught saying something eerie. 'In order to control the learning environment,' he said.

'Is this making you feel uncomfortable?' I asked him.

'No, not really,' said Dan. 'Are you uncomfortable?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Why?' Dan asked.

I spelled out my grievances. 'Academics,' I began, 'don't swoop into a person's life uninvited and use him for some kind of academic exercise and when I ask you to take it down you're, *Oh it's not a spambot, it's an infomorph.*'

Dan nodded. He leaned forward. 'There must be lots of Jon Ronsons out there?' he began. 'People with your name? Yes?'

I looked suspiciously at him. 'I'm sure there are people with my name,' I replied, carefully.

SO YOU'VE BEEN PUBLICLY SHAMED

'I've got the same problem,' said Dan, with a smile. 'There's another academic out there with my name.'

'You don't have *exactly* the same problem as me,' I said, 'because my *exact* problem is that three strangers have stolen my identity and have created a robot version of me and are refusing to take it down even though they come from respectable universities and give TEDx talks.'

Dan let out a long-suffering sigh. 'You're saying, "There is only one Jon Ronson,"' he said. 'You're proposing yourself as the real McCoy, as it were, and you want to maintain that integrity and authenticity. Yes?'

I stared at him.

'I think *we* feel annoyed with *you*,' Dan continued, 'because we're not quite persuaded by that. We think there's already a layer of artifice and it's your online personality – the *brand* Jon Ronson – you're trying to protect. Yeah?'

'NO, IT'S JUST ME TWEETING,' I yelled.

'The Internet is not the real world,' said Dan.

'I write my tweets,' I replied. 'And I press Send. So it's me on Twitter.'

We glared at each other.

'That's not academic,' I said. 'That's not postmodern. That's the fact of it.'

'This is bizarre,' Dan said. 'I find it really strange – the way you're approaching this. You must be one of the very few people who have chosen to come on Twitter and use their own name as their Twitter name. Who does that? And that's why I'm a little suspicious of your motives, Jon. That's why I say I think you're using it as brand management.'

I said nothing, but to this day it kills me that it didn't

cross my mind to point out to him that Luke Robert Mason's Twitter name is @LukeRobertMason.

Our conversation continued like this for an hour. I told Dan that I have never used the term 'brand management' in my life. Language like that is alien to me, I said. 'And that's the same with your spambot. Its language is different to mine.'

'Yes,' the three men agreed in unison.

'And that's what's annoying me so much,' I explained. 'It's a misrepresentation of me.'

'You'd like it to be *more* like you?' Dan said.

'I'd like it to not exist,' I said.

'That's bizarre,' said Dan. He let out an incredulous whistle. 'I find something psychologically interesting about that.'

'Why?' I said.

'I find that quite aggressive,' he said. 'You'd like to *kill* these algorithms? You must feel threatened in some way.' He gave me a concerned look. 'We don't go around generally trying to kill things we find annoying.'

'You're a TROLL!' I yelled.

After the interview was over I staggered out into the London afternoon. I dreaded uploading the footage onto YouTube because I'd been so screechy. I steeled myself for comments mocking my screechiness and I posted it. I left it ten minutes. Then, with apprehension, I had a look.

'This is identity theft,' read the first comment I saw. 'They should respect Jon's personal liberty.'

'Wow,' I thought, cautiously.

SO YOU'VE BEEN PUBLICLY SHAMED

'Somebody should make alternate Twitter accounts of all of those ass clowns and constantly post about their strong desire for child porn,' read the next comment.

I grinned.

'These people are manipulative assholes,' read the third. 'Fuck them. Sue them, break them, destroy them. If I could see these people face to face I would say they are fucking pricks.'

I was giddy with joy. I was Braveheart, striding through a field, at first alone, and then it becomes clear that hundreds are marching behind me.

'Vile, disturbing idiots playing with someone else's life and then laughing at the victim's hurt and anger,' read the next comment.

I nodded soberly.

'Utter hateful arseholes,' read the next. 'These fucked-up academics deserve to die painfully. The cunt in the middle is a fucking psychopath.'

I frowned slightly. 'I hope nobody's going to actually hurt them,' I thought.

'Gas the cunts. Especially middle cunt. And especially left-side bald cunt. And especially quiet cunt. Then piss on their corpses,' read the next comment.

I won. Within days the academics took down @jon_ronson. They had been shamed into acquiescence. Their public shaming had been like the button that restores factory settings. Something was out of kilter. The community rallied. The balance was redressed.

The academics made a very big meal of eradicating the

spambot. They wrote a *Guardian* column explaining that their wider aim was to highlight the tyranny of Wall Street algorithms. ‘It’s not just Ronson who has bots manipulating his life. It’s all of us,’ they wrote. I still didn’t understand why pretending I eat wasabi dumplings might draw the public’s attention to the scourge of Wall Street algorithms.

‘*I have been asked to retire you – do you understand what that means?*’ tweeted David Bausola to the spambot. And, ‘*You have a few hours left. I hope you enjoy them.*’

‘Just press the off switch,’ I emailed him. ‘Jesus.’

I was happy to be victorious. It felt wonderful. The wonderful feeling overwhelmed me like a sedative. Strangers all over the world had united to tell me I was right. It was the perfect ending.

Now I thought back on the other recent social media shamings I’d enjoyed and felt proud of. The first great one happened in October 2009. The Boyzone singer Stephen Gately had been found dead while on holiday with his civil partner, Andrew Cowles. The coroner recorded a verdict of natural causes but the columnist Jan Moir wrote in the *Daily Mail*, ‘Whatever the cause of death is, it is not, by any yardstick, a natural one . . . it strikes another blow to the happy-ever-after myth of civil partnerships.’

We were not going to tolerate a resurgence of old-time bigotry, and as a result of our collective fury Marks & Spencer and Nestlé demanded their advertising be removed from the *Daily Mail*’s website. These were great times. We hurt the *Mail* with a weapon they didn’t understand – a social media shaming.

SO YOU'VE BEEN PUBLICLY SHAMED

After that, when the powerful transgressed, we were there. When the *Daily Mail* mocked a food-bank charity for giving a food parcel to their undercover reporter without running an ID check on him, Twitter responded by donating £39,000 to the charity by the end of that same day.

‘This is the nice thing about social media,’ one tweeter wrote about that campaign. ‘The *Mail*, which relies primarily on lying to people about their neighbours, can’t cope with people communicating amongst themselves, forming their own opinions.’

When LA Fitness refused to cancel the gym membership of a couple who had lost their jobs and couldn’t afford the fees, we rallied. LA Fitness hurriedly backed down. These giants were being brought down by people who used to be powerless – bloggers, anyone with a social media account. And the weapon that was felling them was a new one: online shaming.

And then one day it hit me. Something of real consequence was happening. We were at the start of a great renaissance of public shaming. After a lull of 180 years (public punishments were phased out in 1837 in the United Kingdom and 1839 in the United States) it was back in a big way. When we deployed shame, we were utilizing an immensely powerful tool. It was coercive, borderless, and increasing in speed and influence. Hierarchies were being levelled out. The silenced were getting a voice. It was like the democratization of justice. And so I made a decision. The next time a great modern shaming unfolded against some significant wrongdoer – the next time citizen justice prevailed in a dramatic and righteous way – I would leap

JON RONSON

into the middle of it. I'd investigate it close up and chronicle how efficient it was in righting wrongs.

I didn't have to wait long. @jon_ronson was put to death on 2 April 2012. Just twelve weeks later, in the middle of the night on 4 July, a man lying on his sofa in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, was looking for ideas for his blog when he made a very unexpected discovery.