Twitter, India Knight and Chris Huhne: the end of discretion?

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India Knight

Should politicians' love lives be exposed in public? Times columnist India Knight doesn't think that they should. So when Chris Huhne's marriage break-up and new affair was made into headline news by a Sunday tabloid she expressed her disgust, in public, on Twitter:

> *"Poor Chris Huhne. In what conceivable universe is this anyone else's business? God's sake. Also, who gives a toss?"*

I agree with her, as do many other people. Many of them said as much on Twitter.

Of course, the point about this is that by Tweeting about Huhne we are drawing even more attention to the story and possibly increasing the discomfort for the Minister, his wife and probably the new lover, too. And this blog just adds to it all.

When I asked India Knight via Twitter why she had added to the publicity for this private matter with her Tweet, she gave an interesting reply:

> *"Because I found out about it on here & I was thinking out loud. Also I think it's worth saying how crap, rather than not."*

I think the second bit of that is absolutely right. It's important to register disapproval.

The first bit is even more interesting. I think we are at a point with social media where privacy is blurring in lots of different ways. It's not just about people seeing photographic evidence on Facebook of your wild youth. It's also about the way that use social media to 'find out' things and also to 'think aloud'. Twitter, Facebook and the rest means that it is possible as well as exciting and social to express ourselves much more freely than before.

It also blurs the distinction between 'professional' and 'personal' communication. Journalists on Twitter often don't behave like they do when they write or broadcast.

Social media spells the end of communicative discretion. This may be a good thing.

Media appears to be moving towards an environment where much more discourse is conducted in public and 'live'. It is a process, not a product. It is an open not a closed system. It works at its best when those involved are genuinely listening to each other, of course, and responding with the kind of intellectual empathy that Matthew Taylor talked about in his RSA lecture recently. He suggested that for citizens to create a '21st century Enlightenment':

> *"we need to give more thought to the conditions which give rise to (and diminish) the sentiment which lies behind fellow-feeling: empathy."*

So the social media that produces the kind of transparency that invades Chris Huhne's domestic life also allows India Knight (and me) to discuss it in the open. Once again, the contemporary media makes everything both less discrete and less discreet, but also more connected, and potentially more civilised.

This is where this article ended in its first version. At this point, Time journalist @catherine_mayer asked me on Twitter "How potentially more civilised?" I was hoping to get away with my vague sunny assertion, but I shall try to justify myself.

On balance I think that social media enables us to be more reflective and less selfish. This runs counter to much current research and discourse around the idea of the 'Me' society. People like Cass Sunstein worry that we are becoming more atomised and that the institutions and behaviour that binds us together as families, communities and society are being fragmented by the narcissism and individualism that the Internet allegedly brings.

I have a number of objections to this theory but in the end, I would agree with Sunstein that we should proactively seek ways online of building social capital as well as encouraging individual choice.

Here are my objections to the digital pessimists.

Firstly, if there is a trend towards individualism then it has been happening since the Renaissance and is driven by economic forces and social advances not the Internet. Historically, we are at levels of unprecedented personal freedom thanks to exponentially higher levels of material wealth, health care and education. Technological advances in medicine and transport alone, in the last 30 years, have given us remarkable freedom from the physical limits of the world. And then along comes the Internet to give all this even greater expression. But the Web is the medium, not the motivation of these bigger changes.

Secondly, there is plenty of evidence that the Internet is changing our use of media but very little conclusive evidence that it is somehow re-wiring our brains or altering social behaviour in a profound way. And even where it is, I can see a balance sheet that has credit as well as debit items. Yes some children will be the target for cyber-bullying. Other children will spend too long playing video games. But more young people will find comradeship and solidarity through Facebook or share their creativity with a wide community by uploading a video of their performance onto YouTube.

Thirdly, the charge against the Internet feels ahistorical. Sunstein cites how US political blogs encourage people to gather together in like-minded packs. But isn't that precisely what we have been doing with political parties, trades unions and other human associations from the Mothers' Union to the Ku Klux Klan? Wasn't Obama's digital achievement that he used the Internet to help build a campaigning organisation that had offline as well as online connectivity?

So going back to the Huhne question I would argue that social media is more civilised. It was Old Media that published the story about his private life, it was social media that discussed it. Yes, it is narcissistic of India Knight (or me) to use Twitter to 'think aloud'. But the effect is social not anti-social. A conversation takes place that is uneven but ultimately more transparent and enlightening that could have been possible before the Internet.

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