

Why That Dumb AIDS Tweet Was So Captivating

By Will Leitch

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*Will Leitch, senior writer at [Sports On Earth](#) and founder of Deadspin, is doing his yearly fill-in for Drew Magary on today's Thursday Afternoon NFL **** Joke Jamboroo. ([Here is 2011's version](#), and [here's 2012's](#).) Leitch has written [four books](#). Find more of his business at [his Twitter feed](#).*

My first email address, other than the one the University of Illinois assigned to me that I didn't know how to use, was "filmcritic@hotmail.com." I signed up for it in 1996 because I knew I'd be graduating soon and all my friends would scatter in all sorts of different directions. The long-distance phone calls would be too expensive, so we'd stay in touch through email. I didn't own a computer, but there were Web cafes everywhere. It sounds absurd now, but Web cafes really were fantastic. You hopped online, communicated with everyone you knew (*I'm on email! This is coming to you from CALIFORNIA!*), typed names of your exes into Lycos for a while, and got out of there right before your counter clicked over to an hour (and another five bucks). Then you left, retreating back into life.

I had that email account for four years before I stopped using it in 2000 in favor of Yahoo, a hip mail provider that would retain its cachet for the next 14 years. (williamfleitch@yahoo.com, anytime.) Once I stopped using it, Hotmail deleted the inactive account, so I hadn't seen any of my emails from the late '90s until a couple of weeks ago, when an old friend I hadn't seen in a few years sent me a few of them. The emails were as embarrassing to look at as you'd expect—at one point I went into exhaustive, pretentious detail comparing the series finales of *Seinfeld*, *Murphy Brown*, and *The Larry Sanders Show*, and if any of the women I had things for at the time saw any of these emails, they'd probably have me arrested on the spot—but what was most striking was how *long* they were. Each of these emails were about 800-1,200 words in length, and the responses I received from my friend were roughly the same. We emailed each other, and everyone, as if we were sending missives from the front, as if we didn't know when we'd have time to write again, as if we had to fit everything in. There was nothing ironic or arch or snarky or smarmy about the emails: They were, in the most basic sense, letters. That's how we thought of them. This Internet business was mostly just a way to send letters faster. If it turned out that you weren't able to get to a Web cafe for a week or so, that was OK: The letter would keep you updated on everything you had missed. We missed a bunch back then. No one seemed to mind.

Six days ago, a woman named Justine Sacco, a public relations person for a media company, sent an idiotic, offensive tweet:

Comment [M1]: This is as an example of the kind of essay that Paul Graham espouses: a carefully constructed, continually edited exploration of an idea or question.

Consider this Leitch essay a way of reviewing our universal rubric, and of encouraging *real* writing — the kind of argument that is necessary in college and beyond (see [Graff and Benton's "Great Teachers Can't Save America's Schools"](#) for more on argument as the crux of education).

Comment [M2]: Paragraphs 1-2 offer the approach of this essay. The opening is a narrative, and the perspective on the issue of connectivity and interconnectivity is suggested. (The thesis will be made explicit when we get to the ending.)

LANGUAGE & COMPOSITION



This is the type of joke someone makes when he or she doesn't know how to be funny but has found, say, Seth MacFarlane funny and therefore just tries to do what he does. (MacFarlane is at least sly enough to cover all his jokes in a protective layer of *faux*-self-mockery.) It was moronic, particularly for someone who, by profession, should know precisely not to say things like this in a public forum. It's the type of thing that gets you fired and mocked.

But what went on with Sacco grew far beyond personnel moves and public scorn. Sacco became, on the Friday before Christmas Week, a day when lots of people were at work but no one was actually working, the story that everyone was watching. The reason Sacco was so fascinating, the reason her story resonated so much, was not simply because she had sent an offensive tweet, or because she worked in public relations. It was because she did so right before boarding a 14-hour flight from England to South Africa during which she would have no wireless access. Ordinarily when people say something abhorrent on Twitter, they see the immediate response and then delete it, either apologizing or saying they were hacked, and we all move on. But Sacco sent the tweet, and then vanished into the dark, empty netherworld we used to call Real Life.

This made her story irresistible. We were all pretending to be offended by her AIDS joke—because what could set back the movement to eradicate AIDS more than some entitled PR person being an ass on Twitter? *Fight hard, America!*—but what we were really offended by was how stupidly Sacco had used Twitter. She had said something and then ... *gone away*. This was Sacco's true crime. Stepping offline, removing herself from the grid, was the most helpless thing a person could possibly do; it was fun to make fun of Sacco because we knew what was going on, and she didn't, and therefore *WHAT AN IDIOT*. Did she deserve to be fired for her tweet? Probably, if just because public relations is her job and this is a rather convincing sign she's bad at it. But since when did any of us care about PR people's jobs? Our lives aren't changed one way or another if Justine Sacco loses her job. What we loved was a pile-on. We loved being in on a joke that the subject wasn't.

Thus, while Sacco talked to her family on a 14-hour flight—though probably not—we came up with memes and hashtags, and big corporations tried to profit off her, and Google maybe tracked her (or maybe not), and some guy tried to interview her when her plane landed, and it was all one big laugh. We didn't care about the offensive tweet: We just liked making fun of someone for not knowing what was going on. For being offline for 14 hours ... so long! (Of course, I'm sure that Sacco, like the rest of us when we get off a plane with no wi-fi, frantically turned on her phone the second she could. She needed the fix as bad as the rest of the planet.) That was why the story went so huge. And we churned through, and now we'll move on to something else.

Comment [M3]: In terms of arrangement: This paragraph presents the usual reaction one would have to Sacco's tweet. The first word of the next paragraph ("But") shifts us into the real work of the essay.

Comment [M4]: An example of grammar and style working to create meaning: This dependent clause and appositive contextualize the subject of this essay (Sacco's tweet and its fallout).

Comment [M5]: In terms of meaning and detail: This paragraph crams eight hyperlinks into one sentence, highlighting the idea of interconnectivity while providing more evidence to defend the essay's thesis. It's a brilliant melding of form and function.

LANGUAGE & COMPOSITION

The disconnect between who we are online and off has always been a central tension of the online age. The person I am in my daily life—the guy who goes to the grocery store, and jogs, and stays up too late drinking and watching old movies, and changes diapers, and checks in on his sister, and has a hat collection, and folds his laundry—has nothing to do with my online life, even if I'm the same person in both. We are always heightened online; we compulsively try to make our lives, to *consider* our lives, more interesting than they actually are. This has mostly been balanced by the fact that we don't actually live most of our lives online; that place is the avatar, the blurred but brightened version of the regular person walking around. But in an age of Twitter, and especially mobile, that person is slowly fading. The person we are online *is* who we are. I am not particularly skilled at Twitter—I'm neither confessional nor professional enough—but I check it roughly six or seven times a day, sometimes to post links to things I've written, mostly just to have some vague sense of what's happening in the world. And you know what? *I never have any idea what's going on*. So many people seem to be on Twitter for life—on all the time, no matter what—that penetrating their conversations can be impossible if you're not fully invested. I'm constantly trying to catch up. I never will.

Comment [M6]: Here is the essay's thesis, more or less.

There was a time when people were suspicious of having cellphones, not because they weren't useful, not because they didn't like them, but because sometimes, they just wanted to be left alone. You heard this a lot back when having a cellphone was a decision rather than an obvious requirement of competent living. "Sometimes I'd like to just be left alone, you know? I don't want to have phone calls following me around." Those days are obviously gone now. And that encroachment of that world into the real world is becoming complete. If you are not always dialed in, at all points, you might as well not be dialed in at all.

Comment [M7]: The style adopted in this paragraph: a reflective, self-effacing tone; several dashed asides to emphasize key concepts; a quick hypophora to underscore the speaker's own disconnection; shorter and shorter sentences as the paragraph ends to mirror the solidness of that last three-word conclusion. The stylistic choices bolster the essays detail, arrangement, and meaning.

Comment [M8]: The ending starts here. The penultimate paragraph is a general claim about being "dialed in"; the final paragraph is another anecdote that supports that claim.

During the World Series, I was sitting in the right-field stands at Fenway Park with various other writers, all with their laptops open. They were all staring at Twitter. In the sixth inning of Game 2, David Ortiz hit a home run off Michael Wacha over the Green Monster. Almost at once, having been alerted to Ortiz's homer, they lifted their heads up from their laptops and glanced toward the left field wall to see what had happened. But they'd already missed it. And I, sans laptop, missed what everyone was saying about it. It's becoming clearer and clearer: You can't pay equal attention to both. You can't stay on top of everything. You have to choose.

Comment [M9]: Another variation on the thesis, written as a sort of exhortation to the audience.

Comment [M10]: Note: This next paragraph is not part of the essay itself. In its original form, the essay is followed by a different sort of column.

Whew: It always takes a lot out of me to get that first little Head-Up-Own-*** How We Internet Today rant out of the way. All right, back to normal now. Hi, everybody! It's my third year filling in for Drew on the Jamboroo, and I've learned that my TOTAL LACK OF CAPITALIZED EMPHASIS is doomed to disappoint the most devoted Drew Fans (called Drewwwgs, I think), a group of which I consider myself a member. I also always skip the Poop Story, the Gregggggggg section, and the Nazi Shark/Nazi Bill Simmons/Emmitt Smith picks section. I'm too grossed out by poop and couldn't possibly impersonate Drew on the other two. (Though I'd be remiss if I ignored this bit of Gregggggggg goodness.) So I apologize in advance. Thanks for letting me hang out regardless.

This shift is as an example of how argument — again, the kind that Graff and Benton and colleges all over the world are telling us to study — doesn't just occur in *Harper's* or *The New Yorker* after legions of fact-checkers and editors have their way with it. It happens as part of a joke column on a popular sports site, and the author, having written an effective and engaging argument, moves on immediately.

The point? If we don't know how to recognize that Leitch just wrote something we should process carefully and maybe try to emulate, then we will move right along into the jokes without having learned much. We have to inculcate a reflexive ability to emulate through analysis. We need an internalized mechanism for breaking down good writing, and we need a sense of why it matters — because grades don't exist in the real world. Writing sinks or floats based on merit.