

# TOO MUCH INFORMATION

Sharing our opinions online is standard practice, but hit the wrong note and the backlash can be vicious. *Eleanor Black* looks at the risks of putting it all out there and talks to some of those who've incurred a public flogging.

Who hasn't said something stupid and petty and unkind? And then wished they could snatch it back to their chest like an errant puppy about to run into the street?

In July, 25-year-old Pebbles Hooper, famous daughter, artist, gossip columnist and girl about town, tweeted unwisely. For those who were living under a rock at the time, an Ashburton mother and her three children had died and, for whatever reason, Hooper felt compelled to comment on Twitter. "I'll get major slack for this but leaving a car running inside a closed garage while you're [sic] kids are in the house is natural selection".

It was a thoughtless, horrible statement. Tweeters, Facebookers and commenters on countless blogs and news sites expressed their outrage. What she'd said was cruel, careless and bizarre, they roared. Fair enough. But the public flogging didn't stop there. Hooper's art? That was "crappy", her life "a train wreck". As a person, she was a "useless parasite", a "retarded amoeba" and a "narcissistic sociopath". Her "bloodline" (she is the daughter of fashion designers Denise L'Estrange Corbet and Francis Hooper) was possibly to blame, amateur anthropologists suggested, as her parents had given her the "most idiotic name ever". And on and on and on it went.

Hooper is still recovering. She apologised more than once. She deleted her Twitter account

(temporarily), resigned from the *Herald on Sunday* and disappeared off the Auckland social scene. When contacted for this story, she sent a polite email saying she wasn't ready yet to speak to the media about the Twitter incident.

She is moving on, and so should we. But an intriguing question remains. How does this even happen? Hooper is not alone in making a silly online mistake and becoming infamous for it. In 2013, 22-year-old Alicia Ann Lynch, on her way to a Halloween party, posted a photo of herself in shorts and a t-shirt with

confessional, their sounding board, their forgiving best friend. Cue #oopsIsaidtoomuch #itwasajoke #dontshoothemessenger.

It's the disconnect between the private space in which you compose a tweet or online comment and the public realm it enters after you hit 'send' that lulls users into a false sense of security, says Dr Bodo Lang, a senior lecturer at the University of Auckland's business school, who studies 'word-of-mouth' communication online and off.

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makeup "gashes" and "blood" on her face, arms and legs. She was dressed as a Boston bombing victim, she said. How dare you, replied thousands. Last year Justine Sacco, 30, lost her job after tweeting on her way to Cape Town. "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" It was gallows humour, and meant to poke fun at a certain middle-class attitude, but it backfired spectacularly.

There is something so chummy and personal about social media that it fools people (often young women, experts say) into treating the entire world as their

themselves on," he explains. It's a stage where you don't get stage fright or any of the cues that you would normally have if you were in front of a crowd or were speaking to a group of people who might frown at you or look aghast. "Removal of social cues is a really big issue. You don't get them until it's too late, [your comment is] already out there."

Psychologists suggest we overshare in an attempt to make others like us, to win them over through humour and by appearing clever. Lang reckons most social media oversharing is unintentional, a failure to self-



monitor behaviour and think through consequences. Put it down to youth and lack of life experience.

"I'm 47," says Lang. "To me this sort of stuff is a no-brainer... Yes, of course it will have an impact on your job or career. I know people in human resources are trawling the net for this sort of information. Young people don't know that, most of them haven't had a job yet, they haven't had to go through this rigorous process that is linear and very systematic, and they lack insight into what the consequences can be of oversharing information online."

It could also be that the framing of social media "communities" with "friends" and "followers" tricks you into assuming that you are communicating with only likeminded people. But you're not, you're shooting off your opinions and feelings into the ether, where they

can be picked up by anybody and hurt your job prospects, your hunt for a flat, and your relationships.

Justin Hall was the world's first personal blogger, an oversharer in the era when the world wide web was so small he could keep track of the whole thing. In 1994, while a student at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, he built a simple website and began sharing everything — every blessed little thing — with complete strangers. He composed long link lists of his favourite things, porn sites and illicit drug information mostly. He outlined every sexual experience and STD in excruciating detail. He posted poems and arguments and oddball observations. For 11 years he shared his life with all and sundry and then he met a woman who didn't like it. In 2005, he

made a short film called *Dark Night* in which he sobbed, "I published my life on the f\*\*\*\*\* internet. And it doesn't make people want to be with me. It makes people not trust me. And I don't know what the f\*\*\* to do about it."

What he did was go offline. For 10 years. "I came back but in a different way," he says cheerily from San Francisco, where he is trying to build a career as a "professional media maker," having worked in software development, technology journalism and survived an "emotionally devastating" divorce. "I am much more measured and mature in what I share online. I work hard to make sure my posts aren't going to offend anyone and that I'm not going to mention anyone without telling them beforehand — and I'm telling you, it makes for much slower posting. >>





Singer Lizzie Marvally, who founded a campaign against sexual violence and revenge porn, advocates social-media education.

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I think my approach is ethically right, but it's certainly been challenging. I'm not dashing off what excites me now, because I am well aware of the consequences.”

At 40, and having experienced the backlash that comes from sharing too much online, Hall takes a forgiving stance on missteps such as Hooper's. She made an ill-judged remark; he has made many. “How do we create an internet where someone can make a mistake and it can be de-amplified and someone can find a more worthy cause to be upset about?” he asks.

Well, yes, how indeed? Certainly, some folks need to learn some manners and a sense of proportion. Teulia Blakely was shocked at the shouty people who piled onto her public Facebook page last year to condemn her. The 41-year-old actress was inadvertently caught up in a case of oversharing, when an explicit video of herself and rugby league player Konrad Hurrell was shared by a third party on Snapchat, picked up by looky loos with technical skills and tossed around the

internet like confetti. Although never ashamed of the video, or the fact that she – gasp – has sex, Blakely was dismayed at the reaction.

“Women are still being made to feel ashamed for how they choose to be sexual which is absolutely ludicrous,” she says, her voice rising with indignation. “What have I got to be ashamed about? You should be ashamed for judging me! When you haven't done anything wrong and someone has actually wronged you, you can't take responsibility for that.”

One of the most striking aspects of the episode was how lightly Hurrell came off. The Warriors fined him \$5000 and his judgment was called into question, but not his character, as was the case for Blakely. It's the same old sexist double standard, updated for the digital age.

“I think there's something about women online particularly, that when they make themselves known, they become a target in a way that men do not,” notes

Hall. “And I think that's essentially unfair and tied to some very old attitudes about gender and propriety and voice.”

Commenters sank to such lows that Blakely wrote a heartfelt Facebook apology to members of her Samoan community some of whom were embarrassed. More than a year later, the perceived stigma lingers. When she appeared on *Dancing with the Stars* she would post backstage photos online, and the derogatory comments were revived. “Are people still negative towards me? A little bit, yeah – but I don't carry that.”

Blakely is one of the faces of the #MyBodyMyTerms campaign against sexual violence and revenge porn founded by singer Lizzie Marvally, who having grown up in the public eye has a heart for those who are shamed online, but also the hide of a rhinoceros.

At a Parnell cafe, the composed and funny 26-year-old sips her coffee and says mildly, “I've had 'go and die bitch' on social media. I take it with a grain of salt.” As with all forms of communication, she thinks it is important to look at the source and make a call on how much weight you will give it. As editor of the feminist website *Villainesse* she also thinks that social media platforms are democratic spaces where we should freely share our thoughts and engage heartily with one another – without being dicks about it.

She has some sympathy for those who read something that offends and take to Twitter or Facebook to vent. “By all means, do speak out if someone says something discriminating or horrible, but do remember they are a real human being.”

She gestures across the table: “If you said something right now that I disagreed with, I might say, hey that's wrong and out of line and really horrible, but I wouldn't keep shouting at you for the next two weeks. You get these keyboard warriors who decide to take it beyond, and someone steps over the line and it turns into this uncontrollable beast.”

Marvally is an advocate for social-media education, both for schoolchildren and teens who are learning to navigate the online world, and for the generation above her who make goofy mistakes. She giggles when describing her middle-aged colleague's attempt to direct message her location to a friend on Twitter, during which she broadcast it to the world at large. “If you're going to use social media, learn how to do it properly.”

Napier woman Karen Hammond was fed up with her former employer, NZ Credit Union Baywide, and what she believed was their mistreatment of a friend and colleague. She could have chosen to gossip about them in the tea room at her new job, or send abusive emails, or key the executive team's cars. Her response was far more measured than that. She baked a cake at home, to serve at a private dinner party. And then she iced it

with wobbly pink and blue lettering that said "Credit Union Baywide f\*\*\* you" on top, added a stronger expletive along the side, and she took a photo, and she uploaded it to her Facebook page. Ha ha!

A joke among friends turned septic, however, when her old employers accessed the cake photo, took a screenshot, and distributed it in an attempt to damage her professional reputation. Hammond, representing herself, took the matter to the Human Rights Review Tribunal and three years later was awarded \$168,000, but told the *Dominion Post* in March that the case had "caused major grief for my family" and had cost her employment opportunities.

This is a classic case of context collapse, says Justin Hall, when something online is intended for a particular audience but ends up elsewhere, and the meaning changes. "These executives did not understand how the internet works with critique," he says. "They actually amplified her critique and took a small personnel matter and turned it into a national news story."

Hall is impressed that we have a legal process that someone who is wronged online can pursue. "That's quite a thing, New Zealand! The fact that she could experience shame or humiliation on the internet and seek justice, holy smokes! In America she would just have to lawyer up."

Hammond is vindicated, employed and keeping her

## ARE YOU GUILTY OF 'SHARENTING'?

If you are not yourself a 'sharent' – a parent who overshares on social media – chances are you know one.

A sharent posts questionable photos of their offspring to Facebook and Instagram; blogs endlessly about potty training; and shows off their exemplary parenting on Pinterest, posting photos of immaculate cowboy-themed birthday parties (ice-cream cone teepees, y'all!) and casual at-home days when they make their own play-dough.

Blair Koenig's blog STFU, Parents does the important work of collating and sharing instances of sharenting, such as the mother who photographed and posted her son's "sandwich of the day". And the couple who

saved their baby's umbilical cord, dried it and fashioned it into a heart-shaped Valentine's greeting, which they posted online, naturally. And the parents who took out a newspaper ad to congratulate their daughter on graduating pre-school, and then posted it to Facebook, where it annoyed the crap out of many more thousands of people.

Research from the University of Michigan found that more than half of mothers and one third of fathers discussed their children online. Three quarters of the parents polled said social media made them feel less alone, although two thirds were concerned about private information and photos of their children being shared with strangers.

head down. For Pebbles Hooper, with a public profile and uneasy relationship with the media, the way forward is less certain. The passage of time will help, and the sense that she has paid a price.

"I would not judge someone who makes a stray cruel remark," says Hall. "I would say they have to do their

penance and then that should be enough. But the challenge is for a woman who is going to express a lot of opinions in public, you have to develop a very thick skin, because there are people who will never stop hating you, actively chasing you wherever you go online to remind you of whatever you said that bothered them." ●