Our practices will change!
A response to Elizabeth O’Neill’s: \textit{Three Under-recognized Hazards of Digital Recording}

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Elizabeth O’Neill recently warned us of the under-recognized hazards of digital recording. You can read her thoughtful and highly relevant blog post here.

Her main argument is that:

“any recorded action you take can and will be used against you in the court of public opinion. And the court is (...) like a multi-headed hydra. Some parts of the public are going to find you guilty. (...)

One of the possible outcomes of our current trajectory is the return of permanent—lifelong—stigmatization. (...) In some sense, if it is recorded, each action you take never ends. (...) Recorded actions are not ‘one and done,’ observed solely by the individuals around you and then forgotten. They are actions you will potentially perform over and over, as people rewatch the video.

[Finally, H]ow people react to you day in and day out affects how you view yourself. The hazard here is humiliation, embarrassment, shame, alterations to one’s sense of identity, and loss of self-respect.”

O’Neill then recommends doing the following: “One should act to protect oneself and one’s loved ones by reducing one’s attack surface: deleting recordings that one has placed on social media sites or elsewhere online; declining to introduce internet-connected digital recording devices, including voice-activated devices, into one’s home, neighborhood, car, workplace, classroom, etc.; and avoiding subjection to digital recording by others whenever possible.”

The blogpost is relevant also in light of a recent case in Germany where a young politician from the Green party, Sarah-Lee Heinrich, was attacked for tweets she posted when she was 13 or 14
years old. She deleted those tweets (using a special program), but they still reappeared. She apologized for these tweets, and many consider her young age to excuse these tweets. Still, they almost ruined her career before it could really begin. You can read more about it here.

I think that O’Neill is largely right. We should be more careful about the content we post online and the recordings we consent to. However, I also find some of her worries and arguments exaggerated. First, many people are already aware of the hazards O’Neill is pointing out. In fact, it seems that many people are quite careful when posting pictures or when they make statements on Twitter or Facebook. Most people probably stand behind their statements and, let’s be honest, are happy when they are discussed on social media, which rarely happens.

The posts that gain the most attention in my social media bubble are harmless videos of cats or posts that require engagement, such as a question about which movies to watch on Christmas or some amateur linguistics poll. I rarely get anyone’s attention with serious statements, and I would not make statements online that I would not also make offline. I am quite aware of the fact that they could be held against me now or in the future. If I did not stand behind them, I would not publish them. Of course, things are different when you are a teenager as our views are not yet stable and can easily undergo radical change. At some point, however, it is part of the human condition, sense of identity and self-respect to make oneself heard whether online or offline. It is important to us to be recognized by others.

Moreover, recordings help to keep people accountable. This can be positive. It is positive if you can demonstrate to the public that a politician posted extremist views in his thirties while pretending to be more moderate in his forties. It is great that recordings allow us to look into people’s past to see whether we can trust them.

However, I think the most interesting response to O’Neill is that social norms and practices will likely change. Certain changes in norms and social practices (changes in how we use the internet), I believe, will make it easier and less dangerous to record and publish our actions online. O’Neill addresses this worry. She says that people will probably not become nicer. I agree with her. Norms of niceness online or norms associated with cyber-bullying will probably not change. But this is not everything one can say to defend this response.

Consider the case from before of the young politician from the German Green party. While one might think that members from a less technologized generation hardly consider what happens on
social media to be serious contributions to public life, I have the feeling that boomers take what is happening on Twitter and Instagram much more seriously than zoomers (gen z) and millennials, especially if old-school mainstream media outlets pick up on it. This is because they largely apply their old-school norms to the very different normative landscape of young people.

My dad often tells me about something outrageous someone has commented on Twitter or some “shitstorm” about a post on Twitter. I honestly could not care less about what people say on Twitter. But for my dad, it matters because the TV picked up on it and TV makes it important and real for him. I rarely watch TV and Twitter shitstorms are something I expect to happen anyway. They come and go and only expose some controversy in society that the mainstream media probably would not even have registered.

With the disappearance of mainstream TV and printed newspapers in a few decades, those things will largely disappear as well. We will lose much of our access to what is going on outside of our social media bubble. Maybe there will be some websites reporting on some of these shitstorms, but they will have to compete against everything else that goes on in the metaverse. This might create a kind of anonymity that is comparable to the anonymity of a big city. All I and my friends have left are our own bubbles and our own embarrassing tweets. Importantly “embarrassing” means something else for us that it might mean for you. So, we’re good.

For instance, if, being in my preferred bubble, I say something that another bubble will consider offensive, there is no way they will hear about it. And my bubble will understand it. This future court is anything but a multi-headed hydra, as O’Neill calls it. Nobody outside the bubble cares or has access. For example, I have no access to whatever my cousin’s son is doing on, say, Twitch as I do not know his name on this platform, and I have – to be honest – never really been on Twitch.

Let me illustrate this with another example of the same young Green politician in Germany. In a very informative YouTube discussion (in German unfortunately), Sarah-Lee Heinrich said something about an “icky white majority” in Germany. The context was YouTube. The audience is very young (zoomers and millennials), most of them from minorities. The bubble understood the statement. It was not even discussed. It was clearly not meant to offend anyone and no white German in the audience claimed to be offended by this statement. The purpose was clearly not to say that white people are icky but that she distances herself from a powerful majority that she might be accused of as wanting to belong to.
Once the German mainstream media picked up on it, and applied *their norms*, Heinrich had to apologize. Once again, her online behavior jeopardized her career and exposed her to a lot of hatred. I think she did not really regret the content of the statement. In the context, it was fine. She had to apologize because she relies on the white majority voters, and the mainstream media simply did not interpret the statement in any charitable way. Of course, if the bubbles had never met or heard about one another, this problem would have never occurred. This is what I predict the future to be like.

I think O’Neill is right when she argues that we won’t see people become nicer on Twitter, at least on some topics. However, my experience for example with Twitter, Facebook and Instagram is overall very positive. Most of my followers on Twitter for example are into philosophy of technology and robot rights. There is not much passion involved and nobody will attack me or cancel me if I say that robots should not have rights or that the famous robot Sophia is creepy. But my colleague who is involved in the TERF (Trans-exclusionary radical feminists) debate avoids Twitter for the reason that it is hurtful to read what many TERFs write on Twitter. Every bubble is different, and we can usually choose in which bubble we wish to publish.

Now, this is old social media. Think of new social media. TikTok, Twitch, Telegram, Discord, Fortnite or Minecraft. These bubbles are communities. They work very similarly to normal IRL communities. They are structured and organized by means of the same constraints. If you are not nice to me, I will not talk to you anymore. If I want to belong to a community, I will not insult its members. It is as simple as that. Toxic environments will never cease to exist but then there will always be spaces where like-minded people establish their own preferred norms.

Some people may call this cancel culture but cancel culture (if there is such a thing) simply does not and cannot apply in bubbles. It applies to media that are available to many people from different bubbles. On many Twitch accounts the followers consider themselves a community. Similarly, on YouTube there are incredibly friendly supportive communities. If you read comments in small communities like that, you will be surprised by how friendly they are. Finally, kids today experience adventures in Fortnite or Minecraft together, talk to their friends, record what I consider a new kind of interactive movie and so forth. The problems O’Neill discusses do not really occur here or are less relevant (there are other problems, though).

So, to sum up: What to say about O’Neill’s two claims I discussed here? First, many people are sufficiently aware of the hazards of online exposure. These hazards are far less grave than she
assumes, and the future of the internet will make things better, not worse. Second, there won’t be any multi-headed hydra TV tribunal that is coming after you because TV and mainstream media will disappear. The media communities of the future will be rather small therefore naturally friendly to those endorsing its norms (otherwise they will disintegrate). So, do we really have reason to avoid subjection to digital recording whenever possible? I think some careful recording in friendly online communities is fine.

Finally, people want to be heard. They want to share ideas. O’Neill is an example. She wants to be heard and publish even if she worries about the consequences. Another example is philosopher Kate Mann who recently posted a picture of herself on Twitter saying that she will no longer hide and that she wants her voice to be heard more than she wants to be invisible. I believe the smaller the communities become in the future, the easier it will be to have our voices heard, i.e., to find recognition and respect, and the more comfortable will we become to publish online even potentially embarrassing content.