

The Real Cost of Tweeting About My Kids

When I've told you what my son said, it's not "his data"
anymore.

Agnes Callard

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Here is an anecdote I was not allowed to post on Twitter.

On a recent trip to Costco, the kids were fighting in the back of the car and I asked my husband, “Why do we have such bad children? Is it because we’re bad parents?” He said, “Yes, but it’s not our fault, we must’ve had bad parents.” I said, “But that’s not their fault — ” and my 6-year-old son interrupted, enraged, yelling from the back of the car, “IT’S ALL GOD’S FAULT!”

Your own reaction to this story can tell you why my son wouldn’t let me tweet it: He doesn’t want you to think he’s cute. (He has consented to have it appear here. No children’s rights were violated in the writing of this essay.) When he was saying those words, he was not trying to entertain. He was angry — at me, at my husband, at God and, after I asked him whether I could tweet it, at you for the way he knew you would react.

My oldest son is 15, and he finds my Twitter behavior undignified. (“Why does the world need to know that we are at Costco?”) He feels that a teacher, mentor and role model should cultivate a distance, even a mystique, so as to elicit the kind of respect she needs from her students, advisees and admirers. If people do not think they know you, then you do not need to worry, as my 6-year-old did, that you have left yourself in their interpretive hands. You can restrict their thoughts about you.

To allow others to think about us in whatever way they feel like — perhaps to laugh at us, perhaps to dismiss us — is a huge loss of control. So why do we allow it? What is the attraction of it? I think that it’s the *increase* in control we get in return. Social media has enabled the Great Control Swap. And it is happening right now, beneath our notice.

The first baby step toward the Great Swap was the shift from phone calls to texts. A phone interaction requires participants to be “on the same time,” which entails negotiations over entrance into and exit from the conversation. Consider all the time we spend first on, “Is this a bad time to call? Can you talk?” And then later on, “O.K., gotta go, talk to you soon, see you later, good talking to you ... ” (It’s only in the movies that you can just hang up on someone.) Everyone has been in a phone conversation that ended much later than they wanted it to; the form subjects us to the will of another.

A text or email interaction, by contrast, liberates the parties so that each may operate on their own time. But the cost comes in another form of control: data. Homer’s “winged words” fly from the mouth of one directly to the ear of another, but text-based communication requires stationary words: One person puts them down, so the other can come along and read them at her leisure. And that means they leave a trail.

Imagine a man conducting a romantic affair exclusively by email. He needn’t lie to his wife about fake “business trips,” since he can pursue his shenanigans right under her nose. Likewise, he avoids undesirable entanglements with his mistress: He doesn’t even need to buy her dinner! Email allows him the control to steer the two women out of the way of one another — but the price he pays is a very robust data trail. His affair has a text archive. If his mistress decides to write a book about it, she can be

scientific. She needn't rely on memory or vague impressions. She can systematically analyze their interactions and quote his exact words.

Our anger at social media companies resembles this man's anger over his mistress's theft of his "private data." We wanted one kind of control, and didn't reckon with the fact that we'd have to pay for it with another kind. We wanted to be able to interact with other people entirely in our own time, with people who make no demands on us. We wanted entry and exit to be painless. We understood from the start that this form of socializing — like an affair without physical contact — was shallower than the other, more demanding kind. We were prepared to accept that trade-off, but failed to grasp that we were trading away more than depth. We were also trading away a kind of control.

As my children appreciate, the control issue goes well beyond whether Facebook monetizes our data. It is also a matter of making oneself into a thing that others can own. When I've told you what my son said, it's not "his data" anymore. He can't control whether you laugh at it, or what tone you use when you do.

We don't like to acknowledge just how much we are willing to pay for distance from other people. For example, people warn prospective parents that having a baby is expensive, but that isn't exactly true. What's expensive is getting away from your baby. If you don't want to feed them with your body, you buy formula and bottles. If you don't want them looking at you all the time, you buy contraptions to entertain them. A stroller so you don't have to carry them, a crib so you don't have to sleep with them, a house with extra rooms so you don't even have to sleep near them, child care so that you can get farther away yet: These are the costs that add up. You don't pay much for babies, but you pay a lot to escape them.

All of us have a desire to connect, to be seen. But we live in a world that is starting to allow us to satisfy that desire without feeling the common-sense moral strictures that have traditionally governed human relationships. We can engage without obligation, without boredom and, most importantly, without subjecting our attention to the command of another. On Twitter, I'm never obligated to listen through to the end of someone's story.

The immense appeal of this free-form socializing lies in the way it makes one a master of one's own time — but it cannot happen without a place. All that data has to sit somewhere so that people can freely access it whenever they wish. Data storage is the loss of control by which we secure social control: Facebook is our faithless mistress's leaky inbox.

When we alienate our identities as text data, and put that data "out there" to be read by anyone who wanders by, we are putting ourselves into the interpretive hands of those who have no bonds or obligations or agreements with us, people with whom we are, quite literally, prevented from seeing "eye to eye." People we cannot trust.

The Great Control Swap buys us control over the logistics of our interactions at the cost of interpretive control over the content of those interactions. Our words have lost their wings, and fallen to the ground as data.

Agnes Callard (@AgnesCallard) is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago and the author of “Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming.” She writes a monthly column on public philosophy at The Point magazine.

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