

Magazine

How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life

By JON RONSON FEB. 12, 2015

As she made the long journey from New York to South Africa, to visit family during the holidays in 2013, Justine Sacco, 30 years old and the senior director of corporate communications at IAC, began tweeting acerbic little jokes about the indignities of travel. There was one about a fellow passenger on the flight from John F. Kennedy International Airport:

“‘Weird German Dude: You’re in First Class. It’s 2014. Get some deodorant.’ — Inner monologue as I inhale BO. Thank God for pharmaceuticals.”

Then, during her layover at Heathrow:

“Chilly — cucumber sandwiches — bad teeth. Back in London!”

And on Dec. 20, before the final leg of her trip to Cape Town:

“Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!”

She chuckled to herself as she pressed send on this last one, then wandered around Heathrow’s international terminal for half an hour, sporadically checking her phone. No one replied, which didn’t surprise her. She had only 170 Twitter followers.

Sacco boarded the plane. It was an 11-hour flight, so she slept. When the plane landed in Cape Town and was taxiing on the runway, she turned on her phone. Right away, she got a text from someone she hadn’t spoken to since high school: “I’m so sorry to see what’s happening.” Sacco looked at it, baffled.

Then another text: “You need to call me immediately.” It was from her best friend, Hannah. Then her phone exploded with more texts and alerts. And then it rang. It was Hannah. “You’re the No. 1 worldwide trend on Twitter right now,” she said.

Sacco’s Twitter feed had become a horror show. “In light of @Justine-Sacco disgusting racist tweet, I’m donating to @care today” and “How did @JustineSacco get a PR job?! Her level of racist ignorance belongs on Fox News. #AIDS can affect anyone!” and “I’m an IAC employee and I don’t want @JustineSacco doing any communications on our behalf ever again. Ever.” And then one from her employer, IAC, the corporate owner of The Daily Beast, OKCupid and Vimeo: “This is an outrageous, offensive comment. Employee in question currently unreachable on an intl flight.” The anger soon turned to excitement: “All I want for Christmas is to see @JustineSacco’s face when her plane lands and she checks her inbox/voicemail” and “Oh man, @JustineSacco is going to have the most painful phone-turning-on moment ever when her plane lands” and “We are about to watch this @JustineSacco bitch get fired. In REAL time. Before she even KNOWS she’s getting fired.”

The furor over Sacco’s tweet had become not just an ideological crusade against her perceived bigotry but also a form of idle entertainment. Her complete ignorance of her predicament for those 11 hours lent the episode both dramatic irony and a pleasing narrative arc. As Sacco’s flight traversed the length of Africa, a hashtag began to trend worldwide: #HasJustineLandedYet. “Seriously. I just want to go home to go to bed, but everyone at the bar is SO into #HasJustineLandedYet. Can’t look away. Can’t leave” and “Right, is there no one in Cape Town going to the airport to tweet her arrival? Come on, Twitter! I’d like pictures #HasJustineLandedYet.”

A Twitter user did indeed go to the airport to tweet her arrival. He took her photograph and posted it online. “Yup,” he wrote, “@JustineSacco HAS in fact landed at Cape Town International. She’s decided to wear sunnies as a disguise.”

By the time Sacco had touched down, tens of thousands of angry tweets had been sent in response to her joke. Hannah, meanwhile, frantically deleted her friend’s tweet and her account — Sacco didn’t want to look — but it was far too late. “Sorry @JustineSacco,” wrote one Twitter user, “your tweet lives on forever.”

In the early days of Twitter, I was a keen shamer. When newspaper columnists made racist or homophobic statements, I joined the pile-on. Sometimes I led it. The journalist A. A. Gill once wrote a column about shooting a baboon on safari in Tanzania: “I’m told they can be tricky to shoot. They run up trees, hang on for grim life. They die hard, baboons. But not this one. A soft-nosed .357 blew his lungs out.” Gill did the deed because he “wanted to get a sense of what it might be like to kill someone, a stranger.”

I was among the first people to alert social media. (This was because Gill always gave my television documentaries bad reviews, so I tended to keep a vigilant eye on things he could be got for.) Within minutes, it was everywhere. Amid the hundreds of congratulatory messages I received, one stuck out: “Were you a bully at school?”

Still, in those early days, the collective fury felt righteous, powerful and effective. It felt as if hierarchies were being dismantled, as if justice were being democratized. As time passed, though, I watched these shame campaigns multiply, to the point that they targeted not just powerful institutions and public figures but really anyone perceived to have done something offensive. I also began to marvel at the disconnect between the severity of the crime and the gleeful savagery of the punishment. It almost felt as if shamings were now happening for their own sake, as if they were following a script.

Eventually I started to wonder about the recipients of our shamings, the real humans who were the virtual targets of these campaigns. So for the past two years, I’ve been interviewing individuals like Justine Sacco: everyday people pilloried brutally, most often for posting some poorly considered joke on social media. Whenever possible, I have met them in person, to truly grasp the emotional toll at the other end of our screens. The people I met were mostly unemployed, fired for their transgressions, and they seemed broken somehow — deeply confused and traumatized.

One person I met was Lindsey Stone, a 32-year-old Massachusetts woman who posed for a photograph while mocking a sign at Arlington National Cemetery’s Tomb of the Unknowns. Stone had stood next to the sign, which asks for “Silence and Respect,” pretending to scream and flip the bird. She and her co-worker Jamie, who

posted the picture on Facebook, had a running joke about disobeying signs — smoking in front of No Smoking signs, for example — and documenting it. But shorn of this context, her picture appeared to be a joke not about a sign but about the war dead. Worse, Jamie didn't realize that her mobile uploads were visible to the public.

Four weeks later, Stone and Jamie were out celebrating Jamie's birthday when their phones started vibrating repeatedly. Someone had found the photo and brought it to the attention of hordes of online strangers. Soon there was a wildly popular "Fire Lindsey Stone" Facebook page. The next morning, there were news cameras outside her home; when she showed up to her job, at a program for developmentally disabled adults, she was told to hand over her keys. ("After they fire her, maybe she needs to sign up as a client," read one of the thousands of Facebook messages denouncing her. "Woman needs help.") She barely left home for the year that followed, racked by PTSD, depression and insomnia. "I didn't want to be seen by anyone," she told me last March at her home in Plymouth, Mass. "I didn't want people looking at me."

Instead, Stone spent her days online, watching others just like her get turned upon. In particular she felt for "that girl at Halloween who dressed as a Boston Marathon victim. I felt so terrible for her." She meant Alicia Ann Lynch, 22, who posted a photo of herself in her Halloween costume on Twitter. Lynch wore a running outfit and had smeared her face, arms and legs with fake blood. After an actual victim of the Boston Marathon bombing tweeted at her, "You should be ashamed, my mother lost both her legs and I almost died," people unearthed Lynch's personal information and sent her and her friends threatening messages. Lynch was reportedly let go from her job as well.

I met a man who, in early 2013, had been sitting at a conference for tech developers in Santa Clara, Calif., when a stupid joke popped into his head. It was about the attachments for computers and mobile devices that are commonly called dongles. He murmured the joke to his friend sitting next to him, he told me. "It was so bad, I don't remember the exact words," he said. "Something about a fictitious piece of hardware that has a really big dongle, a ridiculous dongle. . . . It wasn't even conversation-level volume."

Moments later, he half-noticed when a woman one row in front of them stood up, turned around and took a photograph. He thought she was taking a crowd shot, so he looked straight ahead, trying to avoid ruining her picture. It's a little painful to look at the photograph now, knowing what was coming.

The woman had, in fact, overheard the joke. She considered it to be emblematic of the gender imbalance that plagues the tech industry and the toxic, male-dominated corporate culture that arises from it. She tweeted the picture to her 9,209 followers with the caption: "Not cool. Jokes about . . . 'big' dongles right behind me." Ten minutes later, he and his friend were taken into a quiet room at the conference and asked to explain themselves. A day later, his boss called him into his office, and he was fired.

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Next, her employer's website went down. Someone had launched a DDoS attack, which overwhelms a site's servers with repeated requests. SendGrid, her employer, was told the attacks would stop if Richards was fired. That same day she was publicly let go.

"I cried a lot during this time, journaled and escaped by watching movies," she later said to me in an email. "SendGrid threw me under the bus. I felt betrayed. I felt abandoned. I felt ashamed. I felt rejected. I felt alone."

Late one afternoon last year, I met Justine Sacco in New York, at a restaurant in Chelsea called Cookshop. Dressed in rather chic business attire, Sacco ordered a glass of white wine. Just three weeks had passed since her trip to Africa, and she was still a person of interest to the media. Websites had already ransacked her Twitter feed for more horrors. (For example, “I had a sex dream about an autistic kid last night,” from 2012, was unearthed by BuzzFeed in the article “16 Tweets Justine Sacco Regrets.”) A New York Post photographer had been following her to the gym.

“Only an insane person would think that white people don’t get AIDS,” she told me. It was about the first thing she said to me when we sat down.

Sacco had been three hours or so into her flight when retweets of her joke began to overwhelm my Twitter feed. I could understand why some people found it offensive. Read literally, she said that white people don’t get AIDS, but it seems doubtful many interpreted it that way. More likely it was her apparently gleeful flaunting of her privilege that angered people. But after thinking about her tweet for a few seconds more, I began to suspect that it wasn’t racist but a reflexive critique of white privilege — on our tendency to naïvely imagine ourselves immune from life’s horrors. Sacco, like Stone, had been yanked violently out of the context of her small social circle. Right?

“To me it was so insane of a comment for anyone to make,” she said. “I thought there was no way that anyone could possibly think it was literal.” (She would later write me an email to elaborate on this point. “Unfortunately, I am not a character on ‘South Park’ or a comedian, so I had no business commenting on the epidemic in such a politically incorrect manner on a public platform,” she wrote. “To put it simply, I wasn’t trying to raise awareness of AIDS or piss off the world or ruin my life. Living in America puts us in a bit of a bubble when it comes to what is going on in the third world. I was making fun of that bubble.”)

I would be the only person she spoke to on the record about what happened to her, she said. It was just too harrowing — and “as a publicist,” inadvisable — but she felt it was necessary, to show how “crazy” her situation was, how her punishment simply didn’t fit the crime.

“I cried out my body weight in the first 24 hours,” she told me. “It was incredibly traumatic. You don’t sleep. You wake up in the middle of the night forgetting where you are.” She released an apology statement and cut short her vacation. Workers were threatening to strike at the hotels she had booked if she showed up. She was told no one could guarantee her safety.

Her extended family in South Africa were African National Congress supporters — the party of Nelson Mandela. They were longtime activists for racial equality. When Justine arrived at the family home from the airport, one of the first things her aunt said to her was: “This is not what our family stands for. And now, by association, you’ve almost tarnished the family.”

As she told me this, Sacco started to cry. I sat looking at her for a moment. Then I tried to improve the mood. I told her that “sometimes, things need to reach a brutal nadir before people see sense.”

“Wow,” she said. She dried her eyes. “Of all the things I could have been in society’s collective consciousness, it never struck me that I’d end up a brutal nadir.”

She glanced at her watch. It was nearly 6 p.m. The reason she wanted to meet me at this restaurant, and that she was wearing her work clothes, was that it was only a few blocks away from her office. At 6, she was due in there to clean out her desk.

“All of a sudden you don’t know what you’re supposed to do,” she said. “If I don’t start making steps to reclaim my identity and remind myself of who I am on a daily basis, then I might lose myself.”

The restaurant’s manager approached our table. She sat down next to Sacco, fixed her with a look and said something in such a low volume I couldn’t hear it, only Sacco’s reply: “Oh, you think I’m going to be grateful for this?”

We agreed to meet again, but not for several months. She was determined to prove that she could turn her life around. “I can’t just sit at home and watch movies every day and cry and feel sorry for myself,” she said. “I’m going to come back.”

After she left, Sacco later told me, she got only as far as the lobby of her office building before she broke down crying.

A few days after meeting Sacco, I took a trip up to the Massachusetts Archives in Boston. I wanted to learn about the last era of American history when public shaming was a common form of punishment, so I was seeking out court transcripts from the 18th and early 19th centuries. I had assumed that the demise of public punishments was caused by the migration from villages to cities. Shame became ineffectual, I thought, because a person in the stocks could just lose himself or herself in the anonymous crowd as soon as the chastisement was over. Modernity had diminished shame's power to shame — or so I assumed.

I took my seat at a microfilm reader and began to scroll slowly through the archives. For the first hundred years, as far as I could tell, all that happened in America was that various people named Nathaniel had purchased land near rivers. I scrolled faster, finally reaching an account of an early Colonial-era shaming.

On July 15, 1742, a woman named Abigail Gilpin, her husband at sea, had been found “naked in bed with one John Russell.” They were both to be “whipped at the public whipping post 20 stripes each.” Abigail was appealing the ruling, but it wasn't the whipping itself she wished to avoid. She was begging the judge to let her be whipped early, before the town awoke. “If your honor pleases,” she wrote, “take some pity on me for my dear children who cannot help their unfortunate mother's failings.”

There was no record as to whether the judge consented to her plea, but I found a number of clips that offered clues as to why she might have requested private punishment. In a sermon, the Rev. Nathan Strong, of Hartford, Conn., entreated his flock to be less exuberant at executions. “Go not to that place of horror with elevated spirits and gay hearts, for death is there! Justice and judgment are there!” Some papers published scathing reviews when public punishments were deemed too lenient by the crowd: “Suppressed remarks . . . were expressed by large numbers,” reported Delaware's Wilmington Daily Commercial of a disappointing 1873 whipping. “Many were heard to say that the punishment was a farce. . . . Drunken fights and rows followed in rapid succession.”

The movement against public shaming had gained momentum in 1787, when Benjamin Rush, a physician in Philadelphia and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, wrote a paper calling for its demise — the stocks, the pillory, the whipping post, the lot. “Ignominy is universally acknowledged to be a worse punishment than death,” he wrote. “It would seem strange that ignominy should ever have been adopted as a milder punishment than death, did we not know that the human mind seldom arrives at truth upon any subject till it has first reached the extremity of error.”

The pillory and whippings were abolished at the federal level in 1839, although Delaware kept the pillory until 1905 and whippings until 1972. An 1867 editorial in *The Times* excoriated the state for its obstinacy. “If [the convicted person] had previously existing in his bosom a spark of self-respect this exposure to public shame utterly extinguishes it. . . . The boy of 18 who is whipped at New Castle for larceny is in nine cases out of 10 ruined. With his self-respect destroyed and the taunt and sneer of public disgrace branded upon his forehead, he feels himself lost and abandoned by his fellows.”

At the archives, I found no evidence that punitive shaming fell out of fashion as a result of newfound anonymity. But I did find plenty of people from centuries past bemoaning the outsize cruelty of the practice, warning that well-meaning people, in a crowd, often take punishment too far.

It’s possible that Sacco’s fate would have been different had an anonymous tip not led a writer named Sam Biddle to the offending tweet. Biddle was then the editor of *Valleywag*, Gawker Media’s tech-industry blog. He retweeted it to his 15,000 followers and eventually posted it on *Valleywag*, accompanied by the headline, “And Now, a Funny Holiday Joke From IAC’s P.R. Boss.”

In January 2014, I received an email from Biddle, explaining his reasoning. “The fact that she was a P.R. chief made it delicious,” he wrote. “It’s satisfying to be able to say, ‘O.K., let’s make a racist tweet by a senior IAC employee count this time.’ And it did. I’d do it again.” Biddle said he was surprised to see how quickly her life was upended, however. “I never wake up and hope I [get someone fired] that day — and

certainly never hope to ruin anyone's life." Still, he ended his email by saying that he had a feeling she'd be "fine eventually, if not already."

He added: "Everyone's attention span is so short. They'll be mad about something new today."

Four months after we first met, Justine Sacco made good on her promise. We met for lunch at a French bistro downtown. I told her what Biddle had said — about how she was probably fine now. I was sure he wasn't being deliberately glib, but like everyone who participates in mass online destruction, uninterested in learning that it comes with a cost.

"Well, I'm not fine yet," Sacco said to me. "I had a great career, and I loved my job, and it was taken away from me, and there was a lot of glory in that. Everybody else was very happy about that."

Sacco pushed her food around on her plate, and let me in on one of the hidden costs of her experience. "I'm single; so it's not like I can date, because we Google everyone we might date," she said. "That's been taken away from me too." She was down, but I did notice one positive change in her. When I first met her, she talked about the shame she had brought on her family. But she no longer felt that way. Instead, she said, she just felt personally humiliated.

Biddle was almost right about one thing: Sacco did get a job offer right away. But it was an odd one, from the owner of a Florida yachting company. "He said: 'I saw what happened to you. I'm fully on your side,'" she told me. Sacco knew nothing about yachts, and she questioned his motives. ("Was he a crazy person who thinks white people can't get AIDS?") Eventually she turned him down.

After that, she left New York, going as far away as she could, to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She flew there alone and got a volunteer job doing P.R. for an NGO working to reduce maternal-mortality rates. "It was fantastic," she said. She was on her own, and she was working. If she was going to be made to suffer for a joke, she figured she should get something out of it. "I never would have lived in Addis Ababa for a month otherwise," she told me. She was struck by how different life was there.

Rural areas had only intermittent power and no running water or Internet. Even the capital, she said, had few street names or house addresses.

Addis Ababa was great for a month, but she knew going in that she would not be there long. She was a New York City person. Sacco is nervy and sassy and sort of debonair. And so she returned to work at Hot or Not, which had been a popular site for rating strangers' looks on the pre-social Internet and was reinventing itself as a dating app.

But despite her near invisibility on social media, she was still ridiculed and demonized across the Internet. Biddle wrote a *Valleywag* post after she returned to the work force: "Sacco, who apparently spent the last month hiding in Ethiopia after infuriating our species with an idiotic AIDS joke, is now a 'marketing and promotion' director at Hot or Not."

"How perfect!" he wrote. "Two lousy has-beens, gunning for a comeback together."

Sacco felt this couldn't go on, so six weeks after our lunch, she invited Biddle out for a dinner and drinks. Afterward, she sent me an email. "I think he has some real guilt about the issue," she wrote. "Not that he's retracted anything." (Months later, Biddle would find himself at the wrong end of the Internet shame machine for tweeting a joke of his own: "Bring Back Bullying." On the one-year anniversary of the Sacco episode, he published a public apology to her on Gawker.)

Recently, I wrote to Sacco to tell her I was putting her story in *The Times*, and I asked her to meet me one final time to update me on her life. Her response was speedy. "No way." She explained that she had a new job in communications, though she wouldn't say where. She said, "Anything that puts the spotlight on me is a negative."

It was a profound reversal for Sacco. When I first met her, she was desperate to tell the tens of thousands of people who tore her apart how they had wronged her and to repair what remained of her public persona. But perhaps she had now come to understand that her shaming wasn't really about her at all. Social media is so perfectly designed to manipulate our desire for approval, and that is what led to her

undoing. Her tormentors were instantly congratulated as they took Sacco down, bit by bit, and so they continued to do so. Their motivation was much the same as Sacco's own — a bid for the attention of strangers — as she milled about Heathrow, hoping to amuse people she couldn't see.

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Correction: March 8, 2015

An article on Feb. 15 about people who have been publicly shamed as a result of messages they posted on social media misstated the time frame in which Adria Richards, an employee at SendGrid, a Colorado-based email delivery service, was let go from the company. She was terminated the same day a distributed denial of service attack (DDoS) was launched against SendGrid's website, not the day after.

Correction: May 17, 2015

An article on Feb. 15 about people who have been publicly shamed as a result of messages they posted on social media misstated the time frame in which a man was terminated from his job after he made an inappropriate joke at a tech conference. He was fired the day after the incident, not two days later.

Jon Ronson is the author of many nonfiction books, including "The Psychopath Test," "Lost at Sea," "Them: Adventures With Extremists" and "The Men Who Stare at Goats." This article is adapted from the book "So You've Been Publicly Shamed," to be published in March from Riverhead.

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