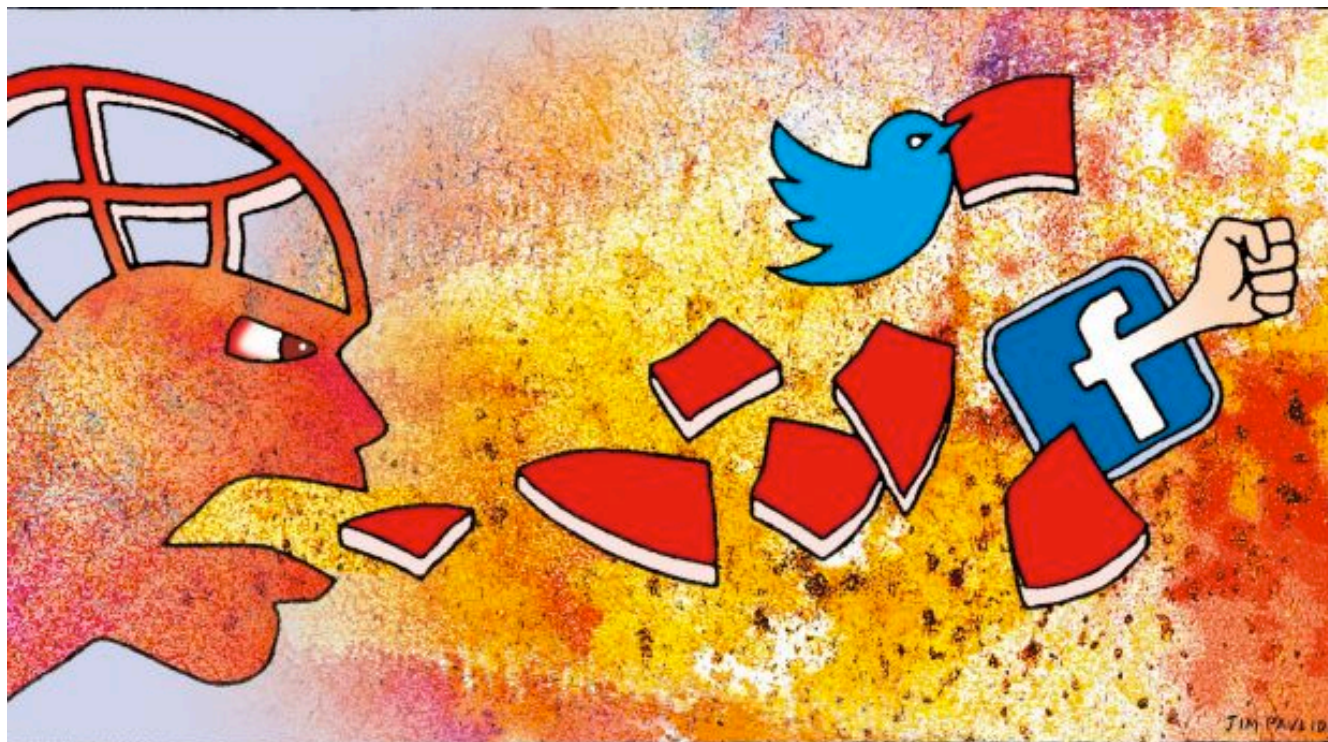


We're scaring ourselves to death

By Aubrey Perry

We are not a fragile or frightful people.

President Obama said this last week at the Democratic National Convention. And while I want to believe it's true, what I see us doing instead is scaring ourselves to death.



Almost daily we're faced with new atrocities. And the newspapers, television, internet and social media make sure we don't miss a minute of it. Headlines, images and violent videos are delivered in a continuous cycle of 24-hour social, emotional and political manipulation.

But are we really such innocent victims, or are we the complicit narrators of our own universal horror story? Much of what makes up the news that we see, watch and read is user-generated content. We feed ourselves videos of death and violence, live-streamed to Facebook and uploaded to YouTube. We gorge ourselves on photos of crimes scenes and bloodstained streets. And we wake up each day expecting to see more. We terrorise ourselves.

And the terror divides us. We let the fear we feel from the daily barrage of violence polarise us into ideological self-segregated groups where extremist points of view intensify.

In the age of the Wild, Wild Web, it's this group polarisation that threatens peace in our society and our resolve to resist fear. Extremist points of view find a welcome forum in online echo chambers where opposition is often met with verbal violence. The added anonymity that some corners of the internet allow for also aids in encouraging online abuse and the communal release of tension and anger, usually misdirected at a scapegoat.

Twitter is a particularly horrible place when it comes to expressions of extremism. That cute little bird nests on an orgy of racism, discrimination, xenophobia and hate. Look what Nova Peris, the ex-Senator from the Northern Territory, experienced from a man who brutally, publicly and racially abused her on Twitter. In a rare case of justice for an online assault like this, the attacker was actually brought to account and served with a sentence for his crime.

For Leslie Jones, one of the stars of the latest Ghostbusters film, legal vindication looks less likely. She was recently attacked on Twitter too. Her crime? Being a black woman in what some people consider a white man's movie. An army of organised internet trolls was set upon her by a well-known, extremist hate group. She reported the attacks to Twitter, but even Twitter admitted it didn't have measures in place to deal with abuse of this intensity, beyond banning a particularly prominent troll.

This is how hate spreads. It preys upon fear and finds its way into our daily lives, our social media and our social narratives. It holds our news feeds and headlines hostage. It segregates us into like-minded groups where extremism intensifies.

We post, comment on and share stories across times-zones and hemispheres, and soon our online public conversations become our offline personal conversations. And online opinions that we form in social media groups, free of state lines and country codes, become offline attitudes and opinions that we take to the voting booths in our national elections.

As a result, we get a nation that votes itself out of the European Union in favour of isolationism. And we have people like Pauline Hanson, Donald Trump and David Duke, the KKK leader himself (now running for Senator of Louisiana), rising from the ashes of political correctness and screaming at us from electoral podiums about freedom of speech and the threat of multiculturalism.

What we don't have is responsibility of speech. Instead, some of us choose to use reckless rhetoric that incites racism and xenophobia and threatens global peace: Pauline Hanson supporting a ban on Muslims entering Australia; Trump suggesting the same in the US, both agreeing that Muslims bring terror and violence with them.

What Pauline Hanson, Donald Trump, Sonia Kruger - who echoed the Muslim ban - and outright racists like David Duke represent is the greatest terror a society faces: fear-mongering by public figures who influence and polarise the public with misinformation, aggressive and emotionally charged language, and the suggestion of hostile action taken toward innocent groups of people.

Fairfax columnist Waleed Aly defended Kruger from the public scrutiny she received for her comment and said that Kruger's opinions were based on fear and that we should show people like Sonia patience and understanding.

The bigger statement to make is that we can't, as a society at large, de-evolve into a snarling, snot-nosed pit of adult-children who have no control over our emotions and spend no time applying critical thought to our public and private discourse.

We can't let fear and anger turn us savage. And we can't let ourselves be convinced that economic instability and inequality born of bad policy-making by public officials is somehow the fault of minorities within our communities.

We are not a fragile people. We are not a frightful people. We cannot let fear weaken our resolve, threaten our integrity, harden our hearts and bias our judgment.

With every racist Tweet, with every share of a hateful and fact-less meme, with every view and comment, we are setting social standards of conduct. Do we really want to be a society of cannibalistic bottle-neckers who can't pull our narcissism away from the screen? Or a nation of people who debate important social issues with the vocabulary and emotional intelligence of a 13-year-old? Do we really want to live in a world where there are such things as armies of Neo-Nazi internet trolls that racially abuse and attack people who oppose them?

We define ourselves and our culture by our freedoms. Freedom of speech is a freedom of choice and self-governance. The internet offers a new frontier where we have the freedom to watch, record, post, share, write and say almost anything. But we also have the freedom, and the responsibility to the preservation of a civilised planet, to know when not to.

Source; <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/were-terrorising-ourselves-20160728-gqfm3f.html>