

If Twitter Crumbles, Will We Go Back to Talking in Real Life?

Before social media, I told my inner thoughts to the cat. It wasn't terrible.



Illustration: Zohar Lazar



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Once upon a time, if you had a snarky or clever observation to make while watching a major national event like the Academy Awards, a political debate or a sad Detroit Lions turkey bowl, you could really only tell it in person, to whatever fools were stuck sitting with you, in real time.

You'd say your snarky or clever thing about the Oscars, the debate or the Lions to a couple of buddies on the couch, and hope for a laugh (you quickly learned the difference between a genuine laugh and a charity guffaw). Maybe you'd be with your family, and you'd chase their approval, too. Maybe it'd be just you and the cat. Maybe it'd just be you, since the cat was outside, smoking a Merit.

What didn't exist, for the longest time, was an instantaneous desire to share your brilliant *bon mots* with millions of strangers online, via social media. The only people who regularly shared all of their thoughts with the rest of the planet were late-night talk show hosts, newspaper columnists and David Lee Roth.

It feels cozy, honestly, the idea of turning inward, among friends, without the temptation to share every last remark with the universe.

Then platforms like Twitter arrived and turned us all into Larry King's USA Today column. (Or some of us. Twitter became catnip for insufferable media narcissists, including yours truly, who created the distortion that it was a widely used utility, when in reality it was a fringe behavior like yodeling or professional pogo stick.) Social media offered anyone a digital megaphone to let the world know their rambling thoughts about sports, TV shows, films, books, news events, politics, the weather, and of course, their urgent frustrations with the air travel industry.

No observation was too personal or banal. Bored at the bank? Irritated with a lunchtime meal? Hope the Yankees make a trade? You could log on and let everyone know your thoughts, immediately, and watch the approval (likes) pour in. Or not pour in.

It was addictive stuff, and the early iterations of social media became a strange garden of oversharing—before, of course, the whole thing turned into a flaming hell pit of rage and despair.

Lately, there's been speculation that the social media era may be petering out, especially at Twitter, where entrepreneur Elon Musk is rocking the boat, provoking some users to leave. I'm still on Twitter, because I'm lazy and miserable, but the discussion of its future has made me wonder: Could we ever go back to the old days when we just made comments to, you know, other people, in real life?

It wouldn't be the worst outcome. If Twitter fades, it's most likely the conversation will merely shift to another platform, where we will repeat the same mistakes until we are miserable there, too.

But what if we returned to a simpler time, when we'd just make our lame jokes about Arby's commercials and best-actor nominees to whoever was stuck in the TV den with us—a spouse, a roommate, David Lee Roth.

I know it is hard to believe, but human beings were capable of being quite funny before Twitter. They weren't viral or verified, but it was perfectly possible to make an impression. Some of the funniest people I've ever met were at Super Bowl parties; most of our comedic and literary heroes never owned a smartphone. Dorothy Parker is still Dorothy Parker, even if she never got 50,000 likes or told the entire planet her thoughts on the season premiere of "Yellowstone."

It feels cozy, honestly, the idea of turning inward, among friends, without the temptation to share every last remark with the universe. Don't get me wrong: I still want to know your thoughts about the Oscars and the Super Bowl halftime show. I really want to know how you are doing in line at the airport. Next time, tell me in person.

Write to Jason Gay at Jason.Gay@wsj.com Appeared in the November 19, 2022, print edition as 'If Twitter Crumbles, Will We Go Back to Talking in Real Life?'