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'I have Social Disease. I have to go out every night. If I stay home one night I start spreading rumours to my dogs.'

Andy Warhol

SOCIAL INTERCOURSE

You will often hear people complain that before the invention of social media, people used to talk. They used to meet in ‘normal’ ways; there was none of this ‘sexting’ business; we had friends before Facebook, you know...In fact, what people used to do before social media was socialise using different media: cave paintings, storytelling, gossip, smoke signals, carving initials in trees. Updating your Facebook status about your lunchtime ham sandwich is much the same as prehistoric man leaving a handprint on the cave wall to tell everyone he’d caught a really big bison.

And that’s the trick to successfully bluffing your way in the confusingly high-tech world of Internet networking and sharing: realising that it is no different to every other way in which human beings talk to and about one another.

As a species, humans have always wanted to share information – and the reason social networking services are so popular is because they make it easier than ever before. Where once you had to corner someone in the next cave to

boast about who you had just snogged, today you can put a picture on Instagram and shout it to the whole world.

While some welcome the mass exchange of information, others mistrust technological developments for fear they make us less human. Charles Dickens, confronted with the development of the telegraph, said: 'Electric communication will never be a substitute for the face of someone who with their soul encourages another person to be brave and true.'

Which ironically is the perfect 140-character length for a tweet (if you lose a full stop).

So when someone wants to complain about social media being the death of proper talking, point out to them that apes grunt, *Homo erectus* had basic symbolic communication, and *Homo sapiens* uttered the first words sometime between 30,000 and 100,000 years ago. Remind them that humankind is a storytelling species and is unique in that regard.

In the 1960s, some Californian geeks began linking their computers in what became known as the Internet and in 1982 Britain's Tim Berners-Lee developed a way of navigating it with addresses, links and readable pages – the World Wide Web. At this point, the evolution of human communication sped up exponentially, with email in 1993, blogging shortly after, Facebook launching in 2004 and Twitter in 2006.

Four years later the Internet went into warp drive, when astronaut T.J. Creamer sent a tweet unassisted from the International Space Station in orbit above Earth.

And here we are, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, at the point where any of us can have an

online conversation with someone on the other side of the world who we've never met, and simultaneously read the news, share amusing animal pictures, watch porn, and farm jelly beans competitively, all while our boss thinks we're working.

Of course, your boring pals might point out that we're so busy with all these distractions that we merely grunt at our nearest and dearest, which means evolution has advanced so far it's actually gone backwards in time. If they do, you can respond with 'AHA! Social media invented time travel too!' and after that they'll probably give up and leave you alone.

While what we say is the same as it's always been, the way we do it is changing at an alarming rate. From a handful of academic web pages in 1969, there are 1.3 billion websites at the time of writing in 2017. About 3.2 billion people used the Internet as of 2015, more than a billion of them in China. Population penetration varies widely between countries and continents, with 78 per cent of Americans online compared to just 31 per cent of Africans.

And it's not just for youngsters. Some 48 per cent of people aged 65 to 74 use social media; 35 per cent of couples who married in the USA between 2005 and 2012 met via social media; and one in five divorces is blamed on Facebook. In a survey, 1 in 7 Brits said they'd considered divorce because of their partner's use of social media, and 25% said they argued about it every week. This is, increasingly, how we live – online, where there's little privacy, constant data harvesting and ever-lurking trolls.

The pace of change being what it is, this guide will probably be out of date before there's been time to hit 'print'. Perhaps one day people will abandon it entirely and go back to banging rocks together, but until then this book will be your best way of learning how to navigate the ever-changing waters of social media.

Maybe you're one of those people who can't go five minutes without grazing Pinterest. Perhaps you have bought or been given this guide in an attempt to haul you into the daunting mêlée of twenty-first-century communication. Either way, this book will tell you things you don't know, warn you about the perils of online intercourse and arm you with the kind of bite-sized knowledge that will make you sound like an expert with very little effort on your part.

It sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about social media and to equip you with the vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and techniques that might even allow you to be accepted as a social media expert of rare ability and experience.

It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your expertise and insight – without anyone discovering that, until you read this, you probably didn't know the difference between a tweet and a dweet.*

*It can mean a tweet sent while drunk, while on a date, or even... ahem... while defecating. Humans, eh?