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OVERSHARING

Written by Emily Hourican

Did you ever think you would miss the annual round robin letters that turned up in early December, complete with details about the scholastic success of kids you had never met? The minute medical matters of adults you last saw ten years ago? The cute caperings of the family pet? No, me neither. Now though, when this kind of information lands on my lap on a daily – hourly! – basis, I look back on the ring-fenced Season of Over-Sharing with some regret.

Because now there is nothing to stop the tide of useless, random, irritating information coming at us from all sides. Meet someone at a wedding and share half an hour of desultory chat, and there is a good chance that, four years later, you will still be receiving relentlessly regular updates on her fertility treatment, husband's promotion and the great trip they took to Italy, via Facebook, twitter and Instagram.

Over-sharing has been around forever – think of Beckett's characters (always women), buried up to their necks in sand, or dustbins, babbling and chatting away without cease, mixing sublime observations with random recollections and pointless questions. We all know women like that, who start off telling you why the doctor has given them three weeks to live, then get so bogged down in their own digressions and side-tracks – what the lady on the bus said about Tom, the bit of newspaper they were reading but left behind in the hairdressers, the man next door who bought a new car – that they never actually reach their conclusion. Instead, they leave you with a vaguely panicked feeling, an overload of information with no path to pick through it.

However, social media is of course God's gift to over-sharers, turning it from an unexpected outburst into an art form. In fact, you could argue that it has made over-sharers of us all. Who isn't guilty of having posted a little something – a photo, a status-update, a reflection – that crosses the invisible line between relevant/ funny, and utterly random? And, just as ideologies contain the seeds of their own destruction, so over-sharing is both the off-spring and nemesis of social media. More and more people are simply leaving Facebook, for example, because they can no longer cope with the tide of unnecessary information. With

social media, there is no need-to-know basis; everything comes with a giant red ring around it exclaiming Urgent! Read Me! See Me!

Of course, there are sites where you can share your friends more appalling bits of over-sharing, but is public ridicule or revulsion really any compensation for having to read the stuff in the first place? And after all, if the culprit was sensitive enough to care about such things, chances are they wouldn't have been guilty of the over-share in the first place.

Parents are possibly the worst offenders. Yes, we know you adore your kids and think every word that comes out of their mouths brilliant beyond belief, and that you have an endless appetite for pictures of them dressed in Fireman Sam outfits or falling down in a pile of leaves. But – whisper it – no one else (except possibly their granny), cares nearly as much about them as you do. I know. Hard to believe, isn't it? But take it on trust. And stop bombarding us with the latest 'hilarious' thing they said or did.

Don't just do it for our sake though. Do it for the kids. Apparently 92% of American babies have a social networking presence before their first birthday, and there is genuine concern about an entire generation growing up so publicly, and with no control over their own profiles. By the time these kids reach the age of wisdom, when they can begin to make their own decisions, it will be way too late. Their footprint across the internet – pictures of them eating bricks, covered in drool and falling over, all name-tagged of course – will be deep as trenches. Their 'funny' comments and observations are engraved across the online world in indelible ink. These kids run a serious risk of never being taken seriously. Hard as it is right now to run for high office or progress smoothly up the corporate ladder, it can only be harder again if everyone you ever meet can go online and see that your mother once posted up 'today little Sarah became a woman...', or a picture of the art she created out of your placenta. Should the over-sharing consist of boastful details about your academic progress ('My Little Straight-A Baby') or sporting prowess ('The coach said he'd never said a child that age so good...'), then the world will wait gleefully for your downfall – a pass degree, failure to be selected for the First team – and all through no fault of your own.

Back in the real world, a new expression is doing the rounds. 'Oh, I have no filter,' people will tell you. Usually quite proudly. As if this is a good thing, meaning they are so spontaneous and uninhibited. Wrong! All it means is they don't know when to stop or how to edit out the madly boring stuff. Those 'without filters' don't understand that intimate details of their horrendous birth are going to stick in your mind forever and permanently affect the way you see them. They can't read the subtle social signs that indicate 'we are not interested in the

minute details of your diet plan' and are unaware that telling us about their sister's vicious divorce is making us uncomfortable.

So what is the psychological behind this need to pony up Too Much Information, sometimes to strangers, either in person or online? According to the experts, over-sharing is often the result of trying subconsciously to control our own anxiety, in a process known as 'self regulation'. In practise, it works like this: The business of having a conversation can use up a lot of mental energy as we try to manage the other person's impression of us. We are so busy trying to look clever, witty and interesting, that the effort required leaves less brain space to filter exactly what we say, and to whom. This of course is why we so often blurt out embarrassing things to exactly the people we most want to impress – our boss, that guy we fancy, the coolest girl in the class. The harder we are trying to impress, the more likely we are to over-step the mark. Just think of all those embarrassing stories of the kinds of squirm-making things people say when they come face to face with their heroes? I know one very cool and together woman who met Barack Obama, her absolute idol. To her eternal mortification, she found herself singing "Happy birthday Mister President" to him...

As a deliberate technique, controlled over-sharing can actually work very well. It can break the ice socially, indicate that you are a person with whom important, 'real' things can be discussed, not just the weather or the match. Truman Capote used it very effectively in delving secrets out of the rich and famous – his trick was to offer up a confidence (always something far less intimate than he pretended), then wait for the other person to reciprocate, which they usually did; except that, caught off guard, they often blurted out the real dirt, not something carefully stage-managed to seem like dirt. However, in general, there is neither thought nor calculation that goes into over-sharing. Instead it is a kind of mental and verbal incontinence.

So, if you start to notice a bored cyber silence from your network, a flurry of 'unfriending' or a steady avoidance by work colleagues,, then it is time to ask yourself – am I rather overdoing it on the sharing? And if you suspect you might be, the next question is how to cure it? Well it's really quite simple. Run a quick check past any piece of information, photo or anecdote you are about to share. Is it actually interesting? Does it add to the discussion? Is it potentially embarrassing, to you or those who will receive it? Would you want someone else to share such a thing with you? Is it dangerous? The answers to those questions will tell you whether you should really be keeping said item to yourself. If, instead of seeing the internet as a vast repository for cute pictures of your kids and a captive audience for your reflections on whether Kim Kardashian should have another baby and what the man at the petrol station

said about your car, you could view it as a group of actual friends, people who know you and will judge you on the quality of your output, as well as so much sticky amber that will trap your inanities forever, then you will be well on the way to curbing the tendency to over-share.

So now – deep breath! – look again at that picture of your dog wearing a Santa hat. Reconsider that long story of how you got lost on the M50 that you were preparing to tell a colleague. Does the world really need to know...? Remember, careless talk costs lives. It certainly causes sighs.

Sidebar

The Parental Over-Sharer: Horribly ubiquitous and buoyed up by a sense of their own righteousness, the Parental O-S simply doesn't understand that the rest of the world might not be as besotted with their kids as they are. From the very first scan, they are posting manically. Sometimes you even get a shot of the pregnancy test with tell-tale blue line. Cutesy pictures, 'hilarious' comments by the under-sixes and 'ahhh' moments are their stock-in-trade. Unfriend, now!

The Medical Over-Sharer: Most likely to cause you feelings of faintness and nausea due to the uninhibited sharing of gory details about operations, side-effects and even vital functions. No detail too revolting to be spared. Tends to be slightly older and shares in person rather than online.

The I'm-So-Sexy Over-Sharer: Her relentless stream of hot bikini shots make you feel inadequate until you twig that, perfect body aside, there is something very sad about the need to show strangers pictures of yourself in your underwear. Loves fancy dress parties (so many opportunities to pose as a sexy nurse/ cat/ Oompa-Loopa) and holidays in particular.

The Beckettian Over-Sharer: Simply has no idea of what to leave out. Every story is an endless series of digressions and irrelevancies. Treats all information as of identical importance, so you get the price of the piece of fish she had for lunch, right alongside the news that her house is about to be repossessed, both delivered with equal emphasis. A fixture among the over-60s, the Beckettian O-S can, surprisingly, be found among any age group. Get trapped by her, and you are stuck for the longest haul.

The Inappropriate Over-Sharer: Lacks a filter, by which we mean any sense of what is and isn't fit for public consumption. So a status-update might tell you they are post-coital, or watching TV in their underpants, or washing vomit out of their hair. Among their observations

you might find a meditation on how 'Love is... treating your husband's scrotum rash'. Seriously. These examples are taken from true life. Which shows just how bad true life has become.

The Nervous Over-Sharer: We can all sympathise with this one. So keen to create a connection, or keep a conversation going, that the most excruciating and random stuff just pops out of their mouths unchecked. Remember Baby in Dirty Dancing? 'I carried a watermelon...' We've all been there.

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