June 7, 2024 / The last good day on the internet

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <Cosmic Beach Interlude>

NOEL KING (host): It started when a staffer at *BuzzFeed*, RIP, wrote “this is important, because I think I’m going insane.” Someone had sent her a picture of a party dress and said –

*<CLIP> REPORTER CATES HOLDERNESS: Please help, I posted a picture of a dress, some people are seeing it as blue and black and some people are seeing it as white and gold. Like, can you explain? We’re losing it.*

NOEL: We rhetorically ask “is the sky blue?” when the answer is, “of course.” We never think someone will say it’s green. But here, people of good faith and fine vision saw DIFFERENT things. That picture went viral, then came to define viral. Nine years later, it still fascinates us.

BRIAN RESNICK (*National Geographic* science journalist): I'm not a textile reporter or obsessed with fashion, but I have been extremely interested in human perception and our blindspots and how our brains make decisions about what we're seeing, and they don't tell us how much they're guessing.

NOEL: And, we’ll hear, that moment of virality was a turning point. Coming up on *Today, Explained*: the last best day on the internet.

[THEME]

NOEL: Brian, go ahead, gimme your full name, and tell me what you do.

BRIAN: So I'm Brian Resnick, I'm a science journalist currently at *National Geographic*, formerly at *Vox*.

NOEL: The dress was a dress, of course, but the vast majority of us who saw it did not see it in real life. We saw a picture of it. Right. Describe what we saw in that picture.

BRIAN: The most important thing I think about the dress was that it's a crappy photo. It's a photo… shot seemingly indoors. Kind of extremely unremarkable. Maybe something you'd find in your phone as a ‘did I take this on accident?’

SCORING <Frogs Not Hopping>

BRIAN: The dress itself, it's a striped dress. So there's, like, these kind of bands across it horizontally, pretty wide bands, and they alternate in color…it's, but, yeah, it looks like just – uh, uh, uh, a dress. And if you want to help me out with more, with more descriptive detail…

NOEL: I can a tiny bit, okay, so it's a bandage dress. It's about thigh length. It has a little kind of like sweater cape on top, which was not the thing that anybody was concerned about. And to me, the bands which run horizontally, they're, they almost look like some of the bands are fabric and some of them are maybe sequins.

BRIAN: Hmm, there’s some textures…

NOEL: …they’re different textures. Yeah, exactly, exactly. So like, it's cute is what I would say. I, you know, I might have worn The Dress at one point. And, and you're right that the picture itself was not very good, but that wasn't the point. What the point was, was that the picture ended up online. Where did it end up online, and how did that play into everything?

BRIAN: Yeah, so this was… we're talking about this all thanks to BuzzFeed. You know in the mid 2010s it was the champion of creating viral moments online. I'm sure you remember the watermelon rubber band thing.

NOEL: <laughs>

*<CLIP> BUZZFEED VIDEO, CHELSEA: Hi, I’m Chelsea.   
 JAMES: And I’m James.   
 CHELSEA: This is our watermelon that we’re gonna try to explode using rubber bands…*

BRIAN: So it was, BuzzFeed writer Cates Holderness. She saw this dress on Tumblr, I believe there was a comment, even maybe asking BuzzFeed or some journalists for help in deciphering the colors of this dress. And, Holderness just kind of, very simply wrote a story on BuzzFeed. The headline was, “What colors are this dress?” The answers: blue and black or white and gold. And the URL was really funny. It cracks me up. It says ‘Help! Am I going insane? It's definitely blue.’

SCORING OUT

NOEL: You saw what?

BRIAN: Oh, blue and black forever.

NOEL: No. No, you didn’t. <laughs>

BRIAN: No ambiguity. It's funny how this still provokes that kind of indignant. Oh, my God, like your perception was different than mine. I mean, I actually think the the actual colors of the dress are blue and black, you know, from, you know, but but, you know, for the sake of the image. Yes. This is, this is exactly what happened that day and, and spiraled out from there so that you and I, millions of other people are split on what colors they see in this dress. And it's not even like there's a hint of ambiguity…

NOEL: No!   
  
BRIAN: …in our responses to this question.

*<CLIP> ABC7: I mean, these people are idiots – it’s gold and white.*

*<CLIP> BUZZFEED VIDEO, STAFFER: It’s blue. It’s obviously blue.   
STAFFER: I – I cannot see blue anywhere in that dress. I don’t even know how you could see blue.   
STAFFER: It’s the fact that you’re smarter if you see it in black and blue.*

*<CLIP> CNBC: This question ignited a firestorm online, specifically on social media. BuzzFeed posted that dress controversy had drawn more visitors to their site at one time than ever before…*

BRIAN: So within just a few days, *BuzzFeed* itself got 73 million page views…

NOEL: Sheeeez.

BRIAN: …on that post, which is a lot. But that was just in the few days. And a lot of this was facilitated by sharing on Facebook and other social media platforms, which, you know, used to be a little bit more generous with the traffic it sent to news websites. So this was not just on *BuzzFeed*.

*<CLIP> NEWSREEL: Ellen tweeted, ‘From this day on, the world will be divided into two people: blue and black or white and gold.’*

*<CLIP> HOST: You think it’s blue and black because you’ve seen the actual dress.  
MATT LAUER: Also, I’m colorblind. I am…*

BRIAN: This kind of metastasized across the internet. And all the websites were commenting on this, reporting on this. It was truly – it was ubiquitous.

*<CLIP> NEWSREEL: Kim Kardashian tweeting, ‘I see white and gold. Kanye sees black and blue. Who is color blind?’ And Taylor Swift: ‘I don’t understand this odd dress debate. P.S.: It’s obviously blue and black.”*

*<CLIP> NEWSREEL: And who knows? Maybe the dress is actually left shark.*

NOEL: I remember I was in a newsroom and we were all, you know, gathered around a computer looking at it. And yeah, first reaction is like, surely I'm right here. Surely there's something wrong with their eyes. And then it was, yeah, how? How are people seeing blue and black here? Since you're a science guy, what was actually happening. m

BRIAN: Yeah. So there's like a big lesson. And then I like a very specific lesson for the dress itself.

SCORING <Question Marks>

BRIAN: The big lesson is that this happens all the time in our brains. We are met with ambiguous stimulus, which is, you know, a fancy way of saying like imperfect information. Our eyes, you know, aren't perfect. Our ears are imperfect. But our brain still needs to generate, you know, a seamless sense of reality. It's not giving you like a 404 error. So that's, that's the big lesson.

TINY SCORING BUMP

BRIAN: The small lesson here is that the best guess for what's happening with the dress is that different brains make different assumptions on the quality of light that's falling on it. So if your brain is making the assumption that the dress is in daylight, it will look one color. If your brain is making the assumption that the dress is under fluorescents, it will seem to be another color. But this is just kind of a hypothesis. <laughs> And there was a study, a few years later that was just wild. That kind of tried to find some personality or individual characteristics that could predict who would see what colors. And one that popped up was something called chronotype, which is like: you're either [an] early riser or a, you know, a night owl. And this is like something that's influenced by genetics. It's kind of hard to change. It's more than a personality trait. It's, like, a little bit more biological in people. But the basic idea was that I think early risers – so morning, morning birds –

NOEL: Mhmm.

BRIAN: – tended to see white and gold, and night owls – people who are more likely to, you know, sleep late, stay up late – were more likely to see it as black and blue. The thinking being that early risers have more lifetime experience and bright morning sun.

NOEL: <gasp> Oh my god. <laughs> Oh my god, that’s so cool.

BRIAN: So that led them to make the assumption that it's maybe bathed in bright morning sunlight. And so you can then – your brain then kind of takes out the sunlight, because what your brain is trying to do… your brain is not like analyzing the wavelengths of light coming from something to determine its color. It's making a guess based on its surroundings, and your brain can kind of compensate for the light that it thinks it's falling on it. So if you think bright morning light is falling on this dreft [misspeak: dress], bright morning light has a lot of blue in it. So your brain could kind of like take out the blue if you're making that assumption.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: I am – I am a dyed in the wool morning bird. I have to be up. I have to be up before the sun, or I'm nervous the rest of the day. And I saw white and gold, I love that.

BRIAN: Mhmm.

NOEL: You know in the past ten years I'm still a morning person and I still see white and gold and you still see blue and black. That has not changed.

BRIAN: No.

NOEL: And yet you wrote about this as a turning point. I think you're of the opinion that it's possible this could not happen on the internet today. We could certainly see things differently today. But this particular set of circumstances, the virality, the conversation around it, that couldn't happen today. What do you mean by that? What do you think happened here?

BRIAN: Yeah, I do think that kind of virality works differently now, at least, where it's not social sharing anymore. It's like this algorithmically-derived feed. So if you go on TikTok, like I see a lot of stuff that couldn't, cannot be like the most common stuff to see on TikTok. Like I'm, I'm kind of into people tiling their bathrooms…

NOEL: Ha!

BRIAN: … and like watching people, you know, put up, you know, bathroom tile. I don't know, this gets fed to me, but I have no way of knowing, like, if that's a kind of common viral experience for people.

NOEL: It is not. <laughs>

BRIAN: It is not. <laughs> Thank you. Thanks for that confirmation there. So, yeah. So, like, a lot of the engines of this kind of social virality have broken down. So, like, where is, where is everyone going to have the same moment to have this come-together moment about how different we can be? I don't see that happening today.

SCORING <Frogs Not Hopping (reprise)>

NOEL: Brian Resnick. Thank you so much.

BRIAN: Oh, of course. My –

NOEL: Thank you for writing this. We're sorry you left.

BRIAN: <laughs> Oh, I miss you all, too.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: One update we’d be remiss not to share. You may recall that the photo of The Dress was taken by a Scottish man named Keir Johnson. His mother–in-law planned to wear it at Keir’s wedding. We now know he has a long history of abusing his wife. Last month he pled guilty and was sentenced to four-and-a-half years for assaulting her. Uf.

Coming up next: ...

SCORING BACK IN

NOEL: … the last best day on the Internet. And everything after.

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> THEME, BUT PITCHED “LAUREL/YANNY”s*

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. We’re back with Charlie Warzel who covers technology and Al Gore’s Internet at *The Atlantic*. The day The Dress photo was uploaded, he was working at *BuzzFeed* but home sick with the flu.

CHARLIE WARZEL (*The Atlantic* staff writer): So I actually found out about it, like waking up from, you know, one of those, like, like long, feverish sleeps and, you know, sort of the thing you did in 2015 if you were working at *BuzzFeed* was you would wake up and before you did anything other than open your eyes, you would check Twitter. And, I'd never seen it so focused on one thing. So this was a moment and a subject, right, this divisive issue that was kind of low stake that made it just like the perfect thing to, you know, to debate, to talk about. And it felt really, it felt really. Organic and, you know, there weren't – after the dress happened, there were so many, like, copycats, right? There was, like, the Laurel and Yanny like voice thing.

NOEL: <giggles>

*<CLIP> COMPUTER VOICE: Laurel/yanny. Laurel/ yanny.*

CHARLIE: And I think now though, it feels like this is something that could not happen again. I don't think that the internet works that way anymore. And I think that that sort of mass event that’s not something like, you know, a pandemic or, you know, a terrorist attack or a war. Other than those types of things, it's very hard for there to be this, like, central cultural event and for it to also stay civil and fun. Right? I could imagine something like the dress happening now and then somehow, you know, you have people using it as a way to talk about vaccines, right?

NOEL: <laughs> No. Right, right. Exactly.

CHARLIE: And ‘Of course – of course, you liberals would –’ whatever, you know? Like, whatever it is. There's a way in which we've sort of gotten used to arguing on the internet in a certain way that leads down this, like, very toxic path. Right? Like, everyone knows exactly the steps you have to take to whatever it is, the bigger argument that you wanna make, is. And it's too simple to say Donald Trump came down an escalator, you know, in the summer of 2015 and everything changed. But I do think the patterns with which we, you know, argue or even just the way that discourse happens online is just very stuck in these patterns now. And in 2015, there was a little less of that.

NOEL: How did the internet end up in such a place of fracture?

CHARLIE: So one way that I, that I think about it is: the period of the you know of non-fracture, of centrality – let's say the, you know, 2007 to 2021, right? That period is dominated by the, you know, web 2.0 social media companies: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, what have you. I think that that actually is the abnormal period, when you look at the way that the internet works, right?

NOEL: Hmm.

SCORING <07 Neutral Aparna>

CHARLIE: The internet actually came about during a moment of, of mass media, right. Cable news, the four networks…

*<CLIP> ABC: This is ABC News: Nightline. Reporting from Washington, Ted Koppel.*

CHARLIE: Massive TV audiences are watching the same thing every, you know, Thursday night on NBC or whatever.

*<CLIP> “FULL HOUSE”, STEPHANIE TANNER: How rude. <audience laughs>*

CHARLIE: And the internet comes about and it really splinters attention in this, in this fascinating way. Right? You get the rise of message boards and chat rooms and private little communities.

*<CLIP> ARCHIVAL AOL AD: Hey Dan, ready for the game?   
 DAN: I’m just finishing up here with my new kayaking friends.   
 FRIEND: Kayaking friends on your computer?   
 DAN: Yeah, I just got America OnLine.*

CHARLIE: And it's this kind of great way to silo things off and, and, and find your people.

SCORING BUMP

CHARLIE: And then I think social media kind of came about and had this, you know, this goal, right, of, of like, obviously Facebook is connecting the world, but there's this idea of sort of, you know, mass audiences.

*<CLIP> META FOUNDER MARK ZUCKERBERG: We’re here to help connect the world, and we take that really seriously…*

CHARLIE: They all succeeded in different ways. Right? Like Facebook did succeed in connecting more people than I've ever been connected in the history of the world. And then Twitter sort of succeeded becoming this really central broadcast channel for media people, right? People who spend all their time, you know, trying to figure out what's important, discussing, debating and then ultimately deciding what's important. So Twitter became the assignment editor for the internet.

SCORING BUMP

CHARLIE: You know, there was a period when I was working at *BuzzFeed* in around 2013 where we had this thing called the *BuzzFeed* Partner Network, I believe. We got the ability to sort of see the way the traffic was flowing on the internet. Right. And there was this time, I think it was 2013, where we noticed internally that all of a sudden, like, Facebook had just, like turned on a spigot of eyeballs. But it was like, this massive boost. And all of a sudden everyone's posts, not just *BuzzFeed*'s, but everyone's we're just getting unbelievable amounts of traffic, right?

NOEL: Yeah. Yeah.

CHARLIE: And this was due to some kind of algorithmic change, and that lasted for a while. I think that – that that combined with the fact that there were these – there was this discussion platform where everyone kind of got to debate, like, what is the story of the day? And then everyone's, you know, writing the story, seeing how that does on other websites, and then writing that, that there ended up becoming this very weird, kind of mass culture on the internet.

SCORING OUT

CHARLIE: I think that naturally, there's naturally that's going to go away. Right? Like, naturally audiences are going to go to different places. You know, there's going to be migrations from different platforms. That happened with Facebook. But Facebook also decided it didn't want to do that with the news anymore. So it turned off the spigot.

*<CLIP> THEN-HEAD OF NEWSFEED ADAM MOSSERI: So the idea is to try and focus more on bringing people together by trying to put more emphasis on facilitating more “meaningful social interactions” between people.*

CHARLIE: And then I think you have external events, right? Like the pandemic. You know, that was a multiyear period where people were stuck inside on their phones, computers like all day, you know, mainlining news because they're scared. They're bored, what have you. And I think that there was this way where, you know, when the world opened up a little bit more people changed their behaviors. Right. Felt like, ‘Oh, I've been, I've been kind of stuck with these people for a long time listening to their thoughts.’

NOEL: <laughs>

CHARLIE: And I think you see the internet moving into more fragmented communities that actually kind of resembles that earlier part of the internet. Pre-social media. You know, there's Discord platforms. There's, you know, message boards. There's even just the sort of walled communities of, like, Instagram Stories where you do [close] friends only. Group chats, all of that. I think people have flocked there because that sort of mass feeling of culture on the internet, it also got toxic really quickly.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: Hello, that was me in the white hat in the viral video you just saw. This is a viral video with, like, hundreds of comments of people talking about how disgusting I look and how skinny I am and how she could do so much better….*

NOEL: You know, these days you work in news and you understand that things still do go viral to some extent, but the difference seems to be that they are things that really do happen, not things that we made happen. So, like Kate Middleton really did appear to vanish for a few weeks. The OceanGate submersible really did, unfortunately, very sadly appear to vanish for a couple days. And and those things went viral. But those were actual news stories.

CHARLIE: Yes. And again, I think that that is… There's something… good about this, right? There's something… obviously, the Kate Middleton story was, was, a bit gross, right? You had somebody who was trying to have privacy over, a health issue, a very famous person, of course. And then a lot of, like, reckless speculation and things like that.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK USER @UNETHICALCLOUTCHASER: I feel like this is strategic. And yeah. Maybe they’re soft-launching his mistress, and soft-launching a divorce…*

CHARLIE: But it also was legitimately a news story in the sense that an incredibly famous person seemed to be going through, a personal potentially, you know, health crisis and they’re, you know, a beloved public figure. So there's going to be interest. It is, it is newsworthy.

NOEL: Hmm.

CHARLIE: I think these things demonstrate. Right. The difference between like what you're describing here is essentially, like top down, right? News that is news…

NOEL: Yeah.

CHARLIE: … filters down to the rest of us instead of the other way. And I think that there's something healthy about that. Right. Because the opposite is what we were talking about before, which is this bottom up. Right. Small things happen in these little tiny communities or little places. And these people get sort of like picked up and like thrown into the national news discussion. Right? You that's how you get Bean Dad. That's how you get, you know, has Justine Sacco landed yet? Or all those types of different things. And some of those stories are really newsworthy. Some of those are really interesting. Some of those are fun, some of those are funny. But there is also this notion, right, of, you know, virality being an excuse to talk about things that really are none of our business.

NOEL: Oooooh. Yeah.

CHARLIE: So I did this experiment, earlier this year where I was really curious: “What does it mean to go viral?” Or, “What does virality mean in 2024?” And to do this, I essentially just typed the phrase, went viral into Google News and just started looking at, you know, different organizations that were writing about stories – or *things* that went viral. And I noticed that, you know, the primary organization that would do this would be like a local news, you know, station, or like a drive time radio station. And they would essentially pluck things out of the internet very, you know, small, local instances of something funny or something weird happening. And they would justify talking about it because it, quote unquote, “went viral” on Instagram or Twitter or some other place, and there was no standardization there. Right. Sometimes it would be, ‘Oh, this thing got 4 million views on Twitter.’ Sometimes it would be, ‘This got 150 million views on TikTok.’

NOEL: Hmm.

CHARLIE: Right? It was – it wasn't very clear what you know now in 2024, what it means to go viral, other than we're kind of using it as an excuse to talk about something that's really none of our business.

SCORING <Neutral Aparna STEMS-1>

CHARLIE: I think that when I look at the future, my bet right now is that things only feel more and more siloed. Whether that's good or bad, I think, kind of remains to be seen, but I do think that the days – outside of like an election day or something like that – the days of us like all gawking at the exact same thing and having the exact same reactions to it… that those are past us, at least for now.

NOEL: I think we'll always have the weather.

CHARLIE: We will! That's true. That's true.

NOEL: <laughs>

SCORING TRANSITIONS TO <Cosmic beach interlude>

NOEL: That was *The Atlantic*’s Charlie Warzel.

Amanda Lewellyn produced today’s episode. Amina Al-Sadi edited. Laura Bullard fact-checked. Andi Kristinsdottir and Rob Byers engineered.

The rest of our team includes Matthew Collette, Miles Bryan, Avishay Artsy, Hady Mawajdeh, Haleema Shah, Denise Guerra, Peter Balonen-Rosen, Patrick Boyd and Victoria Chamberlin, who thinks… many of you probably don’t remember The Dress. Sean Rameswaram is on vacation. Miranda Kennedy is our Executive Producer.

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[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]