# Speaking Freely, Thinking Aloud, and Embarrassing Yourself on Social Media

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*Abstract*. Why do we care about free speech? One theory says that being able to speak freely to others is a necessary condition for us realising our capacities as thinking beings. Why do we care about privacy? One theory says that our interest in privacy is about cordoning off a 'drafting space' in which we can rehearse our opinions and our self-presentational choices, to see what we like and what we want to revise, before publicising these parts of our identity. In this paper I draw on these theories to explain an unhappy feature of social media discourse. We're drawn to share our ideas on social media because it seems like a valuable forum for speaking freely with others and thereby realising our capacities qua thinking beings. But we mistakenly treat social media as if it is a private conversation – a suitable drafting space for our identities – when it is functionally anything but.

Something that happens often, on social media, is that people say more than they would ultimately really want to say, in such a way that they seriously embarrass themselves. Of course this occurs in ordinary offline discussion as well. You wish that you could unsay certain things. You imagine yourself grabbing the words out of the air in front of your face, and stuffing them back in somehow. But this experience is more commonplace on social media. Social media is a communicative environment that seems to somehow enhance and enliven our blurting abilities. Consider the following example.

What we are seeing here is a back-and-forth from a Twitter thread. It has been screenshotted and *submitted to Reddit*, as a funny example of someone evincing a painful lack of self-awareness. I haven't been able to locate further screenshots that reveal the larger context within which this exchange took place, so if we want to reflect on what's going on here we have to fill in the blanks a bit. It looks like we have dropped in on a discussion about the politics of sex. Lara Witt is criticising a comment that appeared earlier, which – we can infer – was making a feminist point about the importance of consent, but in doing so, tacitly suggesting that heterosexual sex, even when it's consensual, is something women are simply subjected to. Witt is saying that this is itself arguably sexist, or at any rate, not something that fits comfortably into an adequate feminist critique of patriarchy.

Then our man comes along. Is he trying to make a stand for misogynistic ideas about sex and sexual politics? Maybe. And maybe with more of the surrounding conversation to go on, we would be able to say with confidence one way or the other. But it seems to me that this probably isn't what he is aiming for. I think what he is trying to suggest, in a fumbling, off-the-cuff way, is that while Witt's insight is *prima facie* sound, it may also be that the view that she is challenging – about the presumptive undesirability of heterosexual sex for women – in fact lines up well with many women's experiences. He doesn't seem particularly cautious in his remark, but nor is he being totally belligerent. Rather, he is, as we say, putting a thought on the table. Unfortunately for him, he is thereby — because he hasn't thought through the embarrassing self-referential implications of his remark — opening a Pandora's Box of shame and *schadenfreude*. He is unwittingly casting himself in a cautionary tale.

When I first saw this little study in self-inflicted harm, I think my initial response was one of *schadenfreude* too. No one asked for this person's opinion. He ventured it anyway — the way we men in such situations are wont to do — and he scored

a spectacular own goal. As the internet says: play stupid games, win stupid prizes. If virtue is its own reward, then vice may sometimes be its own penalty.

But someone I showed this image to had a more sympathetic reaction to our hapless protagonist than I did, and on reflection I came to regard their reaction as the better one. Whatever this man's flaws and foibles might be, his communicative stuff-up here is not so vicious that he deserves to be humiliated. If vice is sometimes its own penalty, fine. But the penalty in this case is something greater, and something out of proportion. This is an off-hand remark by a person trying to think his way through a topic in dialogue with others. Thinking aloud is part of how people think as such, and in the process of thinking aloud all of us say things that reflect our less sympathetic, more ham-fisted selves. For most of us, these unfortunate remarks sink without a trace. In this man's case, though, his ill-considered, accidental admission of being a disappointing lover will almost certainly, come the end of his life, be the words of his that were more widely heard than any others. You might be thinking, "Boo-hoo! Let me get out my tiny violin for him." But the episode surely has at least a smidgen of tragedy about it.

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I want to argue that the tragic(omic) qualities of this example are symptomatic of a tragic allure that social media has taken on in its lifespan to date. To see how this allure arises, it will be helpful to consider some ideas and arguments that we find in philosophical theories of privacy, and in philosophical theories of free speech and its relation to freedom of thought.

Let's consider the free speech-related matters first. Why do we care about free speech? Why should we think that expressing our ideas and opinions should be free in a way that's distinct from or greater than the freedom which is presumptively accorded to any other kind of activity we might engage in?

An old-fashioned answer, ordinarily associated with John Stuart Mill — but whose most important sources are in American First Amendment jurisprudence from the early twentieth century — is that free speech conduces to true belief. False beliefs only survive if they go unchallenged. Free speech ensures that false beliefs won't be insulated from challenge, and it thereby hastens their demise. A slightly more modern answer, as to why we care about free speech, is that free speech is integral to the legitimacy of a democracy. Democracy isn't just about having elections and formally representative legislative bodies. Elections are staged in some authoritarian states where the people have no power at all over their government. Indeed, this sort of political theatre can be used to lend a specious air of legitimacy to utterly undemocratic regimes. Genuine democratic legitimacy requires that there be a free and open exchange of opinion, and that the

authorities face criticism, mockery, whistleblowing and exposure to inconvenient truths. Free speech is therefore a necessary condition for democratically legitimate government.

Both these theories of free speech — a *veritistic* theory and a *democratic* theory — contain a grain of truth, while leaving a number of crucial questions dangling. Doesn't unrestricted speech hamper and undermine truth, at least as often as it aids it? Given the way that libertarian expressive policy can facilitate the spread of misinformation and conspiratorial falsehoods, and lead to an erosion of trust in important truth-promoting institutions like universities, why should we think that there is any deep relationship at all between free speech and true belief?

As for democratic legitimacy, aren't we now witnessing — in the way that democracy has been totally sold out in the United States, since the sweeping deregulation of electoral campaign finance, in the 2010 *Citizens United* ruling — how libertarian expressive policy can in fact jeopardise democratic legitimacy? If we care deeply about truth and democratic legitimacy, it seems like what we need is not a libertarian expressive policy, but rather a careful balancing act between libertarian ideals and regulatory constraints on expression, aimed at securing and stabilising our democratic and veritistic institutions.

If we have any reason to err in a libertarian direction, when it comes to expressive policy, it is because we have a further, deeper ethical commitment — a commitment that in fact underwrites our interest in truth-seeking and in democratic government. This deeper ethical commitment is about us actualising our capacity to be thoughtful beings. In the free speech literature, this is sometimes glossed as a kind of "autonomy-based" argument for free speech. But that is a misnomer at best. Being an accomplished, critical thinker, with a well-thought-through take on the world, on one hand, and being able to autonomously govern one's preferences and choices, on the other, are — as any intelligent and critically-minded drug addict knows — simply two distinct capacities.

A more apt moniker for the kind of theory of free speech to which I am alluding has recently been put forward by Seana Shiffrin.[1] She calls her view of free speech a *thinker-based* theory. Her thesis is that we only realise our capacities as thinking beings in an environment where we are free to share our ideas and opinions without fear of harsh penalties, either formal or informal. Being subject to such penalties is like a milder version of being solitarily confined in prison: we cannot engage in meaningful exchanges of thoughts and ideas with other people, and over time this stunts our capacity to think at all. Our thoughts become truncated, formulaic, stripped of the complexities and nuances that they can acquire if we are at liberty to talk our way around our ideas, and to talk them through with others. Unconstrained free speech has a complex mixture of costs and benefits as far as truth-seeking and democracy are concerned. But much of the significance of democracy and truth-seeking, for beings like us, owes to our status as the bearers of

richly textured mental lives, and free speech is a precondition for us having such lives.

Shiffrin has offered the most developed defence of this theory of free speech in recent philosophical scholarship, but similar views have been put forward by Jonathan Gilmore, Timothy Macklem and Leslie Kendrick.[2] And traces of this view are also discernible in Mill, specifically, in *On Liberty*'s remarks about the inseparability of freedom of speech and thought — notwithstanding Mill's usual affiliation with a truth-based argument for free speech.

One key question that defenders of this account have to answer is which communicative contexts are the ones that really matter, vis-à-vis the disinhibition and realisation of our capacities qua thinking beings. Consider: a proponent of this theory may want to say that journalists and novelists who are subject to ideological censorship are being inhibited in the realisation of their capacities *qua* thinkers. But she wouldn't want to be forced to the absurd conclusion that prior to the historical advent of the novel or the news media, nobody was able to realise their capacities *qua* thinkers. What the thinker-based theorist will need to say is that in every society there are communicative spaces and channels that can serve as fruitful communicative meeting places, where people can engage in dialogue and exchange with others. The crucial thing is that people are free from the threat of viewpoint-based censure in these spaces and channels, whatever exactly they look like in a particular society at a particular time. It is *this* which is integral to the realisation of people's incipient capacities *qua* thinkers.

Being and becoming a thinker doesn't require that everyone can say whatever they please, wherever they please, irrespective of context and circumstances. It requires that there be some adequate quantity and quality of communicative channels and meeting places, where such expressive liberty is protected, and where people can be confident that it is protected. Within these spaces people can develop and revise their thoughts in exchange and collaboration with others, and thereby properly figure out what it is that they think, about any and all matters on which they care to figure this out.

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Let's turn from theories of free speech to theories of privacy. An appropriate starting point – if we're trying to explain what privacy is, exactly, and why it matters – is to acknowledge that there mightn't in fact be any unified notion of privacy in the offing. I don't want my employer to know what I say about them on my weekend picnic. I don't want my neighbours across the road to be able to peer into my bathroom. I don't want my bank records to be searchable online. And I don't want my partner to convey all the intimate personal feelings that I share with her to her friends. We often speak as if all such preferences stem from a single, underlying

interest — namely, *the* interest in privacy – an interest which, so we suppose, underpins our moral and legal *right* to privacy.

It may simply be, however, that there are a plurality of distinct proximate interests, in how we navigate the social world, stemming from a plurality of ultimate, underlying interests. Trying to lump all these interests together into one category, and postulating a right to privacy as a kind of ethical shibboleth standing guard across all of them, might in fact breed confusion regarding these legitimate interests, more than it advances them.

Judith Jarvis Thomson is one philosopher who defends this critical perspective on the putative right to privacy.[3] To be clear, Thomson doesn't discount the legitimacy of the moral interests that we normally lump together when we talk about privacy — unlike some legal theorists, e.g. Richard Posner, who have also argued for a sceptical stance on the putative right to privacy.[4] The key idea for Thomson is just that we can do better at understanding those moral interests, and figuring out what sort of protection they warrant, if abandon the search for some kind of singular, unified notion of privacy.

When I think about the diverse array of interests that tend to be bundled together in discussions of privacy, I find myself in sympathy with Thomson on this point. I am doubtful as to whether my interest in being able to hide my personal journals from others, my interest in not having to see other people's sex practices in public, and my interest in not having my phone's location data tracked and sold by Apple, ultimately have shared normative foundations, beyond the fact that they all have some bearing on my wellbeing.[5]

Having said that, I do think there may be a distinctive subset of the moral interests that come into play in discussions of privacy, which cannot easily be boiled down to another type of right or interest — for instance, in property, or bodily integrity, or the control of information. Let me use a corny example to illustrate.

Suppose you're about to go out on a date, and your romantic partner has arrived at your house a little early, before you have changed into your going-out clothes. Suppose you ask your date if they wouldn't mind waiting in the living room while you get yourself ready. Imagine your date saying, "No it's fine, I'll just come into your bedroom and watch you try on clothes and get your hair sorted." If you're wired like many people, you will feel somewhat intruded upon and weirded out at this point. The vital point for the purpose of my example, though, is that you will likely be weirded out even if you have previously slept with this person, and thus been in a state of intimate vulnerability with them. You will likely be unhappy with this erasure of boundaries even if you expect and desire that in a few hours you will be in bed with them again. The reason you want space behind closed doors is because you want to be able to choose how you will present your-

self to your date, without them being there, so that what they will see is the striking, impressive *result* of you deciding how to present yourself, rather than deeply revelatory *process* of you deciding how to present yourself.

Some of the theories of privacy that have been put forward in the philosophical literature capture the kinds of interests that are at issue in this example. One influential theory of privacy that helped to kick-start the contemporary literature on the subject, from Charles Fried, argues that privacy is a crucial precondition for the development of meaningful personal relationships. Relationships are formed and maintained through adjusting one's levels of intimacy with others. Being friends rather than colleagues or acquaintances is in part about allowing a greater degree of intimacy with the other. And regulating one's intimacy with others is difficult, verging on impossible, if one's privacy is taken away.[6]

There are reasons to doubt the definition of privacy that lies behind Fried's explanation of privacy's moral significance. He says that privacy is in essence about control over information. That seems to be too tightly linking intimacy with informational transparency. Intimacy is indeed affected by informational transparency, but it's also affected by proximity, and by sensuous exposure: being seen, heard, felt, smelled. Still, even if his definition is too narrow, Fried's explanation of privacy's moral significance is compelling.

Another more recent theory of privacy that captures some of what I am adverting to here is what Mane Hajdin calls the *drafting space* theory of privacy.[7] Hajdin's idea is that you need time and space alone to come to a provisional resolution about how you want to be seen, what views you want to put forward as your views, what parts of your inner life you want to make publically viewable, and so on. Our having the opportunity to exercise deliberative agency over these things, beyond the scrutiny of others, is part of what makes it acceptable for us to hold each other responsible for our publically-expressed views and our publically-enacted life choices. The drafting space doesn't necessarily have to be entirely solitary. A private conversation between two people is still in an important sense a drafting space, as long as those two people trust each other to keep things private. Drafting spaces are spaces where public access is limited, and where you can retain control over which individuals, if any, gain access.

I don't want to overstate the point. It remains an open question whether trying to provide a unifying theory of privacy is the best way to conceptualise and further the diverse interests that we associate with that term. My point is just that those theorists like Fried and Hajdin, who emphasise the connections between privacy, intimacy and our choices about public self-presentation, are driving at something ethically and politically significant.

"We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be." So goes the epigraph and the stated moral of Kurt Vonnegut's haunting World War II novel, *Mother Night*. You are in a precarious state if you lack access

to drafting spaces where you can privately figure out who you're trying to be, and how you're purporting to act out your values in public, and what you're ultimately trying to say about things. Without this you end up in an almost unbearably transparent state of exposure to other people's gaze. None of us are perpetually composed selves ready to go on display. We need to figure ourselves out and refigure as we go. And to have one's clumsy attempts at this — one's missteps and unsuccessful experiments — on show for others, is to have one's soul exhibited on stage under blazing spotlights. For those of us over the age of 30, give or take, consider how often we have thought: "thank goodness social media, with its terrible, elephantine memory, didn't exist when I was a teenager."

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Which brings us back to our starting point: the allure of thinking aloud, and the risk of embarrassing yourself, on social media. We really do need spaces and channels to engage in unfettered communicative exchange with others. This is not just a means of conveying our thinking to others. This is an integral part of how beings like us *do* our thinking. We think aloud. We think things through with others. We speak our way towards our opinions, batting ideas around with constructive interlocutors — or pugnacious sparring partners, as the case may be — and thereby figure out the substantive content of our embryonic proto-ideas.

At this moment in history, social media has come to seem like one of the much-needed venues for thinking aloud with others. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that social media is terrible for our mental health, and that it is implicated in a host of seriously damaging socio-political changes — for instance, in the jeopardisation of our democratic competence due to misinformation.[8] And yet many of us are loath to remove ourselves from social media, afraid that in missing out on the conversations that are going on there we will somehow lose touch with modern life's energy and pulse.

We also need drafting spaces: spaces where we can figure out our thoughts, identities, and self-presentational choices before publicising them. At other historical moments, the spaces and channels for figuring out our thoughts by thinking aloud with others were also, on the whole, serviceable drafting spaces. You could have a conversation with you friend on the phone, or at a pub, or at church, or in an exchange of letters. And although you might have said something dumb or embarrassing, in talking your way towards your ideas about things in those cases, you wouldn't have said it to the whole world. You could go out on the weekend as a teenager with some of your friends, and dress up in extravagant goth-y or punk-y outfits and take photos of yourselves, and when that ungainly experiment ended up feeling like an uncomfortable blooper in the process of adolescent self-discovery, those photos would at any rate end up lost before too long, or else safely squirreled away in an album inside a box.

What happens on social media is that we feel like we are in a drafting space, because we are nattering away with others — as humans have always done in their drafting spaces — and sharing our photos, and so on, but in fact the drafting space is being monitored, recorded, mined for data, and uploaded to a permanent archive. Even knowing this we can't help going back to the drafting space, because we feel that we need to talk our ideas through with others. Again, this is part of how creatures like us do our thinking. But although it feels like we are thinking aloud in a relatively intimate, relatively cordoned-off space, this is no longer the case. We are thinking out loud in front of an audience of a potentially enormous size and extended duration. And most of our interesting or sensible ideas won't be remembered, or even particular noticed. Our embarrassing ideas, however: they will belong to the ages.

Just how tragic is this? I don't want to exaggerate the magnitude of the tragedy. Embarrassing oneself on social media isn't the worst thing in the world, although we do come across anecdotal instances of people being driven to depression and self-harm as a result. In any case, if the term "tragedy" is apt here it is because of the *nature* of the bind we're in, rather than its enormity. We feel that we are in the kind of circumstances in which we're damned if we do and damned if we don't. Damned if we don't, because if we absent ourselves from the communicative meeting places in which people engage in exploratory communicative exchange with others, we will be inhibiting our capacities *qua* thinkers. Damned if we do, because in using social media as a space for thinking aloud with others, one is certain to embarrass oneself sooner or later, if not quite as badly as our earlier mansplainer, then in more mundane ways: by being bombastic, juvenile, gratuitously hostile, shallow, sanctimonious, snarky, humble-braggy, or just plain old braggy.

Our situation isn't as tragic as it looks, though, because we are not genuinely damned if we don't. For members of groups that particularly struggle to access public space as easily as the rest of us, social media has created some new and improved opportunities for building relationships. But for most of us, most of the old ways of talking to other people, and figuring out our thoughts in exploratory conversation with others, in the way that the thinker-based theorists of free speech are alluding to, remain open to us the same as they ever did. And in general they offer better – healthier, safer, more intellectually fertile, less echo chamber-ish – spaces for thinking aloud with others than social media does.

The mystery in this whole thing is why it doesn't feel that way to so many people. Why does it feel like social media is a precious and indispensable forum for thinking aloud with others, when its deficiencies in that respect are manifest, and when its dangers and downsides as a would-be drafting space are becoming clearer and clearer? Individuals can navigate these challenges as they please. But we would do well to rid ourselves of misleading and unhelpful FOMO. We do not need to air our thoughts on social media, and we have good reasons for finding

other ways to scratch the psychological itches that nudge us in this direction. Thinking aloud with others is important, but social media isn't a private drafting space for doing so, however much it may feel that way.[9]

_Notes_

[1] Seana Shiffrin, _Speech Matters: On Lying, Morality, and the Law_ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[2] Timothy Macklem, _Independence of Mind_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jonathan Gilmore, "Expression as Realization: Speakers' Interests in Freedom of Speech", _Law and Philosophy_ 30/5 (2011), pp. 517-39; Leslie Kendrick, "Use Your Words: On the Speech in Freedom of Speech", _Michigan Law Review_ 116/5 (2018), pp. 667-704.

[3] Judith Jarvis Thomson, "The Right to Privacy", _Philosophy & Public Affairs_ 4/4 (1975): 295-314.

[4] Richard A. Posner, _The Economics of Justice_ (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[5] It may be that a concern for privacy is as much about trying to protect certain collective goods, and not just my individual interests, as some have argued; see e.g. Carissa Véliz, "Privacy is a Collective Concern", _New Statesman_, 22nd October 2019, newstatesman.com/science-tech/privacy/2019/10/privacy-collective-concern.

[6] Charles Fried, _An Anatomy of Values: Problems of Personal and Social Choice_ (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

[7] Mane Hajdin, "Privacy and Responsibility" in Ann E. Cudd and Marc C. Navin (Eds), _Core Concepts and Contemporary Issues in Privacy_ (New York: Springer, 2018), pp. 63-76; an account of privacy with a broadly similar thesis about the relation between privacy and self-presentation is given in Andrei Marmor, "What Is the Right to Privacy?", _Philosophy & Public Affairs_ 43/1 (2015), pp. 3-26.

[8] For summary and discussion see for instance Gigen Mammoser, "The FOMO Is Real: How Social Media Increases Depression and Loneliness", _Healthline_, 9th December 2018, healthline.com/health-news/social-media-use-increases-depression-and-loneliness; Holly B. Shakya and Nicholas A. Christakis, "Association of Facebook Use With Compromised Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study", _American Journal of Epidemiology_ 185/3 (2017), pp. 203-11; Zack Beauchamp, "Social Media is Rotting Democracy from Within", _Vox_, 22nd January 2019, vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/1/22/18177076/social-media-facebook-far-right-authoritarian-populism.

[9] Many thanks to Scott Stephens for editing on this piece.