Tech Lit Narrative

Abstract

I am a product of the internet in that it has shaped the way I communicate. After discussing my love of cartoons and Tumblr, the paper goes on to discuss my failed attempts at using the internet as a means to connect in-person through humor. After years of using the internet as a crutch in social interactions, I have realized the significant effect social media can have on a developing mind.

With an older brother who controlled the TV remote, I had no choice but to watch Cartoon Network and a select few Nickelodeon shows as a child. The surrealist, random, and dark humor of Courage the Cowardly Dog, The Misadventures of Flapjack, and SpongeBob shaped my humor into what it is today. The strange and whimsical nature of these shows is what I enjoyed about animation, due to the medium, little has to make sense and that's what made these shows so funny. These shows inspired some of my greatest works: a silly story about a penguin befriending a horse and a weekly 'newspaper' detailing fictional events of made-up characters, all written in my prized purple gel pen. Writing and drawing were my main hobbies as a child, they gave my thoughts somewhere to exist outside of my head. I could share what I had made or keep it for myself as a memory.

By the time I was a preteen, my brother and I had become very comfortable accessing the internet on my family's shared desktop. We'd mostly explore YouTube in our pursuit of the next funny video that we can reference over dinner, much to my parent's annoyance. The videos online were much different than the cartoons we watched; they were more absurd and random.

Only on YouTube was I able to watch a cat "singing" about how he loves to dance while "dancing" (in reality, it was a still image of a cat flipping horizontally over and over again), appropriately named "The Kitty Cat Dance" long after it had been uploaded. My parents may not have found that video to be very funny, but it was a hit with my friends. As someone who was always a bit shy, I found that funny videos and pictures were an easy way to bond with others my age. I was never quick enough to be witty or have the best comedic timing. In fact, speaking did not come naturally to me at all, by the time I had formed a cohesive sentence in my head, the moment to make a new friend would pass. In the time it took me to figure out what I was going to say, the person I was speaking to was met with a thousand-yard stare, and they'd realize our conversation was just as uncomfortable for them as it was for me.

Eventually, my friends would come across an even easier way to share what they had found online, social media. I avoided most social media platforms, as someone who did not have many friends, a follower count attached to my name was intimidating. In my melodramatic 13-year-old mind, I didn't have anything interesting to say or share anyways, and my presence was not missed. However, I found solace in one social media website I had found on my own—Tumblr. Social interaction was less intimidating online. I didn't have to think too hard about what to say, I'd simply reblog posts I related to or found funny. It was also easy to be funny on Tumblr, most users shared the same random sense of humor and I never had to question if my joke suited the audience. Probably the best thing about Tumblr was having anonymity; I could have absolute control over how I was perceived. I'd carefully curate my blog to develop an online persona that reflected the person I wanted to be, someone interesting and funny who always knew what to say.

Everything changed when I got my first smartphone my freshman year of high school. I still used Tumblr every day, but after going over my data limit on my family's shared data plan, I'd start using barebones Reddit reader apps when I was not home. However, Reddit came with a learning curve; the community on Reddit was much different than Tumblr. Although there are many different communities on Reddit, the user base was consistent in that they were more serious, with most comments being complete sentences with perfect grammar and punctuation, which made posting and commenting more intimidating. It was also a lot harder to come across as funny; misspelling a word under someone's Tumblr post and random humor wouldn't cut it anymore, I needed to really think about what I wanted to say. So, I didn't say anything, even with the anonymity I had.

However, I enjoyed lurking in the various subreddits, the users were different on each one, so I found myself exposed to a variety of people and content. This translated to my real-life interactions, where I'd learn to be a bit of a social chameleon, connecting with others in the one way I knew how, humor. This was challenging, the internet had become more fragmented, me and my classmates were no longer seeing the same things online. Now I had to put more thought in what I shared with others outside of the internet. Anytime seating arrangements in school had changed, I'd scope out my new conversational hostage and observe their demeanor. Were they the sort of person to use emojis ironically? Did they see the same acronyms I did online? Would they reference the internet? Using this information, I would sort through the dialogue options in my head, like a sim. Although this process made speaking and texting others more of a burden, it was never in vain. I got along with mostly everyone, I could be silly and random with one person and indulge in self-deprecating humor with another. Despite this, I still didn't have a table at prom and no one to sit with at graduation.

As an adult, I realized my method of making friends made in-person social interaction more difficult. Online I could take my time to write, controlling what others thought of me, but I did not have the same luxury in person. Luckily, I have a brother seven years younger to remind me that I am old and the internet that I once knew the ins and outs of has changed dramatically. Every day I open my Instagram DMs or texts to find that he has sent me a slew of memes that can only be described as cryptic. This morning, I opened my texts to find that he had sent me a YouTube video titled "if minecraft door had roblox" which somehow, makes less sense after having watched the video. To him, none of it has to make sense, in fact the more chaotic and distracting the content is, the better. Through my younger brother I'd realize that I had done myself a great disservice.