# Everything Happens So Much

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"Google in Boston is interested in hosting you for an event," my publicist emailed me one day last September. No pay– not even travel expenses to come up from Philly. But they wanted to record my presentation for their Talks at Google series, they said, and they'd buy some books to hand out.

Normally, I'd decline this sort of thing: a tech giant that's vying to become the first company worth a trillion dollars wants my time and expertise for free? *lol nope*, I'd type to a friend, throwing in the eye-roll emoji for good measure. But the book, *Technically Wrong*, my first mainstream title and something I was deeply nervous about, was launching that month. And given its topic–a look at how a toxic culture within the tech industry leads to products with bias, exclusion, and all sorts of unethical behavior baked right into them–it seemed like something I shouldn't pass up. "I spoke about this at Google" adds a layer of credibility, and the video a bit of visibility.

So here I am, trudging across Cambridge on a windy October morning, presentation clicker in my hand, gnawing anxiety in my stomach. It's only been two months since the press picked up the Google Memo–former engineer James Damore's notorious ten-page screed arguing that women are simply biologically less capable of programming than men and demanding that Google end its diversity efforts and stop training staff on skills like empathy. I assume they invited me as part of some sort of PR crisis-recovery plan. But I also know Damore has plenty of fans inside Google, and I'm not sure what kind of reception I'll receive on the ground once I get there.

Meandering through the cafeteria–sorry, *campus café*–before my talk doesn't help things. All around me are groups of guys in polo shirts and khakis. Groups of guys in T-shirts and hoodies. Groups of guys in flannel shirts and Warby Parker frames. I can't say I'm surprised, exactly–the Boston office is mostly engineers and Google's technical workforce is still, after years of touting its diverse hiring efforts, 80 percent male. But I'm on edge, hyper-aware of the distance between me and them.

I slide into a seat at a table, a bowl of Google-subsidized organic kale and chicken in hand, and think about the people around me. Do they realize they

move in packs? Have they ever noticed how many men surround them, day after day–and, correspondingly, how few women? Will any of them even show up for my talk?

I get onstage anyway, and the talk goes fine: I talk about photo recognition software that can't recognize black people, app notifications that leave out queer people, and a tech industry so hell-bent on "delight" it hasn't bothered to ask whether what it's doing is ethical. The attendees ask smart questions. A group lingers afterward to chat. I step back out into the city relieved.

A month later, Google lets me know that the video has just gone live. I click the YouTube link.

This is exactly the kind of hysterical, sanctimonious
female that got Prohibition into law.

This woman is mentally ill… She needs medical care,
not a microphone at Google.

That "lady" needs to not wear those pants.
It's offensive to my eyesight.

I close the tab, smart enough to know that nothing's gained by reading strangers debate whether you're *thicc* or just plain fat. And then I cry anyway.

It isn't the vitriol that breaks me. I knew that would happen when I started writing my book. In fact, I thought it might well be worse–I'd prepared my accounts, warned my husband, asked my publisher how they'd help if I were targeted (they didn't seem to understand the question). It's the speed of it: before I could even share the link with my friends, there were already dozens of comments like this. It had been posted on some forum or other, and a small army in the ground war against women had been sent to put me in my place. Standard practice, to be honest.

I should know. I wrote thousands of words outlining the ways tech products were designed to allow, or sometimes even encourage, abuse. We can see it

at Twitter, where–more than half a decade after women started reporting systematic harassment on the platform, four years after Gamergate made Zoe Quinn's life a living hell, and two years since Milo Yiannopoulos sent a legion of trolls to attack Leslie Jones for daring to be a black woman in a *Ghostbusters* movie–executives still have no idea how to curb abuse on their platform, a place where Pepe the Frog avatars and Nazi apologists run amok. We can see it on Reddit, where subreddits teeming with virulent racism are expected to be handled by unpaid moderators–"Make the users do the hard part," as former general manager Erik Martin put it. And we can see it, as I did, on YouTube, where misogynists (and the bots working for them) flock en masse to content about social justice issues, aiming to immediately downvote the videos themselves while upvoting the vilest comments on those videos. The game is simple: if you can quickly make the content appear unpopular, YouTube will show it to fewer people. And those who *are* shown the video won't just see the talk; they'll also see those top-rated comments.

I'm not just aware of this system. I've painstakingly mapped it out, looking at the way young, financially comfortable white guys come up with ideas that work great for them–without ever noticing just how badly they'll fail for people who are marginalized or vulnerable to abuse. And then, once they *do* notice, they flail about for months or even years without really getting anything done.

The insults themselves aren't even surprising. They read like a page from a sexism primer: I'm ugly, I'm irrational, I'm a humorless nag. It's all so obvious. I've had thirty-five years to learn the rules, after all. I know that to be taken seriously, I should erase my feelings, thicken my skin, avoid being *dramatic*–or expect to have my intelligence and mental health questioned. I know that if I want to avoid ridicule, I should hate my body, too–I should cover my arms, rein in my thighs, wear more black, be more invisible. I had betrayed all those teachings. I'd been confident. I'd talked about feelings. I'd gone onstage in *purple pants*, for chrissakes. And the trolls knew exactly how to punish me for my transgressions. They'd learned the same rules I had.

None of it should feel personal, but of course it does. It always does. But it's also, somehow, validating. Like waking up to a raging head cold after

three days of questioning whether or not that tickle in your throat was real. I wasn't imagining things. The sickness had been festering this whole time.

I didn't trust tech companies much before I started writing this book, and I trust them even less now. The big ones care about pleasing shareholders. The small ones care about pleasing venture capitalists. None of them care about you.

But what I didn't anticipate is how technology would also erode my trust in myself.

Ages ago, in those sweet years before fake news and Russian election hacking, before Gamergate, before random men showed up in my mentions every day to explain my own work to me, Twitter was my lifeline. It was a way to find and connect with peers in an industry–content strategy and user experience design–that was only just emergent, and that I was only just beginning to claim as my own.

It was also a way to bring together my personal and my professional sides, teasing out a space for myself that felt smart and authentic. I could be funny. I could be earnest. I could share an article I'd written about metadata on Tuesday morning, and then send a series of half-drunk tweets about a TV show that night. I felt seen. I felt understood.

Ten years later, I hardly recognize that person. One day, I type drafts and delete them, watching the stream go by without me. The next, I share praise for my book, or I link to the new episode of my podcast, or I retweet the latest article I've written–and I feel ashamed of my self-promotion. I vacillate between a need to share my voice–to *use my platform,* as they say–and a growing desire to hide.

I don't just feel seen anymore. I feel surveilled. Judged. Anxious about what it all means. I calculate: am I making myself a target? Is this the tweet, is this the opinion, that will finally bring on a wave of red-pill trolls and angry white supremacists so big it bowls me over for good? Is feeling surveilled the price I have to pay for being ambitious, for wanting to create and critique and participate in the world? What does it say about me that I'm willing to pay it?

And then, if we're being honest here, I also think something much darker: why am I not getting more abuse? Is my work too ignorable? Are my opinions too safe? Shouldn't I be more controversial by now?

I berate myself. What sort of monster feels *jealous* of people who are being harassed?

This one, it turns out.

Back in 2011, I became infatuated with @horse_ebooks. Purportedly a bot run by a Russian spammer, the account regularly tweeted absurd text snippets: "Unfortunately, as you probably already know, people." "Get ready to fly helicopters." And my personal favorite: "Everything happens so much." The tweets were mesmerizing, inexplicably hilarious, and wildly popular. They were Weird Twitter at its finest.

They also weren't generated by a bot–or at least not for long. Apparently the Russian spammer sold the account to a Buzzfeed employee sometime the same year I'd discovered it, and he'd been the one writing the tweets ever since. Yet, years later, that line still rattles around in my brain. Everything happens so much. I've even found myself unconsciously whispering it out loud as I scroll through my feed, overwhelmed by breaking news and conversations and jokes and trolls and cats and everything else.

*Everything happens so much.* That's the beauty, but it's also the problem. It's not that technology broke my trust–at least not at first. But it broke my context: I don't know where I am. I don't know whether I'm at work or at play, whether I'm watching the news or chatting with a friend. This used to feel freeing: I didn't have to choose. I could simply *exist*, floating in a mix-and-match universe of my own design. But left unchecked for so long–by shortsighted tech companies, and by my own petty desires–that lack of context bred something sinister: a place where everyone's motives are suspect. I don't know who's watching me, or when they're coming for me. But I do know they're there: the James Damore fanboys, the YouTube troll armies, the Twitter Nazis, the casual misogynists itching to play devil's advocate.

For now, at least, so am I. I'm just still not quite sure why. ●