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Xu, E. and Lee, T. (2017) Illness bloggers and sickness scams: Communication ethics and the 'Belle' Gibson saga. In: Duncan, S. and Newton, J., (eds.) Ethical Space (Vol. 14 Issue 2/3). Abramis Academic Publishing, pp. 72-79.

<http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/41278/>

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Illness bloggers and sickness scams: Communication ethics and the ‘Belle’ Gibson saga

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In April 2017, ‘Belle’ Gibson was found guilty of contravening the Australian Consumer Law because she sold her recipe book and mobile app using deceptive business practices. Using the ‘Belle’ Gibson saga as a case study, this paper examines questions of communication ethics and the effect that technology has on our ethical behaviours and practice. It contends that technology has altered our perceptions of authenticity and credibility as well as our social relations and sense of ‘intimacy’ with online strangers.

Keywords: illness narratives, truth telling, communication ethics, social software, Australia

Introduction

In 2015, Annabelle ‘Belle’ Gibson’s ‘miraculous’ recovery from multiple cancers was outed as a lie. On all fronts, the illness blogger’s story appeared authentic and credible. She had published a recipe book with Penguin Australia, was awarded the ‘Fun Fearless Female Award’ for being an inspirational role model, and Apple Inc. marketed her mobile app as one of the pre-installed applications in its then-upcoming Apple Watch product. Central to the controversy was how Gibson deliberately posted texts and images about her health to legitimise her fictional illness narrative, creating ‘experience expertise’ (Leimumäki 2012: 259-260). The false information Gibson shared online validated the authenticity of her illness narrative and

increased her credibility as an illness or sickness blogger and, indeed, as a potent communicator on health remedies.

Communication is no longer an activity premised on 'shared presence'. It creates shared experiences in the constructed online environment. As a form of computer-mediated communication, social media enables internet users to form 'intimate' relationships by facilitating the online transmission and dissemination of information (Whitehead 2015: 121-122). Advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) simplify the diffusion of information through the 'technologizing of communication' (cited in Woodward 2009: 9). Even though computer-mediated communication creates a sense of 'intimate universality' between strangers (ibid: 121), the rapport that is built is contingent on a positive interaction between the perceived authenticity and credibility of the communicators and the information they share. In Gibson's case, her active social media presence and positive news coverage by mainstream news media purveyed the impression that her illness narrative was authentic and credible.

If social institutions are underpinned by communication through the exercise of meaning-making, then the examination of communication ethics must include not only institutional discourses but also human actors involved in the technological 'augmentation of human experience' (ibid: 4). The 'Belle' Gibson saga is representative of the misaligned expectations towards truth-telling and communication ethics in the digital age of information. But it is not unique. For example, *ABC News* reported in 2013 that several American personalities, including recording artistes Natalie Grant and Brad Paisley, were taken in by Hope Jackson's story that her 'daughter' was dying from neuroblastoma, a type of paediatric cancer. Jackson, who got Paisley to sing 'Amazing Grace' to her 'daughter' over the phone under false

pretences, was later convicted of the felony charge of theft of services (Litoff 2013). A more recent case involved British violinist Bethan Doci, who was jailed in the UK for 32 months after pleading guilty to 11 counts of fraud. She appealed for money to cover her cancer treatments by posting an advertisement on the Craigslist website and collected more than 300,000 pound sterling between 2010 to 2013 (Morris 2016). These tales of fakery are symptomatic of the increase in health deceptions, propelled by the ease of online communications forging ‘relational proximity’ between communicators and their audience (cited in Woodward 2009: 11). Rather than simply critique the lack of ethics in the Belle Gibson saga, we look at how the ethical perspectives of human social actors influence their ethical conduct, particularly in the realm of communication practice.

Social software and online illness narratives

The internet has created novel forms of computer-mediated communication that are the product of social relations and social processes. One example is ‘social software’ which is regarded as a new form of socialisation in the online space. The term refers both to ICTs that facilitate computer-mediated communication, and the content produced and/or enhanced by an online community (Fuchs et al. 2010: 43-45, 47). According to the *Digital in 2017: Global Overview* report, there are more than 3.7 billion active internet users and almost 2.8 billion active social media accounts globally (Kemp 2017). The choice of social software, along with its technological constraints and communicative functions, sends ‘metamessages’ about the intentions of the speaker and influences how the recipient interprets the message (Tannen 2013: 101). Within this sociality, mediated by ICTs, communication becomes technologised (Woodward 2009: 9). When used as an avenue to facilitate emotional or informational social support, social network sites become operationalised as online support groups. Receiving online social support is not a passive activity; posting in social network sites constitutes either

an act of gaining or expressing social support, both of which illness bloggers and their readers can simultaneously perform. For instance, adding hashtags such as #stupidcancer to Twitter posts can function as an open and public request for and/or acknowledgement of social support (Myrick et al. 2016: 598).

As a channel of communication, social software can become an unwitting instigator of health deception when fake illness bloggers take advantage of the personal and temporal distance of computer-mediated communication. The terms ‘Munchausen by internet’ (Feldman 2000: 669) and ‘Munchausen’s Syndrome by Google’ (Griffiths et al. 2009: 159) highlight the ease with which the resources of the internet can be manipulated to corroborate fictitious health claims (Cunningham and Feldman 2011: 185). Munchausen’s Syndrome refers to a type of factitious disorder where ‘patients’ try to gain attention or sympathy by feigning sickness. The internet’s provision of easily accessible information makes it convenient for fake illness bloggers to construct untrue personal stories and medical histories. Other than textual information, the internet’s database of images can also be used to legitimise fictional illness narratives. In the UK, doctors documented the case of an unnamed 40-year-old woman who admitted that the printed copy of her radiograph, which she had provided to multiple doctors, was identical to an image found on Google Images (Griffiths et al. 2009: 159-160).

To an extent, the public consumption of personal and intimate information has been normalised by ICTs, exemplifying the ‘social setting’ of a contemporary screen and internet culture (McCosker 2008). With the now-popular emphasis on, and increasing public support of, the value of holistic medicine, the individualised and subjective views of patients take on a measure of medical and scientific legitimacy (Bury 2001: 267). The seeking of technology-mediated social support is an example of how communication has evolved in tandem with advancements

in ICTs. The pedestrian practice of presenting and recounting one's experience of illness or health issues through online illness narratives indicates the increasing centrality of technology in augmenting our human experience (Woodward 2009: 4). Besides offering connectivity, technology also facilitates the determining of 'social similarity' between individuals and their prospective virtual communities (Hampton and Wellman 2003: 285). In fact, our somewhat seamless switch in the use of communication mediums – from mailing lists and Internet Relay Chats (IRCs) to contemporary social and networking platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp – reflects our 'technological membership' in different and evolving types of virtual communities (Feldman 2000: 669).

The meteoric rise and fall of 'Belle' Gibson

In 2009, Australian illness blogger Annabelle 'Belle' Gibson shared with her online readers that she was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer and had four months to live (Do 2015). She told her 200,000 Instagram followers that she had stopped conventional cancer treatment and was treating her malignant brain tumour through a mix of nutrition and alternative therapies (Cavanagh 2015). A few years later, she claimed that the cancer had spread to her liver, spleen, blood, and uterus (Lal 2015). Capitalising on the story of her 'survival' from multiple cancers, she signed a publishing deal with Penguin Australia to release *The Whole Pantry (TWP)* recipe book and later launched a recipe application for mobile phones (Donnelly and Toscano 2015c). The mobile application was voted as Apple's Best Food and Drink App in 2013. It was also among a selection of mobile applications to be pre-installed in the new Apple Watch (Donnelly and Toscano 2015a). She was quoted having said that Apple told her: 'Not only did you create an [sic] great app, you also created a market for healthy living apps' (Avdulova 2014). When *Yahoo7 News* interviewed her on television, she was hailed as a 'new breed of entrepreneurs',

and her mobile application was described as the ‘world’s first health, wellness and lifestyle app’ (Yahoo7 2014).

In a news article published on 8 March 2015, the *Sydney Morning Herald* alleged that Gibson had misled the public about her charitable endeavours. The illness blogger-turned-entrepreneur had stated publicly that she donated A\$300,000 of the proceeds from the sales of her TWP recipe book and mobile application to various charities (Donnelly and Toscano 2015d). As public doubt grew about the validity of her health claims, she deleted thousands of posts that referred to her cancer diagnoses from her social media accounts. Bowing to public pressure, Penguin Australia admitted that it did not fact-check Gibson’s story before publishing the recipe book, which detailed her recovery from multiple cancers in its preface chapter. As the controversy grew, Penguin pulled the book from circulation in Australia, and publisher Simon & Schuster also terminated the book’s impending launch in the US. Before ending their partnership with Gibson, both publishers had reportedly sought clarifications from her but failed to receive requisite assurance about the veracity of her biography and charitable activities (Donnelly and Toscano 2015c; 2015e).

After the public unravelling of her deceit, Gibson permanently deleted her social media accounts (Piotrowski 2015). She did, however, grant exclusive interviews to the *Australian Women’s Weekly* magazine (TAWW) and current affairs programme *60 Minutes* (see Nine Entertainment 2015; TAWW 2015). In the televised interview, which was reportedly watched by more than one million viewers in Australia (Ward 2015), she maintained that she had been deceived by her immunologist and neurologist. Therefore, she was not ‘intentionally untruthful’ to the public (cited in Willis and Ma 2015). When it was later reported that she had received a then-undisclosed five-figure sum for her spot on *60 Minutes*, more than 11,000

people signed an online petition demanding that she donate the money to cancer research (Spinks 2015b). By donating the money, the petitioners wrote that Gibson would be ‘putting it on public record how sorry you are to those you hurt’ (Spinks 2015a).

The fragility of authenticity and credibility

The increase in fake illness bloggers is inadvertently led by the changing measures of authenticity and credibility in the online space. With internet-facilitated mobility, the tendency for online users to perceive strangers as ‘neighbours’ is amplified (Introna 2007: 327). At the same time, authenticity is a social construction without fixed constitutive elements (Omatta 2011: 790). As an expression of the network society, the internet is a virtual provider of ‘intimate universality’ (Whitehead 2015: 121). The users’ response to online narratives is shaped by the creation of shared experiences (Ressler et al. 2012). The rhetoric of authenticity is believed to have a paramount influence on the establishment of online communities because these virtual spaces are operated ‘with a presumption of honesty and authenticity’ (Whitehead 2015: 122, 138). It is posited that the disposition of users to the internet impacts their ability to judge the authenticity of the online content. The degree to which individuals imbue technology into their lives influences their susceptibility in falling prey to ‘information naïveté’ (Omatta 2011: 787-788). In other words, if individuals conceive the internet as an integral part of their lives, it is assumed that their familiarity with various digital environments will equip them with the know-how and discernment to evaluate the authenticity of the online content. This link between familiarity and discernibility appears at worst fallacious, and at best tenuous.

While online authenticity revolves around the communication of socially-mediated *realness* and reality (Omatta 2011: 791; Steffen 1997: 105), online credibility is centred around the notion of reliability. What this means is that the perception of credibility has shifted from the

concept of authority to reliability. In other words, if users had previously assessed an online source as a reliable source of information, they would continue to consider it as a credible source in the future. However, an individual's credibility assessment is also influenced by subjective judgements about the reliability of online sources. For instance, the aesthetics of web pages and the identifiability of bloggers can shape perceptions of credibility (Greenberg et al. 2013: 5). Moreover, the definition of 'news' and 'news sources' has evolved, and the social network connections of users now serve as their 'news filter' in determining what *is* news (Marchi 2012: 248, 252). The lack of objective and definitive indicators points to the fragility of authenticity and credibility in the online space. This fragility also reveals the potency of the incomplete nature of illness narratives because their plots are 'an underlying structure and a dynamic activity unfolding in the process of making sense of the story' (Steffen 1997: 106). Taken together, online illness narratives can be seen as constructed and socially-defined forms of expressions resulting from multiple acts of meaning-making (Whitehead 2015: 121; Woodward 2009: 3).

Both Gibson's social media followers and the journalists who covered her inspirational story thought she was credible, no doubt influenced by her online displays of authenticity. When *Cosmopolitan* magazine was questioned for not thoroughly investigating Gibson's cancer claims before awarding her the 'Fun Fearless Female Award', the magazine's editor was quoted as saying:

She was very believable and I think we all wanted to believe her... I mean who's going to question when someone is talking about that they've got cancer and they're going through this horrendous life experience? ... She was reader nominated and reader voted

– that’s how the Fun Fearless Female awards are done and at the end of the day the readers voted her the winner in that category of social media (Sharp 2015).

Gibson’s former employee was reported as saying that she would describe a trip to the dentist as an all-day doctor’s appointment, making it sound as if it was related to her cancer (Lal 2015). Her convincing presentation of experience expertise was the critical factor that led to the deception of mainstream media outlets and the everyday internet user (see Avdulova 2014; Jones 2014; Sharp 2015).

One could argue that the act of meaning-making commences as soon as a user engages with a piece of communication (Woodward 2009: 4), and as such it is naïve to assume that a neutral position can exist in an illness narrative. Claims that Gibson’s sickness scam would not have succeeded if people had been less trusting and more discerning ignore the innate power relations that exist between illness bloggers and their readers (for example Do 2015; Guilliat 2015; Razer 2016; Sams 2015). In fact, illness narratives contain pre-determined roles for illness bloggers and their readers (Ressler et al. 2012). The very act of meaning-making regenerates reality (life as lived) and experiences (life as experienced) into forms of online expressions (Woodward 2009: 3). ‘[S]haring simply implies the obligation of reciprocity and forces the outsider into a position as insider’ (Steffen 1997: 103). Contrary to the assertion, a ‘peer review process in blogging’ does not always increase the credibility of online content (Banning and Sweetser 2007: 456).

Online illness narratives are a form of technology-mediated social support through which illness bloggers gain access to ‘weak ties’ – namely, individuals who experience similar health conditions and the social support network of friends, families, and empathisers. Illness bloggers

are the ‘patients,’ and the weak ties are their social support. Through group action, the identification and assumption of a role within a social system can normalise over time (Hsu and Lin 2008: 66-67). Participating in illness narratives, therefore, inculcates the role and norms of behaviours – indeed, of ethical practices – that members should adopt in the social system, thereby reducing the risks of role conflicts.

The investigation of responsibility

In 2015, Consumer Affairs Victoria (CAV), the consumer affairs regulator in Victoria, Australia, began investigations into Gibson’s health claims and fundraising activities. It concluded that Penguin contravened the Australia Consumer Law (ACL) by not substantiating the claims Gibson made about her health and charitable donations (CAV 2015: 2-3). The publisher had previously stated that due diligence was ‘unnecessary’ because *TWP* was ‘a collection of recipes’ (cited in Smith 2015). Later, a video of Gibson’s media training session, which was submitted as evidence to the Federal Court of Australia, revealed that Penguin already had concerns about her health claims (see Davey 2016). To address its breach of the ACL, Penguin agreed to a three-year enforceable undertaking. It contributed A\$30,000 to the Victorian Consumer Law Fund and implemented an internal compliance education and training programme. The company would from thenceforth substantiate claims about medical histories or conditions and print a prominent warning notice when statements about alternative and unconventional treatments are made in future publications (CAV 2015: 6-7). The enforceable undertaking initiated by Penguin was a positive development, but it has no legal obligation to follow through with the terms of the undertaking once the agreement expires in 2018.

The blowback from the controversy necessitated the involvement of the CAV, but the limited influence of the enforceable undertaking on the publishing industry indicates that it was aimed

more at placating the public. If the intention was to generate regulatory reform, the Australian Publishers Association (APA) or the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) would have been involved. The existence of enforceable legal regulations and/or industry codes could have reduced the public's investment of trust in Gibson. This lack of regulations meant that news coverage about alternative treatments could be interpreted by the audience as 'medical facts' ratified by journalistic due diligence. To illustrate, the Australian Press Council (APC) has specific standards of practice for journalists to adhere to when they report on suicides. Published news articles have to be accompanied by information about crisis support services and assistance (see APC 2011a). Free-to-air television licensees also have to abide by the industry code when broadcasting materials which may cause distress in news or current affairs programmes (see FreeTV Australia 2015: 7-9). However, no similar legal or industry requirement exists for mainstream media outlets in Australia. They do not have to include a notice or disclaimer in their news coverage of alternative health or medical therapies.

Media outlets should have been more critical in their narration of Gibson's success in self-treating her cancers. The APC's guideline on health and medical matters recommends that statements on efficacy 'should always be sourced, even if made by the most eminent authority; on any lesser authority, they should be cross-checked with some other sources' (APC 2001). However, advisory guidelines are not binding, and publisher members are not obliged to comply with them (APC 2011b). The fundamental ethical responsibility of journalists is to offer truth and objectivity in their reporting (Ward 2009: 71), but mainstream news reports about Gibson's illness and claims about curing her cancer through alternative therapies were neither fact-checked nor cross-checked (for example Barker 2014a; Dasey 2014; Miller 2014). Unlike Penguin, the journalists and news publishers did not face any repercussions. Other than updating the old news articles with a link to another report about Gibson's sickness scam (for

example, Barker 2014b; Jones 2014), journalists who wrote glowingly of her positivity and business acumen did not have to take responsibility for their lack of due diligence.

In April 2017, the Federal Court found Gibson and her company guilty of engaging in unconscionable conduct and misleading or deceptive conduct under the ACL. Gibson was not present in court for the previous four hearings. Both respondents were prohibited from making further claims relating to Gibson's diagnosis of brain cancer, that she had four months to live, and that she eschewed conventional cancer treatments in favour of alternative therapies. Gibson was also ordered by the Federal Court to contribute A\$30,000 towards the CAV's costs. The CAV also noted its intention to seek additional pecuniary penalties against Gibson and pressed the court to order her to print 'a non-punitive/adverse publicity notice' in both the *Herald Sun* and the *Australian* newspapers (Federal Court of Australia Penal Notice, 7 April 2017). At the time of completing this paper for publication (June 2017), final judgements have not been pronounced, and the case remains unresolved.

Technology can constrain ethical behaviours

To make sense of the reactions from the media and public after the controversy broke, we should acknowledge that ethical judgements are determined by differing ideas about the roles and purposes of communication technologies (Introna 2007: 315). In other words, examining our ethical perspectives offers insight into our expectations of ethical behaviours and practices. To the public, Gibson had exploited the internet and the mainstream media outlets for her nefarious ends. She had deceived countless online users and continued to profit from her deceptive practices when she was paid A\$75,000 for her *60 Minutes* interview (*The Dominion Post* 2016). Gauging from comments made on public websites, it appears that public expectations were for her to apologise, to express contrition, and to seek to make amends (see, for example, posts about Gibson on www.gomiblog.com). She was thus seen as fully culpable

and therefore answerable for the controversy. Accordingly, when she neither apologised nor showed remorse for her actions, expressions of public anger emerged (see Donnelly and Toscano 2015b; Spinks 2015a; Thackray 2015). It was reported that Australian customers who bought the recipe book sought refunds for their purchases (Donnelly and Toscano 2015f). Penguin bore a degree of the public's anger for being complicit in the deception because it did not verify Gibson's claims. Although Penguin's acceptance of the enforceable undertaking was ethically sound, the decision was arguably motivated by self-interest and a desire to distance itself from the saga. Excerpts of emails submitted to the Federal Court related how Penguin's public relations firm described the public fallout as 'a situation of corporate risk' and advised its client to 'get on the front foot' to end its partnership with Gibson (cited in Donnelly and Toscano 2016).

The obvious lack of due diligence on the part of Penguin and mainstream news media throws light on the fact that possessing ethical knowledge does not automatically translate into ethical action. Gibson had more than 200,000 social media followers but they, too, were blindsided by what has been described as the 'relational proximity' of online communication (in Woodward 2009: 11). In 2013, Gibson responded to her detractors by writing a (now deleted) Facebook post: 'it's working for me and i am grateful to be here sharing this journey with over 70,000 people worldwide. Thank you for being here – xx Belle' [sic] (Belle

Gibson Uncovered 2015). In this instance, she re-contextualised her high number of online followers into public validation of her illness narrative. The wellness empire that Gibson created can be likened as a form of 'gestural economy' where 'symbolic solidarity is seeded and cultivated without bearing any necessary relationship with evidence-based truth or a genuine commitment to act' (Rojek 2017: 4). While it appears as if social network sites are committed to the social, they are, in fact, forms of synthetic media that produce pseudo-

sociality (Thurlow 2013: 244). Clicking the ‘like’ button on Facebook posts exemplifies this notion of demonstrating interest without committing resolve to take further actions (West and Trester 2013: 145).

In using the ‘Belle’ Gibson saga as a case study, the aim of this paper is not to set out a case for new or better policies and regulations about online behaviours, but to illustrate how the rampant use of technology has managed to blur the distinction between our ‘online’ and ‘offline’ personas. Firstly, communication platforms are structurally embedded with assumptions of how and what they should be used for. They are the constructed artefacts and actors of social relations and processes (Introna 2007: 319). It is understood that ICTs catalyse the creation of virtual spaces and that they bring about new types of content and present new contexts of interaction. However, another way of looking at the entrenchment of the digital space in our everyday lives is to define it in terms of how technology impacts usage patterns, takes advantage of affordances in digital environments, and how users adapt to the techno-structural constraints of the communication platforms (Herring 2013: 5-6). Seen in this way, the term ‘Web 2.0’ does not only describe the technological characteristics of ICTs but reflects the potentialities that arise from the users’ interaction with technology. Secondly, the technical infrastructure of a platform limits the possible actions of communicators and the (non-)ethical outcomes of communication (Christians 2011: 17). Technology is, thus, presented to users with an inherent set of potential ethical issues because it constrains their capacity to exercise individual ethical judgements and behaviours (Introna 2007: 321). As a result, the way(s) we regard and imbue technology into our lives exerts an influence on our ethical positioning and expectation of ethical behaviours.

Conclusion

The 'Belle' Gibson saga offers a timely study into how technology has altered not only our social relations but also our expectations towards communication and communication ethics. As the saga illustrates, ethical conflicts can arise when online expressions are accorded the same ethical expectations as reality (life as lived) and experiences (life as experienced). Gibson's lies about her diagnosis of multiple cancers are both unethical and inexcusable. However, her sickness scam not only raises questions of communication ethics per se, but compels us to rethink our ethical relations with technology – the way we relate to both the communication medium and the information that is being mediated. In our increasingly mediatised society, where acts and processes of communications are augmented by technology, there are tangible risks when subjective assessments of online authenticity and credibility are regarded and presented as objective truths. To practise communication ethics in the online space, paradoxically, it is necessary to establish a 'proper distance' so that we can maintain our proximity and ethical responsibilities simultaneously (Silverstone 2003: 475).

The imbuelement of technology into our lives can (de)sensitise us to how the technical infrastructural of ICTs delimits online behaviours and communication outcomes. The ability for online users to respond is subject to the techno-structural capacity of the communication platform. When we recognise how this alters our communication patterns and expectations, we also glimpse the constraints it places on our ethical judgements and behaviours. If our online behaviours are circumscribed (to an extent) by technology, then we cannot realistically expect an 'online' persona – however *real* that projection and (re)presentation is – to be a true extension of an individual's 'offline' persona.

At the same time, as the successful litigation against Gibson shows, online behaviours can be subject to the purview of the law. As our social relations continue to be shaped by advances in

technology, the challenge of practising communication ethics in the digital space will prompt further discussions about how we can or should maintain a congruent practice of ethical behaviours across different communication platforms.

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