

Cover Story  
by Meghan Walsh



# Invasion of the Extremely Online

The digital natives are coming — with a new form of totally transparent communication. Can companies use it?

AT

the dawn of 2019, Americans got more than just a recalibrated class of representatives. They got an unofficial invitation to Congress Camp. They got a tour of the hidden tunnels that weave beneath Capitol Hill, flipped through the freshman yearbook, and learned the contents of the new member swag bag. They got to visit the darkened Supreme Court chambers where the Dred Scott case was heard, and sit in on the highly anticipated congressional office lottery. They even got to peer into the coin-operated washing machines elected officials use to do laundry.

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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez may be a polarizing figure, but second to her politics is her social-media accounting of politics. The 29-year-old not only rode a series of viral campaign videos from the Bronx to the House of Representatives, but after arriving in Washington, DC, her Instagram became a sneak peek into the congressional onboarding process. Set aside the shade of Ocasio-Cortez's message and for those who deal in quarterly earnings rather than vote tallies, her online presence offers a foreshadowing of the perils and possibilities that lie ahead with an "Extremely Online" workforce.

Capitalized, Extremely Online is used as a personal descriptor as much as a verb. One is Extremely Online in the way one is a Democrat or a Cubs fan. The Extremely Online have their own vernacular, social norms, and hierarchies. They see in pixels and intuitively understand that as the dimensions become inextricably woven there's no distinguishing online and offline. The term Extremely Online itself is superannuated.

#### The Problem


Companies continue to struggle with digital transformation, including the best uses of social media, creating miscommunication among both customers and employees.

#### Why It Matters

A business can live or die on its ability to reach clients better and engage clearer employee communication.

#### The Question

Should companies and workers try a new, far more transparent form of social media—and manage the risk of such openness?



**For the uninitiated,** it's easy to dismiss the appellation as digital dependence and narcissism run riot, but it might actually bring our virtual and three-dimensional selves into closer alignment. "It's a way of being online that allows people to humanize themselves," says Geoffrey Colon, head of Brand Studio at Microsoft Advertising and host of the Disruptive FM podcast, which explores the intersections of tech, business, psychology, and pop culture. It isn't just a matter of documenting the daily for online audiences, it's inviting them into the everyday. Someone who is Extremely Online might crowdsource their fashion style, but rather than only posting perfectly posed selfies will live stream the no-makeup precursor rambling ad-lib about insecurities. It's a look at how the sausage gets made, filtered only through the lens of the content curator.

But what does this mean for Jimmy Dean? How will companies respond to the first truly digital generation of workers and consumers? Visit the home page of the New York advertising agency Sagmeister & Walsh and you'll see a 24-hour live feed of the office. The window stenciling and front desk are designed to mimic the navigation bar. And in the spirit of radical transparency that Extremely Online strives for, Sagmeister & Walsh staff, from the partners to interns, pose nude in their firm's ads.

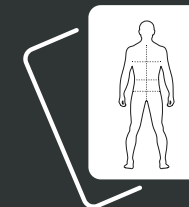
How naked will companies become? And at what cost? "No doubt," says Richard Marshall, global managing director of Korn Ferry's Corporate Affairs practice, "it's going to be a double-edged sword."



# The Naked Truth

## A Hedge Fund Looks into the Mirror

The world's largest hedge fund, Bridgewater, has taken a surprising stab at radical transparency, with a number of unusual steps within the confines of its Connecticut headquarters. Among them:



### Baseball Cards

The firm creates employee profiles based on colleague/manager feedback and algorithms to measure each person's strengths and weaknesses. Used for building dynamic teams.



### The Dot Collector

This app allows employee to rank ideas and performance in real time, with a 1-to-10 scale spanning more than 100 attributes. The rankings are transparent among colleagues, allowing workers to test their own assumptions and motives.

### Management Principles Training



Almost all official interactions and meetings are recorded, which employees review weekly as learning and analyzing experience.

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## How

### it goes and has gone:

a corporate flack pitches a story, a journalist writes about it, and the companies

and media gatekeepers control the narrative. Brands might also launch advertising campaigns, and, these days, teams will post their messages directly to social media. The content is carefully crafted, often accompanied by stock photography and highly produced video snippets. It's the opposite of organic. And while there may be traces of authenticity, the storytelling lacks spontaneity, transparency, and personability.

That sound-bite culture is the antithesis of Extremely Online, which bypasses traditional media channels to speak directly with audiences (e.g., Ocasio-Cortez live streaming with her earbuds in as she rides the train home at night). Perhaps for Darwinian reasons, politicians have been more willing to explore this alien landscape, while many old-guard communications professionals continue to wring their hands. "Every brand is on social media, but most use it the same way they've done PR for the last 30 years," Colon says.

Some C-suite denizens took to Twitter in the early days as a means to brand themselves as thought leaders, but many jumped ship after witnessing how barbarous a faceless mob can be. They might post the occasional blog on

LinkedIn, but rarely are they saying anything that's interesting to the masses and almost never are they exposing vulnerability.

And then there's Elon Musk. The Tesla and SpaceX founder is fluent in EO. His Twitter is a primer on how to build rocket ships as well as the art, critics say, of putting foot in mouth. His nearly 25 million followers get to see him run his businesses in real time—crowdsourcing design and decision-making. He's funny and his passion for science is contagious—when he's not using his pulpit to bully. His fans may be forgiving, but there has already been a cost to his aura of openness, including a \$40 million, admit-no-wrongdoing settlement he and Tesla made with the Securities Exchange Commission. In short, the value of his effort is nebulous. "You can either keep up with the pace of culture or you can measure it," says Mark Schaefer, a business professor at Rutgers University and the author of *Marketing Rebellion*, about whether it makes more sense to count followers or assume an impact on culture. "You probably can't do both at the same time."

According to Pew Research, 77 percent of Americans go online every day, with 26 percent identifying that they are online almost constantly. That's up from 21 percent in 2015. And among 18- to 29-year-olds, 39 percent are constantly connected. Meanwhile, the first

truly digital natives are coming of age. Known as iGeneration, Net Gen, or most commonly Generation Z, they will reshape the economy as we know it. They have grown up online; some will be live stream stars by the time they graduate middle school. For this cohort born between 1995 and 2014, learning to decipher fake news is a survival instinct honed from childhood. While past generations consider online and offline as binary, Gen Z sees no distinction. "Even using that language is not going to resonate," says Rachel Maguire, research director at the Institute for the Future, a Silicon Valley think tank.

## With

### the Internet of Things,

Extremely Online

isn't just a way of relating to the world. It's functional. Do you tell Alexa to play music? Use smart home appliances? Drive a car? Wear a Fitbit? If you answered yes to any of these questions, it's time to come to terms with the fact you, too, are lowercase extremely online.

Here's a question to foreign-speaking digital migrants: "Do you understand Twitch and the implications for your talent pipeline?" asks Maguire.

For those blissfully unaware, Twitch is a live streaming platform that has exploded in growth since Amazon bought it in 2014 for nearly \$1 billion. Last year, the site boasted the sixth-highest traffic numbers among video streamers. The vast majority of those posting and watching are gamers, but there are also feeds of musicians taking song requests, roundtable dining room political discussions, tow truck drivers with dash cams, and GoPro-wielding bounty hunters on the prowl. Every month, roughly 3 million broadcasters upload portals into their own private worlds.

Sure enough, Twitch is like a black hole, the

gravity of voyeurism sucking you deeper and deeper. And for companies looking to attract a new workforce or earn the trust of weary consumers, there's a universe of potential. "The people carrying luggage on and off airplanes, automotive and construction workers ... there are big opportunities for leaders to showcase these different careers that pay as good as retail and restaurants," says Jose Costa, a marketing strategist and chief executive at For Eyes, a GrandVision brand. Costa previously spent most of his career in automotive and fast-food leadership. The US Army has a first-person shooter video game that allows prospective soldiers to preview combat. It isn't hard to imagine a day when person-organization fit is measured through virtual reality simulation.

Costa encourages companies to engage employees in content creation. As he wrote in an article for *Forbes*, it's about distilling your organization's values into the moments of the day, telling a story of who you are through what you do and how you do it. That means having a crystal-clear identity and impermeable culture.

The London-based firm Pulsar is part of a growing industry that creates social listening software. But as Davide Berretta, Pulsar's vice president of marketing, says, it isn't enough for companies to listen in on conversations—they must engage. "Companies need a voice," he says. They have to allow the people who work for them and use their products to tell stories that resonate with other people.

"Who do people believe? Each other," says Schaefer, the Rutgers professor. "People will trust a review from a stranger before they would ever trust corporate messaging. So the new challenge is to be invited to these conversations. And you can't buy your way in. It's going to have to come through authentic, human interactions."

Schaefer gives the example of Glossier, a buzzy New York-based skincare company

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born of a beauty blog by Emily Weiss. "Before fans loved Glossier, they loved Emily," he says. All of the website's models are actual customers, and products are designed to be shareable, online and offline. The packaging is a pink bubble pouch that doubles as a conveniently adorns Instagram background, while stickers make the perfect notebook accessory for teenage girls. The secret: being Extremely Online in service of Extreme Humanity. In this case, Weiss is the brand, and the customer is the advertising.



# Online

## and offline realities are

mirrors of one another, reflecting as well as perpetuating and distorting each other. At the same time we were dismantling personal

privacy boundaries on Facebook, employers were removing cubicle partitions. Along with glass conference rooms, companies are also recording and storing massive amounts of worker data.

Amazon employees are physically tracked to measure efficiency. Police cameras are ubiquitous. In academia, professors' entire careers are readily visible online. A quick Google search reveals what classes they teach, research interests, published papers, how many times and by whom their findings have been cited, student ratings, and possibly even entire lectures. Other companies are now choosing to publish

every employee salary, every expenditure, every financial.

And then there is Bridgewater Associates, the world's largest hedge fund. In one of the most extremes of the Extreme movement, the majority of all official interaction there is actually digitally recorded; employees then spend time every week reviewing videos of their colleagues for learning and feedback purposes—both good and bad. It's all done in the spirit of radical transparency, which is also why everyone from the CEO to entry-level hires rank one another's performances on a regular basis using a set of metrics known as the Dot Collector. Every dot given and received is public. The data collected is then used as a predictive power to partner people with complementary and contrasting qualities.


"It's a whole new world," says co-CEO David McCormick. "I've come to realize that kind of candor is the basis for very deep and meaningful relationships." McCormick, who wrestled while a student at West Point Academy and

served as a captain for an elite parachute unit in the military, likened it to the bonds forged in sport and mission, where teamwork is measured by helping each person come to terms with their strengths and weaknesses.

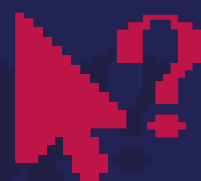
Whenever someone who is not present is mentioned, they are sent a recording of the conversation. "It does alter your behavior," McCormick says. "You're constantly aware of the fact that whatever you're saying you should be able to say in a room in front of 100 people." Those who buy in tend to view the potential for personal embarrassment as a sacrifice to the gods of growth. Those who don't, call it surveillance culture.

It comes back to the double-edged sword: Publishing salaries may lead to pay parity. It may also breed hostility. Documenting meetings might prevent egregious sexual harassment, but it might also stifle creativity. While in some ways the ethos of radical transparency that flows through Bridgewater's lifeblood is a

strain of the Extremely Online ecosystem, the key distinction is that the employees collectively value and trust in truth above all.

Until recently, Silicon Valley was the land of techno-utopianism. In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, walkouts over sexual harassment, and employees pushing back over facial recognition software, Silicon Valley has become blanketed in a skepticism as thick and intractable as the Bay Area fog. Part of Ocasio-Cortez's allure to her fan base is that she has big ideas. People can—and certainly are—debating the merits of such ideas, and that is exactly what takes place every day at Bridgewater's Connecticut headquarters. Extremely Online has opened a door, taking us into tunnels that lead between congressional offices and generations, and that connect the three-dimensional and the digital self. It offers the red pill or the blue pill. And, yes, there are many risks to widespread openness, but as McCormick puts it, "It's more dangerous not to be having honest conversations." 

# How Online Are You?



## Take Our Quiz ....

Digital natives scoff at the antiquated notion that there is an online and an offline. The truth is, unless you live off the grid, you're online—the question is, to what extent. Answer yes to five or more questions and you've crossed the threshold to Extremely Online. Otherwise, you can enjoy being lowercase extremely online for a bit longer.

## Do You:

- 1 ☐ Drive a car that was built after 1990?
- 2 ☐ Express emotions in emojis?
- 3 ☐ Know of Ninja? How about Dude Perfect?
- 4 ☐ Navigate among more than three screens (laptop, tablet, TV, phone, desktop, watch)?
- 5 ☐ Own a strategically placed Peloton?
- 6 ☐ Celebrate your cake day (aka Reddit birthday)?
- 7 ☐ Regularly check three or more social-media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.)?
- 8 ☐ Have smart appliances or a Nest in your house?
- 9 ☐ Wear a Fitbit, Apple Watch, or pacemaker?
- 10 ☐ Ever gone on a digital detox?