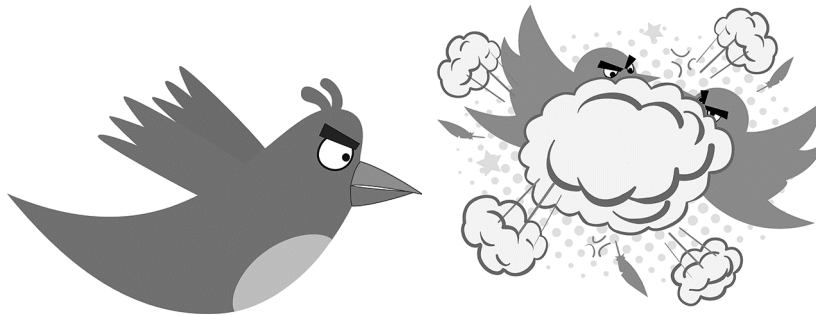


### Twitter Twits

Rosamund Urwin



- 1 There was no Twitter fury this time. No one launched into an offensive rant, calling for the culprits to lose their jobs. In fact, barely a whimper of protest met this week's revelation that University College London was discriminating against female staff on its Qatari campus; a married woman there receives a much lower housing allowance than her male peers. The muted reaction was in contrast to the outrage this summer when Sir Tim Hunt's foolish and sexist joke about female scientists spread online. After that, he says that same university asked him to resign his honorary professorship.
- 2 8-1. Its sharpest pitchforks aren't aimed at the bigwigs — companies, institutions, our culture — they target the individual. It acts as though one person embodies a problem, creating a scapegoat on whose shoulders all sins are hung. An alien watching Sir Tim's hounding might assume he was the greatest misogynist alive but that our species believes the systematic sexism of unequal pay isn't worth worrying about. The raging throng is adept at spotting the speck in someone's eye but routinely overlooks the beam in society's sight.
- 3 Last week I made a similar argument on Newsnight, only about the outcry over Cecil the lion. His killing undoubtedly drew global attention to the horrors of hunting. But the Twitmob wasn't content being angry at Cecil's fate: they wanted blood. When the villain, Walter Palmer, was found he became that week's Public Enemy No 1. No matter that there are other trophy-hunters out there. PETA — People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals — tweeted that they wanted Palmer hanged. 8-2. The virtual wrath boiled over into reality, his holiday home graffitied.
- 4 I doubt there's much overlap between the mob who went for Palmer and the campaigners who are calling on the Government to make the import of hunting trophies illegal. Once the mob is done sticking someone in the virtual stocks there will be a new victim to castigate. The mentality seems to be that you prove your moral superiority by being the nastiest about — or at — that week's hate figure.
- 5 Palmer was, at least, attacked for an abominable act. 8-3

A comment – which once would have been quickly forgotten – is instead amplified, often spun or twisted.

- 6 Public shaming doesn't make sexism, racism or animal cruelty disappear. It just stigmatises an individual. No one goes back over their Twitter posts and checks if the issue they raised has now been adequately addressed with legislation. There's the whiff of Old Testament justice – an eye for an eye – about the Twitter mob. Shouldn't we instead learn to turn our virtual cheeks?

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