



Spring issue: 2015:
“Find Your Voice”
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Find Your Voice

Is it prudent—or even possible—to express your complete self online, personal as well as professional? Our writer speaks out with an emphatic “yes.”

By Sophia Stuart Illustration by Patrick Leger

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I was giving a speech in Paris to fashion industry executives about the importance of digital. As director of digital for a large media organisation, I had given this particular talk many times before, but this time, as I spoke, someone big was getting fired, and word was spreading. It was a Fashion Moment.

Everyone picked up their phones to read the news, and there was a mixture of excitement and horror in the room. None of us, however, could comment publicly, because we were all employed by fashion corporations. The social media feeds splurged out a frenzy of gossip and conjecture. We remained silent.

The irony, of course, was that few of those online knew the person in question, while nearly every one of us in that room did. Talk about feeling impotent. I had worked at high levels in the digital sphere for years, but it was only then that I realised the web had become a parallel world—and none of us could speak

freely there. I began to wonder how that would affect our careers, and our lives, in the future.

It's not my place to debate the nature of corporations and decorum. There are good reasons for toeing the line (such as continuing to receive your very nice salary). But it did make me think about having reached a point where I had something meaningful to say, and a plethora of digital tools at my disposal to say it, yet did not feel able to say it. Sound familiar? It's a situation common to many in the upper echelons of their careers: Your voice exists publicly more as part of an organisation than as an individual's. Maybe you keep up with former colleagues on Linked In, maybe you share photos with friends via Instagram, but there's no real “room of your own” you can claim online.

I started my career as a journalist on British newspapers, and then I got a higher-level job that required a wardrobe from Brooks Brothers. I ended up as an executive in Manhattan with an office on the 42nd floor

of a skyscraper overlooking the Hudson. There followed lots of exhausting yet glam business trips to China, India, Korea and France. But somewhere along the way—as I was meeting more people, developing more informed opinions and discovering more that needed to be said—Sophia Stuart (not the executive, but the person) went quiet.

Then, in 2011, I was suddenly forced to think about my voice in a very personal way. I found myself in front of a doctor who told me I had three tumours in my throat, with a possibility of cancer and the need for surgery. How was I going to deal with this? I immediately realised that the first thing I needed to do was talk about it. I'm aware that not everyone who gets a potentially deadly diagnosis thinks, “Oh, I must share this,” but that is exactly how I had dealt with life when I was younger. When had that stopped?

So, while making arrangements for my medical leave, I broke my silence. I wasn't

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reckless; I covered my tracks, set up an anonymous blog (*teamgloria.com*) and never mentioned my employer in it. “Gloria” started to say what I could not about my fears and tumours. And boy, did she talk—in a way I had not spoken for over a decade. The anguish of illness and the subsequent connections I made through my new-found vulnerability were amazing. I owe my recovery to my honesty and to the kindness of strangers. Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” While I had not taken time to examine my life before I started writing *teamgloria.com*, I discovered that sharing with others online was pushing me to get to know myself.

Eventually I went back to work and tried to fit back into my former life. But I had spoken up, and was now part of a vibrant community online. Maintaining a voluble digital persona as Gloria while being silent as Sophia was too hard on the psyche. So I did something many people considered crazy: I jumped off the career ladder and set to work becoming myself online. I was 42 years old—as good a time as any to take stock. I started to read Carl Jung (as one does): “Thoroughly unprepared, we take the step into the afternoon of life.” I rather liked the idea of being poised at the door of the “afternoon of life.” It felt terribly adventurous. So that was the image I held in my mind as I took a look back at my life and dreamed about where I wanted to go next.

It’s hard to describe the odd combination of terror and exhilaration I felt as I registered *sophiastuart.com*, modified a basic WordPress design template, wrote a bio and pressed “Publish.” I quickly closed my laptop, made a pot of tea and didn’t look at the site again for hours. I was out there, at last, as me.

Now I walk other people through this process. When I ask clients to tell me about their lives so far, I get one of two reactions: Either they give a

pat response detailing highlights of their résumé, or they have an existential crisis before my eyes. I then do with them the exercise that I did for myself: I help them imagine where they want to be and then develop a digital platform to support that dream. A digital presence, I tell them, is your voice in the world. It’s a creative expression to show who you are and how you want to participate in the future. And just like your actual self, your digital self is not set in stone; you can modify, edit and redesign it as much as you like.

The digital world is now the “public” in which conversation and debate take place, reputations are forged (or, sadly, damaged), and work gets done. The millennial generation lives there. And if you don’t, they won’t know who you are—say, when you want a consulting gig and they’re running the corporations. It’s a huge financial risk not to take part online. But more important, it’s also a psychological one. You have achieved much, been places others have not dreamed of. Participating in the online world in a holistic way gives you the chance to own that.

Some of the smartest, wittiest people I know are silent online. Either they’re afraid to join in because they waited so long, or they feel they have nothing to say. Until you’ve dunked your own toe in the digital pool, though, you’ll never find your tribe of like-minded (or not) people waiting for your perspective. Taking a dip of my own as Gloria, then diving in deeper as myself, helped me recover from a hideous illness. If those tumours in my throat had grown unchecked, I might well have lost my voice forever. But I was already silent, and I had no idea. ■

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EXPAND YOUR REACH

Anchor your digital voice with your own site, and use social activity to amplify it. There are so many social media outlets now, including a few you may not have heard of yet. You don’t need to use all of them, so be clear on your strategy: Just as LinkedIn is where your professional CV resides and Twitter helps establish your personality, emerging outlets have their own specific areas of specialty.

- 1** | Need to be relevant in Asia? Get an account on **Line** (*line.me*), a fast-growing mobile messenger network in Japan, Thailand and Taiwan. Select your own avatar sticker line for whimsical e-commerce and branding opportunities.
- 2** | The next generation of savvy consumers (25 million members and counting) is sighing over Paris, pale pink roses and dreamy pop stars at **We Heart It** (*weheartit.com*). If you want to matter to millennials, you need to be there, too.
- 3** | **EyeEm** (*eyeem.com*) is not just the European (and cooler) riposte to **Instagram**; it’s also a tantalising glimpse into the future of the international fashion and style set.