

# Glasgow Effect artist may have the last laugh over misplaced shaming

Angela Haggerty  
Social media

**I**N 2013, 30-year-old Justine Sacco changed the course of her life with a single tweet – and was the last to know about it. Ahead of a trip to Africa just before Christmas that year, she tweeted: “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get Aids. Just kidding. I’m white!”

It can be difficult to get tone across on a platform like Twitter, and nobody picked up the fact that her joke was supposed to be about white privilege. Instead, the internet decided that Sacco was racist and she had to pay. By the time her plane landed in Cape Town she was the number one hashtag trending globally on Twitter.

Amid a furious and highly abusive response, Sacco – who had just 170 followers on Twitter when the chaos began – was soon sacked from her job and later described the intense mental impact the episode had taken on her life.

What happened to Sacco is known as “shaming”, an internet phenomenon best explained in a recent book by Jon Ronson, *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*.

In Scotland last week, a viral social media shaming was there for all to see in the shape of Ellie Harrison, the artist behind the Glasgow Effect art project.

Harrison secured £15,000 of funding from Creative Scotland for the idea, which will involve her not stepping a foot outside of Glasgow for a year in order to explore the benefits of localism in the arts and communities.

But when social media got hold of the news, a different story was created.

The “Glasgow effect” is a term used to describe a mortality rate in Glasgow that experts struggle to explain away with poverty alone – and it seemed to be assumed that Harrison, who is originally from London, was some arrogant, middle-class southerner coming to Scotland to make the poor feel stupid and patronised.

Scottish rapper Darren McGarvey, aka Loki, was one of the first to comment, describing the project as a “poverty safari” and opening up a lively debate on how arts and class collide.

He even retorted, humorously, with a crowdfunder for an alternative “west end effect” project, a “year-long study into what it’s like to be trapped in a middle-class lifestyle”.

“People are not angry at Ellie Harrison or conceptual art. They are angry at social inequality and

how this expresses itself culturally,” he tweeted.

However, the debate didn’t always remain at the level set by the highly articulate rapper. Harrison was soon at the centre of misogynistic, abusive and downright cruel comments online, while other artists expressed concern at increasingly observable anger from members of the public who didn’t think the arts should be funded at all.

The media picked the story up too, meaning Creative Scotland itself had to respond. The episode snowballed rapidly, and by the time Harrison – who was overwhelmed and shaken by the response – got herself together and published the full funding application – which, incidentally, didn’t mention the word “poverty” in it once – the story had already been framed.

Lost in the fury was the detail. Harrison wasn’t a Londoner coming up to patronise poor Scots, she was a respected artist and political activist who moved to Glasgow in 2008. But she had already been caricatured, and as with Justine Sacco, once the social media shamers had chosen a crusade, detail became of little importance within the grand, principled, righteous fight against the great evil they thought they’d discovered.

**I**N the age of outrage, a “like” on Facebook or a retweet may be forgotten as quickly as it’s sent by whoever is behind the screen, but for the subject of the story it can have devastating effects.

Was Harrison’s Glasgow Effect project title – illustrated with a stereotypical picture of chips – insensitive towards some Glaswegians living that reality? Yes. But did that justify the character assassination on social media that followed it? Of course not.

Arguably, Harrison’s art project has already had the effect artists long for: generating ideas that can make society ask the big questions. The depth of discussion about class, arts and politics dominating the social spectrum this week certainly went some way to achieving that for the Glasgow Effect.

The whole thing was summed up by journalist Brian Ferguson, who tweeted: “Fair play. Between them, @ellieharrison & @lokiscottishrap have triggered about 10 times as much debate as the #turnerprize in Glasgow.”

Unlike Justine Sacco, Harrison may well turn this stressful week of her life into something vastly more positive.

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