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The Power of Twitter

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NOT FINALLY

The power of Twitter

We all know people who agree to do an interview on a news programme and are upset at the line the interviewer takes or with the final edit. Their words, they feel, are taken out of context, or the editing misrepresents their point of view.

Politicians and others in the public eye may cry foul, but they usually accept the terms of engagement between themselves and broadcast journalists. A complaint may go to editors or producers, but by and large it's a symbolic ritual to go through. The unhappy interviewees pick themselves up to prepare for the next time on the telly, determined to get their message across.

There are exceptions for those with the confidence to fight back. The trade unionist Arthur Scargill would do only live interviews. The former Labour and now Respect MP George Galloway, objecting to a line of questioning, would remove his microphone and walk away. Many of us remember the former Defence Secretary John Nott doing the same, when he didn't like the way an interview with Sir Robin Day was going. It made for great television. There'd been a defence review, which had been criticised by the

then First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Henry Leach. Nott defended his review and Day uttered those fateful words: "But why should the public, on this issue, as regards the future of the Royal Navy, believe you, a transient, here-today and, if I may say so, gone-tomorrow politician, rather than a senior officer of many years?" That was it. John Nott stood up and replied: "I'm sorry, I'm fed up with this interview. Really, it's ridiculous." Flinging down his microphone, he walked out of the studio and shortly afterwards walked out of politics.

Nott was a confident man, used to a public profile – and to getting his own way. But what of 'ordinary people' who find themselves invited, through some area of expertise, to appear under the glare of studio lights in an interview that goes wrong? These types of interview are not usually confrontational. They are designed, typically, to elicit informed answers for a background package to a studio debate.

This was what Shanene Thorpe expected when she was invited on BBC2's *Newsnight*. Born and bred in Tower Hamlets, she was put forward by her employer when the programme was looking for someone

to take part in a package covering welfare reform and housing benefit.

Thorpe was keen to be involved in the argument. She was a single mother (the relationship with the child's father had broken down shortly after her daughter was born) who worked, but her salary was not enough. With rents high in her borough, she needed housing benefit to make up the difference. She never saw the money. It was paid directly to the landlord.

I remember watching the programme and being surprised at how Allegra Stratton, *Newsnight's* political editor, conducted the interview. Thorpe was asked if she wanted more children, why didn't she live with her mother, and why she had had her daughter. Stratton concluded by saying: "The government is thinking of saying to young people: If you don't have work, don't leave home."

The problem was: Shanene *was* working. She was a young woman doing everything she could to make a good life for herself and her child. As she herself said, she didn't want a hand out, just some help so she could move forward.

Almost immediately after the interview went out, the social media forum Twitter burst into life with people expressing their shock at how this young woman was treated. When Shanene's tweet came up

wanting signatures for an online petition asking *Newsnight* to apologise, I immediately signed.

I wasn't the only one. Thousands did the same. Many retweeted details of her cause, giving her campaign the critical mass it needed for success. *Newsnight*, seeing the way things were going, put an apology on the programme's website. It wasn't enough for a woman who felt she had been 'mugged' on the television. She persisted with her online petition, emailing people to say why a posting on the website was not enough. She wanted an apology on air.

On September 4, she got one. *Newsnight's* Gavin Esler read out an apology making it clear that she had been misrepresented. Shanene had worked, or been in work-related study since she was 16. And the impression that she was living on benefits as a lifestyle choice was not the case. They were sorry for any hurt or distress that may have been caused by the item first broadcast in May. What a result for someone taking on the BBC and doing it through the web and Twitter. A woman with no obvious access to the levers of power had refused to be fobbed off. Shanene Thorpe persisted until she received what was her right. Here was a graphic demonstration of the power of social media.

Now I don't believe that Twitter is a magic bullet. I don't go along with the naive belief that the Arab Spring was a Facebook revolution. I also know that Twitter, blogs and online campaigns really get traction only when the mainstream media take up the cause. But modern

technology and social media are bringing to public platforms evidence that once would have remained hidden; and giving people such as Shanene Thorpe, who would once have been powerless, a voice.

Joy Johnson

The writer was formerly director of media for then Mayor of London Ken Livingstone and worked as a journalist for the BBC and ITN. She is a member of the BJR editorial board.