

MLA's shovelling tweet triggers online avalanche

Winnipeg Free Press OPINION

Monday, January 10, 2022

MELISSA MARTIN

WITHIN 24 hours, Jon Reyes was famous, at least in the way fame works in the digital age, which is that the Waverley MLA's face and exactly 35 of his words had been devoured and regurgitated by the internet's biggest content machines. He'd made it onto Barstool Sports; been mocked by celebrities; been featured as a "Canadian dude" on tabloid swamp TMZ. And the tweet which started the whole thing — a photo Reyes took of his wife, Cynthia, shovelling their driveway after a 12-hour shift as a hospital nurse — had swelled, being shared over 15,000 times, taking on a life of its own as folks made it the base chord on which to riff off their jokes. I shamelessly admit, I was one of them, too.

Behold, the golden rule of these social media hullabalos: it's rarely the tweet that drives them. It's usually the reaction.

As is typical when tweets go viral, the response was a circus. The majority was all in good fun, with locals scoring zingers off the Tories ("The PC government that doesn't seem to understand exponential spread should study this Tweet," one response read) and most others going for fairly harmless jokes about letting a spouse shovel after a long night at work.

"She's digging a hole for your body, bud," tweeted *Jezebel* editor-in-chief Laura Bassett.

Some of the response took it either too far, analyzing what the tweet revealed about the state of the Reyes's marriage (may I humbly suggest: nothing) or trying very hard to make it a front in the gender war (one repeated refrain was that it was sexist to suggest a man had to shovel, missing the mitigating factor of Cynthia being a nurse coming off shift in a pandemic).

There were debates about whether or not Cynthia might like to shovel as a way to decompress, which is entirely possible (on Sunday, a new Twitter account under her name stated as much: "All I wanted to do was shovel!" she wrote, with a face-palm emoji). There were critiques that the tweet's virality was distracting from bigger issues.

Nothing about this particular fracas needs to be that serious. At the end of the day, the situation is pretty simple: a lot of us are cooped up at home, online and a little bored. The Reyes tweet strolled right into a combination of factors that made it a perfect storm, and watching that storm move all the way to American tabloid news was a spectacle in itself.

But why? Explaining what makes things funny, especially online where the mass collaborative response becomes an integral part of the comedy, is a reliably painful exercise, so there's no point in trying. Either you get why the tweet, and the ensuing mining of it for laughs, hit so many nerves and went so viral, or you don't. If you don't, that's fine too.

Still, once this circus has packed up and left town (it will already be played out by the time this column runs), there's maybe something in it worth noting. Because really, this is a story about communication and public perception. It's revealing about how Manitobans are feeling, at this stage of the pandemic, and about what they expect from their leaders.

Or, to put it another way: the most remarkable thing about the tweet wasn't anything Reyes wrote. It's that it was made in earnest, apparently blissfully unaware of how it could be read in context by a public that is boiling with frustration over the Tory government's handling of the pandemic, and especially its effect on stressed health-care workers.

Not only did this cabinet minister not read the room when he composed the tweet, he didn't even scan its table of contents.

And that it came at a time when the Tories would, no doubt, prefer not to have any such unforced errors that invite public derision, gave it that little extra twist of bad timing. Somewhere, surely, Tory communications staffers were banging their heads against the wall on Saturday night. Picturing that reaction is funny, too.

On that note, a missed opportunity in the denouement. On Sunday morning, Reyes gave a statement to CBC, calling his wife “amazing” and adding that he’s “happy she is getting the worldwide recognition she deserves, and it serves as a reminder to everyone — especially me today — that we can never do enough to show our gratitude to health care workers.”

The better response, I think, would have been to poke fun at himself: a tweet of him shovelling snow while his wife looked on sipping coffee would have done the trick. An

offer to shovel the driveways of the first few constituents to reply would’ve gone a long way towards wrangling the spotlight back onto the community, and bringing a bit of delight.

Remember, it’s not the tweet, it’s the reaction. All you can do once it starts is try to play along.

Oh, one last thing, as inspired by a tweet from local gynecologist Dr. Leslea Walters. If there’s any good that can come out of this — and there may as well be — maybe it’s to remember that a lot of health-care workers are slogging through difficult shifts right now. And we’ve had a lot of snow this winter, with the forecast calling for more this week.

So, if a health-care worker lives on your street, and you have time and are able, in honour of Jon Reyes and what he did — or more specifically didn’t do — to give us something to chatter about this weekend, why not give their driveway a shovel?

melissa.martin@freepress.mb.ca

