

Social media is in the news, again

by SHERALYN ROMAN

As I reflect on two recent incidents; one beyond tragic and one where tragedy was no doubt narrowly averted, I think back to a discussion launched in one of my very first columns ? the role of social media in our world today. It can be a force for good, but it's also a force for lies, misinformation, complaints and rumour. Most recently, in the case of the horrific tragedy impacting a local family, social media was both. In part, it was a forum for ?objectively horrible people? (1) to vent their fury at being awakened by the sound of an Amber Alert alarm. (Because when tragedy unfolds, certainly our biggest concern should not be for the victim but for our own peaceful slumber right?) Yet also, almost certainly, the use of the Amber Alert through social media led to the capture of the person accused of this heinous crime.

By now we all know the heart-breaking story of Riya Rajkumar, a beautiful little girl celebrating her birthday and Valentine's Day, with her father, presumably one of the people she trusted most in this world. What happened was hard to fathom for anyone but was made so much worse by the outpouring of complaints from folks who were awoken (or in some cases, merely had their TV viewing interrupted) by an Amber Alert as police frantically searched for her. 911 operators received more than 380 calls asking for the alerts to be stopped. It is almost unbelievable to me that one person, five people or possibly even 10 cranky, horrible, soulless people would call, never mind over 380. 380! For perspective that's way more people than an average movie theatre holds. 380+ people who thought their sleep, their TV time, their ?what exactly??.was more important than finding a child before the unthinkable happened. It was also 380 fewer opportunities for people who legitimately needed a 911 operator and some form of assistance, to get through on their first attempt to call for help. When seconds count, how many others were also impacted by these completely self centered, self absorbed, cranky (and frankly nasty,) folks?

As we now know, the Amber Alert did work. It didn't save little Riya but it did lead directly to the arrest of her father, now accused of taking her life. Another member of the community received the Amber Alert on their cell phone, saw the vehicle described and called police. This lead to an immediate arrest ? proving that Amber Alerts work and that technology CAN be a force for good. The person who called is a heroic citizen. Yes ? they are. They didn't call to complain that their drive home was ?interrupted? by a noisy alert. They called to alert police, to help police, to do the right thing. Whoever you are ? to you we say a collective thank you. To the rest of you ? I sincerely wish the police had the time and resources to track you all down and charge each of you individually with public mischief ? for wasting the time and resources of those who should have been out searching for Riya or responding to other, legitimate 911 cries for help.

The second incident, while not nearly so horrific, is an example that leads back specifically to a point made in my first article about criminal justice in the social media age. In this case, a young woman was recorded throwing objects off a balcony in Toronto. The items thrown, including a chair, from such a great height, could have undoubtedly killed persons passing below. The fact that no one was hurt was nothing more than luck. This person has now been located (thanks to social media) and charged with a variety of offences. I ask again however, what about the people who recorded her? What about the person who posted this crime to social media? Why is it that 1) people think this is ok to encourage, record and post to social media and 2) why are we not also holding those people accountable for the actions of the girl in the video? Because they are responsible. They could have stopped her and they should have stopped her. In a ?civilized? society we each play a role in ensuring the safety of others by acting in a responsible manner. Again I refer to Mr. Gilmore who said; ?Collectively, we agreed to a mostly unspoken social compact: if we look after each other, we will all be looked after. There's nothing particularly unique about this; it's a variation of the ?Golden Rule? which has been the bedrock of every civilization since Ur.?

We all play a role in helping the world around us to be a better, kinder, safer place. Social media plays a role too. Amber Alerts work when people use technology as a force for good. Sadly, social media is also a forum for idiots, fools and whiners. I remain hopeful that the scales tip in favour of the good but these two most recent events certainly call my optimism into question.

Rest in Peace Riya. Collectively we mourn with your family.