Shirley Sherrod and the Social Media Fail
July 22, 2010

On October 30, 1938, Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre troupe performed a live radio broadcast of “The War of the Worlds.” It was the day America learned the perils of blind trust in a new medium as Welles’ faux news bulletins convinced many that the Martians had landed in Grover’s Mill, New Jersey.

On July 20, 2010, a leading communication technology again triggered hysteria. The racists were among us, in the form of government representatives infiltrating an organization founded to fight bigotry. Social media delivered the proof. BigGovernment.com, a blog by Andrew Breitbart, posted a short video of Shirley Sherrod, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Rural Development Director for Georgia, telling an NAACP audience about not applying “full force” efforts to help a white farmer avoid foreclosure earlier in her career.

The edited Shirley Sherrod video:

(Original blog post had embedded video)

Orson Welles was considered a genius, but he didn’t compel FDR to send troops after the Martians. On the other hand, Andrew Breitbart managed to rock the administration of the 44th President. With no alien hordes to vanquish, they did the next best thing: they ousted an inconvenient official.

By October 31, 1938, we knew there were no Martians in New Jersey. By July 21 2010, we saw there was no racist at the NAACP podium. Social media, the great fact checker, lie detector, and collector of the crowd’s wisdom had failed. It had not saved us from our knee-jerk reactions and lack of due diligence.

Shirley Sherrod’s defense was her own words, the complete 43-minute video of her speech, a poignant narrative of her life and career. During her childhood and early adulthood, local
versions of Bull Connor were sheriffs in her home county in Georgia. A white man killed her father. A group of white men burned a cross in front of her widowed mother’s home.

**The complete Shirley Sherrod video:**

(Original blog post had embedded video)

Ms. Sherrod said that she swore to leave the fields but never did. As she took her career path after college, she admitted that her vision of helping people was originally limited to African-Americans. She explained how her attitudes began to change after handing off the white farmer to a white lawyer, “one of his own kind,” only to delve back into the foreclosure case when the lawyer failed to produce results. That part of the story didn’t make the cut in the video shown on BigGovernment.com, the video used to condemn Ms. Sherrod.

How many of us joined the kangaroo court? I read the initial story on Ms. Sherrod, watched the short clip, and posted the link to the Facebook page for my social media class at University of Denver online under the heading “social media drives the news.” Indeed. The story got heavy play in the media. The denunciations from the executive branch and the NAACP were swift. Ms. Sherrod said that she was ordered to pull her car over and resign by BlackBerry.

How many of us, chastened, watched the complete video? I did, after making a “not-so-fast” post about the Sherrod story to the class’ Facebook page. What I saw was not Van Jones or Jeremiah Wright. This was a candid woman explaining her personal journey to racial inclusiveness in the course of her public service. For once, “taken out of context” was not a PR dodge. It was the truth.

Per the value proposition of technological marvels, we expect social media to be a labor-saving device, feeding us bite-size chunks of information screened and endorsed by experts and influencers. In the end, it is just another tool, only as good as the people who wield it. Amid modern cynicism, its free structure gives it “verisimilitude,” a term that has been used to describe the sense of truthfulness and authenticity in Orson Welles’ “War of the Worlds” production. A surreptitious or overlooked video has become social media’s symbol of authenticity. In contrast to Web 2.0, 1930s radio was a medium of commonality and authority. Welles achieved authenticity with the simple, grave announcement, “Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our program…”

Orson Welles knew he was putting on a show. What kind of spectacle were the proponents of the edited Shirley Sherrod video anticipating? More importantly, what kind of spectacles will we enable from now on? Will we take time from our busy schedules to confirm there is no smoking crater in Grover’s Mill?