

The crowded elevator of opinions

We've become convinced that speaking is the most important thing we can do.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue



(Illustration by Federico Gastaldi)

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f dystopian stories serve to warn us of a dangerous future we are in the process of creating, then E. M. Forster's classic short story "The Machine Stops" belongs on our reading lists. He writes—in 1909!—of a world with internet and video conferencing, in which facts are secondary to our imagining of history.

Most intriguingly, he describes a world in which humanity has essentially become an abstraction of ideas and opinions and humans are nothing more than the vehicles of these opinions. In one conversation, the protagonist's friend calls and asks, "Do you have any ideas today?" and when she doesn't, the friend hangs up. Because if you don't have an opinion right now, then what's the point?

Forster's future scenario was startlingly prescient. From op-eds and talking heads to tweets and TikTok, the space of ideas about ideas about other ideas is as crowded as a pre-COVID elevator. And like that elevator, as long as everyone keeps enough distance or makes a good-enough attempt not to violate the others, the resulting experience, albeit unpleasant, remains tolerable.

But opinions do not simply materialize. They are formed, with varying intentions—and we can probably use even stronger language than that. We are encouraged to form opinions quickly. Seduced, even, to crowd the elevator. When some *thing* happens, our internal inclination—*I have to say something about this*—quickly becomes a bold conviction and, soon after, a post. For those of us who feel accountable to some public space, this inclination can feel ferocious and intimidating, and the failure to answer the call can result in a sense of defeat, unworthiness, or being behind the times.

Our answer to that is often simply: do better.

So we become more practiced at having something to say quickly, and maybe next time something happens we make it onto that elevator, even if our opinion amounts to little more than a fart. I won't give examples of quickly formed, poorly shaped opinions—because I'd have to start with some of my own—and I won't suggest that our world, or at least our social media experience, would be better if we all simply shared less in general. I don't have the answer.

But lately the exhaustion many of us have been feeling, along with the sense that all of this online discourse is changing nothing, has me wondering if there is another way. An alternative to boarding an already crowded elevator and forming opinions that resemble already-formed opinions, and then discussing those opinions instead of the thing itself. An alternative to the carelessness that so often accompanies hastiness. An alternative to our uncritical participation in the machinations of Forster's Machine.

If we're honest, for all of our pointing to injustices to get them trending so that the public will feel compelled to solve them, we also rush to comment on *the thing* so that the public will regard us more highly. We build movements, and we build brands. There is a line as thin as floss between "please pay attention to this" and "please pay attention to me saying this." And the answer is not for some of us to do it while others watch. (Lucky me, writing an article!) No: speak!

But we need to ask what specifically needs saying, who is best to say it, and who or what is served by our utterances. It is ours to ask, in this moment or any other, whether we are being the clanging cymbal Paul warns us about (1 Cor. 13:1) instead of the prophet of 2 Peter, who is led by spirit and not anxiety.

I am wondering whether the Machine—still working quite well in our version of the universe—has us convinced that speaking is the most important thing we can do. Specifically, speaking with authority, instead of ceding space so that other, potentially more vital voices can be heard (or better, using our voice to affirm theirs). Speaking with snark and cynicism, instead of pointing toward what matters most or how our text, tradition, and experience may respond to what's happening. Speaking generically, instead of sharing our personal stakes ("I want to see you not through the Machine," says one character in Forster's tale). Speaking quickly, instead of slowing down and inviting others to as well, as though stillness remains a surefire way to encounter the true and living God, especially in chaos.

And finally, speaking at all, instead of encountering every invitation for speech with our humility. Because certainly we should not always be the ones speaking. There is someone better, someone more closely affected and therefore wiser, who can have our voice and our share or retweet. It is sometimes faithful to let someone more deserving enter the elevator before us and with our support.

I'm less concerned about any particular opinion that I am about the fact that we so quickly decide we have to share one at all. Is it the Spirit, or has our own anxiety seduced us? How can our proclamations—our sermons, articles, status updates, and face-to-face conversations—contribute to something better than the crowded elevator, maybe even carry us closer to beloved community?

The next time everyone has something to say, think about that.

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