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How a late-night Luddite accidentally fought his way back into bedrooms (and computers, smartphones, and tablets) across America.

By Douglas Alden Warshaw, contributor

Conan O'Brien is in his bedroom. It's a little bit past 11 p.m., and he's shyly, hesitantly, nervously attempting to do his first webcast. But he keeps getting interrupted. And it's driving him crazy. «Get out of my room! Get out of my room! This is private!» O'Brien's embarrassed, and he's yelling at the top of his lungs. «Everybody get out!!!»

Okay, that's part of a skit from O'Brien's new late-night show, *Conan*, on TBS. But, almost exactly a year ago, more than a few people in the media business thought that O'Brien, [freshly tossed off *The Tonight Show*](#) by NBC after only seven months on the job, just might have to sit in his bedroom for a long time, and that performing a show on the web might actually be his only option. That was until more than a million people, most of them ages 18 to 49, started shouting, «We want Coco!» and the reinvention of Conan O'Brien from traditional television performer to multimedia brand began.

O'Brien's audience came to his rescue in a way that was inconceivable until it happened. In fact, it was inconceivable even while it was happening.

O'Brien's brief tenure on *The Tonight Show* began in May 2009 with ratings so high that Jeff Zucker, then president and CEO of NBC Universal, proclaimed him the «new king of late night.» But the new king wore his crown uneasily, in part because the old king, Jay Leno, had been installed almost directly in front of him with [a new show at 10 o'clock](#) that

was supposed to revolutionize primetime and, instead, ended up revolting the NBC affiliates. NBC's solution to the crisis [was to offer Leno his old time slot back](#) for another new, half-hour show, and push *The Tonight Show* back from 11:35 p.m. to 12:05 a.m. Informed of the plan, O'Brien considered his options and, five days later, on Jan. 12, 2010, hit the send button on an e-mail he'd stayed up most of the night composing at home. The e-mail began «People of the Earth» and made it clear to everyone that he was unwilling to host a *Tonight Show* that actually started tomorrow. And that's half the story of the beginning of the social-media revolution that forever changed the landscape of late-night TV.

The other half?

By pure coincidence, at the same time Conan O'Brien was working on his e-mail in his Brentwood home, just about a 30-minute car ride away a 25-year-old graphic artist and diehard fan named Mike Mitchell was also pulling an all-nighter at home, creating a graphic image of his hero standing in front of an American flag, emblazoned with the words I'M WITH COCO. The image was reminiscent of the Obama poster created by Shepard Fairey, and the name «Coco» was a nickname coined by Tom Hanks when he was the second guest on O'Brien's *Tonight* show. (It is a nickname Conan dislikes – the first time he heard it, he told Hanks, «That catches on, I'll sue you» – but catch on it did.) Mitchell posted his «I'm with Coco» image on his own site, then created a new «I'm with Coco» Facebook page and Twitter account, and then at 4 a.m. he went to bed. When he woke up at noon, he was shocked to discover that more than 30,000 people were following his new Twitter feed, close to 10,000 had clicked LIKE on his new Facebook page, and an untold number were making his «I'm with Coco» graphic their own profile picture on Facebook. Two days later, «I'm

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with Coco» had 185,000 Twitter followers, and just a week after Mitchell's all-nighter the number was 700,000.

That was barely a year ago, but it was before most television executives understood what Twitter was. In fact, it was before Conan O'Brien, age 47, understood what Twitter was. «I'm a Luddite when it comes to computers,» says the man who keeps a bust of Teddy Roosevelt prominently in his office. «I didn't do Twitter. Didn't understand why anyone would do Twitter. I'm not on Facebook.» But now, suddenly, NBC executives were telling O'Brien to «stop it,» and O'Brien was saying, «Stop what? It's not me.» And it wasn't. It was Gen X and Gen Y.

Conan discovers the digital divide

«This is something about myself as a performer that I've never understood,» says O'Brien, who tries to understand everything about himself. «When I started doing television, I always thought I was doing it for my peers, and I quickly found out that the real hardcore fans were much younger than me.» O'Brien's younger audience then and now is on the digital side of the digital divide. It's an audience that doesn't want to be just an audience -- they want to be participants. They love being connected to one another and to the celebrity objects of their affection; they love posting and creating and remixing. Culturally they're very different from the baby boomers who watch most network television -- and the boomers who program network television -- and they're a bit pissed off at them too. And that meant that, as much as they loved Conan, they were equally pissed off at Jay Leno:

I think Conan O'brien is 10 times funnier and better than Leno.. I say he stays and Leno goes. time for Leno to retire. Who is with me on this

«The boomers have overstayed their welcome,» declares the man credited by many with creating the phrase «viral video,» Douglas Rushkoff, the author most recently of *Program or Be Programmed*, a book

about digital media. «Generation X is finally at the stage where they can have the jobs the boomers had, and the economy crashes. There's nothing left for them: There's no Social Security; there's nowhere to invest. Conan was a great stand-in for the frustration with this never-ending boomer legacy.»

«There was this huge explosion online of protests and anger, but also creativity,» O'Brien says. «People were making really funny art and posters.» A statistical breakdown of comments tweeted found almost 40% to be anti-NBC and anti-Leno. «It overwhelmed them,» O'Brien's agent, Rick Rosen, says. «And to this day it's affected the perception of NBC and Jay Leno.» Indeed, though O'Brien's new show is on basic cable, on occasion it has beaten Leno's *Tonight Show* in the ratings demographic that advertisers love, those 18 to 49. Its viewers have a median age of 31, more than 24 years younger than Leno's or David Letterman's. For advertisers that's a remarkable statistic.

Thanks to Twitter and Facebook, and the fact that America loves to watch a car wreck, during the last two weeks of O'Brien's *Tonight Show*, fan rallies spontaneously sprouted up all across the country (mostly outside NBC affiliates), and O'Brien's ratings shot up. But O'Brien's letter to the people of the earth -- which in the digital age turned out to be a letter read by tens of millions -- and his refusal to move the *Tonight Show* to 12:05, meant it was over. And on Jan. 23, after taping his last broadcast, Conan O'Brien, a guy who had been a staple of late-night television for 17 years, no longer had a show. Nor did he have a Facebook or Twitter account yet. But he did have [a \\$45 million payout from NBC](#) -- \$32.5 million for himself and \$12.5 million for his staff, over 50 of whom had moved with him from New York, where *Late Night With Conan O'Brien* was produced, to Los Angeles to work on *The Tonight Show* less than a year earlier. Still, O'Brien's heart and mind remained planted in old media.

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Conan discovers Twitter

«You know that scene in the first *Indiana Jones* movie where he gets thrown through the truck windshield by a Nazi? I was thrown through the windshield of broadcasting,» O'Brien says, a bit wistfully. «I made a decision and that decision very quickly led to me walking away from the crown jewel of old broadcasting and, in addition to that, being legally prohibited from going on television.» NBC's final separation agreement prohibited O'Brien from performing a show on another network for eight months, until September of last year, and from making disparaging comments about NBC Studios, Jay Leno, Jeff Zucker, and a small group of other NBC executives. «What was interesting about it,» points out O'Brien, «is that all the legal prohibitions were coming from people in the old media. They were saying you can't do all these things, and pretty quickly we realized, 'Wait a minute!' Someone said, 'Does that include Twitter? No. It doesn't include Twitter.' And so I started tweeting.»

Around seven o'clock in the morning on Feb. 24, 2010 -- a day that lives in social-media history -- O'Brien, sitting in his living room with his core team, including his longtime executive producer, Jeff Ross, and his former show blogger, Aaron Bleyaert, opened up a Twitter account, typed fewer than 140 characters, and hit the SEND TWEET button:

Today I interviewed a squirrel in my backyard and then threw to commercial. Somebody help me.

Bleyaert, who has his own massive following on Twitter, quickly re-tweeted it. The next thing he knew «it was like a skyrocket!» Every minute or so Bleyaert would refresh his browser, and O'Brien's account would have hundreds of new followers. Every minute. For hours. «I'm just sitting there laughing and laughing. I'm like, 'You guys, this is insane.' And they're like, 'Okay.' And I was like, 'No! You have no idea how crazy this is!' «

O'Brien shakes his head at the memory. «Aaron's saying, 'You're up to 250,000' or something, and I would say, 'I don't know what that means.' « It meant that O'Brien was setting the single-day record for gathering followers on Twitter.

Just as quickly, O'Brien's team began to hear that NBC was far from happy. «The network isn't crazy about you tweeting. They're not sure that's cool,» O'Brien recalls being told. His response was simple: «Tell them I would be thrilled if they shut down my Twitter account. I'd love it if that got out. You think PR's been bad up till now? Wait till you take away my Twitter account.» Today O'Brien laughs at the old-media disconnect of that moment: He is approaching 2.5 million followers.

[Read Conan's tweets to his fans](#)

O'Brien's next step was to give himself a job, hosting a traveling show he called the «Legally Prohibited From Being Funny on Television Tour.» He did it to support his staff, especially his show's eight-piece band, which had not received a severance package from NBC; to try to keep himself relevant; and to accommodate his wife, who wanted him out of the house.

Ross and the rest of the team booked a 30-city tour. They had a website built for ticket orders, acquired a sponsor (American Express ([AXP](#))), and began to talk about the advertising budget for the tour. That's when Ross, six years older than Conan and up to then just as mired in old media, matter-of-factly said, «Let's hold off on taking any ads and just tweet it out.» Now it's Ross's turn to shake his head. «People looked at me like I was crazy. But I was like, 'What's the risk? If it doesn't work in two days, we can advertise.' And it turned out to be a good idea.»

Actually, it turned out to be an amazing idea.

Hey Internet: I'm headed to your town on a half-assed comedy & music tour. Go to <http://TeamCoco.com> for tix. I repeat: it's half-assed.