

# How the Story Broke: Harvey Weinstein, Social Media, and the Blazing Inferno

*When it comes to how a news story breaks, it's safe to say that no two are exactly the same. In our new series, "How the Story Broke," we will be analyzing major stories to determine why they evolved the way that they did. Whether a story is a Flash in the Pan, a Slow Burn, or an Inferno that spreads like wildfire, we have the insight into how it happened, along with ideas for where it's going next.*

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On October 5, 2017, The New York Times published an [article](#) asserting that film producer and movie powerhouse Harvey Weinstein had “paid off sexual harassment accusers for decades.” It was hardly the first time a high-profile case of sexual assault made the news. In fact, this is part of the reason why the Weinstein controversy—which we categorize as an Inferno story—is having such a colossal impact on our culture: Not only has it given victims a long-awaited opportunity to make their voices heard, but it's established social media platforms as powerful spaces for gathering, support, and breaking news.

Weinstein's systematic abuse of power and habitual sexual misconduct exposed one of Hollywood's darkest secrets, and shined a light on an epidemic of sexual harassment. It exploded early, dominated the news cycle, and transformed into a national conversation. Backed by the reach, might, and sense of community inherent to social media, the Weinstein story has disrupted not only the entertainment industry, but our country as a whole.

Here's how.

## An Inferno Spreads Online With Real-World Results

The Weinstein story ignited online and in print, and it immediately went ablaze on social media. Mere hours after the Times published its report, Weinstein [issued an apology](#) and people began taking sides, with some celebrities going so far as to defend him.

Early on, actress Lindsay Lohan leveraged her Instagram following to [insist](#) that Weinstein wasn't being treated fairly, even including a "smiling face with halo" Emoji in her post. Lohan deleted the Instagram video soon afterward, but not before it was [shared by a BuzzFeed editor on Twitter](#) and picked up by the mainstream press.

*Within days, news stories unpacking Weinstein's infamous history were cropping up all over the web, while their repercussions played offline. On October 8, it was reported that Weinstein had been fired from The Weinstein Company.*



lindsay lohan (and her whack accent) is defending Harvey Weinstein on her insta rn. GOODBYE TO YOU FOREVER.



Lindsay Lohan on Instagram

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But what happened on October 10 garnered even more attention: Actress Rose McGowan [took to Twitter](#) to call out Ben Affleck for a [Facebook post](#) in which he claimed to be "saddened and angry" about Weinstein's behavior. The post generated close to 3,000 comments—some supportive, some calling Affleck a hypocrite. In her Tweet, McGowan stated Affleck knew about Weinstein's actions and failed to act.



Rose McGowan on Twitter



Chrissy Teigen on Twitter

*On October 15, the story morphed into something new: an opportunity for women everywhere to open up about their own experiences with sexual assault.*

The feud led to Twitter temporarily [suspending](#) McGowan’s account and sparked a [boycott of the social network](#) on October 13, which was [led by stars like Chrissy Teigen](#). The hashtag “#WomenBoycottTwitter” was used [more than 126,000 times](#).

What came next was a phenomenon that CNBC aptly [described](#) as a “ripple effect,” with the reports about Weinstein propagating allegations against countless others. As the story spread, CNN [compiled an incomplete list](#) of these “powerful men” accused of sexual harassment. The list is only the tip of the iceberg. While the majority of allegations are tied to men working in the entertainment industry, the “Weinstein effect”—a term also [coined by CNN](#)—cannot be contained. Countless politicians have been accused as well, along with people working in the fashion industry. Not 10 days after the Weinstein story came to light, model Cameron Russell [used her Instagram account](#) to begin sharing the harassment experiences of her peers. She encouraged others to post using the hashtag “#MyJobShouldNotIncludeAbuse,”

and the social site rejoined Facebook and Twitter as a platform for disseminating information relevant to the ever-growing story.

Meanwhile, back in Hollywood, news outlets [announced](#) that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences had voted in favor of Weinstein’s expulsion. Fresh reports of Weinstein’s misconduct continued to emerge from female celebrities, including Rosanna Arquette, Kate Beckinsale, Claire Forlani, and Gwyneth Paltrow. Others, like [Molly Ringwald](#) and [Lupita Nyong’o](#), published op-ed pieces revealing their experiences with Weinstein and sexual assault at large.

It wasn’t long before the focus shifted to social media once more. On October 15, the story morphed into something new: an opportunity for women everywhere to open up about their own experiences with sexual assault. That afternoon, actress Alyssa Milano used Twitter to [propose](#) that women post “#MeToo” to emphasize the massive scope of the epidemic.



All the Other Weinsteins in the New Yorker

While there was some confusion around #MeToo's authorship—it was first created by activist [Tarana Burke](#) a decade prior—the hashtag caught on, and in just two days #MeToo [expanded across the globe](#). The Twitter community rallied to spread the word, but it wasn't limited to one network. Facebook and Instagram also became hotbeds of activity as women divulged their own experiences to their personal networks. At times, more than [6 million users](#) were talking about the hashtag on Facebook. On Instagram, artist and graphic designer Victoria Siemer [created an image](#) that embodied the trend. It inspired [22,000 likes and hundreds of comments](#) in a single day.



Victoria Siemer's Instagram image

## A Hot-Button Topic With Fortuitous Timing

If there was another major factor at play in propelling the Weinstein story out of Hollywood and into the public eye, it was the timing of what is inarguably

a hot-button issue. Jodi Kantor, one of the investigative reporters responsible for taking Weinstein to task, explained how her view of the story changed as she conducted her research.

Kantor [told CNN](#) that she initially wondered if the public would feel it was old news, as many of the allegations against Weinstein referenced events that took place in the '90s. But then she discovered more recent incidents from 2014 and 2015. The New York Times had already "[made a real commitment to sexual harassment reporting this year](#)," publishing accusations against former Fox News anchor Bill O'Reilly in April and unmasking a "culture of sexual harassment" in Silicon Valley in June. When the moment came to expose Weinstein as well, Kantor [described](#) his behavior as "half an open secret" that seemed "really important to break."

From [accusations of sexual misconduct against President Donald Trump](#) to Bill Cosby's [sexual assault trial](#) earlier this year, America is currently hyperaware of breaking news stories related to sexual assault. At the same time, social media's expansive reach and starring role in our daily lives mean both eyewitness information and mainstream news travel at breakneck speed.

This has pushed similar but older stories back to the surface, including allegations of pedophilia made by actor [Cory Feldman](#) and [those against Woody Allen](#).

In Allen's case, claims initially circulated in the '90s when social media didn't yet exist. When Feldman's story surfaced in 2011 during [an appearance on Nightline](#), and again in 2013 with the [release of his memoir](#), Twitter wasn't the behemoth that it is now and the concept of hashtag activism was still evolving. Today, however, social media is the primary platform for news to break and viral communities to build—and it happens quickly.

The open secret of Weinstein's behavior is a secret no more. [Over 90 women](#) have accused Weinstein of sexual harassment thus far. This was a story long overdue for exposure that grew into an inferno of epic proportions, in large part because social media continued to break news critical to the story. As Renee Knake, professor at the University of Houston Law Center, [told CNN](#), social media is an outlet for sharing firsthand accounts which create "a critical mass" of testimonials. A combination of investigative journalism, online activism, and heightened cultural awareness around sexual assault fanned the flames of Weinstein's crimes.

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