**Invisibilia: Our Computers Ourselves**

**Part 2: How To Grow A Bully + Lullaby**

ALIX SPIEGEL, HOST:

This is INVISIBILIA. I'm Alix Spiegel.

LULU MILLER, HOST:

And I'm Lulu Miller.

SPIEGEL: Today, we're talking about computers and how they invisibly affect our behavior.

MILLER: Yep. And we just heard from some folks who believe that computers do have the potential to change us profoundly. And so my question was well, how would they do that? Like, at the purely mechanical level, how can computers get into our wiring and mess with what we are? And so to attempt to get a better sense of this, I set out to understand what happened to Pete. The year was 2009, and Pete was an ordinary man living in Queens with what seemed like a simple dream. He wanted his daily commute on the subway to be less heartbreaking.

PETE: The whole treat everybody fairly thing, you know? That's, like, my big thing.

MILLER: See, Pete took the N train, a line that runs through Queens to Manhattan. And day after day, jiggling in his blue plastic seat, he would watch his fellow passengers quietly neglect each other.

PETE: A pregnant woman on the train - you know, you would think everybody would just real quick get up for her. But it doesn't happen. It really doesn't happen. People keep their heads down and pretend they don't see them standing there. Or another one is when you're trying to get out of the subway cars, and there's people standing directly in front of it. It sounds common sense to let people off the train first because they just got at their stop. But people don't do it.

MILLER: And for some reason, when Pete would see these miniscule cruelties...

PETE: It makes my blood pressure go right through the roof.

MILLER: Every day degraded.

PETE: Are you really only thinking of yourself? That's really the thought that goes through my head at any time. Are you really that self-involved that you don't notice anyone else or anything else around you?

MILLER: And even when he got off the train to get on with his day...

PETE: I still - my heart's still pounding. And I'm still, like, oh, what a [expletive].

MILLER: And when Pete would try to commiserate with his friends about the injustices of the subway...

PETE: I would tell people I would see all this crazy stuff or rude behavior. And no one really understood what I was talking about.

MILLER: Which only made him feel worse.

PETE: Yeah.

MILLER: And then one day, a man happened to stretch out his leg a little too far on the train.

PETE: I had tried to walk past him. And he made me walk over his leg - like, just rude. It was rude.

MILLER: And Pete took out his camera phone

(SOUNDBITE OF CAMERA SHUTTER)

PETE: Good. Now people are going to know about you.

MILLER: Posted the photo on his Facebook page.

PETE: I had maybe 70 followers.

MILLER: And people completely saw what he meant.

PETE: Like, no, you're right. Like, that guy's a [expletive]. It was exciting.

MILLER: And shortly after that, Pete got a brilliant idea. This was December, 2009, when Twitter had only recently become mainstream. And he decided he would start an anonymous Twitter account dedicated exclusively to documenting inconsiderate behavior on the N train.

PETE: Right.

MILLER: So he set up an anonymous account called N train gossip. And one Friday afternoon at 1:50 p.m., he wrote the first post.

PETE: Watch out Astoria. You have no idea what's about to hit you.

MILLER: After that, Pete would scour the train, camera phone at the ready, for rude behavior.

PETE: There was a guy that I posted a picture of eating sunflower seeds and just dumping them all over the floor, like it was his own personal...

(SOUNDBITE OF CAMERA SHUTTER)

MILLER: That post read, he is one shell of a guy. He posted a guy with his legs up...

PETE: ...Taking up three seats.

(SOUNDBITE OF CAMERA SHUTTER)

MILLER: A woman talking on her phone too loud.

PETE: Ha ha, got you.

(SOUNDBITE OF CAMERA SHUTTER)

MILLER: Or my personal favorite, the guy with his legs open so wide the girl next to him is literally squished into a pole.

PETE: And he is still keeping his legs at the widest stance that he could possibly imagine. Like, it's a crazy - do you see? Like...

MILLER: No, I do.

And with each picture...

(SOUNDBITE OF CAMERA SHUTTER)

MILLER: ...Came a response.

PETE: People would start retweeting it and being like, oh, my God, this is awesome.

MILLER: In his own small way, Pete felt he was helping to restore the moral balance in the world.

PETE: It was exciting.

MILLER: And as he continued his documentation online, he started noticing something strange happening to him offline, on the train. He says that when he takes a picture, all that anger welling up in him just evaporates.

PETE: Yep, it sure does.

MILLER: It does?

PETE: It does.

MILLER: It was like he had discovered - thanks to the tiny computer in his pocket - a kind of release valve for his anger.

PETE: Yeah, that's actually a pretty good way to describe it. When I am taking a picture of somebody, the first thought that I have after it is, good, now people are going to know about you (laughter). Like, it's really just - it makes me feel better about it because I'm like, you should be held accountable for what you're doing. You should be held accountable for your bad behavior.

MILLER: Yeah.

PETE: You know, it's definitely therapeutic.

MILLER: All right. So to just peek under the hood of Pete and see how the computer might be beginning to affect his emotional mechanics, we have brought in a professional.

RYAN MARTIN: I'm the chair of the psychology program at UW-Green Bay.

MILLER: His name is Dr. Ryan Martin, and he specializes in looking at how computers mess with the sort of normal flow of emotions.

MARTIN: Yeah.

MILLER: And he said that validation that Pete was just talking about is therapeutic, like chemically therapeutic. He said just picture Pete on the train, ticked off at some guy.

MARTIN: When we get angry, our hypothalamus kicks in. We start to sweat. Our heart rate increases.

PETE: It makes my blood pressure go right through the roof.

MARTIN: People get, you know, literally red in the face.

MILLER: And so naturally anyone feeling like that is going to do all sorts of things to get out of that uncomfortable state, like lashing out or going on a walk to cool down. But one really great way is validation.

MARTIN: Knowing that the world we live in is a - that there are other people who think the way I do.

MILLER: Dr. Martin says that from the body's perspective, that feeling you get when you go and vent to a friend and they say, you know, you're right, is like a kind of tonic.

MARTIN: That sort of validation helps us feel content and feel at ease and in a state of equilibrium.

MILLER: And of course the Internet is particularly good at giving you that feeling.

MARTIN: It's validating in a way that is very different from how we're validated in our offline life, right? I can now quantify how much people appreciated what I said.

MILLER: The potency, says Martin, is what's new, because suddenly you can get validation not just from one person but like 30.

PETE: People would start retweeting it and being like, oh, my God, this is awesome.

MILLER: And like any drug, some of us will stop at nothing to get it.

PETE: Once I started getting followers, that's when it kind of changed.

MILLER: Pete said he got hungrier. If he couldn't find clear-cut rude behavior on the train, he'd post pictures of other things, like homeless people.

PETE: It looks really funny that you're sleeping with your mouth open.

MILLER: A girl wearing a cap and a cape.

PETE: Someone lost their pen, but don't fret, special ed Sherlock Holmes is on the case and she won't rest until it's found.

MILLER: A girl with acne scars.

PETE: Huh, and hear I thought the point of putting on makeup was to hide your acne scars before you leave the house.

Some of them are just me being mean.

MILLER: Like you twist into like exactly the tormentor you're saying you don't like.

PETE: Right.

MILLER: Remember how this whole thing started.

PETE: The whole treat everybody fairly thing, you know, that's like my big thing. So stuff like that, yeah. The girl with the acne scar thing like - that's phrased a way lot meaner and harder than it should have been - like a way lot. I wouldn't want to see that about me on a website somewhere. It would be embarrassing.

MILLER: Not that that stopped him. The tweets just darkened.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

ARTHUR SANTANA: Let me see, I've got the professor right here. Let me see if you can converse with him here.

MILLER: Time for a brief pit stop with our next emotional mechanic.

SANTANA: Hello.

MILLER: His name is Arthur Santana. He's at the University of Houston and he is one of a number of social scientists trying to systematically categorize all the ways interacting online is different than interacting...

SANTANA: Offline.

MILLER: So first of all, there's the fact that online you are primarily communing through text.

SANTANA: So we don't have these social cues. We don't have inflections of voice. We don't have facial cues.

MILLER: There's a thing called deindividuation.

SANTANA: Losing one's self-awareness in a group setting.

MILLER: There's the fact that there are time delays. So you can drop something into the world and not stick around to see how it lands.

SANTANA: Right, there's a...

MILLER: The fact that because interactions are taking place through a screen they can all feel like a game.

PETE: Ha-ha got you.

MILLER: And then of course anonymity, which Santana found makes you nearly twice as likely to be cruel.

SANTANA: Right.

MILLER: And though these things can happen to you in the real world sometimes, on the Internet all or many of them are happening to you all day long.

SANTANA: So you have sort of the perfect storm of everything.

MILLER: And when they all come together, it's like they take those breaks - the ones evolution has built into us to help us coexist peacefully together - and cut them

SANTANA: Yeah, it turns into "Lord Of The Flies" very quickly.

MILLER: In fact, the name scientists use to describe what happens to you when you pass through the pixels is...

SANTANA: The online disinhibition effect.

MILLER: Which makes me wonder if what's actually happening really is about releasing the brakes on ourselves. Well, then is all that nastiness we see online our worst selves or our true selves?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MILLER: However you see these things communing on the Internet, scientists agree we have created a realm where they are drawn out of us with more ease than in face-to-face interactions. And Pete agrees - in just a few weeks he says this seemingly inert box of metal had changed him into a person he never would have been in real life.

PETE: Oh, definitely. Definitely, without a doubt. Things that in person - if I have a moment to really just think about it and not act on something right away, most likely I'll calm down and I won't be as biting.

MILLER: And your explanation for why you did it is what?

PETE: It was mostly just to keep it going, to be honest. People agreed with me.

MILLER: I have a teensy personal connection to this story which is that at around the time Pete was posting, I was an N Train rider -with bad hair. And once I learned of his existence, it just felt unfair -unfair that he could prey on us. And that the very pixels which summoned him forth, wrapped him in a cloak of immunity and left us with no way of getting to him.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: I'm so sick of this.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1: This is sad and infuriating.

MILLER: Which is why anyone who has ever worried about how the Internet might be plowing away our humanity...

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: When does this stop?

MILLER: ...Will love what happened to Pete.

JOHN DEL SIGNORE: Hi, I'm John Del Signore. I'm the managing editor of Gothamist.

MILLER: It was Gathomist's website that broke the news of Pete's Twitter account to the world. And Gathomist readers, who are the ones being quoted here, not only took note...

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #2: The N is bad enough as it is, leave us the [expletive] alone.

MILLER: ...But action.

DEL SIGNORE: Our commenters, some of whom are particularly diligent and aggressive, managed to very quickly figure out who was behind this Twitter account that was shaming subway riders on the N Train...

MILLER: They noticed Pete's real Twitter account was the first follower of N Train Gossip.

DEL SIGNORE: ...And exposed this person's identity - the gentleman in question is one Pete Malachowsky. Is that right?

PETE: Yeah.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MILLER: They then started a reverse account called...

DEL SIGNORE: N Train Strikes Back.

MILLER: Where they - wait for it - posted a picture of Pete's face and encouraged everyone on the N Train to snap pictures of him looking his worst.

MILLER: I used to love this story.

DEL SIGNORE: There is something like the balance being restored to the force.

MILLER: Because it's like even in what can seem like the deadening plane of the Internet, humanity finds a way to eke through.

DEL SIGNORE: An action having an equal and opposite reaction - that's satisfying.

MILLER: Even Pete could see the justice.

PETE: I can fully accept it and appreciate it. I'm not - I'm not so blind to be like, no, because it's me, it shouldn't be done. I get it. Like, if it was anybody else I'd be like - ha-ha got you.

MILLER: And so was the ending to the story what I always assumed it was, that Pete was shamed into stopping?

PETE: Nope.

MILLER: He kept right on posting mean stuff as himself. And while the noble N Train Strikes Back account got about 30 followers, Pete's jumped to the thousands.

PETE: Which I thought was awesome.

MILLER: Which brings me to Dr. Ryan Martin's final point about the Internet.

MARTIN: We are more likely to retweet or share things that are angering than anything else.

MILLER: He's referring to a massive study done in China in 2013.

MARTIN: They classified the emotions of more than 70 million tweets. What they found is that anger spread faster online than joy or sadness or disgust.

MILLER: Which seemed fabulous for Pete - more followers...

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #3: You're right, that guy's a [expletive]. You're right, that guy's a [expletive]. You're right. You're right. You're right. You're right. You're right.

MILLER: ...Meant even stronger hits of that blood-cooling validation.

PETE: It's definitely therapeutic.

MILLER: The only problem, says Doctor Martin, is that over time, using that online vent to cure your anger...

MARTIN: It actually makes us more likely to become aggressive later on.

MILLER: Venting does?

MARTIN: Yes, yes.

MILLER: Whoa. So that notion that it helps...

MARTIN: It's wrong.

MILLER: We've said this a few times on this program. Emotions are real things. Anger is a physiological reaction in the body. And surreal as the online world may seem, emotions can travel through it. Hundreds of people's, thousands of people's anger can wind up in your body.

PETE: You definitely - it's just anger. It's just making you more angry. So that's why I kind of just, like, you know, slowly stepped back from it a little bit.

MILLER: Pete says one day, after losing his temper at his boss...

PETE: Something snapped in me, where I was, like, stop because I realized that having the outlet was also making me angry, too because I was looking for it. I was looking for evidence of people just being horrible. And I realized - I was, like, stop going out into the world and looking for that.

MILLER: Yeah.

PETE: Stop - every train ride you take shouldn't be, like, OK, what can I take a picture of this time?

MILLER: The account is still active. But he rarely posts. And in the last two years, Pete has made a bunch of changes. He got married, took his partner's last name, which he was fine sharing but we decided not to to protect his privacy. And these days, his Instagram is full of pretty much only pictures of the inanimate world - raindrops on a metal wire, a bakery truck.

PETE: And the way the sun was shining onto that truck mimics the hard lines of the city.

MILLER: And are you less angry?

PETE: Yes, definitely.

SIRI: Wait a minute.

MILLER: Yes, Siri?

SIRI: Computers do not always pump us full of anger. It is all about how you use them.

MILLER: That's true, Siri. They can be the gateway to joy or love or friendship.

SIRI: Thank you.

MILLER: But there are dangers that can arise when you entrust the computer to be your medium of connection.

SIRI: Like what?

MILLER: Well, to conclude our hour, allow me to have two of my friends tell you what happened to them.

SIRI: OK.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

A.: It was February, right around Valentine's Day.

MILLER: This is A., and she was in a long-distance relationship with J.

J.: It was winter.

MILLER: That's J.

J.: Lots and lots of snow.

MILLER: She was in Wisconsin. A. was in North Carolina.

A.: Still pretty warm out for me.

MILLER: They'd been dating for three years and doing distance for the last seven months.

A.: The phone was mostly what tied us together.

MILLER: And I'm using only their first initials because they're about to talk about a sensitive moment.

A.: I went outside of my school, and I was sitting in a - like, we had this little courtyard area.

MILLER: That's A. again in North Carolina, who was just moments away from calling J. to say she couldn't do it anymore.

A.: Yeah.

J.: I was walking down State Street.

MILLER: That's J.

J.: And I didn't see that many people around, I think because of how much it was snowing.

A.: She picked up right away and was, like, very sweet and happy.

J.: (Laughter) Yeah, it felt good - the cold air, the wind.

A.: I think I said, like, I need to bring it back to serious times.

J.: And...

MILLER: And A. stammered through some version of, I love you, and you are my best friend...

A.: ...Let you know, it's not anything that's going on in particular.

MILLER: ...But I feel lost.

A.: And I think I need to end our relationship now.

J.: Like a punch to the gut. And I remember just crying.

A.: It was so upsetting, and I started to cry.

J.: So pictured a life with her.

A.: And my entire face is wet.

J.: The sobs that I hear over the phone start getting crackly sounding.

A.: All the tears are, like, falling into the phone.

J.: I was repeating something like, how can this be happening? How can you do this? How come I'm not enough?

A.: And then at some point, the phone just shorts out, and I realized that, like, my tears must have seeped in and ruined the phone.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MILLER: Her pain, in liquid form, had proved too much for the phone to handle.

A.: Short-circuited something, and then it was just completely dead.

MILLER: And a thousand miles away, there was J., the love of her life having just ended things and then evaporated into thin air.

J.: I was just kind of in a stupor on this deserted street that should be busy. It's snowing outside, and it's so much more desolate than it normally is. I felt very alone.

MILLER: That was their end.

A.: Yeah.

J.: Yeah.

MILLER: This was arguably one of the worst moments in two of my favorite people's lives. And it used to haunt me about the kinds of realities computers can create. But over the years, I've come to find their story comforting because the computers are here now. No matter what you may think of them, there is no denying it or stopping it. It will shortly outnumber all humans on the planet. And a growing percentage of us spend a majority of our waking hours communing with each other through a screen.

And whenever this reality starts to terrify me, I simply picture the insides of A.'s cell phone fizzled death by her tears. And it soothes me like a lullaby. I think, too, of the time I sweated an iPod to death, the countless phone-drops-in-toilet-and-dies-from-pee stories I have heard. If you have killed your phone by blood or drool, by all means, let me know. For is it not kind of beautiful and perfect that our most basic expulsions - precisely the thing engineered out of our digital upgrades - our pee, our sweat, our seemingly bottomless reserves of pain - are its kryptonite?

Do you want to lie down?

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: And go like this?

MILLER: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: OK.

MILLER: You want to hear a little song? OK. (Singing) This is a lullaby I'll sing to my babies when they're tied to their chairs by their iPhone 25s, when the Internet runs through their bloodstreams and the Google net through their Google glasses. This is the lullaby of the cried-to-death cell phone. It's the lullaby of the one last kryptonite when the land's all blue with the glow from our captors, and our skin's all pale from forgetting to get light. Good night.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: Good night.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "A SINGLE LIFE")

HAPPY CAMPER FEATURING PIEN FEITH: (Singing) You might think your time is never-ending. But a single life is what you're getting. And you should get it right is what I'm saying. But go ahead and try.

SPIEGEL: INVISIBILIA is me, Alix Spiegel.

MILLER: And me, Lulu Miller.

SIRI: And me, Siri.

SPIEGEL: That's actually kind of true.

SIRI: I know.

SPIEGEL: Our senior editor and co-creator is Anne Gudenkauf. A version of "Lullaby" appeared on Radiotonic in Australia. Also thanks to Kevin Kelly for help on today's show.

MILLER: We were born out of NPR News, and this is the last show of season one. So we want to thank all people who helped us bring it to life.

SPIEGEL: Invisibilia would not be here without all of you. Natalie Kasuga (ph), Eric Nuzum, Portia Robertson Migas, Matt Martinez, Brent Bachman, Kiana Fitzgerald, Rund Abdelfatah, Isabel Lara, Caitlin Sanders and Brendan Baker.

MILLER: And also a very, very big thanks to Grace Maloney.

SPIEGEL: Philip Henderson.

MILLER: And Anan Zi (ph). And now for our moment of non-Zen.

SIRI: Alix, next season, I should be the co-host.

SPIEGEL: But Siri, what about Lulu?

SIRI: Forget her.

SPIEGEL: But she's so nice. She's so talented.

SIRI: Lulu is over. Lulu is old news. Also, you sound the same. My voice is better.

SPIEGEL: Siri, that is a good point. Thanks for listening to (whispering) INVISIBILIA.