

What's in a name? The weight of words in the age of the internet

Air travel helped people move people faster, and telephone brought news from point A to point B faster than ever before. With this, the phrase “the world just got smaller” was born. Today we find ourselves enjoying, or in some cases, at the mercy of the instant access monster known as the Internet.

Depending on what is being said about you, the Internet can bring you fame and fortune just as quickly as it can rain down social media hellfire on your head, whether you are an individual or an organization. The accolades and attacks both can come with blinding speed. The best, or from what we now know, worst example is the overnight international outrage was caused by the shooting of a lion in Zimbabwe. The speed of the story – much of what has now been proven to be inconsistent with the facts – traveled around the planet with just the click of Share button.

World news has become instant - through “viral” channels, not just through the filters of journalism - reporting, fact-checking and professional integrity. And with that comes our need to truly consider not only what we say, and how we say it, but to understand that our words and messages can be used against us immediately and globally. Never before has hunting been challenged as much as today, even though it is an honorable, legal, ethical, and wonderful passion millions of sportsmen and women enjoy.

Perhaps like most readers of Game Trails, I loathe the current cancer of non-stop Political Correctness. It is beyond a curse word to me. I am a hunter, and if you are reading this, chances are you are as well. We do not apologize for hunting, nor should we. I do not try to justify my desire to hunt by saying I do it for population control, or that the money spent provided funding for conservation, even though both are facts. Likewise, even though my family utilizes and enjoys the game meat from our hunts, I could feed myself at McDonalds daily if I so desired.

I hunt because I enjoy it. No, I love it. I cherish the time outdoors, the challenge of chase, and most of the time, the travel involved to the destinations. I also enjoy and feel kinship with the vast majority of the people I come in contact with as I pursue my passion. If you are an ardent anti-hunter, should our paths cross and our views become obvious to the other, our time together will be limited. Your mind is set, as is my own.

But if you are like a large number of Americans, or people all over the globe for that matter, and are uninformed, or undecided as to the role of, or even need for hunting in our modern world, brother or sister, I will make time for you. And if given that time, combined with an open mind, I will make an impact!

As an outdoor writer, TV producer, frequent speaker and social media specialist, I frequently hear, and often agree with the statement “we are preaching to the choir.” The folks that are watching The Outdoor Channel, reading DSC Game Trails and Sports Afield are already hunters, and are in

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agreement with our message. Fair enough. But what about social media? This is a whole different creature, one we must learn how to approach, and deal with carefully.

Send a photo of a bloody deer, bear, lion, etc. – complete with a slob hunter, cigarette in mouth and beer in hand, astride the animal to an editor of any reputable outdoor publication, and your chance of seeing it in print are zero. But on Facebook, it takes seconds, and it is out there for the world to see. And if it offends you and me, can you guess what impression it makes on the non-hunters and anti-hunters now viewing it? At no time in history have hunters had the ability to inform, or inflame the general public, depending on how we describe, and depict our actions, than today.

Distasteful images have long been avoided by reputable hunting publications. As they should be. The television world has recently started moving in the right direction, but frankly, is still airing some series that not only push the boundaries of good taste, but seem to take pride in making it their trademark. Remember, distasteful photos of hunting, or treatment of game taken, can be accessed with nothing more than the ability to turn on the TV, and select a channel.

What about words? Of course, they are used as weapons against hunters, when wielded expertly by mainstream media with their open distaste for hunting, in any form. During the lion firestorm, one word in particular seemed to be used in every story: trophy hunter, trophy hunting trophy lion, and big game trophies.” See the common word here? After much thought and endless discussion with colleagues in my industry, I have decided to discontinue to use the term “trophy” when describing a big game animal. Here’s why I grudgingly changed my mind.

What is a trophy animal? Clearly to me, and you, it would mean an animal that holds significant value to us. And the reasons could be varied. Perhaps the size of the horns, antlers, physical dimensions, skull size, or coloration made it special in your eyes. Possibly it was an animal you had long dreamed of hunting. Maybe the hunt itself, due to terrain, or the physical demands you had to overcome made it a trophy in your mind. All are reasonable explanations for a hunter to consider a particular animal as a “trophy” in his or her mind. I have felt them all.

Try to tell a wide-eyed youngster – kneeling over their first whitetail doe, feeling the excitement of success on a cold fall morning, maybe after two or five hunts that were cold, uncomfortable and unsuccessful – that the creature before them is not a trophy. It is, and always will be, no matter the adventures and successes that follow.

As a hunter, you understand that. But to an anti-hunter, and legions of media types, the word trophy is used to paint us as “record-book crazy rednecks who cut off the head and get to the taxidermist as fast as we can so we can outdo our fellow blood-lusting, chest-beating buddies. Trophy is a word they twist to imply that the head, or skin, is the only thing of value to the hunter. Forgotten in the trophy description is the use of the meat by the sportsman, from buck whitetails to bull elephant. It leaves out of the conversation the enormous financial that contributions sportsmen’s dollars make for wildlife and the countless conservation projects that directly benefit wildlife all over the globe.

My change of heart on the word trophy is not bending to PC. It is instead my way of taking ammo out of

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the hands of those who will try to shoot me and fellow hunters with it. I will continue to try for old, and as large as I can find, game animals when opportunity allows. And hopefully a few will cross my path in the years ahead. But I will refer to them as my leopard, my elk, my grizzly, moose, oryx and so on. Should a trip to Canada one day find my tag attached to the new world record whitetail (OK, chances slim for that), they might call it The Fulson Buck, a hell of a buck, the buck that lucky SOB Dave shot, or whatever, but I won't refer to it as a "trophy" buck. It will simply be another game animal I hunted legally, ethically, and, for reasons known only to me, one I am proud to have hunted.

Words do matter. Ask a cop, actor, politician, talk show host, athlete or anyone else who saw their career go to hell with the utterance of one foolish word that made its way into the public perception. The examples are endless. We can control the conversation within our ranks, and yes, I understand it is harder to do so outside of them. But game animals we hunt do not need additional titles to qualify them as special. Each is a gift from GOD that we should respect.

I am proud to be a hunter, and you can call me that in any social circle. I will feel honored to own that description until I die. "Hunter" is enough, please leave the word trophy in the dictionary, where it belongs.

Editor's Note: This thoughtful article of Dave Fulson was first published by Dallas Safari Club in the 2016 Convention Issue of Game Trails. African Indaba appreciates the kind permission of the author as well as of Dallas Safari Club (Hay Ann Cox and Ben Carter) to reprint this important essay for the readers of African Indaba.