

I TURNED CAPS LOCK ON FOR A WEEK AND EVERYONE HATED IT



Kashmir Hill

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Photo Illustration by Elena Scotti/Fusion

THE CAPS LOCK KEY MAY BE THE MOST DESPISED KEY IN EXISTENCE. A "CapsOff" campaign was launched in 2006 to get it permanently removed from keyboards, with the organizers calling the key "useless" and a "villain." Some companies have started to eliminate it. Google abandoned it on its Chromebooks, replacing it with a search

key. Lenovo ditched it on the Thinkpad. *The Oatmeal* says using all caps makes you seem like a demented, tech-illiterate, old person. Typing in all caps is perceived as an accident, an affront or a call for help. Typing in ALL CAPS arouses strong emotions in people. I know. I USED ALL CAPS FOR A WEEK AND PEOPLE HATED IT.

I wasn't just being a troll. After the Sony Pictures hack, my colleagues and I were talking about the incredible email writing style of Sony Pictures head Amy Pascal. She used all caps liberally in short and long bursts. We weren't the only ones who noticed. The *New York Post* created a Pascalizer to transform your emails into Pascal emails, which mainly involved capitalizing them. *Vanity Fair* called her "a maestro of the e-mail art form." Pascal's style got her to the head of Sony Pictures, and once it was exposed, helped her to "hack the hearts" of outsiders who read her email. (Though it didn't fully protect her; she stepped down from heading Sony Pictures Thursday.) I was curious how it would change my own style to use all caps and how people would react to it.

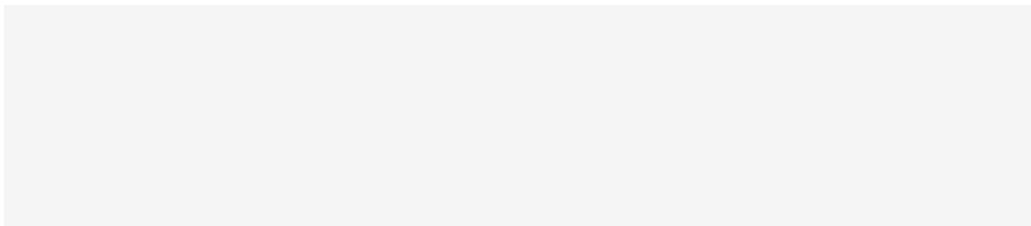
OK, MAYBE I WAS TROLLING PEOPLE A LITTLE. A little.

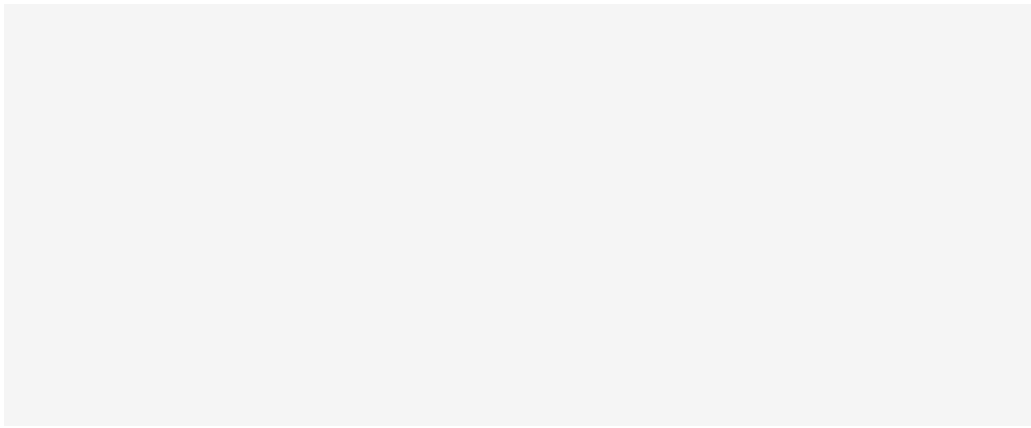
I didn't tell people why I was doing it. One Sunday, I just started writing all my tweets, emails, texts, and online communications with the caps lock key engaged.

"In solidarity I'm going to go around yelling at everyone for the week IRL," joked one of my colleagues. I think that a screaming experiment might actually have been easier. I type at far more people in a week than I talk to.

The first place I tried all caps was in a customer service chat with American Express.

"Rick" was unfailingly nice and one of the only people who chose not to comment on my unusual online speaking style. He seemed even more polite than usual, drowning me in pleases and thank you's. Maybe he thought the caps meant I was super mad and needed appeasing.





Other people were not so nice. I lost followers at an excessively high rate on Twitter. Techdirt editor Mike Masnick said his eyes were glazing over my tweets, leaving them unread. People asked if I'd been hacked, or if my keyboard was broken. One person helpfully directed me to the location of the caps lock key so I could turn it off.

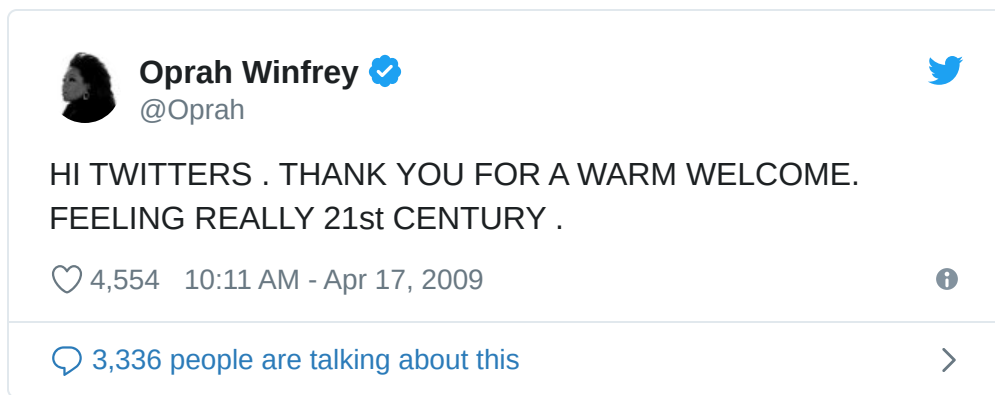
[@kashhill](#) are you aware you are 'shouting'

— [@MikeIsaac](#) [January 27, 2015](#)

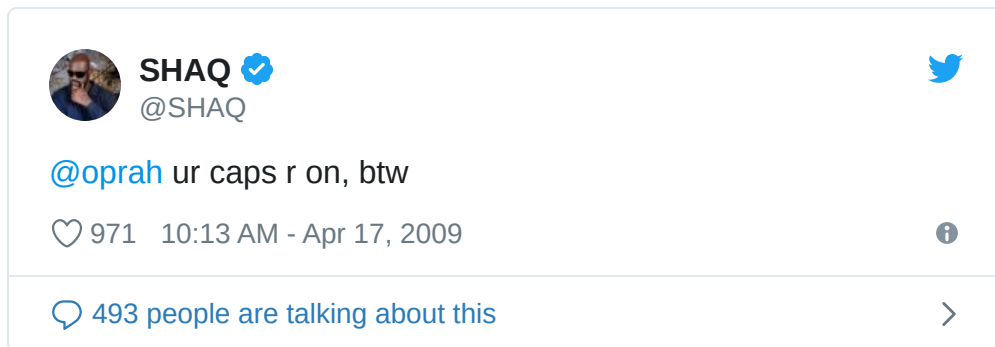
<https://twitter.com/TheRegHunt/status/560166419674181633>



When Oprah first joined Twitter, she used all caps in her first tweet — ironically (?) talking about how 21st Century she felt.



She was quickly chastised in all lower case by Shaq, who is apparently a hater of all caps... except when he is typing his own name.




On Twitter, broadcasting widely, my caps usage just seemed eccentric, but in one-on-one conversations the sudden shift conveyed rage. My roommates thought I was mad at them based on my all caps texts about our wi-fi network having problems. My younger sister thought my first all-caps message was a mistake that I was too lazy to change. "But after the second one, I thought, 'What the heck? Why are you yelling at me?'" she told me. One of my colleagues said my questions about one of her stories — posed in Slack — read harsher than usual. She was *in on the experiment* but still found it hard to unload the emotional baggage attached to caps.


I felt meaner in caps. Even institutions seem to feel that way. When the Navy got rid of its ALL CAPS ship-to-ship messaging system in 2013, replacing it with email, it named its replacement "Navy Interface for Command Email" or N.I.C.E.

I thought I would feel empowered by caps, and sometimes I did. Caps is a way of communicating that WHAT I HAVE TO SAY IS IMPORTANT. That meant I actually had



to be careful. In a normal lower-case week, I would have jokingly tweeted a story about a drunk government employee crashing a toy drone into the yard of the White House as, "First drone attack at the White House..." But tweeting that in all caps, "FIRST DRONE ATTACK AT THE WHITE HOUSE," would have been alarming. I had to become more straight-forward in everything I wrote. When your sentences are full of capital letters, there's no room left for nuance.



 **Kashmir Hill** 
@kashhill 

GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE CRASHED DRONE AT WHITE HOUSE WHILE FLYING IT RECREATIONALLY AT 3 A.M. LAST NIGHT [nytimes.com/2015/01/27/us/...](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/us/...)



A Drone, Too Small for Radar to Detect, Rattles the White House
A system to detect flying objects failed to pick up a small drone, raising questions about whether the Secret Service could bring down [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)

 19 3:10 PM - Jan 26, 2015 

 54 people are talking about this 

But as much as people complained on Twitter about all caps, they worked at getting attention. I tweeted a *Vice* story about the state of Illinois passing a law to make school kids hand over their social network passwords with a normal-cased note — "This is crazy" — the Friday before I started the experiment. A week later at the same time of day, I published the same tweet linking the same story but in all caps.



Kashmir Hill 
@kashhill



This is crazy motherboard.vice.com/read/illinois-...



Illinois Says Rule-Breaking Students Must Give Teachers Thei...

If teachers suspect cyberbullying, they can force students to give up their social media passwords under a new state law.

[vice.com](https://www.vice.com)

 4 9:08 PM - Jan 23, 2015



 [See Kashmir Hill's other Tweets](#)





Kashmir Hill 
@kashhill



THIS IS CRAZY motherboard.vice.com/read/illinois-...



Illinois Says Rule-Breaking Students Must Give Teachers Thei...

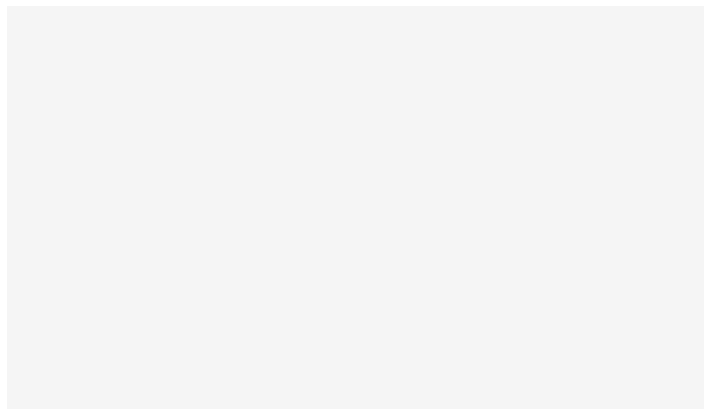
If teachers suspect cyberbullying, they can force students to give up their social media passwords under a new state law.

[vice.com](https://www.vice.com)

 11 9:08 PM - Jan 30, 2015



 17 people are talking about this

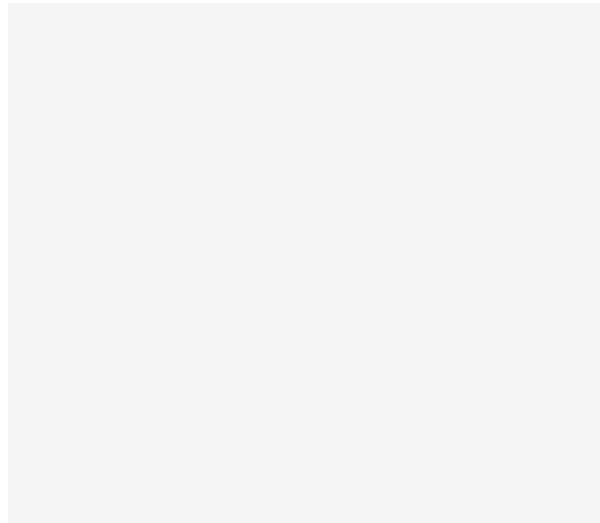


The Drudge report

It got more favs and RTs in all caps, and 65% more people clicked on it. Perhaps this is why the Drudge Report uses so much capping in the headlines on its site. Though the capping style there boggles the mind. Sometimes it's certain words, sometimes whole

sentences. I emailed founder Matt Drudge to see if he has a "CAPS STYLE GUIDE" but he didn't respond.

Once I got used to all caps, I started shortening everything I wrote. No need for clauses and throat clearing. You can't write "I THINK" or "PERHAPS" in all caps. One who is writing in all caps is certain about the world.



What Google suggests when you search CAPS KEY on mobile

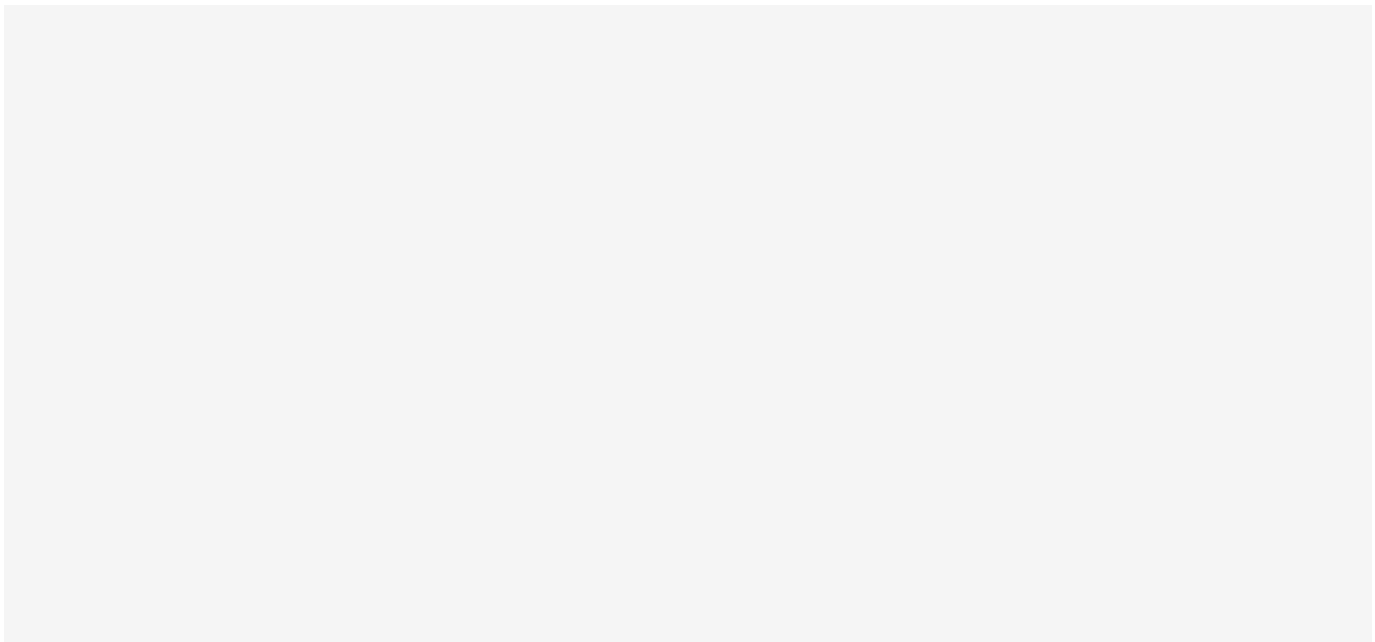
Even my iPhone seemed to realize it. When I engaged all caps mode by tapping the caps key twice, the iPhone no longer tried to auto-correct my typos. The iPhone either knows that someone typing in all caps knows what she's doing or it's in league with the all-caps haters to make people using all caps look dumb. The iPhone tries all the time to get me out of all caps mode. If I switch to the number keyboard, I come back out in normal case. If I use punctuation, I lose my caps lock. So I just stop using punctuation. It's for the best anyway. Using punctuation once you've gone all caps is like wearing a bikini at a nudist colony.

When I send emails, the recipients almost always comment. "Whoa, CAPS!" says a Google spokesperson. "Was it your intention to write in all caps?" asks a female law student. I feel especially self-conscious when emailing Kate Zabriskie who trains people on email etiquette at Business Training Works. I imagine Zabriskie cringing as she reads my MEDIA INQUIRY. Zabriskie says that the caps lock issue was a bigger

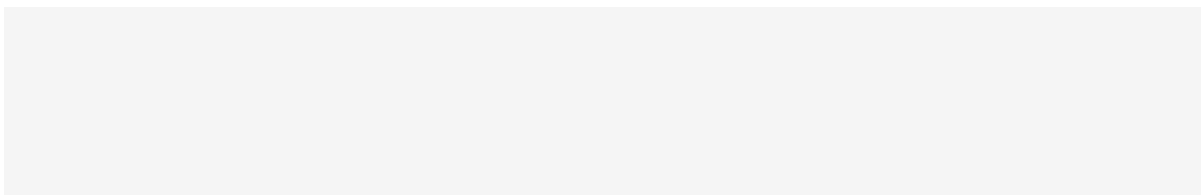
problem for computer users she trained 10 years ago. Now most people — yes, even your grandmother — are aware when the caps lock key is on and know how to turn it off. "We recommend not writing in all caps though," says Zabriskie. "The goal of any email should be understanding in one read. Why oh why would you use all caps if they make information digestion harder and could possibly be offensive."

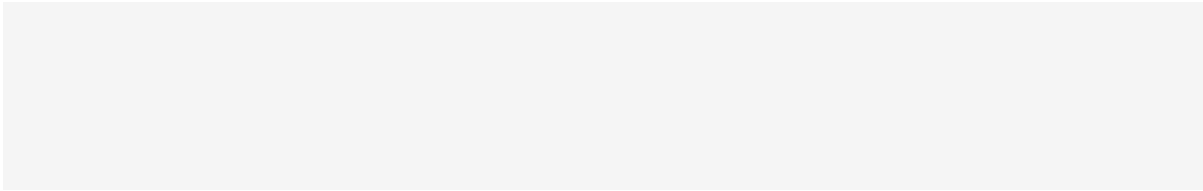
Yes, studies dating back to the 1920s — and mostly conducted by this psychologist, Miles Tinker, who was obsessed with text legibility — have found that lower case is easier to read than all upper case. A whole paragraph of upper caps is not fun to read. In fact, I see a comment on the web from a designer who says his clients put bad news in all caps paragraphs, knowing readers' eyes will skip over it.

But the idea that all upper case means that you're crazy or shouting is relatively new. Comic books for a long time used all upper case to save cartoonists time in lettering, and they often still do. Spiderman is not shouting in his head here:



When Calvin does want to shout in a comic, he goes bold and big:

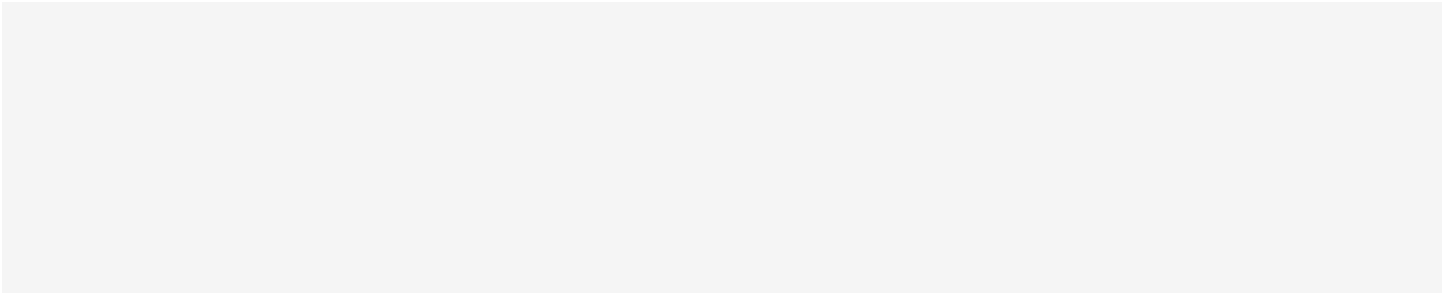




If you hate all caps, be glad you weren't an early adopter in the 1870s. The first keyboard as we know them today came on a typewriter in 1873 that only had caps. Then the Remington 2 typewriter came along in 1878 with lower case letters and a "shift" key to toggle back and forth between cases. A "Shift Lock" key didn't come along until later, when typewriter makers realized it was annoying to hold down the shift button for multiple capitals in a row. But the shift lock key didn't just turn lower case into upper case, it turned numbers into symbols. That was a problem.

"I invented the caps lock key. People curse me every day when they have it engaged and wish it were disengaged," said Doug Kerr, a former Bell Labs engineer, as an aside during a recent 99% Invisible episode. Kerr, who holds a patent granted in 1971 on what we now call the "caps lock" key, told me in a Skype interview that the creation of the caps lock key also involved swearing.

Kerr, 78, worked as a telephone engineer at Bell Labs in the 1960s. The Postal Service at the time recommended that addresses on envelopes be in all caps to optimize readability. "I'd go in to to see my boss, and hear his secretary yell, 'Shit,' and then hear the sound of an envelope being ripped loudly from a typewriter," says Kerr. With the shift lock key engaged, she would have typed \$%^& instead of 4567 in an address. So, Kerr who tinkered with teletypewriters as a hobby suggested a "caps" key. It would only capitalize letters so the "operator is not deprived of convenient access to the numerals and certain common punctuation marks," reads the patent submitted by Bell Labs. The "cap" key was born:



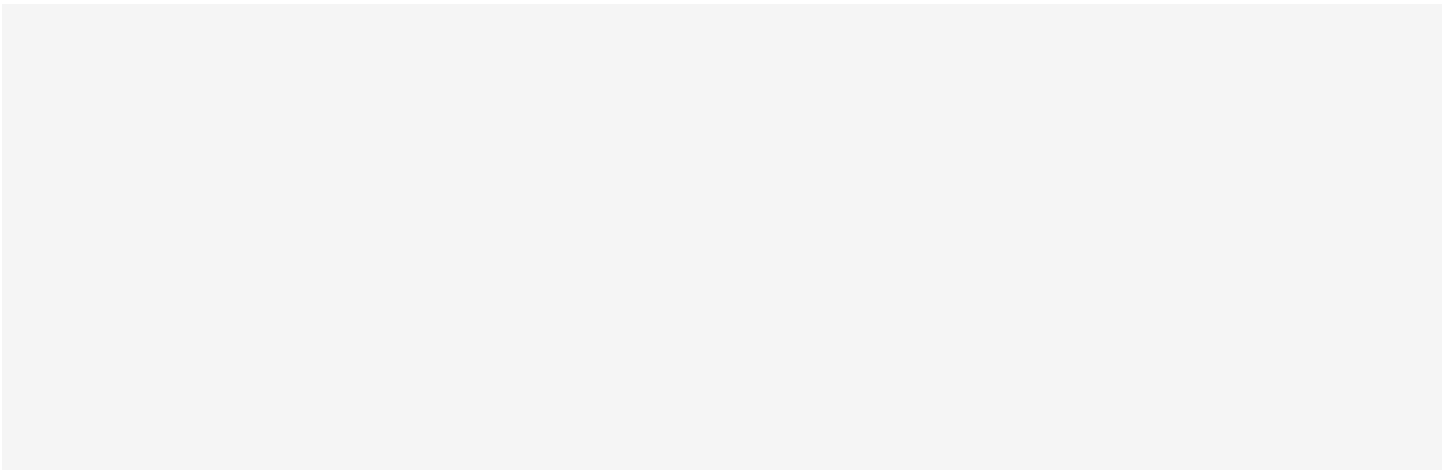


Illustration on the Doug Kerr's 1971 patent on what we now know as the caps lock key.

Kerr says he's aware of the ire toward the caps lock key. He even admits it's not as necessary as it used to be, though he still likes engaging it when typing acronyms. "I invented a thing that can be very useful, but like any useful thing it can be abused or misunderstood," he says. "It's especially bad if there is no indicator. The 'num lock' key is a dreadful thing and I have to remind people I didn't invent that."

There are at least two patents for an indicator that caps lock is on, but those did not come along until the mid-2000s.

That wasn't my problem during caps week though. My problem was when I forget to turn caps on when typing. And then I'd have a long sentence of little useless letters. I became a frequent visitor to "Convertcase.net," a website with the sole purpose of converting your words to sentence case, lower case, UPPER CASE, Capitalized Case or aLtErNaTiNg cAsE. Created in 2006 by a British developer named Jason Gillyon, it's used over a million times per month. To my surprise, people don't usually visit it because they accidentally turned the caps lock key on. Instead, Gillyon tells me that more than half of the visits in the previous month were from people who wanted to make their sentence Capitalized Case (482,854) or UPPER CASE (252,712). I'm far from the only fan of caps.

Caps can be effective after all, when used sparingly, for emphasis. It is especially nice around pleasant thoughts. Other emphasis options are the asterisk or the tilde, but sometimes those just don't do the trick:

This makes me so happy!

This makes me *so happy*

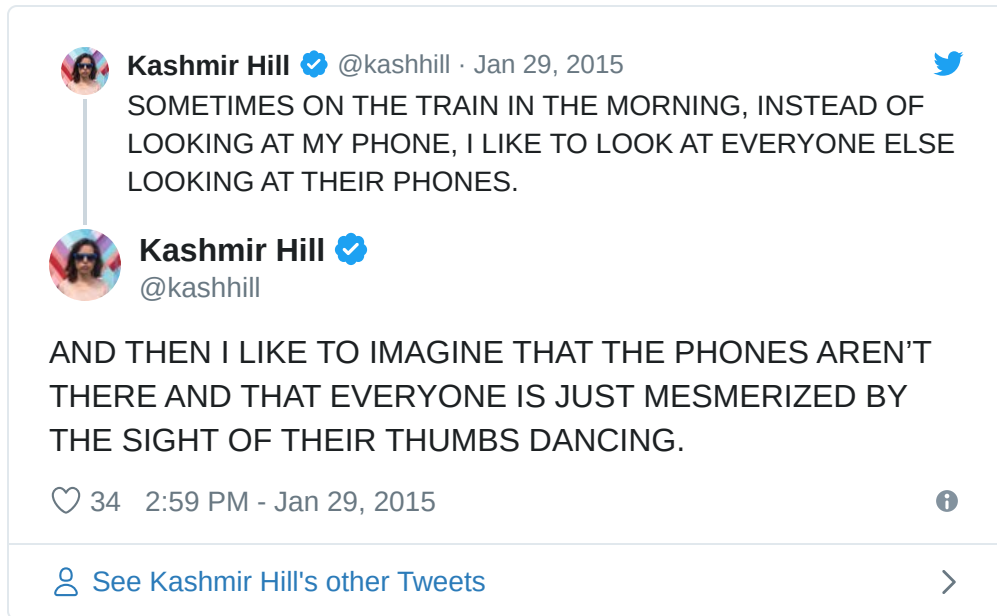
This makes me ~so happy~

This makes me SO HAPPY!

The first person is just happy. The second person is amused in a side-smirking way. The third person is coyly happy or maybe actually unhappy. The fourth person is so deliriously happy that a rainbow is shooting out of the screen into your heart.

Or maybe you disagree. This is the challenge with all that is written or said. It's not always interpreted as you meant but with whatever inherent biases exist in your audience. And I never really know what people think of my caps. I asked one Carnegie Mellon professor with whom I had been corresponding what he thought of my communications. "You have a sense of urgency and importance in what you are trying to tell me. BUT (see what I did there?) I wonder/fear/speculate that if I received four emails in a row from a person, all with caps, I will get either habituated to it (i.e., pay less and less attention) or in fact start wondering about that person's stress level and mental balance," he wrote back, making liberal use of punctuation.

By the middle of the week, I was really sick of caps. Rather than feeling empowered, I felt quieted, and sometimes crazy. One should only shout when it matters. Things that would usually be poetic read like something Jack Nicholson might type in *The Shining* (though he did mostly use lower case).



Near the end of my week, I realize the experiment may actually have been a little dangerous. In a [This American Life episode](#), an online troll who waged a vicious campaign against writer Lindy West — impersonating her dead father on Twitter, for example — said he went after her because he didn't like the confident way she wrote. "You used a lot of all caps," he told her in the episode. I also read headlines about a financial controller with a healthcare company in New Zealand who [was fired](#) a few years back for "using all caps" in her emails. Though when I dig deeper, I see that the all-caps haters were doing their usual propaganda. It wasn't just all caps. The woman [was also using](#) crazy colors and **bold**. An email she sent to staff that was entered into court documents featured the "time and date highlighted in bold red, and a sentence written in capitals and highlighted in bold blue." That's just dreadful.

By the end of the week, I am perfectly happy to disengage the caps lock key and let nuance return to my online voice. Though I do look forward to October 22. Why? It's when we celebrate [International Caps Lock Day](#).