

## Social media

### Elizabeth Shove

The tables and chairs had been stacked away and the floor was swept. I took a last look around the empty kitchen before shutting up shop for good. It was so sad. Half a year ago this place was buzzing with life. We were constantly refilling the trays of salad and garnishes, rushing to clear the tables and working the dishwasher overtime in the tiny space behind the counter. To be honest I still don't really understand what happened.

At first, I was wary of taking on the observatory café. It was a good half hour walk up from the end of the lane and there was not much passing trade. Ray was much more enthusiastic: the view from the top was stunning and he was certain we could make a go of it where others had failed. He said we needed a good following on the internet, and when we had that, our reputation would grow. With a bit of effort, Little Rushford would be famous not just in the UK, but across the world. We fixed on a simple menu: baked potato with a range of fillings for just £5.40 and we set to work, posting, chatting and uploading videos.

To my surprise, Ray's strategy began to have effect. In the early days, just a few visitors parked in the village below, but after a couple of months we were run off our feet. Ray, who was always one for gimmicks, suggested we give the first five customers of the day a free baked potato and a certificate.

Soon the queue was snaking down the hill when we opened at 8am. No wonder the locals complained about the cars and the disruption. Faithful followers camped overnight, enduring midges and tussocks of prickly grass to claim their prize potato.



It turned out that the queue itself was part of the attraction. Waiting for a baked potato had become an event in its own right- featured and commented on by users of tik tok, Instagram, facebook and x (formerly Twitter). By all accounts lasting friendships were formed between strangers who slowly inched up the well-worn path together.

There had been quite an uproar when the observatory was built, what with the diggers and construction work and all, but that was years ago and it was nothing to the chaos brought on by the thousands, some say tens of thousands, of visitors.

A trip to the observatory café popped up first in recommendations about what to do in the area and modern-day pilgrims travelled from as far afield as Australia, South Africa to visit the ‘hidden gem’ they had read about online. Looking back, no one could have estimated the strength of these weak ties, or the global reach of a little food outlet a mile from the nearest village and with a menu of nothing but baked potatoes.

Equally, no one could have predicted the mix up of code behind the scenes. The fact that we’d just taken over, that we sold delicious food, or that Ray devoted hours to social media was beside the point. By some quirk of fate, an AI platform had interpreted ‘the observatory café’ as ‘the café that everyone must see’. Once embedded in the system, the hidden machinery of random algorithmic escalation had acquired a life of its own.

The decline in interest was just as swift. Without warning, the ratings changed and after six months of roaring success, our café was no longer *the* place to be. Queuing for a baked potato was dropped from the list of attractions and the crowds left – moving on to the next AI-led destination.

The flow of eager customers dwindled to a trickle. On a good day a few hikers would stop for lunch but that was about it. The grass grew back on the path and the village returned to normal.

Ray looked at me sadly. ‘Iris’ he said ‘It is time to move on’.