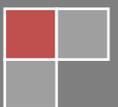




Public Shaming and Social Media

Conflict on an Instant, Worldwide Scale



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Introduction

Public discourse has reached some all-time lows in the past decade. We used to be able to practice civil interactions with one another, and then somehow, somehow, society became deeply divided to polarized spectrums of various ideologies. But, why is that? One could argue that due to our overwhelming awareness of issues, due in part to an increasingly better higher education system, and due in part to Social Media, that we are much more “in the know” about what’s going on in the world. Some of us may even be the first people in our family to speak up about the injustices we see because, unlike previous generations, we have a platform to voice our opinions. But, we as a society also have the ability to segregate ourselves so much that we can almost live in a world where we surround ourselves with news, entertainment, and people we like and agree with. It’s almost like we can live in our own little bubbles and not deal with anyone... dare I say, different than us. And then when something different or something we don’t agree with comes along, we fly off the handle.

Thesis

Advanced personal technology has given a voice to more individuals than ever before. But, with a lack of personal responsibility and professional judgement, there has been a serious lack of discipline in our worldwide open forum, leading some to use the old guard tactic of public shaming. Public shaming on Social Media, in turn, has led to the further decline of interpersonal communication in our society, and our inability to effectively manage and negotiate conflict.

The Worldwide Open Forum

A few years ago, Darren, a boy in a youth group I worked with, turned 13. For his birthday, Darren's older sister, Britta, created a Facebook profile for him. Darren's life prior to 13 was only known by a few hundred people, at most. I say that because our congregation was quite large, and our 8th graders are presented before the congregation each May at the Rite of Confirmation.

Darren, along with the other 8th graders, made a public confession of their faith and membership in the church in front of a large assembly, some of whom he had addressed just weeks before during his faith statement, and some were extended family in town just for the occasion. Darren also played baseball at school and in a city league. Not surprisingly, Darren's confirmation pictures and photos from his most recent ball games were the first posts on his Facebook. His "friends" list grew, and Darren was no longer a kid in the suburbs, he was now a public figure. My only hope was that Darren would be more cognizant of what he posted on Social Media than I was when I first became a rather public figure on the World Wide Web.

A few years prior before I came to St. Andrew's, before I went back to school, and when I was still working a full time job in retail, I had just begun to use Social Media. It was the hay day of MySpace, and about a year prior, Myspace had added a journal feature. I was making use of this journal feature, because let's face it, I had a lot to vent about. Of course, my profile was completely public. I was a bit naïve to think that no one would read my profile, let alone, my journal entries. But, as I soon learned, "an employee should be aware that he or she loses the right to privacy once their comments are placed in a public forum. and they should be mindful of

their actions.” (Ackerly) If only I had read this article. But then again, I was 23, a college dropout, and quite the opinionated young man, too much so for my own good.

I soon had to have some rather painful conversations with some people at work as to why I said what I said about them. I changed all of my privacy settings, and while I continued to vent the way I did (with only select individuals being able to see it), it was a couple of months before the tension finally subsided... that, and some of those people no longer worked there, but for reasons not related to my Myspace journal entries. At least, I hope not.

But Myspace was just the beginning of the new wave of online interaction that would soon be called Social Media. In fact, I remember being on Social Media before we called it Social Media. But the difference with this new wave of media was that more and more people were joining these newer apps. “One major reason is the rapid growth in the use of electronic communications and social media, enabling anyone to broadcast opinions globally at the touch of a button.” (Management Today) Everyone was on this app or the other. Then the iPhone hit the market. Then a whole new wave of social networking took place with more applications and sites.

Social Media just kept growing and growing, and for the first time that I can recall in my rather short existence on this planet, everyone had a voice. “The speed of changed in new technology has overtaken the old codes and norms that had been established... Social media expands the conception of who is a stakeholder... Participation is increased but as much as the benefits are dispersed so is potential harm.” (Auer) While it was really great to see people taking to Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, the down side became apparent as well: bad grammar,

profanity, awkward photos, and so on. It was like we all had our own personal radio stations that we operated, and we all had our own little newspapers we were running in the form of our Social Media profile, yet, quite a few of us, myself included, had no clue how to act, how to communicate through this new medium. We didn't have the discipline of study, the internships, the experience, or the professional codes of Public Relations and Journalism to guide us. We put our thoughts out there, and some of us were not prepared for what might come back.

I don't think Justine Sacco was ready for what might come back. And we all know about her tweet heard (or in this case, seen) 'round the world: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding, I'm white." The fallout that ensued, thanks to Gawker writer Sam Biddle who re-tweeted Justine's ill worded tongue and cheek chatter to his thousands of followers and wrote about it on Gawker, was more than Justine could ever fathom, all of this happening while her phone was off during an 11 hour flight to Capetown, South Africa. The popular #HasJustineLandedYet was trending worldwide, and by the time Justine landed, the damage was already done, and she was fired from her job. But this wasn't the first or the last time something like this would happen.

In a 2015 article in The New York Times Magazine entitled "How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life," writer Jon Ronson recalls another victim of public shaming getting terminated from their employer. Ronson goes on to talk about a man who was at a tech conference in the Silicon Valley where he was privately telling a joke about computer attachments commonly known as "dongles." But a woman at the conference near the man and his colleague, stood up and took a picture of the two of them, only to post the photo on Twitter for her more than nine thousand followers to see with the caption "Not cool. Jokes about . . .

'big' dongles right behind me." This tweet was trending on twitter and caught the attention of his employer, and he was subsequently fired. When the man decided to take to Hacker News about his situation, the women who took to publically shaming him, Adria Richards, soon felt the brunt of public shaming as well. She received death threats, and her address was made public. Richards employer, SendGrid, had their website and corporate servers attacked. The person behind the hacking told SendGrid it would stop when Richards was fired. Not surprisingly, Richards was publically "let go" that same day.

Employees posting online, even off work time or with nothing really to do with their company, have become an HR nightmare for some companies. While the National Labor Relations Board has come out in defense of some Social Media use in the workplace, "private employers are not required by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution to tolerate all forms of speech in the workplace, and employees do not have free reign to denigrate their employers." (Hammer) So, apparently, what happens off the clock and in private conversation can get you fired if it goes viral.

In all cases, there were alternatives to mediate and negotiate real or perceived conflict. Whether we believe we are right or wrong, the perception of our counterpart also matters. "What we think – perceive – affects our behavior, attitude, and communication." (Corvette, 34) Justine Sacco could have worded her tweet differently. And Adria Richards could have merely spoken to the man who told the joke, instead of getting them both fired. They could have talked this out! And, I could have also kept my online journals private... or, maybe I could have spoken with my fellow employees instead of lambasting them on Social Media.

Public Shaming Is Nothing New

The act of publically humiliating and shaming someone as a form of punishment and mechanism of conflict management has been around for a very long time. Ancient texts, including the Holy Bible have brought to account, and even sometimes condoned these acts as a part of a normal social structure. The practice was quite prevalent in Europe during the medieval period, and continued into Colonial America before it became frowned upon after the revolutionary war.

When I was younger, I remember that executions were no longer public, and that even some legal battles were kept off the news to prevent public scrutiny and shame being projected on those involved, or at least until after the trial was over. Also, parents didn't discipline their children in public, and if you had a conflict with someone at the office, you followed the proper channels to get that conflict managed, and sometimes resolved if in the even you couldn't just talk to the person one on one.

By the time I was in the workforce, it seemed that approaching someone you had a problem with one on one was now deemed as harassment. Everything had to go through a supervisor, or HR, and sometimes, that process took weeks or even months, and the conflict usually gets worse because of the absence of any real negotiation taking place. And now "social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are resurrecting the medieval concept of public shaming" (Lum)

In a 2009 article in Maclean's, Amy Alkon, the "Advice Goddess" blogger, was interviewed about her need to blog about the rudeness she sees in everyday life. "I call this blogslapping... it's a recent phenomenon, the power of the Average Joe to expose wrongdoing and effect change with relatively inexpensive and widely available consume electronics." (McKinnell) Alkon went on to say that she had tried to correct people in public, including parents of unruly children, only to receive harsh words in return. Alkon felt that by publically shaming people on her blog, she was doing the right thing.

Alkon, Biddle and others are "evoking the authentic no-nonsense morality of our Puritan forebearers..." and contributing to the era of "...ceremonial humiliation via electronic media..." in today's society. (Beato, 70) Now everyone's a journalist, a crusader, an evangelist for right and wrong, but what's right and wrong seems to blow with the direction of the wind in any given moment in a society that has become more segregated and polarized. The days of the sit-down conversation may soon be over.

It seems the backlash is more prevalent today on Social Media than it was in the humble beginnings. "Everyday people, some with young children... getting annihilated for tweeting some badly worded joke..." (Ronson) I myself have also felt the brunt of ad hominins on Social Media because my opinion, as careful as I tried to word it, the post did not match up with someone else's idea of right and wrong, and therefore, I had to pay the price and be called names, and be subjected to those who glommed onto the tantrum as well. This type of behavior is rather passive aggressive at times, and adversarial in style. And to think, at a board room table, or on the floor of state senate, would people say the same things to me?

“The furor over Sacco’s tweet had become not just an ideological crusade against her perceived bigotry but also a form of idle entertainment.” (Ronson, NY Times Magazine) Some people find joy in putting people down at the time of their misfortune, and the opportunity for explanation or further investigation in the matter is usually never afforded. While there may be people who are hurt by Social Media posts, the original poster ends up becoming a victim as well.

Public shaming has also been done by the news media as well. We can only look at Fox News and MSNBC, as well as countless talk radio programs that are so slanted and so competitive and adversarial, and that I am surprised litigation hasn’t come about yet. Satirical outfits end up poking fun of some issues, but don’t aid the situation. “Once a public shaming is underway, newsrooms often document the phenomenon for the public, exacerbating the shame and humiliation.” (McBride, 37)

Our job as communication and business scholars should be to look further into situations before we use our leadership roles to assign any judgement, blame, or support. Before we speak, write, or post, we need to ask ourselves some questions. “What additional context is necessary to understand the behavior? What other information about the individual or organization might be relevant? In describing crowd behavior, are you also participating in it?” (McBride, 37)

Some of the things said in public shaming on Social Media are downright offensive, and sometimes more offensive than what was supposedly deserving of the shaming. In a way, public

shaming is just a new form of cyber bullying, or electronic aggression. “Electronic aggression includes similar elements as relationship and psychological aggression – namely, revealing private information, insulting and derogatory language, humiliation, obsessive monitoring, and threats. However, because electronic communications can occur at any time, regardless of physical proximity, and with rapid-fire intensity, electronic victimization may be particularly pernicious.” (Bennett, et al)

So, rather than talking things out, once could argue that society has decided to just take to Social Media to punish people for not thinking before they hit send. But at least in previous times, “punishments were assigned, executed, and they were over.” (Beato, 71) Now, public shaming on Social Media lives on long after the furry begins. But this kind of justice is subjective, and is not fair, and even called for. Some could agree that “...justice works best when it’s delivered in uniform, predictable fashion.” (Beato, 71) Now, we just have to be careful and hope our status update doesn’t piss off the wrong person.

Taking a Higher Moral and Ethical Stance

David Letterman famously once said during a taping of his late night variety show, “You can say damn, you can say bitch, you can say ass, but when it comes right down to it, you can’t say [shit] on TV”. Of course, the latter of all of those words was the only one that was censored out of the broadcast. Borrowing from Letterman’s sentiment, you can apparently use whatever words you want on Social Media, but in all reality, you cannot say shh... anything without the possibility of someone, maybe even your employer, finding out about it and firing back with heated words, or even termination.

Last year in an article featured in *Information Today*, George Pike asked “should people be terminated for using social media to air the kinds of gripes that once were limited to conversations around the watercooler?” In fact, is the water cooler no more or less public than posts on Social Media? Maybe it’s because Social Media is just so much bigger and larger than any of us ever expected. Or, maybe the issue is something deeper.

Without regard to how or why, civil discourse, specifically in U.S. American society is in trouble. We treat each other horribly, and for what reason? Are we perfectionists? Have we become intolerant of other people’s opinions and feel that our opinions are somehow justified because of our own education or other means? “An important aspect of the moral psychology involved is the thought that how we treat other human beings in moral contexts is not isolated from how we each treat ourselves, but rather these are inextricably linked, both influencing and being influenced by each other.” (Bloomfield) Public shaming isn’t helping anyone, but it is only further assisting in the decline of our interpersonal communication, and possible even the decline of our culture.

Conclusion

What will we do? Will the scholars and business leaders of the world stand idly by the next time another instant, worldwide conflict erupts online? Or will we champion the cause of due process? Will we ask for context, or clarification? Or will we merely glom on to the legion of trolls and pundits?

Everyone gets a chance to make mistakes in life, and learn from them. But learning from mistakes is next to impossible, and is quite psychologically damaging when public shaming is

used as a method of conflict management. Instead of viewing conflict as bad, we should instead subscribe to the human relations school of thought, and see conflict as “natural and sometimes functional and other times dysfunctional.” (Corvette, 37).

We are going to disagree. We are going to meet and interact with people, in person or online, who have quite different views and goals than our own. Instead of using our time and energy in shaming people as means to get what we want, or make the case for something we are passionate about, perhaps we should take a moment and think... what if it were me? What if I was the one who messed up? Would I want to be shamed or coached? Perhaps it's time that we as a society begin to nurture each other again, and take more collaborative and compromising approaches to conflicts we face in our lives. I'm ready. Are you?

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