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The Politics of Digital Shaming

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After I got married, I put off changing my name not for the usual reasons about preserving my identity or fighting the patriarchy, but because I thought it prudent to keep an extra name in reserve just in case someday an Internet mob decides to destroy me. This may seem like the kind of desperate paranoia espoused by people who believe their televisions are watching them, but anyone who has seen the near-daily evisceration of inadvertently socially insensitive social media users both famous and obscure would know that this kind of thing can happen to anyone.

Celebrities are under greater scrutiny than the Facebooking masses, of course, but anyone can become a celebrity for a few days by making a bad joke. And then he can find himself unemployed. Consider the following examples from the past few years. Justine Sacco was the communications director of an Internet company until she tweeted a poorly phrased joke about AIDS. It was retweeted by the editor of *Valleywag*, part of the Gawker Media empire. After that, she was toast. Lindsey Stone worked as an aide for adults with disabilities until she posted on Facebook a tasteless photo of herself at Arlington National Cemetery; the picture was widely re-shared, and she too found herself quickly unemployed. At a programming conference, an attendee named Adria Richards overheard "Hank" in the row behind her make a sexual joke to a friend, took a photo of him, and tweeted it, accusing him of contributing to the misogyny of the tech industry. Hank was promptly fired from his job, which he announced in an apologetic post on a tech-news site. This in turn outraged another Internet mob, including hackers claiming to be part of the group Anonymous, who demanded that Richards be fired from *her* job for getting Hank fired from his, attacked her employer online, and won her termination. Just about every day brings a new story of Internet ire leveled at someone caught behaving "problematically." Maybe tomorrow will even be your lucky day, the day you discover the usefulness of a backup surname.

So You've Been Publicly Shamed
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Internet mobs have short attention spans and a limitless supply of targets, ensuring that your time in

the virtual stocks will be brief. But the infamy will live on forever on Google, where the first thing that prospective friends and employers will learn about you is that the entire Internet has deemed you an irredeemable bigot and a toxic liability to the species. In his new book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, veteran journalist Jon Ronson explores this new frontier of public humiliation. He discusses social media pile-ons, tabloid sex scandals, the publication of prostitution client lists, humiliation as a form of alternative criminal sentencing, even humiliation pornography. Ronson's strength is victim collection. He managed to secure interviews with Sacco, Stone, Richards, and Hank—as well as the more high-profile Jonah Lehrer and Mike Daisey—in the immediate aftermath of their shamings, a time when they were more inclined to hide out in their basements than speak to a journalist, and to elicit thoughtful comments from them about their experiences.

Ronson describes these experiences from many angles, but offers frustratingly little analysis to account for the differences he encounters along the way, and what those differences might mean. Some people's lives are utterly destroyed by public shaming, other people come away undamaged, while yet others seem to be actually improved by it, but Ronson makes only a cursory effort to explain these distinctions. He moves fairly quickly past the purposes and political implications of social media shaming and into the search for a solution: How can we overcome shame so that we can simply shrug off the effects of an Internet mob when, inevitably, it comes after us?

It turns out that we can't, really. Ronson attends anti-shame trainings and humiliation-pornography shoots, both designed in their different ways to cure participants of their sense of shame, but finds that both approaches fail. Shame is such a visceral passion that no amount of training and practice is sufficient to extirpate it, even from the woman who directs the therapeutic humiliation pornography, who was once belittled on the gossip site TMZ as a mere pornographer rather than a social liberator, news of which left her upset. "It seemed sad," Ronson writes, "that as soon as she saw herself from the outside she felt ashamed, like the shame had snaked its way into her and there was no escaping." Given that there is no escaping from *feeling* ashamed, it's all the more urgent to consider why some people manage to escape from being shamed, or at least from having their lives destroyed by it.

Ronson offers us at least a start by examining a few cases of public shame survivors—Max Mosley, former president of the federation that oversees Formula One racing, whose proclivity for sadomasochistic and allegedly Nazi-themed sex

was exposed by a tabloid; a group of prostitution clients in the buttoned-up town of Kennebunk, Maine; and Mike Daisey, a performer discovered to have invented details of his exposé of Apple's labor abuses in China after it was broadcast on *This American Life*. Though these men's transgressions were publicized, none of them suffered a serious or long-term blow to their reputations. Ronson suggests that what preserved Mosley and the prostitution clients was that "strange sex" has already been broadly "demystif[ied]" for us, which does illuminate something about the form of the new shame.

The social demons which public shamings now seek to exorcise are overwhelmingly political: racism, sexism, homophobia, "privilege." Although Ronson attributes Mike Daisey's shame-storm survival to the semi-mystical fortitude he developed after a near-death experience as a young man, a more plausible explanation for his resilience is simply that an exaggerated depiction of corporate labor abuses is hardly an affront to the political sensibilities of NPR's audience. The proper reaction of right-thinking people to Daisey's particular lapse in professional judgment is pity rather than vengeful outrage.

But the Internet's nonchalance about weird sex and its hypersensitivity to social prejudice does not entirely explain why Justine Sacco exiled herself to Ethiopia to escape the Internet's jeering while Mosley and the Kennebunk johns simply moved on with their lives. Many observers have pointed to the gender disparities in public shaming; women are more likely to be singled out for it, to receive violent threats, and so on. One of Ronson's interviewees explains the differential treatment of male and female targets on the 4chan message boards: "4chan takes the worst thing it can imagine that person going through and shouts for that to happen.... And one of the highest degradations for women in our culture is rape. We don't talk about rape of men, so I think it doesn't occur to most people as a male degradation. With men, they talk about getting them fired." This is astute but not completely accurate because, although women are generally treated more viciously by Internet commenters, Internet shaming aims to deny a means of livelihood to all its targets, male and female alike. The Internet mob always trots out the argument that the disrespect the transgressor has shown to whatever aggrieved group demonstrates his obvious inability to treat people fairly and thereby his unfitness for honest employment. Any employer who keeps this monster on the payroll only demonstrates his own insensitivity to the plight of the oppressed.

One possible reason that Mosley and the Kennebunk johns were spared—beyond the fact that their

antics were deemed too banal for outrage—is that they stand on the two far ends of a spectrum where the effects of public shame are less devastating in the long run: one was a national celebrity, the others were local nobodies not individually worthy of national news. Weathering shame-storms is the celebrity's job description, and outré behavior is itself the means by which some celebrities capture and maintain the public's fickle attention. Scandals provide them with sufficient public recognition to launch a handbag line or land an action film role. Mosley's family was already well known in England for its ostentatious WWII-era Nazism, and it was unlikely that he could be more reviled than his parents, who dined with Hitler. Jonah Lehrer is a similarly atypical subject for Ronson because his status, though not quite that of a Paris Hilton, is closer to celebrity than regular Joe. It is really the Kennebunk johns who represent the possibilities of redemption from public shame for the average person snared in an Internet shame mob.

What their case demonstrates is that the effect of public shaming on the shamed depends on the nature of the public. When the public is local and personal, it can be restrained. When it is national and virtual, there is neither an incentive nor a structural constraint in place to hold it back. In reality, public shaming is not the novel reincarnation of an antiquated punishment, as Ronson claims. Most people have experienced public shaming of a quite mundane kind—mockery from neighbors about lawns not maintained to their standards, or from classmates for practically any minor transgression against the complex social rules of adolescence. And while shame is always painful, in these cases the pain is usually brief and the stain on one's reputation fades quickly. Few of us are defined by that time we wet our pants in the second grade, or were overheard comparing our officemate to an African mammal noted for its large size, so long as these events aren't recorded and uploaded. Everyone else forgets our shame even more quickly than we do, and future friends, lovers, and colleagues have no access to it, since the only place it's preserved is in the memories of those present. But when it's the Internet that oversees or overhears your transgressions, the reputational damage can last forever, or until Google's servers collapse.

Ronson devotes much of one chapter to the case of Ted Poe, a former Texas judge who in the 1980s and 1990s had a predilection for handing down unorthodox sentences requiring acts of public penance in lieu of jail time. A man convicted of manslaughter while driving drunk was required, among other conditions, to walk past high schools and bars once a month for a decade

carrying a sign reading, "I killed two people while driving drunk." Shoplifters have been required to stand in front of the stores they stole from with similar signs, and another drunk driver had the millions in damages that the family of his victim won from him converted into a requirement to write the family a weekly check for $1 with the name of his victim, forcing him to regularly recall what he had done.

Poe argues that his methods were effective: they resulted in lower recidivism than incarceration, and they were cheaper too. And some of the recipients of his punishments have agreed. The drunk driver forced to hold the sign told Ronson that he thought the punishment "was the best thing that had ever happened to him." Rather than "abuse and ridicule," the responses he got from passersby were overwhelmingly sympathetic, thanking him and assuring him that "things will be okay." Since then, he has taken up the cause of sobriety for a living, lecturing against drunk driving and running a halfway house in Houston.

What accounts for this apparently positive result of public shaming, compared with the excruciating suffering inflicted on Sacco and Stone for transgressions notably less heinous than manslaughter? One important difference is that anyone who wants to condemn a drunk driver while he stands on the street, whether out of outrage or a gloating sense of moral superiority, has to do it to his face, with a full view of his pain. The extent to which we are willing to inflict pain on others is tempered by our own shame at being, and being thought, cruel. This means that even when a guest or a colleague makes an off-color remark at a party or at a meeting, few people will respond by gathering everybody to berate the speaker publicly in an Orwellian "Two Minutes Hate" and then throwing him out of the building, which would be roughly the physical equivalent of an Internet pile-on. The only decent way to respond without making oneself more loathsome than the original offender is to take him aside privately and offer a gentle suggestion. Social media diminishes both the discomfort of seeing our victim's suffering and the shame of being seen making him suffer, both of which require personal proximity to experience. When Ronson suggests to Ted Poe that social media shamings are worse than his public shame sentences, Poe quickly supplies the reason: "They're anonymous."

The limits that personal accountability put on public shame are perfectly illustrated in the case of Sam Biddle, the *Valleywag* editor responsible for publicizing Sacco's ill-fated tweet. In the immediate aftermath of the shame-storm, Biddle boasted that his response had been justified because, in Ronson's words, by "cutting down a member of the media elite," he was "continuing the civil

rights tradition that started with Rosa Parks." But by the following year, he posted a lengthy *mea culpa* on *Gawker* for Sacco's takedown. The impetus for this reversal had been an e-mail from Sacco asking him to meet in person. At dinner, Biddle explained,

> I looked up at a face I'd only ever seen on a screen, tweeted and repeated by people who hated that face. I've never been star-struck, but my stomach knotted. Justine Sacco had a face that wasn't made up of pixels.
>
> And, as it turned out, Justine Sacco is not a racist monster.... midway through our meal I had to say sorry. An apology to Justine Sacco had been itching at my throat from the moment I saw her.

Of course, personal accountability does not always prevent cruelty. But even the worst local groups intent on inflicting it—mobs, perhaps—can encounter resistance from the law and from individuals brave enough to fight back. The Internet mob is unrestrainable. You can tweet in defense of Sacco or upbraid Biddle in the comments to his post, but by engaging at all, you're only increasing the number of views the story has gotten and pushing it up the Google rankings.

However preferable a world of locally restrained public shame might be, though, it is not the world we live in, and for the foreseeable future at least, large swaths of the Internet will continue to be animated by the belief that, as Biddle put it, "If we could only put one more wrongheaded head on a pike, humiliate one more bigoted sorority girl or ignorant Floridian, we could heal this world. Each, next outrage post was the one that would make a difference." Ronson's strategy for combating this belief is to depict public shame as personally devastating and even deadly, to shame us into not shaming others.

Ronson even threatens us with the arguments of psychologists David Buss and James Gilligan that humiliation and shame are potent sources of violence. Buss, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Texas, argues that being persistently belittled by others can induce murderous fantasies in regular people. Gilligan, a psychiatrist and author, claims that the apparently pathological behavior of even the most hardened criminals can be traced back to acute experiences of humiliation in childhood, "all violence being a person's attempt to replace shame with self-esteem." Undoubtedly, humiliation is a powerful impetus for revenge, an observation that goes at least as far back as Thomas Hobbes. But this is not an especially enlightening account of our situation, since none of the public shaming victims whom Ronson interviews have responded violently

against their shamers or anyone else (the convicted criminals excepted). Instead, most have become, at least for a while, veritable hermits.

What is lost as a result of these sorts of mass public shamings is more than the reputation of the shamed and the karma points of the shamers. The targets of public shaming lose their jobs, and those not yet targeted adjust their own public and perhaps even private speech to avoid being the next national pariah. In a regime where both financial and social possibilities hinge on employment, to be rendered not just temporarily unemployed but unemployable is a fate not substantially better than imprisonment. Social media can punish those deemed offensive more severely than any formal sentence for a speech violation ever could in the United States. The best strategy that most reasonably risk-averse people will hit upon to deal with this ominous threat to their livelihoods is to shut up.

Ronson understands this much when he recounts how Lindsey Stone used the services of Reputation.com to try to rebuild her online image by drowning the Google results about her offensive photo with higher-ranked websites that emphasized an insipid but politically innocuous persona she had created. "The sad thing was that Lindsey had incurred the Internet's wrath because she was impudent and playful and foolhardy and outspoken. And now here she was, working…to reduce herself to safe banalities—to cats and ice cream and Top 40 chart music. We were creating a world where the smartest way to survive is to be bland."

However, not everyone can follow that dictate. For those who desire a career in media itself, it is important to get exposure, and early. This explains the impulse of small and student-run publications to put their work online and the usefulness of having such work picked up by national outlets. The difficulty is that it is picked up more often to be ridiculed than praised, and once it attracts the notice of professional mockery machines like *Gawker*, it inevitably kindles a five-alarm public shaming. Such were the recent fates of Princeton's Tal Fortgang at the hands of the left, and Harvard's Sandra Korn courtesy of the right. It's an open question what effect on journalism there will be from subjecting inexperienced writers, who venture their naïve opinions in their school papers, to the levels of public scorn previously reserved for politicians accused of pedophilia.

An optimistic possibility is that it will toughen writers up. In these early days of massive, personally threatening smear campaigns, sensitivity may still run high, but after such attacks become a regular feature of the job, perhaps writers will become accustomed to such disproportionate responses and learn to ignore them. A less optimistic possibility, however, is that these conditions will

elevate less scrupulous and perhaps less competent writers whose main asset is the ability to thrive under the negative attention that producing reams of outrageous provocation will reliably bring them.

Unlike other potential targets of public shaming, political journalists cannot survive by being bland or saying nothing. Michelle Goldberg pointed out in *The Nation* that, before every publication down to the adolescent 'zine was online for everyone to read and denounce, many small magazines

> allowed people to take intellectual risks without worrying that they would be shunned as moral monsters.... Magazines were like subcultures, with their own particular norms, sensibilities and insider argot. They could trust that they were judged by a set of standards they had themselves shaped. Social media has done away with all that.

It isn't yet clear how political journalism will adjust to this new regime in which political offense—either to the other side's partisans or to the standard-bearers of one's own party—poses a mortal threat. Goldberg is surely right that "For Twitter's guardians of righteousness, if privileged journalists feel more inhibited about bucking lefty pieties, so much the better"; but the right has its own pieties, which it guards only somewhat less zealously because it lacks the enthusiasm for identity politics that afflicts the left.

The political nature of these online mobs means that, although we probably cannot individually overcome shame as Ronson hopes, we can seek protection from it in much the same way that boys in neighborhoods menaced by gangs do—by joining one. This way, when you're attacked by one corner of the Internet, another will have your back, and their protection is not limited to journalists. In March 2015, when ABC 57 in Indiana broadcast an interview in which the co-owner of a rural pizza parlor said she would not cater a gay wedding, the initial Internet outrage from people who never have and never will find themselves within a hundred miles of the shop was enough to cause its closure. The subsequent response from sympathizers was to donate over $800,000 to re-open it. Poor Justine Sacco never got such support, but maybe her error was in hiding rather than making her cause political. It may well be that the pizza donors righted a wrong, but what the incident demonstrates is that even pizza can, and maybe eventually must, espouse a party line.

Ultimately, it is the fundamentally partisan cast of the new public shaming—which Ronson's book delicately sidesteps—that merits our greatest worry. What social media mobs have most intensively and

systematically policed is not isolated instances of unprofessional behavior or bad jokes, as Ronson suggests, but whatever they have deemed political speech, and in doing so, they have politicized speech that used to be shielded from and irrelevant to politics—the speech of student publications, local business owners, and obscure people tweeting to their friends. The result of this is not simply what Ronson describes as a mass homogenization of speech, but the reductive polarization of spheres of life that were once local or partially closed off from public view and so relatively safe from the full fury of the national political scandal machine. The problem with joining gangs in order not to be defenseless against them is not that it's a wrong calculation about one's own safety, but that when everyone is forced into this choice, the neighborhood tends to become unlivable pretty quickly.

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