IN THIS ISSUE

Cyber-shaming: Retribution in a Virtual World (Duration: 16:53)
In the age of social media, public shaming is making a comeback. Hundreds of years ago, townsfolk would put members of their society who violated the law or moral code into public stocks or pillories to humiliate them. Today, society attacks online, in virtual anonymity, with little fear of retribution. And there is little the victims can do about it. The CBC’s Neil Macdonald looks at the return of public shaming in a virtual world.

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Kids & Technology: The Dark Side of the Wired World, April 2014
Frosh Week Controversy, November 2013
Learning from the Death of Amanda Todd, December 2012
The Internet: Forty Years Later, December 2009

Related CBC Programs

Facebook Follies
Justice for Nadia: Victim of a Cyberpath
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Note to Teachers
The classroom must promote a safe place for students to discuss sensitive issues such as bullying and violence. Prepare students for the topics that will be discussed. Allow for individual reflective time in addition to small group activities where students can safely process their thoughts and emotions.

VIDEO REVIEW

Before viewing

In 1787, Benjamin Rush, a physician and signatory to the U.S. Declaration of Independence, called for an end to the stocks, the pillory and the whipping post, claiming that humiliation (which he referred to as “ignominy”) is a worse punishment than death. He said, “It would seem strange that ignominy should ever have been adopted as a milder punishment than death, did we not know that the human mind seldom arrives at truth upon any subject till it has first reached the extremity of error.” History supports his position: public humiliation in the stocks, the pillory and at the whipping post effectively ended a person’s hope of living a productive life. It negated any chance of reforming one’s life choices and being welcomed back into the fold as a full citizen. This is why, in the mid-19th century, authorities in Canada and the U.S. abandoned humiliation as a method of punishment (although the state of Delaware maintained the practice until well into the 20th century).

1. Why do you think public humiliation has been used as a form of punishment?

2. Why do you think it has been necessary to abandon the practice?

3. Some say the stocks, the pillory and the whipping post are back in the form of cyber-mob reactions on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Do you think this is a fair assessment? Can you think of examples of people using social media to punish someone who has done something wrong?
### Viewing

1. What is virtual or cyber-shaming?

2. Why did Adria Richards post a picture on Twitter of two men at a tech conference she was attending?

3. How did the conference organizers respond to her Twitter post?

4. How did the Twitterverse respond to the controversy at first?

5. What happened to one of the two men shown in the original photo?

6. Who did the cyber-mob set their sights on next? Why?

7. What did Richard’s employer think of her actions?

8. How did Richard’s life change after she was cyber-shamed?

9. Why was Lindsey Stone cyber-shamed?

10. How did Stone’s life change after she was cyber-shamed?
11. According to author Jon Ronson, what is the best course of action if you find yourself the target of cyber-shaming?

12. What does he mean when he refers to the “surveillance society” we have created?

13. What did Jonah Lehrer and Justine Sacco do to become targets of the cyber-mob?

14. What is Jon Ronson’s “avalanche and snowflake” theory?

15. Why did the cyber-mob turn on game developer Brianna Wu?

16. At what point did the threats against Wu become criminal?

17. How did the FBI respond to her efforts to get her cyber-accusers dealt with?

18. Brianna Wu used to agree with cyber-shaming. What does she think of cyber-shaming now?

19. Why are some European governments considering passing laws against cyber-shaming?
After viewing

What does correspondent Neil MacDonald mean when he says, “The scary thing about the internet though is that it allows human nature to do as it likes. Shamers abide by no due process. No government oversees them….What has taken form is the biggest kangaroo court in human history — capricious, vicious, stupid, out of control, and all with effective impunity”? Explain your answer in three to five sentences.

A kangaroo court is an expression used to describe an arbitrary and unofficial gathering of people who sit in judgment of someone they already assume to be guilty.
MINDS ON

From medieval times to the late 19th century, some nations used the pillory to impose punishment on people whose moral conduct crossed the line. People who were deemed guilty of things like deception and thievery would be sentenced to a stretch of time in the pillory. Rendered immobile, the person sentenced to the pillory would be placed in a highly visible location to experience the maximum degree of public humiliation in the hopes that they would not commit any further offences. In fact, people were encouraged to ridicule and berate anyone they saw locked in the pillory.

What do you think of this form of punishment? Do you think it got people to change their behaviour or did it just serve to humiliate and demean people?

THE STORY

It is the modern-day version of the pillory, the stocks and the whipping post. While medieval townsfolk banded together to humiliate notable offenders in the public squares, today’s global villagers use the internet to out people who they think have crossed the moral line. However, instead of physically confining their target to an archaic tortuous device, they use platforms like Twitter and Facebook to invite everyone with a computer, tablet or smartphone to pile on humiliation in any way they see fit — with some twisted shamers resorting to threats of violence, rape and murder.

Some say they deserve it:

- When a U.S. dentist went on a hunting trip to Africa and killed a protected lion, the internet lit up with criticism and condemnation. He lost any hope of privacy as his photo was published around the globe, with some zealots posting his home and work address online. Eventually he had abandon his dental practice and go into hiding.

- When a soccer fan interrupted a live segment with a vulgar comment aimed at a female reporter, one of his friends vocalized his support for what he had done. The social media response was swift and punitive: the identity of the defender was revealed and he lost his $100 000-a-year job with Ontario Hydro.

- When a public relations representative for a U.S. company tweeted “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white” just prior to boarding a flight from London to Cape Town, she certainly didn’t expect to become a global target of cyber-shamers. By the time she landed, she was the number one trend on Twitter with condemnation and vitriol coming from all over the world. She eventually lost her job and went into hiding.
The defenders of cyber-shaming claim that the mindless, reckless and disgraceful behaviour of some people simply opens the door to public ridicule. Opponents of cyber-shaming say that the sheer magnitude of the global online community makes the practice tantamount to the destruction of a person’s sense of self and the elimination of their right to privacy. Now instead of a few villagers gawking at the pillory, millions pile drive a person into virtual oblivion. In other words, the response is out of proportion and the punishment simply doesn’t fit the crime.

Whether you agree with cyber-shaming or not, the experts agree: targets of the practice are being forced into hiding, sometime for making a stupid mistake that was, to begin with, out of character for them.

A Pew Research study in 2014 found that 40 per cent of internet users report they have been harassed online. Almost 70 per cent of people who say they have been harassed say the harassment took place on social media websites.

To Consider

1. What is the modern equivalent of the pillory, the stocks and the whipping post?

2. Can you think of a local or Canadian example of cyber-shaming similar to what the dentist and the soccer fan encountered?

3. Do opponents of cyber-shaming have a point? Does the punishment far outweigh the “crimes” committed by the targets of cyber-shaming?
WOMEN AS CYBER-SHAME TARGETS

Minds on

Monica Lewinsky calls herself “patient zero” in the world of cyber-shaming. In 1998, Lewinsky had an extramarital affair with then U.S. President Bill Clinton. News of the affair broke after a friend of Lewinsky’s secretly recorded conversations describing the tryst and shared them with authorities. Eventually Clinton was formally punished for his transgressions by the U.S. Congress, while Lewinsky became the target of ridicule and shame both in the mainstream media and online. She was called a tramp, tart, and much worse. She was also “fat-shamed” shortly after the scandal broke. As a result of the affair, Lewinsky says, “I lost my reputation, my dignity, I almost lost my life.” Meanwhile Clinton, despite his impeachment, went on to live a very successful and financially lucrative post-presidential life.1

1. How do you explain the fact that Lewinsky was vilified for her part in the affair, while President Clinton was treated with an almost “boys will be boys” attitude?

2. Lewinsky was a 22-year-old White House intern in 1998. Clinton was 49 and the president of the United States! Who holds the most responsibility for the affair?

3. Lewinsky stepped back into the public spotlight in 2015 to begin a crusade against cyber-shaming. Why is she a strong candidate to lead the battle against online shaming?

Three women, three very similar stories

One made a glib, thoughtless joke and sent it to her Twitter followers.

One rebuked two men for making juvenile, sexually charged jokes at a technology conference.

And one chose to critique the distorted image of women in video games.

All three saw their lives virtually destroyed — with more than a few threats of violence, rape and death coming from anonymous internet strangers seeking to cyber-shame them into submission.

Justine Sacco

She was on a trip to visit her family in South Africa. Justine Sacco was wise-cracking as she traveled from JFK Airport in New York across to Heathrow in London before making her final trip to Cape Town. At JFK she tweeted, “Weird German Dude: You’re in First Class. Get some deodorant.” And just before boarding her flight to Cape Town she tweeted, “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!”

With only 170 Twitter followers, she couldn’t have anticipated what would happen next. Over the course of her 11-hour plane ride, Sacco’s AIDS tweet took over the Twittersphere. She was vilified for her seeming lack of compassion for people with AIDS and, as the anger and hostility of the online community grew, a #HasJustineLandedYet conversation emerged. When she got off her plane, a Twitter stranger was there to take her picture. By the next morning, she was an international headline and the subject of talk shows around the globe.

In the days to follow, she was labeled a racist and a bigot. When asked about the incident later Sacco said, “I cried out my body weight in the first 24 hours. It was incredibly traumatic.” She deeply regretted posting the insensitive tweet. She lost her job and, with her picture posted all over the internet, she lost her privacy. She was so
profoundly shamed for her transgression that she could not leave her apartment without worrying that she would be approached by someone seeking to accost her.

Adria Richards
Two men attending a conference for tech developers in Santa Clara, California, were listening to a presentation when the topic of computer and mobile device attachments (nicknamed dongles) came up. One of them made a juvenile ‘dongle’ joke. Adria Richards, sitting a few rows ahead of them, heard the joke and it struck a nerve. She felt the joke was indicative of the male dominated tech industry and the lack of regard many men had for the fact that females, not only work in the field, but they also sit within earshot of these casually delivered, degrading comments at conferences and in the workplace. So she stood up, took a picture of the two men and tweeted, “Not cool. Jokes about…big ‘dongles’ right behind me.” Her over 9 000 followers received the picture and the comment. Shortly after Richards posted her Twitter message, the two men were kicked out of the conference and, the next day, one of them was fired from his job.

For her efforts, Richards received not only criticism, she also received death and rape threats – which seemed to reinforce her point about the male dominated tech industry. A few days later, she was fired from her job. Then, after an angry tweet featuring Richards’ home address was posted (along with a photo of a beheaded woman with duct tape over her mouth), she felt compelled to leave her home and go into hiding.

Brianna Wu
It has come to be known as #GamerGate. When several high profile female gamers criticized the depiction of women in video games, the online community of gamers and gaming journalists responded aggressively and forcefully. Many resorted to targeting the critics with threats of violence and rape, forcing the women to avoid public appearances and driving them from their homes. Eventually, Brianna Wu, a game developer and friend to the early victims of #GamerGate, had had enough and said the following on her weekly podcast, “You cannot have 30 years of portraying women as bimbos, sex objects, second bananas, cleavage-y eye candy. Eventually it normalizes this treatment of women. And I think something is really sick and broken in our culture.”

This made her the next #GamerGate target. Wu documented 45 death threats and numerous threats of rape and dismemberment. One man posted Wu’s home address, along with the comment, “Guess what, bitch? I now know where you live…your mutilated corpse will be on the front page of Jezebel tomorrow…nobody will care when you die.” Wu and her husband were forced into hiding as a result of the ongoing threats.

Sources:

To consider
1. Why are women particularly vulnerable to cyber-shaming?
2. How is the cyber-shaming of women different from the cyber-shaming of men?
3. What did the three victims of cyber-shaming do to cause the ire of the cyber-mob?
4. Were the attacks warranted? Carefully explain your answer.
DOXING

Minds on

1. If you type your name into a search engine like Google, what do you think you would find? A Facebook page? A Twitter account? How much of your personal information do you think is available just by using a search engine?

2. Try it! Add a few more details along with your name – like the city or town where you live or your school. See if your search surprises you.

Be careful or someone might dox you!

In the days before the social media explosion (usually associated with the birth of Facebook in 2004), a practice that has come to be known as doxing emerged as a tactic used among rival hackers to shut an opponent down. Early doxers would hack a fellow hacker’s computer and begin “dropping docs” (short for documents) into a public forum revealing their target’s name, address and phone number — a move that pretty much destroyed the reputation of the hacker that was doxed. By 2003, the practice evolved into a common prank where hackers and non-hackers alike were doxed if someone had an axe to grind with a rival.

The phrase “having an axe to grind” is an idiom — an expression that is intended to mean something different from the literal meaning of the words expressed. This particular idiom refers to having a grievance with someone that drives the aggrieved party to seek revenge. It does not refer to a person who is actually grinding or sharpening an axe.

And then came social media. Suddenly it became very easy to get a lot of personal information from sources like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. A person didn’t need to be a hacker anymore if they wanted to dox someone and, with the wealth of photo and video images shared by the masses, they could not only harvest personal information, they could also provide images that supported their efforts to expose their target. Doxing became an incredibly popular tool for the cyber-bullies and cyber-shamers that have come to dominate parts of the online landscape. While hackers still play their role (bypassing security protocols to get at information), regular internet users can go after anyone with a Facebook profile or a Twitter account to acquire information that can humiliate, embarrass or shame someone.

Now instead of targeting rival hackers, doxers go after anyone who crosses an undetermined, highly subjective moral line. Sometimes the line is clear: when it looked like police in Steubenville, Ohio were going to turn a blind eye to the alleged rape of a 16-year-old girl at the hands of two high school football players, doxing began in earnest, with the hacking collective Anonymous leading the charge. Many credit the internet mob with sounding the alarm, eventually leading to charges and convictions for the two attackers. However, at other times, the line is less clear: shortly after Michael Brown was gunned down by police in Ferguson, Missouri, a 14-year-old boy posted the name, address and social security number of the officer he believed was responsible for the incident. It turned out his information was wrong but, by the time the truth came to light, the innocent officer’s private information was all over the
internet. The individual who leaked the details was never taken to task for what he did — in fact, he expressed no remorse for what he did because he felt the officer was a representative of a corrupt police system.

According to doxing expert Whitney Phillips, “Even if someone has done something objectively terrible, doxing is a problematic response. You can get information wrong. You can harm people who have nothing to do with it. Your actions can have further repercussions than you expect… Anything that relies on the mob mentality is a powder keg.” When Minnesota dentist Walter Palmer, a big game hunter in his spare time, shot and killed a beloved African lion, actress Mia Farrow turned to doxing, posting a screen grab of Palmer’s home address on her Twitter account. Mia Farrow is far from a hacker.

What the doxing movement will morph into next remains to be seen. Some fear that it will continue to be used by cyber-bullies and cyber-shamers with “punishable” infractions shifting from serious transgressions to something as simple as saying the wrong thing or smiling at the wrong time.

Source:

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To consider

1. What is doxing?
2. How has doxing changed since the emergence of social media?
3. Is doxing a legitimate form of expression or does it constitute a gross invasion of a person’s privacy?

Followup

Did the search you conducted in the Minds on section inspire you to reset you privacy settings on social media or try to control your personal information a bit more?

– OR –

Are you comfortable with the amount of your personal information that is currently available online?