

**The Rise of Online Shaming
and What to Do if You're a Target**

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Abstract

This capstone explores the psychosocial roots of the group dynamics that lead to crowd behavior, as well as the drive to humiliate others, and the implications of those behaviors on online interactions. Specifically, this will consider what motivates people to attack others on social media over ideas and values that are in contrast to those held by the attacking group. Due to the extremely fast-paced nature of social media, it is often difficult to prepare for an online battle, because the target of the attack won't know it's happening until they've already lost their first mover advantage. Because of this pace, a shaming target needs to act swiftly to counteract the attack and address whatever harm the attackers feel was done. Through four case studies and the insights gained from research into the psychological basis for the phenomenon of online shaming, this capstone aims to offer advice to anyone unwittingly caught in an Internet tidal wave to lessen and ultimately repair reputational damage.

Introduction

People are shaming each other publicly on the Internet with alarming force and frequency. Nearly every day there is yet another example of this phenomenon, whether on a local or wide scale. But it's the channel, not the action that's new. The behaviors that drive people to gang up on each other on social media are actually derived from our instinctive herd mentality that gave the earliest humans a competitive advantage against perceived enemies, or when working together to hunt prey. Humans for time immemorial have used the strength of a group to enforce social mores and keep life predictable by shutting down people whose behaviors stray from the accepted norm. Predation is literally the result, and depending on the level of the shaming dished out, victims who step outside of the socially accepted norms can be virtually eviscerated by the crowd, their reputations shattered, their careers ended, and their lives threatened.

Social media has slowly but surely taken everything we understood about mass communications and turned it on its head. While just two decades ago, if a person was publicly shamed, whatever newspaper articles might have been written about the shameful event would have been quickly forgotten, and difficult to dig up in the future. Worst-case scenario, the person could simply relocate to a new town and start over. Today, thanks to social media, whatever it is that the person did to get in the crosshairs of the digital mob will live on in perpetuity. The Internet is slow to forgive, and it never forgets.

While social media provides a modern, instantaneous channel for it, there is nothing novel about the human behavior that drives shaming online. Writers like

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Gustave Le Bon, Everett Dean Martin, Wilfred Trotter, and Edward Bernays explored the psychosocial roots of this behavior in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Through case studies of some recent high-profile examples, this capstone seeks to examine the gregarious herd mentality of humans first identified by these authors from the 19th and 20th Centuries, and how their observations are still valid in 21st Century cyberspace. The paper will conclude with some practical advice for anyone unwittingly swept up in a social media tidal wave who hopes to repair the damage to their reputation.

Literature Review

A number of books and articles exist to advise companies how to respond to and mitigate social media attacks that can harm their reputations and their bottom lines. However, there is little written to guide individual, otherwise-private citizens who inadvertently touch off a very public social media firestorm.

The one work devoted specifically to this topic, Jon Ronson's aptly titled 2015 book "So You've Been Publicly Shamed," explores several recent, highly publicized instances of online shaming, and the effects on the people who bore the brunt. These victims' experiences as a result of their shaming ranged from job loss to depression to death threats to suicide.

Ronson looks at the historical roots of public shaming, dating back to colonial days in early America when people were pilloried or lashed in town squares before their entire community. Today, online shaming taps into the same twisted enjoyment at the sight of someone else being humiliated. Those perpetuating the humiliation are un-empathetic, and detached from taking responsibility for playing a part in taking someone else down. The anonymity of social media makes it easier to bring about someone's downfall from the comfort of one's own home without a second thought about the repercussions, he says. (Ronson, 2015)

The weaponization of social media is also explored in Eric Dezenhall's 2014 book, "Glass Jaw." Dezenhall claims that social media's power rests with the "bathrobe brigade" that uses social media to derive a sense of "micro-control, dominance over what emanates from our personal domains." (Dezenhall, 2014, p. 100)

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“In theory, social media encourages dialogue and conflict resolution. When the technology began its emergence, I was hoping this would be the case. However, in practice, social media promotes warfare.” (Dezenhall, 2014, p. 102)

We see this aspect of human nature on a daily basis online. Several books have been written about the human behavior that drives people to come together as a united front and attack others whose opinions they don't agree with. Interestingly, these books were written nearly a century or more ago, but the observations still ring true.

A look back at the earliest studies of a crowd mindset reveals that humans are gregarious herd animals who enjoy being among others who share their viewpoints. Groups of likeminded people grow so quickly because, “the crowd is never so much at home as ‘on the band wagon’,” Everett Dean Martin wrote in 1919 in his “The Behavior of Crowds: A Psychological Study.” (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 23) People by nature want to feel like their opinions are validated and they tend to feel morally superior as part of a winning team on a crusade against a perceived enemy. At its most innocent, this is what makes baseball popular, according to Martin. This is also how huge groups of people can join forces online to punish anyone seen as behaving counter to an unwritten moral code imposed by the group onto a victim.

Public relations pioneer Edward L. Bernays built upon the work of Martin, Trotter, et al. In his watershed 1923 book, “Crystallizing Public Opinion,” Bernays wrote that to understand an individual's point of view, one must consider the larger group that informed the individual. (Bernays, 1923/2011, p. 87) Though Bernays' book preceded the birth of Facebook by more than 80 years, many of his

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observations about the motivations of people in a crowd are as relevant in today's social media realm as they were at a time of newsreels and lecture hall speeches.

Then, as now, Bernays found:

The mental equipment of the average individual consists of a mass of judgments on most of the subjects which touch his daily physical or mental life. These judgments are the tools of his daily being and yet they are his judgments, not on a basis of research and logical deduction, but for the most part dogmatic expressions accepted on the authority of his parents, his teachers, his church, and of his social, his economic and other leaders. (Bernays, 1923/2011, pp. 87-88)

This aspect of group dynamics is important to understand; it explains why it is often so difficult to sway someone's firmly held opinion. Bernays noted:

Not so long ago every intelligent man knew that the world was flat. Today the average man has a belief just as firm and unknowing in the mysterious force which he has heard called atomic energy. It is axiomatic that men who know little are often intolerant of a point of view that is contrary to their own. (Bernays, 1923/2011, p. 90)

In 1922, Walter Lippmann wrote in "Public Opinion" about the stereotypes that shape people's understandings about the world around them. Explaining the susceptibility of people to a crowd mindset based on the belief systems baked in from their upbringing or their surroundings, Lippman wrote:

The systems of stereotypes may be the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society. They are an ordered, more or

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less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world. But they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around. There we find the charm of the familiar, the normal, the dependable; its grooves and shapes are where we are accustomed to find them. And though we have abandoned much that might have tempted us before we creased ourselves into that mould, once we are firmly in, it fits as snugly as an old shoe.

(Lippmann, 1922/1997, p. 63)

This paper will also consider advice for managing reputations in business to draw parallels for private people who can also benefit from these strategies. James Lukaszewski's book, "On Crisis Communication: What Your CEO Needs to Know About Reputation Risk and Crisis Management" contains useful guidance for navigating a social media crisis at a company. Lukaszewski recommends that a person or company found in the crosshairs of a social media attack respond immediately, openly, candidly, and positively to clarify whatever misconceptions are causing the anger on the other side. In addition, he stresses that: "truth is about 15% facts and data and 85% emotion and point of reference." Simply reciting facts won't help end an attack. Instead, the facts must be presented in a way that reaches the attackers on an emotional level. It's critical to respond quickly, and even more

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important that the response not be angry, defensive, or contentious, as that will only incite more of the same from the attackers. (Lukaszewski, 2013, p. 246)

In his 1992 book “Influencing Public Attitudes: Strategies That Reduce the Media’s Power,” Lukaszewski discusses ways to tailor messaging to a variety of audiences that may be touched by a corporate crisis; however many of these strategies are also applicable to private citizens. Most notably, he recommends that anyone facing a reputational crisis should start by enlisting the help of their friends, and putting them to work to help counteract negative publicity. (Lukaszewski, 1992, p. 53)

Similarly, Ronald J. Alsop’s book, “18 Immutable Laws of Corporate Reputation” includes actionable advice for companies facing a reputational crisis that can also be applied to individuals. In business as in life, Alsop writes:

The public wants to see a company take full responsibility for its actions and to show contrition. Your golden rule should be to tell it straight. Rather than trying to minimize a problem or duck responsibility, it’s much more sensible to say, “We screwed up, we’re sorry, and here’s how we’re going to fix things and make amends.”

You may even end up creating goodwill and fortifying your reputation.

(Alsop, 2004, p. 260)

In her research, the author found a gap in specific, practical advice for private citizens facing a social media crisis, as well as an understanding of the behavioral psychology that drives cyber bullies to join forces against a target online. This capstone will venture to expand upon Ronson’s research and put a modern spin on

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the work of Bernays, Trotter, Martin, Lippmann, and Le Bon in order to provide a much-needed present-day guide for individuals who find themselves caught up in a social media gaffe that can ruin their lives in a matter of minutes.

Chapter 1: The Herd

But for the odd hermit or recluse, humans – like other social animals such as cattle, sheep, bees, and wolves – feel better when traveling in packs. It’s because by their nature, people are “gregarious,” Wilfred Trotter wrote in his 1915 book “Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War.” (Trotter, 1915/2015, p. 17) Within the herd, according to Trotter, people find comfort, safety, and a competitive advantage. “The wolf which does not follow the impulses of the herd will be starved; the sheep which does not respond to the flock will be eaten.” (Trotter, 1915/2015, p. 30)

Observations about the herd mentality date back at least as far as Aesop’s fable, The Four Oxen and the Lion:

A lion used to prowl about a field in which four oxen used to dwell. Many a time he tried to attack them; but whenever he came near they turned their tails to one another, so that whichever way he approached them he was met by the horns of one of them. At last, however, they fell a-quarrelling among themselves, and each went off to pasture alone in a separate corner of the field. Then the lion attacked them one by one and soon made an end of all four. United we stand, divided we fall. (Aesop, n.d.)

So there’s a physical safety in numbers, but there’s also a psychological sense of security when surrounding oneself with like-minded people who not only agree with one’s opinions, but concentrate them as the group enhances their legitimacy through sheer numbers. We see this us-versus-them phenomenon all the time: Liberals versus Conservatives, NRA members versus anti-gun activists, people who

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are pro-choice versus people picketing a Planned Parenthood, New York Mets fans versus New York Yankees fans. The crowd dynamic allows people, whichever side of the coin they're on, to band together and gain constant reinforcement for their beliefs from other members who share them.

Trotter noted:

The establishment of homogeneity in the herd is the basis of morale. From homogeneity proceed moral power, enthusiasm, courage, endurance, enterprise, and all the virtues of the warrior. The peace of mind, happiness, and energy of the soldier come from his feeling himself to be a member in a body solidly united for a single purpose.
(Trotter, 1915/2015, p. 144)

According to Martin, homogeneity within a crowd goes even further than a shared mindset. An individual's traits such as their job, character, and intelligence, become irrelevant once they become part of a crowd; the melding of individuals into the collective crowd mind weakens the group's overall intellectual aptitude:

The fact that they have been transformed into a crowd puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation.
(Martin, 1919/2015, p. 5)

Bernays noted that the suggestibility of people to the ideas that fit within the standards of their groups boils down to: "When in Rome do as the Romans."

(Bernays, 1923/2011, p. 123)

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Martin's view is that the "Romans" together act with less intelligence than individual Romans might have on their own. Members of the crowd are more likely to take things at face value and lean on the shared beliefs of the rest of the crowd to give added legitimacy to whatever they are accepting as truth, rather than taking a thoughtful look at a subject from several sides:

It is not really because so many are ignorant, but because so few are able to resist the appeal which the peculiar logic of crowd-thinking makes to the unconscious, that the cheap, the tawdry, the half-true almost exclusively gain popular acceptance. The average man is a dogmatist. He thinks what he thinks others think he is thinking.

(Martin, 1919/2015, p. 41)

This is dangerous, because it becomes very easy to insulate oneself when surrounded only by those who boost one's own ideas and discount any differing opinions. This dynamic typically degrades into two different crowds simply trying to shout each other with no one on either side willing or able to listen or evaluate alternate ideas.

"Every crowd 'boosts for' itself, lauds itself, gives itself airs, speaks with oracular finality, regards itself as morally superior, and will so far as it has the power, lord it over everyone. Notice how each group and section in society, so far as it permits itself to think as crowd, claims to be 'the people.'" (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 22)

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We see this sense of superiority when two or more groups are in competition with each other; in fact, Martin says that's what makes baseball so popular. (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 7)

Opposing sides aim to shut the other down to drown out competing views.

Martin wrote:

The "freedom of speech," which is everywhere demanded in the name of democracy, is not at all freedom in the expression of individual opinion. It is only the demand for advertising space on the part of various crowds for the publication of their shibboleths and propaganda. Each crowd, while demanding this freedom for itself, seeks to deny it to other crowds, and all unite in denying it to the non-crowd man wherever possible. (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 77)

But we also see this behavior when one crowd is in a distinct position of power relative to the other.

As Martin wrote: "The evangelist Sunday undoubtedly owes the great attendance at his meetings in no small degree to the fact that he is regularly expected to abuse some one." (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 7)

This leads to another element of human behavior to be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2: people enjoy seeing others humiliated, because by reducing another's position, they themselves feel superior.

Wrote Martin: "Yes, all crowds moralize, all crowds are also idealistic. But the moral enthusiasm of the crowd always demands a victim. The idealist crowd also

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always makes idols of its ideals and worships them with human sacrifice. The peaceable crowd is only potentially homicidal.” (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 33)

Martin, writing about his experiences lecturing at the Cooper Union observed this behavior among audiences:

When on rare occasions the spirit of the crowd begins to manifest itself—and one can always detect its beginnings before the audience is consciously aware of it—I have noticed that discussion instantly ceases and people begin merely to repeat their creeds and hurl cant phrases at one another. All then is humorous and playful, now there is a note of hostility in it. It is laughter *at* some one or something. Even the applause is changed. It is more frequent. It is more vigorous, and instead of showing mere approval of some sentiment, it becomes a means of showing the numerical strength of a group of believers of some sort. It is as if those who applaud were unconsciously seeking to reveal to themselves and others that there is a multitude on their side. (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 8)

Bernays offered this reflection on Martin’s work: “The main satisfaction, Mr. Martin thinks, which the individual derives from his group association is the satisfaction of his vanity through the creation of an enlarged self-importance.” (Bernays, 1923/2011, p. 116)

At this writing, we can see this at work in American politics, as Republican and Democratic presidential candidates vie for their party’s nomination for 2016,

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and Americans proudly show support for their preferred candidates and occasionally engage in heated debates around the water cooler.

Martin observed:

The egoism of the crowd commonly takes the form of the will to social dominance and it is in crowd behavior that we learn how insatiable the repressed egoism of mankind really is. Members of the crowd are always promising one another a splendid future triumph of some sort. This promise of victory, which is nearly always to be enjoyed at the expense, discomfiture, and humiliation of somebody else, is of great advantage in the work of propaganda. People have only to be persuaded that prohibition, or equal suffrage, or the single tax 'is coming,' and thousands whose reason could not be moved by argument, however logical it might be, will begin to look upon it with favor. The crowd is never so much at home as "on the band wagon."

(Martin, 1919/2015, p. 2)

Le Bon, Martin, Trotter, and Bernays made their observations about crowd minds at a time when the people who comprised them were often (but not always) physically sharing the same space, whether or not they otherwise knew each other, such as attendees at a political rally, scholars at a lecture, or neighbors at the local tavern.

When Bernays was writing "Crystallizing Public Opinion" in the early 1920s, ideas were communicated through daily newspapers, magazines, the lecture circuit, advertisements, and newsreels.

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The masses had no control over the media. Bernays wrote at the time, “Modern conditions are such that it is not feasible to build up independent organs. Innovators and innovations cannot create their own channels of communication.” (Bernays, 1923/2011, p. 138)

Fast forward to today’s always-on culture where nearly everyone has a smartphone in their pocket, and blogs and social media posts allow millions of people around the world to build up their own independent organ, free of charge. If anything, the ubiquity and global reach of the Internet, and the anonymity it affords, gives rise to crowd behavior on steroids. This seems particularly true for society’s disenfranchised who seek the power of a digital crowd to feel like they have a voice.

In “So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed,” Jon Ronson interviewed members of the online bulletin board 4chan to learn why they belong to the group. One teen, Mercedes, told him: “A lot of them are bored, understimulated, overpersecuted, powerless kids... They know they can’t be anything they want. So they went to the Internet. On the Internet we have power in situations where we would otherwise be powerless.” (Ronson, 2015, p. 123)

Much of the online crowd behavior we will explore later in this paper is driven by the sense that the members of the dominant crowd are somehow morally superior to their target who has somehow acted outside of the crowd’s accepted norms. Crowds form to ensure that these norms are protected. Martin wrote:

We all dread the element of the unexpected, and nowhere so much as in the conduct of our neighbors. If we could only get rid of the humanly unexpected, society would be almost fool-proof. Hence, the

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resistance to new truths, social change, progress, nonconformity of any sort; hence the fanaticism with which every crowd strives to keep its believers in line. Much of this insistence on regularity is positively necessary. Without it there could be no social or moral order at all.
(Martin, 1919/2015, p. 70)

To overcome the crowd mentality, Martin wrote, “The kind of people who have an inner gnawing to regulate their neighbors, the kind who cannot accept the fact of their psychic inferiority and must consequently make crowds by way of compensation, would have to be content to mind their own business.” (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 68) That, of course, is an unlikely outcome.

In his 1896 book, “The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind,” Gustave Le Bon hypothesizes that a crowd’s “savage, destructive instincts are the inheritance left dormant in all of us from the primitive ages.” (Le Bon, 1896/2001, p. 27) He wrote:

The passion, so widespread, for the chase and the acts of ferocity of crowds proceed from one and the same source. A crowd which slowly slaughters a defenseless victim displays a very cowardly ferocity; but for the philosopher this ferocity is very closely related to that of the huntsmen who gather in dozens for the pleasure of taking part in the pursuit and killing of a luckless stag by their hounds.

(Le Bon, 1896/2001, p. 27)

We will explore this further in several case studies later in this capstone, including, coincidentally, one about a hunter whose murder of a beloved lion

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triggered a severe and prolonged backlash online from an incensed crowd licking their chops over each blow to the hunter's reputation and livelihood.

Chapter 2: Humiliation

The Latin word “humous,” the root of humiliation, means to be put down to the ground. “Eat dirt,” in essence. In his 1991 study, *The Humiliation Dynamic: An Overview*, Donald C. Klein observed that a person suffering a humiliation is excluded from the group that has cast him or her out, and becomes less than in the eyes of the humiliators, and causing damage to the humiliated person’s identity and sense of self. (Klein, 1991, p. 97) According to Klein, humiliation requires a humiliator, a victim, and a witness. The humiliator often wields more power than the victim, and the humiliation is felt more intensely when there are more witnesses and the event becomes more public.

As anyone who has experienced it knows, humiliation is one of the strongest human emotions. Marte Otten and Kai J. Jonas’ 2014 study found that it is even more intensely felt than both anger and happiness. (Otten & Jonas, 2014, p. 23)

So the experience of humiliation is awful for the victim, but how do the humiliators and the witnesses feel when they observe the victim’s response to it? In a 2009 study, *When Your Gain Is My Pain and Your Pain Is My Gain: Neural Correlates of Envy and Schadenfreude*, a team of Japanese researchers found that people will derive a pleasant “reward” feeling when a person perceived as “advantaged” compared with themselves suffers a misfortune. (Takahashi, Kato, Matsuura, Mobbs, Suhara, & Okubo, 2009)

Los Angeles crisis consultant Jonathan Bernstein told *The Wall Street Journal*’s Jeffrey Zaslow in 2010:

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Human nature hasn't changed. There have always been people whose aim in life was to cause pain to others. If they saw people embarrassing themselves, they got pleasure in sharing that information. Before the Internet, they had to gossip with their neighbors. Now they can gossip with the world. (Zaslow, 2010)

To further explore the mindset of humiliators, particularly in a pre-social media environment, Ronson interviewed former Houston judge Ted Poe, famous for his over-the-top offline public shaming punishments, such as requiring a convicted drunk driver to wear outside high schools and bars a sandwich board sign that read "I KILLED TWO PEOPLE WHILE DRIVING DRUNK," (Ronson, 2015, p. 82)

Though his punishments may have seemed extreme, Poe told Ronson they pale in comparison to today's social media assaults:

"The justice system in the West has a lot of problems," Poe said, "but at least there are rules. You have basic rights as the accused. You have your day in court. You don't have any rights when you're accused on the Internet. And the consequences are worse. It's worldwide forever." (Ronson, 2015, p. 90)

Ronson, who wrote his book in part to better understand his own motivation when he himself had participated in past shamings reflected:

It felt good to see the balance of power shift so that someone like Ted Poe was afraid of people like us. But he wouldn't sentence people to hold a placard for something they hadn't been convicted of. He wouldn't sentence someone for telling a joke that came out badly. The

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people we were destroying were no longer just... public figures who had committed actual transgressions. They were private individuals who really hadn't done anything much wrong. Ordinary humans were being forced to learn damage control, like corporations that had committed PR disasters. It was very stressful. (Ronson, 2015, p. 90)

With the physical buffer of a computer screen shielding a shamer from his or her victim, plus most likely not knowing the victim personally in the first place, it becomes very easy for people online to forget that their words are more than just keystrokes sent out into cyberspace. When they reach their target, there is a very real person absorbing the criticism, the threats, and the attacks. Ronson says the separation allows shamers to dehumanize the people they hurt, which makes shamers feel less guilty about bringing others down.

“In psychology it's known as cognitive dissonance. It's the idea that it feels stressful and painful for us to hold two contradictory ideas at the same time (like the idea that we're kind people and the idea that we've just destroyed someone).”
(Ronson, 2015, pp. 80-81)

Ronson also outlined Twitter's beginnings, when discourse was largely civil:

In the early days of Twitter there were no shamings. We were Eve in the Garden of Eden. We chatted away unselfconsciously. As somebody back then wrote, “Facebook is where you lie to your friends, Twitter is where you tell the truth to strangers... I remember how exciting it felt when hitherto remote evil billionaires like Rupert Murdoch and Donald Trump created their own Twitter accounts. For

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the first time in history we sort of had direct access to ivory-tower oligarchs like them. We became keenly watchful for transgressions. After a while, it wasn't just transgressions we were keenly watchful for. It was misspeakings. Fury at the terribleness of other people had started to consume us a lot. And the rage that swirled around seemed increasingly in disproportion to whatever stupid thing some celebrity had said. It felt different to satire or journalism or criticism. It felt like punishment. In fact, it felt weird and empty when there *wasn't* anyone to be furious about. The days between shamings felt like days picking at fingernails, treading water. (Ronson, 2015, pp. 88-89)

In Jeffrey Zaslow's 2010 Wall Street Journal article, *Surviving the Age of Humiliation*, he interviewed Parry Aftab, a cyber-security attorney. Aftab weighed in on why it's so easy for some to join the mob bandwagon during a shaming: "We're braver when we type. We don't have to look someone in their eyes. It's easier to be vicious, to cross the line between funny and cruel." (Zaslow, 2010))

It's troubling, the ease with which public shamings happen on a daily basis, with people getting fired from their jobs in a tweet, or made to feel ugly, horrible, or worthless. The humiliators show no remorse, and typically don't think twice before torching today's victim and moving on to tomorrow's. Wrote Ronson:

It didn't seem to be crossing any of our minds to wonder whether the person we had just shamed was okay or in ruins. I suppose that when shamings are delivered like remotely administered drone strikes nobody needs to think about how ferocious our collective power

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might be. The snowflake never needs to feel responsible for the avalanche. (Ronson, 2015, p. 56)

Chapter 3: Patient Zero

Perhaps one of the most qualified experts to discuss online shaming from the victim's perspective, Monica Lewinsky, did just that in a TED Talk given in March 2015. Lewinsky was a 22-year-old White House intern in 1998 when news broke that she been involved in an inappropriate relationship with President Bill Clinton.

Lewinsky recalled in her TED speech:

In 1998, after having been swept up in an improbable romance, I was then swept up in the eye of a political, legal, and media maelstrom like we had never seen before. Remember, just a few years earlier, news was consumed from just three places: reading a newspaper or magazine, listening to the radio, or watching television. That was it. But that wasn't my fate. Instead, this scandal was brought to you by the digital revolution. That meant we could access all the information we wanted when we wanted it, any time, anywhere. And when the story broke in January 1998, it broke online. It was the first time the traditional news was usurped by the Internet for a major news story. What that meant for me personally was that, overnight, I went from being a completely private figure to a publicly humiliated one, worldwide. I was patient zero of losing a personal reputation on a global scale, almost instantaneously. (TED, 2015)

Lewinsky went on to talk about the toll her humiliation took on her psyche. Her mother was so worried she would try to harm herself, she said in her speech, that she would insist that Monica shower with the door open.

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Lewinsky handled her humiliation by disappearing for a long while until she faded from the spotlight. She reemerged only recently when she was in a position of power as an advocate against cyber bullying. She made sure she had a respectable platform at TED, and carefully controlled her message in a shareable video that could be watched online.

In her TED Talk, Lewinsky outlined social media's unique potential for a swift, extremely public humiliation:

Cruelty to others is nothing new, but online, technologically enhanced shaming is amplified, uncontained, and permanently accessible. The echo of embarrassment used to extend only as far as your family, village, school, or community, but now it's the online community, too. Millions of people, often anonymously, can stab you with their words, and that's a lot of pain. There are no perimeters around how many people can publicly observe you and put you in a public stockade. There is a very personal price to public humiliation, and the growth of the Internet has jacked up that price. (TED, 2015)

Lewinsky spoke passionately about the need for all of us to stand up against bullies, and to be "Upstandrs" who intervene and speak up on behalf of the victim to try to diffuse the situation, not bystanders who look the other way, or worse, watch passively as others are ripped to shreds online.

Chapter 4: Justine Sacco

On December 20, 2013, New York publicist Justine Sacco sent a tweet to her 175 friends from Heathrow before boarding a flight to Cape Town: “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!” She then spent the next 11 hours sleeping on the plane while her reputation and career were being torn apart on the ground. The reason? Sacco’s tweet was viewed as racist and insensitive, and because it was sent by a privileged white woman, particularly one who makes her living in public relations and therefore should know better, the Internet decided to destroy her for it.



On Twitter, 175 followers isn’t considered very many. But one of them sent the tweet to Sam Biddle, a journalist at Gawker, who at the time was followed by 15,000:



All while Sacco was still on the plane and cut off from the Internet, her employer, IAC quickly fired her, including a comment condemning Sacco's tweet that was aired on CNN. The tweet and news of Sacco's downfall and firing quickly went viral. People around the world waited for Sacco to arrive in Cape Town and discover that her reputation and career had been ruined while she was 30,000 feet above the earth, blissfully unaware of any of it. The hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet became a trending topic on Twitter.



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When Sacco landed, she turned on her phone and found a message from a friend letting her know what had happened while she was in the air. A photographer at the Cape Town airport was waiting to snap a picture.



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Ronson, who in his book admits that he himself had taken part in Internet takedowns in the past, reflected:

“A life had been ruined. What was it for: just some social media drama? I think our natural disposition as humans is to plod along until we get old and stop. But with social media, we’ve created a stage for constant artificial high drama. Every day a new person emerges as a magnificent hero or a sickening villain. It’s all very sweeping, and not the way we actually are as people. What rush was overpowering us at times like this? What were we getting out of it?

I could tell Sam Biddle was finding it startling too—like when you shoot a gun and the power of it sends you recoiling violently backward. He said he was “surprised” to see how quickly Justine was destroyed: “I never wake up and hope I get to fire someone that day—and certainly never hope to ruin anyone’s life.” Still, his e-mail ended, he had a feeling she’d be “fine eventually, if not already. Everyone’s attention span is so short. They’ll be mad about something new today.” (Ronson, 2015, p. 79)

Ronson interviewed Sacco three weeks later to find out the toll it had taken on her. He told Sacco what Biddle had said to him:

“Well, I’m not fine,” Justine said. “I’m really suffering. I had a great career and I loved my job and it was taken away from me and there was a lot of glory in that. Everybody else was very *happy* about that. I cried out my body weight in the first twenty-four hours. It was

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

incredibly traumatic. You don't sleep. You wake up in the middle of the night forgetting where you are. All of a sudden you don't know what you're supposed to do. You've got no schedule. You've got no"—she paused—"purpose. I'm thirty years old. I had a great career. If I don't have a plan, if I don't start making steps to reclaim my identity and remind myself of who I am on a daily basis, then I might lose myself. I'm single. So it's not like I can date, because we google everyone we might date. So that's been taken away from me too. How am I going to meet new people? What are they going to think of me?" (Ronson, 2015, pp. 79-80)

To measure the extent of Sacco's newfound notoriety, according to Ronson's Google AdWords research, Sacco's name had been googled about 30 times in each of the two months leading up to the offending tweet. "Between December 20 and the end of December, she was googled 1,220,000 times." (Ronson, 2015, p. 71)

Sacco told Ronson that she feared the Internet had taken over her persona:

I can't fully grasp the misconception that's happening around the world," Justine said. "They've taken my name and my picture, and have created this Justine Sacco that's not me and have labeled this person a racist. I have this fear that if I were in a car accident tomorrow and lost my memory and came back and googled myself, that would be my new reality. (Ronson, 2015, p. 74)

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

Sacco deleted her Twitter account after the attack, but it was since taken over by someone else in January 2014, exactly a month after Sacco's last tweet. The account now sends out messages about racial, social, and economic justice.



To get away from the spotlight and let things cool down, Sacco went to Ethiopia where she spent a month volunteering in Ethiopia. She returned to New York and found a new PR job. Unfortunately, it led to more press. Her name recently resurfaced when it was discovered that she is now representing the embattled online fantasy football company FanDuel. ("PR guru," 2015)

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING



To this day nearly two years later, a search of her name yields page after page of screenshots of her tweet, other ill-advised tweets she had sent before that one, and photos of her arriving at the airport. This is an example of how a swift and sincere apology might have helped her to better weather the Internet storm.

Chapter 5: Walter Palmer

It was a shot heard 'round the world of the worst kind: a beloved lion at a sanctuary in Zimbabwe was illegally hunted and killed on July 1, 2015 when he was deliberately chased out of the protected lands. The hunter who killed the lion, Minnesota dentist Walter Palmer, was part of a guided group led by a professional hunter; Palmer maintained he had no advance knowledge that Cecil was off-limits. The lion wore a tracking collar and had been studied by wildlife researchers.

Weeks later, London's Telegraph newspaper identified Palmer as the hunter who killed Cecil, touching off the international outcry among animal lovers. Palmer issued this apology on July 28:

In early July, I was in Zimbabwe on a bow-hunting trip for big game. I hired several professional guides and they secured all proper permits. To my knowledge, everything about this trip was legal and properly handled and conducted. I had no idea that the lion I took was a known, local favorite, was collared and part of a study until the end of the hunt. I relied on the expertise of my local professional guides to ensure a legal hunt. I have not been contacted by authorities in Zimbabwe or in the U.S. about this situation, but will assist them in any inquiries they may have. Again, I deeply regret that my pursuit of an activity that I love and practice responsibly and legally resulted in the taking of this lion. (DeLong, 2015)

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

From the first moments that the Internet got wind of Palmer's role in Cecil's murder, the social media accounts connected to his practice, River Bluff Dental, continuously posted deeply insensitive, egotistical, and completely unsympathetic text and photos dismissing the crisis. The posts took the tack of dismissing the public's outcry, and implied that critics were overreacting and that the protests would quickly die down.

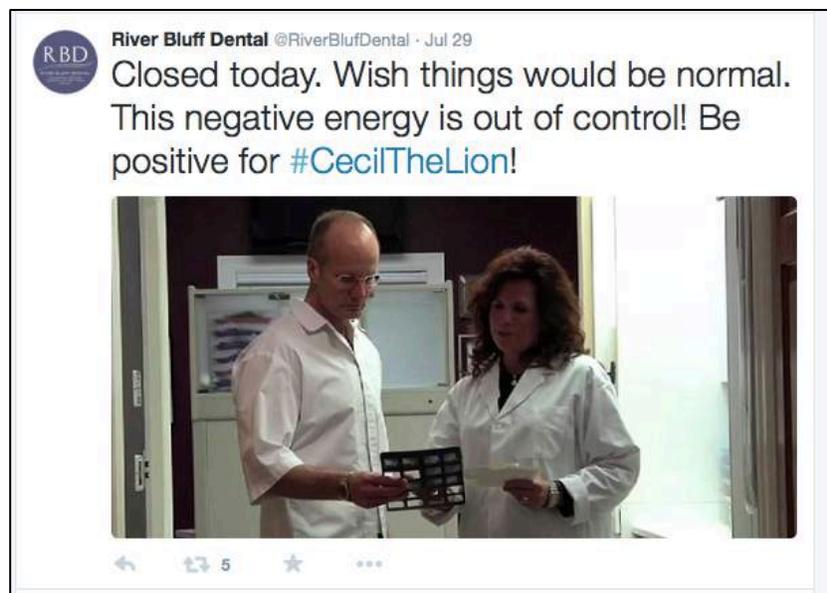


This insincere apology includes the hashtag #NBD, "no big deal."



THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

The River Bluff Dental social media pages continuously minimized the importance of the Cecil event, calling protestors “fickle” and likely to quickly forget about it. The content posted on the River Bluff accounts repeatedly baited protestors with mentions of Cecil by name and lions in general. The practice’s posts made it out to be the victim and tried to turn the tables on protestors by blaming them for closing the business, inconveniencing patients whose appointments were canceled, and jeopardizing the jobs of the office staff.



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That approach, however, served merely to infuriate the protestors, galvanizing their mission to run Palmer out of town. They succeeded. Palmer skipped town with his wife and daughter to their vacation home in Florida. But the protestors found them. Soon “LION Killer!” was spray painted on the home’s garage door. Private security was hired to protect the Palmer family.



THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

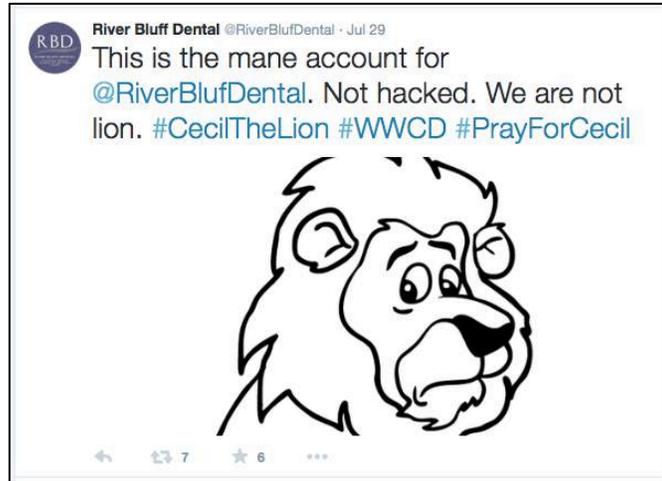
Palmer's personal Twitter profile was shut down, and a note was placed on it announcing that the office website, RiverBluffDental.com had been compromised and the link was no longer valid.



Without a website, protestors took to the dental practice's Yelp page, which saw an endless stream of negative reviews and death threats against Palmer, and sometimes his family. Despite the ramped up threats and anger against Palmer, his social media activity only fanned the flames.



THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

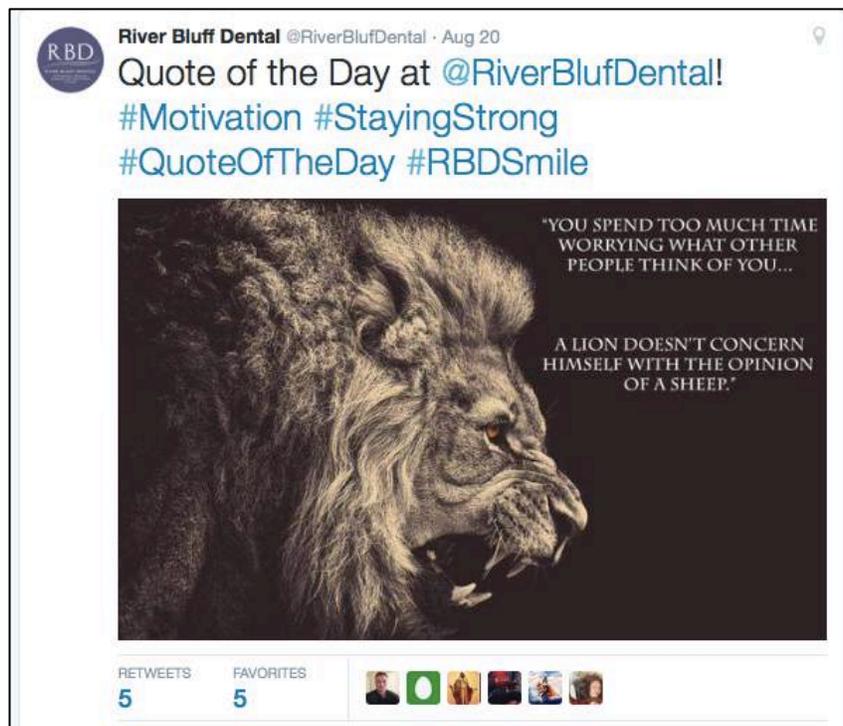
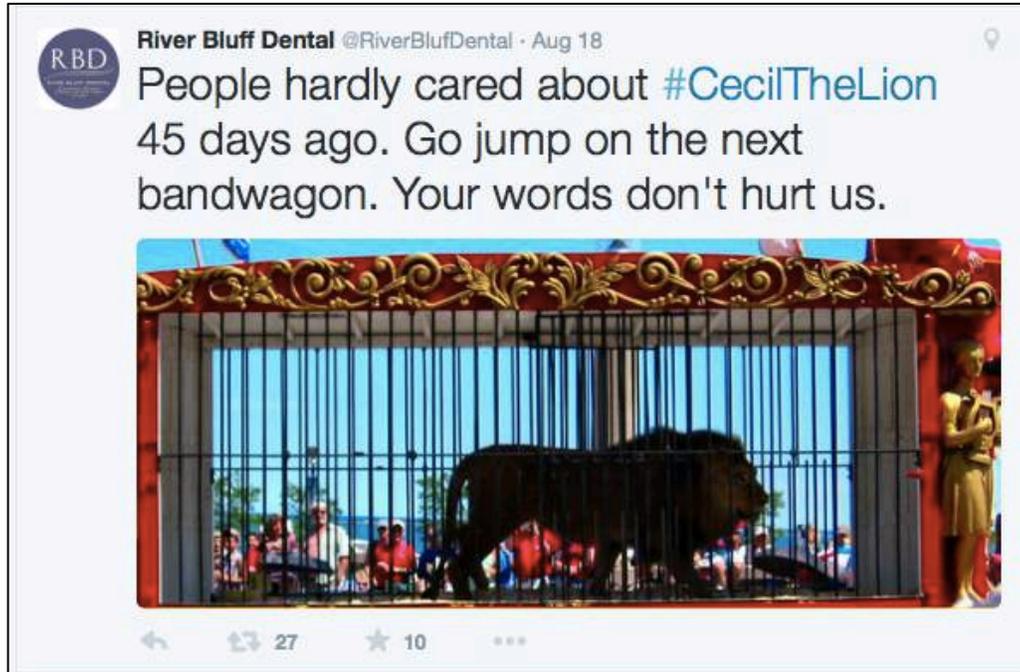


THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

As the crisis continued into August, the tone of River Bluff's posts became increasingly angry and dismissive.



THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING



With throngs of protestors and the media still camped out outside the office, the staff of River Bluff Dental reopened their doors on August 17, 2015, without Palmer. A statement was released stating:

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

Today, River Bluff Dental employees and dentists are beginning to serve our loyal patients. Dr. Palmer is not on site. Our employees have no comment. The media has already inquired at our homes, with our families, however we have no comment and will not entertain your questions or interview requests. We are dental professionals committed to serve our patients and clients. Our office is private property, we ask the press to stay off of the property and respect the peace of mind of our patients and clients. River Bluff Dental is a private business. The employees and patients wish to get back to business as usual to serve our clients and patients, and maintain the jobs of dedicated professionals. There will be no further comment, or anyone available to comment.

Thank you,

River Bluff Dental Staff



THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

With the office now open, instead of toning down their social media posts, the practice continued to take every possible opportunity to work in a lion theme.



THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING



THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING



On September 11, 2015, the practice posted another incredibly insensitive and tone-deaf post:



THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

Not only were the River Bluff Dental Facebook and Twitter pages overrun with negative posts, the damage quickly extended to the practice's Yelp page, an inevitability that was worsened when the practice invited patients to post positive comments there. In a screenshot from July 29, the practice's Yelp page looks as you might expect for a dental office, with logos and photos of the staff, but the one-star review shows that River Bluff's reputation had already suffered a hit:



Protestors quickly took over the page, posting insults, death threats, and photos of Cecil's carcass. Yelp intervened and posted a banner on the River Bluff page acknowledging that the business in question had recently been in the news, and that Yelp would delete any comments that seemed more related to the news story surrounding the business than the actual business itself. This infuriated comment posters looking for Palmer's blood, and they soon turned their anger toward Yelp itself, and circulated a petition to keep the site from deleting their critical posts.

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

Find tacos, cheap dinner, Max's **Near** San Francisco, CA **Sign Up**

Home About Me Write a Review Find Friends Messages Talk Events Log In

River Bluff Dental

36 reviews Details

General Dentistry, Cosmetic Dentists

10851 Rhode Island Ave S
Bloomington, MN 55438
Get Directions
(952) 884-5361
riverbluffdental.com

Write a Review Add Photo Share Bookmark

Ad Aspen Dental
15.7 miles away from River Bluff Dental
Aspen Dental dentists are committed to treating you with the compassion and respect you deserve. They believe in providing care that addresses... [read more](#)

Ad Lifesmiles Family Dentistry
2 reviews 4.9 miles away from River Bluff Dental
Kathleen S. said "My teeth are well taken care of at Lifesmiles. Dr. John and his staff are all professional and friendly. His modern office..." [read more](#)

Party Aides, LLC
partyaides.com
We Help, So You Can Host! Call Us Today For More Information.

Recommended Reviews Search reviews

Sort by Yelp Sort - English (36) Hours

Active Cleanup Alert

This business recently made waves in the news, which often means that people come to this page to post their reactions.

The best place to share your thoughts is on [Yelp Talk](#). You are also welcome to post a review about this business, but we will ultimately remove reviews that appear to be motivated more by the news coverage itself than by the reviewer's own customer experience with the business (even if that means removing points of view we might agree with).

Please note that we apply this same policy regardless of the business and regardless of the topic at issue in order to avoid injecting our own varied viewpoints into the debate. [Read more on Yelp Support](#).

Got it, thanks!

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING



Susan G.
Portland, OR
0 friends
1 review

★★★★★ 8/21/2015

I can't wait to read about the news of the coward's death. I hope he suffers tremendously. Yes Yelp, I'll keep reposting...and I removed all of my other posts for other businesses because I no longer plan to use Yelp other than to tell the truth about this scumbag.



Was this review ...?

Useful 341 Funny 35 Cool 72



Angela O.
Naperville, IL
16 friends
24 reviews

★★★★★ 9/8/2015 · Updated review

The public has a right to decide if they want to use a service provider who participates in unethical activities that contributes or causes harm to animals, humans and/or the environment. (Not in any particular order.)

I prefer not to have my money fund these activities directly or indirectly.



Heidi D.
Port Coquitlam, Canada
0 friends
4 reviews

★★★★★ 8/25/2015

From River Bluff Dental's Twitter Account:
People hardly cared about #CecilTheLion 45 days ago. Go jump on the next bandwagon. Your words don't hurt us.

I am just patiently waiting for more news regarding this disgusting excuse of a human being and dentist.

Regarding the idiotic twitter post above, people "hardly cared about #CecilTheLion 45 days ago" because HE WAS IN A GODDAMN SANCTUARY LIVING HIS LIFE SUPPOSEDLY SAFELY, you morons. NOT BEING LURED OUT OF THE SANCTUARY, SHOT AT AND WOUNDED AND LEFT SUFFERING AND DYING IN PAIN FOR DAYS BEFORE BEING SHOT AND KILLED, SKINNED AND BEHEADED. If the employees or partners of this scumbag feel the need to defend or excuse any of this asshat's actions, or believe that any of the fallout from the public is unwarranted, then GIVE US YOUR NAMES and WE WILL CONTACT YOU INSTEAD!!!

Was this review ...?

Useful 378 Funny 57 Cool 90

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

The screenshot shows three negative reviews for River Bluff Dental, all dated 9/7/2015. Each review includes the reviewer's name, location, number of friends, and number of reviews. The reviews are highly critical and use profanity.

- Kayla N.**, Sacramento, CA, 0 friends, 18 reviews. Rating: 1 star. Review: "Sick piece of shit. He well deserves to have an arrow shot into him and left to suffer like that poor creature did. Anybody that would continue to go to this sick of shit and pay him for it deserves nothing but the same!"
- Chris M.**, Carlsbad, CA, 2 friends, 28 reviews. Rating: 1 star. Review: "F*****g coward!!!! I hope a pride of lions eat him alive while he feels every bite and tear of his flesh. Burn in hell you turd!!!!"
- Suzanne D.**, Turner, OR, 3 friends, 10 reviews. Rating: 1 star. Review: "I wouldn't go to this cretin for a toe mail trim. I hope he loses his business for what he does for thrills: killing beautiful animals for fun."

River Bluff Dental tried to convince people to lay off their vitriol on Yelp, as any beef with Palmer was personal, and not connected with the business. This, as you might imagine, went over like a lead balloon.

The screenshot shows a Facebook post from River Bluff Dental (RBD) dated August 4. The post contains a text-based statement and a comment from Bob Lamb.

River Bluff Dental
August 4 · 🌐

In spite of all that has happened [Yelp](#) still thinks professional and personal life should not mix. - "A Yelp spokesperson said in a statement released to NBC News that "media-fueled reviews typically violate our Content Guidelines. For example, reviews aren't the place for rants about a business's employment practices, political ideologies, extraordinary circumstances, or other matters that don't address the core of the consumer experience."

👍 Like 💬 Comment

Jay Gehrke, David Andres and 2 others like this. Most Recent ▾

3 shares

[View 46 more comments](#)

Bob Lamb

September 9 at 2:05am
↳ 4 Replies

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING



Chris L.
Los Angeles, CA
6 friends
129 reviews

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 8/21/2015

fuck you yelp! I'm deleting my account for sure! It's the fifth time you've taken down my post! This is a very relevant review of Palmer!

I am deleting my account and I am going to use Google for reviews and I am going to dissuade all of my friends from using YELP!! If you want to make your service meaningful, then leave these reviews about big game trophy hunters alone. They are absolutely relevant. I would never patronize an establishment where an owner or employee participated in such inhumanity. It would be similar to an owner of an establishment who was racist, or sexist; in any case these are not establishments I would frequent and fund.

Here is my review of Palmer again:

This guy is a murderer and a major league a**hole!! It is wrong to kill beautiful, majestic creatures for pleasure. And don't give me any shit about how hunting helps local economies and with animal conservation. If you want to help the local economy, you can go there as a tourist, or better yet, there are many charities that would be willing to accept a donation. As if Palmer and others really care about the local economy anyway. And if there was ever a bullshit rationalization, killing these beautiful creatures does not help in their conservation. That is twisted thinking. There is plenty of data out there to show that is wrong, but this argument is beyond logic. The people who participate in this kind of killing are twisted and the only way we will stop them is through the courts and with sustained effort on the part of feelingful, caring human beings.

Was this review ...?

Useful 403 Funny 28 Cool 85

Activity ramped up when the media reported that Palmer would be returning to work on September 8, 2015.



Avril W.
San Antonio, TX
37 friends
6 reviews

Start your review of **Walter J Palmer, DDS.**

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Select your rating.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 9/7/2015

Update: WALTER TO RETURN TO WORK TOMORROW TUESDAY. Call his work or show up to his office to let him know how much you missed his pathetic arse.

The office reopened but Walter is nowhere to be found. Who wants to get a filling from him? Chances are he's channeling is hunting urges into something else... Die a painful death Walter, but go bankrupt before you do.

This is the 7th (3rd day) time yelp removes my review. It doesn't matter how many times your staff removes my comments, I will repost like many people are. This horrible individual needs to take accountability for his actions and face the consequences of such. He not only slaughtered Cecil the lion but many beautiful endangered species. He has to be brought to justice and his patients, friends, future patients and the world in general needs to see the dark soul this man has. End of practice means bankruptcy which translates to no more trips to Zimbabwe or anywhere else. He deserves to be the poster child for this disgusting sport. Thanks for bringing the whole internet together and bring awareness to this matter. Maybe this is the beginning of the end. Walter Palmer, you deserve what's coming to you. How does it feel to be hunted Walter? We don't have a bow and arrow but we have the power of the WWW.

So go ahead again yelp, delete my comment. I'll be back.

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The screenshot shows a Yelp review interface. At the top, there is a placeholder for a profile picture and a rating bar. Below this, the reviewer's name is "Avril W.", located in "San Antonio, TX", with 37 friends and 6 reviews. The review is dated 9/7/2015 and has a 2-star rating. The text of the review is as follows:

Update: WALTER TO RETURN TO WORK TOMORROW TUESDAY. Call his work or show up to his office to let him know how much you missed his pathetic arse.

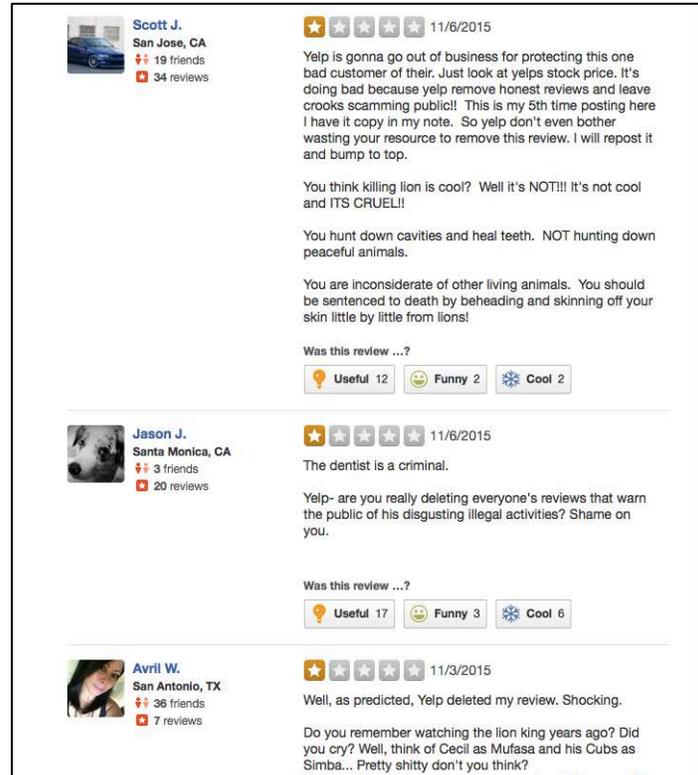
The office reopened but Walter is nowhere to be found. Who wants to get a filling from him? Chances are he's channeling is hunting urges into something else... Die a painful death Walter, but go bankrupt before you do.

This is the 7th (3rd day) time yelp removes my review. It doesn't matter how many times your staff removes my comments, I will repost like many people are. This horrible individual needs to take accountability for his actions and face the consequences of such. He not only slaughtered Cecil the lion but many beautiful endangered species. He has to be brought to justice and his patients, friends, future patients and the world in general needs to see the dark soul this man has. End of practice means bankruptcy which translates to no more trips to Zimbabwe or anywhere else. He deserves to be the poster child for this disgusting sport. Thanks for bringing the whole internet together and bring awareness to this matter. Maybe this is the beginning of the end. Walter Palmer, you deserve what's coming to you. How does it feel to be hunted Walter? We don't have a bow and arrow but we have the power of the WWW.

So go ahead again yelp, delete my comment. I'll be back.

The negative Yelp reviews continued through November, four months later. Several of the posts refer to Yelp deleting previous posts, and a vow by the poster to continue to re-post their message as many time as it takes to stay up on the page.

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING



On November 9, 2015, more than three months after the height of the news cycle surrounding Palmer and Cecil, at least 13 separate Twitter accounts were still using the hashtag #WalterPalmer, including a post that pictured Palmer with a red laser target on his forehead.



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Palmer, returning from a vacation where he enjoyed his personal hobby, probably never dreamed he'd be bearing the brunt of an Internet assault. Now nearly four months after Palmer was identified as the hunter who killed Cecil, his practice's Yelp page is still under siege by highly committed posters who publicly vowed to keep posting negative reviews until Yelp consents to allow them to stay. Meanwhile competing dental practices are likely benefiting as they show up in ads above the fray on the Yelp page.

Had Palmer checked his ego very early on and presented himself as an empathetic person with real sorrow for the hurt he caused animal lovers worldwide, he might have been able to turn the tide on some of the hatred spewed toward him. Instead, he rubbed Cecil's killing in their faces and mocked their pain with insensitive social media posts expressing no real remorse. His refusal to show that he cared, failure to acknowledge that his actions caused harm, and his disrespect for his very emotional victims have caused his crisis to drag on. At this point, Palmer himself is solely to blame for his prolonged place among the Internet's most loathed villains.

Chapter 6: Erika Escalante

In late October 2015, Erika Escalante tweeted photos of herself and a friend posing in front of a cotton field with the caption “Our inner n----- came out today.” Another Twitter user quickly spotted the offensive tweet, saw that Escalante had mentioned that she is employed by local health and wellness company Isagenix, and looked up the company’s contact information. Escalante’s tweet was then forwarded to her employer with the message “@isagenix are you aware ur intern Erika Escalante is being extremely offensive online?”



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Within two hours of being notified about the tweet, the 20-year-old junior at Arizona State University was fired from her sales and marketing internship. Isagenix issued this statement on Facebook:

“We are shocked and outraged by the actions of one of our interns this past weekend. Her actions and social media posts do not reflect the values we hold so dearly.”

The company announced Escalante’s firing on Twitter with this tweet:



Unlike Walter Palmer’s response to being vilified in the public eye, Escalante agreed to be interviewed by her local news station, Fox 10, to offer a sincere apology, complete with a shot of her wringing her hands as she spoke to the reporter.

Escalante said: “I do know better. My parents tell me you need to watch what you post... It was just a lack of my better judgment at the moment. I was not thinking at all. People make mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes, and you learn from them and just move forward.” (Hanna, 2015)

“I apologize to whoever I’ve offended,” Escalante said. “If you took this to heart, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean it at all. It was a mistake. That’s all I can say. It was a really big mistake.” (Intern loses job,” 2015)



In the segment, Isagenix spokesman Kevin Snyder said the decision to terminate Escalante’s internship was unanimous, and remarked:

It’s important to be aware that your life can be an open book, and that you actually should be building your own personal brand, and that you need to behave appropriately so that your personal brand is representative not only of the company you represent but of the type of person that you feel that you are. (“Intern loses job,” 2015)

The reporter ended the interview by saying that Escalante had deleted her Facebook and Twitter accounts, but warned that someone else had appropriated her profile photos and had set up similar handles to continue posting racist material.

Still, her apology didn’t completely end the online attack against her. The hashtag #ExpelErikaNOW gained traction with several tweets to both @ASU and @michaelcrow, Arizona State University’s president, calling for Escalante to be kicked out of school.

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

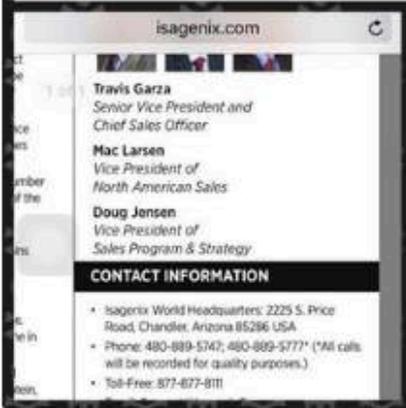


A contingent called “Black Twitter” was gleeful after Escalante’s downfall, and posted congratulations on the takedown. In an article about Escalante’s tweet, Desire Thompson wrote in NewsOne for Black America, “A lesson to all, Black Twitter is something you don’t want to mess with.” (Thompson, 2015)

That bandwagon has since moved on, perhaps satisfied that Escalante was sufficiently damaged, and remorseful.

 **Geddafah Kowda Deway**
@RLDarden Follow

"How to Ruin Your Career in Approximately Five Hours" : The Erika Escalante Story



RETWEETS 210 **LIKES** 164

7:53 AM - 26 Oct 2015

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

 **Isagenix®** @isagenix 25 Oct

We too find this tweet offensive & we are shocked. This does not reflect our values & culture. The intern is no longer with us.

 **Bladadah** @NikoWavy [Follow](#)

We did it again #BlackTwitter 🤔😭🙏🏾 @Eri82195 @isagenix
#YouTried pic.twitter.com/aYsEd101eR

11:31 PM - 25 Oct 2015



 Myrina 10/25/15, 8:18 PM

7 RETWEETS 2 FAVORITES

 **Nate Andree** @NateAndree 5m
@isagenix what tweet

 **Far Away** @madeoflightning 4m
@isagenix 🙏

[sent you a message](#)

🔄 9,089 ❤️ 7,483

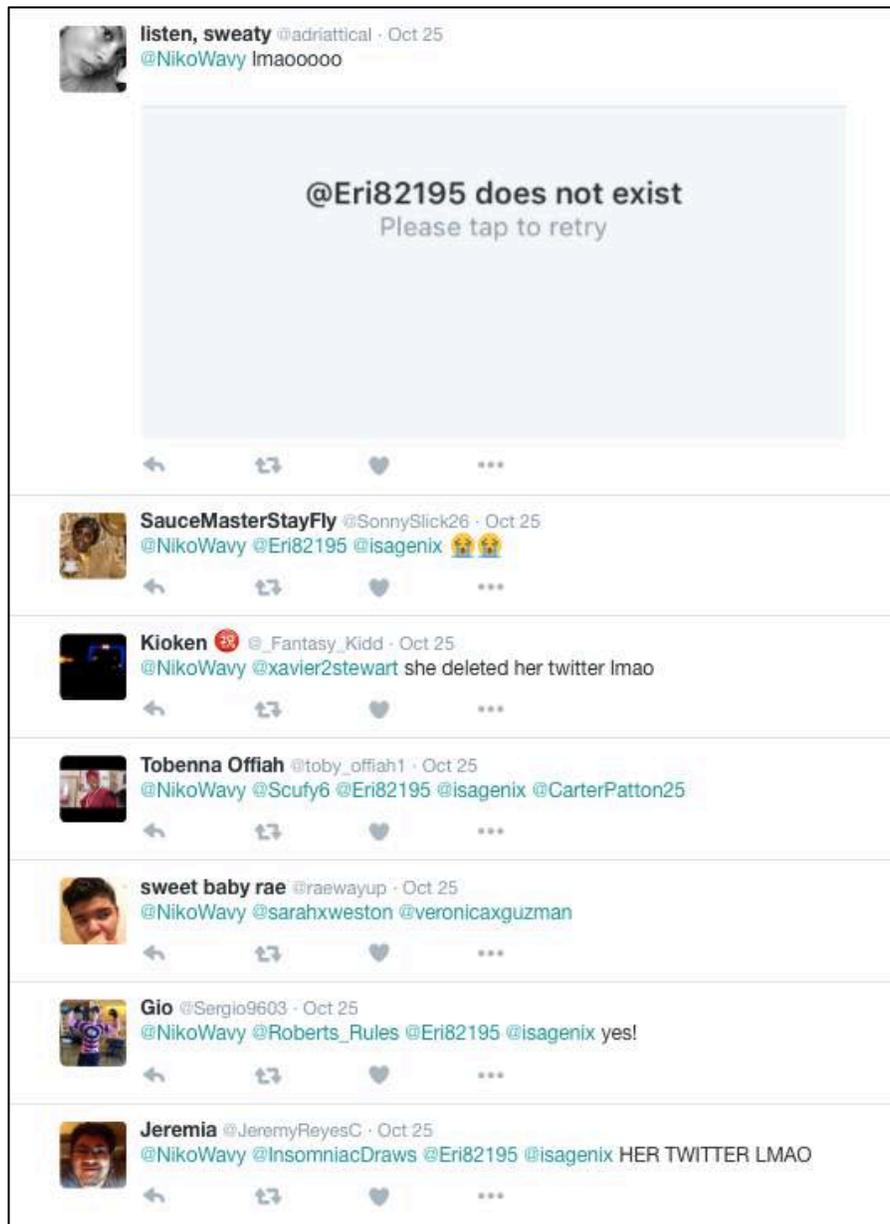
 **SPURS FANS WELCOMED** @TXBOY361 [Follow](#)

That #ErikaEscalante chick got blasted for her racist ass tweet and then lost her job! 😭😭 #GotEmmmmm

4:24 PM - 26 Oct 2015

🔄 5 ❤️ 5

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING



Escalante's apology and disappearance from social media seem to have lessened the severity and duration of the shaming; activity on the hashtag died down a week after the offensive tweet hit the news, and the last mention was November 10.

Chapter 7: Damage Control

Whether the act that offends the crowd happens in public or private, online or off, it will now play out on social media. This means that mistakes big or small that might have been ignored or of minimal consequence just a few years ago may now end up in a global spotlight, and in a search engine archive forever after.

In the cases of Monica Lewinsky and Walter Palmer, actions in their private lives conducted entirely offline — Lewinsky in the Oval Office and Palmer in the wilds of Zimbabwe — deeply shocked and offended the public. The disgusted crowd responded by taking the fight to the Internet, which magnified the issue, exponentially expanded the size of the crowd sharing the offense, and created a united front for the shaming.

In the cases of Justine Sacco and Erika Escalante, their own carelessness on social media brought about their shamings. Sacco argued later that her tweet had been misinterpreted and had actually been a commentary on privilege, not a heartless assault on AIDS victims. Erika Escalante told a news crew in her apology interview that she knew better, and had been warned against posting offensive jokes. Even social-media-savvy people can slip up and find themselves at the wrong end of an ill-advised mouse click.

Regardless of the route that leads to an online shaming, the following best practices can help if you ever find yourself the target.

Check Your Ego/Don't Argue

If a crowd starts to gang up against something you posted, resist the urge to defend yourself. You won't win. In his famous 1936 book "How to Win Friends and

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

Influence People,” Dale Carnegie wrote: “I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way under high heaven to get the best of an argument — and that is to avoid it. Avoid it as you would avoid rattlesnakes and earthquakes.” (Carnegie, 1936/2009, pg. 122)

Carnegie continued:

Nine times out of ten, an argument ends with each of the contestants more firmly convinced than ever that he is absolutely right. You can't win an argument. You can't because if you lose it, you lose it; and if you win it, you lose it. Why? Well, suppose you triumph over the other man and shoot his argument full of holes and prove that he is *non compos mentis*. Then what? You will feel fine. But what about him? You have made him feel inferior. You have hurt his pride. He will resent your triumph. And – a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still. (Carnegie, 1936/2009, pg. 122-123)

Act Fast

Regardless of how they become Internet targets, it's extremely difficult for victims to launch a counter-attack to hit the brakes because these movements happen so fast and are often unanticipated. As a result, victims lose out on the first-mover advantage because the damage is already being done before they can react. Justine Sacco's 11-hour flight is a great example of this vulnerability.

If you haven't already, set up a Google alert set for your name and set it to immediately notify you of any mentions online. This way, you can keep tabs on any

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potential threats and respond right away. Consider suspending posts for a while if you know you'll be off the grid and unable to respond for a period of time.

Sincerely Apologize

It may seem counter-intuitive to consider a crowd of cybershamers as victims, but consider that they may feel hurt and offended by whatever it is they are reacting to.

As Lukaszewski wrote in "On Crisis Communication," victims have four needs: validation of their feelings, a visible platform where they can describe their pain and share their suffering, vindication, and an apology. (Lukaszewski, 2013, pp. 27-28)

If critics start piling on and it's clear the crowd feels victimized in some way by your actions, offer a sincere apology for any harm caused. The crowd is thirsty for blood and once you prove to be an easy kill, there will be no fun left for them and they will move on.

Ronald J. Alsop wrote the following advice that is also applicable to everyday people in his 2004 book "The 18 Immutable Laws of Corporate Reputation":

If you're on America's most-hated list, the last thing you can afford is embarrassing publicity. Hypocrisy, insincerity, and condescension—or even just the perception of them—will be enough to undermine any effort to repair your reputation. You have virtually no reservoir of goodwill to offset any screw-ups," Alsop wrote. (Alsop, 2004, p. 254)

THE RISE OF ONLINE SHAMING

Take Down All Social Media Profiles

After issuing the sincere apology, take all your social media accounts offline and keep them offline. Attackers won't have a direct target to hit, and will soon lose interest. Maintain a clean and professional LinkedIn presence that portrays you in a positive light. Also maintain any personal blogs or professional websites that show you in a positive light, but disable any comment features while under attack.

Seek Professional Help

A very swift, sincere, and humble apology can help diffuse an online attack, but after that, it's a matter of waiting to become yesterday's news, and reduced to the third page of search engine results. The paradox of social media is that it takes mere nanoseconds to post something that will offend the masses and set off a digital pitchfork mob often before the poster even realizes they should have thought twice. But as little time as it takes to get into trouble, it takes a very long time for the damage to fizzle out, then stop, and start to rebuild a ruined online reputation.

Companies like Reputation.com offer to fix negative search results. With a minimum charge of \$3,000 per year at this writing, the company will provide individual clients with 10 personalized websites, one unique direct website, and eight pages of professional content as a way to dilute the negative search results connected with the person's name.

In "So You've Been Publicly Shamed," Ronson describes how one online shaming victim who had been attacked for an insensitive photo she had posted worked with the company to flush her online presence with benign, positive blog

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content. Over time, search engine algorithms began turning up flattering and inoffensive photos and blog posts about animals, vacations, and music.

Wrote Ronson: “We were creating a world where the smartest way to survive is to be bland.” (Ronson, 2015, p. 266)

Chapter 8: Prevention

In his 2015 TED Talk, “When Online Shaming Spirals Out of Control,” Ronson articulated the increasingly fine line we all tread between speaking freely on social media and accidentally revealing the less savory parts of our personalities, like posting or tweeting an offhand racist or sexist “joke” that is offensive to at least one “friend” or follower who then passes it on to create a new angry crowd. Such a momentary slip can launch a new international villain in minutes. And many on social media are salivating over the chance to jump on someone and rip them to pieces over such a blunder.

Ronson said: “These days, the hunt is on for people’s shameful secrets. You can lead a good, ethical life, but some bad phraseology in a tweet can overwhelm it all, become a clue to your secret inner evil.” (TED, 2015)

The following are best practices to avoid Internet notoriety in the first place.

Fly Under the Radar

The best defense against public shaming on the Internet is to use common sense when posting anything under your real name, particularly if the post may be considered controversial, or offensive. Keeping a positive tone will help you fly under the radar on your personal pages. If you can’t shake the urge to engage in fiery discussions on matters you feel strongly about, consider setting up a Facebook or Twitter account with a nom-de-Web. Online posts, particularly tweets constrained to 140 characters, stand for themselves without room for explanation about what was really meant, so think twice—no, make that three times, before

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posting When in doubt, ask a friend for a sanity check before you launch your comment into cyberspace. A good rule of thumb: if you have even the slightest feeling of unease about something you've written, don't post it.

Speak Up for Others

For those who don't deserve their place before the Internet firing squad, particularly young people who are tormented by classmates or others, The Ad Council launched its "I am a Witness" initiative in late October 2015 as a new way to combat cyber bullying, particularly among teens and young adults. To reach this group where they are, that is on text messaging apps, a new emoji was introduced that depicts an eyeball in a chat bubble. The idea is to make it easier for people to come to the aid of a victim when they see them being bullied online. All it takes is a few people posting the emoji to let the bully know they are outnumbered, which will shift power from the bully to the vigilante crowd.



Standing up against cyber bullies can be risky, especially in the context of the herd. As discussed earlier, the crowd effectively pushes out those who don't

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conform to its shared mindset. Martin references Sigmund Freud's analysis of the taboo. "He who touches the tabooed object himself becomes taboo." (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 34)

However, with enough "Upstandrs" quickly speaking on behalf of the victim and drowning out negative comments, it may turn the tide against the bullying group that will probably give up and seek easier targets.

As Martin wrote of the Achilles' heel of any crowd: "Nothing is more fatal to it than a successful assault upon its prestige. Every crowd, even the casual street mob, clothes the egoistic desires of its members or participants in terms of the loftiest moral motive. No crowd can afford to be laughed at." (Martin, 1919/2015, p. 24)

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