A Dirty Shame:
Labelling, Deviance, and the New Media Spotlight
by Chelsea Palmer, 2015

Rapid Cycling Viral News in the Internet Age

The progress of "new media," and the ubiquity of crowd-sourced coverage and social media discourse, have shifted the way cultural norms are enforced and the way that individuals are identified and categorized. From the rise of written literacy, to the development of the printing press, on to the broadcast of radio and television, the development of new media has inevitably altered the way we communicate and disseminate news (Carlsson, 1995; Peters, 2009; Lauer, 2011; Thompson, 2011). With the advent of globalization, the concept of communication has shifted from local, bi-directional transmission to a worldwide spotlight, creating new opportunities for both positive fame and shameful infamy.

The news cycle of social media refreshes itself rapidly, meaning that a story can rocket into the spotlight in mere minutes, and drop from public interest just as quickly (Meyers, 2012). It still remains true that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). In the fickle and fast-moving online sphere, another element of this phrase has become clearer: the mood is the meaning. Whatever light a news item or event is originally presented in when it "breaks" on the Internet, that tone and perspective is likely to shape the public opinion from that point onward, no matter what new information is introduced after the fact. Outrage is immediate and instinctual, and the immediacy of online communication reduces the likelihood of rational consideration before firing off a response.

In the Information Age, individuals face contrasting extremes. They have access to a potential platform to voice their beliefs on a global stage: when everyone and anyone can be a reporter, we now comprise the media, and we can present the news as informed by our own perspectives and social locations (Damman, 2012). However, at the same time, they face the threat of being misrepresented and cast as a target of shame under the all-seeing media spotlight. When people upload their thoughts, videos, and photos, they cannot predict the way they will be used or interpreted from that point on (Lauer, 2011; Reilly, 2013). In parallel, when local news goes "viral" in the online sphere, the original subjects of coverage have even less of a say in how they are represented than they have under

traditional media coverage. The balance between the disruptive effects of crowdsourced social media, and the more hegemonic traditions of traditional news coverage, blend in a transitional hybridization (Peters, 2009; Wright, 2011; Palmer, 2012). In this shifting realm, individuals may crave attention, but they should be careful what they wish for.

Attention and Sousveillance: "Like My Status"

The traditional definition of "community" denotes an in-group in which people share significant ties and characteristics (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). In contrast, online communities seem amorphous, shifting, and many times, temporary. Attention is the new currency, as many individuals salivate at the thought of achieving "microcelebrity" status and impressing vast social networks (Tufekci, 2013). The fast pace and wide reach of the new age of media seems to whet users' appetites for recognition and appreciation considerably more.

The structures of social media encourage a calculating engagement with "mediated visibility," which blurs the line between self-expression and self-promotion (Thompson, 2011). The concept of mediated visibility denotes an attempt to broadcast a widespread, usually positive, image of ourselves and our lives (Lester & Hutchins, 2012). This concerted effort to appear a certain way to the world at large is marked by a deliberate and sometimes calculated performativity which can be correlated to increased narcissism and social media usage (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Pearse, 2012; Passini, 2013; Turnbull, 2013). The pursuit of visibility and recognition on sites like Facebook becomes an actual competition, as users wrangle to master algorithms which subtly determine their perceived popularity and promote their recognition accordingly (Bucher, 2012).

Similarly, the concept of "scopophilia" traditionally refers to the desire to look at or watch something, but Humphreys (2006) extended the term to include the continually amplified desire in modern society to be seen. She explored the primacy of visibility as an affirmation of our successful fulfilment of our roles as "good" consumers of both culture and products. This connects seamlessly to the idea of "sousveillance," a complementary term to surveillance, which represents individuals' active and willing projection of their information to the larger society (Birchall, 2011; Reilly, 2013). Whereas surveillance is generally a top-down, external culling of data through observation, sousveillance is a participatory act in pursuit of recognition (Brighenti, 2007). This is reminiscent of Foucault's (1990) identification of the confessional as a central pillar of modern practices of sexuality. For Foucault, ours is "a society obsessed not only with knowing but also with telling," and the act of

confessing our transgressions is imbued with a strange and powerful excitement itself (Sauter, 2013, p. 10). YouTube videos, blogs, social network profiles: these are our new confessionals. We want so desperately to be heard, to be recognized, and thus to be vindicated.

15 Seconds of Fame, 15 Archived Pages of Infamy

Society's fascination with the failure or humiliation of others is nothing new, but the Internet has created a nearly frenetic news-cycle turnover, as well as a realm where members of the larger population can attempt to gain visibility that they wouldn't have had in the era of television news. The cliché is true: the local is global now, and the effortless navigation of space allows us to watch Youtube compilations where dashcam footage of car crashes in Russia seamlessly transition into Go-Cam captures of bungee jumping in South America. When something exciting happens, people pull out their phones, and they can upload the videos immediately. If the online populace finds the video interesting, too, it can spread virally in a matter of minutes.

The feeling of shame results as a consequence of falling short of social expectations or breaking collectively accepted rules or taboos (Brighenti, 2007; Madianou, 2011). Jacquet (2012) discussed the multiple categories which define the form that shame takes: there is the contrast between state-enforced and crowd-enforced shame, shame which is enacted in public or in private, shaming individuals or groups (such as corporations), and whether the original offense was itself public or private in nature. Monica Lewinsky (2015) poetically referred to herself as "Patient Zero" of online shame, having been the recipient of the global spotlight when her affair with the US president Bill Clinton was revealed in the 1990s. She described how she felt reduced to a label, with her essential humanity overlooked in favour of swift condemnation. No one ever asked for her side of the story: she was merely shoved into the public eye and forced to deal with the fallout.

The recent past is full of examples of rapid cycles of public shaming on the Internet, but one that stands out in particular is the "Has Justine Landed Yet" incident. A young woman tweeted a thoughtless and racist "joke" just before boarding a lengthy international flight. Someone noticed, shared it, and it rapidly went viral, outraging the majority of Twitter users. While she was still in the air, the online sphere blew up, and the hashtag "Has Justine Landed Yet" trended across the site and sparking widespread news coverage (Brown, 2014). The cornerstone of this viral uproar was the fact that she was employed as a prominent public relations manager, making her blind misstep even more shocking (Withnall, 2013).

Although Sacco's original "joke" was crass, unfunny, and offensive, the mob mentality displayed in this backlash was aggressive beyond the point of productivity. What could have been a teaching moment turned into a seething mass of rage, as people all over the Internet waited impatiently for her to land and respond. She landed, she caught wind of what was going on, she shut down her Twitter account and got fired shortly afterwards (Hill, 2013).

Though the frenzied mob reaction to Sacco's misstep was worrisome, there was one notably creative response. Someone bought the domain name http://www.justinesacco.com, and set it up to redirect to the donation site for the "Aid for Africa" charity site (Withnall, 2013). A productive step like this motivates people to translate their anger into positive action. This can undermine the ingrained effects of social privilege, which makes someone like Sacco feel comfortable "to act without consequences and as if one had the right to set the rules" (Choules, 2007, p. 472). As everyone incited an angry swarm, the underlying reason for this fury was not discussed in the public forum: the fact that, even if it was intended to be sarcastic, her statement was callous and dismissive of the systemic health problems which she was insulated from as an American citizen. Taking the path of opening conversation, and encouraging contributions to a relevant charity, is certainly more in the spirit of Community Psychology than tearing someone down on the public stage.

However instrumental shame may seem as a social tool, we see it abused again and again on the Internet. With one tweet, Justine Sacco lost her job, shamed her family, and became a pariah everywhere she went (Ronson, 2015). The outrage that arises as a scandal breaks may be wholly justified, but in the current climate online, the public response almost always veers wildly out of control. The mob mentality which drives crowds to overreact and even incite violence is more likely to happen in larger groups whose members can maintain relative anonymity and escape repercussions for their words or actions (Donley, 2011). Quite obviously, these conditions describe the realm of the open Internet very accurately.

Mob Mentality, Trolls, and the Erosion of the Social Contract

Trolls are people who deliberately provoke other Internet users, aiming to cause chaos and anger (Lessig, 2008; Shachaf & Hara, 2010). Jonathan Zittrain suggested that trolls approach the Internet as a source of entertainment, not as a source of community activity, and thus they continue to treat it as a game even when they escalate into very dark and dangerous territory (Big Think, 2015).

D'addario (2013) was more skeptical about the widespread condemnation of trolling, as he argued that the term has been so generically overused that it's lost its original meaning. Whereas the word "troll" was once reserved for those who clearly sought conflict through spouting extreme, offensive opinions, now that the larger population has learned the label, it is utilized functionally to describe "a person who disagrees with me." D'addario may well be correct about the term's imprecise use, but that doesn't discount the importance of identifying and understanding Internet users who genuinely aim to violate, and even decimate, the unwritten social contract.

One of the most dangerous and direct ways that Internet drama can cross over into the real world is through the act of "doxxing." Doxxing, or investigating the traces of a user's online activity in order to uncover their real-life identity (their "documents"), is not a joke (Quodling, 2015). When someone takes the effort to truly doxx someone, there is an inherent threat in that action, not just of blackmail but of potential genuine harm. Posting someone's address, phone number, workplace and personal history online renders them helpless against the vast hordes of Internet users. The doxxed individual is the only one fully exposed, while all of their attackers are still shielded by their relative anonymity. Combine this with the ubiquitously reactionary mob mentality of momentary outrage, and you have a truly dangerous situation on your hands.

Tom Scott (2010) described a metaphorical chain of events that is, sadly, entirely within the realm of possibility in the current age. His short and captivating speech detailed the viral dissemination of a video of a girl singing, taken without her knowledge, followed by swift doxxing which reveals her street address, and ending in a chaotic and riotous 'flash mob' gone wrong. This story is extreme, and it's fictional, but it's not that far off from reality. Doxxing has already escalated into "swatting," in which trolls report an emergency at the target's address to the police, resulting in their sudden, and potentially violent, entrance to those premises (Quodling, 2015). When the crowd thirsts for blood, and the mob mentality reigns supreme, this danger is even more intense. The larger the group is that has access to someone's real identity, the more likely it is that one of the group members will take a rash and violent action against that person (White, 2006).

Monica Lewinsky (2015) identified the Internet's apparent tendency for desensitization as the source of a permissive environment for invading individuals' privacy and humiliating them. We see a consistent, disproportionate crowd response in this mob mentality, inciting what Weigert (2015) called a "shame-storm." This seems to fly in the face of the original vision of a free and open Internet that still maintained reasonable community standards for respectful behaviour. In the early years of the

Internet, though anonymity was the norm, there was an unspoken social contract revolving around "netiquette" and the various expectations within the realms of chat rooms, forums, and comment sections (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010). Now, despite the existence of paths to report or "flag" abusive behaviour on many sites, and the gradual movement to associate online profiles with real life identities, we still see anonymity enabling outright cruelty in many cases.

It appears that with many of the recent outrages resulting from cyberbullying and hate speech campaigns, the public majority is taking a somewhat united stance: anonymity is not unequivocally earned, and should be revoked when someone begin to use it to abuse others (Swash, 2012). This idea, that the right to anonymity on the World Wide Web only goes so far, can be a dangerous one, and there is still a wide chasm between government regulation and grassroots vigilantism in enforcing it. However, as Brown (2014) emphasizes in an eloquent blog post, freedom of speech is not the same as freedom from its consequences, and the concept of free speech becomes irrelevant altogether once that speech begins to encourage hatred and violence.

The Fallout: What Happens When the Spotlight Leaves?

It's a simple and inescapable fact of modern public relations strategizing that if you try to cover up scandal or embarrassment, whether by attempting to delete existing information about it or even threatening lawsuits against those who discuss it, it will become infinitely more visible as a result of those efforts. In popular Internet parlance, this is called the "Streisand Effect," a tongue-in-cheek term coined by the blogger Mike Masnick (Cacciottolo, 2012). This phrase refers to the viral aftermath of Barbra Streisand's futile 2003 lawsuit, which demanded that a public photo archive remove pictures of her estate taken from the sky ("What," 2013). The lawsuit, which intended to protect the actress's privacy, was publicly perceived as an attack on the open values of the Internet, and thus garnered far more attention and publicity than the pictures would ever have received if she had left them alone (Parkinson, 2014).

The related practice of "reputation management," the process of cleaning up the messy traces of one's online presence, is well-established (Bilton, 2011). This service is arguably necessary because at this point, employers almost universally "cybervet" potential hires by searching their names online (Dalgord, 2012). Even those who are already gainfully employed can lose their jobs from a single social media misstep, a judgment call that is entirely relative and difficult to predict (Garone, 2013).

The comedian John Oliver provides a snarky take on a recent attempt to set legislative precedent in the European Union, in which a citizen attempted to establish "The Right to Be Forgotten," forcing Google to take down undesirable search results. Oliver's reflection upon this man's battle brings the Streisand effect to mind: the only thing we now know about him is what he is fighting in court to keep the world from knowing. Oliver proposes the humorous concept of a global online amnesty, "#mutuallyassuredhumiliation," in which all Internet users cut to the chase and post the most humiliating pictures of themselves in solidarity. It's a goofy take on the issue, true, but it solidly covers the facts at hand. It is impossible to hide things from the Internet, in an era when search engines can maintain a 'cache' of deleted data indefinitely (Segev, 2005). However, we are also all in this together as a sort of community, whether we get along or not.

When discussing the collaborative methods of modern international intelligence communities, Werbin (2011) eloquently described that "social media does not forget. Not only is its memory persistent and difficult to correct, but it is also parsed and distributed and thus open to recombinant logics and endless accumulations in endless forms across indefinite platforms" (p. 1260). The Internet which we access is like an all encompassing collection of "present states," from the first moments of the World Wide Web to the current day.

Though search engines may primarily pull from the most recent history, all the track changes are still traceable (Hellsten, Leydesdorff, & Wouters, 2009; van Dijck, 2010a). Like almost all issues revolving around the Internet age, this storage of infinite iterations and "versions" of the World Wide Web and its databases can be used for good or bad purposes. You may be elated to stumble across that old high school picture on your forgotten MySpace page, but you may also be terrified to be stalked or viciously pursued by someone who has tracked you down through careless traces you've left behind over the years.

We might never eradicate cruelty and mob mentality from human nature. What we can do, however, is try to maintain vigilance about where we are directing our norms of public communication in the social media age, how and why these boundaries are shifting. Without falling into the camp of blind optimism or dark pessimism, we can try to maintain community conversations about what is working, what is toxic, and how we might be able to strike a balance (Siapera, 2014). As Monica Lewinsky (2015) strongly and succinctly stated in her TEDTalk, "shame cannot survive empathy." Perhaps in this age of snap judgment, reactive crowds, and anonymous bickering, we can take her

words to heart and employ a bit of empathy when we hear about the next big scandal.