

Opinion: Four arguments for ethical online shaming (and four problems with them)

May 19 2016, by Matthew Beard



Online Shaming. Credit: Pixabay, CC BY-SA

In democracies, it's pretty difficult to bring about any agreement on anything. So when there is general consensus that something is a problem, I think it's a good idea for us to sit up and pay attention. And

few things have earned more consensus of late than online shaming. From Jon Ronson's [work](#) to Monica Lewinsky's [TED talk](#), all the way down to the [Ashley Madison affair](#), people are starting to get a little antsy about the way reputations can be made or broken online.

Online shaming has been a recurrent theme on Cogito – Russell Blackford has led the charge and Clive Hamilton came to the defence of Stephen Fry, and philosophers further afield have provided a range of arguments as to why online shaming is (probably) [unethical](#).

Less work has been done on assessing some of the underlying concepts and beliefs that inform online shaming. So I think it's helpful to understand why people [shame](#) people who do certain things they don't tolerate or hold beliefs they don't agree with. Some of the reasons I'm going to look into have been discussed elsewhere – if you want some background, you can listen to this episode of ABC's [The Minefield](#).

Basically, what I'm going to explore is the internal logic of mass online shaming. Even if it's unethical most of the time, that doesn't mean the practice is *entirely* unethical, nor does it mean it's unreasonable.

Note that I'm going to focus on reasons I think might hold up to analysis. There are others, like vindictiveness or virtue signalling, which I think do motivate people, but which are always going to be bad reasons for acting in certain ways. I'm also going to focus only on the mass online shaming we tend to see in cases like [Justine Sacco](#). Other forms of shaming warrant consideration, but I don't think they should all be lumped together. There's value in being precise.

1. Righting the power imbalance

The great pitch of [social media](#) is that it gives everybody a voice. Your opinion can be heard! You don't need to be published in a newspaper or

be a powerful individual – you just need a social media profile!

Of course, that's hokum. Social media gives us a platform to speak *from* but it doesn't guarantee us an audience to speak *to*. I can tweet at Kim Kardashian all day but she needn't reply to my critique of her latest selfie. However, if I call her out to likeminded individuals, we can create a critical mass of criticism that means our opinion – my opinion – will be heard. So shaming is a mechanism to give our reasonable argument an audience to make change.

There's also a sense in which social media's egalitarian promise has worked: those rendered 'unshameable' by existing hierarchical power structures are now able to feel the pinch. So we can reverse oppressive or unequal social trends by shaming those whose views perpetuate disadvantage, such as against LGBTI people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders or the disabled.

The issue here – to butcher a metaphor – is that once we've let the shaming cat out, it's hard to get it back in the bag. If we want to make a genuine argument and use shaming as a way of finding an audience or being heard, we've ultimately unleashed a mob on someone without ever being able to explain to them why we did it. Unless, that is, we can shift gear *from* shaming into rational argument.

We're also unable to communicate the point at which shaming is no longer appropriate after it's done the job. Last year *New Matilda* published an [article](#) by Jack Kilbride that criticised *Daily Life* columnist Clementine Ford's particular brand of feminism as being unnecessarily polarising. And he copped it pretty hard, to the extent editor Chris Graham had to [ask his readers to settle down](#). Kilbride had learned his lesson but the shame wagon rolled on for a while longer and would likely recur if Kilbride was to ever venture an unpopular opinion again.

2. Confusion about online communities

[Some anthropologists](#) have argued that moral conduct in communities is regulated by one of two different emotions: guilt or shame. Guilt cultures rely on fear of punishment, rule of law and a notion of individual responsibility to enforce moral conduct while shame cultures rely on the fear of ostracism and exile.

Western countries are typically 'guilt cultures', which is why online shaming has perhaps been more jarring for us than it might have been elsewhere. But the internet is its own community with its own culture, and there is, as yet, no way of holding individuals accountable on the internet in the way guilt cultures require. People can be anonymous and offend against popular sentiment without breaking a law, or simply reject any external punishment imposed on them.

This means [online communities](#) need to fall back on shame. But that's a problem: shame works best when there is a commonly-held standard the community can enforce. The inherent plurality of views online, coupled with the fact there is more than one community online, means shame is going to be a pretty blunt and indiscriminate mode of moral education. But seeing the internet as a shame community (or group of shame communities) helps us understand how online shaming has developed.

There's obviously something legitimate about a society using moral emotions to try to communicate and instil values in the members of that society. However, the de-personalised nature of online communities makes shame as a moral educator difficult, because in order for the shamed person to learn from being shamed, they need to be guided by the community to a new level of understanding.

This seems to require a connection and intimacy most online communities are unable to provide – and which the 'churn and burn'

mentality of most online shaming surges isn't patient enough to offer.

3. The futility of argument

Sometimes there's simply no point continuing to argue past a certain point. We realise our positions are not going to change, our interlocutor isn't listening or we're talking in circles. But perhaps we still want to see behaviour change in our opponent. This is where shaming is really handy. We can't change their *mind* on a topic, but hopefully communal outrage will change the way they *behave* in certain ways that advance our cause or hinder theirs.

I don't think this is likely to be defensible except in the most morally serious cases (perhaps when someone has doxxed another person and refuses to take the private information down) because it's invasively coercive. It effectively says you can only be free to act on your beliefs if they're the right beliefs. That's a mode of thinking to be sceptical of if we value the principles of liberal democracies.

4. Pleas for help and third-party assistance

Victims of shaming or online abuse may 'counter-shame' as a way of asking for help. If someone is being inundated with violent, aggressive or overwhelming commentary they might, for instance, start retweeting comments as a way of saying 'I'm powerless here, please help'. Other members of their community will then take up keyboards against the aggressors by counter-shaming them. In other cases people might notice what is happening and offer assistance without being asked.

In most cases this seems ethically permissible in the same way as we would offer assistance to someone being verbally bullied on the street. However, it should still to be governed by ethical restraint – righteous

indignation can often lead to 'pile ons' where the counter-shaming actually outweighs the initial incident, or a few users cop the full wrath of their opponents disproportionately.

Perhaps an alternative approach is possible? Imagine if, instead of using social media as a 'sword' against those involved in shaming, we used it as a 'shield' to protect the victim. If groups used their collective mass to send messages of love and support to the person being shamed they might drown out the abusive voices without perpetuating a vicious cycle.

This might not be ethically necessary as a response, but it does strike me as a possible circuit breaker – both in terms of the cycle of shaming and counter shaming and with regard to the feelings of anger, retribution and aggression shaming tends to generate.

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