

Professor says people are turning to 'socially mediated vigilante justice' to right perceived wrongs

June 18 2018

The internet loves creating villains: People get caught on camera or social media behaving badly, the post or video goes viral and anyone with a computer or smartphone piles on and fans the flames.

You've seen them—the New Jersey Port Authority commissioner who verbally abused two police officers after they ticketed her daughter's friend for a traffic violation; the New York state employee who caused a scene on an airplane over a crying baby and threatened to have a flight attendant fired; the Dallas district attorney employee who taunted an Uber driver with legal action for taking a wrong turn; the Tucson CFO who videotaped himself bullying a Chick-fil-A clerk at the drive-through window.

And unlike a prison sentence, punishment is swift and open-ended for these Hall-of-Shamers. It often includes enduring public ridicule, being suspended or terminated from a job or switching vocations. For many, it means a partial or complete withdrawal from [social media](#), which may be a trivial sacrifice—or a career-ender.

ASU Now turned to Dawn Gilpin, an associate professor in Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, to discuss the new cultural phenomenon that she calls "socially mediated vigilante justice" and says is a grass-roots "American Idol" model for addressing perceived wrongs.

Question: What exactly is socially mediated vigilante justice, and how is it being employed?

Answer: I'm a big fan of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," and when I consider these situations, I always think of a quote from the show: "It's about power: who's got it, and who's willing to use it."

We are experiencing a very particular cultural moment, one that is influenced and enabled by media and technologies. The information environment is so vast and dynamic, there is increasing awareness of systemic injustices and insults that happen daily in many areas of life. All of this fuels a desire to ensure that society better represent our values, however we might individually and collectively define them.

On the one hand, we are told that as consumers, and as citizens, we have a responsibility to make our opinions heard if we want to enact change. On the other, many people feel alienated from social, economic and political structures and institutions. It can feel as though expressing our views through conventional means, such as by voting or individual consumer choices, is more like tossing a pebble into the void than having a legitimately recognized seat at the decision-making table.

Social media platforms offer an opportunity to build awareness of issues and form widespread ad hoc coalitions of people who share issue positions, and to make collective public statements that can be difficult for the holders of economic, political and cultural power to ignore. As a result, a number of people are turning to socially mediated justice-seeking efforts, which occasionally result in tangible change.

In her book "Twitter and Tear Gas," the sociologist Zeynep Tufekci distinguishes between two aspects of movements: capacities to organize and sustain coordinated action, and signals that promise (or threaten) the

mobilization of those capacities. If we think in these terms, we can see how agitation to remove someone perceived to be a bad actor, a one-off response to specific behaviors or allegations, differs from a more enduringly organized response such as the March for Our Lives protests that took place in the wake of the Parkland shooting. And those in turn differ from a more amorphous shift in cultural awareness such as the #MeToo movement, which is less narrowly focused.

We might say, then, that these efforts to seek socially mediated justice are grass-roots experiments in harnessing the signaling power of today's communication technologies to address institutional inadequacies, bypassing the need to develop long-term capacities.

Q: For lack of a better term, isn't this really just public shaming?

A: I prefer the term "signaling" to "shaming," because it allows for those instances where people cohere to support individuals as well as those fueled by anger. The latter tend to attract more media attention, but we find examples of both. In fact, wherever we find people mobilizing against a person or organization, we typically find a countermovement of supporters. Humans tend to naturally self-organize into opposing teams.

That said, legal systems are slow to change, and lag well behind cultural values. They also aren't designed to cover the full range of behaviors people might find unacceptable. There is a wide gap between what some consider to be highly objectionable or even unethical behavior, such as Rachel Dolezal representing herself as African-American (although she was recently also charged with welfare fraud), and someone like Charlie Rose, with numerous allegations of sexually harassing subordinates and colleagues in the workplace. If, as I mentioned, people feel alienated from the formal social structures that should enforce consequences for

misconduct, they are likely to turn to the nearest means that allows them to swiftly assert their power to settle perceived wrongs: social media.

I would caution against flattening these varied cases into a single category because they begin online, however. It's tempting to dismiss these protests simply as "online outrage," but this is where signaling comes into play: People in positions of power within those institutions, as well as broad swaths of the public at large, receive a message when hundreds or thousands of individuals express their indignation. Politicians and voters can decide that certain legislation is worth sponsoring or supporting, corporations can gauge how personnel actions may be received by stakeholders, and everyone paying attention can consider where our culture is headed. In the best-case scenarios, these instances spark positive change and ongoing dialogue. In the worst, they lead to hasty, unreflective calls for action in what essentially amounts to vigilantism.

The "American Idol" model of "letting the people decide" may not be the best approach to settling nuanced social issues, but it can be a useful starting point for identifying where change is necessary.

Q: These internet villains are getting fired, having to change vocations or not finding employment at all for years. In those instances, it seems as if the justice might be a little too harsh. Are we going too far?

A: It's hard to generalize about these cases, since they vary substantively to such a significant degree and there are rarely clear causal paths. When public outcry is widespread and harsh, there is certainly the risk of a disproportionate or inappropriate reaction, but it's hard to pin down who is responsible for outcomes. For example, in the case of Adam Smith, who filmed himself bullying a Chick-fil-A employee about the

company's social policy stance, the social media backlash came from multiple quarters: those who supported the fast food chain's positions on issues such as gay marriage, and those who were indignant about his rudeness, just to name a couple. It's debatable whether either should constitute a firing offense, but an employer may find itself in a difficult position if a high-level executive draws public fire. They may have found his conduct to be unbecoming of someone at his rank, and question his judgment in filming and posting the encounter. Prospective employers may also reasonably balk at hiring someone with such a history. In this case, who would we say has "gone too far"?

When we are dealing with perceived wrongs that aren't clearly addressed by our current systems, and with multiple sources of pressure, it's hard to say what we mean by "too far," or who is taking those steps beyond what is reasonable. This is why we need to have public conversations about the topics these cases engendered and try to decide, as a society, what needs to be deemed acceptable, regulated or legislated, and why. Unfortunately, outrage movements can exercise pressure on organizations and institutions to act without adequate time for reflection and discussion. This in turn may lead to codifying harsher punishments or more extreme expressions of values that might need to be walked back later, when the emotional dust has settled.

Q: Is this effective when watchdogging in the commercial realm, such as the Kendall Jenner Pepsi ad or the Dove T-shirt controversy?

A: The commercial realm offers an interesting perspective. Businesses can act swiftly and unilaterally, without the need for coalition building required by legislative bodies. In crisis communication, one concept we look at when determining strategy is "locus of control." If the organization itself is at fault, then it bears more responsibility for

righting the perceived wrong than if the situation was caused by an external actor. And of course, there's a big spectrum in between.

Rosanne Barr's highly successful television program was canceled just a few hours after she posted a series of racist tweets. There was nothing illegal about her statements, but the network made a business decision that the continued revenue would not be worth the reputational damage that might result from appearing to support her positions, even tacitly. In this case, the locus of control for the crisis was clearly Barr herself, and the network decided to sever ties immediately to distance themselves.

Distancing is harder to accomplish when the locus of control clearly rests within the organization itself, such as when a company creates an ad campaign that many find objectionable. The cosmetics subscription box service Ipsy recently came under fire when its online ad video, intended to celebrate Pride Month, was instead seen by many as using transphobic language. The company removed the ad and apologized, but not before it had arguably worsened the situation by, allegedly, spending the first couple of days deleting negative comments and responses from trans customers. The marketplace of ideas moves very quickly these days, but consequences tend to come more swiftly when the cause is an employee or third party.

Q: Let's flip this. Can this scenario also be used as a powerful force?

A: I think the continued effects of the #MeToo movement remain an excellent example of how powerful a force this kind of response can be when it crosses over from online into offline domains, and develops capacities as well as signaling. Actress Asia Argento, one of Harvey Weinstein's accusers, made a formidable statement at this year's Cannes (Film Festival) warning that powerful people will no longer be able to

get away with workplace sexual misconduct as they have in the past. And Netflix canceled the U.K. press tour for the latest season of "Arrested Development" after a cast interview with "The New York Times" went awry. Actress Jessica Walter received massive social media encouragement for describing, in tears, the verbal abuse she had suffered on set from co-star Jeffrey Tambor—who had been fired from the Amazon series "Transparent" for sexual harassment claims. Her male co-stars, on the other hand, were excoriated for minimizing her pain and rushing to the support of Tambor.

Nothing that happened in the interview crossed into the realm of illegality, and Netflix operates on a subscription model that shields it from the risks of advertising-driven network television. And yet, even they took some steps to limit their exposure on this issue.

These incidents both happened months after the most recent wave of the movement began last October. That suggests this is not an ephemeral phenomenon that can be dismissed as mere online outrage, but a lasting shift in our collective consciousness and expectations, even without any kind of formal organization.

What's changing is who has power, and who is willing to use it. We just need to try to thoughtfully adapt our structures and systems alongside these changes, to reduce the risk of institutionalizing hasty decisions.

Provided by Arizona State University

Citation: Professor says people are turning to 'socially mediated vigilante justice' to right perceived wrongs (2018, June 18) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-06-professor-people-socially-vigilante-justice.html>

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