Previous Story Next Story

Article rank | *4 Aug 2015* | *The Vancouver Sun* | *Douglas Todd dtodd@vancouversun.com Twitter: @douglastodd*

When public shaming goes wrong 10

Internet age: Posts calling out a person's bad behaviour seems like the new normal, but is it bullying in another guise?

Robyn Craigie is all for ecological protection — and for people following Metro Vancouver's tough new ban on sprinkling their lawns.

TWITTER

Drought-shaming a homeowner in Vancouver on Twitter.

Like many of us, the urban studies masters student at Simon Fraser University can see the value in wealthy homeowners in places like Beverly Hills or Vancouver's Kerrisdale being publicly "drought-shamed" for sprinkling their verdantly green lawns.

But Craigie is also thinking deeper about online shaming. For instance, since he "totally agrees" with people who oppose "slut-shaming," in which women are publicly criticized online for dressing in sexy or revealing manners, he is wondering in general about the ethics of humiliation.

"When is it OK to use shame?" Craigie asks. "Is it just right or wrong depending on who we shame?"

In this Internet age, public shaming seems like the new normal. Men and women sitting behind computer screens, often anonymously, use the World Wide Web to ridicule miscreants, ideological opponents or individuals they just don't happen to like that particular day.

Often the cause seems right, as with the photographic exposure that goes on online via #droughtshaming, which is a popular hashtag in Metro Vancouver, along with #grassholes.

In Brazil, activists are targeting drivers who park in spots for the disabled, ridiculing them with colourful YouTube videos that go viral. In the Philippines, activists are "paint-shaming" shanty homes of people charged with dealing drugs.

But shaming can go easily off the rails. A B.C. news website this month posted a video of a man ranting at someone wanting to protect a pet from heat exposure in a car. The website took down the contempt-provoking video when editors realized the man was mentally ill.

Another online shaming episode in Ontario escalated this month into a harassment case. Postmedia columnist Christie Blatchford has described the complications that ensued after a group of female students tried to silence a critic by publicly attempting via the Internet to destroy his reputation.

The World Wide Web is giving billions of people a powerful new weapon for shaming. But how far removed is what they do from the kind of shaming that went on in olden days, and which still exists in some places, where people are disgraced for being homosexual or not covering their hair with a scarf?

Typically, people in the West condemn shaming. As Craigie notes, they often associate it with bullying, which some define as an attempt to make people feel worthless merely for being different.

Psychologists say shame is a most insidious emotion. It is a sense of inadequacy, often caused by abuse. It is the feeling not only that "I did something bad," but "I am bad." It's not necessarily simple to make a distinction between feelings of shame caused privately or publicly.

Another downside of online shaming is that it gives a lot of power to people who have a need to morally posture.

It's easy to imagine how individuals who get a charge out of shaming someone else could be falling into the psychological trap of projecting their own unacknowledged ethical failings onto others. Some call this hypocrisy.

In addition, public shaming has a vigilante quality, and vigilantes often make mistakes — whether they're 19th-century Southern U.S. mobs tarring and feathering black "thieves" or self-righteous online news media commenters abusively "trolling" opponents with blindly ignorant barrages.

If you have a hunger for members of your community to behave in a socially positive way, what are some of the alternatives to public shaming?

In an era when brown is the new green, it's not illegal during a drought to post online photos of the gorgeous lawns of celebrities such as Kanye West, Kim Kardashian or Barbra Streisand. It's even kind of thrilling.

But could other enforcement methods prove just as useful?

Vancouver city's director of engineering, Jerry Dobrovolny, who says staff are being flooded (so to speak) with calls about rogue water users, encourages neighbours to talk to each other before reporting them to city hall.

And for the sake of community relations, Dobrovolny definitely doesn't want residents calling each other out online via #droughtshaming or #grassholes. "We don't support shaming, period."

Perhaps Dobrovolny doesn't want Canada to go the way of primitive "honour and shame" societies — where rights and free expression are virtually non-existent and people are kept strictly in line by rigid, fear-based social or religious codes.

Dobrovolny's suggestion echoes the codes of conduct some ancient civilizations came up with regarding what to do when you have a conflict with your neighbour. The protocol involves first speaking personally with your neighbour and, if that doesn't work, taking your concern through proper channels to the wider community.

What other creative means are available to resolve conflicts over water usage — not to mention over climate change, gender politics, ethnic strife, civil war and the gap between the world's rich and poor?

As Craigie says, "If I had the answer to that I'd get the Nobel Peace Prize."

Previous Story Next Story