YouTube vigilantes

Will Internet shaming turn Average Joes into Big Brother?

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Did you see that YouTube video of an Australian priest hurling abuse at a motley crew of skateboarders in front of Melbourne's St. Patrick's Cathedral? Well, his superiors did, and last week the Rev. Mgr. Geoff Baron was placed on indefinite leave.

And what about the famous, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist's cringe-making "personal" e-mail about his wife leaving him for Ted Turner? Gawker highlighted it last week with this in the precede: "insane insane INSANE."

Heck, you might say, they had it coming. But think again. What if one of your worst moments -- when you've lost your temper or judgment -- wound up on the World Wide Web for all to ridicule? Even on your best day, how do you feel about people posting your image or your words without your approval?

When we talk of privacy in the Internet age, we mostly speak of financial information and the mounds of data that search engines keep on our e-behavior. But more and more, digital media and the relative anonymity of the Web enable netizens to expose, call out and shame others in cyberspace.

Once upon a time, we thought that the Internet would usher in a new era of free human expression, interconnectedness and understanding. But increasingly we're finding that it actually nurtures our baser instincts and enables social behaviors that date back to when we lived in caves. Snitching, for example.

Sure, there are benefits. Cellphone calls have helped state troopers catch drunk drivers. Video postings have featured politicians saying stupid things, which I figure is a public service. Last month, a Washington liquor store owner helped police catch an armed robber after he posted surveillance video on YouTube. Earlier this year, a YouTube video of high school students firing weapons and igniting explosives helped police in Connecticut foil an alleged bomb plot.

But for the most part, "gotcha" moments on the Web have less to do with real crime and punishment than they do with old-fashioned public shaming. Who needs a scarlet letter when I can embarrass you digitally on the Internet?

Any netizen with a cell cam -- and a nosy sense of right, wrong, crime and punishment -- can act as a social enforcer, wielding the mass medium of the Internet. Celebs such as Michael Richards, caught spewing racial epithets, seem like fair game. But in one case in South Korea, the Web made an international pariah out of a nobody. After a young woman's dog pooped inside a subway train, a fellow passenger took photos of her and posted them on a popular blog. Within hours, she was labeled with a name that's unprintable in a family newspaper, and within days her identity was revealed.

Given her rude behavior, most observers cheered this incident of Internet vigilantism, but did the punishment match the offense? Search engines have long memories, and unlike other, more temporal forms of shaming -- say a misdemeanor ticket or even community service -- the South Korean dog owner will forever be known as, well, you know.
And individuals aren't the only ones using the Net to bring people into line. States have launched sites to post the names of people and businesses that owe back taxes. Maryland calls its site "Caught in the Web"; Wisconsin nails the phenomenon: "Website of Shame."

A few years ago, George Washington University law professor Daniel J. Solove wrote an essay in which he challenged the idea that the threat to our privacy in the Internet age is akin to the constant surveillance of Big Brother. Referring primarily to the scores of public and private agencies collecting data on us all, Solove argued that a better metaphor for life in cyberspace is Kafka's "The Trial," the story of Joseph K., a man who awakens one morning to find he is under arrest and then begins a frustrating quest to discover why. As K. wanders the city, encountering a farago of lawyers, priests, citizens and functionaries, his impotence and paranoia expand. In the end, he faces no direct accusers, never has a day in court, and condemns himself.

I think the same analysis applies to Internet shaming. You never know who's snapping an illicit picture or video, or when and where your name or face could appear on the Web. It's not so much a centralized authority we fear but our fellow citizens, who now have the capacity to grab little pieces of our lives, pass judgment on them and project them across the globe.

So, just in case anyone's watching, you better behave.

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