
The New York Times

Room for Debate: A Running Commentary on the News

« Room for Debate Home

« Back to Discussion

You're Mad! You're on YouTube!

Will the inability to remain invisible stop people from losing their tempers and inhibitions in public?

The Glue of Civility

Updated June 22, 2011, 02:01 AM

Christine M. Pearson is a professor of management at the Thunderbird School of Global Management and co-author of "The Cost of Bad Behavior."

The question of whether growing "publicness" of incivility will cause would-be offenders to think twice infers that they have thought once. Regrettably, this is not the case for many people. Incivility is often thoughtless: lots of offenders are oblivious to their disrespectful behavior and its effects.

That part of the brain that should regulate civil conduct just hasn't kicked in for them. For these individuals, the new threat of being outed in social media is unlikely to cross their minds quickly enough to stifle their bad behavior.

Ironically, for some, the possibility of achieving immediate global attention may actually increase the appeal of behaving badly. Easy access to public forums could increase the intensity and bizarreness of their public displays of disregard. For their five seconds of any type of fame, they may take the plunge.

Then, there are the chronically uncivil who do think carefully before they offend. They consider when, where and in front of whom they will behave badly. "Publicness" may lead habitual offenders to think twice. Unfortunately, the issue they're likely to consider will not be how to enhance their conduct, but how to avoid detection under the new constraints.

Luckily, most people don't "perform" civility. It's just the way they are. The visibility of their actions has no bearing on their behavior toward others. Whether or not anyone could possibly be watching, they practice the respect that glues society together.

Join Room for Debate on Facebook and follow updates on twitter.com/roomfordebate.

Topics: Internet, Technology, privacy

Easy access to public forums may increase the intensity and bizarre nature of public misbehavior.