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You're Mad! You're on YouTube!

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

The Rage of Being Right

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Most incivility is unintentional. People don't know they are being rude. They are simply doing their own thing and going around in a bubble often barging through crowds or blocking the movement of others. They are just busy getting on with life, but have no idea they are doing anything wrong. Consequently they will not modify their behavior as they are simply not thinking about what others might think of them.

It's true that shaming -- and the threat of shaming -- is a potent social force. However for this to work people have to be aware of the social norms at play. In a situation of divergent social norms (say age-specific expectations about how loud to play an iPod on a train), this logic does not hold. The threat of exposure only works if the deviants are able to imagine themselves as a degraded norm breaker in the eyes of anonymous others looking at a future video.

Yet with divergent norms they might simply be "doing what is normal" for them. So why fear a recording?

In situations that escalate into extended arguments and fights (such as we find posted on YouTube), it is generally the case that both parties feel they are in the right. They feel they are standing up for dignity, for their legal rights or freedom from bullying by others. Driven by the idea that they represent "the good" they become enraged.

In this context it is likely that the video recording will be interpreted by the rude participants as evidence that will validate their interpretation of the situation and their capacity to do something about it. So why stop? Further, if a person really has gone postal, something more than a cell phone camera will be needed to stop them.

Some people are psychopaths, have grandiose images of their own self-importance, or are chronically insensitive to how others feel about them. Others feel entitled or are arrogant and imagine that they can get away with anything. Others might simply lack self control. A few might be drunk. These people also will not be affected by thoughts of future online humiliation.

More generally we know that people generally devalue future costs (Internet exposure) relative to present gains (the satisfaction of behaving badly).

Still there will be some impacts. If we take away the conditions outlined above we are left with a small subset of cases where the risk of future Internet exposure could make a difference. This will be when relatively sensitive and rational people acting intentionally are aware of shared community norms.

These people have the emotional intelligence to project how others might see them and are aware that their behavior might be interpreted in a bad light. In such cases people will self-censor or check their behavior before they do or say something they might regret.

Of course the irony is that such people are doing this anyway through a diffuse commitment to ongoing everyday civility.

The risk of exposure might stop a small subset of normally sensitive and rational people from acting up in public.

Generally speaking, internalized shame will kick in well before any rational calculation of future humiliation is undertaken and any cellphone camera is needed.

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