

SUMMARY

SO YOU'VE BEEN PUBLICLY SHAMED

JON RONSON



Summary of “So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed” by Jon Ronson

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Discover the captivating and brilliant exploration of one of our world’s most underappreciated forces: shame.

Introduction

5

Social Media Has Given Power to the Public

6

Shaming is Often Used to Feel a Sense of Control

8

Crowd Mentality Likely Contributes to an Uncontrollable Public Backlash

10

Victims of Public Shame Often Live a Life Full of Terror

12

Childhood Shame Often Leads to Violence and Crime

14

There is Hope - But Only if You Are Willing to Pay

16

Final Summary

17



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Introduction

When learning the history of the world, we often hear about the barbaric punishments that occurred: public whippings, public hangings, and brutal public shaming. We even read literature in school like *The Scarlet Letter*, which told the story of a woman accused of adultery, and was branded for life as a “harlot” or “whore.” She was then forced to wear a scarlet A on her clothing to remind the world of her sins. As we may know, public shaming was the punishment of choice in North America during the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact, one of the first accounts of public shaming occurred on July 15, 1742, when a woman named Abigail Gilpin was found “naked in bed with one John Russell” while her husband was out at sea. Both parties were set to be “whipped at the public whipping post twenty stripes each.” For Abigail, it wasn’t the whipping that bothered her, but the public nature of it. Documents suggest that Abigail pleaded with the judge to “let me have my punishment before the people are stirring” to spare her children from viewing the public shame.

As early as 1787, the U.S. founding father, Benjamin Rush, called for the abolition of public shaming, and by 1839, public punishments were abolished in every state except Delaware. But why do away with it? Was it ineffective? No, it was quite effective. Instead, it was perceived as *too brutal*. Today, however, we have seen a resurgence of public shaming with the rise of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. It too is becoming increasingly brutal. Seemingly small transgressions, like posting a silly photo or tweet, can lead to career-ending scandals and a storm of public verbal abuse. Even worse, the aftermath can be life-changing and devastating for its victims. It seems as if modern life is engaging in an escalating war on human flaws, and we all play a very scary part in it.



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Social Media Has Given Power to the Public

In the past, major corporations have exploited their employees and their customers, yet despite feelings of anger and outrage, not much could be done. Luckily, this is no longer the case today. Thanks to social media, average citizens now have the power to take action against a giant corporation in the face of injustice. Instead of feeling powerless, people can take to social media to voice their concerns by sharing their thoughts on sites like Twitter and Facebook. Suddenly, a flood of public shame follows, forcing the corporation to take action.

For example, a major gym called LA Fitness once refused to cancel the gym membership of a couple who had lost their jobs and couldn't afford the fees. To show their distaste, they shared their thoughts online and people rallied against the giant corporation. People took to Twitter to join the protest, and many canceled their own memberships with LA Fitness out of anger and disgust. LA Fitness was forced to back down, taken down by the people who used to be powerless. Now, anyone with a social media platform can turn to online shaming to speak out about the injustices of giant corporations.

Unfortunately, when you're on the other end of the shaming, the results can be devastating. This is exactly what happened to author Jonah Lehrer who was exposed as a fraud by journalist Michael Moynihan. Moynihan revealed in a 2012 article in the *Jewish Tablet*, that Lehrer fabricated Bob Dylan quotes and plagiarized passages from many other texts. After the article was published, it didn't take long for the online backlash to pour in, and Jonah Lehrer quickly became a victim of a vicious public shaming campaign.

Even worse, once the public found out that Lehrer was paid \$20,000 to speak out about plagiarism at a journalism lunch, the public became disgusted. Twitter became flooded with tweets from the angry public, saying things like, "*Wish I could get paid \$20,000 to say that I'm a lying dirtbag,*" and "*Ugh, Jonah Lehrer is apologizing next to a live Twitter feed*

of people mocking him. It's basically a 21st-century town square flogging." Eventually, the Journalism foundation apologized for paying the disgraced author, and Lehrer was advised to donate the money to charity. However, nothing could turn around Lehrer's disgraced reputation.



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Shaming is Often Used to Feel a Sense of Control

Public shaming is often a tool used to regain control when victims feel helpless, and it is certainly a powerful weapon. Author Jon Ronson once spoke with a member of an online messaging board called 4chan, a place where trolls meet to engage in public shaming. This group, however, was motivated by the desire to do good. For instance, once 4chan tracked down a boy who had been physically abusing his cat and “daring people to stop him.” 4chan users tracked him down, and “let the entire town know he was a sociopath.” As a result, the cat was eventually taken away from him and adopted into a loving family.

When the author asked a member of 4chan to describe the type of people who joined, the member stated, “a lot of them are bored, under-stimulated, over-persecuted powerless kids,” she continued, “They know they can’t be anything they want. So they went to the Internet. On the Internet, we have the power in situations where we would otherwise be powerless.” Another such public shaming occurred in the moments following an incident at a tech event called PyCon, where a woman named Adria Richards overheard two men joking about a device’s “large dongles” and using sexualized language. After Richards tweeted a photo of the two men and told her story, one of the men, Hank, was fired from his job.

The members of 4chan, however, were enraged that this man’s life had to fall apart due to Richards’ actions. So they started a massive public shaming campaign against Richards, stating, “A father of three is out of the job because a silly joke he was telling a friend was overheard by someone with more power than sense. Let’s crucify this c***.” Soon after, a website belonging to Richards’ employers vanished after someone set a malicious program onto it, also known as DDoS attack. Hours later, Richards was fired from her job.

Members of 4chan would later go on to be arrested after DDoSing PayPal in revenge for them refusing to accept donations to WikiLeaks. Their argument? You could donate to the Ku Klux Klan via PayPal, but not to WikiLeaks. When one of the members was asked if these prosecutions would end the 4chan's DDoSing and trolling campaigns, she simply stated, "The police are trying to claim the area." By "area," she meant the Internet. She then went on to say, "Just like in the cities. They gentrify the downtown, move all the poor people into ghettos and then start trolling the ghettos, stopping and frisking everyone."

These people in gentrified areas believe their space is being taken away from them, pushing them out of the areas they used to live in and feel safe. This is especially true in New York, where police officers randomly stop and frisk as many as 1,800 people each day. But according to the New York Civil Rights Union, 9 out of 10 of those subjected to the policing policy are completely innocent. In 2012, a civil rights lawyer, Nahal Zamani, stated in a research paper that "Several said that being stopped and frisked makes you 'feel degraded and humiliated.'" Despite these findings, the policy continued through the 2000s and into the 2010s, and some repeatedly frisked young people sought revenge in online activism - by joining 4chan.



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Crowd Mentality Likely Contributes to an Uncontrollable Public Backlash

If you've spent any time on the Internet, you've likely witnessed public shaming similar to what we've previously described. It all starts the same. A Twitter user tweets something without thinking - something idiotic, perhaps something racist, sexist, or something similar. Suddenly, an angry mob of Twitter users attacks the person, intent on only stopping once the person is ruined. But what is it about this group mentality that initiates this kind of online public shaming?

Well, as early as the nineteenth century, the French physician Gustave Le Bon described this exact phenomenon. "His idea was that humans totally lose control of their behavior in a crowd. Our free will evaporates. A contagious madness takes over, a complete lack of restraining. We can't stop ourselves. So we riot..." In his book called *The Crowd*, Le Bon stated that individuals may be cultivated when isolated, but in a crowd, that same individual becomes a barbarian, a creature acting by instinct. In a crowd, every sentiment and act is contagious. He then goes on to say that in a crowd, we are "microbes" infecting everyone around us. In other words, people have no control over their riotous behavior in crowds.

Social psychologist Steve Reicher, however, doesn't believe in Le Bon's view of crowd behavior. Instead, he doesn't believe people unintentionally join forces. For instance, once Reicher attended "people's day" at Wimbledon, where ordinary people were allowed into the show courts. Sitting amongst the ordinary folk, people in the crowd started the wave. It went around the three "popular" sides of the court until it reached the club member's side where they refused to rise! The infectious behavior didn't infect them! Of course, as this continued to happen, the rest of the crowd urged the members to rise, and eventually, they did so begrudgingly.

Rather than a contagion, this behavior is more about the influence and boundaries between groups - between class and power. There are always

patterns in crowds, and those patterns always reflect wider belief systems. In other words, people typically engage in group behavior because of their own moral convictions, not because of the crowd's hypnotic influence on the group.



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Victims of Public Shame Often Live a Life Full of Terror

In October 2012, Lindsey Stone was enjoying a trip to Washington DC as a caregiver for a group of adults with learning difficulties. She and the other caregiver were taking “dumb pictures all the time,” like smoking in front of a No Smoking sign, or posing in front of statues, mimicking the pose. So when they were at the Arlington cemetery, they saw the Silence and Respect sign when “inspiration struck.” Lindsey posed for a tasteless photo by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the two laughed as they posted it to Facebook. Some comments began pouring in, like “This is kind of offensive. I know you girls, but it’s just tasteless.” Lindsey simply replied with: “OBVIOUSLY we meant NO disrespect to people that serve or have served our country,” but failed to take the picture down.

It was four weeks after their return from Washington DC when Lindsey began to receive public backlash for the photo. She went online to find comments like, “Lindsey Stone hates the military and hates soldiers who have died in foreign wars,” and “You should rot in hell,” and “I hope you die a slow painful death.” The next day, camera crews were outside her front door, and she was fired from her job. In the years following the backlash, Lindsey fell into depression, became an insomniac, and barely left home for a year.

Lindsey’s response to the public shaming is not uncommon; in fact, victims of public shaming often feel attacked and humiliated and causes victims to suffer from depression or even PTSD. Additionally, they find their lives are simply ripped out from under them as they are often fired from jobs they love. For Lindsey, she scanned Craigslist for work in caring for others, but nobody ever responded to her applications. When she was finally offered a job caring for children with autism, she became terrified. She became plagued with questions like, “What if my new company googles me?” “Should I tell them?” Even after high praise at her job, she never felt safe, happy, or relaxed. The terror continued to follow her.

Victims of public shaming often feel the same terror. The terror of being found out, of feeling that same shame, of not being able to live a normal life. Even author Jon Ronson felt terror realizing that any of his past indiscretions could come to light someday and ruin his reputation.



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Childhood Shame Often Leads to Violence and Crime

A Texan judge named Ted Poe notoriously used public shaming to restore order in Houston. For instance, in 1996, a Houston teen had been driving drunk at 100 mph with no headlights. He crashed into a van carrying a married couple and their nanny, killing the husband and the nanny. Poe sentenced the teen to 110 days of boot camp, and to carry a sign once a month for ten years in front of high schools and bars that read, "I KILLED TWO PEOPLE WHILE DRIVING DRUNK." As if that wasn't enough, the teen was also ordered to keep photographs of the victims in his wallet for ten years and to observe the autopsy of a person killed in a drunken-driving accident.

While some people criticized Poe's sentencing, Poe's shaming methods became admired in Houston society, and he was even elected to Congress for Texas's 2nd Congressional District. To defend his methods, he stated that public shaming was a much more effective deterrent to crime than prison time. In fact, according to Judge Poe, about 66% of the people he sentenced to prison would go on to commit another offense; meanwhile, only 15% of those publicly shamed would repeat an offense. Poe even tells the story of a notorious young shoplifter who was sentenced to parading around a store while carrying a sign that read, "I STOLE FROM THIS STORE. DON'T BE A THIEF OR THIS COULD BE YOU." The experience changed the young man, he went on to get a bachelor's degree and started his own business in Houston.

While public shame can certainly prevent crime, it can also trigger crime and violence. According to psychiatrist James Gilligan, violent criminals were "keeping a secret. A central secret. And that secret was that they felt ashamed - deeply ashamed, chronically ashamed, acutely ashamed." He went on to say that he has yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by some experience of feeling shamed, humiliated, disrespected,

or ridiculed. Acting violently is often an attempt to restore the self-esteem that has been damaged from the shame.

Of course, people can also inflict pain and violence on themselves as a way to feel something other than the physical and emotional numbness and deadness that comes with intense shame. At Walpole, Massachusetts' most riot-prone prison during the 1970s, prisoners engaged in numerous suicides, homicides, and fire-setting. After speaking to the inmates, Gilligan discovered that prisoners were subjected to immense shame as officers exerted control over inmates by forcing them to lie face down before they were allowed a meal, or lying about having a visitor. As a result, the shame stimulated violence.



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There is Hope - But Only if You Are Willing to Pay

You've likely seen celebrities or people of influence commit heinous crimes, a giant scandal at first eventually vanishing just a few years later. Try to google the act itself, and the search results produce nothing. But how is this possible? Simply put, it is possible for those who have one thing in common: money. One agency in particular, called Metal Rabbit Media, works on restoring damaged reputations by making sure that the first pages of a Google search on their clients will only produce positive, flattering results. Meanwhile, damaging information on the scandal is pushed to the secondary pages where people are less likely to find them.

These companies will often take on any paying client and have even been known to take on convicted child abusers. One is even run by a convicted felony rapist, a man who spent four years in prison for raping a woman and started a company to obscure his past. Luckily, other companies have codes of conduct that only accept those who haven't been convicted of violent crimes, sexual crimes, or crimes against children. But how would someone go about soliciting the help of these businesses? Well, it's not easy, and it's both laborious and expensive.

Businesses like these spend countless hours editing clients' Wikipedia pages and creating fake news content about their clients. In fact, those gossip articles you read about celebrities may just be made-up stories by reputation-management services intended to hide something even more salacious. Of course, it is likely only celebrities and influential people who can afford such services. For instance, the owner of reputation.com, Michael Fertik, helped manage Lindsey Stone's online presence for free. A case like hers, however, would typically cost up to several hundreds of thousands of dollars. In other words, it seems as if only millionaires have the privilege to use these reputation-management services!



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Final Summary

Public shaming has been a part of human society since as early as the 18th century. While victims of public shaming in the past have been subject to public whippings, today's public shaming comes in the form of online backlash. A careless, tasteless photo or a seemingly harmless tweet can make you the center of public anger and criticism. Even worse, the effects of public berating can lead to depression and PTSD, causing victims to live an anxiety-ridden life and fearful of never overcoming their public shame. Luckily, there is a way out, but it won't be cheap.



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