Harvard
Business
Review

Firing

Why Do We Publicly Shame People Out of Their Jobs?

by Gretchen Gavett

April 06, 2015

Company Praised for Firing Woman Who Took Disrespectful Photo Next to Soldier's Grave

So reads a *New York Daily News* headline reprinted in Jon Ronson's new book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*. According to the paper, more than 4,000 people "liked" the announcement of her termination on Facebook, while a thriving group of commenters went as far as to say that she should be shot or exiled from the United States.

The woman in question, you see, had a running gag with a friend that involved doing the opposite of what public sign stated and taking a photo. And one of these photos happened to be at Arlington National Cemetery.

Public shaming is nothing new – it was a fairly common form of punishment in 18th and 19th century New England – but after a decades-long lull it's taken on a bit of a resurgence. When Ronson set out to better understand why, his investigation involved, among many other examples: disgraced author Jonah Lehrer (he was fired), a woman whose ill-conceived tweet went viral while she was on an airplane (she was fired), and a woman who was attacked after she posted a photo of a man who made a sexually-suggestive joke at a tech conference (both were fired, though he eventually found a new job).

It's worth reading the whole book to better understand both Ronson's journey and his conclusions. But I spoke to him recently about one specific topic: why all of this shaming inevitably leads back to what someone does for a living. An edited version of our conversation is below.

A common thread in your book is that people who are publicly shamed online often lose their jobs as a result. Why do the companies give in?

If you're a small business and you realize that one of your employees has been publicly shamed on the Internet, even if you support that person and understand that that person's been misconstrued, the default seems to be to fire them because of the terror that social media will turn on you next. And they shouldn't be so scared. In fact, a number of people who've read my book said the people who come over the worst are employers.

Have you ever run across a company that stood up for their shamed employee?

I did have a couple of emails from people after my book was excerpted in *The New York Times* where people said to me, I had a very similar shaming. One guy said, "My employers stuck up for me."

Why do these online mobs form, and get so caught up in calling for someone to be fired?

On social media, we still like to see ourselves as a kind of silenced underdog. We like to see ourselves as powerless people punching up, you know, fighting the good fight. I think that's the reason why we're so ferocious. But the power balance has shifted and we haven't quite caught up with that reality. To an extent I think we on social media are so powerful now that we put the fear of God into everybody.

There's a line in your book about gender that goes something like this: Women are punished online when they're shamed with violent, sexual threats. For men, it's based on their employment, getting them fired. It's basically based around what society has determined as sort of most threatening.

I found that incredibly interesting actually. I used to have a line in the book, "I can't think of anything worse than being fired." And the reason I took it out was because a few early readers said to me, "You know, I understand what you're trying to say here but it sounds like you're saying that being fired is as bad as being raped," which obviously I wasn't.

I can certainly say that, for me, being fired is the worst thing I can imagine. You know, it actually happened to me when I was in my early 20s. I was a DJ on a radio station in the North of England and was blissfully happy and then I was fired because they wanted to make it more "commercial." And I really fell apart. I mean, I got depressed for a few months and ever since then, one of my main goals has been to protect against anything like that ever happening again. So I always do four or five different types of work at once. Books and magazines. A huge amount of my life is making sure nobody has the power to fire me and determine the course of my life again.

Is public shaming just a risk people who are gainfully employed run, with trying to be "authentic" online while also having your job title right there in your Twitter profile?

I don't think it should be. When Twitter first started, it really was this kind of unselfconscious place where people would admit shameful things, and everybody would go, "Oh my God, I'm exactly the same." And that reminds me of when children with intrusive thoughts like, Oh my God, I could throw that baby out the window, I must be a monster. And they go to psychiatrists because they think that they're evil and the psychiatrists would say, No, no, no, everybody has those feelings and it doesn't mean you're a bad person. It's just human that the brain sometimes works that way.

I'm a sort of social media utopian, I suppose, because I remember times when that's what social media was like. So for me, if somebody going on to Twitter partly for business reasons and partly just for human reasons and the two things have blurred, that's great. It's great when everybody's human and forgiving and kind and compassionate. But then it just turned into this sort of bullying.

How would you like to see things change?

I would say, the more employees who are blaring on about their human foibles, the better. If you say to people, "Be bland because you might be misconstrued," that's not a good world. That's a kind of cold, frightening, conformist world.

It's completely naïve, but I think companies should be encouraging everybody to go onto Twitter and be themselves. I think that's a better world.

Gretchen Gavett is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review.