Public Shaming and Attacks on Social Media: The Case of White Evangelical Christians

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Abstract

In this article, we compare public shaming with attacks on social media by looking at how these tactics have been used regarding White Evangelical Christians in the United States within the current political climate. We first examine public shaming historically and then in its current form on social media. Then, we differentiate shaming from attacks and argue that this distinction is vital for understanding the goals and motives of online use of these tactics. By making this comparison, we can identify the motives and goals of using these types of posts. We conclude with considerations and recommendations about conflict on social media.

Within a climate of division and outrage, social media serves as both an outlet for individual expression and a venue for bringing attention to collective concerns. In this article, public shaming and public attacks are differentiated for the role they play online either to attempt to restore others to a community or to build cohesion within a community against a vilified enemy. By understanding the goals of these tactics, we can differentiate what is considered fair or unfair messaging used to achieve those goals. In a time when constructive dialogue can restore trust and respect, this article examines the function of online shaming and attacks in light of what we know about effective communication for managing conflicts.

When face-to-face with another person, we often let a lot of potential conflicts just go by. We may vent before talking to the other person or complain later to someone about what was said, but many of the things we get upset about are not worth commenting on. One measure of maturity is the ability to walk away, cool down, and get over it. If the issue being discussed is important, good conflict management prescribes using a calm voice, addressing the person using I-statements, remaining focused on the issue and not attacking the other person's character, and working toward resolution—or at least management—of the issue creating the conflict.

Yet on social media, these guidelines for effective conflict communication are not evident, and they seem to be ignored. Social media invites immediate reaction and instant indulgence of one's own opinions and outrage over another person's comment:

> I don't like what you said, I have to leave a comment right now! . . . Here. . . Publicly. . . and let everyone know how angry I am with what you said.

Twitter, in particular, invites this type of reactionary response to what others have tweeted, especially if the tweet refers to one's own social, political, or religious group. Twitter functions as an open forum on what others have said and any replies that those comments have elicited.

All forms of mediated communication reduce the number of channels we use to communicate. Social media, in particular, replaces nearly every communication channel used for seeing, hearing, watching, and responding. As social presence theory explains, media restrict social cues, which attenuates relational closeness among users (Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Further, social media opens interaction to large numbers of people. When people in small groups interact, they can address subtlety and variation in arguments and ideas. But when large numbers of people interact, coherence is built around broader negatives (Simmel, 1902). In other words, social media, such as Twitter, collapses the ability to effectively interact and constructively argue about ideas. Face-to-face interactions within smaller groups of people allow for greater clarity and finesse of complex ideas. Social media reduces the channels and the social structure that supports good communication, especially when engaging in disagreement and argument over what is good for society.

In other words, social media replaces face-to-face forms and forums for managing conflict. When these forms and forums are absent, so is any accountability to them: The social media user is not required to think critically about outcomes because immediate ramifications seem to have low stakes (e.g., a tweeted response). Further, responsibility is mitigated because the user's actions often have no obvious consequences. However, when many users pile on negative responses to another person's tweet, a single inconsequential tweet can contribute to serious consequences for the other person, such as being fired from one's job.

In this paper, we ask the following: When is calling out a group on social media *public shaming*, and when is it a *public attack*? Although commentary on public shaming often treats these two tactics the same (Mohammad, 2018; Scheff, 2018), we argue that shaming and attacking serve different purposes by those who use them and that this distinction is important for understanding productive online discourse. Therefore, we address the following questions: What is the difference between these actions when they occur on social media? When does challenging another party's views and actions publicly cross the line to become public shaming? And if it is not public shaming, what is it? Why does communication, shaming or attacking, quickly become uncivil, unproductive, ineffective, and mean spirited? Here, we will differentiate between public shaming and public attacks by comparing the types of posts, the goals, and the use of supportive evidence when disparaging a targeted person or group.

We first examine public shaming historically and then in its current form on social media. Then, we differentiate shaming from public attacks. By making this comparison, we can identify the motives and goals of using these types of posts. We then compare posts about Christians on Twitter that shame versus those that attack. We conclude with considerations and recommendations about conflict on social media.

Public Shaming

Public shaming is not new. History and literature are filled with examples of people being shamed in public. For example, stocks used to hold the accused in the town square, where people could come and throw rotten vegetables at those being held. Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1850/2019) book, *The Scarlet Letter*, depicted a woman, accused of adultery, who was made to wear a scarlet *A* sewn on her clothes. Similarly, in France at the end of World War II, women accused of fraternizing with German soldiers had their heads shaven not just to shame them publicly but also to ostracize them. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), professors and landlords and others who "required re-education" had their hair chopped off and were made to stand outside in public, where the people could pass by, and those being shamed were made to wear tall pointed hats with shaming messages written on them.

In the past, public shaming was used to enforce a society's moral norms by humiliating those who violated those norms. The act of disgracing a person publicly served to punish that individual to deter that person and others from future violations. Certainly, it involved the power and arrogance of the people

who took part in publicly mocking others, and it is important to note that often public shaming was used to suppress the voices of women and minority groups through tactics of humiliation and dominance.

The goal of public shaming has been, and continues to be, to call out and jeer at violators of expected group norms, to force the violators—and anyone watching—to become aware of and in line with normative expectations, and to encourage social rejection—to publicly embarrass or ostracize the violators—if they fail to repent and realign themselves with the group's expectations. Broadly speaking, this remains the goal of public shaming online. Specifically, Petley (2013) identified three goals associated with naming and shaming online: (a) to punish informally and name an individual, (b) to inform the public about the person's actions, and (c) to ostracize and express disapproval of the individual's actions. In contrast with attacks, shaming is an attempt to hold actors accountable in an effort to bring about change in their actions. In short, the target who is shamed is treated as *subject*: Although the subject may be ridiculed and criticized, it is the actions and attitudes of the subject that are the focus of change in an effort to restore the person to the community.

Public shaming, historically in the town square and currently on social media, has targeted individuals. Whereas individuals used to be hauled out before the public by either a legal or public authority, on social media, individuals are called out by other individuals who have a sufficient public presence on Twitter or some other social media platform to influence others to join in the contagion of targeting individuals with their tweets. Public shaming may humiliate, embarrass, or discredit the target in public.

On social media, high profile groups of individuals, such as gun owners, supporters of Elizabeth Warren, or White Evangelical Christians, can be the target of public shaming. But because shaming assumes some shared set of moral standards or norms, the goal of shaming is to call out others for not living up to those standards. Here, the implicit motive is that targets who are called out would, in shame, retract their statement or repent of their behavior in order to restore the central norms.

The anthropologist Ruth Benedict, in her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), distinguished cultures by whether they were more motivated by guilt or by shame. In particular, she characterized shame cultures as ones in which shame is possible because people are concerned with their overall selves (as opposed to individual acts) and they fear falling short of an ideal standard (Hesselgrave, 1978, p. 429). At the root of shame is some shared standard within a society or group that people are expected to live up to.

Building on work that followed Benedict's distinction, Hesselgrave (1978) provided a distinction between collectivistic-dependency cultures and individualistic-independency cultures. He argued that shame, which is a primary motivator in the collectivistic-dependency cultures, is prevalent but has different fears in traditional and modern cultures. In traditional cultures, which have an ancestor orientation, the goal is to avoid shame that would dishonor one's ancestors. In popular culture, which is oriented toward the peer group rather than toward ancestors, the goal is to avoid shame that would disappoint members of one's peer group.

In other words, shame is used as an act of accountability among those who share a collective moral standard. Those who are members of a group can remain within the group and hold others within the group accountable for not living up to the group's norms, or they can remove themselves from the group and lob metaphorical stones from outside (via Twitter or other forms of social media) at those within the group for not living up to those standards (Schachter, 1951).

An integral aspect of shaming is that it relies on power. Shame depends on the social mandate of norms and customs (Heller, 1985), which gives these norms and customs authority over the actions of those within a community. Further, as Simmel (1902) observed, as social groups grow larger, they focus their attention much more on the ways norms and customs are violated, not on how they are supported and upheld. Historically, the act of public shaming was controlled by authorities who upheld the societal rules; they represented the law and religion (but note that these were not always separate sources of power). To the extent public shaming might be considered productive, it held offenders accountable and restored them to the community.

However, using public shaming in an effort to motivate actors to change their behaviors can result in an abuse of power. There is good reason to be wary of shame-inducing tactics. Similar to sexism and racism, the ability to wield public shaming is often held disproportionately by the powerful. Today, public shaming online rests less with official sources such as law and religious powers, but rather with those who have an online influence. They hold the power to publicly shame others more effectively than those without a significant following.

A few principles, therefore, characterize public shaming (see Table 1). First, public shaming assumes a shared set of norms that those who are being shamed both understand and have violated. Second, those norms that the target is being held to are in some way verifiable; that is, there is an external standard for behaviors and attitudes that is being violated. To this end, propaganda and fake news are not characteristic of public shaming, because they do not reflect verified standards. Third, the purpose of the shaming messages is to influence the target; in other words, shaming is target-oriented. That is not to say the person doing the shaming is not also seeking attention, but the message has to be aimed at the target. Fourth, at least to some extent, the goal of shaming is restoration and prevention: to make others accountable for their violation in an effort to try to return them to the normative expectations, as well as to prevent others from straying from those norms (Figure 1).

These principles of public shaming contrast with those of public attacks. Whereas attacks and shaming are often treated as synonymous, we differentiate them here, because they serve different functions and rely on different sources of information. Discerning the difference between shaming and attacking provides insight into how these online tactics are used.

Public Attacks

In contrast to public shaming, attacks are not about restoration; they go beyond humiliation of the victim to degradation and dehumanization of the targeted individuals or groups. In short, the target is treated as *object*: the object of attack, without human characteristic.

Historically, an obvious example of attacks is when, in Germany, Jews were required to wear yellow stars on their clothing in order to be identifiable in public, to prevent them from service, to isolate them, and make them targets. Within concentration camps, different colors of triangles were used to identify different groups (such as brown for Roma [referred to using the derogatory term "gypsies"], green for criminals, black for prostitutes, and purple for Jehovah's Witnesses). Pink triangles used for gay men resulted in these men becoming targets of attack by both German guards and other prisoners (Mullen, 2019), which continued after WWII ended. Outward markers identified these and other groups as targets for mistreatment and often led to people attacking them in public with acts of cruelty.

Although those who are targeted by attacks may experience shame, attacks are not meant to elicit change by their targets.[1] Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory addresses how people navigate between their individual identity and their group identities, which are shaped by conformity to the norms and customs within the social groups to which they belong. When a group's identity is competitive with other groups and its legitimacy is threatened, in-group favoritism by its members serves to strengthen in-group cohesion against such threats. Attacks are an aggressive form of competition focused on in-group favoritism and the disparagement of the out-group.

In Germany during WWII, the purpose of these attacks was to identify groups as outsiders so they could be ostracized without concern for restoration. A primary goal of such attacks was to facilitate cohesion of the in-group toward a common enemy. In World War I, Germans were the target of propaganda in the United States, and Germans and Japanese were the target of similar attacks in the United States

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[1]Although these attacks were not aimed at bringing about change, some Jews have changed their names, tried to pass as Christians, or in other ways have tried to hide their Jewishness to avoid being attacked. However, these efforts have been ineffective at preventing being targeted when they were suspected or discovered (Lipstadt, 2019).

Table 1
Comparing Public Shaming, Public Attacks, and Public Bullying

	Goal	Assumption	Target	Information source	Role of facts	Outcome
Public shaming (historical)	Restoration to norms, though typically through oppression	Established social norms The target shares, but has violated, these norms	One or more members of a social group that has violated expected norms	Top-down set of customs and norms	Claim against target must be verifiable (e.g., norms, law, or religious beliefs)	ostracism, isolation, disenfranchisement, exclusion OR public apology, reform, conformity
Public shaming (social media)	Restoration to norms, typically through mass opinion	Shared social norms Target shares, but has violated, these norms	One or more members of a social group that has violated expected norms	Collective set of standards within group	Claim against target must be verifiable (e.g., norms, law, or religious beliefs)	ostracism, isolation, disenfranchisement, exclusion OR public apology, reform, conformity
Public attacks	Build cohesion of in-group against common enemy out-group	The target is the enemy	Common enemy; may be individual or group	In-group set of shared beliefs about the enemy	Claims do not require verification; may include propaganda, fake news	ostracism, isolation, disenfranchisement, exclusion, dehumanization
Public bullying	Dehumanize target	The target deserves to be dehumanized	Individual	Specific event or act that violates someone's own standards or expectations	Claims based on individual opinions	ostracism, isolation, violence, degradation, dehumanization

"I DARE SAY, I OUGHT NOT TO HAVE SENT THAT TWEET."

Figure 1. (*Cartoon of Colonial Man in Stocks*, 2020. caption unsourced)

during World War II. The purpose of such attacks is not to restore the person or group to some moral standard held by society. Rather, attacks make use of the members of an out-group as a means to build in-group cohesion.

Attacks are messages that degrade, humiliate, and discredit the target. The purpose is to exclude and divide. Moreover, truth or justice in the claims made against the target is not a concern for the attackers. Attacks can make use of exaggeration, propaganda, lies, and—in today's terms—fake news to support these attacks. The purpose of the attacks is to bring together those who are like-minded in positioning the "other" as the enemy and as a threat to the attackers' social order, which is not a society they want the targets to be part of.

Although public attacks target individuals or groups, the messages are aimed at solidifying the in-group and making the out-group into a dehumanized enemy. For this purpose, there is no need to verify facts, because the goal is to build cohesion against the enemy, to gain a sense of empowerment over the enemy with whatever means are available. Therefore, propaganda and fake news do not need to be verified to hit their mark.

Related to attacks are acts of cyberbullying, which are repeated online events aimed at dehumanizing and degrading specific individuals who cannot easily defend themselves (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). The victims are indeed a target: Those who are attacked might as well have a bullseye on their head. Like attacks, the goal is to dehumanize the person, and to make sure the person feels the full weight of being discarded and degraded. But whereas attacks are focused primarily on unifying the attackers and creating cohesion, public bullying is focused on the *taking down* of a specific target. Similar to attacks, public bullying builds cohesion of the group against the other, and propaganda and fake news can feed the flame of outrage against the targeted person.

The difference between public shaming and public attacks can be illustrated by comparing messages on Twitter that either target Christians or are used by people who claim to have a Christian agenda. The following section looks at tweets that use these two types of tactics.

The Case of Christians on Twitter

The case of White Evangelical Christians in the United States[2] on Twitter offers a lens into differences between public shaming and public attacks because religion assumes a standard of behavior for which public shaming and attacks are generally considered inappropriate. The governance of right and wrong, or what Christian theologians and philosophers used to refer to as the *law of nature,* claims that all bodies are governed by laws which, to some degree, guide what is fair and unfair (Lewis, 1952). Appealing to this moral standard is a necessary objective of the Evangelical Christian for the process of sanctification. The Bible operates as the set of standards for how the Evangelical Christian ought to go about appealing to one another. However, it condemns the tactics of both public shaming and public attacks.

Public Shaming

Public shaming appears to start with a triggering event or action on the part of the target. Here, one such event was the 2016 election, during which 82% of White Evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump for president of the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, in March 2019, 69% of White Evangelical Christians continued to support Donald Trump (Schwadel & Smith, 2019). Although there are a number of ways we can explain and try to understand this phenomenon—social identity theory, group contagion, tightness (compared to looseness) in cultures and the pressure to conform to moral and social norms, homophily theory—it was a shock for many of the remaining 18% of people who identify as White Evangelical Christian that Christians would support someone who was regularly shown to be the antithesis of much of what Christians stand for and believe, such as caring for and loving others, about the "fruits of the spirit" (Galatians 5:22–23)—"love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, and faithfulness" (New International Version).

Here we look at two sets of Twitter hashtags (#) to compare public shaming with public attacks. Hashtags (#) are a Twitter function for following a like-minded thread by anyone on Twitter who wants to follow or contribute to a line of thinking.

The first set of hashtags are offered by people who were Evangelical Christians at one time and now are not, by people who just do not like what Evangelical Christians stand for, or—in some cases—by Evangelical Christians who are unhappy with the current political leanings of Evangelical Christians as a political block. These hashtags include ones such as #Exvangelical, #EmptyThePews, and #HowToEvangelical. The last one has not had many posts since October 2019, but the others have been active fairly consistently over the past three years. The posts that used these hashtags largely represent public shaming rather than attacks. One question posted on Twitter using one of these hashtags was "What three things do Evangelicals get wrong?" Some responses were thoughtful, such as concerns about women's rights and LGBTQ rights and questions about theological positions, but others were not: "Everything," was one response.

We do not suggest that shaming is necessarily kinder in tone than attacks, but the messages using these hashtags were aimed at the targets for the purpose of calling them out, to publicly shame Evangelicals for not living up to norms of being Christian that are shared by those posting tweets. To this end, there is some level of accountability in the messaging, because to be effective, there is a presumption that there are facts that will support their assumptions about these norms. A tweet in the thread of #Exvangelicals and #EmptyThePews provided the picture of a book to be released in June 2020 (by J. Soboroff) about the separation of families at the U.S.-Mexican border:

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[2]Note that Evangelical Christianity in other parts of the world does not carry the same cultural assumptions as White Evangelical Christianity in the United States. For an example, see Hayhoe's (November 1, 2019) opinion piece in *The New York Times* on being a Canadian Evangelical Christian and a scientist.

This [book] is for you, Trump Evangelicals. Your resentful thirst for revenge on secular culture has cost vulnerable, traumatized families and children everything—including their lives. You're not fit to participate in a humane democracy. (February 20, 2020)

Although not the type of language one is likely to use in face-to-face interaction, the message is clearly aimed at Evangelicals who support Donald Trump, and it makes note of a book that has been researched and is being published, presumably having been vetted at least somewhat for its claims.

Further, like attacks, the message serves the purpose of building cohesion among those who share the views of this thread. But it is clear that one goal of the message is to call out the target audience for not meeting the expectations of "participat[ing] in a humane democracy." The assumption of this tweet is that Evangelical Christians in the United States share a moral standard that is not being met and that a correction of actions may help to restore that standard. But for shame to work there must be some level of agreement about what that shared standard is.

Take, for example, the case of Glennon Doyle Melton, in 2016, who started her public writing career in the Evangelical Christian realm. She married the female soccer player, Abby Wambach, and she was eventually the target on Twitter by Evangelical Christians for not living up to their standard of what it means to be a Christian. Her online response was directed at Evangelical Christians:

Evangelicals: re messages about me breaking the "rules"- I didn't even ask to play. Feel like Kramer: u can't fire me. I don't even work here. (November, 25, 2016).

Therefore, the shaming was ineffective, because the target rejected the standard to which she was being held. This is an important distinction and separates the mechanisms by which the efficacy of public shaming versus attack is determined.

Finally, the level of influence of those who post affects the influence of the effort to shame and call out those who do not meet their interpretation of the moral norms. For example, John Pavlovitz, who has more than 200,000 followers on Twitter, frequently calls out Christians who support policies of the current president. For example, he posted the following on Twitter:

We reject any claim Jesus would sanction the expelling of immigrants, the rejection of refugees, or the walling off of foreign neighbors under duress. He would be sickened by the cruelty they are being subjected to by professed Christians. (March 6, 2020)

Public Attacks

The second set of hashtags reflects the other side of the aisle, with hashtags such as #GodlessDemocrats, which was paired with ones such as #ClimateChangeHysteria, #ClimateHeresy, and #ClimateHustle, as well as #Demoncrats. One such Tweet cited a news report from "Life News":

Democrats Push New Congressional Legislation to Force Americans to Pay for Abortions. . . #GodlessDemocrats (July 8, 2015)

Another read,

It is All #ClimateHustle !!! Just another LIE promoted by the #GodlessDemocrats !!! It is too dangerous to vote for Any democrat in Any election!!! (October 5, 2019)

In these posts, the goal is to build a cohesive in-group against the out-group by attacking Democrats as godless and demonic. The purpose is not aimed at bringing Democrats to a shared standard of moral expectations but to denigrate Democrats generally, while claiming support for the science of climate change is a hoax or hustle. One tweet read,

Accountability, NOW! We cannot and Will NOT turn the other cheek. These #GodlessDemocrats & RINO [Republican in name only] conspirators need to pay. Freeze & seize ALL there [sic] assets and pay reparations to Flynn etc. Subpoenas, Warrants & 4am storm Trooper raids on CNN. (March 25, 2019)

Another Tweet, showing a picture of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, read,

Not my House. . .As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord! Under the new Democratic House majority, it's "yes" to taxpayer funding for abortion, "no" to a border wall, and "no" to God. (February 3, 2019)

Recognizing public attacks for what they are and what they aim to do takes away the need to argue or debate with the attackers. It is not their goal to reason, nor is it their goal to represent truth or facts. Using terms such as hustle and hoax about the science of climate change does not invite interaction, and the purpose is internal, in-group rallying, not out-group persuasion or accountability.

The challenge, however, of these attacks is when they are not recognized for what they are and what they aim to do. In a recent article posted on a reputable Christian listserv, one author mentioned the "godless Democrats" as if they are a real entity, not one labeled for the purpose of in-group cohesion and out-group attack. The article crossed from reason to implicit attack by borrowing the trope used to dehumanize rather than meant to restore. Although many threads on Twitter appeal to certain groups through the long-established mechanism of public shaming, they most likely are attacks, which do not follow the same process, are not motivated by the same goals, and, therefore, should not be engaged with in the same way.

Implications

In today's online frenzy, public shaming and public attacks are motivated by frustration, retaliation, and fear, but also by reflex, because one person can call someone else out with little direct consequence. In the fury of outrage, which happens at a heightened state on social media (see Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Bavel, 2017), it may not even occur to the sender that nonresponse, or even not reading the related thread, are options. In such cases, interaction becomes less relevant and mere participation takes precedence.

When it comes to being "just not nice" to others, there are many ways we can do this, especially in public. Attacks and bullying are social forms of not only dehumanizing others but also making sure that treatment is made public. Add social media, and this treatment reaches a much broader audience and relinquishes personal responsibility. There are several implications that arise from the use of both public shaming and public attacks.

With the rise of social media, public shaming has transformed from what it was in historical contexts. Future research could investigate the type and scope of this transformation. Whereas public shaming may previously have been aimed at correcting and reinforcing the moral commitments held by a society, it has become the act of individuals to punish others they disagree with, are offended by, or just dislike. The public forum of social media can turn an individual's tirade into an angry mob. We argue these actions can end up becoming more of an attack—even when that is not the intention—because it leaves the targets with few options to respond or defend themselves. Whereas public shaming used to require some level of group sanction for the humiliating acts to take place—whether by agents of the law or religion, or about communal outrage or fear over the target's behavior or beliefs—now public shaming can be enacted by individuals who have a public platform toward anyone whose opinions or jokes or views are those with which they do not agree.

Attacks contribute to the tribal divides within a culture, in which people not only take sides, but they reinforce their side against the other (presumably opposing) group. The rise of fake news and unverified facts exacerbates the tribalism, breaking down the importance of verifiable standards and evidence and the importance of rational debate.

But another implication of online attacks and bullying is that the online versions do not go away. Whereas historical versions of attacks may eventually recess or the targeted individual could leave the community (Hirschman, 1970), online attacks and bullying of an individual can follow the person indefinitely. In his book, *So you've been publicly shamed*, Ronson (2015) wrote about two cases of

women who not only were fired after being called out on social media for comments they made online, but they became unemployable because of the public's vilification. Further, in a famous case in spring 2020 in the United Kingdom, the host of the television show, *Love Island*, was vilified online for the unethical hiring of her boyfriend. But instead of allowing administrators to do their job, she was attacked online, which resulted in her committing suicide. Clearly, the implications of such attacks are not inconsequential.

Finally, public shaming, attacks, and bullying online can serve to shut down the willingness to speak out, especially online, as well as anywhere there is a cell phone taking video of interactions or presentations. People may fear speaking up or be afraid to joke or to communicate online for fear of making mistakes that others will attack, and these attacks can be vicious. And in some case, they are more than just public shaming. They go beyond the stocks in the town square, which at some point will end, but the shaming becomes permanent and public, and it can ruin people's lives. The idea that one person attempts to silence another goes against the American commitment to freedom of speech. Online deterrence silences people from speaking.

John Dewey said that freedom of speech was not intended for the good of the individual, but for the public good (Menand, 2001). The marketplace of ideas means that people should be able to put all sorts of ideas out there, and society should take the best ones and implement them. It is a type of social brainstorming process. But if people are silenced, afraid to speak for fear of being vilified, then good people will not speak up (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Those most likely to show restraint in conflict situations will be the ones restraining themselves. And the least likely to show restraint will have the loudest voices online.

Recommendations

Can there ever be productive conflict management on social media? Yes, we believe so, if the end goal is to communicate with respect over different ideas, attitudes, and actions. Because this special issue addresses the question of how we can have dialogue in these divisive times, we end with some recommendations for dealing with conflict on social media. Just as there are principles for good conflict management in face-to-face interactions, there need to be rules for conflict management online.

We know social media can be a powerful tool. On the one hand, the powerless may feel that online attacks are their only recourse against those in power and that there is no forum for dialogue and influence against those leading in a direction that others do not want to go. On the other hand, social media provides a platform for those who feel powerless to be heard and to feel connected with one another. Social media may be new, but discourse is not. Therefore, the same rules apply to social media as they do for face-to-face interaction, but with careful considerations.

Although attacks and shaming may not be productive (see Brady & Crockett, 2019), there may still be a role online for public accountability. If two people are in a social situation—say at church—then for one person to call out, in front of others, the other person for holding a particular belief or behaving badly would be considered rude. The appropriate action would be for the first person to take the other aside and talk with that person. In the New Testament, in 2 Timothy, Paul wrote the following instructions to Timothy:

> Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth. . . (2 Timothy 2: 23–25; New International Version)

Think about how conflicts ought to be handled. There is a well-established list of prescriptive behaviors for how to handle conflict wisely:

Regulate Emotions

When feeling angry (or outraged), count to ten before responding. Let emotions subside if they start to bubble up. Don't let emotions get the better of you.

Do Your Homework

Be prepared with well-informed and well-supported arguments. Distributive tactics—such as putdowns, attacks, and threats—are much more likely to be used when a person has not prepared thoughtful and well-reasoned arguments. Use objective standards. Seek to understand the other person's position.

Communicate Effectively

Listen first, then talk. Speak softly. Use I-statements.

Keep Your Goal in Mind

As Fisher and Ury (1981) prescribed, when you are finished, the relationship should be better—or at the very least as good—as it was when you started; not worse.

When engaging in conflict via social media, the same preparations should be considered, and if they are not addressed sufficiently, that may be a good indication that an intervention might be more productive offline.

There are many examples of when online discourse has been productive, connective, and inspiring. The trending hashtags of #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #OccupyWallstreet have contributed to social change in the United States but also around the world. Smaller trending hashtags, such as #NoKidHungry, have brought both attention and financial support to important social issues. Yet, in addition to influencing positive change, a host of tweets also exhibit people being called out and shamed for any message that does not meet another Twitter-user's standard, even when the original tweet was issued naively or with good intention but poor delivery.

When it comes to public accountability as a tactic for productive restoration, we find that most of these examples include, as the verses from 2 Timothy suggest, the need for private messaging. If a private appeal is first made and nothing has changed, then the power of social influence via social media may be a useful democratic tool for prosocial behavior. For example, Ronson (2015) described a time when two people set up a fake account using his name. After messaging the fake account owners privately and then meeting with them, they still refused to take down the account. Finally, Ronson uploaded a video to YouTube of their conversation and tweeted the link. Hours later comments poured in, shaming the account creators into taking down the fake account. This is one example where social influence through the mechanism of public accountability helped hold the violators responsible. But any tool that can be used benevolently can also be subverted for nefarious activity. And because attacks do not require evidence, there is no place for private appeals: There is nothing to restore.

Trying to privately appeal online to the person one disagrees with using direct messaging is a good heuristic for checking the efficacy of social media for productive conflict. If the subject is not one that is appropriate to message to a friend, colleague, or stranger, then perhaps it is best left unsaid. Using private appeals to inform and public appeals to reinforce norms has been a tactic used by many great leaders. This prescription, while perhaps not as obvious online, remains a good rule for gauging when public engagement is appropriate.

Rather than shutting down or dismissively labeling one another, we should seek to send messages that counter but do not attack, that argue but do not disparage, that persuade but do not humiliate.

Pause.
Consider your goals before posting.
Respond rather than react.

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