

Jon Ronson ←

# So You've Been Publicly Shamed

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as clearly as can be. He'll recycle and repeat, he'll puke his gritty guts out."

No matter what transgressions Jonah had or hadn't committed—it seemed to me—he couldn't win. But his *Book About Love* is scheduled to be published by Simon & Schuster around the same time that this book will appear, so we'll all learn at once if it will win him some redemption.

## Four

# God That Was Awesome

During the months that followed, it became routine. Everyday people, some with young children, were getting annihilated for tweeting some badly worded joke to their hundred or so followers. I'd meet them in restaurants and airport cafés—spectral figures wandering the earth like the living dead in the business wear of their former lives. It was happening with such regularity that it didn't even seem coincidental that one of them, Justine Sacco, had been working in the same office building as Michael Moynihan until three weeks earlier when, passing through Heathrow Airport, she wrote a tweet that came out badly.

It was December 20, 2013. For the previous two days she'd been tweeting little acerbic jokes to her 170 followers about her holiday travels. She was like a social media Sally Bowles, decadent and flighty and unaware that serious politics were looming. There was her joke about the German man on the plane from New York: "*Weird German Dude: You're in first class. It's 2014. Get some deodorant.—Inner monolog as I inhale BO. Thank god for pharmaceuticals.*" Then the layover at Heathrow: "*Chili—cucumber sandwiches—bad teeth. Back in London!*" Then the final leg: "*Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!*"

She chuckled to herself, pressed send, and wandered around the airport for half an hour, sporadically checking Twitter.

"I got nothing," she told me. "No replies."

I imagined her feeling a bit deflated about this—that sad feeling when nobody congratulates you for being funny, that black silence when the Internet doesn't talk back. She boarded the plane. It was an eleven-hour flight. She slept. When the plane landed, she turned on her phone. Straightaway there was a text from someone she hadn't spoken to since high school: "*I'm so sorry to see what's happening.*"

She looked at it, baffled.

"And then my phone started to explode," she said.

We were having this conversation three weeks later at—her choice of location—the Cookshop restaurant in New York

City. It was the very same restaurant where Michael had recounted to me the tale of Jonah's destruction. It was becoming for me the Restaurant of Stories of Obliterated Lives. But it was only a half coincidence. It was close to the building where they both worked. Michael had been offered a job at *The Daily Beast* as a result of his great Jonah scoop, and Justine had an office upstairs, running the PR department for the magazine's publisher, IAC—which also owned Vimeo and OkCupid and Match.com. The reason why she wanted to meet me here, and why she was wearing her expensive-looking work clothes, was that at six p.m. she was due in there to clean out her desk.

As she sat on the runway at Cape Town Airport, a second text popped up: "*You need to call me immediately.*" It was from her best friend, Hannah. "*You're the number one worldwide trend on Twitter right now.*"

"In light of @JustineSacco disgusting racist tweet, I'm donating to @CARE today," and "How did @JustineSacco get a PR job?! Her level of racist ignorance belongs on Fox News. #AIDS can affect anyone!" and "No words for that horribly disgusting, racist as fuck tweet from Justine Sacco. I am beyond horrified," and "I'm an IAC employee and I don't want @JustineSacco doing any communications on our behalf ever again. Ever," and "Everyone go report this cunt @Justine Sacco," and from IAC: "This is an outrageous, offensive comment. Employee in question currently unreachable on an intl flight," and "Fascinated by the @JustineSacco train wreck. It's global and she's apparently \*still on the plane,\*" and "All I want for Christmas is to see @JustineSacco's face when her plane lands and she checks her inbox/voicemail," and "Oh

man, @JustineSacco is going to have the most painful phone-turning-on moment ever when her plane lands,” and “Looks like @JustineSacco lands in about 9mins, this should be interesting,” and “We are about to watch this @JustineSacco bitch get fired. In REAL time. Before she even KNOWS she’s getting fired,” and then, after Hannah frantically deleted Justine’s Twitter account, “Sorry @JustineSacco—your tweet lives on forever,” and so on for a total of a hundred thousand tweets, according to calculations by the website BuzzFeed, until weeks later: “Man, remember Justine Sacco? #HasJustine LandedYet. God that was awesome. MILLIONS of people waiting for her to land.”

I once asked a car-crash victim what it had felt like to be in a smashup. She said her eeriest memory was how one second the car was her friend, working for her, its contours designed to fit her body perfectly, everything smooth and sleek and luxurious, and then a blink of an eye later it had become a jagged weapon of torture—like she was inside an iron maiden. Her friend had become her worst enemy.

Over the years, I’ve sat across tables from a lot of people whose lives had been destroyed. Usually, the people who did the destroying were the government or the military or big business or, as with Jonah Lehrer, basically themselves (at least at first with Jonah—we took over as he tried to apologize). Justine Sacco felt like the first person I had ever interviewed who had been destroyed by *us*.

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Google has an engine—Google AdWords—that tells you how many times your name has been searched for during any given month. In October 2013, Justine was googled thirty times. In November 2013, she was googled thirty times. Between December 20 and the end of December, she was googled 1,220,000 times.

A man had been waiting for her at Cape Town Airport. He was a Twitter user, @Zac\_R. He took her photograph and



Justine Sacco (in dark glasses) at Cape Town Airport. Photograph by @Zac\_R, reproduced with his permission.

posted it online. “Yup,” he wrote, “@JustineSacco HAS in fact landed at Cape Town international. She’s decided to wear sunnies as a disguise.”

Three weeks had passed since Justine had pressed send on the tweet. The *New York Post* had been following her to the gym. Newspapers were ransacking her Twitter feed for more horrors.

And the award for classiest tweet of all time goes to . . .

“I had a sex dream about an autistic kid last night.”  
(February 24, 2012)

—“16 TWEETS JUSTINE SACCO REGRETS,”  
BUZZFEED, DECEMBER 20, 2013

This was the only time Justine would ever talk to a journalist about what happened to her, she told me. It was just too harrowing. And inadvisable. “As a publicist,” she e-mailed, “I don’t know that I would ever recommend to a client that they participate in your book. I’m very nervous about it. I am really terrified about opening myself up to future attacks. But I think it’s necessary. I want someone to just show how crazy my situation is.”

It was crazy because “only an *insane* person would think that white people don’t get AIDS.” That was about the first thing she said to me when she sat down. “To me, it was so insane a comment for an American to make I thought there was no way that anyone could possibly think it was a literal statement. I know there are hateful people out there who

don’t like other people and are generally mean. But that’s not me.”

Justine had been about three hours into her flight—probably asleep in the air above Spain or Algeria—when retweets of her tweet began to overwhelm my Twitter feed. After an initial happy little “Oh, wow, someone is *fucked*,” I started to think her shamers must have been gripped by some kind of group madness or something. It seemed obvious that her tweet, whilst not a great joke, wasn’t racist, but a reflexive comment on white privilege—on our tendency to naively imagine ourselves immune from life’s horrors. Wasn’t it?

“It was a joke about a situation that exists,” Justine e-mailed. “It was a joke about a dire situation that does exist in post-apartheid South Africa that we don’t pay attention to. It was completely outrageous commentary on the disproportionate AIDS statistics. Unfortunately, I am not a character on *South Park* or a comedian, so I had no business commenting on the epidemic in such a politically incorrect manner on a public platform. To put it simply, I wasn’t trying to raise awareness of AIDS, or piss off the world, or ruin my life. Living in America puts us in a bit of a bubble when it comes to what is going on in the third world. I was making fun of that bubble.”

As it happens, I once made a similar—albeit funnier—joke in a column for *The Guardian*. It was about a time when I flew into the United States and was sent for “secondary process-

ing” (there was a mafioso hit man on the run at the time with a name that apparently sounded quite a lot like Jon Ronson). I was taken into a packed holding room and told to wait.

There are signs everywhere saying: “The use of cell phones is strictly prohibited.”

I’m sure they won’t mind *me* checking my text messages, I think. I mean, after all, I *am* white.

My joke was funnier than Justine’s joke. It was better worded. Plus, as it didn’t invoke AIDS sufferers, it was less unpleasant. So mine was funnier, better worded, and less unpleasant. But it suddenly felt like that Russian roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter* when Christopher Walken puts the gun to his head and lets out a scream and pulls the trigger and the gun doesn’t go off. It was to a large extent Justine’s own fault that so many people thought she was a racist. Her reflexive sarcasm had been badly worded, her wider Twitter persona quite brittle. But I hadn’t needed to think about her tweet for more than a few seconds before I understood what she’d been trying to say. There must have been among her shamers a lot of people who chose to willfully misunderstand it for some reason.

“I can’t fully grasp the misconception that’s happening around the world,” Justine said. “They’ve taken my name and my picture, and have created this Justine Sacco that’s not me and have labeled this person a racist. I have this fear that if I were in a car accident tomorrow and lost my memory and came back and googled myself, that would be my new reality.”

I suddenly remembered how weirdly tarnished I felt when the spambot men created their fake Jon Ronson, getting my character traits all wrong, turning me into some horrific, garrulous foodie, and strangers believed it was me, and there was nothing I could do. That’s what was happening to Justine, although instead of a foodie she was a racist and instead of fifty people it was 1,220,000.

Journalists are supposed to be intrepid. We’re supposed to stand tall in the face of injustice and not fear crazy mobs. But neither Justine nor I saw much fearlessness in how her story was reported. Even articles about how “we could all be minutes away from having a Justine Sacco moment” were all couched in “I am *NO WAY* defending what she said,” she told me.

But as vile as the sentiment she expressed was, there are some potential extenuating circumstances here that don’t excuse her behavior but might mitigate her misdeed somewhat. Repugnant as her joke was, there is a difference between outright hate speech and even the most ill-advised attempt at humor.

—ANDREW WALLENSTEIN, “JUSTINE SACCO: SYMPATHY FOR THIS TWITTER DEVIL,” *Variety*, DECEMBER 22, 2013

Andrew Wallenstein was braver than most. But still: It read like the old media saying to social media, “Don’t hurt me.”

Justine released an apology statement. She cut short her South African family vacation “because of safety concerns. People were threatening to go on strike at the hotels I was booked into if I showed up. I was told no one could guarantee my safety.” Word spread around the Internet that she was heiress to a \$4.8 billion fortune, as people assumed her father was the South African mining tycoon Desmond Sacco. I wrongly thought this was true about her right up until I alluded to her billions over lunch and she looked at me like I was crazy.

“I grew up on Long Island,” she said.

“Not in a Jay Gatsby-type estate?” I said.

“Not in a Jay Gatsby-type estate,” Justine said. “My mom was single my entire life. She was a flight attendant. My dad sold carpets.”

(She later e-mailed that while she “grew up with a single mom who was a flight attendant and worked two jobs, when I was twenty-one or twenty-two, she married well. My stepfather is pretty well off, and I think there was a picture of my mom’s car on my Instagram, which gave the impression that I’m from a wealthy family. So maybe that’s another reason why people assumed I was a spoiled brat. I don’t know. But thought it was worth bringing up to you.”)

Years ago I interviewed some white supremacists from an Aryan Nations compound in Idaho about their conviction that the Bilderberg Group—a secretive annual meeting of politicians and business leaders—was a Jewish conspiracy.

“How can you call it a Jewish conspiracy when practically no Jews go to it?” I asked them.

“They may not be actual Jews,” one replied, “but they are . . .” He paused. “. . . Jewish.”

So there it was: At Aryan Nations, you didn’t need to be an actual Jew to be *Jew-ish*. And the same was true on Twitter with the privileged racist Justine Sacco, who was neither especially privileged nor a racist. But it didn’t matter. It was enough that it sort of seemed like she was.

Her extended family in South Africa were ANC supporters. One of the first things Justine’s aunt told her when she arrived at the family home from Cape Town Airport was: “This is not what our family stands for. And now, by association, you’ve almost tarnished the family.”

At this, Justine started to cry. I sat looking at her for a moment. Then I tried to say something hopeful to improve the mood.

“Sometimes things need to reach a brutal nadir before people see sense,” I said. “So maybe you’re our brutal nadir.”

“Wow,” Justine said. She dried her eyes. “Of all the things I could have been in society’s collective consciousness, it never struck me that I’d end up a brutal nadir.”

A woman approached our table—a friend of Justine’s. She sat down next to her, fixed her with an empathetic look, and said something at such a low volume I couldn’t hear it.

“Oh, you think I’m going to be *grateful* for this?” Justine replied.

“Yes, you will,” the woman said. “Every step prepares you for the next, especially when you don’t think so. I know you can’t see that right now. That’s okay. I get it. But come on. Did you really have your *dream job*?”

Justine looked at her. “I think I did,” she said.

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I got an e-mail from the *Gawker* journalist Sam Biddle—the man who may have started the onslaught against Justine. One of Justine’s 170 followers had sent him the tweet. He retweeted it to his 15,000 followers. And that’s how it may have begun.

“The fact that she was a PR chief made it delicious,” he e-mailed me. “It’s satisfying to be able to say ‘OK, let’s make a racist tweet by a senior IAC employee count this time.’ And it did. I’d do it again.”

Her destruction was justified, Sam Biddle was saying, because Justine was a racist, and because attacking her was punching up. They were cutting down a member of the media elite, continuing the civil rights tradition that started with Rosa Parks, the hitherto silenced underdogs shaming into submission the powerful racist. But I didn’t think any of those things were true. If punching Justine Sacco was ever punching up—and it didn’t seem so to me given that she was an unknown PR woman with 170 Twitter followers—the punching only intensified as she plummeted to the ground. Punching Jonah Lehrer wasn’t punching up either—not when he was begging for forgiveness in front of that giant-screen Twitter feed.

A life had been ruined. What was it for: just some social media drama? I think our natural disposition as humans is to plod along until we get old and stop. But with social media, we’ve created a stage for constant artificial high drama. Every day a new person emerges as a magnificent hero or a sicken-

ing villain. It’s all very sweeping, and not the way we actually are as people. What rush was overpowering us at times like this? What were we getting out of it?

I could tell Sam Biddle was finding it startling too—like when you shoot a gun and the power of it sends you recoiling violently backward. He said he was “surprised” to see how quickly Justine was destroyed: “I never wake up and hope I get to fire someone that day—and certainly never hope to ruin anyone’s life.” Still, his e-mail ended, he had a feeling she’d be “fine eventually, if not already. Everyone’s attention span is so short. They’ll be mad about something new today.”

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When Justine left me that evening to clear out her desk, she got only as far as the lobby of her office building before she collapsed on the floor in tears. Later, we talked again. I told her what Sam Biddle had said—about how she was “probably fine now.” I was sure he wasn’t being deliberately glib. He was just like everyone who participates in mass online destruction. Who would want to know? Whatever that pleasurable rush that overwhelms us is—group madness or something else—nobody wants to ruin it by facing the fact that it comes with a cost.

“Well, I’m not fine,” Justine said. “I’m really suffering. I had a great career and I loved my job and it was taken away from me and there was a lot of glory in that. Everybody else was very *happy* about that. I cried out my body weight in the first twenty-four hours. It was incredibly traumatic. You don’t

sleep. You wake up in the middle of the night forgetting where you are. All of a sudden you don't know what you're supposed to do. You've got no schedule. You've got no"—she paused—"purpose. I'm thirty years old. I had a great career. If I don't have a plan, if I don't start making steps to reclaim my identity and remind myself of who I am on a daily basis, then I might lose myself. I'm single. So it's not like I can date, because we google everyone we might date. So that's been taken away from me too. How am I going to meet new people? What are they going to think of me?"

She asked me who else was going to be in my book about people who had been publicly shamed.

"Well, Jonah Lehrer so far," I said.

"How's he doing?" she asked me.

"Pretty badly, I think," I said.

"Badly in what way?" She looked concerned—I think more for what this might prophesy about her own future than about Jonah's.

"I think he's broken," I said.

"When you say Jonah seems broken, what do you mean?" Justine said.

"I think he's broken and that people mistake it for shamelessness," I said.

People really were very keen to imagine Jonah as shameless, as lacking in that quality, like he was something not quite human that had adopted human form. I suppose it's no surprise that we feel the need to dehumanize the people we hurt—before, during, or after the hurting occurs. But it always comes as a surprise. In psychology it's known as cognitive dissonance. It's the idea that it feels stressful and painful

for us to hold two contradictory ideas at the same time (like the idea that we're kind people and the idea that we've just destroyed someone). And so to ease the pain we create illusory ways to justify our contradictory behavior. It's like when I used to smoke and I'd hope the tobacconist would hand me the pack that read *SMOKING CAUSES AGING OF THE SKIN* instead of the pack that read *SMOKING KILLS*—because aging of the skin? I didn't mind *that*.

Justine and I agreed to meet again, but not for months, she told me. We'd meet again in five months. She was compelled to make sure that this was not her narrative. "I can't just sit at home and watch movies every day and cry and feel sorry for myself," she said. I think Justine wasn't thrilled to be included in the same book as Jonah. She didn't see herself as being anything like Jonah. Jonah lied repeatedly, again and again. How could Jonah bounce back when he'd sacrificed his character and lied to millions? Justine had to believe that there was a stark difference between that and her making a tasteless joke. She did something stupid, but she didn't trash her integrity.

She couldn't bear the thought of being preserved within the pages of my book as a sad case. She needed to avoid falling into depression and self-loathing. She knew that the next five months were going to be crucial for her. She was determined to show the people who had smashed her up that she could rise again.

How could she tell her story, she thought, when it was just beginning?

...  
 The day after my lunch with Justine, I caught the train to Washington, D.C., to meet someone I had prejudged as a frightening man—a fearsome American narcissist—Ted Poe. For the twenty or so years he was a judge in Houston, Poe’s nationally famous trademark was to publicly shame defendants in the showiest ways he could dream up, “using citizens as virtual props in his personal theater of the absurd,” as the legal writer Jonathan Turley once put it.

Given society’s intensifying eagerness to publicly shame people, I wanted to meet someone who had been doing it professionally for decades. What would today’s citizen shamers think of Ted Poe—his personality and his motivations—now that they were basically becoming him? What impact had his shaming frenzy had on the world around him—on the wrongdoers and the bystanders and himself?

Ted Poe’s punishments were sometimes zany—ordering petty criminals to shovel manure, etc.—and sometimes as ingenious as a Goya painting. Like the one he handed down to a Houston teenager, Mike Hubacek. In 1996, Hubacek had been driving drunk at one hundred miles per hour with no headlights. He crashed into a van carrying a married couple and their nanny. The husband and the nanny were killed. Poe sentenced Hubacek 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,

and to erect a cross and a Star of David at the scene of the crash site, and to keep it maintained, and to keep photographs of the victims in his wallet for ten years, and to send ten dollars every week for ten years to a memorial fund in the names of the victims, and to observe the autopsy of a person killed in a drunk-driving accident.

Punishments like these had proved too psychologically torturous for other people. In 1982 a seventeen-year-old boy named Kevin Tunell had killed a girl, Susan Herzog, while driving drunk near Washington, D.C. Her parents sued him and were awarded \$1.5 million in damages. But they offered the boy a deal. They would reduce the fine to just \$936 if he’d mail them a check for \$1, made out in Susan’s name, every Friday for eighteen years. He gratefully accepted their offer.

Years later, the boy began missing payments, and when Susan’s parents took him to court, he broke down. Every time he filled in her name, he said, the guilt would tear him apart: “It hurts too much,” he said. He tried to give the Herzogs two boxes of prewritten checks, dated one per week until the end of 2001, a year longer than was required. But they refused to take them.

Judge Ted Poe’s critics—like the civil rights group the ACLU—argued to him the dangers of these ostentatious punishments, especially those that were carried out in public. They said it was no coincidence that public shaming had enjoyed such a renaissance in Mao’s China and Hitler’s Germany and the Ku Klux Klan’s America—it destroys souls, brutalizing everyone, the onlookers included, dehumanizing them as much as the person being shamed. How could Poe

take people with such low self-esteem that they needed to, say, rob a store, and then hold them up to officially sanctioned public ridicule?

But Poe brushed the criticisms off. Criminals didn't have low self-esteem, he argued. It was quite the opposite. "The people I see have *too good* a self-esteem," he told *The Boston Globe* in 1997. "Some folks say everyone should have high self-esteem, but sometimes people *should* feel bad."

Poe's shaming methods were so admired in Houston society that he ended up getting elected to Congress as the representative for Texas's Second Congressional District. He is currently Congress's "top talker," according to the *Los Angeles Times*, having made 431 speeches between 2009 and 2011, against abortion, illegal immigrants, socialized health care, and so on. He always ends them with his catchphrase: "And that's just the way it is!"

"It wasn't the 'theater of the absurd.'" Ted Poe sat opposite me in his office in the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C. I'd just quoted to him his critic Jonathan Turley's line—"using citizens as virtual props in his personal theater of the absurd"—and he was bristling. He wore cowboy boots with his suit—another Poe trademark, like the catchphrase and the shaming. He had the look and mannerisms of his friend George W. Bush. "It was the theater of the *different*," he said.

The Rayburn building is where all the congressmen and congresswomen have their offices. Each office door is decorated with the state flag of the congressperson who is inside:

the bald eagles of Illinois and North Dakota and the bear of California and the horse's head of New Jersey and the strange bleeding pelican of Louisiana. Poe's office is staffed by handsome, serious-looking Texas men and tough, pretty Texas women who were extremely nice to me but totally ignored all my subsequent e-mail requests for clarifications and follow-up interviews. Although Poe ended the interview by warmly shaking my hand, I suspect that the moment I left the room he told his staff, "That man was an idiot. Ignore all future e-mail requests from him."

He recounted to me some of his favorite shamings: "Like the young man who loved the thrill of stealing. I could have put him in jail. But I decided that he had to carry a sign for seven days: I STOLE FROM THIS STORE. DON'T BE A THIEF OR THIS COULD BE YOU. He was supervised. We worked all the security out. I got that down to an art for those people who worried about security. At the end of the week the store manager called me: 'All week I didn't have any stealing going on in the store!' The store manager loved it."

"But aren't you turning the criminal justice system into entertainment?" I said.

"Ask the guy out there," Ted Poe replied. "He doesn't think he's entertaining anybody."

"I don't mean him," I said. "I mean the effect it has on the people watching."

"The public liked it." Poe nodded. "People stopped and talked to him about his conduct. One lady wanted to take him to church on Sunday and save him! She *did!*" Poe let out a big high-pitched Texas laugh. "She said, 'Come with me, you poor thing!' End of the week, I brought him back into

court. He said it was the most embarrassing thing that had ever happened to him. It changed his conduct. Eventually, he got a bachelor's degree. He's got a business in Houston now." Poe paused. "I have put my share of folks in the penitentiary. Sixty-six percent of them go back to prison. Eighty-five percent of those people we publicly shamed we never saw again. It was too embarrassing for them the first time. It wasn't the 'theater of the absurd,' it was the theater of the *effective*. It worked."

Poe was being annoyingly convincing, even though he later admitted to me that his recidivism argument was a misleading one. Poe was far more likely to sentence a first-time offender—someone who was already feeling scared and remorseful and determined to change—to a shaming. But even so, I was learning something about public shaming today that I hadn't anticipated at all.

It had started earlier that morning in my hotel room when I telephoned Mike Hubacek, the teenager who had killed two people while driving drunk in 1996. I had wanted him to describe the feeling of being forced to walk up and down the side of the road holding a placard that read I KILLED TWO PEOPLE WHILE DRIVING DRUNK. But first we talked about the crash. He told me he spent the first six months after it happened lying in his prison cell, replaying it over and over.

"What images did you replay?" I asked him.

"None," he replied. "I had completely blacked out during it and I don't remember anything. But I thought about it

daily. I still do. It's a part of me. I suffered a lot of survivor's guilt. At the time, I almost convinced myself I was in a living purgatory. I lived to suffer. I went more than a year and a half without looking in a mirror. You learn to shave using your hand as a guide."

Being in purgatory, he said, he had resigned himself to a lifetime of incarceration. But then Ted Poe unexpectedly pulled him out. And he suddenly found himself walking up and down the side of the road holding that placard.

And there on the side of the road, he said, he understood that there was a use for him. He could basically become a living placard that warned people against driving drunk. And so nowadays he lectures in schools about the dangers. He owns a halfway house—Sober Living Houston. And he credits Judge Ted Poe for it all.

"I'm forever grateful to him," he said.

My trip to Washington, D.C., wasn't turning out how I'd hoped. I'd assumed that Ted Poe would be such a terrible person and negative role model that the social media shamers would realize with horror that this was what they were becoming and vow to change their ways. But Mike Hubacek thought his shaming was the best thing that had ever happened to him. This was especially true, he told me, because the onlookers had been so nice. He'd feared abuse and ridicule. But no. "Ninety percent of the responses on the street were 'God bless you' and 'Things will be okay,'" he said. Their kindness meant everything, he said. It made it all right. It set him on his path to salvation.

“Social media shamings are *worse* than your shamings,” I suddenly said to Ted Poe.

He looked taken aback. “They *are* worse,” he replied. “They’re anonymous.”

“Or even if they’re not anonymous, it’s such a pile-on they may as well be,” I said.

“They’re *brutal*,” he said.

I suddenly became aware that throughout our conversation I’d been using the word *they*. And each time I did, it felt like I was being spineless. The fact was, *they* weren’t brutal. *We* were brutal.

In the early days of Twitter there were no shamings. We were Eve in the Garden of Eden. We chatted away unself-consciously. As somebody back then wrote, “Facebook is where you lie to your friends, Twitter is where you tell the truth to strangers.” Having funny and honest conversations with like-minded people I didn’t know got me through hard times that were unfolding in my actual house. Then came the Jan Moir and the LA Fitness shamings—shamings to be proud of—and I remember how exciting it felt when hitherto remote evil billionaires like Rupert Murdoch and Donald Trump created their own Twitter accounts. For the first time in history we sort of had direct access to ivory-tower oligarchs like them. We became keenly watchful for transgressions.

After a while, it wasn’t just transgressions we were keenly watchful for. It was misspeakings. Fury at the terribleness of other people had started to consume us a lot. And the rage that swirled around seemed increasingly in disproportion to

whatever stupid thing some celebrity had said. It felt different to satire or journalism or criticism. It felt like punishment. In fact, it felt weird and empty when there *wasn’t* anyone to be furious about. The days between shamings felt like days picking at fingernails, treading water.

I’d been dismayed by the cruelty of the people who tore Jonah apart as he tried to apologize. But *they* weren’t the mob. *We* were the mob. I’d been blithely doing the same thing for a year or more. I had drifted into a new way of being. Who were the victims of my shamings? I could barely remember. I had only the vaguest recollection of the people I’d piled onto and what terrible things they’d done to deserve it.

This is partly because my memory has degenerated badly these past years. In fact, I was recently at a spa—my wife booked it for me as a special surprise, which shows she really doesn’t know me because I don’t like being touched—and as I lay on the massage table, the conversation turned to my bad memory.

“I can hardly remember anything about my childhood!” I told the masseur. “It’s all gone!”

“A lot of people who can’t remember their childhoods,” she replied, as she massaged my shoulders, “it turns out that they were sexually abused. By their parents.”

“Well, I’d remember *THAT*,” I said.

But it wasn’t just the fault of my lousy memory. It was the sheer volume of transgressors I’d chastised. How could I commit to memory that many people? Well, there were the spambot men. For a second in Poe’s office I reminisced fondly on the moment someone suggested we gas the cunts. That had given me such a good feeling that it felt a shame to interrogate it—to question why it had beguiled me so.

“The justice system in the West has a lot of problems,” Poe said, “but at least there are rules. You have basic rights as the accused. You have your day in court. You don’t have any rights when you’re accused on the Internet. And the consequences are worse. It’s worldwide forever.”

It felt good to see the balance of power shift so that someone like Ted Poe was afraid of people like us. But he wouldn’t sentence people to hold a placard for something they hadn’t been convicted of. He wouldn’t sentence someone for telling a joke that came out badly. The people we were destroying were no longer just people like Jonah: public figures who had committed actual transgressions. They were private individuals who really hadn’t done anything much wrong. Ordinary humans were being forced to learn damage control, like corporations that had committed PR disasters. It was very stressful.

“We are *more frightening than you*,” I said to Poe, feeling quite awed.

Poe sat back in his chair, satisfied. “You are much more frightening,” he said. “You are much more frightening.”

We were much more frightening than Judge Ted Poe. The powerful, crazy, cruel people I usually write about tend to be in far-off places. The powerful, crazy, cruel people were now us.

It felt like we were soldiers making war on other people’s flaws, and there had suddenly been an escalation in hostilities.

## Five

# Man Descends Several Rungs in the Ladder of Civilization

**G**roup madness. Was that the explanation for our shaming frenzy, our escalating war on flaws? It’s an idea that gets invoked by social scientists whenever a crowd becomes frightening. Take the London riots of August 2011. The violence had begun with police shooting to death a Tottenham man, Mark Duggan. A protest followed, which turned into five days of rioting and looting. The rioters were in Camden

swimmer (the different spelling didn't seem to matter to Google Images). The swimmer had been captured mid-stroke, moments from winning the New York State 500-yard freestyle championship. The photo was captioned: "Lindsay Stone had the right plan in place and everything was going exactly to plan."

A whole other person, doing something everyone could agree was lovely and commendable. There was no better result than that.

## Fifteen

# Your Speed

We have always had some influence over the justice system, but for the first time in 180 years—since the stocks and the pillory were outlawed—we have the power to determine the severity of some punishments. And so we have to think about what level of mercilessness we feel comfortable with. I, personally, no longer take part in the ecstatic public condemnation of people unless they've committed a transgression that has an actual victim, and even then not as much as I probably should. I miss the fun a little. But it feels like when I became a vegetarian. I missed the steak, although not as much as I'd anticipated, but I could no longer ignore the slaughterhouse.

I kept remembering something Michael Fertik had said to me at the Village Pub in Woodside. “The biggest lie,” he said, “is, *The Internet is about you.*” We like to think of ourselves as people who have choice and taste and personalized content. But the Internet isn’t about us. It’s about the companies that dominate the data flows of the Internet.”

Now I suddenly wondered. Did Google make money from the destruction of Justine Sacco? Could a figure be calculated? And so I joined forces with a number-crunching researcher, Solvej Krause, and began writing to economists and analysts and online-ad-revenue people.

Some things were known. In December 2013, the month of Justine’s annihilation, 12.2 billion Google searches took place—a figure that made me feel less worried about the possibility that people were sitting inside Google headquarters personally judging me. Google’s ad revenue for that month was \$4.69 billion. Which meant they made an average of thirty-eight cents for every search query. Every time we typed anything into Google: thirty-eight cents to Google. Of those 12.2 billion searches that December, 1.2 million were people searching the name Justine Sacco. And so, if you average it out, Justine’s catastrophe instantaneously made Google \$456,000.

But it wouldn’t be accurate to simply multiply 1.2 million by thirty-eight cents. Some searches are worth far more to Google than others. Advertisers bid on “high-yield” search terms like “Coldplay” and “jewelry” and “Kenya vacations.” It’s quite possible that no advertiser ever linked its product

to Justine’s name. But that wouldn’t mean Google made no money from her. Justine was the worldwide number-one trending topic on Twitter. Her story engrossed social media users more than any other that night. I think people who wouldn’t otherwise have gone onto Google did specifically to hunt for her. She drew people in. And once they were there, I’m sure at least a few of them decided to book a Kenya vacation or download a Coldplay album.

I got an e-mail from the economics researcher Jonathan Hersh. He’d come recommended by the people who make *Freakonomics Radio* on WNYC. Jonathan’s e-mail said the same thing: “Something about this story resonated with them, so much so that they felt compelled to google her name. That means they’re engaged. If interest in Justine were sufficient to encourage users to stay online for more time than they would otherwise, this would have directly resulted in Google making more advertising revenue. Google has the informal corporate motto of ‘Don’t be evil,’ but they make money when *anything* happens online, even the bad stuff.”

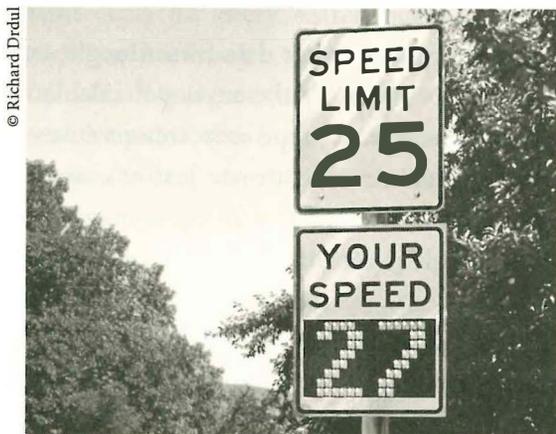
In the absence of any better data from Google, he wrote, he could only offer a “back of the envelope” calculation. But he thought it would be appropriately conservative—maybe a little *too* conservative—to estimate Justine’s worth, being a “low-value query,” at a quarter of the average. Which, if true, means Google made \$120,000 from the destruction of Justine Sacco.

Maybe that’s an accurate figure. Or maybe Google made more. But one thing’s certain. Those of us who did the actual annihilating? We got nothing.

...

From the beginning, I'd been trying to understand why—once you discount Gustave LeBon and Philip Zimbardo's theories of viruses and contagion and evil—online shaming is so pitiless. And now I think I have the answer. I found it in, of all places, an article about a radical traffic-calming scheme tested in California in the early 2000s. The story—by the journalist Thomas Goetz—is a fantastically esoteric one. Goetz writes about how in the school zones of Garden Grove, California, cars were ignoring speed signs and hitting “bicyclists and pedestrians with depressing regularity.” And so they tried something experimental. They tried Your Speed signs.

After I read Thomas Goetz's article about Your Speed signs, I spent a long time trying to track down their inventor. He



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turned out to be an Oregon road-sign manufacturer named Scott Kelley.

“I remember exactly where I was when I thought of them,” he told me over the telephone. “It was the mid-1990s. I was over by my girlfriend's house. I was driving through a school zone. And my mind just pictured one of the signs up on a pole.”

“What made you think they'd work?” I asked him. “There was nothing about them to suggest they'd work.”

“Right,” said Scott. “And that's where it gets interesting.”

They really, logically, shouldn't have worked. As Thomas Goetz writes:

The signs were curious in a few ways. For one thing, they didn't tell drivers anything they didn't already know—there is, after all, a speedometer in every car. If a motorist wanted to know their speed, a glance at the dashboard would do it . . . And the Your Speed signs came with no punitive follow-up—no police officer standing by ready to write a ticket. This defied decades of law-enforcement dogma, which held that most people obey speed limits only if they face some clear negative consequence for exceeding them.

In other words, officials in Garden Grove were betting that giving speeders redundant information with no consequence would somehow compel them to do something few of us are inclined to do: slow down.

Scott Kelley's idea, being so counterintuitive, proved a marketing nightmare. No town official anywhere in America was placing orders. So he did the only thing he could—he

sent out free samples for testing. One ended up in his own neighborhood.

"I remember driving by it," he said. "And I slowed down. I knew there was no camera in it taking my picture. Yet I slowed down. I just went, 'Wow! This really does work!'"

In test after test the results came back the same. People did slow down—by an average of 14 percent. And they stayed slowed down for miles down the road.

"So *why* do they work?" I asked Scott.

His reply surprised me. "I don't know," he said. "I really don't know. I . . . Yeah. I don't know."

Scott explained that, being a tech person, he was more interested in the radar and the casing and the lightbulbs than in the psychology. But during the past decade, the mystery has galvanized social psychologists. And their conclusion: feedback loops.

Feedback loops. You exhibit some type of behavior (you drive at twenty-seven miles per hour in a twenty-five-mile-an-hour zone). You get instant real-time feedback for it (the sign tells you you're driving at twenty-seven miles per hour). You decide whether or not to change your behavior as a result of the feedback (you lower your speed to twenty-five miles per hour). You get instant feedback for that decision too (the sign tells you you're driving at twenty-five miles per hour now, and some signs flash up a smiley-face emoticon to congratulate you). And it all happens in the flash of an eye—in the few moments it takes you to drive past the Your Speed sign.

In Goetz's *Wired* magazine story—"Harnessing the Power of Feedback Loops"—he calls them "a profoundly effective tool for changing behavior." And I'm all for people slowing down in school zones. But maybe in other ways feedback loops are leading to a world we only think we want. Maybe—as my friend the documentary maker Adam Curtis e-mailed me—they're turning social media into "a giant echo chamber where what we believe is constantly reinforced by people who believe the same thing."

We express our opinion that Justine Sacco is a monster. We are instantly congratulated for this—for basically being Rosa Parks. We make the on-the-spot decision to carry on believing it.

"The tech-utopians like the people in *Wired* present this as a new kind of democracy," Adam's e-mail continued. "It isn't. It's the opposite. It locks people off in the world they started with and prevents them from finding out anything different. They got trapped in the system of feedback reinforcement. The idea that there is another world of other people who have other ideas is marginalized in our lives."

I was becoming one of those other people with other ideas. I was expressing the unpopular belief that Justine Sacco isn't a monster. I wonder if I will receive a tidal wave of negative feedback for this and, if so, will it frighten me back again, to a place where I'm congratulated and welcomed?

"Feedback is an engineering principle," Adam's e-mail to me ended. "And all engineering is devoted to trying to keep the thing you are building stable."

Soon after Justine Sacco's shaming, I was talking with a friend, a journalist, who told me he had so many jokes, little observations, potentially risqué thoughts, that he wouldn't dare to post online anymore.

"I suddenly feel with social media like I'm tiptoeing around an unpredictable, angry, unbalanced parent who might strike out at any moment," he said. "It's horrible."

He didn't want me to name him, he said, in case it sparked something off.

We see ourselves as nonconformist, but I think all of this is creating a more conformist, conservative age.

"Look!" we're saying. "WE'RE normal! THIS is the average!"

We are defining the boundaries of normality by tearing apart the people outside it.

## Bibliography and Acknowledgments

A note about the title. For a while it was going to be, simply, *Shame*. Or *Tarred and Feathered*. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing. It was a surprisingly hard book to find a title for, and I think I know why. It was something that one of my interviewees said to me: "Shame is an incredibly inarticulate emotion. It's something you bathe in, it's not something you wax eloquent about. It's such a deep, dark, ugly thing there are very few words for it."

My encounter with the spambot men was filmed by Remy Lamont of Channel Flip. My thanks to him, and to Channel Flip, and, as always, to my producer Lucy Greenwell. Greg Stekelman—formally known as @themanwhofell—helped me remember how Twitter mutated from a place of unself-conscious honesty into something more anxiety-inducing. Greg is not on Twitter anymore. His final tweet, posted on May 10, 2012, reads: "Twitter is no place for a human being."