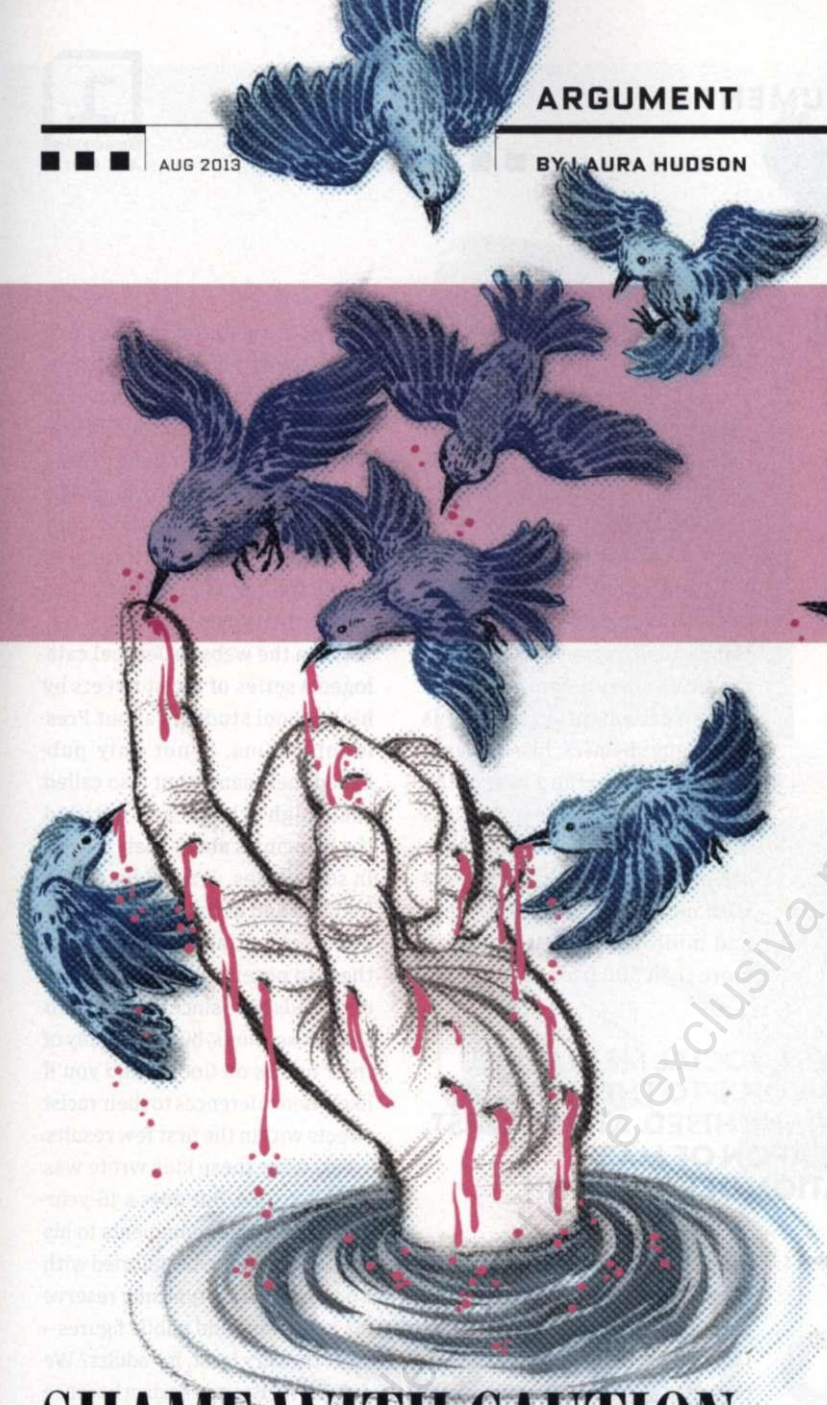
BY LAURA HUDSON



SHAME WITH CAUTION

MAD AT SOME JERK? THINK TWICE BEFORE SENDING THAT TWEET

EARLIER THIS YEAR, at a tech conference called PyCon, the consultant Adria Richards overheard some indelicate puns—involving the terms "dongles" and "forking"—from a couple of male attendees sitting behind her. The jokes made Richards uncomfortable, so in the heat of the moment she decided to register her displeasure through what she saw as an act

ILLUSTRATION BY YUKO SHIMIZU

Uso exclusivo para fines educacionales.

of guerrilla justice: She tweeted a picture of the two guys, calling their behavior "not cool."

In the context of a tech culture that often fails to make women feel welcome, it's easy to see why Richards, sitting there in the (roughly 80 percent male) PyCon audience, felt like she wasn't the one with the power in that room. But online it was a different story. The two men were social-media nobodies, whereas Richards had more than 9,000 Twitter followers, some highly connected in the tech world. Her grievance quickly received more than 100 retweets and press coverage that stretched from *The Washington Post* to MSNBC.

PyCon soon responded—sympathetically—to her complaint, but the damage was done. One of the men was recognized by his employer and lost his job. The backlash against his firing then triggered a massive onslaught of online abuse against Richards, who also got fired. No one emerged happy. "I have three kids, and I really liked that job," wrote the newly unemployed jokester. "Let this serve as a message to everyone, our actions and words, big or small, can have a serious impact." Later, Richards made a similar assessment: "I don't think anyone who was part of what happened at PyCon that day could possibly have imagined how this issue would have exploded into the public consciousness... I certainly did not, and now... the severest of consequences have manifested."

Shaming, it seems, has become a core competency of the Internet, and it's one that can destroy both lives and livelihoods. But the question of who's responsible for the destruction—the person engaging in the behavior or the person revealing it—depends on whom you ask. At its best, social media has given a voice to the disenfranchised, allowing them to bypass the gatekeepers of power and publicize injustices that might otherwise remain invisible. At its worst, it's a weapon of mass reputation destruction, capable of amplifying slander, bullying, and casual idiocy on a scale never before possible.

The fundamental problem is that many shamers, like Richards, don't fully grasp the power of the medium. It's a problem that lots of us need to reckon with: There are millions of Twitter accounts with more than 1,000 followers, and millions on Facebook with more than 500 friends. The owners of those accounts might think they're just regular people, whispering to a small social circle. But in fact they're talking through megaphones at a volume the entire world can hear. Increasingly, our failure to grasp our online power has become a liability—personally, professionally, and morally. We need to think twice before we unleash it.

AT ITS BEST, SOCIAL MEDIA HAS GIVEN A VOICE TO THE DISENFRANCHISED. AT ITS WORST, IT'S A WEAPON OF MASS REPUTATION DESTRUCTION.

CONSIDER A FORM of shaming that a lot of us might want to get behind: calling out people who say indefensibly terrible things online. Numerous Tumblr and Twitter accounts have cropped up to document racist and sexist remarks on social media. Following a feed like @EverydaySexism or @YesYoureRacist can be a powerful experience; after a while, the shocking ugliness fades to a dull, steady ache, an emotional corrosion that simulates how the dehumanization of prejudice can become almost mundane. These feeds shame the jerks they highlight by broadcasting their ignorance far beyond their typically small, like-minded audiences to tens of thousands of people.

When the website Jezebel cataloged a series of racist tweets by high school students about President Obama, it not only published their names but also called their high schools and notified the principals about their tweets. In some cases, Jezebel listed the hobbies and activities of the students, essentially SEO-shaming them to potential colleges. Most of the kids have since deleted their Twitter accounts, but search any of their names on Google and you'll likely find references to their racist tweets within the first few results.

Yes, what these kids wrote was reprehensible. But does a 16-year-old making crude comments to his friends deserve to be pilloried with a doggedness we typically reserve for politicians and public figures—or, at the very least, for adults? We despise racism and sexism because they bully the less powerful, but at what point do the shamers become the bullies? After all, the hallmark of bullying isn't just being mean. It also involves a power differential: The bully is the one who's punching down.

And this is precisely the differential that so many of us fail to grasp when our friends and followers are just abstract numbers on a social-media profile. Indeed, the online elite don't always wield the same sort of social power and influence in their offline lives and jobs; many have been victims of bullying themselves. When Mike "Gabe" Krahulik, the artist behind

LAURA HUDSON (@laura_hudson) *is a senior editor at* WIRED.

Autorizado deste artigo é exclusivo para fins comerciais

the popular webcomic *Penny Arcade*, heard that an unprofessional PR rep for a game controller had been insulting and taunting one of his readers, he gleefully posted the damning emails to his website, along with the man's Twitter name, for the express purpose of unleashing the Internet kraken.

"I have a real problem with bullies," Krahulik wrote, after the marketer was deluged with hate mail. "I spent my childhood moving from school to school and I got made fun of every place I landed. I feel like he is a bully and maybe that's why I have no sympathy here. Someday every bully meets an even bigger bully, and maybe that's me in this case." But even if you think your bullying is serving a greater good, the fact remains that you're still just a bully.

INTERNET SPEECH CAN becruderand crueler than our real-life interactions, in large part due to our literal distance from the people we're talking to and their reactions. That detachment can sometimes be liberating, and it's often a good thing that people speak bluntly online, especially against injustice that they see around them. But a sense of proportion is crucial. These days, too many Internet shame campaigns dole out punishment that is too brutal for the crime. Using an influential social media account to call out individuals, as Richards did, isn't simply saying something is "not cool"; it's a request to have someone put in the digital stocks, where a potentially unlimited number of people can throw digital stones at them. And it turns out to have real-life consequences for everyone involved.

That's why starting a shaming campaign is not a decision to be taken lightly—especially because the Internet doesn't do take-backs if you change your mind later. The bigger the so-called Donglegate story became, the more disproportionate and unfair Richards' original tweet seemed, even if that level of exposure was never her intent. As Krahulik wrote after the PR bully pleaded with him to make the abuse stop, "Once I had posted the emails I didn't have the power anymore. The Internet had it now, and nothing I said or did was going to change that."

Online shaming is a door that swings only one way: You may have the power to open it, but you don't have the power to close it. And sometimes what rushes through that door can engulf you too.

JARGON WATCH

Ring rain
n. / ˈriŋ ˈrān /
Precipitation on Saturn caused by erosion of the planet's icy rings. Astronomers estimate that 660,000 gallons of water—the amount in an Olympic-size swimming pool—drizzle down on Saturn daily. We can thank the erosive process for making the rings so shapely.

Morphees
n. pl. / ˈmȯr-fēz /
Shape-shifting smartphones. Activated by an app, a morphee can in theory transform into anything from a gaming console to a stress ball. Prototype versions contort using small servomotors, shape-memory alloy, or polymers that bend when electrically charged.

Fashion fingerprinting
v. / ˈfa-shən ˈfiŋ-gər-ˌprin-tiŋ /
Identifying people in a crowd from the colors and patterns of their clothes. Using this technique, an app developed for Google Glass can spot your friends at a concert or busy mall—with more than 90 percent accuracy—by analyzing selfies their phones have uploaded to the cloud.

Transcriptor
n. / ˌtran-ˈskrip-tər /
A biological transistor, the basic building block for making a living cell programmable like a computer. Engineered from DNA, transcriptors switch genes on and off. Eventually, specific combinations of transcriptors could prompt cells to produce drugs in response to diseases.

—JONATHON KEATS
jargon@wired.com

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais.

Fonte: Wired, San Francisco, ano 21, n. 8, p. 19-24, Aug. 2013.