

Have you ever watched an old western movie which contained scenes of "mob justice?" In the movie, it is determined that someone has committed a crime such as horse thievery and the posse goes out and captures the perpetrator. Without trial or opportunity to defend himself, the perpetrator is hanged in the public square to the delight of the "angry mob."

Or perhaps, you've seen the 1939 version of the Hunchback of Norte Dame. The physically deformed cathedral bell-ringer, Quasimodo, is sentenced to be flogged in the public square and turned on the pillory for one hour so that he may be publicly shamed for his alleged transgression.

Punishment conducted in public and the shaming that goes with it was part of western culture for many centuries. Aren't you glad we've become more civil? Or have we?

We seem to have replaced the physical punishment and public shaming of the past with a more insidious method: tongue lashing via social media.

When I shared with our public relations manager, Marissa Orbanek, that I was going to write a Lancer Letter likening social media (in which she is engaged daily) to public punishments, she did not argue against it. But she did give me "homework." I was assigned to read the book, "So You've Been Publicly Shamed." It seems that I am late to this party as the comparison has already been made.

In the book, British author Jon Ronson, chronicles the conversations he had with a number of people who were skewered by the faceless rabbles who deem themselves judge and jury of what is said in social media. Some of the shaming victims in the book, such as the award-winning journalist who was caught making up quotes and lying about his sources, were big contributors to their own demise. But most of those he highlighted were only guilty of minor lapses in judgement which turned into international furors causing some to lose their jobs and sending them into deep depression over a life ruined in an action that took seconds.

Ronson's work with the people highlighted in his book caused him to rethink his time spent with social media though he freely admitted that he had been part of the mob for years. "In the early days of Twitter, there were no shamings. We were Eve in the Garden of Eden." But he goes on to point out that "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."

Ronson pointed out that in the beginning, it was celebrities and politicians who were the targets of the social media mob. But as time went on, "the people we were destroying were no longer just . . . public figures who had committed actual transgressions. They were private individuals who really hadn't done anything much wrong."

Ronson interviewed Judge Ted Poe for the book. Judge Poe is known for sentences that include an element of public shaming such as the young man who stole from a store. He sentenced him to carry a sign for seven days in front of the store that said, "I STOLE FROM THIS STORE. DON'T BE A THIEF OR THIS COULD BE YOU." Ronson points out that the internet mob is even more damaging than the judge. "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."

Social media has impacted schools in a big way and it is not all positive. At the student level, principals must now deal with the shamings and taunting that occur student to student online overnight, on the weekends and over vacations. Social media has eliminated any “cooling off” time or respite that previously occurred by the physical separation of time away from school.

Unfortunately, the adult world is not much better when it comes to social media as Ronson’s book so aptly outlines. Our children watch carefully what we do and learn from us, even when we think they are not looking. I’m afraid that students are learning that if you have a problem with someone, the way you handle it is via the faceless opportunity that social media gives us.

I will say that social media also has many positives. It is like money. Money is neither good nor bad. You can spend your money to make good things happen like feeding the hungry or you can spend it to make bad things happen like paying for a bribe. Social media is being used to provide educational material and can be used for positive communications. Like money, we can use it to produce good things or bad things. What will we do?

*Note: This week’s topic has not been prompted by a specific or recent incident (I know you may be wondering) but rather, an observation I’ve made over a period of time as the negative use of social media is pervasive.*