

Discussion Guide for *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*

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Academic First Year Experiences book discussion for CSUN faculty and staff
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Review from *Booklist*, a trade publication for librarians.

Thoreson, Bridget. "So You've Been Publicly Shamed." *Booklist*. 1 Mar. 2015: 5. *General OneFile*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

Is technology moving humankind forward, or does the powerful reach of social media hearken back to the public floggings of the past? The author of *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2005) and *The Psychopath Test* (2011) takes a hard look at modern-day shaming in his provocative new book. Inspired by an episode where a spambot impersonated him on Twitter, Ronson employs his typical investigatory approach to take the reader on a years-long exploration of humiliation via technology, his curious mind pursuing new avenues of inquiry as they open up. He recounts the real-time Twitter shaming of a disgraced author, which was displayed on a feed the author could see as he was making his apology speech; the race-tinged tweet of a public-relations executive that upended her life; and the story behind a Facebook photo that mightily offended members of the military and their supporters. Beyond that, though, he talks to those involved--both the people shamed and those who acted as instruments for their humiliation--about their motivations, what the experience did to them, and whether they recovered. With confidence, verve, and empathy, Ronson skillfully informs and engages the reader without excusing those caught up in the shame game. As he stresses, we are the ones wielding this incredible power over others' lives, often with no regard for the lasting consequences of our actions.--Bridget Thoreson

Questions to consider:

1. Are there any positive aspects of social media campaigns? For instance, when might social justice have a role to play? Consider for instance these examples: organizing causes/campaigns, condemning dishonest or unjust corporations or governments, crowd sourcing funds....
2. How do the roles of mainstream media and social media differ in episodes of public shaming? How (if at all) do they influence each other?
3. Can you define someone based on the worst thing they have said or done? Should you?
4. What recent examples of public shaming can you think of? For each example: do you think it was justified?

5. Some people have criticized Jon Ronson's for sympathizing with Justine Sacco. To what extent does she deserve our sympathy? Can you think of another person who he could have chosen for his poster child of people who are unfairly shamed?
6. "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 sickening villain. It's all very sweeping, and not the way we actually are as people" (79). How has social media changed the degree to which people are publicly shamed?
7. How do you feel about Google, social media, and mainstream media platforms making money from public shaming?
8. "We're creating a culture where people feel constantly surveilled, where people are afraid to be themselves" (269). Are we becoming a surveillance society? Do you ever find social media stressful?
9. As a society are we becoming desensitized to public outrage?
10. "The snowflake never needs to feel responsible for the avalanche" (56). What role does anonymity play in social media and public shaming?
11. Ronson profiles a lot of people in this book. Were there any that you felt did not deserve to be publicly shamed? How easy was it for them to put their life back together?
12. Where is the line between holding people accountable for their actions and publicly shaming them? What kind of offenses or transgressions—if any—deserve public shaming?
13. Do you feel there is a disproportionate punishment of those that are publicly shamed?
14. What are the similarities and/or differences between being shamed on social media vs. being physically bullied or incarcerated?
15. Think about your own social media presence. Is there anything you felt ashamed of posting or would be embarrassed about if someone now saw it?
16. What are the differences between how men and women are publicly shamed?
17. Is anyone immune to public shaming? Are you?
18. Should social media have civility rules/boundaries to prevent posts that would not be ethical?
19. Who controls social media? Are we in control? Does social media depend on us for its power? Who is this powerful "us" or "we"?

Podcasts:

- This American Life episode 545 [“If you don’t have anything nice to say, SAY IT IN ALL CAPS”](#)
- The Nerdist [episode 763 with Jon Ronson](#)

Videos

- Monica Lewinsky’s TED talk [“The Price of Shame”](#)
- #MoreThanMean – “Women in Sports ‘Face’ Harassment”: <https://youtu.be/9tU-D-m2JY8>

Book reviews:

- Bilton, Nick. "The Shamers and the Shamed." *New York Times* 30 Apr. 2015. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.
- Sicha, Choire. "Going Down in Infamy." *New York Times Book Review* 19 Apr. 2015. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

Possible topics for research assignments:

Bullying/Cyberbullying
Free Speech
Identity theft
Suicide
Privacy
Objectification
Hate Speech
Privilege
Incarceration

#BlackLivesMatter
Censorship
Community Policing
Peer Pressure
Prostitution
Civility
Hackers/Hacking
Online Ethics
Anarchist Groups

Exercise: Academic Honesty

[Attribution Decay](#) lesson plan and assignment created by Christina Heady, a librarian from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. “Using popular examples from BuzzFeed and Facebook, this is an activity called ‘Real or Rumor?’ Participants will be shown examples of images and stories that have gone viral and asked to identify whether they are real or rumors using simultaneous reporting.”

[Attribution Decay Worksheet](#): Split the class into small groups and hand them a different case to research about real life plagiarism. Groups will research their case and report back to the class. Entire exercise will take approximately 25 minutes (15 to group work, 10 to present). This will require them to use their cell phones to Google their subjects. Afterwards

you can have a larger discussion about the value of intellectual property and academic integrity.

Note: since two of the people in the Attribution Decay Worksheet are discussed in *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, you may want to use other examples. Here are some possibilities:

- Jeff Koons: sued over copyright infringement over artwork.
- Amy Schumer: stealing jokes from other comedians.
- Robin Thicke /Pharrell Williams: sued over music copyright infringement.
- Shaun King: Journalist wrongly accused of plagiarism.
- Michael LaCour: Graduate student accused of fabricating data.
- Elizabeth Holmes/Theranos: Created a new blood testing device; accused of lying about its technology.