

Discussion Guide for So You've Been Publicly Shamed

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Book discussion for CSUN faculty and staff

April 27, 2016

Questions for students to consider

1. Journalist Michael Moynihan initially felt guilty about hitting the send button for his story about Jonah Lehrer. When others exposed Lehrer's additional instances of plagiarism, do you think Moynihan still should have felt guilty? (Chapters 2 & 3)
2. Regarding Justine Sacco, Ronson wrote, "It seemed obvious that her tweet, while not a joke, wasn't racist, but a reflective comment on white privilege – on our tendency to naively imagine ourselves immune from life's horrors. Wasn't it?" (Chapter 4, page 73) Do you agree or disagree with Ronson? Why?
3. Some people think that Justine Sacco was the wrong person for Ronson to highlight in his book as being the poster child for online shaming, and that other people have had much worse experiences than she had. Should Ronson have focused on someone else? Does race play a role in this? Did Ronson write about her because she is a white woman, seen as a damsel in distress (afterword, page 285)?
(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/02/24/twitters-rage-mob-should-be-stopped-but-justine-sacco-is-the-wrong-poster-child/>)
4. Have you ever found yourself laughing at, or enjoying an online public shaming? Looking back on that, did you consider how that person was feeling? Even if you didn't post anything yourself, or share the post, do you feel any regret about how you enjoyed it, or laughed along?
5. Is attempting to change a person's or an organization's search results in Google akin to manipulating the truth and chilling free speech, as asserted on page 268?
6. Recently, the Sacramento Bee reported that UC Davis hired a firm to try to bury google references about a 2011 pepper spray incident on its campus
(<http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article71659992.html>). This is what Jon Ronson tried to do for Lindsey Stone as well. Compare Lindsey's reasons for doing this with those from UC Davis. Are you more sympathetic to Lindsey's cause? Why or why not?
7. Is online shaming ever ok? What if it comes from a good place, like the genuine outrage that occurred when American dentist Walter Palmer killed Cecil the Lion in Zimbabwe? What about when not only he, but also his family started getting death threats? How far should "shaming" go before it turns into harassment?
8. What do you think is the more important message conveyed in this book? Be careful what you tweet / post online, because you never know who will see it, and what the eventual ramifications will be? Or is it that we should think more about how we react to and engage with other peoples' tweets and social media postings and gaffes? Discuss.

The following 3 questions were adapted from LitLovers: <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/14-non-fiction/10245-so-youve-been-publicly-shamed-ronson?start=3>

9. Which, if any, of the people highlighted in the book do you have sympathy for? Why?
10. Did any of the people in the book deserve the high profile shaming that they received?
11. Can you think of any other real life examples of online public shaming through social media that were not in the book? Did that person deserve the attention and disgrace?

Potential activity for students (a version of Peter Elbow's "The Believing and Doubting Game," adapted for U100 by faculty member Jamie Phillips)

Students sit in groups of four and discuss one of the people profiled in the book, for example Justine Sacco. For the first five minutes, all of the students agree that what Justine said was awful, and that she deserved all of the comments and repercussions that came her way. Have them talk about why this is this case, using facts, arguments, logic etc. After five minutes, everyone in the group now believes that while what Justine said was regrettable, she probably did mean it as commentary on privilege, and that she didn't deserve to be vilified in the way that she was, nor did she deserve all the online harassment she received. They will now argue this side of the debate.

The goal of this exercise is to students practice forming arguments, points, and counterpoints. Having them all argue the same point at the same time will prevent it from becoming too competitive an exercise.

If there is time, students can report out to the larger class their experience. Or they can write a Moodle post about it.

Other people from the book:

Lindsey Stone | Jonah Lehrer | Adria Richards | Jim McGreevey | Mike Daisey

You could also choose a person or situation not mentioned in the book and have students read an article or two about the person before engaging in the exercise.

Potential topics for projects and papers

- Online bullying
- Prison
- How online harassment differs for men and women
- Mainstream media's role in disseminating social media shamings
- Plagiarism / copyright
- PTSD
- Mob mentality
- Depression
- Men's Rights Movement

- Gamergate
- Broken Windows Policing
- Anonymous
- Social justice activism
- Identity theft
- Empathy
- Social Media
- Black Lives Matter and police brutality
- Politicians on twitter / political gaffes
- AIDS
- Civility in modern society
- Privacy in a digital world

[Amazon review of *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*](#)

Author Jon Ronson knows a thing or two about public shaming. When a trio of "academics" hijacked his persona for an infomorph—basically an automated Twitter feed that spewed inane comments about food in his name—he took the fight to the internet, where the virtual, virulent hordes soon compelled the spambot authors to cease and desist. The experience hatched a thought: Once upon a time, if you wanted to participate in a good, old-fashioned public humiliation, you actually had to show up. But as with most everything else, the internet has made condemnation an exercise in crowdsourcing, with today's angry mobs trading stockades and scarlet As for social media and its inherent anonymity.

So You've Been Publicly Shamed is Ronson's tour through a not-necessarily-brave new world where faceless commenters wield the power to destroy lives and careers, where the punishments often outweigh the crimes, and where there is no self-control and (ironically) no consequences. On one hand, part of what makes this book (again, ironically) so fun to read is a certain schadenfreude; it's fun to read about others' misfortunes, especially if we think they "had it coming." Jonah Lehrer, whose admitted plagiarism and falsifications probably earned him his fall, stalks these pages. But so does Justine Sacco, whose ill-conceived tweet probably didn't merit hers; as it turns out, the internet doesn't always differentiate the misdemeanors from the felonies. But the best reason to read this is Ronson's style, which is funny and brisk, yet informative and never condescending. *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* is not a scholarly book, nor is it a workbook about navigating ignominy. It's an entertaining investigation into a growing--and often disturbing--demon of uncharitable impulses run amok. --Jon Foro

[More book reviews](#)

NPR: <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/01/396384141/jon-ronson-has-nothing-to-be-ashamed-of-but-what-about-the-rest-of-us>

The AV Club: <http://www.avclub.com/review/jon-ronson-dives-internets-deep-end-so-youve-been--217104>

The Guardian: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/15/publicly-shamed-jon-ronson-is-shame-necessary-jennifer-jacquet-review-think-before-you-tweet>

Additional related resources

Monica Lewinsky: 'The shame sticks to you like tar'

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/16/monica-lewinsky-shame-sticks-like-tar-jon-ronson>

THE FIRST #MAKETECHHUMAN PODCAST: MONICA LEWINSKY ON CYBERBULLYING

<http://www.wired.com/brandlab/2015/08/the-first-maketechhuman-podcast-monica-lewinsky-on-cyberbullying/>

This American Life 545: If You Don't Have Anything Nice to Say, SAY IT IN ALL CAPS

(Or particular interest, Act 1 (Ask Not For Whom The Bell Trolls; It Trolls for Thee), in which a writer actually interviews someone who harassed her online, to try to figure out why trolls can be so cruel)

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/545/if-you-dont-have-anything-nice-to-say-say-it-in-all-caps>

Jon Ronson: how the online hate mob set its sights on me

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/dec/20/social-media-twitter-online-shame>

This American Life 460: Retraction (Mike Daisey, who is profiled in the book)

Ira also talks with Mike Daisey about why he misled *This American Life* during the fact-checking process.

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/460/retraction>

Some Tweets are #MoreThanMean

This is a take on Celebrities Reading Mean tweets about themselves, with a twist. Women who work in sports are harassed online all the time. More so, and in more harsh ways than men do. In this short video, watch real men read real tweets to some women who work in sports. The tweets are not their own, but the men have to read them in person to the women they are directed towards. The women have seen the tweets before, while the men are seeing them for the first time, as they read them out loud.

<https://www.facebook.com/justnotsports/videos/1593227214326997/>