

Smart mobs, cyber public shaming, and social justice

Pilar G. Blitvich - University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The aim of this presentation is to explore public shaming (PS) in the digital age. Different ways of PS have been implemented by culture groups as a response to transgressions (Goldman, 2014). Often PS had socialization (Fader, 2006) and reintegrative functions (Braithwaite, 1989) aimed at deterring future occurrences of the transgressive behavior and reinstating justice or public morality (Cheong & Gong, 2010; Boudana, 2014; Zingerle, 2015). Of particular interest are those transgressive behaviors that involve inappropriate use of language and more specifically language use that can be considered aggressive or demeaning, such as instances of hate speech. PS as a reaction to impoliteness or language aggression could then be theorized within extant models of responses to impoliteness (Culpeper et al., 2003; Bousfield, 2008; Dobs & Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Bou-Franch & Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2014).

Through the analysis of a case study involving a recent instance of cyber PS in which a crowdsourced smart mob (Harmon & Metaxas, 2010; Lazarus, 2017) emerged as a response to a call for a Human Flesh Search Engine (Gao, 2016), this presentation problematizes extant models of responses to impoliteness and argues that we need new ways to conceptualize the transgeneric, transmedia, transinstitutional, multimodal, multisequential trajectories through which phenomena such as cyber PS occur (Lemke, 2009; Cheong & Gong, 2010).

Although cyber PS, smart mobs, cybervigilantes (digilantes) (Juliano, 2012; Nahn et al., 2017) and HFSE have received some attention recently in criminology, law, and related fields, it has been argued that we need to understand these phenomena from the point of view of participants who act as digilantes or members of a smart mob (Cheong & Gong, 2010). By analyzing user-generated comments in which participants engage in critical civic self-reflectivity (Cunliffe & Junn, 2005) regarding the scope and repercussions for the target in question of cyber PS, this presentation also aims to advance research. What emerges are crucial connections between language aggression and moral values; these connections are paradoxical as language aggression is seen as an instrument both to either destroy or to restore a community's moral values by achieving social justice (Juliano, 2012).