

**BOOK**

*So You've Been Publically Shamed*

**AUTHOR**

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**SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]**

"A great renaissance of public shaming is sweeping our land. Justice has been democratized. The silent majority are getting a voice. But what are we doing with our voice? We are mercilessly finding people's faults. We are defining the boundaries of normality by ruining the lives of those outside it. We are using shame as a form of social control.

"Simultaneously powerful and hilarious in the way only Jon Ronson can be, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* is a deeply honest book about modern life, full of eye-opening truths about the escalating war on human flaws - and the very scary part we all play in it."

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"Bad liars always think they're good at it," Michael said to me. "They're always confident they're defeating you."

"It was July 15, 1742. A woman named Abigail Gilpin, her husband at sea, was found "naked in bed with one John Russell." They were both to be "whipped at the public whipping post twenty stripes each." Abigail was not appealing the whipping itself, but was begging the judge to "let me have my punishment before the people are stirring. If your honor pleases, take some pity on me for my dear children, who cannot help their mother's unfortunate failings."

"Something Jonah had e-mailed me before I flew to Los Angeles: "The shaming process is \*\*\*\*\* brutal." I thought about the phrase "shaming process." It was probably reassuring for a shamee to envisage their punishment as a process rather than a free-for-all. If you're being destroyed, you want to feel that the people tearing you apart at least know what they're doing."

"It turned out that public shaming had once been a process. A book of Delaware laws I discovered at the Massachusetts Historical Society revealed that if Jonah had been found guilty of "lying or publishing false news" in the 1800s, he would have been "fined, placed in the stocks for a period not exceeding four hours, or publicly whipped with not more than forty stripes."

"The movement against public shaming was already in full flow in March 1787 when Benjamin Rush, a United States founding father, wrote a paper calling for their outlawing—the stocks, the pillory, the whipping post, the lot."

“Public punishments were abolished within fifty years of Rush’s paper, with only Delaware weirdly holding out until 1952 (which is why the Delaware whipping critiques I excerpt were published in the 1870s).”

“Over the years, I’ve sat across tables from a lot of people whose lives had been destroyed. Usually, the people who did the destroying were the government or the military or big business or, as with Jonah Lehrer, basically themselves (at least at first with Jonah—we took over as he tried to apologize). Justine Sacco felt like the first person I had ever interviewed who had been destroyed by us.”

“I suppose it’s no surprise that we feel the need to dehumanize the people we hurt—before, during, or after the hurting occurs. But it always comes as a surprise. In psychology it’s known as cognitive dissonance. It’s the idea that it feels stressful and painful for us to hold two contradictory ideas at the same time.”

“They said it was no coincidence that public shaming had enjoyed such a renaissance in Mao’s China and Hitler’s Germany and the Ku Klux Klan’s America—it destroys souls, brutalizing everyone, the onlookers included, dehumanizing them as much as the person being shamed.”

“Mike Hubacek thought his shaming was the best thing that had ever happened to him. This was especially true, he told me, because the onlookers had been so nice. He’d feared abuse and ridicule. But no. “Ninety percent of the responses on the street were ‘God bless you’ and ‘Things will be okay,’” he said. Their kindness meant everything, he said. It made it all right. It set him on his path to salvation.”

“Social media shamings are worse than your shamings,” I suddenly said to Ted Poe. He looked taken aback. “They are worse,” he replied. “They’re anonymous.” “Or even if they’re not anonymous, it’s such a pile-on they may as well be,” I said. “They’re brutal,” he said.”

“Ralph Nader. In 1961 a young man named Frederick Condon crashed his car. Back then, sharp edges and no seat belts were considered stylish in car interiors. But the sharp edges turned Frederick Condon into a paraplegic. And so a friend of his—the lawyer Ralph Nader—began lobbying for mandatory seat-belt laws. Which was why General Motors hired prostitutes to follow Nader into stores—a Safeway supermarket and a pharmacy—to seduce and then blackmail him.”

“Could that be it? Does a shaming only work if the shamee plays his or her part in it by feeling ashamed?”

“A shaming can be like a distorting mirror at a funfair, taking human nature and making it look monstrous.

“Knee-jerk shaming is knee-jerk shaming and I wondered what would happen if we made a point of eschewing the shaming completely—if we refused to shame anyone. Could there be a corner of the justice system trying out an idea like that?”

“After I read Thomas Goetz’s article about *Your Speed* signs, I spent a long time trying to track down their inventor. He turned out to be an Oregon road-sign manufacturer named Scott Kelley.”

“The signs were curious in a few ways. For one thing, they didn’t tell drivers anything they didn’t already know—there is, after all, a speedometer in every car. If a motorist wanted to know their speed, a glance at the dashboard would do it . . . And the Your Speed signs came with no punitive follow-up—no police officer standing by ready to write a ticket.”

“In test after test the results came back the same. People did slow down—by an average of 14 percent. And they stayed slowed down for miles down the road. “So why do they work?” I asked Scott. His reply surprised me. “I don’t know,” he said. “I really don’t know. I . . . Yeah. I don’t know.”

“Feedback loops. You exhibit some type of behavior (you drive at twenty-seven miles per hour in a twenty-five-mile-an-hour zone). You get instant real-time feedback for it (the sign tells you you’re driving at twenty-seven miles per hour). You decide whether or not to change your behavior as a result of the feedback (you lower your speed to twenty-five miles per hour).”

“In Goetz’s Wired magazine story—“Harnessing the Power of Feedback Loops”—he calls them “a profoundly effective tool for changing behavior.” And I’m all for people slowing down in school zones. But maybe in other ways feedback loops are leading to a world we only think we want.”

“We see ourselves as nonconformist, but I think all of this is creating a more conformist, conservative age.”