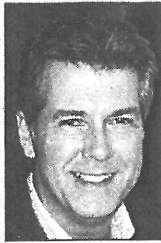


'One Riot, One Ranger': Mob mentality and social media



The recent flap involving University of Illinois Chancellor Phyllis Wise keeping the campus open during cold weather and some students' vitriolic comments on social media raised the subject of civil discourse in 21st-century America. At least in central Illinois, for a moment, anyway, although the Huffington Post and Slate magazine covered it. In our frantic-24-hour-news-cycle-driven-attention-span-of-a society, that may be the best we can hope for. The next tabloid story involving Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus or XYZ politician caught in a lie drown out discussions about the direction of our society — and reveal it.

In regard to Chancellor Wise, before we indict the UI student body and the younger generation as a whole, we are talking about a dozen or so students on social media. For many people, this is akin to a group chat around the kitchen table, so comfortable have we become with Internet discussions. The short distance from brain to fingers to the always-present cellphone, tablet or laptop circumvents peoples' discretion filter. That, along with limited space to elaborate or qualify like we do in actual conversation, leads to bloviating bursts that others try to top. Thus a common social media exchange:

Comment — response — comment again — third person comments — response — comment back — fourth

person comments — barrage of comments from many people and then an "Oh my God, I can't believe I/you just said that. Outrageous. LOL."

Except they did say it — "laugh out loud."

For some, it is a slip, a "not their best moment" moment. We all have them. But in this age of "everyone can be the star of their own life" through social media, it is often a way of calling attention to ourselves. Scattered seconds that add up to Andy Warhol's "fifteen minutes of fame." But famous for what? Accomplishment, achievement, contributions to society? No. Now, far too often, fame is sought for fame's sake, and if it can only be achieved through snarky, vulgar and "outrageous" behavior, so be it.

Call it the Paris Hilton effect.

But there is something else at play, less excusable and more destructive: the mob mentality. As Ken Eisold, Ph.D., in the August 18, 2011, issue of *Psychology Today*, describes it in relation to a riot, the mob mentality creates a "life of its own. Deep-seated resentments, repetitive frustrations and long-standing disappointments galvanize people into action. And the mob provides cover, an anonymity that makes it easier to overcome one's usual reticence or moral scruples. One is immersed, engulfed. And it can become an exuberant experience, a joyful release for long-suppressed emotions. It can also become manic, driven, a means of restlessly seeking new outlets."

Internet mobs offer anonymity and

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opportunity to "overcome one's usual reticence" as no one is required to use their real name when posting. Unlike an actual riot, there is no looting, vandalizing or immediate physical harm. But our modern day torches and pitchforks — cellphones, tablets and PCs — fire up and sharp tongues are loosed. A different type of riot ensues and people — real people — are hurt.

A Google search of "suicide due to social media bullying" yields instances from around the world. In a Dec. 11, 2012, article from Scripps Media, friends of Jessica Laney, a 16-year-old from Florida, state they believe she killed herself after constant social media mob bullying that called her "fat and a loser" along with taunts like: "Can you kill yourself already?"

While the comments directed toward Chancellor Wise may not be as reprehensible as the evil inflicted upon Jessica Laney, they were, according to Wise, who is Asian-

American, "vulgar, crude and in some instances racist and sexist." Slate reports that tweets like "Communist China no stop by cold" and "In a room with Phyllis Wise, Adolf Hitler and a gun with one bullet. Who do I shoot," as the tamer ones, others too vulgar for publication. Sure, Chancellor Wise is not a vulnerable, 16-year-old girl and criticism of someone in her position goes with the territory. But it is unlikely such remarks would be voiced in a face-to-face forum where an individual stands in front of others shed of the cloak of anonymity. No, these are the actions of a social media mob, and even for an accomplished, self-confident woman like Wise, at some level, they hurt.

When I lived in Dallas and flew on business trips, I often used Love Field. There is a statue there of a Texas Ranger along with the line "One Riot, One Ranger." It is a mostly mythical story with roots in an incident involving an illegal prize fight. But like many legends, it speaks to the better angels of our souls. Of how one person can make a difference.

A person like my mom, for example. At her funeral, a bespectacled, middle-aged minister commented on my mother's practice of writing thank-you notes.

"When Betty turned 80," he said, "her children threw her a party complete with a beautiful birthday cake from a local bakery. A few days later, the baker received a thank-you note from Betty complimenting her on the wonderful cake."

The minister smiled at my broth-

ers, sisters and me.

"She knew you kids paid for the cake, right?"

Everyone laughed.

"Betty Pemberton maintained decorum," he continued. "But it was more than that. She appreciated people and let them know. In an ever-coarsening society, she did her best to stem the tide."

Mom wrote letters and thank-you notes in ink. Not something most people do anymore because it's time-consuming, and if we make a mistake, the paper is tossed and a fresh one begun. There is no delete button. No copy and paste. One must think and take care before putting pen to paper. A self-imposed pause button, if you will.

Like many people, I wish I could pause the group insanity that social media sometimes fuels. Certainly we can call people out should we stumble upon a social media mob, but the Internet is too vast to patrol. There is no alarm bell to answer. The mob mentality is as old as man, a hard-wired, genetic instinct that can erupt at any moment and cannot be wished or legislated away.

But I can start writing thank-you notes.

One Riot, One Ranger.

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