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June 25, 2006

The internet mob builds a worldwide web of punishment

Judicial forms of humiliating offenders have long been banned but they are making a sinister return online, says John-Paul Flintoff

We don't brand thieves' flesh with hot metal these days, or shave the heads of adulterers. And we no longer put petty criminals in the pillory and hurl rotten fruit at them. The United Nations convention on human rights prohibits these kinds of public humiliation. But the convention was drawn up before the advent of the internet. Public humiliation has returned. It has gone online.

A good example has just occurred in New York, where a petty criminal has been arrested after she and her family had been subjected to a lively campaign of online censure.

The story began when — Advertisement —
Evan Guttman's best friend, Ivanna, left her mobile phone in a taxi. After buying another, Ivanna logged on to her phone account and found pictures of an unfamiliar young woman, Sasha Gomez.

Gomez, 16, had used the lost phone to take pictures and send instant messages. On Ivanna's behalf, the tech-minded Guttman tracked her down and asked her to return the phone. She told him to get lost. So he set up a web page with a brief account of what had happened and pictures of Gomez and her family.

Within hours he was fielding thousands of messages from people with their own bitter memories of lost gadgetry. Some found Gomez's personal page on **MySpace.com** and bombarded her and her friends with e-mail messages. Others found her street address and drove by her home taking videos or shouting out "thief".

Gomez's older brother, a military policeman, warned Guttman to leave her alone. So Guttman posted the exchange. Within days he was contacted by soldiers saying that the threat was a violation of military policy and promising to report him. The brother was officially reprimanded.

After posting a warning that Gomez had one last chance to return the phone, Guttman accompanied Ivanna to a police station. The police arrested Gomez

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and charged her with possession of stolen property.

It is hard not to admire what Guttman achieved, but the over-the-top conduct of his thousands of helpers suggests that an element of mob rule has invaded cyberspace. There seems to be no way of stopping it.

Earlier this year tens of thousands of Chinese “netizens” took it upon themselves to pursue a pair of adulterers after a husband revealed online the details of his wife’s affair with a college student. The student involved was tracked down, his address and telephone number were posted on the web. He had to flee his home.

“We call on every company, every office, school, hospital, shopping mall and public street to reject him,” wrote one of his morally upstanding pursuers. Others denounced his university for not expelling him, with one arguing that the institution deserved to be “bombed by Iranian missiles”. Others still threatened to “chop off the heads of these adulterers” or to put the wife in a “pig cage” and drown her.

Having already replaced snail mail and record shops, it seems that the internet has now replaced the stocks. Step out of line and you, too, could face a public humiliation that is far from virtual. And it is not just a foreign phenomenon. A British website, www.ratemyteachers.co.uk, enables pupils to post comments on teachers such as “(she is) one of those teachers who you feel almost wants to be hated, she is rude, harsh and a horrible person”.

When 50 schools understandably blocked access to the site from their computers, the website retaliated by placing them on a “wall of shame”.

It almost goes without saying that the individuals who rate teachers on the site do so without giving their real names, so pupils are free to abuse teachers in a way they would never dare to at school and with little regard for the feelings of the real people they write about. More importantly, they often lose sight of the difference between opinion and a legal verdict. “This is public vengeance writ large,” says Cary Cooper, professor of psychology and health at Lancaster University. “It’s an extreme form of bullying.”

By its nature, says Cooper, the internet offers easy and fast access so “there’s no stopping the number of ways people could use it to get revenge”.

A worrying example of this is American website Dontdatehimgirl.com, which offers profiles, often including a photograph, of philanderers across the United States, Australia, South Africa and Britain. The site asks users to “keep it clean and respectful” but few of the angry third parties who post these profiles heed that.

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