

## Dropping the Puck

*Why the Rioters should be shamed publicly online.*

The 2011 Vancouver Stanley Cup riots exemplified what could be considered the worst of public behavior. Property in the millions of dollars was destroyed and many people were seriously injured. These riots were not precipitated by any act that could adequately justify the violent outburst – such as grave political injustice. Rather, the riot was precipitated by the result of a hockey game. In response to the violent revelry of the night, some people witnessing the riots visually recorded the actions of the rioters. These images were then sent to many of the schools, employers, and families of those pictured, as well as the police, and they were posted online in order to expose the rioters' identities. Was this course of action morally right? Was it a form of digital justice? Put simply, yes, the shaming of the rioters was justifiable because it promoted the ideals of social responsibility and public accountability.

Several different aspects of this riot legitimized the digital shaming. One important factor to note is that the riot took place in a highly public location. In public places, where cameras and cell phones are now common, there is no reasonable expectation of privacy. People cannot therefore, expect anonymity- particularly not when they engage in highly anti-social activities. Thus, the public has every right to photograph, and publish online negative images, and disapproving views of the ugly events of that evening.

I would not argue that all riots are negative experiences worthy of shaming. Riots are sometimes caused by a rising frustration at government policies involving social or economic injustices. When social or political change is morally required and after peaceful protests have failed, it may be legitimate to consider other, more radical, methods of protest. Think, for

example, of the historical struggle for universal suffrage, or the African-American efforts to gain civil rights. When the legitimate demands of an oppressed group are rejected then a power struggle between people and the government may occur. Governments always seek to maintain their power through controlling their people, but a riot can shift that power. In short, riots are not all bad or all good; rather their causes and consequences make them so. The public must weigh the merits of any riot against its negative consequences. Only once this is done, can people decide whether to praise or shame the acts of the rioters. This is in much the same way that rebellions become revolutions upon the validation and victory of the people.

However, the Vancouver Riots were clearly not caused by a desire for social change. The rioters did not champion the cause of the downtrodden, nor were they fighting for some worthy ideal. Instead they acted on alcohol-fueled anger over a loss by “their” hockey team in a fair contest. Public opinion viewed the riots as little more than a night of senseless violence and supported the shaming of the rioters.

I would argue, however, that even when a riot enjoys wide public support, those who disagree with the rioters should be allowed to publicize the events online in an effort to express their opinion. If suppression of the public outcry against the riots were imposed, it would be an act of authoritarianism that would strip citizens of their democratic right to side with or against acts of protest and dissent.

However, it must be remembered that with every right comes a corresponding responsibility. In this case, the right to free expression must be paired with responsible verification. Those posting the images have the responsibility to ensure that those photographed

are clearly engaged in riotous acts and are not merely victims of circumstance, who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and not actually engaged in the violence.

Beyond casting a light on public misbehavior, the act of shaming the rioters also creates potential benefits. These include retribution, deterrence and the explanation of social viewpoint. Those pictured and shamed for their involvement in the riots will have to deal with the negative reactions of family, friends, strangers and employers. The reactions to the rioters should act as both a punishment for their part in the riots as well as a deterrent to future unwarranted riots. Online shaming of the Vancouver rioters also expresses society's verdict upon those who are willing to hijack a tool designed for social change and who misuse it purely for the purpose of destruction.

Public condemnation of the Vancouver Stanley Cup riots and rioters was a legitimate exercise in public debate about anti-social activity. Canadians reasonably concluded that the actions of the rioters served no acceptable political, social or economic purpose. Rather, they were the childish actions of those who could not properly cope with a loss by their home team. Public online condemnation of the rioters in this instance was both right and justified. The populace weighed the lack of purpose against the damages caused and found the riots to be indefensible and worthy of shame. We can only hope that next time, when the final goal is scored, supporters of the losing side will think twice before expressing their disappointment in a disgraceful manner.