

Shot down in flames: the dangers of the blame game

Nov 16, 2015



The tendency among pilots to be tough on each other can be nasty—and ultimately, hazardous. By Kreish Ballantyne.

'Self-indulgence and severity towards others are the same vice.' **Jean de La Bruyère (1645–1696)**

Shane Masterton* was a grade three instructor in a north west flying school when he and a student had an aborted take off in a Cessna 206. Although there was no visible damage, for reasons unknown to him now he failed to declare the incident to the authorities.

A month later, Masterton was 'let go' by the school. For the next six months, he found it impossible to obtain another job, despite attending more than 10 interviews. He started to feel there was a conspiracy against him but he couldn't prove it. That is, until he joined Facebook.

Within hours, Masterton was able to read malicious rumours, threats and stories people—pilots—had spread about him. No one had used his actual name, nicknaming him Captain Crash and Dash*, and claiming he

a negligent and hapless instructor, and that his undisclosed event was tantamount to murder. False Facebook profiles were created, including one in the name of Captain Crash and Dash.

He followed the posts across Twitter and Facebook, and then to LinkedIn and PPRuNe, and soon began receiving anonymous text messages claiming 'we know what you did'. Slurs were posted across all forms of social media and his email account was hacked.

Close to a nervous breakdown, Masterton changed his name and phone number, moved to a different state and eventually left the industry altogether. He now works in a factory to pay off his aviation debts.

Still badly bruised, Masterton still has no idea why he was singled out and persecuted, but claims aviation is the toughest and cruellest industry in which he's ever worked.

Tarred and feathered

Public shaming is not a new concept. From the stocks on the village green to public flogging, humiliation has a long history in punishment. While public shaming fell out of use across the 20th century, the advent of the internet appears to have brought it back—in full force.

What is it about the internet—social media and online forums in particular—that has inspired the return of shaming? And why is it particularly rife in the pilot community?

A culture of humiliation

A grade one instructor emailed this comment:

'Aviation is one of the only professions where its employees are not university educated. In general aviation there are plenty of rough-and-ready chaps and gals who paid for their training by washing planes and sweeping hangar floors. There's a toughness, a rough-and-ready respect for "grafters" and hard workers in this industry. This attitude makes it easy for some to look down on those with privilege, to consider them "soft" or "politically correct".'

British journalist Jon Ronson, author of *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* details stories of people who have had their lives ruined by internet public shaming. Ronson says social media acts as a 'mutual approval machine' and we surround ourselves with people who share our opinions, of whom we approve. But, when someone else expresses an opinion about which we do not share approval, we scream them out, using public shaming as a means to humiliate and 'get' those who bear opposing opinions.

‘The hunt is on. You can live a good ethical life, but some bad phraseology or a poorly timed tweet can overwhelm it all,’ he says.

No stranger to internet criticism myself, I left a well-known pilot’s forum some years ago, due to the negative attitude and bullying that occurred there. I’m certainly far from the only pilot to depart an online forum, with women in particular claiming they feel the forums are a virtual home to chest beating, one-upmanship and bullying. As one ex-user said, ‘If you give any indication that you’re a woman in your user name, you simply get pounced on! Also, you have to work twice as hard to be taken seriously. The whole place is exhausting and dehumanising.’

With this topic close to my heart, I conducted a series of interviews and they revealed some of the reasons: cyber-humiliation finds a home in aviation.

Anonymity—the cloak of invisibility

Human society depends on restraint. As adults we learn to control our base feelings of anger, rage and fear, and the rules of society dictate we behave according to a socially acceptable moral code. As pilots, we measure ourselves against the code of airmanship, as well as the basic code of professionalism. However, internet anonymity removes these codes and allows an outlet for our baser emotions. As one interviewee, a charter pilot in a remote location, told me.

‘The anonymous setting makes it easier for these “knowledgeable” pilots to correct and tell another pilot that they are wrong in the nastiest way. Put the same two people in the same room together and I would bet a hot chocolate they talk to each other with respect. A lot of the time that same person who belittled you on the internet is the person who sits in the corner of a room and doesn’t pipe up when it comes to real confrontation.’

Group madness—pitchforks at dusk

‘Deindividuation’ is a concept in social psychology generally thought of as the loss of self-awareness in groups. The idea is that a crowd can become ‘contaminated’—according to Gary Slutkin of the World Health Organization, quoted in Ronson’s book—by ‘a virus that infects the mind and causes a collective group to engage in motivated violence’.

While this mentality is occasionally displayed in crowd-based events such as football matches and public demonstrations, the internet—in particular, internet forums and social media—allows that group mentality coupled with anonymity, which can lead directly to mass cyber-bullying.

This is how it was for Masterton. ‘It felt like pitchforks at dusk,’ he said.

Expertism—keyboard heroes

The internet is the home of the keyboard expert. In *The Psychology of the Internet*, author Patricia Wallace writes:

‘One characteristic used to define elitist groups on the internet is expertise, so ‘expertism’ is probably more prevalent on the internet than it is in real life. On some forums, the insider knowledge of the group’s history, norms can be the dividing line between belonging to the in-group or the out-group, with little reference to a race or gender. The practice of trolling illustrates how the insiders taunt neophytes who try to break into the group and thereby increase their own cohesiveness.’

There is an entire area of a popular pilot’s forum dedicated to non-aviation specific conversation in which being a newbie is often a humiliating experience. It’s not uncommon for longstanding members of the group to lay down traps for the new player in order to humiliate and test them publicly. If the newbie passes muster, they’re welcomed to the group, where they must then perpetuate this behaviour towards incoming new members.

Belonging to a group, and being on the inside of a forum where one is a group-endorsed expert provokes a feeling of security and acceptance: traits all humans as pack animals, desire and crave.

Insecurity—attack as defence

Flying presents a series of challenges, both intellectually and physically: no person can be naturally skilled at each facet of flight. Numerous cognitive tests show that people display an area of strength in one skill-set and a weakness in another—one pilot may have excellent spatial skills but average processing times, while another may have highly honed memory, but poor listening skills. Learning something new—if you’re not constantly learning about aviation then you might question yourself—presents challenges that can bring out the insecurity in us all. Aviation has many uncertainties—each flight is different due to a combination of elements: weather, passengers, aircraft type. Uncertainty leads to insecurity, and insecurity leads to defensive behaviour. Psychologist Brene Brown says, ‘Men walk this tightrope where any sign of weakness elicits shame, and so they’re afraid to make themselves vulnerable for fear of looking weak.’

Red Bull aerobatic pilot and QBE Ambassador, Matt Hall, has spoken of ‘machismo’ in aviation, and centred his talks around airmanship and the breaking down of the negative hangar talk that can lead to a culture of defensiveness and shame. In his talks, he addresses groups on topics such as empathy and transparency, and encourages pilots not to bash each other with ‘I could have done better’ thinking.

Blame, shame and safety

Each facet of bullying and public shaming has a direct impact on safety. From the 'I would have done it differently' culture that emerges after every accident, to the shaming of pilots who have near misses, the s game turns often-trivial accidents into potential fatalities. Do I need to spell out how?

Every time a person shames another, they're implicitly declaring, 'I would never be that stupid, careless or heavy handed'. How can you be so sure? Do you know and understand the factors and pressures that face the pilot who had the incident? Can you, hand-on-heart, say you have always resisted them?

Every accident and incident in aviation provides an opportunity to learn a lesson. Blaming and shaming detract from that opportunity. By criticising others rather than re-examining one's own attitudes and practices, blame becomes a lesson wasted. If the industry is to promote a culture of safety and transparency, the blame game cannot go on.

*names have been changed

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