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The Dark Side of 'Webtribution'

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN



Imagine this scenario: Every person you know—each family member, friend, co-worker and casual acquaintance—receives an anonymous email from a stranger making terrible accusations about you.

How would you feel?

Renee Holder knows: "Devastated."

Several years ago, Ms. Holder discovered that dozens of her MySpace friends had received an anonymous email calling her a tramp and a home-wrecker.

For weeks, she tried to counter the allegations, which she says came from her new boyfriend's former girlfriend. She methodically contacted each person she believed received the email and explained that she hadn't started dating her boyfriend until months after he had broken up with his ex.

But the harm was already done. Family members called her and questioned her morals. Co-workers whispered about her behind her back. Several friends cut her off completely.

"It took me far longer to repair the damage than it took that woman to create it," says Ms. Holder, a 34-year-old customer-service representative in Austin, Texas, who eventually married her boyfriend. "In a matter of minutes, she spread a rumor internationally."

For much of human history, exacting retribution on your enemies—as opposed to fantasizing about it—was too much of a hassle for most people to bother with. It involved duels, poison or, at the very least, clever rumors that took ingenuity to create and patience to spread. By the time you had devised a revenge plot, you typically had cooled off and come to your senses.

That's not the case anymore. Thanks to the Internet, vengeance—let's call it "Webtribution"—is easier, and nastier, than ever. And it's also a whole lot more prevalent. The Internet permits us to be impulsive and anonymous. It requires a minimum amount of work: You can ruin someone's life while sitting on the couch watching TV. And it provides a maximum amount of pain.

"It's perfect for public humiliation," says Jacquelyn Eschbach, an editor at a university in Philadelphia.

She should know. When she found out her husband was cheating on her last March, she logged onto his Facebook account, deleted all his privacy settings—allowing anyone to see his page—and created a new status update for him: "Moving back to my mom's because my wife caught me cheating with a woman from work."

Almost immediately, her husband's friends began sending questions, which Ms. Eschbach answered, acting as him. She named the other woman and explained that the affair had been going on for four years and had been carried on over lunch, sometimes at the woman's house, sometimes in a car. She asked if anyone had a room for rent. Finally, she disparaged his physical attributes, adding that "I am surprised Jackie stayed with me for so long."

"I wanted everyone to know what a jerk he was, and this was the easiest way to do it without saying it to each person's face," says Ms. Eschbach, 39 years old.

By the time she was done about an hour later, there were 55 comments from family and friends on her husband's Facebook page. Some asked if the status updates were true. Others, including his sisters, angrily criticized her husband and the other woman.

When her husband found out about it, he immediately changed his Facebook password. But he says he understood why she wanted revenge. (He also begged her forgiveness.) Now the couple is trying to work things out. Ms. Eschbach says she doesn't regret her online outburst, but sometimes feels embarrassed when she runs into people she knows and wonders if they are aware of her husband's affair.

"I'm fine with what she did now," says her husband, who asked that his name not be published. "It made her satisfied, and it was better than her slashing tires or doing something even worse that would get her in trouble with the law."

Most of us have heard of someone posting naked photos of an ex online. Or writing nasty reviews for a restaurant or book, not because they dislike the product, but because they dislike the person who created it. Or signing up an acquaintance for email advertising lists. (I can assure you that if your inbox suddenly fills up with ads for male-enhancement treatments, someone is out to get you.)

Why aren't we mature enough to resist the temptation to seek Webtribution—even if it seems easy and (we hope) untraceable?

It's simple: The Internet turns us into a mob.

"We know that in a mob people will do socially unacceptable things they would never otherwise do," says Elizabeth Englander, director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center and professor of psychology at Bridgewater State College in Bridgewater, Mass. "They feel invisible, so they cede responsibility."

Psychologists actually have a term for this: the "online disinhibition effect." They divide this type of behavior into two categories: "benign disinhibition" (which is what happens when someone says something private they might not have shared publicly with many people offline) and "toxic disinhibition" (expressing rudeness, anger, criticism or hate).

Look no further than the Web sites that cater to retribution if you want to see what toxic disinhibition looks like. A small sampling: RevengeLady.com gives advice on "revenge therapy." ("It's fast and it's cheap and it gives immediate satisfaction.") JobVent.com lets you trash your employer. And—for

people with more money than time (or creativity)—ThePayback.com will send wilted roses or a dead fish to the victim of your choice.

There are downsides to the ease of taking revenge online. Melissa Braverman is happy to spell them out for you.

Last summer, after her ex-boyfriend told her he was getting married, Ms. Braverman mocked him on her blog for sending her a link in an email to his wedding Web site. "To paraphrase Miss Manners, forwarding event details to an uninvited guest is, well, tacky," she wrote.

Later that day, she received an angry email from her former flame. "If your intention was to hurt and humiliate me in an effort to entertain your blog readers, you have succeeded," he wrote. Ms. Braverman, 35, a travel publicist in New York, says she felt guilty and hasn't spoken to her ex since. "This episode definitely taught me to think twice before airing grievances in the blogosphere," she says. "And to be cognizant that there are consequences when you do."

Sometimes there are very big consequences. In 2006, a Florida woman named Sue Scheff won a landmark \$11.3 million decision against another woman who used the Internet to vent about her and the company she created to help families of troubled teens. "The first three pages of Google were all the most horrific statements about me—I abuse kids, I kidnap them, I was a con artist, I exploit families, I am a crook. You name it," says Ms. Scheff, 47. "Until you go through a vengeful attack on your good name, service or business, you have no idea what a Google bomb can do to you."

Earlier this year, a Vogue magazine model named Liskula Cohen sued Google to unmask the name of the person who called her "a skank" on a blog hosted by the company's blogging platform, Blogger. The culprit—an acquaintance of the model—seemed stunned that her anonymity wasn't protected. The judge ordered Google to give Ms. Cohen the name of the blogger or information leading to the name.

So let this be a lesson to you. If you're thinking of revenge, step away from the computer. At least until you calm down. And unless they really deserve it.

—Write to Elizabeth Bernstein at bonds@wsj.com.

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