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This is What Happens When We Forget That Speech Has Consequences

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This is What Happens When We Forget That Speech Has Consequences

By Nathan Holic
UCF Forum columnist
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The other night, I watched a Bravo “Real Housewives” reunion show in which a woman yelled through a bullhorn “You’re a dumb ho! Shut up!” at another woman two feet away. A split-second later, this woman (the one with the bullhorn) looked genuinely surprised when the other woman (the alleged dumb ho) charged at her, furious, and began swinging.

It was one of the strangest moments of television I’ve ever watched, and not just for the more cartoonish reasons: the bullhorn, the hair-pulling, the fact that these women were wearing expensive ready-for-TV dresses and gowns and yet were saying and doing vile things that undermined any beauty they’d mustered. No, I’m desensitized to the nastiness; as a married man who wants to *stay* married, Bravo must remain pulsing and seething on at least one television in my house at all times, lest I give my wife an excuse to turn off my weekend football marathons in the fall. It’s a seesaw of TV torture.

Anyway, the moment was actually bizarre for another reason: the shock. I watched this and I wondered: Have we become so disconnected from reality by our easy and safe Internet vitriol that we no longer imagine people reacting in real time when we say something truly hateful and hurtful?

This woman—the one who shouted “You’re a dumb ho” into a bullhorn, remember—was *shocked* that her words had caused someone to leap into action, shocked that she was now being attacked...she’d literally used a bullhorn (a fact I can’t emphasize enough) to shout expletives into another woman’s face...they were an arm’s length apart...and yet there was this “why is she charging at me?” look on her face. Had she really expected she could insult someone so dramatically (again: *bullhorn*) without suffering any consequences?

I really don't want to admit that anything Housewives-related is representative of our larger culture (you've got to believe me; it kills me to write this), but this moment felt much bigger than the Housewives, something much more expansive, something I see almost daily now: an ever-heightening level of anger and outrage and unchecked vitriol (usually expressed online), with a corresponding decline in our levels of self-awareness about what we've said. The important thing, many people think, is that we said the words, see, that we "got that off our chest," or that we "told that person off," or that we "made that joke," or whatever. Often, our mean-spirited commentary is capped off by the awful expression, "Just sayin'," the polite equivalent of a mobster saying "It's just business, nothing personal," before putting a bullet in someone's brain.

We want to say the thing, but we don't want to concern ourselves with the consequences of the saying. We're, like, just sayin', you know? It is as if we are tossing pennies into a bottomless pit, and we get to walk away without hearing the final plunk of copper on the cave floor.

This, of course, is why online outrage is so popular. On news sites, the comment boards ask us for our thoughts on breaking stories, and we quickly pollute the space with terrifying hateful rhetoric. Not just about important issues, but about *everything*, the release date for the new *Spider-Man* movie, the cast of the new *Star Wars* movie, the draft position of a football player. We summon our fury, and we scream in all-caps. We watch angry TV commentators argue, also hear them on the road as we drive, and we remain angry all day. Angry on message boards, angry on Facebook, angry on Twitter. On Yelp, we take out our anger on servers who make the slightest of mistakes, on restaurants that fail to achieve constant perfection. We rate the beers we drink, the bathrooms we visit, the amount of sunshine on a particular afternoon. On RateMyProfessor, my students have for years been registering their displeasure over the fact that—in my writing courses—I make them write. Some of them are furious. Some of them *hate* me. Everywhere we go, someone or something is asking us to rate our experience, to tell our horror stories, to let the mean spirits loose.

And so much of what we say is written under the veil of usernames, or is written in places and spaces that guarantee we won't need to worry about reactions. Even on most television shows, the worst remarks are said via video-conference, or in those "testimonial"-style videos wherein a solitary Housewife speaks her mind to the camera. All of us: We speak our anger in safe forums, but there is no corresponding app to hold us accountable for what we've said, or to ask others to rate our value as human beings.

Our nation's love affair with outrage isn't a new development, obviously. The new development is how little regard we now pay to the consequences of our speech. We have become so enamored of our right to say *whatever we want* that we are shocked when someone reacts in non-virtual ways, when (for instance) someone we like is fired by their employer for offensive speech, or when a business is spurned by consumers after a CEO says something awful. We've wished the "right to free speech" into the "right to *consequence-free* speech."

Juxtaposed against this brief moment on the couch watching the Housewives altercation, I'd spent most of my evening reading Andre Dubus III's excellent memoir *Townie*, in which he recalls a youth spent in constant fights with other Boston youths. Funny looks leading to bloody knuckles, mouths emptied of teeth, hospital visits. Men stabbed, faces beaten to hamburger. The slightest of slights, and then: violence. This was a world where you were always accountable, where you didn't look surprised when someone punched you in the face.

Of course, I'm not saying that violence is acceptable retaliation against insulting language. I'm not advocating for the world of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, where comment-boarders are sought out and beaten for their online insults. I'm not advocating for the atomic obliteration of comment boards or Twitter, either.

I'm only advocating for a world in which we recognize that our speech does have consequences, that it can hurt, that it can wound, that it can cause someone to throw a punch even if we had the "right" to say what we said, that it can get us fired or cost us our reputation. I'm only advocating for a world in which—no matter how many new social media portals open before I'm finished typing this sentence—we recognize that the bottomless pit into which we throw our words does indeed have a bottom, a world in which (maybe, just maybe) we take a long moment to peer into the darkness before tossing our pennies.

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