How To Say ‘Sorry’ On Social Media

VATSALYA SRIVASTAVA

10/04/2021

DKODING Studio

Must the old and new always be in conflict? The rise of self-proclaimed arbiters of justice on social media need not imply that the ideas of apologies and forgiveness be consigned to the history books. They are perhaps the most effective conflict resolution mechanism we have. And they will likely have to be part of the evolution of social media.

Highlights

- **Social media is empowering masses to showcase their wisdom, but is also giving rise to self-appointed judges and juries.**
- **Social Media outrage showcases our collective inability to relent.**
- **The evolution of Social Media has also intensified the ‘Mob Mentality’.**
- **How can we leverage the power of social media, instead of fighting it?**

In May 2019, a man posted a video of a confrontation in Chipotle on Twitter, and a 23-year-old college student became an object of hate overnight. A food delivery executive was accused of assault in Bangalore in a video on Twitter and Instagram. The video went viral, but the tables quickly turned when the executive’s version of the story was put up on social media. The accuser became the accused and is now the target of the very online mob that she had unleashed.

These are not isolated incidents. The internet is awash with individuals taking responsibility for administering justice. Some do it by highlighting crimes that they perceive have been committed against them or sometimes even in their presence. Others participate by castigating and shaming the accused. Social media has empowered the masses to showcase their wisdom by appointing themselves as judge and jury.

Social media outrage highlights our shortcoming to show the white flag

Some are horrified at this revival in mob justice, expressing concerns about verifiability and standard of evidence while emphasizing the need for a presumption of innocence. But some others claim that the traditional setup is structurally biased and has so many blind spots that these changes improve access to justice for those who would have little recourse otherwise. Collateral damage, they say, is part of any monumental change. The clash between these two conflicting positions will play out in the coming years. Nevertheless, the immediate concern is how participating in the online outrage machine has compromised our capacity to apologize and forgive.

As a regretful acknowledgement of an offence or failure, an apology is used across cultures to seek forgiveness, reconcile differences and enable future cooperation. We live in a world full of uncertainties, and in such a world, mistakes are bound to happen. Many of these mistakes can, and regularly are addressed by one or all concerned parties tendering an apology: a simple sorry, an expensive card with a carefully crafted message, a heartfelt letter, or even a show of regret in actions. Usually, if an apology is deemed sufficient, it is accepted by a show of forgiveness. The implicit promise of the process is that the relationship has been repaired, things can go back to how they were, and the world can move on. But the second part of this process breaks down once the matter is taken online. Consider the possibility that the food-delivery executive and the original complainant (from Bangalore) meet, apologize and forgive each other. Neither of them can make sure that everyone who participated in the online outrage is informed of their reconciliation. They will continue to suffer from being recognized as a *criminal* on the street, or while taking their kid to school or when sending their CV for a job. If the world cannot move on and you are not going to be allowed to return to your old pre-infamy life, why offer an apology and risk being seen as admitting guilt?

Online Mobs are worse than the people they shame

I, for one, do not want a world without apologies and forgiveness. I like the idea of a world in which you can make up for your mistakes and have compassion for those who seem to have wronged you. A world in which we do not condemn people for having a bad day or a poor upbringing. If this conciliatory vision of the world has to be reconciled with the reality of mob justice on social media, then we must start by conceding that the cat is out of the bag. We can try and pass legislation and bring in new regulations against making allegations on the internet, but they are not likely to accomplish much besides restricting free speech. Increasing awareness, the other usual go-to option for policymakers will also have minimal impact as the incentives to gain support for someone who thinks she been *wronged* are too strong to overcome with moral injunctions. Though I do think it would help if we gave more thought to the larger implications of posting an allegation or lending our support when have no way of verifying a claim.

Perhaps a clue on how to proceed comes from an incident in Australia where a man taking selfies for his kids was mistaken to be taking photos of someone else's children. His picture was posted on Facebook, the post was widely shared and he was labelled a "creep" and "pedo". But soon after, a post by *Knox Leader* confirmed the man's innocence. The clarification led to responses like "Lesson learnt. Deleted straight away. Apologies to the man himself" and "and this is how people are wrongly accused and get a label for something they genuinely haven't

done …". The accused escaped a terrible predicament in this case, but it is unreasonable to expect that guilt can be ascertained so quickly in most instances. But it does seem that people are willing to forgive offenders and even apologize for judging too quickly if they have the appropriate information. Unfortunately, a lot of the conversation in this domain is a nostalgic look back at a time without social media. The need of the hour however are suggestions that leverage the power of social media, instead of fighting it.

My proposed mechanism is an attempt to create the possibility for the offender and offended, the people usually with the most information about an incident, to converse, apologize and if possible forgive. This is a sort of online mediation where a platform creates the possibility where both parties *can* contact each other. They can of course choose not to. But if any one of them wants, they can send one message to the other. The conversation can continue if the other person does not block the original sender. Then if the accuser believes that the matter is resolved, the information about their reconciliation can be sent to every person who had seen the original post*. This will necessitate some changes on behalf of platforms, but given the rising concerns about internet mobs and their role in it, most of them would be willing to try out a setup like this. What if at least one of the large platforms is willing to pilot it, and the trial is successful, market competition will take care of the rest obviating the need for government regulation. A decentralized (part) solution for a decentralized network.

There is of course no way of knowing if this proposal will indeed mitigate any of the problems at hand. But thinking about how to deal with the issues created by social media without attempting to alter its promise of democratization is the way forward.

**Perhaps something similar can be set up for cases that end up going to courts, but that would require more careful thinking as it might infringe on the rights of the accuser*.

Vatsalya Srivastava

Education: University of Delhi, B.A. (Honors) Economics; Tilburg University, M.Sc., Research Master and Ph.D. Candidate in Economics | Vatsalya Srivastava has been an Assistant Professor of Economics at Jindal School of Government and Public Policy since July 2018. His research interests lie in using the tools of Microeconomics, particularly Game Theory, to develop an economic paradigm to investigate the incentives and trade-offs that underlie the social, legal and political institutions that create and maintain what Oliver Williamson called good order and workable arrangements.