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Criminal Justice in the Social Media Age

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Unless you are living under a rock, this past week you likely read, saw or heard about two horrific events involving young adults (one hesitates to call them adults young or otherwise) committing heinous crimes. Not only were the crimes themselves repugnant, that they were also shared widely on social media made them especially so. It's time to have an open and frank discussion about criminal justice in the age of social media.

I am referring of course to the St. Michael's College School sexual assault and the Nova Scotia disabled teen forced to act as a human bridge.

Please note that I am referring to both of these events as crimes because that's what they are. We can debate the semantics about whether one is more abhorrent than the other but here's what is not up for debate: they are crimes; not hazing, not boys will be boys, not harmless, not bullying, and certainly not any other euphemism for crimes.

When first reported, the St. Michael's College crime was not described in its entirety, possibly so as not to offend our sensibilities or to protect the identity of the victim(s). We were told the school dealt with the offenders via expulsion. It soon became apparent no such fear for our sensitivities, nor concern for the victim's identity, was on the minds of those who videotaped then posted the crime to social media. It quickly became a matter of police interest ? as it should have been all along ? because a crime was committed. Joseph Gillis, who teaches psychology at the University of Toronto called it ritualized violence. (1) Unlike hazing which implies a boys will be boys attitude of permission, perhaps even expectation (that one should expect when trying out for a football team to be attacked, held down, brutalized and videoed while it occurs) ritualized violence provides a more apt descriptor of the crime committed.

In the second incident a Nova Scotia teen with cerebral palsy was forced first to his hands and knees and quickly thereafter, to a prone position, lying flat in a ditch of fast running, snowy water, to act as a human bridge for his friends. This too was videotaped for the enjoyment of ?. who exactly? Who on earth would enjoy watching this? Who on earth would think, for even one moment, that this was something that was: 1) ok and 2) hilarious enough to record, then post? What in fact have we become in this social media world when cruelty and torture are commonplace and prized for the number of ?views? received? Where is our humanity? Are we becoming so complacent that we are all now complicit?

I suggest that the time has come to reassess our definition of complicit relative to crime. The perpetrators of these acts must be held accountable, on that I am sure we all agree but so too must the videographers. These young ?adults? whose first instinct in the face of a crime being committed is to reach for the phone to record it ? not as evidence so justice might be served but rather, merely for its ?entertainment? value ? must also be held accountable for their actions. They are just as guilty as the person(s) committing the crime. They are not also victims, (as some might suggest, innocent bystanders of the bully too afraid to speak up) no. They are in fact willing participants, playing an active role both during the crime as it's being committed, and after when they choose to post it. It's time we hold everyone accountable and it's time we consider amending the criminal justice act to reflect the crime of ?posting? in the age social media.