Forgiveness

By Steven Anning

In the words of Ashleigh Brilliant, 'It's human to make mistakes and some of us are more human than others'[1]. Yet when mistakes are indefinitely recorded in our digital footprint, what is the role of forgiveness in an increasingly online society? This blog post has been written following a Brave Conversations event at the Soapbox Youth Centre in London to understand the disruptive impact of technology on society. The Brave Conversations team brought together a diverse group of people from charities, business, youth work and academia. The academic element used Web Science to understand how technology disrupts society. Web Science is an interdisciplinary field of research seeking to understand the impact of the technology on the World, and indeed what impact the world is having on technology[2]. Professor Sir Tim Berners-Lee pioneered this field in response to the World Wide Web he created; it has since expanded to cover more areas such as Artificial Intelligence. A Web Science approach was used to understand what a life in balance might look like in response to the disruptive impact of technology.

As society increasingly becomes online, it seems there is a missing role for forgiveness. In 2013, Paris Brown, 17, was appointed to be a Youth Police and Crime Commissioner for Kent Police. A pioneering role in the UK, its purpose was to enable youth representation within Kent Police, and the need for youth representation in Policing is difficult to overstate. Five years later in 2018, the BBC reports rising levels of gang-related violence in Kent involving children as young as 10 years old[3]. In neighbouring London, complex questions encompassing "Drill" music, youth gang culture, online censorship and urban deprivation is emerging for the Metropolitan Police in response to a dramatic rise in knife crime[4]. In both cases, along with many others, it stands to reason that the most appropriate response requires youth representation at the highest level. Nevertheless, in what could only be described as mob justice, Paris Brown was forced to resign from her role after just one week because of inappropriate tweets she had posted some years earlier.

Ann Barnes, the Police and Crime Commissioner who formed the role and recruited Ms Brown described her as an 'enthusiastic young woman with exceptional skills who had performed well in a very tough interview process'[5]. In response to a Mail On Sunday newspaper investigation disclosing her offensive tweets posted between the ages of 14 and 16, the Mail Online described Ms Brown as a "foul-mouthed, self-obsessed Twitter-teen" and many politicians called for her resignation[6]. There is no doubt the tweets were offensive, they were racist, homophobic and endorsed a drug culture incompatible with the rule of law. Clearly upset and troubled by the events, in response Ms Brown publicly apologised for her behaviour and stepped down. Following another scandal with her successor over an inappropriate relationship, which was equally unforgiving, and a failed youth

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[1] Brilliant, A. (1979) *I may not be totally perfect, but parts of me are excellent, and other brilliant thoughts*. Woodbridge Press Pub. Co.
[2] Hendler, J. *et al.* (2008) 'Web Science', *Communications of the ACM*, 51(7), p. 60.
[3] BBC News (2018) *New strategy to tackle youth gang crime in Kent and Medway*, *BBC News*. (Accessed: 13 June 2018).
[4] Lizzie Dearden (2018) *Police targeting drill music videos in controversial crackdown on social media that 'incites violence'* , *The Independent*. (Accessed: 13 June 2018).
[5] BBC News (2013) *Paris Brown: Kent youth PCC resigns after Twitter row*, *BBC News*. (Accessed: 13 June 2018).
[6] Russell Myers (2013) *Paris Brown: Is this foul-mouthed, self-obsessed Twitter teen really the future of British policing?*, *The Mail Online*. (Accessed: 13 June 2018).

advisory group initiative, an Independent Police Advisory Group report in 2016 suggests communication between youths and the Police remains problematic[7]. While Ms Brown's behaviour had fallen short of expectations, she did apologise, yet mob justice prevailed to the cost of youth representation.

It is perhaps worth understanding how mob justice manifests online. Ms Brown described her tweets being a consequence of online bravado; reports about her were particularly pernicious, most likely a consequence of self-interest to sell papers or earn political capital. While plausible explanations, an idea called the 'Online Disinhibition Effect' provides some explanatory value for online behaviours. Defined by John Suler in 2004, online disinhibition occurs when people say or do things online they would not otherwise in face to face interactions. This effect is subdivided into 'benign disinhibition' where people feel more able to express vulnerabilities when online, whereas 'toxic disinhibition' reveals a darker side of humanity[8]. The overall result is like a reality television show of the mind in which victims become caricatures of their real selves in the imagination of online communities. Online interactions play out the fiction as users become disinhibited from the consequence of their actions and victims become increasingly de-humanised. Suler keenly observes that the caricatures often represent projections of a person's negative past experiences rather than upon reality. In the case of mob justice for Ms Brown, her inappropriate tweets were likely in response to caricatures of minorities, and it was also too easy to impose a 'foul-mouthed, self-obsessed Twitter-teen' caricature upon an 'enthusiastic young woman with exceptional skills'.

Robert Enright and the Human Development Study Group pioneered Forgiveness research. They define forgiveness as 'a foreswearing of negative affect and judgement by viewing the wrongdoer with compassion and love, in the face of a wrongdoer's considerable injustice'[9]. It is also necessary to distinguish forgiveness from what it is not, such as: 'pardoning', which is a legal term; 'condoning', which implies justification of the offence; 'excusing', which implies the offender has a good reason for committing the offence; 'forgetting', which implies that the memory of the offence has simply decayed or slipped out of conscious awareness, and 'denying', which involves an unwillingness to perceive the harmful injuries that one has incurred[10]. Enright proposed forgivesness to be a process[11], and examples of such processes can be found in models of Justice.

Following the collapse of Apartheid, Truth and Reconciliation commissions helped the nation of South Africa to confront its past. Nelson Mandela pioneered this approach, which became enshrined in the nations new post-Apartheid constitution. The constitution gave explicit reference to the African concept of 'ubuntu' meaning humaneness, or an inclusive sense of community valuing everyone[12]. What followed were countless examples of perpetrators of violence asking for and being granted forgiveness by victims. Forgiveness was not for everyone, but it is hard to imagine what South Africa would be like otherwise. Truth and reconciliation has since become vital to other post-

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[7] Gurvinder Sandher and Elaine Bolt (2016) *IPAG Young Persons Report (Final) Young People & Kent Police Engagement*. (Accessed: 13 June 2018).

[8] Suler, J. (2004) The Online Disinhibition Effect, *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 7(3).

[9] Enright, R. D. (1991) The moral development of forgiveness, in Kurtines, W. M. and Gewirtz, J. L. (eds) *Handbook of moral behavior and development*. Erlbaum. P123

[10] Kattumuri, R. and Holm, A. K. (2011) Reconciliation and transitional justice: the contribution of forgiveness towards healing and restoration, in Martin Albrow and Hakan Seckinelgin (eds) *Global Civil Society 2011: Globality and the Absence of Justice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p41

[11] Enright, R. D. (1991) The moral development of forgiveness, in Kurtines, W. M. and Gewirtz, J. L. (eds) *Handbook of moral behavior and development*. Erlbaum. P238

[12] Minow, M. (1998) Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Negotiation Journal*. Wiley/Blackwell (10.1111), 14(4), p320

conflict environments, such as Peru, and is recognised in law under Transitional Justice with thousands of success stories.

Forgiveness is also arguably the implicit premise of criminal justice in which courts mediate the process on behalf of criminals and victims. The process of trail and punishment attempts to enable forgiveness and give criminals a second chance. It more explicitly features in Restorative Justice pioneered by Sir Charles Pollard in the late 1990s, which focuses on rehabilitation through reconciliation. In this form of justice, criminals and victims meet face to face in controlled circumstances with a view to forgiveness. Interestingly, two scholars of Restorative Justice find that forgiveness is not just between victim and criminal, but also with ourselves. They describe a need for self-reflection whereby, 'restorative Justice can produce ongoing transformation, however, the transformation must begin with ourselves, for we too have recompense to pay, reconciliation to seek, forgiveness to ask and healing to receive'[13]. In the unforgiving environment Ms Brown faced, some inward reflection might reveal vested interests and more people who may owe an apology.

An unforgiving society serves no purpose. Ms Brown explicitly asked for forgiveness yet unforgiveness has since prevented youth representation at the highest levels on important issues. Moreover, in being so unforgiving to a youth, one must wonder if unforgiving adults provide positive role models since we surely all deserve a second chance. To make mistakes, however, is to be human and unfortunately the Web provides a permanent record of our errors. Toxic disinhibition plays two roles in this problem, firstly with the offender who commits the original act, and secondly with the mob justice reaction of online communities. Models of justice provide powerful examples of how forgiveness can heal societies following conflict and provide criminals with a second chance, so how do we enable a more forgiving society? Models of justice are enabled by third party mediators, are not necessarily available in online societies. In the spirit of unbuntu, therefore, there is a need for more humaneness to overcome toxic disinhibition, which requires people from all sides to face truth rather than fiction to reconcile mistakes. As is the case with Restorative Justice, reconciling mistakes in online societies often begins with self-reflection to achieve forgiveness and positive change. As was perhaps the case with Ms Brown, unforgiveness was probably through self rather than collective interest, and as Suler observes, caricatures more likely reflect personal experiences than reality. It is in questioning our motives through self-reflection, therefore, that we find brave conversations and a more forgiving society.

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[13] Daniel W. Van Ness and Karen Heetderks Strong (2015) *Restoring Justice: An Introduction to Restorative Justice*. 5th edn. Edited by Pam Chester. Waltham: Elsevier. P175