The Flip Side of Internet Fame

By Jessica Bennett

In 2002, Ghyslain Raza, a chubby Canadian teen, filmed himself acting out a fight scene from "Star Wars" using a makeshift light saber. His awkward performance was funny, in part because it wasn't meant to be. And it certainly was never meant to be public: for nearly a year the video remained on a shelf in Raza's school's TV studio, where he'd filmed it. Sometime in 2003, though, another student discovered the video, digitized it and posted it online—and Raza's nightmare began. Within days, "Star Wars Kid" had become a viral frenzy. It was posted on hundreds of blogs, enhanced by music and special effects, and watched by millions. Had that teenager wanted to be famous, he couldn't have asked for anything better. But in Raza's case it became a source of public shame and embarrassment, precisely what every kid fears the most.

Razas of the world take note: among the generation that's been reared online, stories like this are becoming more and more common. They serve as important reminders of a dark side of instant internet fame: humiliation. Already dozens of websites exist solely for posting hateful rants about ex-lovers (DontDateHimGirl.com) and bad tippers (the S----ty Tipper Database), and for posting cell-phone images of public bad behavior (hollabackNYC.com) and lousy drivers. Such sites can make or break a person, in a matter of seconds.

Public shaming, of course, is nothing new. Ancient Romans punished wrongdoers by branding them on the forehead. In Colonial America heretics were clamped into stocks in the public square, thieves had their hands or fingers cut off, and adulterers were forced to wear a scarlet A. More recently a U.S. judge forced a mail thief to wear a sign announcing his crime outside a San Francisco post office; in other places sex offenders have to post warning signs on their front lawns.

Although social stigma can be a useful deterrent, "the internet is a loose cannon," says ethicist Jim Cohen of Fordham University School of Law in New York. Online there are few checks and hardly any monitoring. Moreover, studies show that the anonymity of the net encourages people to say things they normally wouldn't. Some sites have turned into a stage for bigoted rants and stories that identify people by name.

5 Regulators find such sites hard to control. Laws on free speech and defamation vary widely between countries. In the United States, proving libel requires the victim to show that his or her persecutor intended malice, while the British system puts the burden on the defense to show that a statement is not libelous (making it much easier to prosecute). A 1996 U.S. law specifically protects the operators of websites from liability for the speech of their users. (If AOL, say, were held responsible for every poster, it would quickly go out of business.)

So, then, what's to stop a person from posting whatever he wants about you, if he can do so anonymously and suffer no repercussions? For people who use blogs and social- networking sites like diaries, putting their personal information out there for the world to see, this presents a serious risk.

Shaming victims, meanwhile, have little legal recourse. Many people share IP addresses on college networks or Wi-Fi hotspots, and many websites hide

individual addresses. Even if a victim identifies the defamer, bloggers aren't usually rich enough to pay big damage awards. Legal action may only increase publicity—the last thing a shaming victim wants.

Once unsavory information is posted, it's almost impossible to retrieve. The family of the "Star Wars Kid," who spent time in therapy as a result of his ordeal, filed suit against the student who uploaded his video, and settled out of court. But dozens of versions of his video are still widely available, all over the net. If the "Star Wars Kid" has anything to teach us, it's that shame, like the force, will always be with you.