

# RUDE, BLUNT, abrupt, outspoken, strident, vocal, direct, frank, *explicit, candid...*

*Why are we being increasingly MEAN to each other? Kerry Potter investigates*

Recently I was invited on to a live radio show to review new music releases. It was all ticking along nicely until I noticed the computer screen in front of me was a live feed of the listeners' online forum. They were having their say about the show, the music and... me. And, wow, some of them did *not* like what I was saying. 'Who is this idiot?', 'Why has she been allowed on the radio?' and 'She clearly knows nothing about music.' On and on they went, my unadoring public. Before you feel too sorry for me, bear in mind that I am a journalist and have detailed my fair share of opinions about people in print before. Yet this was the first time I'd been at the sharp end of the instant, unedited, unstinting feedback that the internet allows – and it was a deeply unpleasant experience.

I believe a culture of rudeness, cruelty and outspokenness has pervaded our lives in recent times. Indeed David Denby, a contributor to *The New Yorker*, has written a book decrying it, called *Shark: It's Mean, It's Personal and It's Destroying Our Conversation* (Picador). So why can't we play nice any more? The fact that much of our social interaction takes place online is one reason. We can pass judgement instantly and anonymously, and an off-the-cuff remark can go global in minutes. A trawl of the 'have your say' reader comments on online newspaper articles

reveals an outpouring of viciousness and opprobrium, often extraordinarily misplaced and just plain bonkers. I recently read a story about a woman giving birth on a London bus, about which someone had commented, 'I hope they fine the stupid mother for being negligent.' *What?*

Then there's the terrifying world of online parenting forums. As a new mother on maternity leave, I clicked on Mumsnet on occasion. The 'my way or the highway' attitude and rudeness of some of its members was breathtaking. It takes a lot to make me feel sorry for a politician, but I don't think even Gordon Brown or David Cameron deserved the haranguing they both received from Mumsnet's scarier members when they did web chats on the site. Where are your manners, ladies? Meanwhile, American businesswoman Penelope Trunk notoriously ►

announced on Twitter that she was having a miscarriage during a board meeting. A little too much information for my liking, but I was taken aback by the vehement response from her followers: did she really deserve to be told, 'You are a poor excuse for a human being'? You could argue that Trunk invited this kind of feedback – we have a tendency to over-share the minutiae of our lives when we're online, so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised when others respond to that – yet there's something cowardly about these modern-day versions of the poison-pen letter. If you won't put your (real) name or your face to an opinion, perhaps it's best left unsaid.

Switch on the television and you won't need to search hard to find another pointer to why we've all become so openly mean. Reality TV is the standard-bearer of cruelty and humiliation – the modern version of putting people in stocks and throwing stinky apples at them. Who wants to see Simon Cowell telling an act on *The X Factor* that they're brilliant? Boring! And remember on *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* how Katie Price was consistently voted for by viewers who wanted to see her eat bugs and be trapped in confined spaces. When she refused to play any more and walked, a tabloid front page screamed in response: 'Is this the most hated woman in Britain?'

Cultural commentator Miranda Sawyer believes people take behavioural cues from what they see on TV. 'Take *Big Brother*. They're all very confrontational, and, as a result, viewers think that's how we're supposed to interact. We start to believe that if we're not constantly telling people what we think, we're repressed.'

This seems to be a specifically female problem. Sifting through Facebook's 'hate pages' (fan sites are so last century), I notice that they tend to be created by women about women. Socially acceptable bullying? If we behaved like that towards colleagues or in the playground, disciplinary action would follow. The only A-list famous male I could find on Facebook who attracts the same unwelcome attention is David Beckham – and the page about him is run by a man who merely thinks he's an overrated footballer. It's several notches of viciousness below the others. Sawyer believes that men simply can't be bothered to be that nasty to each other: 'They just pootle around in their own little worlds. Women notice things more, they pay better attention to detail, and they love unpicking what people say.' This is particularly the case when it comes to our favourite topic of debate: what we look like and what other people look like. Exhibit A: the treatment meted out to Gemma Ward, the model who recently dared to gain a few pounds. Cue a cascade of online vitriol, including videos on YouTube comparing her 'before' and 'after' shots.

But it's not all about our love-hate relationship with celebrities and reality TV. Our penchant for nastiness can also stem from female ambition gone bad. We're supposed to have achieved equality with

men and be treated as equals in the workplace, at home, in society. But, of course, that's not actually the case. Women have to work much harder and be much more ruthless to make it to the top. And how do you communicate the fact that you're a woman to be reckoned with? You're direct, you say what you think, you're outspoken. Note how the perception of outspokenness has changed in recent years. It used to be pejorative, now it's a badge of honour. No one wants to be the timid little woman, the one who doesn't speak her mind. We think if we adopt Alan Sugar's straight-talking (translation: abrasive and unpleasant) style, we'll make it to the top too. I also detect a backlash against the 1990s Bridget Jones school of thinking. Women have moved to distance themselves from the stereotype of the neurotic, uncertain, hapless woman. This rejection

is undeniably a very good thing, but does the alternative have to be Cruella de Vil meets Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*?

The world would clearly be a nicer place if we were all a bit less rude to each other, but there are also sound medical reasons to lose the bad attitude. David Hamilton is a former scientist turned author. His latest is *Why Kindness Is Good for You* (Hay House). 'I wrote it because I wanted to demonstrate that when you show kindness and compassion, it massively impacts on your physical health. Humanity is genetically wired to be kind. If a person wanted to develop coronary artery disease, the fastest way – faster than even a poor diet and lifestyle – is to become aggressive. That way of behaving produces large amounts of free radicals in the bloodstream, which can cause disease.' If this wasn't bad enough, free radicals accelerate the ageing process – so not only can being mean make you ill, it can also give you wrinkles.

Fear not, though: Hamilton isn't asking us all to become Mother Teresa. The occasional bit of bitching is good for us. 'Offloading now and then is fine – in fact, you get a kick out of it and feel good because your brain releases endorphins, and that's OK. But when rude behaviour becomes a daily habit, that's when the collateral damage happens to your body and the free radicals build up.'

I'm all for a bit of gossip, debate and difference of opinion – the lifeblood of female conversation –

but please let's ratchet down the breathtaking rudeness. It may sound old-fashioned, but how about a return to kindness, courtesy and discretion? We'd be happier and healthier for it. My mother drilled into me that if I haven't got anything nice to say, I shouldn't say anything at all. This is a bit rich coming from the world's bluntest woman (if you think changing-room mirrors are harsh, try going clothes shopping with her), but she has a point. Call me an old hippie, but I don't want my baby daughter to have to grow up nervously picking her way through a world in which women communicate with each other by being uniformly vile. After all, aren't we all a little too old to be starring in a never-ending version of *Mean Girls*? ■

## SO CRUEL...

*Natalie Evans-Harding, features assistant*

'I tried to step into a lift with a capacity of four, to be told I'd strain it as I must count for at least two people. I'm a size 10-12.'

*Laura Davies, sub-editor*

'My boyfriend wrote a review for NME about a pop duo called Tegan and Sara, giving them four out of 10. He was subjected to a torrent of abuse, including, "This writer needs to take this s\*\*\*, roll it and shove it up his ass."'

*Amy Bannerman, assistant to the fashion director*

'On my first photo shoot, I gave my opinion on which shot was my favourite. The photographer replied loudly in front of everyone, "Darling, nobody cares what you think."'