

A Window not a Bubble

By Mike Trippitt

25 YEARS AGO a work colleague made an uncanny observation.

“Have you noticed how some drivers behave differently behind the wheel of a car to how they do if standing in the street?”

Truth was I hadn't, but he was right. He'd say: “It's that metal bubble of protection, that gives people the bravado to do and say things that they would not say or do to someone face to face.”

Of course, he meant the habit of giving offensive hand gestures to, or shouting obscenities at, pedestrians, cyclists and other drivers who had caused inconvenience, or shown poor standards of road sense.

How cathartic to hurl abuse from the safety of our motor car at another human being, for doing nothing more than, in the words of Monty Python, “incommoding the passers-by.”

After all, we are unlikely to be punched, offered a duel, or taken to the courts for slander. It's easy, safe and inconsequential. Far better than telling them what we think of them to their face or than announcing our views in the press. They're far too risky: we might get sued or even assaulted.

Behaving badly behind the wheel of a motorcar has been around since the car itself, though most would deny that road rage, as it came to be known, was something afflicting us.

My former colleague, of the Luddite school of progress, did master the motorcar, but technology has largely passed him by. So Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Emoji are but foreign languages. He lives in blissful unawares of a new, pernicious “bubble of protection.”

Recently I joined a local discussion forum on a social media platform. One post showed a man in a video behaving badly, and probably drunkenly. Forum users did not hold back. The person was named and shamed, vilified and subject to the most offensive vitriol. He was undoubtedly labelled too.

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My colleagues words came flooding back – “the bubble of protection”. How easy it is to hurl abuse, derision and insult through the safety of our smartphones and in the comfort of our own home. That little device has become our motorcar. We can say almost what we like, about almost whom we like, with almost no fear of repercussions.

We can so easily be drawn into that bubble where our sense of reason, proportion, fair play and decency is lost, and anyone with whom we disagree, or disapprove, can be given both barrels of our acerbic wit and savage tongue.

So much of what is said online goes unchallenged, and is in practice unchallengeable. So long as we stay on the right side of the criminal law we have, or so it would seem, *carte blanche* to say what we think.

Or have we?

Our use of social media and what we say on it is not an indictment of those we seek to judge. It is a judgement of us. It is the window through which we allow others to see into our hearts and our minds; to tell the world who we really are. No more likely should we be to criticise and defame online, as we would be to do so on our streets. The consequences might be greater than we think, and that little smartphone might not be the bubble of protection we had hoped.



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