

Internet is liberating the worst in us

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Steve Blake of the Los Angeles Lakers missed what would have been the winning shot in a critical game. His wife got death threats.

Singer John Legend's fiancée, Chrissy Teigen, criticized singer Chris Brown's performance on an awards show. She got death threats.

Clint Eastwood's daughter Francesca publicly destroyed a \$100,000 purse as a piece of performance art. She got death threats.

A conservative teenage activist from North Carolina posted a video supporting her state's constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. She reported death threats.

All these threats came within the last two weeks. All were delivered online.

Welcome to the seamy underbelly of the communications revolution.

Professional athletes have this expression. When the doughy guy in the stands, fortified by the overconsumption of hops and barley, yells abuse to some chiseled giant down on the field, he is said to possess "beer muscles." The aforementioned revolution has produced its equivalent. Call it "Internet courage."

It does not always manifest itself in death threats. Sample the message boards attending your average opinion column, blog or controversial news story and you will find Internet courage by the bucket — people flaming the writer and one another with gleeful abandon you know they'd never dare display in the flesh-and-mortar world.

Perhaps you remember when new technology was supposed to make us better, bind our families, strengthen our communities, bring our world together. At least, that is what was promised in all those gauzy TV commercials and futurist essays that practically glowed with the warmth of human potential.

The reality, unfortunately, has proven a more mixed bag. Yes, it is now possible to video chat with Nana who lives three states over or share notes with a colleague who works on the other side of the planet. But it is also possible to be bullied even after you've come home from Hell High and retired to the sanctity of your room. It is possible to be relentlessly stalked and viciously threatened by people you've never even met.

One imagines the twisted sorts who do that kind of thing regard it as fun. The communications revolution empowers them to commit acts of emotional terrorism on the cheap, a species of abuse whose cruelty is exceeded only by its cowardice, which is in turn exceeded only by its laziness. You can now frighten and alarm someone without leaving the comfort of your bed.