

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Leonard Pitts, Jr., is a columnist for the *Miami Herald*. He is the author of the novel, *Before I Forget*. In 2004 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in commentary. The essay below was first published on October 10, 2010.

### **In All This Information Technology, We've Lost Our Humanity**

There is another story here.

That it has escaped us thus far is not surprising. After all, the primary story, the obvious one, is compelling and sad.

In recent weeks, a string of teenagers have killed themselves after being tormented by classmates because they were, or were believed to be, gay. That includes 13-year-old Seth Walsh, who hanged himself, 13-year-old Asher Brown, who shot himself, 15-year-old Billy Lucas, who hanged himself. It includes Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old freshman at Rutgers who leapt into the Hudson River after his roommate secretly "webcammed" him making out with another man in their dorm room and streamed it live.

Add in the bizarre case of Chris Armstrong, a gay University of Michigan student who is the target of ongoing harassment by no less august a personage than Michigan Assistant Attorney General Andrew Shirvell, and it's not hard to understand why the headline here is about the bullying of gay young people.

In a 2005 Harris Poll, a staggering 90 percent of gay students (versus 62 percent of straights) reported being harassed or assaulted in school. So, yes, the headline is appropriate.

But separate Tyler Clementi from the others and you'll see: there's also another story here.

Imagine an alternate scenario. Imagine that instead of a guy, Clementi was making love with a girl when his roommate, Dharun Ravi, went to another dorm room, remotely activated his webcam, and broadcast it to the world. With the distracting filter of homosexuality removed, a troubling question emerges.

Forget gay or straight. How do you do that to someone? Anyone? How do you broadcast someone's moment of intimacy or private indiscretion for the world to laugh at? And why?

As it happens, the Clementi tragedy was roughly coincident with a video that has been making the rounds in journalism circles. It takes place in a television newsroom. As a news reader is reporting in the foreground, an intern behind her, oblivious to the live camera, picks her nose and appears to eat what she finds.

A link to the video reached my inbox with a note calling it hilarious.

I disagreed. After all, this wasn't a clip from some sitcom. This was a real person, a young

woman, finding herself reduced to a national punch line, a laughingstock, all because of one ill-considered moment.

What she did was distasteful, yes. But the decision to share it with the whole wide world was worse.

Proof that these are not isolated incidents is as close as YouTube. There is always some video going around whose calculated effect is nothing more or less than humiliation on a global scale. Technology, it seems, has unleashed an ugliness in us.

In a Facebook, iPad, automated teller, self-serve, smartphone, e-mail, voice recognition kind of world, it is increasingly possible to make it through an entire day without the bother of having to interact with other human beings. Maybe as a result, we are forgetting how.

No, there is nothing new about pulling pranks. What is new is the distance we now have from other people, this tendency to objectify them.

What is new is the worldwide reach technology now affords us.

And what is new is the cruelty, this willingness to casually destroy someone else with a few clicks of a mouse.

It is as if we have forgotten or never knew: People are not objects. They have feelings. They have intrinsic dignity and worth. And each of us is bound to respect that.

There are things you just don't do to other people, and the fact that technology makes those things easy to do doesn't make that any less true.

So yes, there is another story here, and it is wrenching, simple, and self-evident: Tyler Clementi was a human being.

And he wasn't treated like one.

## **ESSAY TOPIC**

In what ways, according to Pitts, has modern communication technology affected or altered human thought and behavior? What do you think of this views? In formulating your response, be sure to cite specific examples, which you may take from your personal experience, the observations of others, or any of your reading.