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CHARACTER ASSASSINS AND MORAL ENTREPRENEURS

Social Media and the Regulation of Morality

Joshua Reeves and Chris Ingraham

In the early days of 2013, a high school newspaper in San Diego reported that slut shaming was on the rise in local schools. According to the article, students of both sexes were scrutinizing the Facebook profiles of female students, looking for suggestive photos or evidence of other moral infractions. The offending girls were then singled out and attacked on Facebook and other social media. In the words of the high school journalist who wrote the story, “Provocative photos of girls are being posted and reposted on Facebook by both genders as a way to punish girls for taking lewd pictures” (Brice, 2013). While the paper interviewed a number of students who condemned these attacks (e.g., “I think sluts are cool. Who cares about what type of photos they take? You’re not their moms.”), several students defended shaming as an effective means of regulating their fellow students’ morality. Lily, a junior at the school, opined: “As for slut-shaming, I think it’s a good thing because it can cause self-realization for girls who are sluts. Let them take the shame and change who they are” (Brice, 2013). For Lily and many of her peers, slut-shaming is simply a way to manage the conduct of their fellow students.

With the rise of social media, many adolescent struggles for acceptance in the face of ostracism – which traditionally have been carried out in gyms, parking lots, classrooms, and hallways – have migrated online. Yet this problem is not confined to students and young adults. For people of diverse ages and backgrounds, shaming has become a popular means of ostracizing and attacking their peers for perceived immoralities. Moral entrepreneurs are those who endeavor with particular vigilance to bring others into conformance with their own moral norms and codes of appropriate behavior. Shaming is just one among several techniques that moral entrepreneurs mobilize in an effort to do so. Some others include cyber-bullying, trolling, outing, ostracizing and, conceivably, more concerted attacks like doxxing, catfishing, phishing, and DDoS campaigns that paralyze computer networks by flooding them with data. All of these techniques can be understood as forms of incivility that sow discord under the guise of regulating a moral order.

In the case of shaming (our focus in this chapter), moral entrepreneurship tends to take the argumentative form of a character assassination. Character assassinations are often conflated with *ad hominem* attacks, but argumentation theory recognizes an important difference. An *ad hominem* attack challenges someone’s *argument* through the character of the person making it. To say, “You are a person of bad character and therefore I reject your argument” is to levy an *ad hominem* attack on the basis that a person’s credibility or character invalidates the merits

of their argumentative claims (Jackson, 2006, pp. 19–21). But to say, “You are a person of bad character” – full stop – is to attack someone personally, not their argument, which makes it character assassination.¹ Shaming can take the form of an *ad hominem* attack, and would, for instance, if we imagined a disputant in an online forum attempting to discredit another’s position by shoring up evidence of hypocrisy, poor judgment, or some other character flaw. Suppose that someone in a fan community devoted to raising tree frogs admitted to having accidentally killed several frogs, yet then offered advice about how best to care for tree frogs. If someone else shamed this person for his or her personal failing to keep the frogs alive – “you murdered your frogs,” “you have no concern for living beings,” etc. – that would be an *ad hominem* attack to the extent that doing so was intended to invalidate the person’s advice on the basis of his or her failures as a person. Effectively, “You’re a bad person. Why should we listen to you?” Character assassinations operate without the added “Why should we listen to you?” When the aim of shaming is not the undermining of an argument, but rather a kind of moral regulation, therefore, shaming functions as a balder character assassination. This chapter examines how it does so in the context of our new media environment.

Our argument is that widespread conditions of digital sociality have: 1) made shame a political technology, 2) activated a thirst for moral outrage and ostracism, and 3) consolidated these consequences into an apparent belief, evident from Donald Trump to Joe Sixpack, that character assassinations are a viable and morally responsible form of social empowerment. In order to advance this three-legged thesis, we proceed in three parts, each corresponding to one of our claims. Each section also offers a different concrete example of shaming in online settings as a way to support and illustrate the more theoretical positions we intend to advance. What it all points to, we suggest, is a disconcerting current conjuncture within a longer history of attempts to regulate the behavior of others. Although shaming looks different from how it has in the past, it is still supported by classic political rationalities given new life in an age of digital media. Rather than the isolated incivilities of discrete bad actors, character assassinations that take the form of shaming are more laterally distributed attempts to regulate the moral order – at great cost to those who are shamed and, more indirectly, to those who do the shaming.

Before proceeding to make this case, however, it will be important to identify one premise from which we operate with regard to the evolving relationship between social media, character assassination, and moral regulation. The example of slut-shaming in the San Diego high school offers a particularly useful inroad to do so. Many scholars have approached the Internet as a networked domain of more or less sovereign domination through which powerful actors attack and marginalize their opponents. Adopting the conceptual vocabulary of an assassination, Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller (2014), for example, have described the emergence of a “digital pillory” that can impose a “digital mark of shame” on its victims. Traditionally, a pillory is a wooden frame designed to secure an offender’s head and hands for purposes of public display and abuse. For Hess and Waller, however, the media context has simply changed from a wooden framework to a digital screen. In other words, public shaming cannot be separated from the question of which media technologies make it possible. Looking at how shame activists filmed a drunk Australian woman urinating in public and posted the video footage to YouTube, Hess and Waller (2014, p. 102) make the interesting observation that “the media have a strong connection to public shaming, particularly in regards to ‘ordinary’ people and that humiliation has emerged in recent years as a viable and symbolically rich vehicle for social control.”

While Hess and Waller give an insightful analysis of how YouTube and commercial television stations contributed to the public humiliation of the offending woman, they overlook a related facet of how character assassinations take place in the digital age. Indeed, Hess and Waller emphasize the role of “the media” – i.e., corporate media such as cable television – in

augmenting the digital pillory by publicizing moral infractions to a broader, more general audience. Yet, as our current media culture illustrates, social media don't serve as simply networked supplements to more centralized practices of media-fueled ostracism (such as televised exposés, perp walks, and scandalous special investigations). Rather, they have given rise to new practices and cultures of character assassination that do not rely on traditionally disseminated forms of publicity. Terms like the "digital pillory," of course, are essentially *sovereign* metaphors – metaphors that are based in the governing logics of sovereign power. That is, they conjure images of a stable, monolithic figure or institution that metes out a humiliating brand of punishment in which the public is relegated to a more or less passive, consumptive role. While it might be valid to characterize a televised spectacle – à la the television show *Cheaters*, which hunts down unfaithful spouses and publicizes their misdeeds to millions of viewers – as a form of media "pillorying," this sovereign metaphor is poorly equipped to capture the complexities of character assassination in the days of social media. Twitter, Flickr, Reddit, Instagram, YouTube, and similar outlets allow citizens to locate, capture, archive, and publicize their neighbors' moral or criminal infractions; likewise, in the case of something like "revenge porn," social media allow citizens to attack their ex-partners by articulating private records to networks of ridicule and moral condemnation. So, while plenty of character assassinations might take the character of "pillories," a significant portion of these assassinations now take place in multilateral media environments that encourage dispersed, asymmetrical attacks rather than simple sovereign pillories.

"Shame" as Political Technology

The vigilance campaigns of those who shame others online often invoke a tacit moral imperative: *we are all personally accountable to speak up when we see or hear something unacceptable*. As one of us has shown, the perceived imperative exemplified by the mantra, "If you see something, say something," has American roots that long pre-date the rise of digital technologies, making lateral surveillance and citizen-policing a practice endemic to American citizenship itself – and in contexts well beyond shaming as such (Reeves, 2017). Indeed, many of the practices that get labeled "shaming" in the context of digital culture do not simply cause their targets "shame," at least not if we follow the more or less standard definition of shame put forward by media theorist Thomas Keenan (2004, p. 436): "a primordial force that articulates or links knowledge with action, a feeling or a sensation brought on not by physical contact but by knowledge or consciousness alone . . . 'a painful sensation excited by a consciousness of guilt or impropriety, or of having done something which injures reputation, or of the exposure of that which nature or modesty prompts us to conceal.'" Instead, these practices tend to initiate a form of communal punishment that would teach "offenders" (and others) a lesson. Such practices, that is, seek to manage the conduct of others by marginalizing certain forms of behavior. Online shaming – of sluts, cheaters, jerks, and otherwise – is therefore best understood as a political technology, not as the deployment or manipulation of an emotion such as shame.²

Our point, to be clear, is not simply to quibble over semantics. The emphasis on "shaming" in social theory and criminology too often takes for granted the role of emotional shame in the punishment of criminal and moral offenders.³ But in many cases, "shaming" actions cannot be best understood in terms of the emotional personal experience imposed on the offender. On the contrary, as criminologist David Karp (1998, p. 298) has pointed out, this emerging trend in shaming culture is "not driven by the practical desire to impose suffering on offenders as much as it is to clarify and enforce normative standards through some symbolically expressive means." For Karp (1998, p. 298), social exclusion "is the primary sanction in a shame penalty."

Thus, shame tends to be less conceptually valuable as an emotional *experience* than as a powerful technology of social exclusion.

Neoliberal public policy, as can be expected, has contributed to this politically creative deployment of shame. Legal theorists such as Stephen P. Garvey have noticed that shaming actions have come to play a central role in today's do-it-yourself punishment and character assassination culture. According to Garvey (1998, pp. 737–738), shaming punishments “expose the offender to public view and heap ignominy upon him in a way that other alternative sanctions to imprisonment, like fines and community service, do not . . . Moreover at a time when the costs of imprisonment consume ever larger shares of state budgets, shame may serve as a politically viable and cost-effective way of achieving deterrence. . . . as well as of satisfying the legitimate demands of retribution.” “Shaming,” then, makes good neoliberal economic sense: in the words of Toni Massaro (1991, p. 1883), “The resort to formal shaming as a criminal sanction is only one of several attempts to expand the sentencer’s arsenal in an effective, inexpensive manner.” Like the moral entrepreneurs who serve as their civilian counterparts, judges use shame as a “cost-effective” punishment that defers the punitive onus onto the general public. Judges are increasingly turning to punishments that publicly degrade the offender, such as publishing the names of prostitute patrons, requiring offenders to put special stickers on their cars or wear special shirts, or even requiring public confessions and apologies (Massaro, 1991, p. 1887). In a similar fashion, while it is generally argued that sex offender registries protect the public and are not punitive to the offender, observers like Doron Teichman (2005, p. 362) have pointed out that “the true effect of these laws is punitive, referencing the harsh non-legal sanctions triggered by these laws such as physical attacks on offenders and their property, denial of housing, and termination of employment.”⁴

Teichman (2005, p. 358) argues that these shaming sanctions tend to have two primary adverse effects: the first is personal shame and embarrassment, which, as we have pointed out, receives most critical attention. The other effect, however, is that “these measures may induce sanctions, inflicted on wrongdoers by other members of the community, such as the severing of relationships, termination of employment, and even violent retaliation. This is the external aspect of non-legal sanctions.” This “external” aspect of punishment, of course, is characterized by a market-style moral enforcement in which punishment is delegated to a community’s most vigilant and impressionable members – to outraged moral activists, employers who are susceptible to boycotts, and family members, coworkers, and acquaintances who are concerned about their own social status. Given the potential vastness of these social consequences, “shame” is hardly the most important thing at stake. Instead, it is clear that “shaming” is a form of direct social action that implicates diverse actors in a multilateral public struggle for the normalization and moral definition of society. As Marko Skoric and his colleagues (2010, pp. 182–183) have found in their research of online shaming cultures, “individuals who engage in online shaming of fellow citizens are more concerned with the (re)enforcement of social norms and promotion of civility within their societies . . . This might bring about a change in terms of how new technologies can be used for societal self-regulation via the deterrence of deviant behaviors.” In an important sense, shaming is not simply a way to establish the parameters of social norms and deviance – it is a struggle over who should be “in” and who should be “out,” a struggle over the very conditions of social membership, dismissal, and rehabilitation.

For example, in 2013 Kimberly Hall, a director of women’s ministry at a Texas Presbyterian Church, exemplified the benevolent pedagogical voice of rehabilitation when publicly shaming some of her sons’ female friends. Hall used her blog to single out a few high school girls who posted Facebook photos of themselves in sexy poses and various states of undress. Addressing

the girls, Hall (2013) wrote, “it appears that you are not wearing a bra. . . . [and] I can’t help but notice the red carpet pose, the extra-arched back, and the sultry pout. What’s up?” With her casual, hip lingo, Hall (2013) compliments the girls’ intelligence before declaring, “That post doesn’t reflect who you are at all! We think you are lovely and interesting, and usually very smart. But, we had to cringe and wonder what you were trying to do? Who are you trying to reach? What are you trying to say? I know your family would not be thrilled at the thought of my teenage boys seeing you only in your towel. . . . You don’t want our boys to only think of you in this sexual way, do you?” With benevolent condescension, Hall (2013) answers her own question, painting an alluring ideal of womanhood to which these girls should aspire: “Neither do we. We’re all more than that. . . . Every day I pray for the women my boys will love. I hope they will be drawn to real beauties, the kind of women who will leave them better people in the end.” Implying the girls to change their ways, Hall (2013) offers them an inspiring vision of moral reform:

Girls, it’s not too late! If you think you’ve made an on-line mistake (we all do – don’t fret – I’ve made some doozies, even today), RUN to your accounts and take down the closed-door bedroom selfies that make[s] it too easy for friends to see you in only one dimension. Will you trust me? There are boys out there waiting and hoping for women of character. Some young men are fighting the daily uphill battle to keep their minds pure, and their thoughts praiseworthy – just like you. You are growing into a real beauty, inside and out. Act like her, speak like her, post like her.

As so often happens in the digital age, Hall’s little blog post suddenly became an object of national attention as writers for the Huffington Post, journalists as far away as Chicago and Arizona, and countless feminist bloggers picked up the story. These observers often noted the quaint, normative moral vision that Hall’s blog post prioritized. One journalist, Deborah Cruz (2013), attacked Hall’s moral policing style, admitting that she “take[s] issue when another mother . . . takes it upon herself to bestow her passive aggressive condescension onto the entire teen female population.” When Hall quickly found herself attacked on innumerable fronts, she learned a lesson in the digital moralism she had directed in such a saccharine way to her sons’ female Facebook friends.

Yet Hall’s case teaches us more than how quickly moral outrage can spread on the web. It also shows how rehabilitative shaming has become increasingly casual and widespread in the digital age. As social media have given rise to new impulses of self-display and self-archival, they have likewise granted morally anxious personalities like Kimberly Hall access to new sources and venues for moral outrage and offense. Although Hall framed her attack in a nurturing, rehabilitative rhetoric, this rhetorical posture ultimately covered over the real struggle for social and moral reconstitution in which her slut-shaming took place. At the core of Hall’s (2013) attack, of course, lies a plea for young women to adopt her normative vision of tame femininity: “You are growing into a real beauty, inside and out. Act like her, speak like her, post like her.” While it is doubtful that Hall’s moral vision inspired any young women to stop taking sultry selfies, her rhetoric reveals the larger, underlying moral anxieties that bolster shaming practices. Perhaps most of all, Hall’s actions expose the myth of post-assassination social *rehabilitation* in all its paternalistic naiveté. By positing a rational subject who can be ridiculed and shamed into reform, the logics of rehabilitative shaming fuel the rampant moral entrepreneurism that lies behind many contemporary trends in shaming and character assassination.

Not all slut-shaming, however, is fueled by rehabilitative impulses. Indeed, perhaps most of the web’s slut-shaming endeavors are aligned with vindictive apparatuses of exposure and

marginalization. The practice of doxxing, for instance, which involves publicly exposing otherwise private documents and information about people without their consent, has been around for some time, though it has flourished because of the “new media” apparatuses that have made it so easy to do. Consider the variety of shaming websites, such as ShesAHomeWrecker.com, that allow audiences to submit profiles of women who have allegedly taken part in extramarital affairs. These profiles include photos, narratives, addresses, and phone numbers of the offending women, and users can search their archives by state. ShesAHomeWrecker.com has ventured into social media as well, where they tweet at @exposeamistress. And of course, all of these exposés (and others) are posted to their popular and frequently updated Facebook page, which have several hundred thousand “likes.” And like many of these exposé websites, ShesAHomeWrecker.com (and its counterpart HesAHomeWrecker.com) fuel a more general culture of snooping and suspicion by advertising such products as mSpy, a smartphone app that allows users to record all text messages, verbal conversations, and even locations of a targeted cell phone. It is on account of such apparatuses that doxxing and other vengeful practices have become so commonplace. Given the many resources that make vindictive behaviors possible, in other words, it’s no wonder that digital culture has cultivated a more widespread thirst for moral outrage and ostracism.

A Thirst for Moral Outrage and Ostracism

The common impulse behind shaming reminds us of Harold Garfinkel’s (1956, p. 420) classic insight that “there is no society that does not provide in the very features of its organization the conditions sufficient for inducing shame. . . . [T]here is no society whose social structure does not provide, in its routine features, the conditions of identity degradation.”⁵ In his description of “degradation ceremonies” Garfinkel set out to analyze the ways in which rituals of public condemnation like shaming are deployed to reinforce communal standards of conduct and morality. Governing through shame and condemnation, he points out, is hardly a new impulse. Rather, the processes by which social transgressions are sought out and then ceremoniously punished have simply been reinvigorated by new surveillance and communication technologies. Since the rise of social media, these technologies have become an essential force in the establishment and maintenance of moral norms. Now that ubiquitous computing has empowered most citizens to seek out, observe, record, and broadly publicize their peers’ moral infractions, digital technologies have become central to processes of collectivized moral government. Indeed, the very conditions of cohesive social identity are predicated on expressive cultural practices of moral indignation, ostracism, exclusion, and isolation. These ceremonies are continuously reproduced in social praxis, concretizing into forms of public memory and collective knowledge that allow the community to reflect on and recreate itself by its legacies of shaming and character assassination.

One of the most interesting tendencies of these assassination rituals is that, while they have normalizing effects, they normalize through the creation and reinforcement of social *division*. Describing the various practices by which the ostracized other is constituted “as a social object,” Garfinkel (1956, p. 420) asserts that these rituals introduce a chasm into social relations, “fully identifying” him or her with a class of shamed or ostracized personalities: “Persons identified for their socially categorized and socially understood behavior will be said to be ‘totally’ identified. The degradation ceremonies here discussed are those that are concerned with the alteration of total identities.” In other words, the moral or criminal offenses carried out by the shamed party are not intelligible as isolated acts, but as defining, constitutive evidence of the offender’s status as *offender*, as a member of a shifting class of outcast individuals. The shaming ceremony is the public fulfillment of this “total” reconstitution. Accordingly, for Garfinkel (1956, p. 421), these

acts of exclusion are collective rites of identity “destruction”: “The transformation of identities is the destruction of one social object and the constitution of another. . . . The other person becomes in the eyes of his condemners literally a different and *new* person. It is not that the new attributes are added to the old ‘nucleus.’ He is not changed, he is reconstituted.” This public degradation *creates* a social outcast insofar as it reconstitutes the shamed individual on the basis of his or her division from society (a fact that further belies the myth of rehabilitation). This reconstitution, therefore, is more than the alienation of a solitary individual via spectacular ostracism; it is constitutive of society in the sense that, as Garfinkel observes, society’s very existence relies on “identity degradation” and thus the structural production and maintenance of internal enemies. Rituals such as Garfinkel’s assassination ceremonies, therefore, are an essential method of societal maintenance.

As with the digital “pillory,” Garfinkel’s analysis could be supplemented with some further critical insight. For example, shaming ceremonies are hardly sufficient in themselves to effect a total reconstitution of a social enemy. This ostracism must be reproduced through micro-practices of exclusion throughout the social order. While shaming rituals might galvanize widespread public disapproval, they are only one aspect of more participatory and communal processes of ostracism. It is also important to note that shaming rituals take place in ongoing struggles for social reconstitution; therefore, they do not always create “the enemy” against which society defines itself, but rather assert *claims* about who should be *an* enemy. While the medieval pillory might have been a successful instrument of identity reformation by reducing its victim to a more or less universally recognized class of outcasts, the pillory-ritual’s efficacy depended on the accepted authority of the sovereign to revoke bonds of citizenship. In twenty-first century America, however, particularly since the rise of social media, many everyday citizens attempt to use the ostensible public-ness of the Internet to carry out similar rites of identity destruction against their peers. While these efforts do not have the same effect as pillories, they are an important – if often clumsy and ineffective – impulse of character assassination, moral policing, and social activism.

Perhaps most importantly, these trends illustrate how our society’s thirst for moral outrage and marginalization has been fueled by the participatory media climate of the digital era. This thirst has resulted in the proliferation of shaming practices and discourses. Mark Peters (2013) of *Slate* magazine, for instance, observes how the overuse of the term “shaming” has rendered it a dull instrument of social critique. Reflecting on this overuse, Peters bemoans the fact that: “Breast-feeding advocates are sometimes accused of formula-shaming moms. I’ve also seen *social-media-shaming*, *tattoo-shaming*, *luxury-shaming*, *attendance-shaming*, *snack-shaming*, *bigot-shaming*, *privilege-shaming*, *salary-shaming*, *single-shaming* (i.e., shaming the nonmarried or nonattached), [and] *fedora-shaming*.” For Peters, this careless extension of the “shaming” label to every form of criticism is potentially dangerous, as it risks emptying the word of its important political content. Peters (2013) argues, “We really should restrain ourselves from mindlessly slapping this label on every single thing in the world that makes us feel bad. I’d hate to lose such a potent word to the Buzzword Abyss, especially since real shaming – the kind mostly done by misogynist jerks or terrible parents – is a true disgrace.” While Peters contends that we should save the term “shaming” for those who really deserve it, we are less concerned with maintaining the term’s integrity than showing how its clichéd circulation is a symptom of the contemporary state of American moral regulation and character assassination. From our perspective, “shaming” is less a politically charged term than a historically situated social practice that has gathered significant momentum in our hyper-mediated present. In fact, although shaming is fueled by our contemporary technocultural milieu, it is still backed up by classic political rationalities based on the ostracism of moral deviants.

We see this, for example, in a conservative defense of slut-shaming penned by James E. Miller, the editor-in-chief of the libertarian Ludwig von Mises Institute of Canada. After using his blog to declare, “Slut-shaming now, slut-shaming tomorrow, slut-shaming forever,” Miller (2013) proclaims himself “an enthusiastic proponent of the modern practice of shaming sluts.” In a predictable move, Miller (2013) goes so far as to locate slut shaming at the foundation of Western civilization: “Frowning upon lewd behavior is not exactly a new phenomenon. It has existed since Christianity, in Rod Dreher’s words, brought about a reasoned liberation from the ‘sexually exploitive Greco-Roman culture.’ . . . Where man would only use his body for frivolous, short-lived pleasure, he now found purpose in himself as a being worthy of respect and reserve.” For Miller, “slutty” behavior is reminiscent of a more barbaric, hedonistic age in which sexual exploitation ruled the day. Slut-shaming, therefore, “is a welcome course of action – even more so in an era where young women wear their craving for erotic climax as a badge of honor . . . True human power comes from resisting hedonistic temptation. It comes from placing reason above animalistic urges” (Miller, 2013). Lambasting contemporary American sexual morality and popular culture, Miller goes on to argue that earlier generations shunned sexual inhibition because “they were championing a standard of decency that holds mankind (and womankind, to please the more gentle reader) up as more than a fornicating wildebeest” (2013). Slut-shaming, therefore, isn’t just about causing an individual shame; it’s about protecting society from an invasive moral threat. Commenting on Miley Cyrus’s bizarre, titillating romp at the 2013 MTV Music Awards,⁶ Miller (2013) avers: “In truth, I am happy to join the shunning. Social ostracization is one of the most peaceful means for defending mores.”

Miller’s slut-shaming provides an excellent illustration of the ties between character assassination and broader schemes of moral regulation. Miller, of course, is not really trying to cause Miley Cyrus any deep personal shame; rather, he advocates slut-shaming as a means of regulating the social by enforcing traditional gender and sexual norms. Merely the term “slut,” Miller (2013) avers, implies the social fissures that accompany ostracism: “The term itself [slut shame] is borderline tautological. In a more sane time, promiscuousness was not a redeeming feature. It was looked down upon, and rightfully so. To call someone a slut was simultaneously an act of shaming. As far as I am concerned – and I would also wager the wider public – the perception has not changed.” In this larger fight for the moral direction of society, “slut-shaming” is less about causing shame than about naming those who deserve to be shunned. This attempted constitution of an ostracized class, we’ll remember, “is one of the most peaceful means for defending mores.” To Miller, the identification and isolation of the immoral is a fundamental process of civilization. We maintain that character assassinations are also often mobilized for the aim of social empowerment.

Character Assassination as Social Empowerment

Perhaps the crowning example of the digital slut-shaming movement is Cheaterville.com, which dubs itself “The #1 Online Dating Resource in the World.” In addition to its Facebook page, which has more than 350,000 likes, it also maintains a popular Twitter account, which is introduced with Cheaterville’s trademarked slogan: “Don’t Be the Last to Know™ – If you’ve been Cheated on, or know someone who has, visit us to report on, find out about, and denounce the misdeeds of Cheaters.”⁷ To facilitate amateur investigations and exposés, Cheaterville.com allows users to search by city and even to use an interactive map to see cheating “hot spots” around the United States. When a visitor clicks on a given city, s/he is greeted with all of that city’s cheater profiles, which are accompanied by lurid, submitter-generated tag lines (e.g., “Liar, cheater, & hypocrite!” and “Husband Cheats with Classmate Who Cheats on Her

Bf”). These profiles allow users to view photographs as well as the name, Zodiac sign, maiden name, sexual preference, age, profession, education level, eye color, weight, and height of the exposed “Cheater.” Users are even encouraged to gather and post photographic evidence of the cheating taking place. And, if a particular cheater is especially unfortunate, s/he might be named “Cheater of the Day,” where her or his profile will be given pride of place on the website’s front page.

Each profile also features submitter-generated narratives that detail the Cheater’s daily habits, last known whereabouts, and sexual proclivities. One jilted lover, for example, had this to say about his ex-girlfriend: “She is a lying, cheating, manipulative **** stricken narcissistic sociopath.” After detailing a few of the woman’s sexual transgressions, the poster alleges that she has a sexually transmitted disease: “so future victims, beware. . . . [I]f you can look past the 4lbs of makeup, the pushup bras, spanx to hold everything in place and the fact that she has **** then more power to you. . . . Gentlemen you have been warned” (Cheaterville, 2014a). Cheaterville’s narratives illustrate how these sites offer outlets for vindictive ex-lovers to lash out in revenge against the men and women who have jilted them. Many Cheaterville users adopt a familiar refrain, justifying their hostile behavior by appealing to the righteousness of exposing the immoral. One poster, for example, denounces his ex-girlfriend before noting that all such women “deserve to be outed for exactly what they are”: “[The woman] is so nasty that she actually was cheating on her husband with her boss and cheating on her boss with another poor soul who works for her! Can’t make this up! . . . A double cheat! This lady has SERIOUS issues and is disgustingly low. . . . She just cant [sic] help herself. They deserve to be outed for exactly what they are” (Cheaterville, 2014b). Cheaterville users, however, are not the only ones who promote this pedagogy of revenge. Cheaterville’s proprietor, James McGibney, agreed with an interviewer for *Platinum Girl Celebrity Blog* when she asserted, “It’s apparent the overarching intent [of Cheaterville] is to empower victims and prevent those who could be” (Taylor, 2012). Toward this goal, Cheaterville’s master account occasionally singles out high priority targets for crowdsourced surveillance. For example, in April 2014 the message happened to be, “[Cheaterville.com] Needs Your Help Identifying the Current Physical Location of Convicted Felon and Cyber-Stalker Thomas R.”⁸

These familiar rhetorics of empowerment and cooperative crowdsourcing gloss over the political realities in which Cheaterville and similar shaming sites operate. Cheaterville, for example, is a hotbed of sexist outrage. In 2012, McGibney boasted that of Cheaterville’s almost one million posts, eighty-one percent are against women “cheaters” (HuffPostLive, 2012).⁹ Unsurprisingly, women have always borne the brunt of the Cheaterville blast. In fact, Cheaterville is the tame reincarnation of IsAnyoneUp.com, a “revenge porn” site that encouraged users to submit nude photographs of ex-lovers. In the words of IsAnyoneUp.com’s founder, Hunter Moore, the site was “a place where revengeful exes come for a peace of mind [sic]” (Cheaterville, 2012). After spending a few days getting to know Moore, *Rolling Stone* journalist Alex Morris described the will-to-assassinate that drew Moore toward revenge porn: “the Internet can provide a viable career alternative if you know how to read and manipulate its trends. This involves giving people what they want and, according to Moore, what people want is ‘to hurt one another’ and ‘to get back at the people that hurt them’” (Morris, 2012). The 350,000 unique daily visitors drawn to IsAnyoneUp’s project, however, were soon disappointed to find that McGibney had acquired IsAnyoneUp.com and remolded it into the more respectable Cheaterville.com (see Doder, 2013). While IsAnyoneUp had used nude photos to shame (mostly women) ex-lovers – between fifteen and thirty per day (Morris, 2012) – Cheaterville eschewed pornography and opted for a slicker, more politically correct facade.

Despite this shift away from revenge porn and its doxxing-like nature, however, Cheaterville has stuck by its vindictive guns. This is nowhere clearer than in its advertisements, which sell the opportunity for vengeful attacks. One ad, in particular, urges its potential users: “Don’t go down without a fight! Fight Infidelity, Post a Known Cheater Now!” Tapping into the vindictive impulses in current shaming culture, the ad features a well-dressed woman wearing boxing gloves, crouched to her knees and punching a man in the groin. The male cheater is doubled over in pain, reeling from the blow. Cheaterville, the ad implies, empowers jilted lovers to “fight” back against cheaters on a democratized battlefield: the digital exposé.

Cheaterville.com, of course, did not emerge in a cultural vacuum – in fact, it arose in a network of exposé business enterprises that also includes Bullyville.com, a site dedicated to outing so-called bullies. While it might seem strange that Bullyville.com and Cheaterville.com are joint ventures, McGibney is not the only entrepreneur to bring together diverse exposé websites under a single commercial umbrella. For example, Cyrus Sullivan, the founder of CyberBullyingReport.com, also began IllegalAlienReport.com – a site that allowed citizens to report people they suspect of being undocumented workers – as well as STDCarriers.com, which allowed users to generate profiles of people with sexually transmitted diseases. The fact that these shaming sites emerge from the same entrepreneurial cloth reveals an important element of digital culture: the web’s exposé/assassination genre responds and contributes to a growing tendency to locate cheaters, “sluts,” bullies, rude drivers, undocumented workers, the politically or culturally insensitive, the obese, and countless other offenders in order to expose them to the scrutiny and condemnation of their peers. Examples of such platforms abound. On Twitter, men can investigate their potential love interests on @hoesExposed and @STDDatabase. The social network Flickr has provided users with an opportunity to share photos of all kinds of annoying or offensive behavior. Some of the more lighthearted of these include “ycantpark,” which allows users to submit photos of selfish or sloppy drivers, and “IHateStupidPeople,” which encourages users to track down and submit photos of various sorts of embarrassing and bizarre public behavior. Celebrity culture, too, is awash in crowdsourced celebrity surveillance sites, which encourage people to track down celebrities and submit narratives and photos that detail everything from the scandalous to the utterly mundane. And Reddit, in particular, is filled with countless subreddits devoted to its users’ lateral surveillance and amateur exposés.

Conclusion

Amid this explosive growth of shaming culture, Cheaterville.com and other slut-shaming enterprises are more indicative of a general surveillance/exposé cultural impulse than an entrepreneurial concern with a single moral issue. This observation, in fact, allows us to depart from Garfinkel and other shame theorists: while they focus on how these ceremonies affect the shamed, we would also like to observe how these ceremonies affect the shamers. Critics of digital shaming tend to overlook this larger structural flaw in the contemporary ethics of shaming and lateral surveillance. Lauding the socially conservative role of shaming, for instance, Daniel Solove (2008, p. 102) writes: “Without the threat of shame, people would transgress norms, making society less orderly and civil. But . . . although shaming is done to further social order, it paradoxically can have the opposite result. Instead of enhancing social control and order, Internet shaming often careens out of control. It targets people without careful consideration of all the facts and punishes them for their supposed infractions without proportionality. Shaming becomes uncivil, moblike, and potentially subversive of the very social order that it tries to protect.” While Solove is right to warn against the dangers of shaming, he critiques it for the wrong reasons. Instead of

worrying about shoring up the social order by policing online “incivility” and norm subversion, perhaps we should consider these transgressions to be less harmful than the larger cultural shift toward obsessive moral policing. Indeed, as Gray Cavender, Kishonna Gray and Kenneth Miller (2011, pp. 255–256) have pointed out, these acts of shaming are often “less about lowering the status of the degraders . . . and more about reaffirming the status of the degraders.” The status of the shamers, therefore, is as much at stake as the status of the shamed. In this present conjuncture of cultural and technological development, we are seeing the emergence of a peculiarly digital brand of the moralistic seeing-saying citizen. We all risk being pulled into this brand of high-octane moralism in the name of safety, security, and moral purity. But amid the trendy banality of character assassination in the digital age, moral policing itself is the greater social danger, not sluts, immigrants, fedora-wearers, bigots, bullies, or even the tattooed.

In the digital present, we are confronted with a convergence of technical and cultural momenta that is characterized by a growing drive to find, document, and display others’ transgressions. This provides an important point of contrast to the kind of moral vigilance often enacted in the past. To take just one example, the temperance movement to reduce alcohol-use in the 1800s was a moral crusade fought principally on legal and scientific grounds. The legal tensions that structured that movement’s activism styles tend to be less important in digital shaming culture. Moreover, while much of the temperance movement based its moral activism in scientific knowledge and legal struggle, with digital shaming we have moved fully from a scientific and juridical marginalization of the subject into more amateur apparatuses of ostracism and rehabilitation. Perhaps most of all, while temperance activists took personal responsibility for altering their peers’ conduct by directly confronting them with communicative action, this sort of interpersonal evangelism has in many cases given way to the passive-aggressive phenomenon of public “shaming.” The onus for moral correction, therefore, is deferred by the vigilant citizen and placed into the hands of other members of the community. The explosive growth of ubiquitous computing and social media provides everyday citizens with the tools necessary to participate in these fast-paced digital battles for ostracism and exclusion (Ingraham and Reeves, 2016). What we have, then, is not simply a class of gatekeepers that singles out social offenders for ostracism, although that, of course, continues to happen in certain venues. Rather, we are left to deal with a decentralized phenomenon of social warfare that brings to mind Andrejevic’s (2007, pp. 43–44) characterization of vigilance in the digital age: the tendency “to pit all against all in a manner that undermines a sense of the social and threatens to replace community with a variant of hypersuspicious survivalist individualism.” This pitting of all against all, therefore, isn’t simply bad for the assassinated; it’s bad for the assassins, as well.

Notes

1. Thanks to John Jackson for his elegant formulation of this distinction.
2. For a similar conclusion, see Cobb, 2007.
3. In addition to the authors we address later in the chapter, see Sedgwick, 2003; Ngai, 2007; Woodward, 2009.
4. Also see Foucault, 2009.
5. Also see Williams, 1942.
6. See the video archived here: “Miley Cyrus Unplugged,” *MTV.com*, September 4, 2013, www.mtv.com/shows/miley_cyrus_unplugged/we-cant-stop-blurred-lines-give-it-2-u-medley/942064/video/#id=1720754.
7. See <https://twitter.com/CheaterVille>.
8. The post actually specifies “Bullyville,” Cheaterville’s companion anti-bullying site. In addition, I have abbreviated the alleged offender’s name. See www.cheaterville.com/?page=articles&id=100554.
9. It is interesting to note that forty-percent of those posts, or about thirty-two percent overall, were posted by other women.

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