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Avowal is Not Enough: Foucault and Public Shaming in a Socially Mediated World

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Foucault described avowal as a performance in which individuals confess their sins and reveal a truth, allowing society to assess, forgive, and move on. Traditional structures of avowal have become ineffective due to the rising culture of secondary orality on social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter. When combined with omniscient surveillance enabled by the same social media, individuals who come under fire for wrong-doing become victims of a public shaming cycle that cannot be escaped through traditional methods of avowal. This essay explores how citizens are turned into individual cyberpanopticons and made complicit in this punitive shaming cycle, and how a social turn can be made back to avowal.

When Fargo, North Dakota mom Cindy Bjerke became fed up with her 18-year-old daughter's spoiled behavior, she performed an increasingly common punitive parenting maneuver: public shaming via social media (Mazza, 2014). Bjerke posted to a local online garage sale Facebook page, informing the entire community that she was selling the Katy Perry tickets she had purchased for her daughter (at a $20 loss, no less) because she found her child's recent behavior too childish to merit attending the event. The choice to publicly shame individuals whose behavior we deem out-of-line – whether those individuals be our own offspring or complete strangers – is increasingly enabled by the rapidly expanding capabilities of social media. Ronson's 2015 bestseller *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* chronicled some of the most infamously crucified individuals in recent popular culture history. Lindsey Stone, for example, was photographed mocking the sign requesting "Silence and Respect" posted in Arlington National Cemetery. The one-off, tasteless joke photo of a crude gesture cost Lindsey her job and forced her into reclusive hiding for more than a year, as death threats, rape threats, emotional flaming, and abuse continually flowed in her direction via the Internet. Even after finding new employment, she lives in constant fear that her one-time indiscretion will resurface to rob her of her livelihood (Ronson, 2015, p. 205-209).

Despite possessing little knowledge of such individuals' biases, political leanings, or personal attributes, we as a mass public feel entitled to attack them on a lasting, vindictive, and deeply hurtful level. And in the current socially mediated news and entertainment climate, when Twitter claims 316 million active users and Facebook has 1.13 billion, drawing a crowd to shame perceived wrong-doers is easier than ever before (Twitter, 2016; Facebook, 2016). In this essay, the author uses Foucault's description of the Panopticon and performances of avowal in conjunction with the divergent effects of social media on surveillance, compliance, and belonging to assess the current shaming epidemic, ultimately seeking to understand why using social media as a court of public opinion to persistently humiliate wrong-doers subverts their inner processing of shame and guilt and drastically undermines the traditional process of apology and redemption.

Foucault (1975) conceptualized the Panopticon as a means of top-down surveillance authorized by the state or an otherwise legitimized institution; contemporary social media capabilities have shifted the power inherent in the Panopticon and dispersed across a broad citizenry completely willing to monitor the misdeeds of their fellow individuals. In order to tear down the current public shaming epidemic and allow a new form of avowal to flourish, we must divest ourselves of the cyberpanopticon functions we have assumed and resume a view of our fellow citizens characterized by empathy, rather than suspicion. This essay proposes that the culture of public shaming has strengthened because traditional discussions of avowal are no longer enough to compensate for shifts in agency enabled by social media and digital technology. By humanizing wrongdoers rather than policing each other, we as digitally mediated culture may arrive at a more fitting view of the Panopticon not as a state sponsored monolith, but as a widely dispersed individual function that swiftly overwhelms individuals without constant reflexivity and awareness.

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Origins of a Shaming Epidemic

Avowal in the 20th Century

More dogged examples of public shaming and persistent humiliation can easily be found by turning toward figures of (inter)national notoriety. Monica Lewinsky, the put-upon mistress of President Bill Clinton, hid from public scrutiny for more than a decade after the 1998 scandal consumed political and gossip media alike. When the now-43-year-old Lewinsky finally broke her public silence in a *Vanity Fair* editorial, she opined the cold, disaffected attitude the nation seemed to display as a result of the distanced perspective electronic devices can provide to us. "Having lived humiliation in the most intimate possible way, I marvel at how willingly we have all signed on to this new way of being" (Lewinsky, 2014, n.p.). Lewinsky's forlorn narrative explained that her story rises and falls in popularity as a late-night/satire punchline throughout political cycles; those cycles of attention have decimated her personal romantic life and her chances of steady professional employment. This is a person who, despite one degree from a prestigious liberal arts college and another from the London School of Economics, has never been able to escape the dehumanizing labels of That Woman or the Blow Job Queen. Her experience happened just on the cusp of the current hypermediated news and entertainment climate, and 20 years of paranoia and anxiety have closely followed at her heels.

The practice of shaming a social wrongdoer is longstanding, vastly predating the United States and our particular political dramas. Two things have changed in the past decade: the relationship between the wrongdoer and a misdeed, and the public's willingness to grant forgiveness via a process called avowal. Foucault (1981/2014) defined avowal as "a verbal act through which the subject affirms who he is, binds himself to this truth, places himself in a relationship with regards to another, and modifies at the same time his relationship to himself" (p. 17). In other words, avowal is an embodied performance, requiring full physical and verbal commitment to convincing the audience that one is worthy of forgiveness. Foucault traces the term throughout history, beginning with a parable about chariot racing in ancient Greece, progressing through early Christian rituals of penance and monasticism, and finally arriving at the modern social role of the penitent, describing repeatedly the recurring patterns of avowal as a means to find the truth in a situation and reconcile with it. His central query regards the place and role of truth-telling in the judicial system; however, in the era of social media, globalization, and online disinhibition, the emphasis has shifted from the perpetrator's truth-telling to the accuser's placement of blame. Foucault maintained that avowal, or the "verbal act through which the subject affirms who he is, binds himself to this truth, places himself in a role of dependence with regards to another, and modifies at the same time his relationship to himself" is a key facet of the punitive or judicial process (p. 17). We could verbally disclose wrong-doings to be absolved of their weight and impact through a process called *exagoreusis*, which necessitates an external expression of the internal thought processes that reveal a relationship of obedience to someone or something else (Foucault, 1988). Foucault further emphasized that the performance of *exagoreusis* displays the permanence of such total obedience, completely subjugating one's own will and self before what- or whoever is deemed as a worthy master, whether that be God, a confessor, family, or society at large. Historically, to make an avowal a person would contemplate her actions and submit her own will before prostrating herself in front of another in order to be made back into a person seen as acceptable by society (Foucault, 1988). Performing the renunciation of misdeeds always required a strong degree of verbal self-disclosure, but the social contract affirmed that in exchange for such self-flagellation forgiveness would be offered – or if not forgiveness, then at least forgetfulness. Putting oneself beside one's mistake carries the expectation that the power of the self-disclosure should be enough to neutralize the misdeed. President Richard Nixon's apology for his actions during the Watergate scandal exemplifies avowal in the 20th century. As Nixon explained to interviewer David Frost,

> I had let down my friends, I let down the country, I let down our system of government and the dreams of all those young people that ought to get into government but will think it is all too corrupt and the rest. Most of all I let down an opportunity I would have had for two and a half more years to proceed on great projects and programs for building a lasting peace. . . . Yep, I let the American people down. And I have to carry that burden with me for the rest of my life. My political life is over. (Nixon, 1977)

Despite the heaviness of Nixon's statement that his political life was over, he went on to publish multiple memoirs and maintained good-natured connections with other Presidents and political or media professionals. In fact, over the ensuing decades, Nixon's previous accomplishments, particularly as a foreign affairs authority, have received increasing amounts of coverage (Cyr, 2014; Miller Center, 2015). His apology functioned as a way for both the President and the public to examine Nixon the man side-by-side with the Watergate scandal and consider how each proportionately relates to the other. To complete his act of *exagoreusis,* Nixon avowed his misdeeds in front of the power of the American people, allowing both parties to move forward with a modified set of information and opinions regarding the scandal before firmly relegating it to the past. The literature on image repair is extensive and can be referenced here for more detail on how public apologies such as Nixon's are intended to ameliorate the relationship between the self and others once trust and goodwill have been damaged (see Benoit, 2015 or Ware & Linkugel, 1973). However, because these strategies are focused on ways to evade or circumvent blame rather than openly admitting to wrong-doing, they have not been extensively considered here.

Avowal in the 21st Century

In the Twittersphere (and other social media forms), an avowal of wrong-doing like Nixon's is no longer enough to exonerate the sinner. To understand, let us examine the case of Jonah Lehrer. Lehrer is a journalist and author who was discovered to have fabricated a significant portion of the quotations and stories in his work, leading to two of his books being pulled from retail shelves and his dismissal from his position as a staff writer at Wired.com and *The New Yorker*. As an apology, Lehrer delivered a public speech in which he blatantly admitted his transgressions and apologized to anyone who had purchased his books and subsequently felt cheated or betrayed – all while standing in front of a giant screen scrolling reactionary tweets from the public in real time. While a few users pointed out that this particular punishment seemed "cruel and unusual" and was "basically a 21st century town square flogging" (Ronson, 2015, p. 48), most tweeters gleefully lambasted Lehrer for the inadequacy of that apology, believing him to be unrepentant for his actions or merely up to old tricks to regain popularity. A significant portion of Ronson's book chronicling the effects of public shaming revolves around Lehrer, who reports that his regrets are all-consuming. Not even time is healing the effects of the shame, he explained, calling the loss of career, status, and respect "miserable and haunting" (Ronson, 2015, p. 59). Even today, more than two years after the scandal broke, a Google search for Jonah Lehrer returns pages full of results about his shame, his mistakes, and his supposed lack of conscience, not his attempts at telling the truth and apologizing. Lehrer has yet to experience a Nixonian reclamation of any of his achievements. Akin to Lewinsky's experience, his public shaming has caused him to retreat deeply into fear and paranoia rather than re-emerge as a stronger, wiser individual.

The contrast between Lehrer and Nixon (men who each made choices considered egregious in their respective professions) raises the question: was Foucault wrong about the place of avowal? In the hypermediated 21st century world of instant, transnational digital connections, the answer is frequently and unfortunately yes. Despite Foucault's assurance that avowal will bring freedom or transformation, Lehrer and others like him find themselves bound more strongly than ever to their misdeeds with no hope of verbally modifying that relationship to lessen the transgression. When Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* was first published in 1975, the total number of homes in the U.S. receiving a daily paid newspaper subscription was just 60 million (Communications Management, 2011). Foucault had no way of predicting how social media would radically alter the implications of his theories. Further, contemporary social media scholars struggle to keep pace with the emergence of new forms of online communication. In explanation, Herbig and Hess (2012) said that "developing ways of studying audiences should not only account for both what and how people consume but also should involve them in the production" (p. 272). Because social media is participatory by nature, these platforms cannot be studied comprehensively without paying attention to the needs, preferences, and misgivings of both original authors and readers or responders. The researcher's task of defining and delineating the functionality of social media is further complicated when we consider that e-mails, Internet chat forums and discussion boards, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter are not just distinct from more traditional forms of written or mediated communication due to their participatory nature; they each have specific utilities, structural constraints, and user bases that set them apart from other platforms.

We can see clear differences between platforms at even the most basic structural level. Blogs and discussion boards rely on long, content-heavy posts arranged on a website in reverse-chronological order, showing the most recent first and progressing back through time in an orderly fashion. Audiences depend on this order and structure

to build a friendly, trusting relationship with the author. This stands in contrast to microblogs like Twitter, with each post set to 140-character limit and a non-chronologically ordered stream or feed that prioritizes what other viewers found favorable. Because scholars recommend focusing on mediated identities in context, contingent upon user history, experiences, and local digital situations, the portability of apps and the mobility of the average social media user introduces one more layer of complexity into understanding how digital media alters our relationship to ourselves and each other (Bjork-James, 2015; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Therefore, distinct considerations are necessary to analyze patterns of communication across multiple social media platforms (including the newly emerging outlets such as Snapchat, Unseen, YikYak, and Whisper that compound the complexity of the social media landscape), and to define how our online and offline selves function in this networked web.

The Effects of Digital Shaming

The problems addressed above arise not within Foucault's carefully elucidated discussion of avowal, but rather when we attempt to uncritically transpose ideas created in a pre-Internet society straight into the morass of digital culture. Once we accept the altered landscape of shaming and avowal, the question now becomes whether social media moved Foucault's theory into the future or regressed it into the past. The Twitter user who likened Lehrer's treatment to town square floggings was fairly close to the truth. Foucault described the trials of a woman adulterer performing penance: "she stood among the ranks of the penitents, the bishop, the priests, and the weeping populace crying with her, her hair disheveled, deathly pale, her hands soiled, her head sullied with ashes, and she humbly bowed" (Foucault, 1981/2014, p. 109). In this ritual, termed *exomologesis*, the public wants to see the sinner's awareness of sin manifested. The focus herein lies not on repentance or forgiveness, but on the sense of being tarnished, cast out, full of everlasting remorse. Foucault is careful to call attention to the fact that *exomologesis* entails not an avowal of sin, but a grandiose display of awareness of the state of being a sinner, the sin committed, and the all-consuming remorse resulting from the sin that leads to the will to cease committing objectionable acts. Note that Christianity is inextricable from this concept, but yet the sinner's desperate desire to be free from sin does not guarantee the forgiveness of the observers. Correspondingly, when we collectively lambast an individual for plagiarism, a tasteless joke, or a racist comment online, the motivation behind the act is not to convince the wrong-doer that he is redeemable or that he has learned and improved as a person, but rather that he is now and forever fallen. Lehrer has not been active in social media since the scandal erupted: the last post from @jonahlehrer, dated February 13, 2013, reads "Here is the text of my speech. I'm deeply sorry for what I've done." Psychologists widely consider the ability to forget a vital part of creativity and mental acuity (Storm & Patel, 2014). How are we harming ourselves by disabling the ability to forget unfavorable action and move on? Considering an answer to that query requires exploring the similarities of social observation and civil obligations that are resurging in the contemporary age of secondary orality and observability.

The early Christian societies Foucault described in his texts were characterized partially by a collective sense of guilt, and certainly a prioritized sense of social order enabled by the close-knit social structures in smaller communities. As society enlarges, such bonds become difficult to sustain, and old orders of discipline are replaced via necessity. As previously discussed, Foucault's discussion of modern disciplinary tactics revolves around the Panopticon, an architectural feature of prisons and institutions that grants the commanding or enforcing entity total view of the enforced population at all times. The observed have no way of knowing when they are being watched, but must live under the knowledge that they are able to be observed at literally any moment (Foucault, 1975). Foucault (1975) further explained that the major effect of the Panopticon is to render prisoners permanently, vividly aware of their own visibility, thus guaranteeing the continued function of authoritarian power. Broadly speaking, the Panopticon has come to stand in for the idea of a society under constant observation, and the corresponding effects that type of totally visibility has on a society and social power dynamics. The norms of digital consumers in 21st century America make it abundantly evident that when a population is told that an ever-watchful eye is always turned upon them, the need to exercise legitimate physical authority wanes. Even from childhood, we are told that we must be good children or else we might not receive any holiday bounty, because the watchful eye of Santa Claus can always see us, wherever we go. As adults, we receive a less fanciful but hardly different story. We must be careful about what we do and say: the National Security Administration is tracking phone records, there are cameras on every street corner, and more and more professions are acquiring the status of mandatory reporters. Performing

the role of good citizen becomes a full-time job, and the Panopticon becomes not an external force, but rather an automated internal impulse – and furthermore, an impulse that urges us to turn against each other rather than resist legitimate external mechanisms of power.

Power and Agency in the Cyberpanopticon

Popular logic might seem to suggest that an increase in overbearing external forces of regulation and observation would lead to rebellion, à la the American Revolutionary War, the French Rebellion, or the Arab Spring. Most recently, we have seen isolated cases of protest against police brutality and institutional abuse in New York City, Baltimore, and Ferguson, Missouri. But, in an increasingly mediated society, knowing whom to rebel against is less and less obvious. Gandy (2006) warned that digital records of our lives constitute a permanent, ever-expanding archive – and unlike memories, which can shift and mutate with the experiences of the memory owner, archives are locked into a frozen representation of an expired state of being. With such an endless source of knowledge available exterior to ourselves, trusting our own experiences and knowledge is rendered increasingly difficult. Considering, as Bossewitch and Sinnreich (2012) explained, that social power is constituted by what is alternately concealed and revealed, the methods we use to accumulate and distribute that knowledge matter a lot. When the balance of social power shifts outside of memory and experience into the hands of whomever controls the digital archives and cyberspace, rebelling against surveillance power suddenly becomes a battle against the Hydra. Power, as Foucault (1976) defined it, then becomes omnipresent, because "insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, it is simply the overall effect that emerges from all of these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement" (p. 93). Now these concatenations are multiplied not only by what we are currently doing or engaged in, but by the archive of everything we have done before – every call or message we have ever sent, every person we have pretended to be, every decision that left a trail of keystrokes like breadcrumbs that may easily be traced back to us.

Additionally, Campbell and Carlson (2002) suggested that these surveying powers are so difficult to identify in cyberspace because the capitalist system has effectively convinced the mass public that being linked into the system is a necessary part of living comfortably within the social system. We may hesitate to turn over our daily routine, habits, preferences, and desires to a government agent in person – but online, we happily input all of that data as soon as we perceive that it might make our purchasing decisions or daily tasks slightly simpler. Poster (1990) warned of the damage privacy would incur in the aftermath of the Internet long before social media emerged on the scene:

> The population participates in its own self-constitution as subjects of the normalizing gaze of the Superpanopticon. We see databases not as an invasion of privacy, as a threat to a centered individual, but as the multiplication of the individual, the constitution of an additional self, one that may be acted upon to the detriment of the "real" self without that "real" self ever being aware of what is happening. (p. 97)

Poster's warning about the ubiquitous presence of databases storing our purchasing preferences, credit scores, addresses, phone calls, and more has only become stronger as multiple accounts are linked together across devices and platforms.

Consider, for example, the commonplace nature of storing personal information in a prolific array of digital locations. Campbell and Carlson (2002) succinctly pointed out that despite cultural fears of spying and government intervention or manipulation, the majority of us still willingly sign up to be monitored and manipulated by corporate interests. Google and online retailers save bank account numbers, credit cards and household bills run on autopay settings, and the advertisements seen on a Facebook profile sneakily mimic the users' recent Amazon searches. Bossewitch and Sinnreich (2012) added that the younger generation is disproportionately influenced by the internalization of these transparent data norms, and since corporations frequently adjust or update their privacy and disclosure policies without overtly notifying the user, individuals have even more of a tenuous grasp on the control of their information than they might presume. From every angle – personal, economic, professional – loosened privacy standards, permanent data recollection, and constant watchfulness change our relationship to our knowledge of ourselves and our actions. Our social identities are caught up in a plethora of online media outlets (e.g., Twitter,

Facebook, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Instagram) just as much or more than our financial identities, and victims learn the hard way that if even one social avatar misbehaves, the entire fractured digital persona comes rapidly under fire.

Having been thus convinced by the corporate sector that the monitoring of our financial or leisure pursuits is for our own good, effectively rendering each of us a Panoptic tower surveilling our own and others' activity, it becomes easier to agree with Ronson's (2015) argument that we publicly shame strangers out of a twisted sense of moral obligation or greater good. Avowal has strong roots within religion and morality; Foucault explained that regardless of the society in which it is found, avowal is a way of verbally cleansing the self, finding a way back to the truth and subjectifying oneself in relationship to said truth. With instant access to the wrong-doings of a significant percent of the global population through Twitter and similar media, the citizen can now consider him/herself a watchdog. Hacking and doxxing (the practice of disseminating someone's identifiable personal information without permission with the intent to cause harm) all radically shift the balance of social power: now, the truth waiting to be discovered via avowal is that a black mark created by one person tarnishes the whole group. Simply put, it will never be erased from the archive; you are stuck with it, and we are stuck with you. An apology is not enough to cleanse the digital record.

The omnipotence of personal data is a threat to even the most average citizen/social media user, but a demonstrable and constant danger to individuals who already tend to come up shorthanded in traditional relations of power: the underpaid, the poverty classes, the racial and gender minorities who face daily discrimination. Foucault's work has always faced criticism from feminist theorists for andocentrism, and when those criticisms are compounded by the history of misogyny on the Internet, trouble erupts. See the case of Zoe Quinn, independent video game developer whose sexual choices managed to launch an entire spiteful online movement now known as #Gamergate. Opponents in the industry discovered that Quinn had engaged in a sexual relationship with a journalist who had favorably reviewed one of her games. Quinn then became the center of a maelstrom of hate targeted at women in the gaming industry, replete with death threats, rape threats, and attacks on her personal information that became so severe she was forced to leave her home and take judicial action (Van Der Werff, 2014). For social actors like Quinn who have had all of their agency forcibly stripped due to factors outside of their control (such as gender, race, and age), avowing their actions and reconstituting themselves in light of the new experiences would be so completely demoralizing it is completely outside the bounds of possibility.

Women also feel the deathlock of public shame when they attempt to point the finger of blame, particularly at men. Adria Richards became briefly infamous when she took a picture and shamed two men at a game developers' conference for making irreverent jokes in the crowd while a speaker was trying to discuss gender equality. Her tactics were successful, in the sense that one of the men she targeted was fired. But, Richards was so swiftly inundated with an array of violent misogynistic threats – targeted not just at her, but at her employer as well – that she also lost her job and was forced to hide at a friend's home for months (Zandt, 2013). The victim of her shaming quickly found employment elsewhere. Richards did not. Lehrer found a publisher willing to publish another book – this time about redemption. Lindsey Stone still lives in petrifying fear of what might happen if she is found out again. Clearly, the path to re-subjectification is not on equal terrain for all. How can the one attempting avowal bind herself to "the truth" when the public and the victim fundamentally cannot agree on what that truth is?

Another alarming implication of this broken system of avowal concerns public privacy and identity management. In describing the methods used to maintain order and righteousness in civilization, Foucault (1981/2014) introduced the concept of alethurgy: a ritual procedure for bringing forth that which we already know, the truth. What seems at first blush to be a relatively straightforward concept becomes ethically complex in the contemporary climate of information flux. We have already established that individuals in cyberspace might actually have considerably less power than they are aware of, due to digital archives and opaque privacy policies. Information flux (closely related to the ideas of Poster) posits that the total flow of knowledge between an individual and a network is equally relevant to power dynamics as the nature of volume of information. Taken in light of circumstances like Zoe Quinn's, the modern alethurgy takes on the capability of being not just a staged performance, but a vindictive witch hunt conducted by anonymous networked strangers with digital archives on their side. Public humiliation has been out of favor in the formalized American legal system for two centuries; reviving the practice on social media senselessly forces individuals to perform avowals over and over with little to no hope of redemption.

In his public apology, Jonah Lehrer said to his worldwide audience,

> A confession is not a solution… these flaws that led to my failure - are a basic part of me. They are as fundamental to myself as those other parts I'm not ashamed of. This is the phase that comes next, the phase I'm in now. It is the slow realization that all the apologies and regrets are just the beginning. That my harshest words will not fix me, that I cannot quickly become the person I need to be. It is finally understanding how hard it is to change. (Lehrer, 2013)

Lehrer's dour outlook is indicative of exactly how difficult avowal and reconstruction are in our hyper-mediated society, and this assessment is coming from a privileged white man who was lucky to suffer nothing more than verbal backlash from his transgressions – transgressions more serious than many other victims of more harmful shaming. The system of avowal that Foucault laid out in the late 20th century has been subtly but irrevocably shifted by emergent technologies; cyberspace renders everyday citizens both knowingly and unknowingly complicit in the observation and manipulation of everyday activity. The easy access to and relatively low literacy requirement of social media is rapidly facilitating a strong resurgence of secondary orality in public life. When personal information is willing shared, publicized, and put on display, personal facts become shared narrative and the idea of private personal information begins to break down. After all, the very concept of private information was enabled and perpetuated by a literate society: books are easier to lock away than whispers or stories, and the oral society has a far longer history on this world than the literate one. In that sense, the trend we have discussed is not new, but rather very old. Today's Twitter shaming is yesterday's stoning. A Facebook photo of a shamed, spoiled daughter echoes the fallen woman locked in the stocks in the town square.

Rethinking Contemporary Shaming

Schadenfreude, the feeling or enjoyment or happiness at the misfortune of others, was originally considered to belie mental health; however, Gao et al. (2014) pointed out that far from being a sign of insanity, schadenfreude might be a universal response to another's misfortune. And, while in the pre-Internet era we all might have gotten some self-indulgent satisfaction out of other people's misfortune, we now have the unique ability to weigh in on the outcome of trials, serving as a communal jury and firing squad in a way that has not been possible since communities were small enough for all-inclusive town hall meetings. Computer-mediated communication theorists are full of ideas about this cycle is possible, ranging from the simply explained cycle of intensified feedback we enter into online (Walther, 1996) to the toxic disinhibition enabled by anonymity and invisibility (Suler, 2004) to plain mimicking of social preferences. The specifics in this case are not relevant; to some degree, all of these concepts are applicable here. Regardless of why we flock to jump on the public-shaming bandwagon, the sense of schadenfreude we gain from criticizing strangers' accidents and missteps provides some form of positive aid in self-evaluation: at least I am not stupid enough to make a mistake like that, we tell ourselves – at least, until we find ourselves on the wrong end of the gun sight.

This cycle of blame and avowal has bizarre effects on the mind of both victims and perpetrators, alternately evoking feelings of regret and staunch conviction. When working with victims and perpetrators of public shaming, Ronson (2015) discovered repeatedly that journalists and reporters who had exposed someone else's ethical violation thought the public had gone too far towards crucifying their current victim. Michael Moynihan, who broke the Lehrer scandal, said "I'm watching people stabbing and stabbing and stabbing Lehrer, and I'm like, HE'S DEAD" (Ronson, 2015, p. 51). And, yet, just as frequently, shamers dug their heels in, utterly convinced that they were doing the right thing.

An avowal was originally constituted as an exercise of renewal – one which was used to rebuild the subject and place them into a new relationship with the world. Increasingly, though, the deadlocked grip of digital archives, in combination with the subversive omnipresence of the cyberpanopticon – complete with implicit public co-operation – renders the avowal not a one-time ritual on the path to renewal, but rather a constantly restarting, never-ending loop of penance. As Steele (2010) explained, shame, and honor, its inverse, is meant to be a deeply introspective, private evaluation of the self. When scandals blow up on social media, however, the public sphere clamors to see the evidence of that pain: to have the innermost levels of emotion dragged into the spotlight to be judged by the public and deemed wanting.

How will this Sisyphean loop constituted by practices of observation and our surrender to orality evolve in the future? Will the tendency to give our information over to websites and databases solidify, or will society see a backlash against those practices? We cannot claim to know how digital technology and social media usage will evolve in the future; regardless, the system as it currently exists allows a harmful culture of shaming. Technology and the Internet may have brought an era of free information and open access to us, but they have also opened the door for the demise of private information; without private information, reasoned and impartial judgment become vulnerable to being drowned out by the whims of impassioned public opinion. Clarifying what our expectations are for confessions received from perceived wrong-doers is a crucial first step in remedying this harmful cycle of public shame.

The first step necessary to combat this trend is a restoration of empathy to those who have committed an act we perceive as wrong. A major culprit behind the shaming access is the pure ease with which we can level criticism against another person – sending a tweet or constructing a Facebook post (unlike, say, writing a newspaper editorial) requires so little effort that we take no time to consider the humanity of the target of such attacks. Yet, clear examples of the ways in which social media facilitates kindness, generosity, and empathy abound. The "Ice Bucket Challenge" that went viral on social media in the summer of 2014 required participants to dump an icy bucket of water on their heads, ostensibly mimicking one of the symptoms of ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease), before encouraging others to donate money to research into the rare disease. While this effort was publicly derided as useless slacker-activism, the $77 million dollars raised for research recently proved vital in helping scientists discover a new gene linked to the disease (Rogers, 2016). Their breakthrough illustrates how social media, when connected to empathy for the plight of another, can bring strangers together in the service of a need just as easily as it can bring strangers together in a coordinated attack. The millions of global users on social media break down traditional barriers of communication, but without a dedicated effort to humanize these communicative others, their misdeeds become unforgivable character flaws rather than simple errors in judgment that we ourselves might have committed under different circumstances.

However, the onus of responsibility cannot be placed entirely on the audience of shamers. *Exagoreusis* hinges on the wrongdoer's willingness to accept that they are just part of a greater social whole. Once the public is willing to see the humanity of the wrongdoer and move past the misdeed, the wrongdoer must be equally willing to recognize their place in the scheme of this globally mediated culture. When a digital persona is as permanent and easy to discover as ours are on social media, the shaming audience can easily discover signs of hubris or hauteur that may derail attempts at avowal. Concerted efforts to humanize the wrongdoer and display willing humility comprise the first step in reconstituting a workable system of avowal.

A second step necessary to revising our cultural shaming epidemic is acknowledging the changed nature of the cyberpanopticon. Let us return to Jeremy Bentham's (1843) original description of the institutional panopticon: a structure that allows one watchman to simultaneously keep an eye on many subjects, without the subjects knowing when they were or were not being observed. This form of institutional state power over citizens is still present, and it is often strengthened by the existence of heavily Internet- and social media-reliant citizens (Elmer, 2013). But, of more concern, is the individual member of the cyberpanoptic, who removes the tower from the center of Bentham's prison and instead creates an institution where every individual inmate can always see and critique every other inmate. Sunil Tripathi's case exemplifies the turn toward a cyberpanoptic; Tripathi was a student at Brown University who went missing two days before the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013. When news and updates on the disaster began to be passed back and forth online, social media users mistakenly identified Tripathi as the man in a surveillance photo taken near the scene. Another individual claimed to have heard Tripathi's name on a police radio. Mainly via Twitter and Reddit (a crowdsourced news amalgamator that bills itself as the "front page of the Internet"), speculation and accusations about Tripathi's alleged involvement grew quickly; Internet users flooded social media with accusations of Tripathi's guilt and self-congratulatory statements on citizen journalism (Bidgood, 2013). Tripathi's name was cleared after the Tsarnaev brothers were found guilty of the terrorist plot, but this news did little to comfort his family members who had suffered through the onslaught of public shame directed at their loved one, only to later discover him the victim of an unrelated suicide.

This example of heady public conviction can partially be attributed to the increasing strength of *sous*veillance in contemporary America (Reilly, 2015). A *sous*veillance society, as opposed to a surveillance society, is predicted on the concept of individual citizens "watching from below" (*sous* being the French word for

"under" or "beneath"). The ability to perform *sous*veillance first emerged with camcorders and audiorecorders, technology used to hold persons with traditional positions of authority accountable when they abuse their abilities and the people suffer: the taping of the police brutalization of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991 is a classic example of *sous*veillance (Hoffman, 2006). However, when omnipresent cellphones put high-tech cameras and audio recorders in almost everyone's pocket, the Panoptic eye turns from justifiably correcting the misbehaviors of authority figures to hungrily policing the words and actions of any citizen. Ostensibly, first-person participant-based recordings seem more reliable; if we trust citizen journalism because of its relative lack of institutional biases and agendas, why not citizen policing?

Unfortunately, these ideals are as false in policing as they were proven to be in journalism: untrained individuals are rarely freer from bias than their institutionalized or professional counterparts. Relying on these assumptions of neutrality and power-balance in the form of *sous*veillance too frequently leads to oppressive power relations that disproportionately punish minor transgressions. Lindsey Stone, the young charity worker referenced earlier who lost her job over a crude joke photo taken at a site of national public memory, perfectly exemplifies this trend: despite being described as a good and passionate worker, 12,000 strangers deemed her crime of tasteless humor to be one that no amount of avowal or humiliation could redeem (Ronson, 2015). Stone was fired and two years passed before she found another job (Rowles, 2015). *Sous*veillance can function as an effective tool against abusive state-sanctioned power, as in the case of the Rodney King riots, but more frequently it is just a tool in the destruction of individuals who have committed no legally punishable crime. With no dependable mechanism to target methods of *sous*veillance only towards abusive institutional forces, we must work twice as hard to self-monitor and prevent this bottom-up tool for the regulation of power from becoming a tool misguided individuals use to needlessly oppress their peers. Cell phone camera technology, especially, is too valuable in the ongoing social fight against police who abuse their power to advocate against. However, left unchecked, the employment of such technology against non-state-sponsored individuals does more harm than good.

An outmoded understanding of Foucault, combined with a social media user base that too easily perpetuates a culture of public shaming, have created a social milieu that embraces *exomologesis* rather than *exagoreusis*. This culture prohibits the individual ability to move past our mistakes, further disadvantaging traditionally discriminated-against populations, but it also produces a more fractured and disjointed social whole that cannot conceptualize mistakes or wrongdoings (like President Nixon's) as beneficial lessons. In order to return to a state of *exagoreusis*, individual citizen watchdogs must beware of turning *sous*veillance power against their peers; bottom-up monitoring of power can serve as a deterrent to abuse of state-sponsored power, but inevitably only freezes individuals with no institutionalized authority in a state of unforgiven error. To further combat the dispersed nature of the cyberpanopticon, social media users must modify their expectations of wrongdoers and humanize their global peers, just as wrongdoers must admit misdeeds without hubris or superiority. These tasks are not easy; they require constant self-monitoring and reflexivity, but social media has already been proven to be a powerful empathic force. It can and must work to the public advantage, not against it. As social media evolves, further exploration must be done into both the technology itself and user norms and preferences (especially as wearable technology becomes more omnipresent) to continue managing the variable relationship between individual power and social media.

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