Abstract
This article engages in a qualitative thematic analysis of media discourse about two prominent cases involving screenshots and public shame: the story of Amanda Todd, a Canadian teenager who took her own life after years of cyberbullying facilitated by screenshots; and the story of Anthony Weiner, the New York U.S. Congressman whose political career crumbled after screenshots revealed extramarital flirtations. It shows how screenshots violated the assumed boundaries of media environments, and in doing so prompted moments of public sense-making around new media. By focusing on cases where public shaming collides with the introduction of new media technologies, this article also offers an opportunity to understand how public spectacles of emotion, specifically of shame, shape new media technologies’ meanings and uses.

Contents
Introduction
Making sense of new media
Shame, scandal, and public emotion
Methodology
Amanda Todd
Anthony Weiner
Conclusion: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame

Introduction
The screenshot is simply a captured image of what appears on the screen of a computer or mobile device. Typically taken, saved, and circulated exclusively in digital space, it is one of the most ubiquitous photographic practices today (Gaboury, 2019), employed in tasks as prosaic as pointing out computer errors, reproducing memes, or saving social media posts. But when addressed in public discourse, it is evident that the screenshot is more than just a rote tool. In media and popular cultural texts, screenshots routinely draw attention to the consequences of misunderstanding the persistent and public nature of digital media. The screenshot is implicated in discussions over online speech today, a mechanism in scandals
Screenshot, save, share, shame: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame

where deleted social media content is resuscitated in order to shame a speaker for sexual indiscretions or problematic social perspectives. It has made its way into political gaffes, capturing a politician’s spelling mistakes or preserving messages that were supposed to be sent privately. It is present in parental panic about young people’s use of social media, included in warnings that one should exercise caution even when communicating amongst friends, as anything can be screenshot, saved, and shared. In each of these scenarios, screenshots move digital information between the walls of seemingly private (e.g., one-to-one communication) or privatized realms (e.g., proprietary platforms) and public display, just as they threaten to save and circulate media that was assumed to be ephemeral. In each, they play with expected boundaries of digital time and space.

In their ability to move between these boundaries, screenshots exemplify what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Sarah Friedland (2015) have described as the essential character of new media: leakiness. “New media are not simply about leaks: they are leak” [1], simultaneously breaching and sustaining assumed boundaries between public and private. ‘Leaky’ events, like Edward Snowden’s release of NSA documents or Wikileaks’ dumps of classified information, have been met with public surprise, or even shock. Chun and Friedland assert that these events should not be understood as out of the ordinary in digitally networked environments. “What is surprising about all of these recent leaks is not their existence,” they note, “but rather our surprise at them” [2]. However, I argue that because these events have surprised us, leaky moments like these have been revelatory for public understanding of life in a digital world. In other words, the very public disclosures that major leaking events engender become forums in which groups may negotiate new media’s particular meanings. At the same time, they also become moments to reconsider existing social norms in light of a changed mediascape, whether public values (Jordan, 2019) or professional practices (Hindman and Thomas, 2013). Because screenshots also embody this leaky characteristic, it suggests that they too are instructive for life in a digital world.

In turn, this article uses the screenshot to examine sense-making around new media. It examines the ways that normative boundary violations — which may include transgressions of public/private or ephemeral/permanent demarcations — have helped publics make sense of the new boundaries and new rules of networked media environments. This is done through a qualitative thematic analysis of media related to two public events where screenshot use figured prominently. The first is the cyberbullying and death by suicide of Canadian teenager Amanda Todd in 2012, in which a topless screenshot was taken without her consent on a video chat, then circulated amongst her school classmates. The second case offers a counterpoint, focusing on the ouster of U.S. Congressman Anthony Weiner after screenshots were taken of his quickly deleted sexual tweets in 2011. By focusing on the framing of screenshots and normative boundaries in these cases, I argue that they allowed publics to make sense of new media’s new rules while further entrenching existing gendered norms around sexual propriety and public space.

While screenshots share the potential for boundary violations with the hacks and leaks that Chun and Friedland (2015) discuss, they differ in important ways. Most notably, while hacks and leaks are more often wielded against powerful institutions, screenshots are wielded against individuals, typically for purposes of shaming. The limited scholarly work focusing on screenshots indeed notes that the potential to be judged through screenshots’ social evidence influences young people’s digital media behavior (Jaynes, 2020), just as the opening examples of screenshots in public discourse revolve around the threat of shame. Likewise, while Amanda Todd and Anthony Weiner’s cases involve screenshots, their emotional center is shame. In focusing on these cases, this article offers an opportunity to understand how public spectacles of emotion like shame shape new media technologies’ meanings and uses. By examining events where public shaming collides with the introduction of new media technologies, this article allows for considerations of the affective dimensions of technological sense-making, particularly around new media of today.

Making sense of new media
A robust body of literature examines how social groups make sense of novel media forms and media technologies. Much of it is based in the premise that new media technologies do not come with ‘built-in’ meanings determined by their technical features. Rather, media develop meaning through social forces. While the initial interpretations of a medium often reflect the anxieties of that society in that particular era (Williams, 2003), new media are not simply tabula rasa onto which the concern of the day can be projected. Meaning is instead developed in the context of existing social structures, media practices, and ideological systems. New media are typically used and interpreted through the social practices of existing technologies (Dunbar-Hester, 2014). They also contend with longstanding cultural tropes about media development in general, for instance, the belief that each successive medium vanquishes the medium that came before (Gitelman and Pingree, 2003).

While novel media technologies enter into this existing semiotic environment, they still exert force on the social world through new types of encounters that they facilitate (Gitelman, 2006; Marvin, 1988). These new encounters may be between social groups, for instance, connecting people from formerly distant locales or from different social classes (Marvin, 1988), though they could also be one-way encounters, with media circulating information about a social group in newly visible ways. If new media facilitate novel encounters, then they necessarily cross existing social boundaries. In crossing these normative boundaries, new media offer a setting in which social norms themselves are reevaluated, re-entrenched, or reformed (Marvin, 1988). This becomes apparent in historical examples. For instance, the handheld camera’s introduction into Victorian-era England violated standards of propriety, destabilizing norms around public interaction, just as it helped instate the first legal rights to personal privacy (Gunning, 1999).

While social norms may shift as a result of new media’s social boundary transgressions, norms related to the medium itself must also be considered in order to understand sense-making. Gershon (2010), in her analysis of online breakups, argues that people make sense of a medium through “idioms of practice,” or learned appropriate uses of a technology (e.g., that one shouldn’t send e-mail messages on Sundays), and “media ideologies,” or ways of thinking about a medium in general (e.g., the belief that e-mail is a formal medium). Gershon notes that these normative boundaries become most clear, and are most clearly articulated, in the moments when they are violated. Taken together, this literature suggests that normative boundary violations, which are the transgression of existing social norms, media ideologies, or idioms of practice, are crucial processes for sense-making around new media.

If screenshots are understood as leaky media that break normative boundaries, their analysis reveals the process of new media sense-making. But what are screenshots making sense of? Amanda Todd and Anthony Weiner’s accounts suggest that technological sense-making was focused on the increasing prominence and porousness of digitally networked environments in general, as well as the stronger link between one’s “real” and “virtual” identities through social media (Siibak, 2015). That is, the sense-making that occurs is not about screenshots themselves, but rather about the networked media ecosystem that they operate within.

---

**Shame, scandal, and public emotion**

Amanda Todd and Anthony Weiner’s cases involve the screenshot but revolve around representations of shame. As the “painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior” (Lexico.com, n.d.), shame is a powerful consequence of normative violations. That is, shame can be understood as the emotional result of social violation because it is the awareness that one has done something inappropriate or in violation of legal, moral, or ethical norms. Yet shame is a relatively unexamined thread in literature on social violations, belying its ubiquity as an emotion that may in fact structure much of social interaction. As Scheff (2014) argues, shame and its avoidance are at the core of canonical theories of social interaction, including Cooley’s looking-glass self or Goffman’s impression management, even if shame was not explicitly named in those theories. A notable exception is queer theory,
where there is a rich literature on the politics and possibilities of shame accompanying non-normative sexualities (e.g., Stockton, 2006).

The inclusion of shame in media studies is usually limited to discussions of scandal. Unlike the individualized and internal feeling of shame, scandal is instead a form of public shaming, or public moral criticism “in response to violations of social norms,” as Paul Billingham and Tom Parr have explained [3]. As this definition suggests, moments of scandal become lightning rod events in which social norms can be negotiated and policed. As Tumber and Waisbord write:

Scandals spur debates about central issues that define social and political life: legality, morality, ethics, inequity, and the behavior of powerful individuals and institutions. Scandals reveal something more than corruption and wrongdoing. They lay bare the ways societies define acceptable behaviors and norms, and how different publics struggle to define and impose laws and social expectations (Thompson, 2000). [4]

That is, just as new media technologies allow for the reinforcing or revising of social norms through their facilitation of new encounters, scandal and other forms of public shaming open up spaces where norms may be publicly defined and debated.

Despite the ostensible importance of shame in scandal, the emotional and affective components of shame have largely been overlooked when considering these moments of norm reckoning. However, since what has been called “the affective turn” (Clough and Halley, 2007), scholars have argued for the importance of affect, roughly understood as the capacity to act and be acted upon (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010), and emotion, the socially formed interaction of thoughts and feelings (Lünenborg and Maier, 2018), in public life. One of affect studies’ contributions is in understanding feelings not as individual psychological experiences but rather as cultural and social phenomena, that, collectively experienced, influence social and political possibilities (Cvetkovich, 2012). These frameworks have also been fruitfully applied to the study of media technologies, whether to understand online hate speech as emotion (Lünenborg and Maier, 2018), to see networked communities as gathering around shared feeling (Papacharissi, 2014), or even observing that leaks have affective dimensions, as they trigger the capacity for political resistance (Micali, 2018).

Taken together, this body of work suggests that public shaming has affective and emotional components that influence the process of norm definition and debate. It also suggests that emotion and affect are at work in the process of technological sense-making, a juncture that is explored in the analysis of Amanda Todd and Anthony’s Weiner’s cases.

Methodology

A qualitative thematic analysis of news media about screenshots in the cases of Amanda Todd and Anthony Weiner was conducted. In both cases I am concerned with 1) the framing of screenshots; 2) the work of normative boundary violations; and, 3) the portrayal and positioning of shame.

Selection of cases

The case study approach is ideal for qualitative thematic analysis because it tends to retain relevant context (Maxwell and Chmiel, 2014). While selecting one of these cases could have provided a rich example of the phenomena of interest, two cases were chosen to allow for the ability to compare and contrast (Meyer, 2001). Amanda Todd’s story was chosen as a case because it was used as an example in Chun and Friedland’s (2015) development of the “leaky” media concept, though their analysis did not focus on screenshots. Anthony Weiner’s case provided salient commonalities and relevant differences. Both cases
prominently involved screenshot use, received significant media attention, and had overlapping timelines (Todd’s story first went viral in 2012; the first revelations about Anthony Weiner were made public in 2011). They also had important differences, which allowed for a nuanced understanding of boundary violations. Amanda Todd was a young, female, private citizen. Screenshots were taken without her consent from a seemingly ephemeral medium of video chat. Anthony Weiner was a middle age, male, public figure who originally captured and circulated his own images privately through social media. A screenshot allowed for the preservation and circulation of these images when he accidentally made one public.

Qualitative thematic analysis

News media encodes ideologies that both shape and reflect their broader social contexts (Cotter, 2015), and they have been important resources in literature on technological sense-making (Marvin, 1988); therefore, an analysis of news media was conducted in order to understand sociotechnical sense-making in these events. Using the database ProQuest, I gathered English-language articles that included the term “screenshot” and either “Anthony Weiner” or “Amanda Todd.” Searches with synonyms and alternate spellings were conducted to capture additional articles. These searches were then conducted in Google News for additional coverage. In total, the Anthony Weiner case yielded 36 relevant articles, while the Amanda Todd case yielded 29.

A qualitative thematic analysis of each set of articles was conducted using qualitative data analysis software NVivo. I began deductively with theoretically grounded codes that were consistent for both cases, and then engaged in open, inductive coding of each article set. Using these additional codes, I went back to the opposite case and recoded with the new terms. In an iterative process, themes were connected to the article’s foci of screenshots, boundary violations, and shame. These themes are discussed in what follows, and a synthesizing discussion is offered in the final section.

Amanda Todd

Canadian teenager Amanda Todd took her own life in 2012 at the age of 15 after years of blackmail and cyberbullying for screenshots that were captured without her consent. Todd, who had used Webcam chats to talk to others on the Internet, was routinely asked to flash her breasts in front of her interlocutors; one day, she did. A then-anonymous perpetrator took a screenshot. He proceeded to blackmail her, threatening to circulate the images to Todd’s friends and family if she didn’t engage further. When she refused, the picture was posted on pornographic Web sites and sent to her friends via Facebook. She was bullied at her schools and online as the image circulated. Todd moved schools to attempt to escape the harassment; the perpetrator would then circulate the screenshot to classmates there.

A month before her death, Amanda Todd posted a nine-minute video chronicling her story on YouTube. Titled “My story: Struggling, bullying, suicide, self-harm,” the silent, black-and-white video shows Todd cycling through a series of handwritten notes. As she discusses the re-circulation of the screenshot at her new school, her cards read: “Cried every night, lost all my friends and respect / people had for me ... again ... / Then nobody liked me / name calling, judged ... / I can never get that photo back / It’s out there forever ...” (ChiaVideos, 2012). The video went viral in the days after her death, amassing millions of views and garnering global media attention. As of March 2020, a Dutch man accused of her abuse is awaiting extradition to Canada from the Netherlands, where he is serving an 11-year sentence for charges of blackmailing and fraud unrelated to Amanda Todd (Brend, 2020).

Screenshots

In Amanda Todd’s case, the screenshot was framed most often as the tool that made her blackmailing possible. It was included in recounting the pivotal events of her story, describing how the perpetrator ‘took
Screenshot, save, share, shame: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame

a screenshot and tried to blackmail her into sending more photos or suffer the humiliation of providing the photo to all her friends’ (Madigan and Dimitropoulos, 2018). Blackmail, or coercion through the threat of public exposure — via the screenshot in this case — thus signals the “leakiness” that Chun and Friedland (2015) initially discussed as the breaching of public-private boundaries. In this case, it was the movement of personal images into the public space of Todd’s community and the public space of networked sites more broadly that constituted the (realized) threat of this blackmail.

The screenshot also operated within a broader symbolic realm. Screenshots were characterized as allowing that which should have faded into the past to remain persistent, difficult to forget, and disturbing in their continued presence: in other words, screenshots were framed as haunting. Because a screenshot was taken, a moment that should have been temporary instead followed Todd. For instance:

It was an impulsive, in-the-moment act — but one she wouldn’t be able to leave behind. Someone took a screen capture of the image, posted it to a porn site, and sent the link to all of Amanda’s Facebook friends (Fumano, 2013).

The screenshot’s haunting is enabled by its temporal boundary crossing, such that an “impulsive, in-the-moment act” became difficult to forget.

The screenshot is also understood as haunting in the sense of ‘disturbing,’ because it is employed by a frightening networked subculture, where predators specifically use the screenshot to prey on the vulnerable:

Todd’s death, however, revealed a sinister community of sexual extortionists, known as “cappers,” who target teens just like her. Cappers are individuals who lurk in video-chat rooms with the sole purpose of surreptitiously taking screenshots and recording video of the person they’re chatting with (Martins, 2013).

Todd’s case helps to reveal this “sinister community” (Martins, 2013), this “community of predators who hide in plain sight” (Martins, 2012), these “[monsters], plain and simple” (MacDonald, 2012) that use the screenshot as their tool of choice.

Like the hacks and the leaks that reveal broader conditions of new media environments, so too do screenshots reveal the conditions of new media environments in these accounts; here, environments are framed as rife with peril, especially for young women. As such, they recreate discourses of the online predator that have circulated since the beginning of public access to the Internet (Marwick, 2008). However, unlike previous discourses, they do not focus around one type of medium — the Internet, or social media, or computers. Rather, articles highlight an environment that includes all these interconnected components — the Internet, social media, small electronics, chatrooms — that the screenshot toggles between, crossing boundaries of expected privacy and temporality.

**Boundary violations**

As described earlier, screenshots were mapped to two types of boundary violations: the social boundary between information spaces understood to be public, and those deemed private; and the temporal boundary between media’s ephemerality and persistence. Here I expand on these descriptions to show the ways that these violations were mobilized to assert new rules for social conduct in this new media environment.

While the screenshot shows how information understood to be private can be made destructively public, this transgression is positioned within larger discussions of the erosion of private boundaries altogether. Private space in these accounts is marked by perceptions of safety and is mapped to the home. As one article noted: “In the past, parents saw the outside world as a threat. Today, it’s more likely the threat’s in
your child’s bedroom, lurking behind a computer screen or smart phone” (Martins, 2013). Another article chronicled a Webcam cover made by a cyber-safety organization in Amanda Todd’s name, a response to “people being secretly watched via their own Webcams in the privacy of their homes or places they should consider safe” (Corbett, 2015).

Numerous accounts make recommendations for boundary delineation to combat this erosion of private, safe space, typically understood as boundaries that should be put in place by parents, or those who possess knowledge about normative public/private boundaries. These include technical boundaries — especially checking privacy settings on accounts — as well as social boundaries, by teaching children to assert “personal boundaries” (McIntyre, 2014). As one article summarized, “unlike the real world, it’s much harder to put up fences. The hope, experts say, lies in better education” (Luymes, 2013).

While the erosion of private boundaries is framed as needing bolstering from those who understand the correct sociotechnical construction of public/private, discussions of temporal boundary violations are often used to send a warning to young people. Building on the notion of haunting, young people were routinely warned to not make mistakes in networked environments because mistakes could last forever and be exploited by predators. For instance, the fact that Todd flashed was often deemed a “mistake” (Luymes, 2013), an “indiscretion” (Corbett, 2015); her video “chronicled the mistakes she made online” (Martins, 2012). Mistakes, it should be noted, build on a social boundary violation of public/private, because the mistake here is signaled as exposing the private (white, female) body for public view [5]. The decision to flash was described as one that should have been quick, ephemeral — an “in-the-moment act” (Fumano, 2013), or “one split-second decision” (MacGill, 2017) — that became permanent. “You make one mistake, trust the wrong person, choose to do the wrong thing and it will haunt you like a monster under the bed forever,” one article warned (MacDonald, 2012). This temporal boundary violation is entangled with media circulation, as the condition of “forever” is dependent on media’s duplication and dissemination, discussed in these accounts as occurring through social media. Young people were thus advised: “Don’t share naked pictures with your friends. […] Don’t post naked pictures of yourself” (Luymes, 2013), because “one supposedly innocent photograph sent to a boyfriend could be circulated for thousands to see, including pedophiles and future employers” (Martins, 2012).

In nearly all accounts, Amanda Todd’s case was held up as a parable, displaying what could go wrong in the networked digital world. One article was entitled “Lessons in death” (MacDonald, 2012); her name became “household knowledge, a stark reminder of the worst-case scenario” (MacGill, 2017); a teen interviewee stated that “I’m careful because of what happened to Amanda Todd” [29]. The lessons imparted from this parable were articulated in response to normative boundary violations, and thus became instructive on how these new media environments functioned: what once was private was now public, what once was ephemeral was now permanent, what once was singular was now networked. These are media ideologies (Gershon, 2010). At the same time, these violations prompted lessons on how one should act in these new media environments — idioms of practice (Gershon, 2010). These idioms of practice signaled the entrenchment of broader social norms. In Todd’s case, they appeared to further ingrain gendered understandings of what was allowed in public and what was suitable in private. In what follows, I discuss the way that these boundary violations and their lessons were animated specifically around shame.

Shame

If Amanda Todd’s story is held up as a lesson about what happens when one acts incorrectly in new media environments, the ‘what happens’ revolves around persistent feelings of shame and persistent shaming, discussed as “cyberbullying.” That is, shame — and the mental distress it caused — is framed as the primary consequence of normative violations in these networked environments. As one article noted: “Todd later killed herself due in part to the humiliation she experienced from these incidents and extensive online bullying” (Madigan and Dimitropoulos, 2018). Indeed, shame by definition signals normative violation: the painful feeling of humiliation “caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior” (Lexico.com, n.d.). As noted earlier, the normative violation — the mistake, the wrong behavior — was not only in self-exposure, but self-exposure in a networked environment. The framing of Todd’s story around shame,
Screenshot, save, share, shame: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame

humiliation, and ultimately, death, suggests that shame was a significant factor in asserting the seriousness of new media’s new boundaries, and the importance of subscribing to its codes of behavior.

While defined by shame, Todd’s strength through shame was discussed in an explicitly affective register. Her video was routinely described as “heart-breaking” (Martins, 2013) or “gut wrenching” (Canadian Press, 2012) for her expression of feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. It was ascribed with a capacity to move, to incite action: people discussed starting charities, creating technical solutions, proposing laws, talking about bullying, even quitting their jobs to start cyber-safety initiatives. Public shame, then, could be considered to have affect here in that it prompted sense-making around networked environments, just as it was affective because it moved those who watched Todd’s story.

Anthony Weiner

Screenshots played a prominent role in former New York U.S. House Representative Anthony Weiner’s political and personal demise. Once an animated, young, and notably social-media savvy Democrat, the married representative was first subject to scandalizing screenshots in May 2011, when he publicly tweeted a sexually suggestive photo. The image, which was intended for a direct message exchange with a young woman, was rapidly deleted. The deletion wasn’t quick enough to escape public notice. A screenshot was captured of the photo and published the next day on the Andrew Breitbart-run conservative Web site Big Government. The screenshot, while limited to a cropped image of an aroused man in boxer briefs, prominently displayed contextual information that provided the damning details, as the account that it had come from was “RepWeiner.” These events triggered one of the most press-frenzied American political scandals of the last decade, dubbed “America’s first full out political techno sex scandal” (Wypijewski, 2011).

By July, 2011, amidst growing media scrutiny, Weiner resigned from his post in U.S. Congress. In 2013, he made a nearly successful comeback when he ran for mayor of New York City, but his campaign was derailed when reports — with accompanying screenshots — emerged of other online sexual dalliances. Weiner’s half-decade cycle of political scandal and public shaming through innumerable screenshots came to an apparent end in 2017 when news emerged that he had been sending sexually explicit messages to a 15-year-old girl. Their screenshot exchanges were published through the Daily Mail. Based on this evidence, Weiner was convicted of transferring obscene material to a minor and was incarcerated in 2017. Investigations into Weiner’s exchanges with the minor eventually led to federal inquiries about Hilary Clinton’s use of a private e-mail server while U.S. Secretary of State, as Weiner was married to and would sometimes use the same computer as Clinton aide Huma Abedin.

Screenshots

In Weiner’s case, screenshots were framed as evidentiary in nature, providing detailed and contextual proof of wrongdoing through phrases like: “Screenshots show the electronic chats began in late January 2015” (Courier-Mail [Brisbane], 2016). While screenshots provided evidence, the evidence often circulated not through a network of illicit Web sites or social media, as they did in Todd’s case, but through news outlets who either took, were sent, or purchased these screenshots, including the New York Post, Big Government, or the Daily Mail. Despite this more traditional circulation, screenshots were still routinely associated with the movement of private information into widespread public circulation, able to be sent out “to millions” (Marcus, 2011) or shared with “the entire world” (Donnelly, 2013).

About half of the articles that mentioned screenshots discussed apps that were designed for ephemeral communication, including Snapchat, Confide, and Secret.li. A representative article noted: “Want that naked sext you sent to just go away? There’s an app for that” (Shea, 2013). These articles often discussed how these apps were designed to discourage screenshotting — sending an alert when a screenshot is taken,
for instance. At the same time, screenshots were also understood to be an unavoidable crack in the wall of technical security:

This is the promise of Snapchat, the mobile app that theoretically allows users to send whatever silly or ugly or dirty picture they want, to whomever they want, and never have it come back to haunt them, to leave no digital trace. It is a false promise, as anyone with the technical chops to run a screen capture knows, but that doesn’t really seem to matter (Ross, 2013).

The framing of screenshots in Weiner’s case asserted that in these networked environments, the expected or desired boundaries — between public/private, ephemeral/permanent, or secure/vulnerable — were illusionary. Try as you might, the environment leaks. As one article read: “... never assume your content is 100 percent safe from people who want to share or make a screenshot. Just because that should be the case doesn’t mean it is” (Kleinberg, 2015).

**Boundary violations**

As in Amanda Todd’s case, screenshots were understood to violate normative boundaries of private/public and permanent/ephemeral. However, what these boundaries meant for Anthony Weiner differed. In Weiner’s case, private signaled the ability to carry out an affair discretely and without consequences, while ephemerality was the type of continual impermanence that would allow for this type of privacy (e.g., “Anthony Weiner might be picking out chairs for the mayor’s office today if [Snapchat] had been around” [Ross, 2013].) As becomes evident through Weiner’s case, expected sociotechnical boundaries were violated not just because things like screenshots could permeate them, but also because these environments were proximal: public and private functions, business and personal functions were all dangerously close in a networked environment.

In response to proximate and permeable boundaries, technical security practices were routinely recommended. Because Weiner’s initial mistake was publicly posting a private, sexual message from his identifiable Twitter account, articles recommended reviewing privacy settings (Kleinberg, 2015), follower lists (Hannaford, 2015), and ensuring that one has distinct accounts for distinct purposes (Montgomery, 2014). Because Weiner’s illegal sexting became the means by which Hillary Clinton’s e-mail messages came under federal investigation, articles suggested not sharing accounts or devices with loved ones (Butter, 2016). As these recommendations and the earlier recommendations for ephemeral apps demonstrated, technologies viewed as creating the conditions for these boundary violations were also understood as the means through which these normative boundaries could be partially restored. As one expert stated: “the same software that has turned our lives into a 24/7 photo op could eventually be used to enhance confidentiality” (Shea, 2013). Recommendations for purely social solutions — like not sending risqué pictures — were less prominent in these accounts than they were in Todd’s.

Weiner’s story is framed as a cautionary tale of what happens when one doesn’t understand the altered boundaries of networked environments, particularly the myth of security — a media ideology — as well as the new technical rules of discretion, or idioms of practice. As one article noted, Weiner was a “peculiarly modern cautionary tale” (Marcus, 2011); another implored the reader to “learn from ex-U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner’s downfall” (Kleinberg, 2015); a social media consultant is quoted as saying that “some people’s purpose in life is to serve as a warning to others. [...] Anthony Weiner is one of those” (Donnelly, 2013). In this case, the cautionary tale was most often directed at adults who, like Weiner, appear unaware of new media’s porous boundaries.

**Shame**

While Weiner’s story certainly worked within the script of political sex scandals in the United States
Screenshot, save, share, shame: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame

(Gamson, 2001), the often tongue-in-cheek public discourse didn’t necessarily shame Weiner for his moral misdeeds. The terms used to describe Weiner were sometimes “disgraced” (Elkind, 2017); but more often Weiner is “a laughingstock” (Rosenberg and Golding, 2016); “very, very silly” (Johnson, 2015); “stupid,” “pathetic,” and like an “errant child” (Marcus, 2011); possessing less sense than “your average teenage girl” for sending sexual images across the Internet (Donnelly, 2013). In other words, Anthony Weiner’s shaming came in the form of emasculation, and was not so much directed at his sexual indiscretions as it was at his routinely foolish decisions online. For an adult man, and a public figure, the shame was in not understanding the idioms of practice or the media ideologies enough to hide indiscretions in this environment.

While acts of shaming may take place in this public discourse, Anthony Weiner himself was rarely portrayed as possessing the feeling of shame. (He was once described as shameless. [Rosenberg and Golding, 2016]) Instead, the subject of humiliation was just as often trained on Weiner’s marriage or directly on his then-spouse, Huma Abedin. One article noted that the “couple’s marital problems have been subjects of years of tabloid mockery and humiliation” (Chozick and Healy, 2016), while another called them the “perv pol and his humiliated spouse” (New York Post, 2013). Public shaming through news media thus explicitly worked to spell out what was foolish in a networked environment. At the same time, the wielding of public shame here further entrenched the idea that powerful men might suffer the material consequences of wrongdoing but can avoid shame’s more deleterious forms of moral reprobation.

Conclusion: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame

This article examined two case studies that sit at the intersection of screenshots and shame. It demonstrated how screenshots violated the assumed boundaries of media environments, prompting negotiations with media ideologies, idioms of practice, and social norms. Moreover, it sought to understand the affective and emotional dimensions of sense-making around today’s networked environments. To conclude, I discuss major takeaways around screenshots, boundary violations, and shame.

Screenshots act in ways that are consistent with Chun and Friedland’s (2015) conception of leakiness, breaching and constituting normative boundaries between public and private. In these cases, this was the movement of private information — sexual images — from what should have been private digital forums into public forums, whether social networks in Todd’s case or news media in Weiner’s case. However, the screenshot’s framing in these cases also reveals the ways that the breaching of public/private boundaries is especially entangled with the boundary between permanence and ephemerality. The screenshot’s capacity to make seemingly ephemeral moments permanent signaled another normative boundary crossing, revealing and violating existing media ideologies that assumed some measure of ephemerality in digital spaces. In Todd’s case, this was the assumed ephemerality of live, unrecorded video; in Weiner’s case, it was the assumed ephemerality of a deleted social media post. This suggests that the essential characteristics of new media environments are as much temporal as they are spatial.

Through this public discourse, we can see how screenshots bring normative boundaries to the fore precisely because of their violation. Boundary transgressions reveal the conditions of new media environments and incite acts of sense-making. For instance, when media ideologies were violated, they prompted reckoning with the redrawn lines of public and private, ephemeral and permanent, and secure and vulnerable in networked media spaces. Amanda Todd and Anthony Weiner’s stories are framed as violations of idioms of practice in these new environments; in turn, they prompted clear articulations of the new rules of acceptable behavior. Finally, by dint of the new types of encounters facilitated in these environments, social mores were violated and reinforced. In Amanda Todd’s case, this new encounter was not only between a predatory adult and a young woman an ocean away from one another, but one in which Amanda’s immediate community was able to encounter these images “capped” at that distance. Anthony Weiner’s case, however much it played in political sex scandal tropes, allowed for the public to encounter his indiscretions at an
unprecedented level of detail. Social norms were reinforced in each case, especially the further entrenchment of gendered norms about sexual propriety and public space.

This article has further substantiated models of technological sense-making that cite the importance of normative boundary violations, just as it has described a particular moment of sense-making around networked digital media. To conclude, however, I want to build on these models by arguing that media sense-making is a process that involves not just boundaries and practices, but emotion and affect. We make sense of things through feeling (Cvetkovich, 2012), and the presence of shame in Amanda Todd and Anthony Weiner’s stories is a case in point. Because shame results from normative violations, the public discussion of Todd’s shame or Weiner’s shaming is inextricable from the sense-making that arose from other sociotechnical boundary violations. Shame in fact highlighted these boundary violations. Moreover, because both stories show that the consequences of violation are shame or shaming, the idioms of practice that were articulated could be understood as public instructions for shame avoidance. Finally, Amanda Todd’s expression of shame in her video was framed as significantly moving, as affective. This expression of shame was a crucial reason her case received widespread attention, becoming a lightning rod moment for discussions over new media environments. Given shame’s centrality in these cases, this article argues for a more focused consideration of emotion in studies of technological sense-making, probing the ways that feelings are inseparable from this process.

About the author

Frances Corry is a Ph.D. candidate in communication at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Her research is concerned with technology, memory, and archives, and asks questions about how conceptions of the past are (or are not) shaped by technological change. Previous writing and research have appeared in the International Journal of Communication, Computer Communication Review (CCR), Feminist Media Studies, and in the edited volume Uncertain archives: Critical keywords for big data (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2021).

E-mail: corry [at] usc [dot] edu

Acknowledgments

Thank you Larry Gross for early guidance on this topic, Francesca Gacho for her support on later drafts, and an anonymous reviewer for feedback.

Notes

2. Ibid.
4. Tumber and Waisbord, 2019, p. 11.
5. See Chun and Friedland (2015) and Osucha (2009) for robust discussions of racialized and gendered construction of privacy, including the Amanda Todd case.
References


*Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 2016. “Weiner gets the chop” (31 August), p. 27.


Screenshot, save, share, shame: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame

Press.


---

Editorial history

Received 25 February 2021; accepted 3 March 2021.

---

This paper is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
Screenshot, save, share, shame: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i4.11649