Shameless dicks: On male privilege, dick pic scandals, and public exposure
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Abstract
Academic debates on shame and the involuntary networked circulation of naked pictures have largely focused on instances of hacked accounts of female celebrities, on revenge porn, and interconnected forms of slut-shaming. Meanwhile, dick pics have been predominantly examined as vehicles of sexual harassment within heterosexual contexts. Taking a somewhat different approach, this article examines leaked or otherwise involuntarily exposed dick pics of men of notable social privilege, asking what kinds of media events such leaked data assemble, how penises become sites of public interest and attention, and how these bodies may be able to escape circuits of public shaming. By focusing on high-profile incidents on an international scale during the past decade, this article moves from the leaked shots of male politicians as governance through shaming to body-shaming targeted at Harvey Weinstein, to Jeff Bezos’s refusal to be shamed through his hacked dick pic, and to an accidentally self-published shaft shot of Lars Ohly, a Swedish politician, we examine the agency afforded by social privilege to slide through shame rather than be stuck in it. By building on feminist media studies and affect inquiry, we attend to the specificities of these attempts to shame, their connections to and disconnections from slut-shaming, and the possibilities and spaces offered for laughter within this all.

Contents
Introduction
Oh, shame on you!
Disgusting, deformed, and monstrous
“No thank you, Mr. Pecker”
“Lars, you’re showing your willy!”
Wholesome nudity
Moralism and shameless male privilege

Introduction
Academic debates on shame and the involuntary networked circulation of naked photos have largely focused on the hacked accounts of female celebrities, on revenge porn, and on myriad forms of slut-shaming connected to sexting. Meanwhile, dick pics have been predominantly examined in their unsolicited forms as vehicles for sexual harassment within heterosexual contexts (e.g., Amundsen, 2020; Hayes and...
Shameless dicks: On male privilege, dick pic scandals, and public exposure

Dragiewicz, 2018; Oswald, et al., 2020; Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light, 2019; Ringrose and Lawrence, 2018; Salter, 2016; Waling and Pym, 2019; Waling, et al., 2020). Taking a somewhat different approach to naked pictures and the affective circuits of shame online, in this article we examine leaked or otherwise involuntarily exposed dick pics of white straight cis-men of social privilege, asking what kinds of networked media events these assemble, how exposed penises become sites of public interest and attention, and how male bodies may escape the circuits of public shaming.

For Tomkins (2008), shame, in entailing a sense of failure and inferiority, is a powerful engine of sociability that plays a central yet complex role in the making of the self. There is however nothing automatic or causal about how shame builds up or fades away, or how attempts to shame work, given that their power is dependent on both personal affective investments and social relations of power. Examining internationally reported dick pic incidents involving members of the political, cultural, and economic elite, this article moves from the leaked dick pics of male politicians as a form of attempted governance through shaming to body-shaming targeted at Harvey Weinstein in the context of #MeToo, to Jeff Bezos’ refusal to be shamed by his hacked dick pics, and to an accidentally self-published shaft shot of Lars Ohly, a Swedish politician. By focusing on the agency afforded by social privilege for male bodies to slide through shame rather than be stuck in it, we inquire after the contextual specificities of these attempts to shame, their connections to and disconnections from slut-shaming, and the possibilities and spaces for laughter emerging within this all.

Oh, shame on you!

Research on nude selfies has shown that while slut-shaming is a spectral threat in women’s self-shooting practices, it remains somewhat detached from men’s sexting practices. In contrast, men’s naked selfies expand towards humor in homosocial pranking [1] and to the crueler shades of ridicule and shaming connected to modest (“peanut”) penis size as a source of humiliation, as faced especially by young men [2]. A man showcasing his genitals may, then, not be perceived of as a slut but his body may be a source of amusement and, should the photos in question be sent without consent, he may well be labeled an asshole or a creep (see Ravn, et al., 2021). Popular discourses on dick pics frame them — even in the context of solicited and reciprocal sexting — as something to be ashamed of, and the men sending them as inappropriately shameless. This results in forms of risk mitigation practiced by dick-pic-sending men towards the potentially negative impact of sexting on their jobs or social ties [3]. Meanwhile, men equally emphasize the importance of relationality in visual sexual exchanges that allows them “to feel recognised or acknowledged by a loved one or partner as attractive” (Waling, et al., 2020).

An obvious gap then exists between sexting connected to flirtation and entailing an edge of vulnerability in the desire to be desired and accepted, and the circuits of shaming and mockery that emerge when such practices are rendered public. The scale of publicness grows manifold when the men involved are public figures whose actions are considered newsworthy and whose leaked visual productions may attract the attention of thousands, or even millions of curious viewers. In dick pic incidents involving men of social privilege, the simple fact of being able to witness photographs of them in the nude, courtesy of online platforms, has become a source of persistent public titillation — not least since this occurs in connection with vernacular moralizing and judgement concerning the actions of the men involved. Enter sexting scandals.

In a famous 2011 case, U.S. House Representative Anthony Weiner resigned after he was found to have sexted with several women, and especially as a photo of his erect penis in boxer briefs, intended as a direct message to a female college student, was tweeted from his official @Rep.Weiner account. While Weiner claimed that his account had been hacked, the reputational damage was done (Gray, 2011). Weiner continued his political career until 2016, when news of FBI investigating his sexting with a 15-year-old girl broke, leading to his imprisonment the following year. Since Weiner had been sending these messages from
In 2020, the campaign of the Paris Mayor hopeful, Benjamin Griveaux, came to an end as news broke of his sexting and as a video of his masturbating sent to a woman not his wife was made public. The video was uploaded by the Russian-born artist, Petr Pavlensky, who accused Griveaux of political hypocrisy and later faced charges on the violation of privacy and publishing sexual images without consent. Also known for his 2013 performance, “Fixation”, where he hammered a large nail through his scrotum to Moscow’s Red Square during the Russian police day, Pavlensky claimed that the leaked video was part of his new art project, the platform “Porno-Politika” focused on uncovering deceitful politicians. (RFI, 2020; Higgins, 2020). The incident marked a departure within French politics where extramarital affairs have tended to be considered a private issue of no public importance or concern. Many commentators saw it as a sign of unwelcome moralizing and “Americanization” (Américanisation) of culture and fellow politicians loudly condemned the revelations as an attack on privacy and democracy alike (Breeden and Nossiter, 2020; de Montaigne, 2020). Indeed, the case might not have qualified as scandal of any kind were it not for the option of public witnessing offered by Pavlensky’s short-lived platform and the participatory opportunities allowed by social media.

A scandal is a public event where the audience is invited to witness norms of appropriate behavior being transgressed and to judge the issue for themselves. Connected to suspected misconduct, scandal reveals individual and collective actions and subjects them to public evaluation and debate (Adut, 2008). A scandal then involves publicness on two interconnected levels. First, the accused has to be a public figure of some standing. Misconduct by a random person — a nobody — toward someone equally unknown does not a scandal make. Second, scandal is a media event open to general consumption and judgment. In sexting scandals of male politicians, the heart of the issue involves discrepancies between professional image and private action. Within politics, character and personality function as capital key to the making of public careers — the issue being not only one of policy but also personal qualities and their perceived authenticity.

The public accessibility of male politicians’ naked selfies added an additional layer of intensity to the scandals as people were invited to not merely witness and judge their alleged actions but also their naked bodies and erect genitalia (and, possibly, their skills in self-shooting and sexual messaging). Stripped of their clothing, the men were as if symbolically stripped of authority and brought down from their privileged social standing to bodies visually consumed for public merriment, ridicule, and shaming. In fact, the mere visibility of politicians’ penises in the networked realm may qualify as scandalous: the scandal may well lie in sexual explicitness as such.

All this involves no small degrees of moral judgment or moralizing masked as such. Examining the case of Weiner, Taylor (2019) for example uses it to pass judgment on his actions, the actions of the public, as well as the state of social media culture: “Here was the worst of our social media age in a nutshell: the sad sexting with anyone who would indulge him; the tragic, grainy pictures shared in chat windows by an older man who should have known better; a viral media frenzy sparked again and again by sheer titillation, exposing our baser instincts.” According to Taylor’s three-layered invitation to shame, Weiner should have known better and be ashamed, we as the public are drawn to shameful, gratuitous titillations, and social media breeds sad, base and shameful forms of networked sociability.

Shame comes wrapped up with a sense of failure, of falling short and feeling inferior, be this connected to not matching expectations (set by others or the person in question) or to having violated a social norm. In the stronger affective intensities of humiliation, the incapacitating powers of shame bleed into the dynamics
Shameless dicks: On male privilege, dick pic scandals, and public exposure

of contempt and disgust [5]. Sex scandals entail the humiliation of the accused, yet the circuits of shame also operate in expansive and immersive vein encompassing their audiences. Consequently, Apostolidis and Williams [6] argue that absorption in sex scandals is tinted with shame that leaks and sticks to the bodies so engaged. Some of this titillation is encapsulated in the BuzzFeed article title, “Here are the alleged Anthony Weiner dick pics you didn’t want to see” inviting people to enjoy the visuals as if against their will. “Seriously. Don’t scroll down,” the article further advises, framing the images through notions of risk, displeasure, and voyeuristic thrill (Broderick, 2013). This kind of stickiness, or mirroring effect, where shame moves between the bodies of those accused of transgression and those witnessing, and where judgement comes with affective thrills, ultimately renders the position of a smug outsider impossible. Sex scandals close audiences in their embrace, implicating them in guilty pleasures tinted with shame. The tenacious permanence of data on online platforms means that evidence of scandal remains perpetually visible, to be referenced and re-evoked whenever similar incidents occur. Both shame and titillation linger within such scandalous archives: frozen in time, they refuse to go away.

Disgusting, deformed, and monstrous

A different articulation of disgust and shame emerged in 2017 as the scandal of Harvey Weinstein — major U.S. film producer — being accused of serial sexual harassment and rape, broke, fueling the #MeToo movement that spread virally through Twitter and Facebook. Within the Weinstein scandal, the entirely unacceptable behavior of a highly privileged man was shown as being enabled by a network of people committed to a code of silence. Media coverage framed it equally, if not more explicitly, as a sex scandal through the disclosure of salacious details of events taking place behind closed doors; from an assault victim’s account of Weinstein masturbating onto a potted plant to his uses of erectile dysfunction medication, and to a former employee’s description of semen-dotted sofas (Gill and Orgad, 2018). The case was not one of dick pics but of sexual assault, yet public attention soon clustered on Weinstein’s genitalia described in court and in the tabloid press alike.

The moral disgust and outrage expressed toward Weinstein’s actions was further amplified in commentaries zooming in on his body and expressing distaste towards his physical appearance. “The only sound ‘signal’ that an ugly pig like Harvey Weinstein should expect from a woman is DISGUST,” a Variety reader exclaimed, while the British tabloid, The Sun, gleefully revealed his Cannes nick name, “the Big Pig,” owing to his “sweaty and grunting” manner (Duff, 2017). As Weinstein’s trial proceeded in early 2020, attention clustered on this penis, described by a court witness as “disgusting,” with the appearance of having been “cut and sewn back on.” (Evans, 2020) “His body was hairy, it had moles on his rolls, a disgusting looking penis,” the witness elaborated, while another described both his seeming lack of testicles and his potential vagina. The jury was then shown naked photographs of Weinstein, including a full-frontal shot, in order to assess the credibility of witness statements. Covering the incident, Page Six describes it with relish:

Manhattan jurors at Harvey Weinstein’s rape trial sat through some cringe-worthy testimony Tuesday before things really took a turn for the worse.

Toward the end of the day, the panel was shown five nude photos of the portly, 67-year-old disgraced producer, presumably to help corroborate his alleged victims’ description of his odd genitalia.

One female Manhattan Supreme Court juror made a slight face when she saw the snaps, while another woman on the panel raised her eyebrows and a male juror opened his eyes widely
These images remained invisible to the reading public, yet some of their affective appeal was mediated through the words chosen and the jury reactions described — from “the cringe-worthy” to the “odd” and to faces made, eyebrows raised, and eyes widely opened. Later asked by a journalist “whether the photos were of him in the buff,” Weinstein jokingly responded with “no, it was Playboy.” The U.S. edition of *The Sun* further explored the issue, arguing that Weinstein had genital Fournier gangrene: “Information on the unseemly condition ... comes months after his victims took the stand to give graphic first-hand depictions of his ‘deformed genitalia’.” (Lock, 2020)

The coverage of the Weinstein affair, resulting in many a clickbait-compatible news headline and reader comment, facilitated his singling out as a monstrous predator whose physique is as repellent as his actions. It further suggested that, as a social deviant, Weinstein should be ashamed and that he deserves to be ridiculed both for his actions and his body [7]. Within all this, attention zoomed in on his penis, described verbally, documented through photographic means, and offered to jurors as compulsory viewing. The penile spectacle of the disformed, abnormal, and disgusting entailed a powerful fixing of Weinstein as monstrous other, and therefore as an exception from the rest of the population. This was paradoxical in that the affective force of #MeToo has been largely premised on the ubiquity, and hence the fundamental ordinariness, of sexual harassment and violence against women (Boyle, 2019).

As a social operation, shaming positions its target as one who should engage in self-reflection and critique, hang his head in shame, apologize, repent, and mend his ways. It was not merely the case that Weinstein was called to feel ashamed: the call was for humiliation [8]. Othered as monster, Weinstein was — despite his long and successful career as a Hollywood producer — depicted as a both moral and physical failure. His joking response to nude shots of himself being shown in the courtroom nevertheless suggests that the call to feel ashamed, as amplified by news sources, social media shares, and comments, may not have had the intended outcome. An attempt to shame, after all, does not necessarily stick or result in experiences of shame [9]. Shame can linger, layer, and grow into a sense of humiliation, it can be perceived in the much lighter hues of embarrassment, and it can slide by so that others become embarrassed for the one who shows no shame.

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“No thank you, Mr. Pecker”

On 8 February 2019, Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon and the world’s richest man, published a text in *The Medium* accusing the tabloid *National Enquirer* for blackmailing him with photos hacked from his phone. Unless Bezos dropped the investigation into how the tabloid obtained his intimate messages with lover Lauren Sanchez for its previous exposé and made a statement according to which it had no political motives, his dick pic would be published. Rather than going along with the extortion, Bezos decided to make the photos public himself “despite the personal cost and embarrassment they threaten.” He also published e-mail exchanges with *National Enquirer’s* publisher, AMI, describing the images in question:

In addition to the “below the belt selfie — otherwise colloquially known as a ‘d*ck pick’” — *The Enquirer* obtained a further nine images. These include:

- Mr. Bezos face selfie at what appears to be a business meeting.
- Ms. Sanchez response — a photograph of her smoking a cigar in what appears to be a simulated oral sex scene.
- A shirtless Mr. Bezos holding his phone in his left hand —
Shameless dicks: On male privilege, dick pic scandals, and public exposure

While wearing his wedding ring. He’s wearing either tight black cargo pants or shorts — and his semi-erect manhood is penetrating the zipper of said garment.

A full-length body selfie of Mr. Bezos wearing just a pair of tight black boxer-briefs or trunks, with his phone in his left hand — while wearing his wedding ring.

A selfie of Mr. Bezos fully clothed.

A full-length scantily-clad body shot with short trunks.

A naked selfie in a bathroom — while wearing his wedding ring. Mr. Bezos is wearing nothing but a white towel — and the top of his pubic region can be seen. ... (Bezos, 2019)

Exposing the actions of AMI and its CEO, David Pecker, explicitly refused the attempt to embarrass and shame, opting for publicness instead: “If in my position I can’t stand up to this kind of extortion, how many people can?” Given AMI’s ties with the Trump presidential campaign of 2016 and Bezos’ ownership of Washington Post known for being critical of the president, he identified the seemingly banal incident of sexting extortion as a politically motivated low-blow tactic of silencing (Bezos, 2019). The incident further grew into an international political scandal as, counter to AMI’s claims that the messages had been leaked by Sanchez, they were connected to a 2018 hack where malware came to Bezos’ phone via the personal WhatsApp account of the Saudi Crown prince (Kirchgaessner, 2020). The scandal of the case then involved much less Bezos’ extramarital affair and dick pic practice than the political and diplomatic ramifications of hacking and political blackmail both within the United States and internationally. Unwilling to resist serial puns, Mashable analyzed the incident’s potential ramifications: “And while Weiner’s weiner brought us Trump, Pecker’s pecker-related threats may help to bury him.” (Taylor, 2019)

While a Saturday Night Live sketch zeroed in on Bezos’ penis (“if it’s small, it looks funny, you better have the money, honey”) and the existence of the dick pic was received with degrees of glee across social media, public opinion seemed to be firmly on his side. Representatives of Wall Street were quoted describing him as a “genius” not easily distracted by trivialities (Levin, 2019), Twitter users saw his move as bold (Sung, 2019), and journalists otherwise characterizing Bezos as “a terrible human being” defended his right to naked self-shooting and consensual sexting (Manavis, 2019). Bezos’ stand, according to which this was a private affair and therefore nobody else’s business, found popular support. This was also possible since his business success — unlike the success of politicians or executives working for a brand not of their own building — has little to do with personal reputation management or adherence to so-called family values.

Bezos, in sum, refused to be shamed while nevertheless citing his embarrassment. For Goffman, embarrassment is densely social, always present in human encounters, and threatening to turn social comfort into awkward discomfort — or, in his terms, “discomfiture” — that moves from the intensity of abrupt embarrassment to sustained uneasiness of “barely apparent flusterings.” [10] Embarrassment is unpleasant, yet its intensities may soon diminish or remain perceptible as something of a murmur. At the same time, it entails stickiness and mirroring similar to those of shame, for as Goffman argues, it is not always the case that the one and the same person is both the cause of embarrassing social dissonance, the one for whom things are embarrassing, and the one for whom the embarrassment is felt. A person may fail to feel “appropriately” embarrassed and others may blush for him instead: “This is why embarrassment seems to be contagious, spreading, once started, in ever widening circles of discomfiture.” [11] Networked connectivity tends to intensify such affective contagions, as social media speed up the transmission and circulation of affect (Sampson, 2012). Thus, in networked forms of discomfiture, those aiming to embarrass, those targeted, and those feeling embarrassed are intensely interlinked as the blush — or the lack thereof — travels quickly between bodies and platforms.
“Lars, you’re showing your willy!”

Dick pics are not always intentional: they may not only be shared, but also produced by accident. This happened to Lars Ohly, the former leader of the Left Party in Sweden (2004–2012), in the midst of summer in 2013 when he was still a member of the Swedish Parliament. Ohly was sunbathing in the nude and decided to take a picture of his freshly inked calf featuring a tattoo of the Liver Bird, a mythical creature symbolizing the city of Liverpool and its football club. He then proceeded to post the picture on his public Instagram account with the comment: “the calf,” not realizing that the shot also captured a part of his penis as it peaked between his thighs in the lower righthand corner of the frame. It did not take long before the comments started to build up, from the cautious “Someone isn’t shy” and “It’s hardly the calf that comes to mind when looking at the picture” to the more straightforward “Lars, you’re showing your willy!” [12] But it was not until the newspaper *Aftonbladet* contacted Ohly that he became aware of his fortuitous dick pic (Linderborg, 2013). By the time he took it down, merely minutes after the initial posting, numerous screenshots had already been grabbed and news about the event were spreading across social media platforms.

People had a field day on Twitter, and Ohly was among the first to make fun of himself: “Ha, ha, I accidentally posted a picture on Instagram that showed more than intended,” he tweeted, “Now corrected” (tweet no longer available), and “The wife is laughing hard at the willy pic.” (24 retweets, 34 likes). Fellow politicians were quick to chime in. His political opponent Carl Bildt of the conservative Moderate Party, at the time the Minister for Foreign Affairs, tweeted: “Congratulations to you after all these years for getting this genuinely public breakthrough!” Ohly himself proudly shared a private text message from the former leader of the Social Democrats, Håkan Juholt: “The best reaction today! Sms from Håkan Juholt: ‘Was thinking of barbecuing sausages tonight, but now I’ll stick to chicken’.” The comedian Robin Paulsson further contributed: “Thanks to Lars Ohly, The Left Party advanced today 7 centimeters in the latest opinion poll.”

It was thus humor rather than shame that was put in motion, shared, and circulated. Humor may work both to reduce the risk involved in having dick pics shared and shape the experience of receiving them (cf., Mandau, 2020). Dick pics are, after all, also a source of male homosocial humor fueled by fascination felt towards others’ bodies [13]. By immediately making light of the incidence, and by not being afraid to let others have fun on his behalf, Ohly tapped into a humorous register connected to male nudity in relation to which a surprise willy becomes the object of (mostly) friendly mockery and laughter, as encapsulated in the infantile term, “willy” ("snoppen"). Such laughter may partly be grounded in *schadenfreude*, in the act of taking joy in witnessing the shortcomings of others, amplified by the rapid circulation of images in social media. It can equally stem from what Weiss (2018) calls secondhand shame, a sense of shame in the face of others’ shameless behavior, or embarrassment felt for another, yet the accidental nature of Ohly’s dick pic also frames it as unintentional and, indeed, nonsexual. The interlacing of such secondhand shame with laughter forms a kind of cringe comedy that draws pleasure from situational awkwardness and viewer discomfort [14].

This laughter could also be one of surprise at the unexpected reveal, and amusement in following the development, even if this social media event never turned into a scandal. In their research on political scandals, Allern and Pollack (2019) argue that a violation of social norms or moral codes is not enough to turn something into a scandal. Scandalization depends on particular kinds of mediation and framing in terms of editorial angles, headlines, and images: it requires a type of media reporting that ripples through public spaces as critique, if not outrage. If the public is not affected, the event remains merely a potential scandal, a hypothetical disgrace. Social media complicates this picture in so far as scandals also develop horizontally and erratically, and as images gone viral feed public reactions beyond journalistic processes (as was partly the case with Griveaux’s leaked video). In Ohly’s inadvertent slipup, laughter quickly covered up what could have been far more embarrassing, or even scandalous, taking the edge off of an affectively
volatile situation.

The non-scandalous quality of the event was also due to the light and playful media reporting. Swedish media unanimously referred to the incident as en tabbe — a gaffe, a slipup, a small mistake (Gimling Shaftoe, 2013; Linderborg, 2013; Videla, 2013). The more common Swedish tabloid vocabulary for describing similar occurrences, in reference to female nudity in particular, would be nakenchock (nudity shock, or shock of nudity), which, contrary to how it sounds, has less to do with nudity being perceived as shocking and more with creating titillation for the readers. Ohly’s stumble builds on a series of mistakes at the intersection of penises and digital media: the accidental dick pic, the unintentional upload and share of said shot, and his absentminded non-presence on Instagram as comments started to surface. Social media temporality plays a part in all this as Instagram in 2013 was still relatively young and users afforded a different kind of innocence than they would be today. Something could also be said about generation and how someone like Ohly (born in the late 1950s) may be more easily let off the hook due to his assumed boomer ineptitude in social media use.

The framing of the event as nothing other than a stumble was picked up by the French news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP, 2013) in their headline “Swedish lawmaker bares all in social media gaffe,” which made the news spread internationally from Daily Mail to Washington Post, and beyond. In New York Magazine, the headline read: “Swedish politician’s dick pic much more innocent,” filed under the section “Other countries’ embarrassments” (Coscarelli, 2013). Buzzfeed turned more graphic: “A Swedish politician just Instagrammed his balls,” followed by the dare “Look away now if you don’t want to see this guy’s balls.” Similar to the framing of Weiner, the article draws on a sense of voyeuristic risky pleasure in daring the reader to scroll down to reveal the image, a second exposure of something already exposed, and an attempt at creating drama and scandal where these were lacking (Leggett, 2013). In retrospect, Ohly’s accidental shaft shot awarded him the sixth place on Rolling Stone’s list of “History’s 10 most significant dick pic scandals” (where Weiner came second and Bezos topped the list), which acknowledged that it was, in fact, no scandal at all: “In proof that junk-shot scandals are survivable, Sweden’s former Left Party leader Ohly emerged unscathed after he accidentally posted his packaging. ... Is everything in Europe easier?” (Taibbi, 2019)

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**Wholesome nudity**

The seeming absence of not only shame but also public shaming in the case of Ohly’s accidental dick pic spread is noteworthy. While admitting in a podcast interview with RFSU (Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning or Swedish Association for Sexuality Education) that the incident was a slight embarrassment as it was completely unintentional, it did not strike him as particularly shameful as nudity “isn’t so dramatic.” [15] It was thus the technological slip and slide that was more of an embarrassment than his inadvertent public exposure. “It’s not very embarrassing really,” he moreover told The Local, “You just need to be a bit laid back.” [16] Indeed, it would take quite a bit of laidbackness in relation to both one’s body and public image to not look closer at the picture when shooting, uploading, and sharing it, and to then take the unexpected result in good humor. But it would also take an equally relaxed attitude to male nudity on behalf of the public for the event to not take off differently as a scandal fueled by public shaming.

The notion of a media scandal as rooted in a violation of social and moral norms is interesting when considering the non-scandalous quality of Ohly’s dick-slip. While a detailed account of norms regulating nudity, bodies, and shame in a Swedish context is well beyond the scope of this article, a little background is helpful. Sweden is essentially Lutheran in its cultural legacy, but not Puritan in the sense that naked bodies and their (potential) sexualization have historically been understood with reference to health, nature, and the natural. Steorn demonstrated how the use of images of naked men was widespread in the early twentieth century Sweden across a range of visual genres, from the active bodies of sports magazines to art, to health journals and medical books, enough so for the muscular, naked man to become “a nationalistic
This figure was also at the heart of how athletics became part of a bourgeoning outdoor sports movement, shaped by Romanticist notions of wholesome bodies exposed to sun and fresh air.

In this historical light where nudity is framed as natural, takes non-sexual forms, and is nothing to be ashamed about, the sunbathing, relaxed (albeit not very muscular) nude Ohly and his self-shooting fumble, combined with short-lived social media virality in which shame and shaming never quite surfaced, takes on a particular meaning. Given all this, Ohly’s dick stumble did not necessarily constitute the kind of normative transgression that would merit public outrage. Adding the fact that the shot was accidental, not connected to secretive sexting routines, and openly laughed at by his wife, the event of public pubic exposure proved to be of an ephemeral kind. Resorting to laughter and not minding being not just laughed with but laughed at, Ohly dodged the circuits of shame and humiliation, even as embarrassment and discomfiture lingered.

The weight of public shaming connected to naked bodies is differently distributed in the contexts where this article moves. In both Sweden and France, the fact of a male politician’s mediated nudity was a source of titillation, yet ultimately perceived of as insignificant: in the case of Griveaux, scandal and humiliation involved the disconnect between his public and private presentations of the self just as the act of leaking of the video was perceived as scandalous and objectionable. Ohly’s accidental willy pic remains in circulation whereas Griveaux’s exposures were removed from public view, yet both remain reminisced on online platforms internationally. In the cases of Weiner, Weinstein, and Bezos, as different as they are, the shock and spectacle of the exposed male body gained a different kind of status and attention as the key source of public attention and frisson: there was scandal to the sexual male body as such.

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**Moralism and shameless male privilege**

Despite the ubiquity, and hence banality, of sexting and dick pic practices of diverse kinds, they remain newsworthy, and potentially scandalous, in connection with public figures. Consider, for example, the actor Chris Evans (known for his role as Captain America in Marvel films) who, when posting a screen-recorded Instagram story video to his 5.7 million followers in September 2020, accidentally included his photo and video roll with a shot of his erect penis. Expressing his embarrassment and teased on Twitter, Evans then used the international attention by tweeting for people to vote come the presidential elections on 3 November. In a dynamic not unlike that connected to Ohly’s accidental “willy pic,” the incident was framed in terms of amusement and embarrassment, with the fact of genital visibility being the key focus, and with attention clustered on the non-scandalous revelation soon fading. As we have shown in this article, different careers are differently impacted by such scandals while further divisions are drawn along the lines of cultural context, consent, and intention — here, the cases of Weiner, Griveaux, Weinstein, Bezos, and Ohly (or, indeed, that of Evans) remain both interconnected and distinct.

The incidents offer explicit glimpses at bodies regularly hidden by custom-made business suits, rendering them subjects to scrutiny, commentary, and ridicule as a social leveling act of kind. While the men involved have, in different degrees, been able to escape the circuits of public shaming, their perceived shamelessness is not untouched by, or disconnected from shame. As a powerful affective mechanism of sociability, shame rarely disappears from view: rather, it becomes redistributed in social exchanges (both networked and not), in media coverage, commentary, gossip, and analysis. The seeming absence of shame would thus imply a form of displacement wherein men belonging to the social elite behave shamelessly and other people experience shame in their place, and where the affective circuity is amplified by the shaming apparatus of social media. But shame is also displaced disproportionally with regards to violations of bodily norms. Shame shapes identity by making and breaking relations and connections in ways that connect affect with cultural politics: it “involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies ‘turn away’ from the others who witness the shame.”
There are those, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, “whose sense of identity is for some reason tuned most durably to the note of shame.” Such shame-prone identities can be linked to, for example, gender, sexuality, and race (Munt, 2007; Probyn, 2005; Stockton, 2006). Bodies that diverge from white, cis-male, straight, fit, and young bodily norms habitually suffer from the shame of being looked at and found lacking, even while not actively engaging in acts deemed shameful (cf., Bartky, 1990). From this follows that those enjoying proximity to bodily norms have considerably more leeway, their sense of bodily shame being much less sticky, and their engagement in potentially transgressive acts being much less risky. The men who figure in this article enjoy straight white male privilege, yet they are not necessarily young or fit in ways befitting normative body ideals, a divergence partly — yet not fully — compensated by their positions of social power. The one described as the most bodily deviant, even abject, would be Weinstein, his normative transgressions providing fuel for body-shaming, ridicule, and humiliation. Unlike leaked naked photos of straight women of celebrity status, such as those released within the 2014 “Fappening” incident, their dick pics do not circulate on porn sites, contextualized as potential masturbation fodder. In a familiar dynamic, naked female bodies become identified as sexual, or even pornographic, while male ones retain more semantic mobility in the registers of laughter and bemusement (see Paasonen, Light, and Jarrett, 2019).

Shame is intensely relational, easily amplified, and unevenly distributed as it vibrates through the affective fabrics of social media. As we have shown, the circuits of shame and shaming are open to disruption: Shaming can fail as positions of power and male privilege allow for those who seem not have a sense of shame to refuse such attempts at social control, as manifestly done by Bezos. It can equally fail if the person in question is not interested in the acceptance of those pointing out and judging his shortcomings. Shaming involves the attempt to put someone in their place by delimiting how they move in the world and engage with other bodies in it. When such attempts fail, by a lack of investment in the exchange or in the regard of the other, no social control is accomplished — even if there is no way to simply be free from shame as such. A focus on acts of shaming shrouded in moral judgment connected to naked self-shooting and sexting, while crucial in unraveling the affective body politics of social media, may nevertheless leave intact the question of how sex and sexuality become steeped in shame in the first place. Yet, this question is vital to our ability to differently imagine bodies, desires, and networked exchanges.

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Notes

15. RFSU, 17 October 2013.

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