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### Abstract

Shaming in a social context is necessarily assembled, as it depends on a loosely and often spontaneously arranged network of actors to convey denunciation. Digital tools further the expansion of such networks, a development that is of particular concern for surveillance scholars. This paper seeks to advance an account of user-led surveillance of peers that is centred on the enactment and experience of shame, notably as such practices can mobilise and be mobilised by press and state-led initiatives. Drawing on literature that considers shaming in criminological, journalistic, and digital media contexts, it considers tensions and other developments among a range of social actors who perform shaming. Recent examples in the Dutch context support an understanding of shaming as a process that enrolls a set of social actors to stigmatise and exclude (categories of) individuals under scrutiny.

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### Introduction

In January 2017, a 78-year-old misplaced her wallet in a shop in the Dutch municipality of Oldenzaal. A 68-year-old woman took the wallet, an act of theft that was filmed on the shop's security camera. Local police broadcast the footage on a crime program entitled *Onder de Loep* ("Under the Magnifying Glass"). The woman turned herself in to the police, but footage from the TV show was uploaded to Dumpert, a populist Dutch media-hosting platform. The video generated nearly a half million views, and its audience—a self-described community of *Reagurrders*—harassed her, including through the public comment section on Dumpert. Shortly afterwards, the woman took her own life (Baard 2017). While unable to attribute the woman's suicide to any single factor, this incident appears to exemplify the social harm inflicted by shaming through digital media. Shame is a deeply internalised sentiment, yet it is externally imposed through an assemblage of actors that include private security cameras, police, public broadcasters, social media platforms, users, and their devices. The latter three are part of a relatively novel development through which a target is rendered visible and accountable to a vaguely defined network of social actors. In the absence of other publicly accessible citizen-authored commentary on the theft, online comments may be the closest approximation to public sentiment.

This incident is a particularly severe rendition of what Thompson (2017) calls the normalising function of shaming practices (335), which may be pervasive and disciplining in a manner that surveillance researchers would otherwise associate with the panopticon. As such they should not only consider the

mode of socially-mediated visibility effected through shaming but also its formation, through which private and public actors may mobilise one another. Mediated shaming can be understood as a seemingly user-led surveillance practice to render other social actors visible in a punitive and denunciatory light. While we may frame such practices as citizens acting outside state control or approval, the relations between institutional and individual actors (whether understood as citizens of a particular territory or simply users of a device or platform) warrant greater scrutiny. Each case—including the ones addressed in this paper—invokes different social configurations that may meet public approval or disapproval and may even contravene legal boundaries.

Shaming in a social context is necessarily assembled, as it depends on a loosely and often spontaneously arranged network of actors to convey denunciation. Digital tools further the expansion of such networks, a development that is of particular concern for surveillance scholars. The notion of the surveillant assemblage underscores the potential for formerly discrete institutions and social actors to share information along with various forms of capital (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). Through increased mediated scrutiny of all facets of both public life and personal conduct, we may consider how shaming mobilises such morphologies and even serves as a moral justification in order to facilitate information sharing and socially harmful visibility. Shame is manifest as a form of cultural violence (cf. Galtung 1990), at times implicitly or explicitly endorsed but also operating beyond the remit of the state. Likewise, many examples covered in this paper also operate in excess of traditional press due to the proliferation and uptake of digital media devices and platforms. The relation between states, public broadcasters, private entities such as social media platforms, and citizens is an overarching concern in this area, yet without formal strategies or mechanisms, many individuals and organisations by default leak and circulate personal details, especially in cases where a target’s alleged actions invoke feelings of outrage or disgust. Such incidents are indicative of emerging practices involving mediated visibility (Thompson 2005) that in turn shape public conversations about privacy, integrity, and related forms of harm. In terms of an existential condition, these incidents may reify the sensation of being followed by one’s worst action, or most damning tweet (Ronson 2015). Not only are the social harms associated with shaming in the long term largely uncharted but the emerging solutions, such as search-engine result modification, tend to privilege those who can afford them. This paper seeks to advance an account of user-led surveillance of peers that is centred on the enactment and experience of shame, notably insofar as such practices can mobilise and be mobilised by press and state-led initiatives. Drawing on literature that considers shaming in criminological, journalistic, and digital media contexts, it considers tensions and other developments among a range of social actors who perform shaming. Recent examples in the Dutch context support an understanding of shaming as a process that enrolls a set of social actors to stigmatise and exclude (categories of) individuals under scrutiny.

Shaming typically manifests in response to behaviour or utterances that breach either legal or moral boundaries. Through mediated coordination, the perceived transgressor becomes the “transgressor-victim” of scrutiny and denunciation (Cheung 2014: 302). This outcome may be explicitly sought, for example, by expressing a desire to make someone infamous on YouTube (Francoeur 2012). Yet even when participants do not explicitly seek to tarnish a target’s social standing, their use of media for distribution and dissemination often results in the incident becoming a prominent search-engine result when inputting the target’s name. Shaming as a social process operates in excess of the individual (or any other single social actor) who initiates a campaign. Mediated shaming complicates scholarly approaches to user led attempts to weaponise visibility, which is understood as challenging the monopolisation of violence by the state (Trottier 2017). In the cases considered here, shaming is partly the remit of the state as well as an equally and necessarily collaborative and co-constructive endeavour with press and citizenry. Through its reliance on a public—or an imagined public—state-enacted shaming of individuals has always been a crowdsourced mode of governance. Put simply, shame “cannot work without community” (Palmer 2006: n.p.).

In light of the above tensions, we may consider Burris et al.'s (2005) understanding of contemporary governance as “characterised by a plurality of actors” operating through “a plurality of mechanisms (force, persuasion, economic pressure, norm creation and manipulation)” (31). This echoes Dandeker’s (1990) understanding of the state, which on one hand “claims authority over all its members” and “all action taking place within its territory,” yet, on the other hand, simultaneously depends on a “minimal level of consent” from its subjects (Ibid., 10-11). Such consent and compliance (in terms of either being an object of surveillance or a surveillant subject) may come from a variety of motivations, including financial gain, ideology, and convenience (Ibid., 10-11). In the context of mediated shaming, a range of entities temporarily coalesce in order to shape the societal outcome of targets. These include formal branches of the state but also other institutions and even citizens, notably in cases where they actively participate on digital media platforms that bear the ideological and material characteristics of a governing node (Burris et al. 2005: 37-38). Through assemblages, state actors may temporarily enrol non-state nodes, for example, when the police obtain access to store camera footage and in turn they broadcast this footage through a public media channel. And while such broadcasts might invoke a form of citizenship that compels individuals to watch over their peers (Reeves 2017), particular nodes may push for an errant interpretation of desired outcomes for a target, for example, by rendering a target visible (coupled with denunciatory rhetoric and vitriol) to a degree that other nodes may not find suitable.<sup>1</sup>

### Reconciling Accounts of Shaming and Visibility

Four years prior to the incident in Oldenzaal, digital media users participated in the mediated shaming of a group of youngsters who assaulted a 22-year-old student in Eindhoven. Again, police shared CCTV footage on *Bureau Brabant*, a regional crime-based reality television program. The populist weblog *GeenStijl*<sup>2</sup> posted information about the incident on the same day<sup>3</sup> and invited their user base to identify the assailants. The next day, two of the suspects turned themselves in to police, with the remaining six stepping forward over the following two days (de Vries 2014). On *GeenStijl*, photos and eventually names of suspects were sourced and published, along with thousands of comments from *reaguurders*. In recognition of the punitive nature of having one’s personal details released to the public under these circumstances, the defendants received a reduced sentence (de Vries 2014). As with the opening case, a range of actors contributed to the visibility of the targets, including police, public broadcasters, a television audience, and social news websites and their user bases. Police initially released camera footage through a regional broadcaster in order to identify the assailants. The task of both identifying and shaming assailants was then picked up by other actors through digital media. In terms of the temporary formation of a surveillant assemblage, the police appeared to play a pivotal role in the initial collection of footage but were largely displaced by citizens using digital media when it came to the aforementioned tasks. This has three distinct effects on the public response to a criminal event: (1) the mediated visibility of the targets (including footage of their assault, a broader narrative of the attack and aftermath, and other identifiable details) is augmented to an amorphous public; (2) an expansion of motivations among participants, including a more explicit expression of shaming among digital media users; and (3) an unanticipated range of societal outcomes (including harassment) that is deemed to be disproportionate to the offending acts.

Shaming refers to the practice of denouncing someone on the basis of acts they have committed, or in response to some other stigmatising feature. Following Goffman (1963), these features include

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<sup>1</sup> We may even complicate the functional unity of any single node, for instance, in cases where an individual takes advantage of their affiliation to a branch of the state in order to leak footage of a suspect to a tabloid in exchange for personal financial gain.

<sup>2</sup> *GeenStijl* is affiliated with *Dumpert*; they both link prominently to each other’s webpages, both employ the *reaguurder* subject position, and both are owned by Telegraaf Media Group.

<sup>3</sup> See post at: [http://www.geenstijl.nl/mt/archieven/2013/01/teringtiefustuigh\\_sloopt\\_jonge.html](http://www.geenstijl.nl/mt/archieven/2013/01/teringtiefustuigh_sloopt_jonge.html)

abominations of the body, blemishes of character, and tribal (or categorical) stigma (4). In taking offending acts as a point of departure, contemporary shaming practices are primarily concerned with blemishes of character. Yet online denunciations of asocial behaviour may be accompanied by categorical and body shaming, notably through racist, sexist, and other discriminatory comments. Shaming is also inherently relational and communicative; it is a process that features individuals expressing shame and individuals receiving shame, with the former communicating to the latter that they are “dishonourable and unworthy of respect as an equal person” (Loader 1998: 47).

Social actors engage in shaming for a variety of motivations, and one can broadly distinguish between reintegrative and exclusionary practices (Braithwaite 1989). The distinction here rests in the expressed tone of denunciation, as well as the process (which may entail punitive and/or rehabilitative components) and eventual societal outcome (including the possibility of forgiveness and expungement of criminal records). Based on available case data, shaming online primarily bears stigmatising features, although the possibility and feasibility of reintegrative online shaming is of considerable importance. In the context of contemporary Anglo-American cultural politics, this distinction is exemplified through a distinction between “calling out” wrongdoers and “calling in” (Trần 2013: n.p.). Given the largely exclusionary framing of online denunciations, Ahmad (2015) favours “speaking privately with an individual who has done some wrong, in order to address the behaviour without making a spectacle of the address itself” (n.p.). Such a corrective measure endeavours to retain the offending target within a social environment, rather than cast them out. In contrast to earlier understandings of reintegrative shaming, confidentiality is arguably key to “calling in” online. Yet one must also consider the inherent risks for those who are vulnerable or otherwise disadvantaged in private contexts (such as within a domicile or private organisation) for interpersonal or political confrontations (Fairbanks 2017). In such cases, “calling out” may be the only available recourse.

In considering a socially progressive enactment of shaming, a further distinction can be made between targeting of private unaffiliated citizens and shaming campaigns that focus on public figures and organisations. The latter appears to carry potential to effect change in either the target of shaming or among those who are affiliated with or financially support the target. Examples include shaming of corporations engaging in environmental harm (Jacquet 2015), war criminals (Boulton 2015), and governments engaged in genocides (Krain 2012) and human rights violations (Hafner-Burton 2008; Murdie and Davis 2012). While the focus of this paper is the shaming of individuals, it bears noting that the vocabulary, techniques, platforms, and practices do not appear to be distinct between targeting individuals and targeting public figures or entities. We can consider whether participants report overlapping motivations and techniques when shaming individuals and corporate or political entities. Such potential overlaps underscore the relevance of asymmetries in terms of the forms of capital available to a multinational with a public relations department, and a marginalised individual with limited media capabilities.

As stated above, shaming is both externally imposed and experienced as an individualised and existential state. Following Cheung (2014), while shaming “is essentially about directing community disapproval and hostility against an individual,” shame is centred through “a sense of self-awareness or self-consciousness” (4). As such, it is worth considering shame as an existential vulnerability that is ostensibly instilled in all humans. Martha Nussbaum (2004) positions shame as a core element of early socialisation:

When an infant realizes that it is dependent on others, and is by this time aware of itself as a definite being who is and ought to be the center of the world, we can therefore expect a primitive and rudimentary emotion of shame to ensue. For shame involves the realization that one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate. Its reflex is to hide from the eyes of those who will see one’s deficiency, to cover it. (184)

Shame thus stands as a core existential realisation that “lurks around in our lives” (Nussbaum: 185), with the potential of being invoked through shaming practices. Shame is a crucial socialisation mechanism in parent-child relationships, manifest through “the exposure of any aspect of the self that we wish to keep hidden from others” (Loader 1998: 44). Arguably, the socialised child is not only exposed to external social expectations through shame but also to the strategic management of visibility of their shortcomings. As such, it stands as an early and purportedly cross-cultural instance of social control. Scheff (2000) describes shame as “the premier social emotion” (98), framing the sentiment in sociological rather than purely psychological terms. It is possible to consider the societal merits of shaming, which Nussbaum (2004) describes as being “sensitive to an invitation to shame, and related self-examination, issued by people one loves and respects” (215), noting in consequence the potential pathology of being shameless. Despite the wide range of offences at the heart of shaming campaigns, researchers may dwell on the possibility of a target maintaining a state of shamelessness. This speaks to a potential refusal to acknowledge and internalise moral judgment from an assembly of social actors including but not limited to branches of the state. Yet even in such instances, a purported refusal to internalise public shame nevertheless betrays an “awareness of shame as a moderating mechanism” (Palmer 2006: n.p.). We can also note that such a perspective overlooks the broader disciplinary effect that mediated shaming may carry on other citizens who bear witness to an attempted shaming. Moreover, researchers should consider the degree to which shamelessness is invoked as an accusation levelled against those who are about to be shamed, rather than an actual invulnerability against it.

### **Shaming in Relation to the State**

In order to understand the manner in which states manage and utilise shame, we can consider both legal protections against shame as well as legal enactments of shame. The above section casts shame as a deeply embedded existential condition that any given misdeed can potentially evoke. In charting the broader relevance of shame and shaming in a legal context, we may begin by considering that experiencing shame—and stigmatising shame in particular—stands as a broad predictor for future crime and especially for violent actions (Gilligan 1996; Scheff and Retzinger 2001). In addition to shame driving criminal acts (and legal responses), we can also consider the state-sanctioned shaming that emerges from criminal procedures. These may either be intended and directly sought out by the state through policy or emerge as unintended consequences of legal processes that are rendered visible, notably in response to a dynamic media landscape, and formally unaffiliated entities augmenting the exposure of shameful content, either for political or financial gain. As an example of the latter, consider mugshot-scraping websites that augment the mediated visibility of individuals who have been arrested, ostensibly to provoke greater shame as a motivation to compel these individuals to pay a fee to remove their mugshot from the site (Kravets 2013). Although the mugshot may already be accessible on government platforms, these sites remediate this content in order to make it a prominent result when searching an individual’s name. Even though the denunciation is originally borne out of state practices (the police booking, the court proceeding, the maintenance of a .gov website), it becomes socially visible when picked up by non-state actors, who may leverage search engine optimisation against the reputation of targeted individuals for financial gain. Likewise, consider the distinction between a government sexual offender registry that is governed through several criminological motivations and anti-paedophile vigilante groups that either embody different motivations, or that prioritise these motivations differently, placing visibility-based shaming in the foreground (Silberstein 2013). As such, artefacts of state-sanctioned shaming may be most prominently accessed through non-state (and unsanctioned) entities remediating this content and adding a more explicit shaming narrative in the process.

States and their legal frameworks often take active steps to manage and even minimise shame and shaming, as well as in a broader set of relations among individuals and between individuals and the state (Nussbaum 2004: 282). Not only are these measures subject to contestation but are routinely reconsidered in relation to other related conceptual developments. For instance, Cheung (2014: 302) recommends that

legal and policy articulations of privacy position dignity as “part and parcel” of such a right, and as such they limit possible articulations of citizen shaming. Given the lack of consensus on such measures, Nussbaum (2004) considers opposing perspectives of how states should engage with shame:

On one view, the shaming of those who are different is a pernicious aspect of social custom, which should not be sanctified by building it into our legal practices ... On the second view—not unrelated to Lord Devlin’s views about disgust—what is wrong with modern societies is that they don’t make a large enough place for shame. We are adrift without a moral compass, in large part because we have lost our sense of shame. (174-75)

Juxtaposing these perspectives portrays shame as something that is both inherently discriminatory and harmful, as well as a socialising force that is currently under-utilised. The reader may wish to reconcile this tension by aligning reintegrative shaming with the latter perspective (such that we ought to have more of ‘the right kind’ of shaming), although one may wonder if the media assemblages considered above could allow the possibility for a rehabilitative and proportionate shaming, notably as this seems to presume an end-state where all involved actors would cease commenting and circulating the target’s personal details.

Recent criminological scholarship points out instances where states make use of digital media platforms and users as a way to shame citizens into legal compliance. These include regional governments in China and Canada testing the possibility of publicly shaming citizens who have unpaid taxes (CBC 2016) or damages in judicial rulings (Cheung 2014). Such developments can be explained by a broader tendency among states to experiment with new technological possibilities, which may generate controversy, backlash, and a re-assessment of how media technology and shared values may align (Trottier 2015). Yet Kohm (2009) positions such developments in the context of a “re-emotionalization” of law (Karstedt 2002), also referring to a recent shift towards a punitive framework that “set the stage for current developments of shame and humiliation” (Kohm: 193; cf. Garland 2001). In Singapore, a state official interviewed on this topic frames shaming as a “soft power” (Skoric et al. 2010: 190), in contrast to harsher manifestations that may not need to be exercised as often. We can consider the characteristics and morphology that allow a ‘softer’ power to remain effective, as this appears to involve mobilising a considerable portion of a given population. Yet already these officials also voice their concern about the “permanent nature of digital information” (Skoric et al.: 190) as an undesirable feature of digital media cultures, which may in turn dampen endorsements of mediated state-led shaming.

While contemporary crime media may involve a renewed mobilisation of public shaming, we can also dwell on the notion of soft power to consider how state-led shaming can be a viable alternative (or supplement) to fines and incarceration. ‘Soft’ appears to denote a lessened severity but also the dispersed nature of such an intervention, notably through the mobilisation of cultural and economic institutions. Fellow citizens across social contexts are invited to bear witness and cast judgment on the target’s misdeed, and the target is made to believe that their misdeed has been rendered visible to their broader social network. Such a description is congruent with the above consideration of shaming as inherently assembled and nodal. In effect, state-sanctioned shaming amounts to a form of crowdsourcing that has existed long before current discussions of this phenomenon. Following Nussbaum (2004): “In shaming, the state does not simply mete out punishment through its own established institutions. It invites the public to punish the offender” (234). She notes that this endangers the possibility of “impartial, deliberative, neutral justice” (234) and instead allows the possibility of disproportionate punishment and abuse on categorical grounds. Thus, we may consider state-sanctioned forms of shaming as (a) necessarily invoking the (imagined) activity of citizens (and non-citizens in the likelihood that information about the target is circulated beyond national borders) and as (b) incompatible with notions of proportionality in response to criminal acts.

In terms of the broader cultural climate through which states may consider mediated shaming, Nussbaum also refers to a tendency to scale up from an individual target to a broader category of presumed offenders, noting that such mobilisations are not “about a bad act in the first place,” but rather “a person or group of persons, and to a person seen as embodying some deviant identity (perhaps even an identity seen as disgusting), against which a dominant group seeks to define, and thus protect, itself” (2004: 235). She identifies the possibility of “net-widening” (236-37), where an underlying function of public shaming is to bring broader categories of individuals under scrutiny and control. Of particular concern is how such forms of categorical discrimination, monitoring, and public denunciation may be state-initiated but greatly augmented through both the press and citizenry. Indeed, uptake by these social actors may fulfil a state agenda or co-opt and redirect such campaigns in unanticipated directions. State actors may not exclude the possibility of digital media users providing information about suspects but would likely take a dim view of users circulating these details amongst each other on public platforms such as Reddit or Geenstijl. Also, they would not openly approve of inflammatory rhetoric about these cases.<sup>4</sup>

### **Shaming as Performed through Mass Journalist Media**

Much like the state, the press have historically played a prominent role in public shaming. Also, like the state, mass media agencies are an institution that citizens may appear to sidestep, while in reality there may be a more complicated and possible coexistent relationship between journalists and users engaging in denunciations. The necessarily shared nature of shaming speaks to the procedural overlap between journalistic and citizen-based surveillance of other citizens. Although typically distinct and distanced from branches of the state, journalists may invoke notions of ‘public interest’ as a justification for shaming practices, including broadcasting denunciations of targets (Petley 2013). Public interest can be conceptualised along punitive, informational, and moral grounds, considering the press’ role “(1) to punish informally a named individual; (2) to inform the public about their actions or conduct; and (3) to criticise and express disapproval of them” (Rowbottom 2013: 1). Although ‘public interest’ may serve as a kind of justification for what can be understood as weaponised visibility (bringing social harm to targets by publishing their personal details), even on these terms it is not as exclusive as the state’s supposed monopolisation of violence. Complications arise when the press takes a proactive role that is independent of the state in terms of naming and shaming, with such misalignment with state activity contributing to unsanctioned vigilantism (Rowbottom 6). The press are not merely reporting on criminal or moral infractions, nor are they adding their own perspective. Rather, by virtue of their prominence and ability to invoke and mobilise a broadly defined public, they arguably determine widely shared understandings of newly emerging and contested scandals and shame.<sup>5</sup>

Some scholarship refers to a potential ethics of care and responsibility in journalism, stemming from (among other perspectives) feminist interpretations of public interest (Fullerton and Patterson 2013: 120-21). Such perspectives may consider the target’s wellbeing when articulating public interest, in contrast to more exclusionary and stigmatising accounts. In practice, such coverage may work towards a reintegrative account through a series of measures including proportionate coverage of the entire reintegrative shaming process (instead of an exclusive focus on denunciation), granting the target an opportunity to provide their own account of events and avoiding categorically excluding the target. As a counter-trend, these authors also refer to “penal populism” or “populist punitiveness” (citing Pratt 2007: 3) in which the press plays a pivotal role in denouncing and excluding criminal suspects. Yet regardless of the ethics adopted by journalists, the assembled nature of shaming initiatives means that audiences may interpret incidents differently and may persist in performing exclusionary shaming. Dutch public broadcasters can take

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<sup>4</sup> This holds even if the reality programs they partner with may share similar forms of rhetoric (Rapping 2004).

<sup>5</sup> See Innes and Fielding (2002) on the role of the press and signal crimes whereby press coverage confirms an indication of social disorder, as well as the Canadian public broadcaster CBC’s seemingly confirmatory role in the revelation of scandalous material during the 2015 federal election (CBC 2015).

preventative and progressive steps in their framing of criminal events, but other branches of a media landscape may be as influential in this framing.

In addition to press-based shaming (and press reporting and endorsement of pre-existing shaming of targets by states and or civil-society), a relatively recent development is mediated shaming through reality television and crime-based reality television in particular. Like the press, this genre appeals to a sense of collective interest, often without a clearly delineated sense of community (Palmer 2006). Not only are such programs sustained through a collaborative relationship with police agencies (Doyle 2003), but prominent shows like the American *To Catch a Predator* emerged out of a partnership with internet vigilantes *Perverved Justice* (Kohm 2009). Although footage of shamed child abusers may serve to symbolically distance viewers from “the object of humiliation” (Kohm 195), Kohm echoes the above concern about proportionality in noting that “the lens of popular culture” (189) complicates any ability to wield shaming and humiliation as a tool for social control. Polysemous interpretations of *To Catch a Predator* may support such partnerships or may instead emphasise police inability to stop child exploitation. Thus, mediated shaming is a form of social control that itself appears to escape institutional control. In terms of the affect that is evoked in such programs, there is a tension between on the one hand a “deep feeling of impotence” stemming from an “inability to act adequately to stave off the dangers thought to plague modern life” and the fear of “exclusion from membership in civil society” through a spectacle of humiliation and exclusion” (Kohm 200). Such initiatives mark a clustering of police, news/entertainment media, and citizen-led vigilante groups. As such they may raise legal and ethical concerns, including “presenting as news the very stories it has financially and logistically created” (Kohm 196). This confluence of production and reporting of shaming is also evident in campaigns occurring on social news platforms such as GeenStijl and Reddit, which can dually serve as platforms to render a target of shame visible and also to report on the ensuing shaming and persecution that follows.

### **Citizen-Led Shaming and Digital Media Cultures**

Citizen-centred denunciations can be framed in terms of conflicts over the legitimate use of violence, in relation to the state’s supposed exclusivity over such mechanisms. Yet the ‘soft power’ detailed above entails a particular form of cultural violence for which public participation, under particular conditions, is condoned and even solicited. Early instances of shaming through digital media were based around online communities (Wall and Williams 2007), in which the reliance on contextually isolated and internally consistent identities facilitated a shared understanding of reintegration. Moving beyond chat rooms and message boards, digital media play a pivotal role in citizen-led shaming, notably as they broaden the scope of actors who “are able to disclose transgressions, as well as to determine who and what behaviours are susceptible to shaming” (Detel 2013: 94). The above cases feature interactions between digital media users and the press, which arguably enacts shaming that is “less predictable and the potential for damage to reputation more extensive” (94). These developments can be understood in the context of a new mode of visibility in which technologies that are understood and enacted in a digital media culture that priorities user-centred notions of savviness (Andrejevic 2007) enable the ‘viral’ diffusion of shameful content through social networks (Detel 2013: 90; see also Boase and Wellman 2001).

As stated above, citizens may be driven by a range of motives to participate in mediated shaming. Juliano (2012) notes that for a victim of an online scam, shaming provided a level of satisfaction through an elevation “beyond the level of a mere victim” (60). Shaming here may be mobilised through the citizen’s own feelings of shame and inadequacy following a scam, yet researchers should not assume that this is the sole or even primary reason to engage in mediated shaming, especially as barriers to participation are lowered. Skoric et al. (2010) notes in the Singaporean context that citizens maintaining public shaming websites ostensibly seek to encourage proper civic behaviour. They do not consider their actions to be shaming as such, and indeed maintain a distinction between shaming an individual and shaming an individual’s behaviour by claiming that they are simply “raising awareness” of the latter (Skoric et al.



188). This distinction highlights a potential for shaming campaigns to address and effect social change (for example, on the topic of civility on public transit) without inflicting lasting harm on those caught in the gaze. Yet these are compromised by “lack of due process in shaming” alongside the possibility of “the permanence of content on the Internet, even though the accused might not even be guilty of the alleged transgression” (Skoric et al. 197). Faced with the burden of a potential commitment to reintegrative—or at least not intentionally stigmatising—shaming, citizen participants may instead engage in an aggregate shaming of peers by stressing the visibility of the offence in relation to the visibility of the offender. The decision to include the offenders face, number plate, or other identifiable features may potentially facilitate a broader appeal to self-scrutiny among its audience. However, even anonymised instances of citizen shaming will likely contain gender, ethnic, and class-based markers that serve to reinforce discrimination and categorical struggles over legitimate use of public space.

In reporting on shaming practices in digital media culture, Cheung (2014) refers to a new configuration of Garfinkel’s status degradation ceremony, in which “turning the others into a form of lower social objects” occurs through “the exposure of personally information of the transgressor-victims concerned, followed by online or offline harassment or abusive behavior” (19). The outcome is clearly stigmatising, given “the ostracism of the individuals concerned from their communities or causing real or psychological harm to them” (19.) On these grounds, user-led shaming seems to exclude the possibility of reintegration. Another example of this is gendered harassment and cultural violence in the context of so-called slut shaming (Poole 2013; Thompson 2017). This phenomenon is relevant in an academic and societal context, most prominently because it emphasizes the disproportionately gendered nature of online abuse. Poole (2013) succinctly describes digital media’s augmentation of “the power and scope of shaming” through “(1) anonymity and the lack of consequences; (2) the allowance of instant and widespread communication; (3) the near impossible removal of harmful material; (4) the availability of a forum that is often beyond the reach of parents’ and teachers’ eyes; and (5) a lack of respite from torment” (243). The most prominent solution proposed in response to (slut) shaming is digital abstinence, which not only amounts to self-erasure and self-removal from ‘public’ platforms (problematic as they may be in terms of ownership and regulation), but one’s absence from a platform does nothing to prevent the circulation of stigmatising content about an individual (Trottier 2012).

Digital media culture is seemingly characterised by a “fascination with capturing others’ images” as an entry point to a range of outcomes including “shaming, humiliation, character assault, and even harassment” (Cheung 2014: 19). Yet as a counterpoint, we can consider the potential for a reflexive self-shaming. Those participating in denunciation of a target can potentially include themselves as the object of scorn, notably when disclosing their own personal details. A prominent example is Barbara Ehrenreich’s self-inclusiveness in shaming those who benefit economically from the labour of the working poor (as detailed in Nussbaum 2004: 244). Beyond the realm of shaming, such mechanisms of endorsement or re-circulating with one’s own input already feature prominently on many social media platforms.

### **Conclusion: Shame-Based Shaming Subjectivities**

Shaming features prominently in the weaponised use of digital media visibility: it is the end-state of many instances of user-led online surveillance, and the above incidents in particular appear to fuse a judgement of person’s character with a prominence and enduring permanence of networked visibility of personal details. In the context of surveillant assemblages that feature digital media users, a generalised desire to shame often serves as a kind of mobilising force. Yet shame is also part of a broader existential condition that is central to early socialisation, potentially reinforced by major institutions, and arguably internalised by subjects in a manner that parallels (and possibly interacts with) the internalisation of scrutiny under panoptic conditions. While this paper is not primarily concerned with the psychological conditions that drive individuals to shame others, Nussbaum (2004) makes a provocative and productive claim when

stating that “the stigmatizing behavior in which all societies engage is typically an aggressive reaction to infantile narcissism and to the shame born of our own incompleteness” (219). By way of conclusion, I want to consider this statement by highlighting the presence of shame in digital media subjectivities that are closely associated with online shaming.

Subject positions articulated through online shaming may in some instances, and to a limited degree, align with the external and self-imposed shaming of active subsets of digital media users. *Reaguurders*, who feature in the cases of online shaming described above, take a decidedly negative self-assessment, characterising their lifestyle in terms of cans of pilsner, onanism, and living in a garbage-strewn cellar.<sup>6</sup> As this subject-position favours lowly self-pleasure over a supposed meaningful societal contribution, we can infer an implicit shame in contrast to an imagined other or broader inter-generational expectations. In an Anglo-American context, we may find a corollary subject-position in the failson, a stylised interpretation of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Forum members on SomethingAwful collaboratively engaged in describing the failson as “disappointments to our families, burdens on societies,” who in the context of family gatherings are “paraded in front of our extended families as the boring losers that we are and humiliated.”<sup>7</sup> Noting the potential for political mobilisation, Anderson (2016) cites American podcast *Chapo Trap House* in describing the failson archetype as:

“twenty-six,” in Community College, and more interested “gaming and masturbating” than spending time with their family at Thanksgiving. Or, more compassionately as “nonessential human beings who do not fit into the market as consumers or producers or as laborers... *Some of them turn into Nazis...* Others become aware of the consequences of capitalism.” (n.p., emphasis in original; see also Beran 2017)

It is worth noting that the user base and cultural practices associated with SomethingAwful are closely linked to 4Chan and other contemporary facets of trolling and harassment culture (Phillips 2015). Likewise, in the Chinese context, Witteborn and Huang (2017) refer to *diaosi* (or ‘loser’) as a “way of relating,” or more substantively as “a constitutive term and communicative practice that engages people in social grouping” (142). Here, we can consider users’ alignment with such a subject position in both existential and functional terms, such that it provides them with a way of making sense of their own (self or externally imposed) limitations and to mobilise in response to these limitations. We may speculate the degree of overlap between *diaosi* as a subject position and the subjectivity of netizens in China who engage in denunciatory practices often described as “human flesh search engine” (Cheong and Gong 2010). Subsequent research should consider how such subject positions are invoked and negotiated in the context of shaming other individuals, notably in response to the potentially unintended by-product of participants rendering themselves visible to public scrutiny. In addition to considering who participates in shaming and what counts as participation, researchers should consider the roles that both algorithms and user-centred resources such as support guides<sup>8</sup> serve to either propagate or decelerate the mediated visibility of targets. Both of these can be viewed as protocols for informational exchange that explicitly or implicitly direct shaming, and both are also authored in a manner that reflects particular cultural and political interests.

Shaming is a social mechanism through which state- and press-affiliated actors mobilise the public, either as a passive audience member or as an active participant providing personal details about—or

<sup>6</sup> See examples at: [https://www.geenstijl.nl/5095922/trekken\\_en\\_komen/](https://www.geenstijl.nl/5095922/trekken_en_komen/) and [https://www.geenstijl.nl/5072922/necrosis\\_wederom\\_reaguurder\\_of\\_the\\_year/](https://www.geenstijl.nl/5072922/necrosis_wederom_reaguurder_of_the_year/).

<sup>7</sup> See: [https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:vely\\_tb\\_uSYJ:https://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php%3Fthreadid%3D3518389+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=nl](https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:vely_tb_uSYJ:https://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php%3Fthreadid%3D3518389+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=nl).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Mattise (2015) and Quinn (2014).

condemnation of—a target. Yet through digital media, citizens are able to render shamed targets visible to a degree that may exceed the former’s understanding of ‘proportionality’, or the latter’s understanding of ‘public interest’. The societal merits of shaming are beyond the scope of this paper. Yet in pursuing this line of research, we may consider the possibility of reintegrative shaming in the context of visibility through digital media platforms. Even in accepting the merits of reintegrative shaming, a key limitation is that rituals of reintegration will likely not generate as much visibility through digital media. When enacting such a distributed network of social actors that may exceed national boundaries, some aspects of a shaming process (such as the offence and the targeted individual’s personal details) are rendered excessively visible, while other aspects necessary for a rehabilitative and reintegrative shaming (such as the target’s immediate response, their subsequent process, or any collective assertion of forgiveness), may not generate as many ‘likes’, ‘retweets’, or ‘shares’. Even in highly visible manifestations of an attempted atonement and reintegration, digital media platforms can mobilise a polyphony of voices and opinions, which may contest and deny the legitimacy of this process.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A prominent example of such contestation can be found in the one-star reviews of Adam Mark Smith’s book that reflects on his own public shaming after harassing a fast-food employee over the company’s homophobic ties. See review at: [https://www.amazon.com/Million-Dollar-Cup-Water-Authenticitybook/dp/B00UIFEHV0/ref=cm\\_cr\\_arpd\\_product\\_top?ie=UTF8](https://www.amazon.com/Million-Dollar-Cup-Water-Authenticitybook/dp/B00UIFEHV0/ref=cm_cr_arpd_product_top?ie=UTF8).

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