

Habits of Leaking: Of Sluts and Network Cards

*I*n October 2011, the director of technology of the Georgia Fayette County Public School District held an assembly on Internet safety, during which he showed an image of then seventeen-year-old Chelsea Chaney in a bikini standing next to a cardboard cutout of a black rap star (fig. 1). Tagged with the line “Once It’s There, It’s There to Stay,” this image—preceded by a slide in which a cartoon daughter confronts her mother for listing as her hobbies “bad boys, jello shooters, and body art”—was taken without consent from Chaney’s Facebook page. After school officials refused to apologize or hold a requested assembly on “respecting the rights of others on the Internet,” Chaney sued the school district for two million dollars, arguing that the district had acted as a bully by branding her as a “sexually promiscuous abuser of alcohol (Kingkade).”

This event is one of many episodes of “slut-shaming”: the public shaming of women perceived to be promiscuous on or through social media. The banality of the image in dispute makes this instance remarkable. Ms. Chaney is hardly “caught in the act” of underage drinking or fornication (Matyszczyk). She is simply standing in front of a cutout of Snoop Dogg, and

Figure 1:
Chelsea Chaney's
disputed Facebook
image



one wonders: would this image have been singled out had she not been white and the rapper black? The moral of this and so many other stories of slut-shaming is: don't be stupid enough to expose yourself online because "Once It's There, It's There to Stay." More insidiously, the message is: once you've exposed yourself as a slut—as a consenting spectacle, as shameless—you deserve no protection, no privacy. You can be re-exposed or shamed over and over again, especially as an example of a bad or stupid user. Tellingly, the 2013 law passed in California to protect victims of revenge porn sites (sites that mainly circulate images of naked women without their consent) does not extend to "selfies" (images taken by oneself). The assumption: consent once, circulate forever.¹

As this article reveals, slut-shaming has emerged as the prototype of the dangers—and for some, the pleasures—of Web 2.0 because of the logic of the example lodged within it. This exemplary logic evokes condemnation of and/or sympathy for the slut/victim and spawns endless, morally tinged debates over personal responsibility. Is the victim or those who circulate the images to blame for the victim's "ruin"? It does not ask why these images should be considered harmful, and it does not (or very rarely does it) provoke rigorous examination of networking and social protocols or the relationship between publicity and democracy. This debate about slut-shaming transforms the consequences of the endemic publicity of the Internet—which is an effect of its technological, social, and political infrastructures—into user-induced accidents. It blames the user—*her* habits of leaking—for systemic vulnerabilities, glossing over the ways in which our promiscuous machines routinely work through an alleged "leaking" that undermines the separation of the personal and the networked.

The example of Chelsea Chaney links Chaney's gender, race, and privacy in a manner that has a long history. As Eden Osucha and Eva Cherniavsky have argued, the right to privacy in the United States was juridically defined in relation to a white femininity that was allegedly injured by mass circulation. (We will return to this history below.) Traditionally, white women have "embod[ied] interiority *for others*" (Osucha 57). Not surprisingly, the vitriol directed toward "sluts" is proportional to the horror expressed at the suffering of "real victims," where real victims are "good," "enclosed," or, more disturbingly, dead girls, such as the fifteen-year-old Amanda Todd, who committed suicide after topless images of her were leaked by a blackmailing capper.² To displace this disabling logic, this article emphasizes the inherent promiscuity of new media and argues that, in order to understand and negotiate our public networks, we should not

embrace or call for impossible bubbles of privacy, but rather fight for what Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade have called the “right to loiter.” We need to fight for the right to take risks—to be in public—and not be attacked. We need to counter the corporate security of Web 2.0, which is in fact no security, by building new forms of interaction that cannot “leak” because they do not seek to create imaginary bubbles of privacy between users in the first place.

New Media—Wonderfully Creepy

From Edward Snowden’s revelations about the U.S. National Security Agency’s (NSA) extensive data collection programs to images of unsuspecting “sluts” that circulate on social media, from WikiLeaks to Facebook disasters, we are confronted everywhere with leaks. This leaking information is framed paradoxically as both securing and compromising our privacy, personal and national. Thanks to these leaks, we now understand the extent to which we are under surveillance; because of these leaks, we are exposed. This leaking information and the problems/solutions it exposes/provides are often presented as oddly personalized and humanized. Snowden is a hero or a rogue agent; Anonymous are advocates or vigilantes; slanegirl is a victim or a slut. But to what extent is leaking information an issue of personal human agency?

Indeed, what is surprising about all of these recent leaks is not their existence, but rather our surprise at them. This is only in part because news of the NSA’s extensive data collection apparatuses has been repeatedly made public by whistleblowers working at AT&T and other telecommunications companies since at least 2006 and because the exclusion of metadata from wiretapping provisions was established in 1979 (Cauley). It is also and more basically because *new media are not simply about leaks: they are leak*. New media work by breaching, and thus paradoxically sustaining, the boundary between private and public: from the Internet’s technical protocols to its emergence as a privately owned mass medium, from social media’s privatization of surveillance to its redefinition of “friends,” new media compromise the boundary between revolutionary and conventional, public and private, work and leisure, fascinating and boring, hype and reality, amateur and professional, democracy and pornography.

Technically speaking, wireless networks call into question the distinction between the personal and the network, the directed and the broadcast. Every wireless network card downloads/reads in all packets

it can and then erases those not directly addressed to it; if it is running in “promiscuous” mode, it also writes these packets forward to its central processing unit (CPU). *Promiscuous mode*, not monogamous mode, is a technical term. A monogamous network card—a network card that only read and wrote your traffic—would be inoperable; if your computers are (retroactively) monogamous, it is because they discretely erase their indiscretions, thus leaving the ordinary user in the dark. This promiscuity means that every user has probably downloaded all sorts of illegal materials. Your network card is, technically speaking, initially “slutty”: dirty, open to all traffic, indiscriminate (to clean is to delete). Crucially, though, without this necessary vulnerability/openness, there would be no Internet, no communications; our network cards only appear “promiscuous” if we envision our machines as personal. Further, TCP/IP does not automatically equal a massive surveillance machine. As one of us has been arguing for at least a decade, the Internet fosters democracy and freedom, if it does, not by creating empowered super-users, but by exposing users to others, machinic and otherwise (Chun, *Control*). The danger lies not with dissemination, but rather with infrastructures of tracing and remembering that allegedly protect by enclosing our machines.

Even when our machines are not networked, they leak: they write to read, read to write, erase to keep going. Digital media, if it “saves” anything, does so by transforming storage into memory: by accelerating decay, by proliferating what it reads, by making the ephemeral endure.³ That is, new media “store” information by making what is stable more ephemeral, so that now, in order for something to remain, it must not remain: it must constantly be regenerated. This is not simply due to physics—to the fact that magnetic drives deteriorate much faster than paper and film (in this sense, attempts to preserve books and film by digitizing them are rather perverse)—but also due to our constantly changing, manically upgrading software. The paradox: what does not change will not endure, yet change—progress (endless upgrades)—ensures that what endures will fade. This paradox is completely covered over in glib understandings of digital media that declare, “Once It’s There, It’s There to Stay.” Insofar as this is true, it is not due to the inherent nature of computers, but rather to an extensive human-techno-political system that copies in order to save, thus fulfilling one objective of an archive, continued accessibility through time, by killing another, preservation (also making clear that the duty of the curator has never been merely to preserve but also to decide what to delete).⁴ This system reads, writes, migrates, regenerates—that is, cares for—anything that we want to remain to be cared for, to be read.

Social media is also driven by a profound confusion of the private and public, and the online and off-line. The very notion of a “friend,” initially viewed as a way to restrict communications in social media sites such as Friendster, has led to various “disasters” in which the boundaries between private and public, friend/boss/mother are breached.⁵ These boundaries are crossed because the notion of friend on social media is so banal and, as danah boyd points out, so coarse. It makes no distinction between types of relations: everyone is a friend. This banal coarseness, however, is not accidental, but rather essential: as boyd notes, Friendster profoundly and deliberately confused the boundaries between public and private by depending on the “public exhibition of private relationships in order to allow for new private interactions.” These interactions, though, were never either public or private, but rather differently limited, and they were always accessible to the database, which technically received and distributed these interactions. These sites fostered trackability because “friends” (especially friends looking to hook up) created links (or leaks) between the on- and off-line. Remarkably, social networking sites have transformed friendship from something inherently broadcast and difficult to track into a reciprocal and reciprocating relation. As Jacques Derrida has argued, friendship is an act of love for another that does not have to be acknowledged or returned; but now, due to these sites, friendship has moved from a sociologist’s “problem” (how to account for all these noncoinciding, perhaps incalculable relations?) into a sociologist’s dream: a neat map of verified connections.⁶

This transformation of friendship has made it dangerous precisely because it is so banal and because it has been framed as offering a safety that is no safety. Randi Zuckerberg, marketing director of Facebook, argued in 2011 that, for the sake of safety, “Anonymity on the Internet has to go away.” Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google, made a similar argument in 2010, stating, “[I]n a world of asynchronous threats, it is too dangerous for there not to be some way to identify you.” These arguments were not new or specific to Web 2.0; ever since the Internet emerged as a mass medium in the mid-1990s, corporations have argued that securing identity is crucial to securing trust (Bosker, “Eric” and “Facebook’s”). Two simple assumptions drive this argument: first, accountability breeds responsibility (in Zuckerberg’s words: “People behave a lot better when they have their real names down”), and second, the worst dangers stem from strangers rather than friends. But are these assumptions true?⁷

This linking of trust and security has been challenged by many scholars, in particular by Helen Nissenbaum. Nissenbaum, writing in 2001,

noted that although security is central to activities such as e-commerce and banking, it “no more achieves trust and trustworthiness online—in their full-blown senses—than prison bars, surveillance cameras, airport X-ray conveyor belts, body frisks, and padlocks could achieve [them] offline. This is so because the very ends envisioned by the proponents of security and e-commerce are contrary to core meanings and mechanisms of trust” (121). *Trust*, she insists, is a far richer concept that entails a willingness—and an ability—to be vulnerable. As she also points out, the reduction of trust to security assumes that danger stems from outsiders, rather than “sanctioned, established, powerful individuals and organizations” (128).

Indeed, although introduced as a way to authenticate others and thus combat “stranger danger,” the emergence of “friends” online has altered the Internet in ways that are not simply good. The naive presumption that transparency would “cure” the evils of the early Internet—pornography, trolling, flame wars, and so on—has proven to be false. Cyberbullying takes place most effectively within the trusted structure of “friend” networks. Moreover, it is arguably most traumatic when both parties are known or are assumed to be “friends of friends,” since connections are drawn between the on- and off-line. The difference between friends and foes is slight (Derrida): one’s closest friend is often one’s most powerful foe, and casual friends are often “frenemies.” With friends and social networking, we have also experienced an explosion in child pornography. This pornography, however, is not produced by lecherous old men for lecherous old men, but rather by teenagers for teenagers (Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell). “Child pornography,” through the popular practice of sexting, has been crowd sourced. The fact that teenagers are the producers of these images in which they are featured, though, does not protect them from prosecution.⁸ Further, our friending behaviors, because they breach the borders between work and leisure, acquaintances and family, compromise and expose all of us in unwanted ways: from school admissions committees that surreptitiously examine potential students’ profiles to employers who use posted comments as the bases for firing employees. Finally, it is through our actions as friends—our liking, our retweeting, our posts, and so on—that we are more effectively profiled and our consumption more carefully tracked and crafted by governments and corporations. Snowden’s revelations—the NSA’s data—are so valuable not simply because U.S. corporations cooperate with the U.S. government but also because of the ways in which U.S. corporations have been pushing user transparency in the name of trust. The protests by Google and others ring false, for these corporations insist on Real Names in

order to make their data more valuable. The end of anonymity and the rise of “transparency,” with its stipulated exposures, are so insidious because they reveal connections between users.

To state it as baldly as possible: attempts to make networks seem intimate and thus safe put us at risk. Attempts to cover over the constant exchange of information that is the network make us more vulnerable. What is even more insidious and troubling, however: these attempts to make the network more private, which in fact make it more dangerous, also place the blame for inevitable transgressions and leakages at the feet of users, in particular, sluts. Through slut-shaming, machinic and social habits are rewritten as individual habits of leaking.

#slanegirl

In mid-August 2013, an Eminem concert was held at Slane Castle in Ireland. At the concert, photographs of a seventeen-year-old woman from West Ireland were taken and posted online (Romano). These images showed her in the midst of two sexual acts: kissing a shirtless man while he penetrates her with his finger and performing oral sex while he raises his arms in the air. The photos instantly went viral, circulating on Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, tagged with #slanegirl and #slaneslut. A slanegirl meme quickly emerged and trended around the world. Participating sites later deleted these images, which counted as child pornography in countries such as the United States. News stories reported that slanegirl had been hospitalized after these images of her were publicized and circulated online. Some articles also indicated that she was seeking medical attention due to a possible sexual assault at the event perpetrated by men other than those pictured in the viral images (Foy). Such reportage included a remarkable slippage: it was left unclear as to whether slanegirl’s hospitalization was due to the injury of her image’s circulation or to the alleged sexual assault. One such article included the exemplary subtitle “Teenaged Girl Hospitalized after Being Photographed Having Oral Sex” in which the cause of hospitalization is saliently obscured (Linton). The slippage of these two possible causes for hospitalization articulates how the violence of a leak, of online publicity, is perceived to match that of sexual assault. The slanegirl meme is but one in a long series of exposures: a habit of leaking images that supposedly wield the power to “ruin” a woman through the link between her online and off-line activities. These leaks are frequently the movement

of images or videos of individual subjects. The leak has developed into a ruinous and pernicious habit that disproportionately finds young women as its victims: from blackmailing cappers to revenge porn sites.

In all of these forms of leaking, images and/or videos of women naked or engaged in sexual acts (consensual and nonconsensual) have emerged and circulated online, and particular incidents have become major news stories. The “ruin” of female subjects through the exposure of images of their (sexual) bodies is a habit of leaking and of new media use.⁹ This leaking figures the online subject as open, vulnerable, and perhaps asking for it: that is, as traditionally female. If the initial moment of the “mass” Internet was dominated by the figures of the lurker and the young exposed child, Web 2.0 is imagined through the “friend” and the young girl. If, as one of us has argued, the Internet user “at risk” of exposure was once figured as a young boy, exposed to child pornography and/or lurked upon (Chun, *Control*), Web 2.0’s crisis of exposure is being played out not over the young boy and pornography, but over the young girl who is circulated pornographically. These cases of online exposure suggest that new media habits continue old constructions of race and gender; slanegirl’s exposure is symptomatic of how a discourse of “ruin” still mediates the treatment of female sexuality that is open and visible. The notion of “ruin,” of the end of a female subject, has a long and sexist history in which “virtue” is upheld as a patriarchal ideal of contained, and virginal, white female sexuality. Its breach—by means of sexual contact with the wrong person either through rape, premarital sex, or some other unwanted sexual encounters—is the end or death of the subject. What is significant about the cases of slanegirl, revenge porn victims, and others is that their “ruin” is caused by both their erroneous sexual decision and its online publicity. The traditional idea of female virtue—one that is destroyed by sexual experience or physical exposure—positions ideal female sexuality as contained, private, and invisible. The positioning of slanegirl and others as ruined suggests how the leak—not the sexual act per se—destroys the virtue of its victims. Both the notion of a leaky opening (slut) and of a violently penetrated interior (rape victim/ruined virgin) depend upon the promise of closure, of being sealed. This desire to contain female sexuality, to uphold the virtue of virginity, now plays out both in our orifices and our interfaces. The very logic of virtuous containment and enclosure bears the destructive threat of the leak. (Of course, this leak would not be destructive if the opposition between rape victim/ruined virgin was not in place to begin with.)

Indeed, the case of slanegirl suggests the slut and her obverse, the victim, have been refigured and renewed through new media. Accompanied by #slanegirl, the images of slanegirl¹⁰ were initially reposted with three predominant projects: first, to slut-shame and, second, to celebrate the young man receiving the blowjob in the photographs. After the first wave of tagged content went viral, a third project soon emerged: posts lamenting the sad ruin of the young woman and her virtue brought about by her photographs' publicity, as well as expressing solidarity with slanegirl. For example, one Twitter user, @tentspitch, wrote, "Time for ppl to show a little #slanegirlsolidarity instead of maliciously or what's worse CASUALLY ruining ppl's lives for their mistakes." In the commentary following the posting of slanegirl's photographs, the young woman was defined as both asking for it and not asking for it; she was simultaneously depicted as both slut and victim, not just of a possible sexual assault but of the violence of publicity. These leaks indicate not only the desire for a privately sealed, protected Web 2.0 but also for a female sexuality and feminized online activity that is similarly sealed and contained, as though users could really control their open networks, as though freedom did not entail risk. The online discourses that respond to the leak only entrench the sexist politics that suggest the inherently debilitating vulnerability of women.

Slut/Victim

The figure of the slut is the woman who is repeatedly and habitually open and opened.¹¹ As Feona Attwood outlines in her essay on the history of the word *slut*, the figure's lower-class associations are partially characterized by her "looseness" (234). We see this characterization of the slut as open, too, in the logic of Hunter Moore's defense of revenge porn. Moore, the much hated and now convicted founder of the site Isanybodyup, has repeatedly suggested that the exposure of naked women on his site is due to women's stupidity in taking, or allowing the taking of, naked photos of themselves.¹² Slut-shaming is condonable, in his logic, because the slut self-exposes, self-opens. The slut is leaky. Sluttiness, then, is a habit of leaking. This figuring of the slut as open or opened genders as female vulnerability and risk. Unlike the male, who is imagined as always impossibly erect and able to plug in, the slut is an open socket that is always available to be plugged. The slut "asks for it"—that is, she brings penetration and exposure upon herself through her openness and thus constant vulnerability. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault differentiates the sodomite

from the homosexual as one who engages in a particularly sinful sexual act versus a subject whose formation is determined by that act.¹³ Similarly, we can differentiate between promiscuity as an ungendered activity and the slut as a subject who is determined by the act of being sexually open or promiscuous. Sluttiness is the activity of a female subject who has made a habit of being sexually active and therefore always and necessarily open.¹⁴ Yet, always open, the slut should be resilient to the exposure and opening of leaks. In this way, we need to rethink sluttiness as a way to disavow the violence of the leak.

The figure of the slut ought to disable the injurious ability of exposure, yet she simultaneously continues its logic. Slut-shaming enables a double leak, a double exposure: the first leak is the discovery of the sin of the slut, and the second is its publicity. The claim that the slut is always open allows for and enables slut-shaming; she brings the injury of exposure upon herself through her openness, her sluttiness. But, already wounded and ruined by her own sexual openness, the slut should not be injured by the second exposure of public shaming.

Slanegirl is paradoxically positioned not only as a slut but also as a victim: of publicity, of the camera, and potentially of sexual assault. Soon after the slanegirl meme and #slaneslut trended worldwide, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites began receiving accusations of hosting child pornography. Regardless of consent, it is illegal to circulate these images, for slanegirl was seventeen at the time of the image's posting, which still qualified her as a minor in most nations in which the photo or meme was reposted, if not in Ireland. Facebook, Twitter, and others soon released denial of service charges to anyone who reposted the image, and the photo is now reposted only in a cropped and censored version. The *Irish Independent* reported on the incident: "[A] schoolgirl was being examined in hospital last night as gardai launched an investigation after images of her performing a sex act on a boy were posted on the internet. The 17-year-old was being treated after hundreds of internet users shared the images, taken in broad daylight at the weekend" (Foy). The language employed in this report seems to suggest that the viral publicity of her image was the cause of slanegirl's hospitalization and medical treatment. By this logic, the constantly circulated images and/or videos remain perpetually to reinjure, or more properly as evidence of the injury as injury.

This notion of publicity as injuring a subject simply by circulating her image grounds the rise of U.S. privacy laws at the turn of the twentieth century, laws that granted protection only to "deserving" victims. As Osucha

has argued, in Justices Warren and Brandeis's landmark paper "The Right to Privacy" (written in response to the mass circulation of print images), publicity is described as "an experience of acute personal injury," and "the archetypal violated object of this gaze is invariably gendered female" (70).¹⁵ Mass media are portrayed as intrinsically pornographic and, moreover, implicitly racialized and racializing. Osucha makes this point by comparing the cases of Abigail M. Roberson, to which "The Right to Privacy" largely responded and who inspired New York State's first privacy law, and Nancy Green, the woman who would become known as "Aunt Jemima." Both women's images were used to sell related mass commodities: Roberson's to sell flour, Green's to sell pancake mix. Green's image—like so many images of people of color used in advertising during that period—is assumed to be general rather than individual; Green did not have—and is never perceived as having—a right to privacy. As Hortense Spillers has argued, captivity and slavery degender the enslaved body into unprotected female flesh.¹⁶ In contrast, Roberson is perceived to have been damaged by her image's mass circulation: her body's image needs to be protected. As Osucha elucidates, "[T]hat Roberson's mental 'distress and suffering' expressed itself in physical illness served, in this case, as evidence not simply of a wound to her privacy but of the very *existence* of her privacy" (95–96). It is precisely because the image is so lifelike that it is so damaging, for it exposes Roberson—through her legible image—to places and audiences that she would never voluntarily choose to visit or entertain.

Not surprisingly, just as the original victim of mass media publicity is a young female, so, too, is the ideal victim of Web 2.0 and its exposing leaks. Child pornography laws emerged in the United States in the late 1980s in response to video and digital images. According to these laws (also developed in relation to a New York State case), it is impossible for a minor to consent. Child pornography first emerged as a crime because, it was argued, the visual depiction of these acts directly recorded the sexual abuse of children.¹⁷ In the case of *slanegirl*, media reports of her hospitalization as a result of the publicity accorded images of her body and active sexuality frame the circulation of her image as itself a sexual violation, not merely as sexual exposure. Her personal injury and hospitalization suggest that the formation, disfiguration, and violation of online subjects is (reversely) indexical. This belated indexicality is also evident in the *Irish Independent's* reportage, which expresses the possibility of a double breach of an interior subject—through sexual penetration and through the penetrative exploitation of the image:

[T]he Irish Independent has learned that the teen has made a separate complaint of being sexually assaulted at an event that does not relate to the photos which have been posted on the internet. The secondary school student and her family have been left devastated after the images appeared on social networking sites. Sources said she was so distraught she had to be sedated in hospital yesterday afternoon. One source said: "The primary concern for gardai at this time is for this vulnerable teenager and her state of mind. Gardai have been dealing with her and her family. This is a very sensitive case." The teenager has not been medically fit enough to make a formal statement yet, but when that happens this could turn into a sexual assault investigation. (Foy)

While the *Irish Independent* notes the "separateness" of slanegirl's sexual assault claim—it was an incident involving other men at the concert—its language suggests a slippage and fluidity of injury between the real-life sexual assault and the virtual assault caused by her circulating image—captured while she engaged in consensual sexual acts. In the *Independent's* reportage, it is unclear which is the cause of her vulnerable and fragile state while in the hospital: the circulation of her image online or the sexual assault.¹⁸ This slippage suggests how the publicity of leaked images or videos, including revenge porn, has become endowed with a violence perceived to be as injurious as that of a physical sexual assault.

Anxiety over the victims of online exposure reveals the raced construction of both virtue and victim. Symptomatically, the most publicized revenge porn victims have been young presumed to be heterosexual white women. The three women who have become public crusaders for anti-revenge porn legislation and around whom both legal and journalistic attention has turned—Holly Jacobs of End Revenge Porn, Bekah Wells of Women against Revenge Porn, and Kayla Laws (whose mother, Charlotte, has been called the "Erin Brockovich of revenge porn")—are all young white women (Laws). The extremely limited attention in the media given to revenge porn victims who are women of color reflects the way in which the publicized subject of sexual assault has been racialized as a white woman. We see Osucha's argument—that "white women are required to embody interiority for others"—in these leaks: young women's exposure on Web 2.0 signals the breach of a privacy and subjectivity that is not limited to their own bodies. The particular attention toward and anxiety over white female bodies are clear in the response to the rape of a sixteen-year-old girl in Steubenville,

Ohio, that shocked many, sadly not because of the nature of the crime, but rather because the so-called rape crew took pictures and videos of the “dead body,” which they then posted on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. After Alexandra Goddard, who had stored and posted these materials to her blog in part because she had lived in Steubenville and was dubious that anyone would be convicted, was sued, Anonymous—a free-floating group that first made its name through trolling, rickrolling, and harassing a fourteen-year-old female bully—resuscitated the deleted files and organized protests. Anonymous also posted videos suggesting that they knew who the rapists were and that they were going to expose them. These videos ended with their signature anthem:

We are Anonymous.
We are legion.
We do not forgive,
We do not forget.
Expect us.

Anonymous’s pursuit of the Steubenville rapists—however laudable and important—raises questions, since their attention specifically toward these white rape victims is not dissimilar to the specific attention of white male lynch mobs in the South who, masked and hooded, pursued black men accused of raping white women. As Estelle B. Freedman notes, historically, rape has been constructed as a “negro crime” and the victim of rape a white woman (90). The lynch mob’s attacks were not merely against black male bodies but were also an expression of an urgent attendance to the honor and virtue of an untouched, virginal white female heterosexuality.¹⁹ Similarly, Anonymous’s campaign against the Steubenville rapists is not only for justice, but it is also a campaign to revenge and protect the heterosexual virtue of a young white woman. Unwittingly, Anonymous reinforces a logic of protectionism that has historically racialized sexual assault and rape.

To be clear, this is not to say that Anonymous and the lynch mob are the same—they are importantly different—but that we need to question the logic of revenge and protection (“We do not forgive / We do not forget”) that drives these actions. Indeed, given the pushback against feminists and rape victims on forums such as Reddit, we need to ask: why and how have rape victims become such a cause célèbre for groups such as Anonymous? And how can this create a link between two groups that are usually considered at odds: hackers and “girls”?

What crucially distinguishes slanegirl from the Roberson case is the vitriol directed at slanegirl and other sluts who refuse to be properly enclosed, who refuse to embody privacy for others. As slanegirl is derided and attacked and made into an “example” not simply of social media’s violation of privacy but also of user naïveté or stupidity, in the online slut, the two seemingly opposing stereotypes of white femininity come together. What is also different: the linkages between sexual assault and online exposure in the case of slanegirl evince the way in which online exposure, that is, leaks, is violently gendered and raced—but also identified with. The parallelism between sexual assault and online exposure is evidenced by the growing popularity of the word *rape* online. For example, when a Facebook account is hacked or assumed by another person, most often a friend of the real-life user, it is labeled a *frape*. In recent years, *#rapeface* has trended worldwide, accompanying photos in which people have creepy or awkward smiles, as if about to rape someone. Additionally, in gaming language, to be “pwned” is to be dominated by another user, much like in a rape one body dominates another. The language of rape is employed online to suggest the possibility of online subjects dominating, violating, or transforming other online subjects. The deployment of the language of rape frames the risk and vulnerability of the online subject as that of the female virgin, and the exposed subject as the female rape victim. For this reason, the potential misnomer between *slane* and *slain* is salient. In gaming language, to slay is to destroy or violently tear or kill. Yet *slay* also takes on sexual connotations in current usage: it is to sexually conquer or defame a woman. Exposure violently kills online subjects; the leak of a woman’s sexual body or acts indicts her to a state of inactivity by ruining her online subject’s image. The publicity of slanegirl’s sexual acts enabled her ruin online; she was slain.

The logic of ruin and of the leak is enabled through the politics and permanence of memory as storage. Osucha articulates the *injury* caused by exposure and publicity, but the exposure of Web 2.0 *kills*; it ends online subjectivity, since these “girls” are told to go off-line if they want to remain safe. The permanence of memory as storage enables the death of these online subjects, for the injurious exposure—image, video—is not just *out there*, in cyberspace, but out there *forever*. Thus, once exposed, an online subject can never regain her subjectivity (as it is inseparable from her online subjectivity) as a private yet digitally constructed interiority.²⁰ With the permanence of storage, the violent break of interiority (leak) that exposes also engenders a permanent ruin of the subject—a death. With Web

2.0, true victims are dead victims. The real-life suicides of subjects who have been the victims of online leaks evince this logic. As such, the language of death that predominates online—killed, destroyed, pwned, raped, and so on—reflects the politics of memory of Web 2.0.

The slut is figured through this same politics of memory. The slut is not only the subject who is habitually open and opened but also the subject whose previous sexual acts are habitually re-viewed and remembered by others. The slut's sexual activities are constantly monitored by those who look at her. The slut is formed through the un-forgetting of her monitors, her sexual acts archived, remembered. The politics of memory as storage enables the slutty figure. Yet, in this way, the slut emerges as a type of radical figure for habits of new media, for the slut, in terms of online use, shows resilience in the face of the permanence of storage. In the temporality of the slut as *always* open, she disavows her end or death. Impossible to seal, the online slut cannot be exposed. The slut, despite her exposure, continues to be active online—ruined and yet undead.

Habits of Leaking, the Right to Loiter

The construction of the slut suggests that the categorization and formation of sexual subjects—the slut, the virgin, the victim, the predator—have implications for, and even are interpreted to correlate with, particular habits of online activity. To return to Moore's YouTube commentary: his suggestion that stupid bitches/sluts bring revenge porn on themselves points to the way in which habits of new media, of being active online, are reiterations of gendered figures. Moore's comment frames stupidity and sluttiness not merely in terms of sexual acts but in terms of specifically digital ones. He seems to suggest that sexting and sending naked photographs are slutty new media habits. Sluttiness, then, is not only the habit of sleeping around but of allowing your digital body or likeness—digital subject—to get around. The call for young women to “clean up” their online profiles suggests a desire not only for the containment of female sexuality but also for the containment of that sexuality's spilling out, leaking, online. Leaking often finds its form in the movement or circulation of images of real-life subjects. It seems that virginity is not merely the state of a woman prior to being sexually penetrated but also the state of her online subject prior to a leak—or exposure or publicity.

In the face of these ruinous leaks, many respond by cautioning women to be “safe” in their activity online, to keep their use and exposure

contained. In *Why Loiter?*, Phadke, Khan, and Ranade argue that “[S]afety [. . .] can and does easily slide into a protectionism that restricts women’s access to public space and does so with a rationality that is unquestioned” (70). The “safety” that is sought for women in response to these cautionary tales of Web 2.0 victims curtails women’s access to pleasure within an online public. What Phadke, Khan, and Ranade articulate with regard to the public space of Mumbai is exceedingly relevant for the online public in which these exposures, leaks, and ruins occur:

The presence of these often apocalyptic visions of impending disaster have the effect of making women anxious, compelling them to strategize and negotiate every square foot of public space they access, all the while constantly looking over their shoulders, stalked ceaselessly by the ghost of past crimes. These accounts of danger reinforce women’s anxieties in public, thus normalizing women’s lack of access to public space. Furthermore, they have the added effect of sanctioning various kinds of restrictions on women’s mobility by rationalizing them as being for their own safety and well-being. (54)

Phadke, Khan, and Ranade suggest that rather than fight for privacy, we need to fight for the right to loiter. We need an online public in which women are not victims, but loiterers, actively engaging in its public sphere without a discourse of predators, pornographers, and slut-shamers waiting there to ruin them.

Indeed, a more positive reading of the prevalence and deep resonance of these cases would be this: they point to the fact that we need to fight for the right to be vulnerable—to be in public—and not be attacked. We need to grapple with the ways that trust and publicity have always entailed risks. This was the message clearly delivered by the famous SlutWalks, which started in Toronto in response to a Toronto officer’s implicit blaming of rape victims for the violence directed toward them (see fig. 2). Marching against the assumption that women who dress “provocatively” are “asking for it,” women of all ages and occupations united under the banner of “sluttiness” in order to claim their right to enjoy public areas. As Phadke, Khan, and Ranade argue, rather than fight for privacy—for hermetic bubbles of protection—we need to fight for the right to loiter in order to displace the twinned logic of ruin and vengeance.

Phadke, Khan, and Ranade link loitering to claiming citizenship, contending, “[I]t is only by claiming the right to risk [. . .] that women can

Figure 2:
From Toronto
Slutwalk 2007



truly claim citizenship.” Claiming risk means redefining our understanding of the “dangers” of public space “to see not sexual assault but the denial of access to public space as the worst possible outcome for women” (60). This claiming of risk resonates beyond freedom for middle-class women. As they point out, the policing of women’s bodies on Mumbai streets is also linked to the policing of the bodies of Muslim and other “dangerous” men. The logic of safety perversely makes space safe by reserving the public for people who are already allegedly safe in it: it removes for the sake of women both women and lower-class men.

Phadke, Khan, and Ranade link the right to take risks—to enjoy oneself in public—not to familiarity, but rather to anonymity. Indeed, the streets in which a woman can be identified (her identity on and off the street linked) are often the most dangerous, since they are linked to pernicious gossip and “community policing.” These streets, in other words, become hazardous spaces that constantly threaten to ruin women who are seen on them; identifiability leads not to the end of sexual harassment, but rather to the justification of it (e.g., of course *x* was assaulted: she is always walking alone on the street). They thus argue for mass loitering because it creates mixtures and possibilities that erode boundaries and establishes spaces that do not leak because boundaries are not compromised and thus

buttressed; they are fundamentally changed. They stress: “[L]oitering is significant because it blurs these boundaries—the supposedly dangerous look less threatening, the ostensibly vulnerable don’t look helpless enough” (178). Most provocatively, they ask, “What if there were mass loitering by hip collegians and sex workers, dalit professors and lesbian lawyers, nursing mothers and taporis [. . .]. [T]his scenario might seem to be anarchic, but within this apparent chaos lies the possibility of imagining and creating a space without such hierarchies or boundaries” (178).

What might this right to loiter look like online? How can we conceive of our networks in these terms—in terms of our signals that are “out there,” forever intertwined with another’s? (In terms of CDMA cellular networks, my signal is your noise and vice versa.) To loiter online, we would have to create technologies that acknowledge, rather than render invisible, the multitude of exchanges that take place around us, technologies that refuse the illusory boundary between audience and spectacle. We need to question why it is illegal in countries such as the United Kingdom to know what your Ethernet card knows. Packet sniffers do not automatically give access to encrypted information, but they do give users a sense of how their computers operate. Natalie Jeremijenko’s early “Dangling String,” which twitched every time packets were sent across a local area network, demonstrates nicely the ways in which the rhythms of network exchange can be incorporated into our off-line space. David C. Howe and Helen Nissenbaum’s AdNauseum, a browser extension that randomly adds searches, is another way forward toward mass loitering. In addition to these types of technologies, we would also have to build ones that question the basic premise that memory should equal storage, that everything read in should be written forward.

But mass online loitering cannot be accomplished solely or mainly through technology. We need to engage in a politics of forgiveness and deletion in which we remember that to delete is not to forget, but to open other less inflexible ways of remembering. To forgive is to give in excess, to give away: to create give in the system by giving way, by giving more than what one gets. That is, to build an Internet that embraces its status as a public domain, in which there is no “promiscuous” mode because there is no monogamous mode, we need to inhabit things differently: to develop new habits of connecting that disrupt the reduction of our interactions to network diagrams that can be tracked and traced. Our networks operate by fore-giving: signals, some of which we can read, are constantly caressing us. What we need to do is to see this mass touching—this mass writing—as

the basis for communicating.²¹ Most important, we need to create ways of occupying networks that thrive in the shadowy space between identity and anonymity, that thrive through repetition. Although the collective Anonymous is usually taken as the example of such an inhabitation, we conclude with the story and note card video of Amanda Todd.

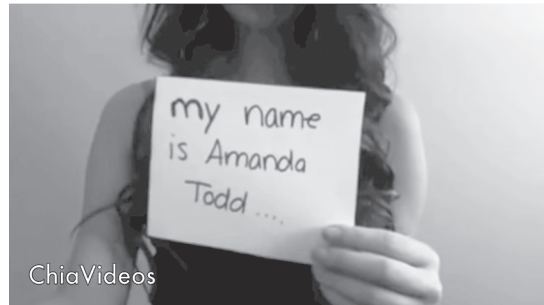
Coda: Message in a Bottle

On September 7, 2012, the then fifteen-year-old Amanda Todd posted a note-card video to YouTube relaying her “never ending story” of online blackmail and off-line bullying (see fig. 3). It started when she was thirteen, when she began to frequent webcam chat sites with friends. Online, she received many compliments: she was called “stunning, beautiful” and asked to flash, which she did. A year later, a blackmailing capper threatened to circulate her topless photo if she did not put on a show for him. A few months later, he did so. In response, Todd became depressed and suffered from panic attacks, eventually abusing alcohol and drugs. She moved schools to start afresh, but the blackmailer followed her, sending Facebook friend requests to her new peers from a page that featured her breasts as its profile photo. Todd then began cutting and moved schools once more; she was isolated, she relays, but finally happy. After sleeping with an old friend, however, she was publicly beaten by his girlfriend in front of her newest school. The video of her assault was posted, and her consequent suicide attempt by drinking Clorox mocked. Todd’s video ends with the cards: “I have nobody / I need someone ☹”; “my name is Amanda Todd.”

This video went viral after her suicide one month later. One of the many copies of the original video (the original was taken down shortly after her death) had reached 16 million views by December 2013 (Todd). It was widely viewed as a cry for help, a tragic foreshadowing of her imminent death, but Todd offered a very different interpretation in the post, published on September 7, 2012, that accompanied her video:

I’m struggling to stay in this world, because everything just touches me so deeply. I’m not doing this for attention. I’m doing this to be an inspiration and to show that I can be strong. I did things to myself to make pain go away, because I’d rather hurt myself than someone else. Haters are haters but please don’t hate, although im sure I’ll get them. I hope I can show you guys that everyone has a story, and everyones future will be bright one day,

Figure 3:
Screenshot from
Amanda Todd's
YouTube video,
"Amanda Todd's
Story: Struggling,
Bullying, Suicide,
Self Harm"



*you just gotta pull through. I'm still here aren't I? —AmandaTodd
(2012)*

For Todd, as her mother would later insist, this video documented her survival and her will to live; it performed her desire to be an inspiration. In it, she retells—she reclaims—her story and her exposure. In it, her face is shaded and partly cut off, and the note cards are positioned strategically at chest-level. We, the audience, are focused at the site of her initial exposure, but instead of seeing her breasts, we read her story. The note cards and her shadowy presence offer a shield and shelter from which Todd voluntarily reveals her “secret”: not her story, but her name, Amanda Todd.

Using a note-card video to reveal a story of abuse (become self-abuse) was not unique to Todd. In March 2011, then thirteen-year-old Alye Pollack posted a video that used note cards—interspersed with images of her face—to narrate her story of being bullied and her temptation to cut. She writes: “Not a day has gone by without one of these words” / “Bitch, Whore, Fat, Lesbo, Slut, Freak, Ugly, Wierd, Fag.” Fourteen-year-old Jonah Mowry posted a similar video that August, in which he described his cutting and his experiences with being bullied because of his sexuality. In December 2011, Mowry’s went viral, garnering many million views and television news coverage. Both Pollack’s and Mowry’s videos started with “Hello/Hi, I’m . . .” and cards that explained that their happy faces were lies. This format—this revelation of a secret true and troubled self—became standard in the many videos that would follow, and the creation of these videos to combat teen suicide and to reveal secrets became a standard exercise in schools (Bogush; and Gasparini).

These videos thus play into a larger and troubled history of the confessional outlined by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1. As he notes, the confessional and the secret have long histories within the West, ones that are not simply liberating. The confession has been central

to the operations of power, and the secret—in particular, sexuality as the secret of the self—foundational to a certain will to power.

To place these videos and their responses within this context, however, is not to dismiss them as self-delusional acts of freedom. It is, rather, to move out of the unending cycle of judging the videos on the basis of their “truth” and to open different ways of understanding their power. Intriguingly, the protagonists in these videos, rather than confessing to being straight or gay, to having flashed or not, engage with the aftermath of being “outed,” of having been exposed, having been exposed as exposing. Further, the secret they confess to is their vulnerability: their unhappiness.

Indeed, what is so striking about these videos and what makes them particularly interesting in this era of neoliberal empowerment and individualism is their embrace of the template as the way to negotiate the demand to be individual. They relay their singular stories in a form that seems to deny singularity: repeating the narrative style, the note-card form, even the content. At stake in these videos and these outings/confessions is a reaching toward community that stems both from what seems to be in common and from what can never be: the singular experience of abuse and vulnerability. This reaching and desire for community is not simple. Indeed, to understand these moves, we need to understand them in relation to the vitriol they inspire: hundreds if not thousands of comments, which are routinely deleted and routinely reappear, which are evidence of another type of community based on hate and on the common victim it assaults. To do justice to these videos, we need to think through their engagement with writing, with the repetition of images and text as the basis for something like communication.

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Notes

- 1 The California Assembly Bill, which adds a section to the civil code relating to privacy, was signed by the governor on September 30, 2014 (Wieckowski).
- 2 A *capper* is typically a person who records audio or video from a broadcast for a fan community to share.
- 3 Computers have conflated memory with storage, the ephemeral with the enduring. Rather than storing memories, we now put things “into memory,” both consciously and unconsciously. “Memory”—computer memory—has become surprisingly permanent. As Matthew Kirschenbaum has argued, our digital traces remain far longer than we suppose. Hard drives fail but can still be “read” by forensic experts (optically, if not mechanically). Our ephemeral documents and other “ambient data” are written elsewhere—that is, “saved”—constantly. As Wendy Chun has argued: to read is to write elsewhere (*Control*). At the same time, however, the enduring is also the ephemeral, not only because even if data storage devices can be forensically read after they fail, they still eventually fail, but also and more important because what is not constantly upgraded and/or “migrated” becomes unreadable. As well, our interactions with computers cannot be reduced to the traces we leave behind. The experiences of using—the exact paths of execution—are ephemeral. Information is “undead”: neither alive nor dead, neither quite present nor absent. Memory and storage are different. *Memory* stems from the same Sanskrit root for *matyr* and is related to the ancient Greek term for baneful, fastidious. Memory contains within it the act of repetition: it is an act of commemoration, a process of recollecting or remembering. In contrast, a *store*, according to the *OED*, stems from the Old French term “to build, establish, furnish.” A *store*—like an archive—is both what is stored and its location. Stores look toward a future: we put something in storage in order to use it again; we buy things in stores in order to use them. By bringing memory and storage together, we bring together the past and the future. We also bring together the machinic and the biological into what we might call the *archive* (see Chun, *Programmed*).
- 4 For more on files and deletion, see Vismann.
- 5 Friendster was initially conceived as a dating site, albeit one with an expanded user base. Rather than rely on algorithms and forms, it crowdsourced matchmaking by allowing people automatically to see “friends” within four degrees of separation. Tellingly, insisting on “proper” friendships—a strict separation of private from public—led to Friendster’s demise as a social networking site in the United States.
- 6 For more on this, see Allan. Although the term “Facebook friend” still persists as a way to distinguish between “real” and “online” friends, this distinction is becoming less clear and is actually conforming to more sociological views of friendship such as Allan’s, which emphasize the looseness of the term (he includes “mates”).
- 7 This move toward transparency was a response to the failures of the initial Internet to live up to its hype as an ideal public sphere. By the early 2000s, the early promises of the Web were exposed for what they were: unfulfilled and perhaps unfulfillable imaginings of ideal public/democratic spheres. Like the newsgroups that preceded them, chat rooms were often nasty

- spaces subject to “Godwin’s Law,” which states that as an online discussion proceeds, a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler becomes inevitable. Open listservs were dying, killed by spam and trolls, whose presence was amplified by those who naively “fed” them and others who admonished them for doing so (Lovink). Further, the Internet was filled with phishing scams, and allegedly private email accounts were flooded with spam messages advertising pornography, body modification tools, and dodgy pharmaceutical companies. Many, although not all, viewed anonymity, which once grounded the dreams of the Internet as a utopian space of the mind, as actually destroying the possibility of a civilized public sphere. Corporations such as Google and Facebook, which also needed reliable, authenticated information for their data-mining operations, supported the tactic of tethering the on- and off-line as the best and easiest way to foster responsibility and combat online aggression. See Bosker; and Bynum.
- 8 In one early 2004 high-profile case in Florida, A. H., a sixteen-year-old girl, took photographs of herself and her seventeen-year-old boyfriend J. G. W. having sex. The sex was consensual and legal, and these photographs were never distributed to a third party. One of the parents, however, saw the photos in the daughter’s email and called the police, and both minors were convicted of knowingly producing, distributing, and promoting child pornography. In Florida, they could marry, they could have sex, but, due to laws introduced in the 1990s to protect them from the Internet, they could not legally take images of themselves having sex without becoming “sex offenders.” So even though their names cannot be published because they are minors, they will have to register as sex offenders for the rest of their lives (Kimpel 299).
 - 9 For more on the habit, see Chun, *Habitual*.
 - 10 We do not refer to the young woman as “slanegirl” to contribute to her shaming; rather, we use this to highlight the particular figuring of the victim of these leaks. She is at once revealed and anonymous—a particular girl whose life is ruined but also just any girl, just a slut, not a singular woman worthy of name and identification. The victim is exposed and yet anonymous. We believe that it is partially through this play between the anonymous and the singular, the unidentified and identified, that the habit of leaking operates.
 - 11 The term *slut* suggests numerous figures that are both specific in their historical reference and ambiguous in their hybrid meanings. See Attwood. It is important to note, as Attwood outlines in her essay, that the term has been reclaimed by recent feminists. The term we invoke here is one that still carries with it the potential to “ruin,” “expose,” and “shame.”
 - 12 Hunter Moore was “charged with multiple counts of conspiracy, unauthorized access to a protected computer to obtain information, and aggravated identity theft” (Greenhouse).
 - 13 From Foucault:
This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case

history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. [. . .] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (42–43)

- 14 Attwood has suggested how the “term ‘slut’ has broadened in its application to include gay men and bisexual men and women, and teenagers,” not only promiscuous women (237).
- 15 See also Warren and Brandeis.
- 16 See Spillers. In particular, she argues, “[T]he profitable ‘atomizing’ of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions. To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.”
- 17 See *New York v. Ferber*.
- 18 The injury done to slanegirl by her image’s circulation reiterates how the circulation and use of a subject’s image have profound ramifications for her supposed virtue: Roberson’s lawyers “claimed that the adventurous peregrinations of

her commodified image brought on her person a shame and distress as real as if she herself had been sold and circulated in such a way” (Osucha 95). Slanegirl, as a real-life subject, felt the physical effects of the shame attributed to her online image getting around.

- 19 See Freedman: “After the end of Reconstruction, the association of black men with the crime of rape deepened. By the end of the century, southerners were justifying lynching as a means of protecting the sexual honor of white women and calling for the disenfranchisement of black men” (95). This crisis over the breached sexuality of white, female, potential virgins plays out with each new media crisis of exposure, with each image leaked, and works to preserve the same policing of virtue that enabled the racist violence of the lynch mob and allows for the persistence of slut-shaming. Considering, as Freedman writes, how “protecting white women from rape” justified “the summary, and brutal, executions of African Americans,” we must be wary of the impulse to seek revenge for the “sexual honor of white women.” Analyzing the figure of the rape victim in the antebellum South, Freedman notes, “[T]o be female and African American remained an obstacle to being a believable rape victim and a challenge to attaining the full rights of citizenship, including sexual self-sovereignty” (88).
- 20 Osucha discusses how the sense of an interior self is constructed through a legal notion of privacy. If one’s privacy can be violated, one has an interior self.
- 21 For more on this, see Chun, *Habitual*.

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