

Scandals

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By Laura Kipnis



Newt Gingrich

What ever happened to shame? It just isn't what it used to be, despite the endless amount of public bad behavior. The term "scandal fatigue" doesn't mean there's too much scandal; it means the consequences aren't sufficiently high to be satisfying. A real scandal requires shame, but we're living through a shame recession. Social conservatives are particularly pained about the situation but are misidentifying the cause—they think it's about moral decline. I'd argue differently. What it's really about is the eroding distinction between public and private, and the effects it's having on all of us.

The public/private breakdown is one of the major upheavals of our lifetimes, rippling through every sphere of existence: political, economic, cultural, intimate. The effects are so seismic and ongoing that no one knows how to think about it or where the dust

is going to settle. Which is why scandal is such a salient topic at the moment. Scandal enters the public-private story because it sits exactly at the dividing line—you might even say it *constitutes* the line. Scandal is premised on the disclosure of secrets. Something previously private, humiliating, deliberately hidden, and probably illicit becomes public. The transgressor is punished, social order is restored.

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Or once upon a time, that's how scandal worked. But with the public/private divide in such flux, scandal outcomes are far more unpredictable. Sure, there are still classic downfall stories in which transgressors are ritually shamed and lives are wrecked. But increasingly these are backward glimpses at a vanishing horizon, when the social world really was policed by humiliation. Shame requires the traditional opposition of an inner and outer person: This means an ego that feels the sting of guilt and punishment. It also means a culture capable of defining transgression and assigning blame. In ours, a talk show apology suffices to redeem all but the worst sins, the follow-up memoir details substance problems or a bipolar disorder, penance is a stint on ***Dancing With the Stars***.

Which is why we need more and more scandal: All this instant redemption is like eating a dozen low-fat cookies instead of the real thing. Yet it's too easy to blame scandal saturation on the media, everyone's favorite scapegoat. To really understand what's changed, we have to ponder the rise of what's been called "digital capitalism."

As all of us who've been launched (willingly or not) into the Internet age are vaguely aware, the online economy itself hinges on dissolving public/private boundaries in ways that a few generations ago would have been considered threatening incursions. Privacy activists use terms like "consumer surveillance," but most of us ignore them since we like our free e-mail, despite the pop-up ads that track the contents of our messages, or the pair of shoes you looked at a week ago that perpetually haunts your browser due to "**remarketing**." Why bother to care when ISPs sell your search data, which are marketed back to you in the form of "behavioral targeting"? It's all so intrinsic to the online experience that resisting would practically shut you out of the

economy. Resist? Instead, there we are, exposing even more private information on social networking sites. Voluntary self-disclosure has become so woven into the modern personality, it's the new normal.

These aren't just lifestyle questions; they're political ones, since ultimately they're about the roles of corporations and governments in our lives. The more habituated we get to new forms of high-tech surveillance, the less protest there is about increasing government surveillance and rights abridgements of the sort sanctioned by the Homeland Security Act and its successors. Of course, much of this is in the guise of "security": Let's not even get into those new full-body scanners at the airports. But how can we assess the trade-offs when we barely recognize the public/private division anymore, and when virtually every aspect of the culture collaborates in eliminating the distinction?

And I do mean every. Consider the rise of reality television, the entertainment genre in dominance at the moment, which repackages **surveillance as an entertainment form**, with lucky participants allowed to live under round-the-clock scrutiny for months on end while subjected to ritual on-air confession sessions about their innermost thoughts. In literature we have the ascendancy of the memoir: no secrets worth keeping there; *everything* inner must be made outer. And of course there's 12-step culture itself, which infuses our contemporary language of the self: Confession predominates, because recovery requires externalizing every secret corner of the psyche. In short, self-disclosure is the air we breathe these days. Which brings us back to the question of shame, since what all this externalizing also means is that, for better or worse, the shame-based ego structure seems to be on its way out.

Here's a telling example from the recent scandal annals: the bizarre attempted extortion involving David Letterman. Dave, you probably recall, had been in the habit of bedding various office staffers, as the boyfriend of one of them, a CBS producer named Robert Halderman, discovered by reading his girlfriend's diary. Armed with these revelations, he embarked on a **lamebrained scheme** to blackmail the married Letterman by offering to sell him a "screenplay treatment," detailing a famous talk show host's secret sex life, for \$2 million.

Among the oblivious Halderman's mistakes was thinking we still live in the sort of shame-soaked culture in which one person's secrets can be parlayed into another's gain. The far cannier Letterman knew there was no private/public boundary worth trying to uphold. Dave went to the DA, then simply acknowledged the secret in his next monologue. After a brief publicity burst and a round of jokes—many of them by Letterman at his own expense—everyone got over it. The women involved stayed mum, the sponsors stayed put, and there's Dave making the usual self-loathing jokes every night on TV.

By contrast, regard John Edwards, the current poster boy for public downfall, who tried valiantly to *keep* his secret. *This* was the real scandal in an age of compulsive disclosure, exceeding even the sexual transgressions. He lied, he lied some more, he seemed to think there was a zone of privacy big enough for his mistress and love child. When he finally apologized, he said all the wrong things: He explained that he was a narcissist and an egotist, but this was a case of stating the obvious. (As Susan Wise Bauer **points out** in *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America*, the rituals of public confession must be strictly observed; an apology is not the same thing as a confession.) But the Edwards scandal was a satisfying scandal in the classic sense: propelled by unbelievable levels of self-deception and revealing the human animal at its most incoherent. Shame was allocated, with both scandalizer and public fulfilling their traditional roles. Edwards doesn't seem due for a quickie redemption anytime soon.

On the other hand, there's Newt Gingrich, hypocrite extraordinaire and as shameless as they come. Here were all the constituent elements of scandal, yet nothing happened! Newt did belatedly **confess** (to sanctimonious Focus on the Family founder James Dobson) his own affair with an intern, conducted while trying to hound Bill Clinton out of office for similar activities; he was driven from the House leadership by a pileup of ethics charges. Yet now there are noises that he'll be running for something again. Like president. Apparently even for the most ardent conservatives, his devoted fan base, shame doesn't have the traction it once did, despite all the bloviating about social decline.

This is rather useful information about the moral and political contradictions of our times. When people talk in embarrassed tones about being addicted to scandal, it's as if they think the only way to be serious about the big questions of the moment is to speak of lofty matters in lofty ways. I've been arguing the reverse in this series of essays: that the *only* way to understand our cultural moment is to be addicted to scandal.

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Scott Walker's First Big Chance

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