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Editors

Scandal in a Digital Age

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Scandal in the Age of Sexting

Joshua Gamson

The first major scandals with “sexting” storylines erupted in 2009, three years before the term made its way into the Merriam-Webster dictionary (“the sending of sexually explicit messages or images by cell phone”) and a few years after the term first appeared in print. By then, forms of technologically based sexual encounters—phone sex, erotic photos exchanged by e-mail—had perhaps come to seem clunky-sweet vestigial customs of the late twentieth century.

That sexting lent itself easily to scandal was not too surprising, since phone communication was, and still is, widely understood to be private. Like anything else people do in private, it could be made public, and like almost anything sexual people do, its public revelation would be likely to cause some sort of moral consternation, disapproval, or outrage. It was, and it has.

For the most part, sexting has taken its place in scandals less as a discrete scandalous behavior than as a gotcha mechanism, providing a record—granted, often an especially salacious one, given that sexting encourages loose-fingered fantasy texts and spontaneous exhibitionist genital photography—of an offline sexual relationship. That relationship, extramarital or kinky or non-heterosexual, is the scandalous activity. The story then triggered is an old one: of infidelity and disloyalty, of lying and evading detection, made scandalous by contrast to the role expectations of the person having the affair (for instance, the integrity many expect from public servants), the moral positions they have taken (for instance, advocating for the “traditional family”), or the public image the person has cultivated and profited from (for instance, being a clean-cut boy-next-door).

The 2009 Tiger Woods scandal, for example, began with a *National Enquirer* story claiming Woods was having a relationship with a woman who

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was not his wife, after which several other women claimed to have had sexual encounters with him.¹ When some of these women later released explicit text messages allegedly between them and Woods, they were scandalous, for sure—spanking, and threesomes and golden showers, oh my!—but mainly side shows to the central cheating scandal. They included not just fantasy sex but practical planning for get-togethers; they were proof of ongoing sexual infidelity.² Similarly, in early 2010, *In Touch* magazine reported that actress Sandra Bullock's husband Jesse James was having an "affair with a model" ("The Ultimate Betrayal!") and offered their "steamy texts" as evidence.³ In these sorts of sex scandals, sexting is the electronic lipstick on the collar, and penis pictures, as some commentators like to say, are the new "smoking gun."

In a couple of high-profile cases, however—that of quarterback Brett Favre and New York Congressman Anthony Weiner, the focal points of my discussion here⁴—sexting itself generated a scandal. No face-to-face meetings were alleged, no exchange of bodily fluids, no lipstick-stained collars (or semen-stained dresses) to be cleaned, no hiding of credit card receipts. In both cases, pictures of penises were sent by male public figures to women they had never met, and both involved text messaging, hard-core in one case and soft-core in the other. Both led to extensive media and public coverage, much of it jokey or shaming or both, and had serious career and personal consequences for the participants. They were real scandals about virtual sex.

As such, they appear to be a new kind of sex scandal. These early sexting scandals offer an opportunity to investigate what has and has not changed as sex scandals have entered an era in which surveillance is increasingly pervasive, virtual sex has become technologically accessible, and the revelation of "private" life has become a commonplace form of entertainment, such that "a desire to be watched and to watch others being watched pervades almost everything we do."⁵ If scandal is understood as "the publicization of a transgression of a social norm,"⁶ and the exposure of private life is increasingly normative, precisely what social norms do sexting scandals broadcast? If scandals can "reveal much about historically distinctive constructions of the public/private divide," what altered constructions might they uncover? These cases, I will argue, offer a snapshot of sex scandals in transition.

As I recount and analyze these scandals, I will suggest that one of their most significant characteristics is actually their familiarity. Despite its technological novelty and its elimination of the face-to-face aspect of sexual encounters, sexting was quite easily absorbed into existing sex scandal narratives. The structures that generate and sustain sex scandals have remained largely unchanged, and so does their storytelling. At the same time, though, new themes poke through: of the changes wrought by new media on the publicizing of private lives, and of the "new rules" of sexual life in the "Internet age." These sexting scandals serve to publicize both emerging sexual norms—and the disgrace visited upon those who have not learned them—and the increasingly troubled zone of "the private" in a world of sophisticated surveillance technologies.

BRETT FAVRE: "C

The alleged behavior that lan quite mild by past sex scandal years in the past. In August owned by Gawker Media, b allegedly sent text messages a named Jenn Sterger, at the tir Host" for the New York Jets about 15 years older than Ste grandfather. According to De few "athlete dong photos," a cell phone-donging her was n

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BRETT FAVRE: "GRANDFATHERS SHOULDN'T SEXT"

The alleged behavior that landed quarterback Brett Favre in a sex scandal was quite mild by past sex scandal standards and, by the time it came to light, two years in the past. In August 2010, Deadspin, a tabloid-style sports website owned by Gawker Media, broke the story that in 2008, football star Favre allegedly sent text messages and penis pictures to a young, unmarried woman named Jenn Sterger, at the time a 24-year-old model, TV host, and "Gameday Host" for the New York Jets, the team Favre had recently joined. Favre was about 15 years older than Sterger, married, and by the time the story broke, a grandfather. According to Deadspin, Sterger had been the recipient of quite a few "athlete dong photos," and one person in particular "who was very into cell phone-donging her was none other than Brett Favre."⁷

The two had never met, although Favre had asked, through an intermediary, for her phone number. Sterger declined, but then received "strange, friendly messages" on her voicemail that appeared to be from Favre—the man never identified himself, but gave clues such as "new to the team" and "gray hair"—which she ignored. One night, the story went, she got "a picture on her phone which was so shocking that she just tossed it across the room. It was his dick. Brett Favre's dick." Multiple other photos followed. In one, Sterger reportedly told Deadspin, Favre—if indeed it was Favre—was masturbating while wearing a pair of Crocs.⁸

A few months after posting this rumor, Deadspin purchased the pictures, texts, and voicemails from a third party,⁹ and the story was quickly picked up by tabloid papers like the *New York Post* and *Daily News*. Within a day, the NFL announced it was launching an investigation into possible "personal conduct violations" and sexual harassment, although Sterger herself was not filing any charges,¹⁰ with the league's official investigation as a legitimate news peg, the story spread widely to non-tabloid media such as *The Washington Post*, ESPN, and *USA Today*. A few days later, a masseuse who had been hired by the Jets came forward, claiming that, also in 2008, Favre had sent a "seamy stream of phone calls, e-mails, and texts" about his "bad intentions."¹¹ Favre said very little publicly, aside from that he hated "if this has been a distraction" and just wanted to "keep focus on the game." Reports circulated, however, that in private, Favre had offered his teammates a "teary apology"¹²—a "sappy mea culpa," the *New York Post* called it¹³—for the distraction. "I need you guys to carry me tonight," Favre told them, according to an ESPN interview with kicker Ryan Longwell.¹⁴

Even as the NFL issued serious statements about its "workplace conduct training program" and the goal of making sure that everyone associated with the league "understand their responsibility and conduct themselves in a responsible fashion,"¹⁵ and sports writers wondered how the scandal might affect his play,¹⁶ Favre was the source of much public tittering. A few weeks into the scandal "Saturday Night Live" produced a spoof ad for Wrangler, one of several companies for which Favre had served as a highly paid endorser—among

men claimed to have had sex—women later released explicit photos, they were scandalous, for heavens, oh my!—but mainly they included not just fantasy sex but were proof of ongoing sexual activity. A magazine reported that actress Britney Spears was "having an affair with a model" and "sent steamy texts" as evidence.³ In the case of the former, a pink lipsticked collar, and in the case of the latter, a pack of cigarettes, are the new "smoking gun." The case of quarterback Brett Favre was the focal point of my discussion. No face-to-face meetings were reported, no stained collars (or semen-lit card receipts). In both cases, the focus was on women they had never met in one case and soft-core in the other. In the case of the former, the coverage, much of it jokey, focused on the personal consequences for the woman involved in the scandal.

Sex scandal. These early sexting scandals have and have not changed as surveillance is increasingly pervasive, and the revelation of the private life of entertainment figures, such that being watched pervades almost everything. Is the publicization of a transgression of private life increasingly non-scandalous? If scandals are constructions of the public, what do they uncover? These cases, I suggest, are in transition.

I suggest that one of their most important contributions is their clarity. Despite its technological complexity, the scandal is a simple aspect of sexual encounters, sex-scandal narratives. The structure remained largely unchanged, even as the media, through new themes, poke fun at the publicizing of private life in the "Internet age." These sexting scandals challenge traditional moral norms—and the disgrace visited on the individual—and the increasingly troubled landscape of surveillance technologies.

them, Remington rifles and Snapper lawn mowers—deploying his “prowess on the field, coupled with good ol’ boy charm and grizzled stubble.”¹⁷ The “SNL” skit featured Jason Sudeikis as Favre, tossing a football with his buddies and touting the “all new Open Fly Jeans from Wrangler,” pausing only to snap pictures of his manhood. “Why let zippers or buttons slow you down?” he asks, pixels hiding his crotch. “With Open Fly jeans, it’s always out and camera ready.... Look, I put my pants on just like anyone else, one leg at a time. Then, I pull my penis out and sometimes I take a picture of it.” He had become, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* suggested, literally “laughable.”¹⁸

Two weeks into the scandal, Sterger had hired a lawyer, who had complained that “her life’s been turned upside down by this” but, despite losing nine pounds, was “doing her best to stay focused on work and being a 26-year-old woman.”¹⁹ Sterger eventually provided materials for the NFL’s investigation, which reviewed substantial documents, heard hours of testimony, and used “high-tech forensic work to trace the electronic pathways and transmission of any photos or messages that might have been sent during communication between them.”²⁰ In December, the league announced that “the forensic analysis could not establish that Favre sent the objectionable photographs to Sterger,” and that the review had found no evidence that Favre and Sterger had ever met in person or that Sterger had engaged in any “inappropriate conduct.” However, since Commissioner Roger Goodell had determined that “Favre was not candid in several respects during the investigation, resulting in a longer review and additional negative public attention for Favre, Sterger and the NFL,” fined Favre \$50,000 for “failure to cooperate.”²¹ ESPN noted that Favre, even while sitting out the next game due to post-concussion symptoms, earned that money back “over about three minutes of action.”²²

Favre, who had already retired once before and then returned to work, filed retirement papers a month after the investigation concluded. For her part, several months after the scandal subsided Sterger—who had been discovered as a college student in the stands at a Florida State football game, had posed for *Playboy* and *Maxim* and written for *Sports Illustrated*, and had gigs at ABC and Spike—took a job hosting kickboxing specials for Fuel TV. She appeared on *Good Morning America*, telling George Stephanopoulos she wanted “people to know me and to know that I’m not a gold digger and I’m not a home wrecker.”²³ She then moved to “a quiet part” of Los Angeles where, *The New York Times* reported, she “landed a few small roles in movies” and a “steady boyfriend.”²⁴

The brouhaha may seem outsized in relation to the alleged sexual transgression, but that is not an unusual feature of sex scandals. What is perhaps more surprising is how, despite the novelty and virtuality of sexting, the Favre scandal narrative played out through quite old-fashioned, conventional scripts. Indeed, the basic elements of the case seemed to lend themselves quite easily to several stock storylines.

Occasionally, Favre was faulted for being “unfaithful” to his wife, Deanna, and commentators sometimes expressed sympathy for her presumed humiliation, but that was rare, perhaps because everyone involved agreed that Favre

and Sterger had never met in the tabloid press, present athlete past his prime, trying bimbo-who-might-also-be-great” throwing “a Hail Mary” “gridiron granddaddy”²⁶ and lewd photos;²⁷ the NFL fired “cringe-inducing,” “a “ham-fisted bid to charm grace—and his fall from grace simply confirmed the decline

In this version of the tale “almost-too-hot-for-TV” her “fake breasts” were her “c” “sideline siren”³² a “walkin’ her 15 seconds” of fame.³³ Earlier scandal,³⁴ the woman’s identity. Although she later fought digger images, Sterger also wrote to Deadspin writer A.J. Daulton, “I don’t roll that way boobed hoes have morals and although she had not met her

Sexting, which was rarely easily into this familiar narrative became the pathetic, creepy symbol of youth technoculture marker of his distance from “Grandfathers shouldn’t see

Sex scandal stories begin then typically become stories of disloyalty, and risk-taking they also tend to “morph in the routine workings of institutional rise to the scandalous behavior story, even as it was also being about the NFL’s handling of a gendered culture of sports and the era of the scandal by *Post* columnist put it,³⁸ “If it none of my business. But if it workplace, then the matter is

This frame did not in fact sexting constitutes a “dalliance between adults are the business

text messages were relevant not as shocking sexual behaviors but as possible violations of workplace sexual norms, akin to in-person unsolicited advances or the creation of a hostile environment. For instance, a *USA Today* writer argued that the NFL had been given “the unwanted yet educational opportunity to remind its players ... that the locker room, playing field and team headquarters are a workplace. And that when women are there, either with a credential or a contract, they are there to work, and to be treated as such.”³⁹ The NFL, in its public statements, essentially agreed, steering clear of questions of sexual morality altogether. They were “working hard” on their workplace training, Commissioner Roger Goodell said, which they expected to roll out “by the end of the season.”⁴⁰ When the NFL’s investigation concluded, Goodell announced that the \$50,000 fine he had imposed on Favre, in fact, would help fund that training program.

Told this way, the story became one of the “boys’ club” cultures of the NFL. Behaviors like those of which Favre was accused were more typical than not, protected by the other men in the club, and the notion that female workers are treated as respected equals required educational reminders and trainings. Sexting was notable not for its novelty, but for its similarity to other forms of boys-will-be-boys behavior, from cat-calling to locker-room towel snaps to the bros-before-hos code, that were endemic features of the male-dominated sports world. Indeed, when the NFL announced its findings and “slap on the wrist” fine,⁴¹ it was this institutional culture, more than Favre’s sexting, which came under fire. Sterger’s lawyer, Joseph Conway, called the NFL’s decision “an affront to all females” that showed “once again that, despite tough talk, the NFL remains the good old boys’ league.”⁴² Sterger’s father echoed: “Their decision is a complete travesty to women,” he said, “and they are just treating him this way because he is the NFL’s golden boy.”⁴³

Jenn Sterger appeared neither enraged nor surprised. Although she found Favre’s electronic pursuit of her intimidating, she told *Good Morning America*, she never considered herself a victim and never wanted anything from Favre, not even an apology. “I knew what I was getting myself into working in sports, you know?” she said. “It’s the boys’ club.”⁴⁴

If the stories of the horny, ham-handed grandpa and the typical boys’ club member had very little new in them, the Favre scandal coverage also included, if somewhat more quietly, a telling new theme: how new technology was changing the sports world. The distinctive element of the scandal, the sexting, in these stories symbolized a “new era” in sports characterized by entertainment criteria and the exposure of private behavior rather than athletic performance—of a new relationship, that is, between public and private selves.

This frame in part simply lamented changes in sports media characteristic of media industries more generally. For instance, a *USA Today* columnist, noting how quickly NFL-partnered television networks had “jumped on” the Favre story, argued that gone are “the days of sports media ignoring stories about the alleged personal scandals of athletes they cover”;⁴⁵ a *Christian Science Monitor*

writer added that “the story much ‘Access Hollywood’ Kurtz⁴⁷ argued that sports under the media microscope show; “those of us in the get used to it.” New tech went, by making it easier to entertainment purposes.

Favre, in these stories, was the media-driven erosion mechanism of his fall was exposure of private parts. metaphor for the modern a 289 consecutive starts, yet problems with picks to work similarly. Favre, he asserted, but then was undone by a phone pursuit of Sterger, his Deadspin website, “a perfect upon itself.”⁴⁹ He had gone from “the epitome of what to “a selfish, drama-loving delivering entertainment su factured drama.”^{50,51}

Favre was caught, this not the new media ones. A *US*

Fifteen years ago in a world of no cellphones and no cell phone cameras—alleged—would have gone to the front page of the world’s largest newspaper. Perhaps hundreds, of well-known athletes, another in private, for the entire length of the career. They come from that world. The new era. Someday, it will likely be athletes found out their extramarital because they were so entitled. While Favre’s reputation a must be wishing, as Wood almost everything. It must be without cellphones, without

Favre’s awkwardness with ties to an earlier, pre-Internet erosion of privacy for sport

writer added that “the story remains a testament to how sports is becoming as much ‘Access Hollywood’ as ‘NFL Films.’”⁴⁶ *The Washington Post’s* Howard Kurtz⁴⁷ argued that sports figures’ “private behavior has increasingly come under the media microscope,” and that “in this TMZ era” tabloids run the show; “those of us in the so-called respectable press,” he said, “had better get used to it.” New technology has contributed to this shift, the argument went, by making it easier to catch and circulate private behavior for commercial entertainment purposes.

Favre, in these stories, was shown to embody these institutional changes—the media-driven erosion of public-private boundaries—perhaps because the mechanism of his fall was so new, so technological, and so literally about the exposure of private parts. Favre, a *USA Today* writer said, was “the perfect metaphor for the modern athlete”: “Here’s a quarterback who has weathered 289 consecutive starts, yet he gets undone by a cellphone? He’s gone from problems with picks to woes with pictures.”⁴⁸ A *Globe and Mail* writer argued similarly. Favre, he asserted, had been “celebrated as an everyman/superman,” but then was undone by a path “more distinctly of the moment”: by his cellphone pursuit of Sterger, herself “a creation of the Internet age,” and by the Deadspin website, “a perfect example of how twenty-first-century culture feeds upon itself.”⁴⁹ He had gone, a *National Post* columnist argued less charitably, from “the epitome of what we were told quarterbacks were supposed to be” to “a selfish, drama-loving diva,” adept at “giving us something to laugh at,” delivering entertainment suited to “an America now riveted by mindless manufactured drama.”^{50,51}

Favre was caught, this narrative suggested, between the old media rules and the new media ones. A *USA Today* columnist captured this interpretation:

Fifteen years ago in a world with no Deadspin and no TMZ, with no text messages and no cellphone cameras, [athletes’] personal transgressions—real and alleged—would have gone unnoticed, except perhaps for a few supermarket tabloid headlines.... [Tiger] Woods and Favre would have been like dozens, perhaps hundreds, of well-known professional athletes before them, living one life in public, another in private, and pulling it off with hardly anyone knowing, often for the entire length of their careers. Of course, men like Woods and Favre don’t come from that world. They live in, and in fact have come to symbolize, another era. Someday, it will likely be viewed as the Internet era in sports, a time when athletes found out their extravagant salaries came with a price: their privacy. Only because they were so entitled did some not realize this until it was too late.... While Favre’s reputation and future twist in the wind, we can imagine how he must be wishing, as Woods likely did, for a time when athletes got away with almost everything. It must sound downright sublime to live without the Internet, without cellphones, without anyone to catch you doing anything wrong.⁵²

Favre’s awkwardness with new communications technologies underlined his ties to an earlier, pre-Internet, pre-sexting era, and his slowness to discover the erosion of privacy for sports stars until it was too late.

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On his HBO show *Real Time with Bill Maher*, comedian Bill Maher brought this “new rules” theme into momentary bloom, hinting at what would become a more flourishing public conversation in the soon-to-unfold Anthony Weiner scandal. “New Rule,” he began. “If a woman rejects your first dozen advances, don’t up the ante by sending her a picture of your penis.” In a provocative rant, Maher tied the Favre scandal to the decline of white male political power, arguing that the Favre scandal “isn’t about sports or sex or how necessary caller ID is—it’s about how pathetic and clueless white American males have become.” Central to his argument was the charge that some people, in particular men in power, are unaware that the rules of publicity and privacy, from which they used to benefit, have changed. The revelation of their inept sexting is the evidence. “Let’s just dwell for one more moment on how stupid it is to forget that in 2010 when you text someone a picture of your genitals, you’re not just sending it to that person, but to every person she has in her contacts, and then everyone on the planet who has access to the Internet,” said Maher.

Maher noted that in one alleged texted picture, Favre was “pleasuring himself” on a bed while wearing pair of Crocs. “Is there any better metaphor for the sad state of America today,” Maher asked, “than an over-the-hill white guy lazily masturbating in plastic shoes?”⁵³

ANTHONY WEINER: “TWITTER MAKES US STUPIDER”

Although Brett Favre got there first, Anthony Weiner was by far the most prominent pioneer in the still mostly uncharted territory of sexting-while-a-public-figure. If Favre’s story was easily integrated into existing narratives, the Weiner scandal even more faithfully followed the well-trodden scandal script of “accusation or revelation, broadcast, denial and/or confession—and frequently, a comeback or attempted comeback.”⁵⁴

Weiner’s sexual transgression was first alleged in late May 2011, when conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart published claims that Weiner sent a picture of his “underwear-clad erection”⁵⁵ to a 21-year-old “pretty Seattle coed”⁵⁶ via his Twitter account. Weiner denied that the crotch in question was his own, claiming his Twitter account had been hacked. “Tivo shot. FB hacked. Is my blender going to attack me next?” Weiner tweeted.⁵⁷ He threatened criminal action, then a few days later said he could not “say with certitude” if the picture was of him, and then disappeared for a few days.

When tabloids published explicit text conversations, allegedly between Weiner and several women he had met online, and Breitbart announced plans to publish more incriminating pictures, Weiner called a press conference. Two weeks into the scandal, he confessed and apologized. “I made terrible mistakes,” he said. The picture was of him, he said, and he had “exchanged messages and photos of an explicit nature with about six women over the past three years.” He broke down. “I am deeply sorry for the pain this has caused my wife Huma, and my family, and my constituents, my friends, supporters, and staff. . . . I have done things that I deeply regret . . . I am deeply sorry . . . I am deeply ashamed.”⁵⁸

Despite pressure from the D instead take a leave of absence scandal continued unabated, v Congressional gym surfacing. dealer published on Radar On tight and wet for me baby?” at you,” etc.);⁵⁹ new evidence of man’s erect penis” sent to ano and new wiener jokes emergin. (“Weiner Roast,” “Weiner’s F three weeks after the story bro

And so, there it was, the fan

A year later, Weiner entered reinvention and comeback. In Weiner and his wife, Huma Ab 6-month-old baby. “Anthony the headline. He was now a “h over the sink, doing the laund Hillary Clinton, continued her time, Abedin said, but Weiner best dad and husband he could people to know we’re a norma there were no more texts to st more dick pictures.

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Weiner did not, as we know, dal cycle simply repeated itself Weiner, using the pseudonym with a woman, and also sent l from Congress and the birth o a “different person” and worki had professed to be deeply sor woman, Sydney Leathers, also c to delete the chats and pictures mayoral candidates, and the N for Women, called for him to d and *People* magazines turned ag

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Despite pressure from the Democratic Party to resign, Weiner said he would instead take a leave of absence and get professional treatment. However, the scandal continued unabated, with new half-naked photos that he took at the Congressional gym surfacing. Also new Facebook chats with a Vegas blackjack dealer published on Radar Online and in *The New York Post* ("your pussy still tight and wet for me baby?" and "I want to feel you cum with my fat cock in you," etc.);⁵⁹ new evidence of other "risqué online chats" and an image of "a man's erect penis" sent to another woman allegedly from a Weiner account;⁶⁰ and new wiener jokes emerging daily on late-night television and in headlines ("Weiner Roast," "Weiner's Pickle," "Hide the Weiner"). Finally, less than three weeks after the story broke, Weiner resigned.

And so, there it was, the familiar sex scandal arc.

A year later, Weiner entered the next common, if optional, scandal phases of reinvention and comeback. In July of 2012, *People* magazine ran a story about Weiner and his wife, Huma Abedin, accompanied by a photo of them and their 6-month-old baby. "Anthony Weiner: 'I Feel Like a Different Person,'" said the headline. He was now a "happy househusband," shampooing his kid's hair over the sink, doing the laundry while his wife, an aide to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, continued her career with his support. It had been a painful time, Abedin said, but Weiner "has spent every day since then trying to be the best dad and husband he could be." It took a lot of work, she said, "but I want people to know we're a normal family."⁶¹ The implication, of course, was that there were no more texts to strangers about tight pussy and fat cock and no more dick pictures.

The next April, *The New York Times Magazine* offered a lengthy profile of the couple as they "painstakingly pieced their private life together," moved through to the other side of the scandal and prepared to re-enter public life.⁶² Weiner was rehabilitated. Six weeks later, he announced that he would be running for mayor of New York City. *The New York Times* noted his "surprising rebound from scandal" as he "vaulted to the front of the race for mayor."⁶³

Weiner did not, as we know, become mayor of New York. Instead, the scandal cycle simply repeated itself. A gossip site called The Dirty revealed that Weiner, using the pseudonym Carlos Danger, had exchanged X-rated texts with a woman, and also sent her a photo of his penis—*after* his resignation from Congress and the birth of his child, while he was supposedly becoming a "different person" and working hard to repent for the actions for which he had professed to be deeply sorry, deeply ashamed, and deeply regretful. The woman, Sydney Leathers, also charged that Weiner had contacted her to ask her to delete the chats and pictures. Wiener/Weiner jokes were dusted off. Other mayoral candidates, and the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women, called for him to drop out of the campaign. *The New York Times* and *People* magazines turned against him.

He apologized again, with his wife at his side at a July 2013 news conference, and asked voters for a second chance. "Generally speaking, though," former Clinton official Chris Lehane told *The Washington Post*,⁶⁴ "you only get

one bite at the apology apple." Indeed, Weiner's political career finally came to its end. (Fulfilling another common sex scandal plotline,⁶⁵ Ms. Leathers soon had breast augmentation surgery and filmed "a full-out porn flick" with "a Weiner look-alike."⁶⁶)

Revelation, cover-up, confession, salacious sexual details, late-night jokery, long-suffering wife standing uncomfortably by her man, resignation and fall, comeback, and fall again: The Weiner scandal story practically told itself.

The Weiner scandal was also a conventional sex scandal in its institutional storytelling. From the very first revelations, reporters and commentators, especially those in the non-tabloid press, treated the scandal as one of political gamesmanship—that is, as a story not just of individual immorality or stupidity, but one that revealed the normal operations of political institutions that give rise to and are affected by scandals.

The New York Times, for instance, suggested that the budding scandal was "an example of how easy it is for political rivals to harm each other's reputations."⁶⁷ Weiner's opening claim that he had been hacked fed directly into this narrative, as did the suspicions of the initial Twitter picture recipient, Genette Nicole Cordova, who told *The Washington Post* that she assumed it was an attempt at "defaming the Congressman and harassing his supporters."⁶⁸ The *Times* and others briefly focused on the partisan activities of Breitbart and the #born-freecrew, "a small group of determined, self-described conservatives" who had been tracking Weiner online and warning young women about him.⁶⁹ This sort of storytelling suggested that the scandal revealed—was perhaps even generated by—the motivation to inflict damage on rivals endemic in political institutions.

Indeed, as the scandal unfolded, the routine machinations of politics, more than Weiner's sexual proclivities, quickly moved to center stage. House Democratic leaders, reports said, were in a "panic" over the "spectacle" and "circuslike story," which "exploded at a time when [Democrats] believed they had the Republican Party on the defensive over an unpopular Medicare proposal."⁷⁰ They launched an "orchestrated effort" to force his resignation,⁷¹ were "exasperated" in their attempts to "persuade him he is damaging himself, his family and his party by remaining a member of the House."⁷² They took the moral high road, calling his behavior "offensive,"⁷³ "indefensible,"⁷⁴ "bizarre and unacceptable."⁷⁵ They suggested that Weiner, as Rep. Nancy Pelosi magnanimously put it, needed professional help "without the pressures of being a member of Congress."⁷⁶

In this narrative, Weiner's problem was not the cock shots but his political vulnerability. Because his "aggressive media presence and penchant for partisan bombast," a *Time* writer asserted,⁷⁷ "had ruffled feathers in the New York delegation and beyond, [Weiner] was left with few if any allies." Surviving a scandal, *The Washington Post* asserted, takes "a combination of personal resolve, crisis-management skills and the right political circumstances."⁷⁸ These sorts of stories suggested that had he managed to collect the loyal allies required for political survival, Weiner's sexting might have been embarrassing but not ruining.⁷⁹

The normal routines of politics, surprisingly, central in the comeback, *Times Magazine* piece, which was published years after he resigned from Congress, told the story as one of political gamesmanship. Weiner's "post-scandal playbooks" were the normal business of politics. The *Times* reported, "what they want—and gauge public opinion,"

When, not long after the publication of the second Weiner sexting story, the focus was on sexual morality; there were even racially charged Carlos Danger jokes. Instead, the focus was on the revelation, *The New York Times* reported, "Weiner has offered throughout his political career a glimpse of himself and repairing his family relationships." The *Times* suggested he has spent his time on "a comparison of Weiner's claims to the normal business of politics." "The latest revelations have, at best, damaged the remorseless mayoral bid."⁸⁴

Thus, as in earlier scandals, the normal, if problematic, rituals and routines of politics. Weiner's sin was not just but a *Daily News* liked to call him.^{85,86} his political conformity: There he was, enlisting his wife in well-trodden political playbook, courtship, and so on. Weiner might have been ruined because of how bad he was at politics.

Conventional as it turned out, the Weiner scandal was simply a variation on the Favre scandal. A public figure felled by a technology fully understood. Like Favre's, Weiner became a symbol of the public and private.

r's political career finally came to a full plotline,⁶⁵ Ms. Leathers soon "a full-out porn flick" with "a

sexual details, late-night jokery, by her man, resignation and fall, story practically told itself. al sex scandal in its institutional porters and commentators, especially the scandal as one of political individual immorality or stupidity, of political institutions that give

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The normal routines of politics revealed by scandal were overtly, if unsurprisingly, central in the comeback phase as well. The high-profile *New York Times Magazine* piece, which was the centerpiece of Weiner's reemergence two years after he resigned from Congress but before he lost in the mayoral election, told the story as one of political strategies—of, as the article's title puts it, Weiner's "post-scandal playbook." Weiner and Abedin were the ultimate political couple; they met at a Democratic National Committee retreat, and both their personal lives and political fortunes were closely linked to the Clintons.⁸⁰ Weiner, with backup from Abedin, was engaged in strategic storytelling, the normal business of politics. The *People* magazine shoot from the year before, Jonathan Van Meter reported, had been calculated to beat the paparazzi at their own game, and the *Times Magazine* piece was itself a way to "give voters what they want—and gauge public reaction."⁸¹

When, not long after the publication of the *Times* magazine cover story the second Weiner sexting story emerged, very little coverage was devoted to sexual morality; there were plenty of eye-rolling jokes about the corny, racially charged Carlos Danger pseudonym, but the sexting itself was a stale joke. Instead, the focus was mainly on Weiner's failure as a politician. The revelation, *The New York Times* reported, "collides with the narrative Mr. Weiner has offered throughout his campaign, in which he has repeatedly suggested he has spent his time since leaving Congress rehabilitating himself and repairing his family relationships."⁸² *People* ran a "Then and Now" comparison of Weiner's claims from the year before to the current situation, transforming its own earlier Mr. Mom profile into a politician's pack of lies.⁸³ "The latest revelations have, at a minimum," a *Washington Post* writer suggested, "damaged the remorse-and-redemption theme that fueled Weiner's mayoral bid."⁸⁴

Thus, as in earlier scandals, the Weiner story became a reminder of the ordinary, if problematic, rituals and tactics characteristic of its institutional location. Weiner's sin was not just being a "pervy pol" or "lustful lawmaker," as the *Daily News* liked to call him.^{85,86} His sexual transgressions served to emphasize his political conformity: There he was, performing "standard" contrition rituals, enlisting his wife in well-trodden damage control strategies, enacting plays from a political playbook, courting and testing voters, offering strategic narratives, and so on. Weiner might be lustful and pervy, but he fell, the story went, because of how bad he was at political performance.

Conventional as it turned out to be, it would be a mistake to conclude that the Weiner scandal was simply a repeat of earlier political sex scandal narratives. Running across and through these familiar elements was a new theme, muted in the Favre scandal coverage but now given fuller voice: that of a public figure felled by a technology whose power and workings he has not yet fully understood. Like Favre's, Weiner's story was, to a degree, a scandal *about* new media and the anxieties surrounding them. Hoisted on his own petard, Weiner became a symbol of the changing lines between real and virtual and public and private.

As with Favre, this theme was inflected by its institutional location. Social media were sometimes presented as particularly troubling to politicians, who were struggling to harness them for political gain. One danger, visible at the beginning of the scandal, was that social media could give political adversaries more potential ammunition with which to work. "As Democrats and Republicans embrace Twitter and other social media tools as a way to interact with their constituents and woo voters, many have discovered a downside to online communication: cyberstalkers who track and criticize their every move," wrote a *New York Times* columnist.⁸⁷ This was reasserted after the scandal, as well, when Weiner's attempts to lay low were thwarted, since in an "age when anyone with a smartphone can press a button and play gossip columnist, Mr. Weiner's movements have been tracked as if he were Lindsay Lohan or Paris Hilton."⁸⁸

More commonly, however, the trouble reporters and commentators pointed to was that new media make it easier for politicians—and everyone else—to do stupid, risky things. The scandal, they suggested, revealed what one *Washington Post* writer called the New Idiocy. "New Idiocy," the writer⁸⁹ asserted, "is much easier and more mortifying than Old Idiocy. Before, sex scandals required leaving your chair. Now? All you have to do is surround yourself with cats and caption a photo unwisely, and a few weeks later all heck breaks loose." Weiner was not drunk or high, she continued, nor even "drunk with power," but was acting like a *typical* Twitter user. "Twitter makes us stupider than usual. 'I've placed personal information unwisely on the Internet' is another way of stating 'I am a human in the twenty-first century.'" Another *Washington Post* editorial writer argued similarly. "Tweeting is new-ish," she began, "and dangerous as a loaded pistol at a brawl." What happened to Weiner, she suggested, could have happened to "anyone who snaps, tweets, or texts, especially to young people who have grown up in this share-all world of Facebook, for whom 'friend' is a verb and relationships are often anonymous and virtual."⁹⁰ That is, Weiner was not deviant but normal, one of us, a somewhat desperate foreigner in the new media land of "young people," inadvertently revealing a culture he had not mastered.

Weiner thus symbolized not just new ways to be "stupid," but also a new set of rules in a media environment in which surveillance should be assumed, and pretty much every communication should be considered public. He was routinely portrayed, for instance, as an avid social media user with a novice's understanding of the new rules. Many reporters noted that Weiner was "an adept user of new media"⁹¹ and a "technophile" who "has clearly considered the role of Twitter in honing his public image," making fun of Sarah Palin, Michelle Bachman, and others in a "strikingly punchy and personal" style.⁹² Yet, as *The New York Times* put it, "Twitter trouble found Mr. Weiner in an unexpected way." *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson⁹³ captured the new-rules argument:

For all his dazzling smarts, for all his New York savvy, Weiner was both ignorant and naïve about the Internet. There are certain things about the cyberworld, and about human nature, that anyone tempted to make a hobby of "sexting" really

ought to know. First is the fact that it is essentially a public realm in which actions yet remain unobserved ... Weiner never forgets... Weiner ignored Facebook, or someone to "folk

Noting that Weiner's "transgression" was like most others more than a simple imposition akin to being deemed creepily. (Nowhere in the suggestion that sexting might be a bad sex play.) The larger point, though, was that sexting as sexting *naïvely*, mistaking

Weiner's story, this line of thought was only "creepy" about Weiner's lack of understanding about boundaries that was not just a matter of it, "We are dealing with the gray area between the boundary between our 'real' and 'virtual' being pushed, and never where it comes when we mistake people of themselves," when we mistakenly charged hashtag" for activism.

Weiner's case, then, came to mind. Wypijewski⁹⁵ insightfully wrote that sex to sell papers and ads" but it is the "cesspool" of politics and e-mail. West." The fact that the sex involvement, no strings," the fact it was a scandal," is exactly what made it give form to the anxiety that "they could neither confirm nor deny the rules of the virtual world.

In many ways, the Favre and Weiner scandals—serve as powerful and telling genres. Despite the new rules involved, the narratives proceeded as if men were treated quite similarly to those who came before them, as victims of "decency" and formal codes of conduct. They were publicly judged, tried, and punished in a familiar way: long-suffering, humiliated victims of powerful men or families.

its institutional location. Socially troubling to politicians, who gain. One danger, visible at the time, could give political adversaries a way to interact with their constituents—a downside to online communication. “As Democrats and Republicans find a way to interact with their constituents every move,” wrote a *New York Times* columnist, as well, when Weiner’s scandal, as well, when Weiner’s “age when anyone with a smartphone, Mr. Weiner’s movements or Paris Hilton.”⁸⁸

Writers and commentators pointed out what one *Washington Post* writer⁸⁹ asserted, “is much more, sex scandals required leav- around yourself with cats and cap- l heck breaks loose.” Weiner was drunk with power,” but was acting stupider than usual. ‘I’ve placed t’ is another way of stating ‘I am r *Washington Post* editorial writer gan, “and dangerous as a loaded , she suggested, could have hap- , especially to young people who book, for whom ‘friend’ is a verb tual.”⁹⁰ That is, Weiner was not perate foreigner in the new media ing a culture he had not mastered. s to be “stupid,” but also a new surveillance should be assumed, ld be considered public. He was social media user with a novice’s rters noted that Weiner was “an ile” who “has clearly considered tge,” making fun of Sarah Palin, gly punchy and personal” style.⁹² trouble found Mr. Weiner in an Eugene Robinson⁹³ captured the

ought to know. First is the fact that the Internet is not, repeat not, a private space. It is essentially a public realm in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to be active yet remain unobserved ... Weiner also was apparently unaware that the Internet never forgets... Weiner ignored the fact that a person known only as a “friend” on Facebook, or someone to “follow” on Twitter, is still basically a stranger.

Noting that Weiner’s “transgression involved sexual fantasy, not sexual fact,” Robinson—like most others making this argument—condemned it nonetheless as an imposition akin to being “a flasher in a raincoat,” and “seriously, irredeemably creepy.” (Nowhere in the Weiner scandal coverage can you find the suggestion that sexting might be considered pleasurable, safe, and consensual sex play.) The larger point, though, was that Weiner’s mistake was not so much sexting as sexting *naively*, mistaking the cyberworld for a private one.

Weiner’s story, this line of reasoning went, revealed something uncommonly “creepy” about Weiner, but more than that, it revealed a confusion about boundaries that was not at all uncommon. As another commentator put it, “We are dealing with the gray space where fidelity meets Facebook and with the boundary between our ‘real’ lives and our online lives, which is constantly being pushed, and never where you expect it.” The confusion, she suggested, “comes when we mistake people for the shorthand, social-networked versions of themselves,” when we mistake a Facebook friend for an actual one, a “politically charged hashtag” for activism, and sexting for sex.⁹⁴

Weiner’s case, then, came to publicize these confusions. As journalist Joann Wypijewski⁹⁵ insightfully wrote at the time, the media were of course “using sex to sell papers and ads” but also “to channel the anxieties of the age” about the “cesspool” of politics and even more about life in the “private-public Wild West.” The fact that the sex involved “no contact, no fluids, no baby, no payment, no strings,” the fact it was “America’s first full-out political techno-sex scandal,” is exactly what made the Weiner scandal so compelling as scandal. It gave form to the anxiety that, “for all the grown-ups’ professed sophistication,” they could neither confidently discern nor successfully follow the new rules of the virtual world.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, the Favre and Weiner scandals—the first major American sexting scandals—serve as powerful reminders of the strength of media storytelling genres. Despite the newness of the alleged moral transgression each involved, the narratives proceeded largely according to existing scripts. The men were treated quite similarly to the long line of male scandal figures who came before them, as violators of informal norms surrounding sexual “decency” and formal codes of conduct, and as national jokes: They were publicly judged, tried, and punished. The women, too, were central-casting familiar: long-suffering, humiliated wives standing by their men, innocent victims of powerful men or fame- and wealth-seeking manipulators—or both.

It is not that Weiner was both ignorant of things about the cyberworld, and make a hobby of “sexting” really

The newness of this particular sexual behavior, especially the absence of any sexual contact, was quite easily subsumed into these familiar storylines. The institutional stories, too, developed as scandals have typically done, as the same act was mobilized to illustrate the pathologies of institutional settings that gave rise to it—the masculinist boys' club of professional sports, the calculated gamesmanship of professional politics.

In these ways, it seems the more things change the more they stay the same. This is a useful reminder not to overestimate how much technological change and the rise of surveillance culture has transformed media storytelling. That should not be surprising. After all, sex scandals do not bubble up from below but are created by institutional actors in interaction with media organizations. Sex scandals take the narrative form they do, wedging the twenty-first-century phenomenon of sexting into twentieth-century scandal narrative molds, because they are shaped by the relatively stable interests of institutional actors. The media terrain has certainly shifted as journalism has undergone "tabloidization,"⁹⁶ such that the stuff of scandal (personal lives, rumor, spectacle) has become more widely publicized; but the structures of the institutions in which scandals emerge—of sports and political industries, for instance—and the interests of the actors within them have changed very little.

Still, as we saw, the media narratives through which the Favre and Weiner sex scandals unfolded—shaped, of course, by their different institutional environments—also gave rise to some new media frames.⁹⁷ The Favre media coverage, for instance, began to register changes in the media environment itself. After all, the scandal was told as a story of how sports journalists had become supplicants to—rather than prestigious superiors of—tabloid journalism. The Favre scandal became an illustration of sports in the "Internet age," and Favre a symbol of the clueless man unaware of the "new rules" of privacy and publicity and of sexual interaction. The Weiner coverage, within its conventional scandal arc, also brought the theme of new rules into even greater focus: Weiner, by mistakenly imagining that online communications were private and unwatched, was said to reveal the confusing, shifting boundaries between private and public and the routine surveillance of personal life to which we are all now subject.

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