

Book review

Poersken, B., and Detel, H. (2014). *The unleashed scandal*. Exeter: Imprint Academic. 214 pp.

Reviewed by **Wannes Heirman**: E-mail: wannes.heirman@uantwerpen.be

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One of the key features of living in a digital information society is that maintaining control over the spread of one's personal information is more difficult than ever before. Of course, as long as there have been human societies, scandals have emerged in case some sensitive information was made known or revealed to the larger public. In most instances, the traditional mass media (e.g., newspapers and television programs) have been the primary initiators of scandals (e.g., the journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the Washington Post, whose revelations about the Watergate-scandal eventually forced the then U.S.-president Nixon to resign and leave the White House). The fundamental point made by Poersken and Detel in their 220-pages book is that the transformation of the media landscape during the digital era has now provided anyone with minimal technological knowledge to unleash a scandal story on the internet. The *Unleashed scandal* by Poersken and Detel provides the reader with a sophisticated insight into the question how the dynamics of the scandal-concept in a web 2.0-era have evolved and culminated to an unseen level in history ... to the *unleashed scandal*.

The *unleashed scandal* is a scandal that ...

- (1) ... can be launched by virtually anyone, including bloggers, saboteurs and online communities (e.g., a political science student whose actions caused the German Federal president Horst Köhler to resign), whereas in the era of 'old' mass-media, professional journalists have most often behaved as the main gatekeepers in deciding upon whose faults, errors and human misconducts would become the focus of such scandalization. Today, however, virtually every single internet user with some minimal knowledge of how to upload information (albeit visual or textual) has strictly speaking the capacity to release a digital scandal. This is no longer a privilege for journalists as gatekeepers of information in society.
- (2) ... can hit virtually anyone, including totally unknown and innocent people, whereas in typical traditional scandals, mostly speaking, exclusively powerful, notorious or prestigious people of society (due to their public exposure) were likely to get involved in a scandalizing news story.

- (3) ... can explode/unleash for every possible reason, including absolute banalities happening to and by everyday people in everyday life. In the digital era, digital media are ubiquitous and allow for permanent digital observation. This increases people's likelihood of being caught on 'digital tape', making the potential for scandals omnipresent. No longer are misdeeds performed by some happy few the focus of attention. Online media have stretched the limits of what can be the topic of an online scandal to the extreme ... As soon as it is registered by a digital device, it is theoretically a potential topic for an online scandal.
- (4) ... is far more difficult to manage, if manageable at all, than the traditional typical scandal. In addition, new forms of information insecurity emerge. None of the protagonists involved in an unleashed scandal can after the scandal ever be totally confident or sure about what others know about him/her and which information can be retrieved about the scandal in the online realm.

The strength of the book by Poersken and Detel is that it manages very well to illustrate the peculiarities of the 'unleashed scandal'-concept by extensively discussing 15 scandals that have a root in the online environment. These scandals differ greatly and originate from all countries over the world: It involves political, sexual, humanitarian, environmental, self-staged scandals involving important persons, but also self-launched scandals or very private communication initially sent by either known (e.g., the Anthony Weiner sexting scandal) or totally unknown people (e.g., Gao Qianhui, a Chinese online gamer who became the target of a cybermob after blaming the victims of a Chinese Earthquake in Sichuan in a YouTube-video for interrupting her gaming activities).

The selected scandals do well support the central thesis of the book. For each scandal, the authors manage to offer the reader a meticulous and detailed case reconstruction of the scandal, with a careful discussion of the peculiarities of each case and the decisive moments (*the butterfly effect-moment*) in which an online event transformed from something private and banal into a massive online scandal. The authors have collected additional information (e.g., letters from scandal initiators and interviews with the targets of the unleashed scandal) to give a complete reconstruction of each scandal. This approach taught me some more interesting details about widely covered scandals in the media (e.g., how in the Wiki-Leaks affair, Bradley Manning came to the decision to reveal American top-secret documents to the world and how he accomplished to steal this information using a rewritable CD-ROM with the label of Lady Gaga). On the one hand, all the scandals discussed have in common that their 'revealers' and 'targets' lost total control over the information spreading about

the scandal. This may start to sound repetitive when you proceed as reader through the book. On the other hand, it must be said that Poersken and Detel manage very well in informing the reader how every discussed scandal subtly differs from the other scandals discussed in the book. Each scandal has its unique angle on how unleashed scandals develop and spread in the online realm.

All information in the book is presented in an essayist style, which I personally appreciated, but which perhaps can be disturbing or atypical for other academic readers. The most important information of the book is entirely presented in the first chapters, and the key points made in the beginning section and their support is derived from the scandals that are discussed in the following chapters. Personally, I liked this structure as it provides, on the one hand, the quick reader with a solid overview of the book and, on the other hand, the interested reader (including me) with a very good introductory chapter that is elaborated in a detailed fashion in the subsequent chapters.

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