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## The Selfie of the Year of the Selfie: Reflections on a Media Scandal

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### Introduction

At 11:00 a.m. on December 10, 2013, the French newswire service Agence France-Presse tweeted a photo of Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt taking a selfie with U.S. President Barack Obama and UK Prime Minister David Cameron during Nelson Mandela's memorial service. Thirty-nine minutes later, media gossip website Gawker had picked up the photo, followed swiftly by news outlets around the world. By the next day, the image was Agence France-Presse's second most downloaded photo from the memorial, second only to the image of Barack Obama and Raul Castro exchanging a historic and controversial handshake ("Photo of Thorning's Selfie," 2013). *The Washington Post* declared it the seventh-best political photo of 2013 (Cilizza, 2013).

The image and the reaction to it in the press and on social media sparked an international media frenzy nicknamed "Selfiegate." Pundits in countries from China to Denmark dissected the picture, weighing in with their criticism and, occasionally, appreciation. Santiago Lyon (2013, para. 2) from *The New York Times* argued that the photo "captured the democratization of image making that is a hallmark of our gadget-filled, technologically rich era." UK tabloid *Mirror* declared it "the most controversial selfie ever taken" (Beattie, 2013, para. 4). This article analyzes newspaper coverage of the photograph in U.S., UK, and Danish newspapers to answer the question: Why, of all the selfies out there, was this one, as the *New York Post* put it, "the Selfie of the Year of the Selfie" (Smith, 2013, para. 4)?

The answer, we suggest, is that the photograph—not actually a selfie, but a depiction of the act of taking a selfie—is polysemic in ways that evoke multiple, simultaneous cultural shifts and anxieties. The picture captures the increased popularity of selfie taking, raising questions about who takes selfies and under what circumstances. It captures the infusion of technological gadgets into events where they were previously absent. It also speaks to shifts in the social fabric that led to a man of color being president and a woman being prime minister.



**Figure 1. Photo that sparked Selfiegate scandal.  
From left to right: David Cameron, Helle Thorning-Schmidt,  
Barack Obama, Michelle Obama.**

*Photo Credit: Roberto Schmidt, Agence France-Presse*

### **Media Events, Scandals, and Panics**

Media events such as Selfiegate are not necessarily about representing the facts of a particular situation; rather, these incidents take on their own meaning, becoming conduits for discussion of broader societal issues and concerns (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001.) As different social groups discuss Selfiegate, they engage in public debate about the issues it raises (Molotsch & Lester, 1974). However, Selfiegate is not just a media event; it is also a media scandal and a moral panic. Media scandals are a common, if not perpetual, fixture in the international media landscape: Gitlin (1996) has described the United States (among other nations) as being in a state of permanent scandal. Tumber and Waisbord (2004a) describe scandals as “frenetic events, media and political frenzies that initially capture a great deal of attention and later, gradually or suddenly, disappear” (p. 1031). Media scandals offer opportunities to discuss moral questions in the mediated public sphere (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004b, p. 1146). Watergate is widely considered to be the ultimate media scandal, but the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, or “Zippergate,” marked a new era of scandal reporting in the U.S. and British media, one where titillating details and “bonk journalism” became prioritized over “denunciations of high crimes and misdemeanors” (ibid.).

Several factors have contributed to this shift, but two major culprits are the “tabloidization” of journalism and the shift in agenda setting and gatekeeping brought on by the widespread adoption of digital and social media (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004a). Tabloidization, at least among its detractors, has resulted in a deterioration of journalistic quality and standards where “rumor replaces rigor, sensationalism replaces substance, voyeurism replaces veracity” (Bok, 1998, in Tumber & Waisbord, 2004b, p. 1144). This has increased the frequency of scandal coverage globally and shaped how these events are reported to the public (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004b).

The widespread adoption of the Internet and proliferation of digital media outlets also have added fuel to the scandal-publishing flames. In a highly saturated media environment where sites compete fiercely for audiences, both traditional and nontraditional outlets have entered the click-bait wars, publishing “gossip, innuendo, and other scandalous fare” (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004a, 2004b, p. 1147) that would never have made it past the traditional gatekeepers of the late 20th century, ostensibly as part of their audience-building strategy. The digital media environment also has changed who controls a given story. As Liebes and Blum-Kulka (2004) have described, the exposure of scandal is often not controlled by the journalist. In many cases—Selfigate included—scandals are unwittingly created by journalists through a process of “mainstreaming and spotlighting,” calling attention to common violations of social norms through coverage of a routine story (Liebes & Blum-Kulka, 2004).

The stories, scandals, and events that gain traction in the media are important sources of societal and cultural insight, particularly online. As Baym (2010) argues, “though these sources might seem trivial, silly, or even gossipy, they should not be underestimated in their capacity to reflect pervasive cultural attitudes” (p. 28), especially as news media cater to stories that their audiences find most compelling. As Fiske (1996) argued, these media events go beyond factual representations of what took place to take on their own realities, allowing for public debate of “more deep-seated, foundational issues about the human condition” (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, p. 171). Scandals are often grounded in moral panics and hence serve as excellent prisms for examining social mores, particularly since moral panics occur when “[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen, 1973, p. 9).

The ideological systems that undergird scandals and fuel moral panics also pervade popular culture, the news media included: “The discourses of the moral panic and the scandal require that a societal moral baseline is challenged. Their very discussion in the media assures that conventional morality is once again asserted as normal” (Lull & Hinerman, 1997, p. 5). These belief systems are often based heavily in nostalgia—a “golden age” in the “good old days” (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p. 562) when upstanding citizens knew how to behave and the world was well-ordered. Perhaps unsurprisingly, moral panics are most likely to occur in times of upheaval (Pearson, 1983), operating to communicate and process anxieties relating to social change and “(re)affirm a sense of existential security in moments of perceived insecurity” (Hier, 2011, p. 524). Scandals are thus processes of moral regulation and policing through shame, reminding news audiences of the boundaries of moral transgression (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004b).

In the case of Selfiegate, the scandal and moral panic center on taking selfies, a practice in which people hold out a camera phone and photograph themselves. The mobile phone is key to making something a selfie (rather than a self-portrait taken with a regular camera). As our analysis will reveal, Selfiegate is not just about technology—there are other factors that made this particular image the Selfie of the Year of the Selfie—but it is very much a technological panic. As Sturken and Thomas (2004) explain, the meanings of technologies are socially constructed: How a certain technology is described or discussed speaks to “the desires and concerns of a given social context and the preoccupations of particular moments in history” (p. 1). Technological panics reflect both the views of the individuals telegraphing their fears and wider cultural concerns—“the visions, both optimistic and anxious, through which modern societies cohere” (Sturken & Thomas, 2004, p. 1).

### Method

By analyzing mainstream print and online news coverage of the event, this article strives to unpack the anxious and optimistic visions reflected in the moment Helle Thorning-Schmidt pointed her camera phone at herself, David Cameron, and Barack Obama. Because it happened in Africa and featured an American, a Dane, and an Englishman, the meanings of the event speak to both transnational and national issues. One goal of this article is to compare different cultural reactions.

We used WestLaw News Service to download all articles referencing the photograph from December 10, 2013, when the image was taken, until January 1, 2014, when its coverage all but disappeared. News media outlets across the full political spectrum covered the event, and although the tone of coverage varied along the political spectrum, the number of articles by partisan leaning was fairly evenly divided: 37 articles from left-leaning outlets, 45 articles from right-leaning outlets, and 7 from news media in the center. Articles were chosen from outlets in the top 50 news markets in the United States; all coverage from the United Kingdom and Denmark was included. Danish articles were translated into English by a professional translation service. The resulting database had 89 articles: 39 from the United States, 17 from the United Kingdom, and 33 from Denmark.

We analyzed the articles iteratively: reading them individually, discussing them together, and then returning to the articles and developing a sense of what the articles shared across political views and nations. Once we had built that framework—presented below—we conducted frequency counts of themes to assess differences between countries. In what follows, we explain how selfies are constructed as a highly contested form of participation and representation: Within our sample, descriptions of selfies range from “empowering” (von Sperling, 2013, p. 2) to “symboliz[ing] the greater global calamity of Western decline” (Goodwin, 2013, para. 4).

The Selfiegate coverage dealt with several concerns that extended far beyond the topic of selfies themselves, indicating the moral freight selfie-taking carries at this historical moment. We found that the topical coverage fell into three broad categories: characterizations of selfies, depictions of the three world leaders and their behavior, and representations of social anxieties. There were four subcategories of social anxieties: tensions surrounding technology and normative violations, technology and control, the changing face of global leadership, and shifting journalistic practices and standards. Selfiegate combined a novel

and contested technological practice, “untraditional” leaders, and discourse about what constitutes news in a changing media environment. As such, it provided an opening for media pundits and laypeople alike to (re)direct the conversation toward highly charged moral and political issues.

### **The Development of a Scandal**

Despite the fact that Selfiegate was about 10 days long, its narrative varied by nation and changed over time. Quite a bit of the coverage, particularly after the first two days, focused on other outlets’ and nations’ treatment of the scandal, resulting in a recursive call-and-response within the press.

Coverage across all nations on the first day focused on the fact that the selfie was taken and spoke to the normative violation of taking a selfie at a funeral. In the United States and United Kingdom, comments on Michelle Obama’s facial expression were also prevalent; in Denmark, the press particularly responded to the international furor over the photo. On December 11, the day after the image was first posted, the uproar over the perceived impropriety of taking a selfie at a funeral reached a fever pitch. Additionally, the photographer who took the photo of the leaders responded to the allegations that Michelle Obama disapproved of the selfie, setting off a round of articles in all three countries. David Cameron also deflected criticism regarding the selfie in a press conference on the 11th, sparking even more coverage. From December 12 onward, the press in all three nations took a turn toward commentary and editorial coverage, focusing on previous media coverage of the event as well as the societal significance of the selfie.

### **When Can You Take a Selfie?**

The Selfiegate image could not have been the Selfie of the Year of the Selfie had there not already been a thriving public discourse around selfies. Surely, Agence France-Presse found the image newsworthy in the first place, because selfies were both a popular practice and topic in the media zeitgeist. But it was *particularly* newsworthy because of who was taking the selfie and where: It was not just three world leaders taking a selfie; it was three world leaders taking a selfie at a memorial service for an internationally beloved human rights leader.

Much coverage of Selfiegate made it clear that selfies should only be taken in certain contexts, and a serious occasion—such as a funeral—is not one of them. As an editorial in Denmark’s *Jyllands-Posten* remarked, “Fun, solemnity and ‘selfies’ make for an unpalatable combination” (“Editorial,” 2013, para. 6). Much of the criticism directed at Obama, Cameron, and Thorning-Schmidt centered on the perception that they had behaved disrespectfully and even shamefully by taking a selfie at a memorial service. The general sentiment is exemplified by Alexandra Petri (2013) of *The Washington Post*, who scoffed,

That is a nadir, right there. The taking of selfies at moments when we are supposed to be focused on paying our respects to the deceased is one of those few behaviors people seem to agree is a little beyond the pale. (para. 3)

The taboo on taking selfies at solemn events ran through all three countries' coverage, but it was most pronounced in the United Kingdom, where almost 90% of the articles referenced this particular issue. However, when we more closely examine the language used, we see that it was not just the selfie-taking that caused outrage; it was the smiles. The media were policing display rules, the culturally based guidelines that shape how individuals manage and modify emotional displays within particular social contexts (Ekman & Friesen, 1969, 1975). Obama, Cameron, and Thorning-Schmidt let their game faces slip by smiling and laughing when they were supposed to be somber and dignified, failing to engage in the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) that their jobs required. In this regard, selfies (and the rules governing their engagement) are part of a larger social system of managing emotional expression to show deference and to perform the duties required of one's social and professional position.

Not all journalists agreed that taking the selfie was "a tasteless act" rather than "a cute moment" (Killough, 2013). A few articles argued that the world leaders were not at a funeral but at a "at a carnival-like memorial service that featured music, dancing and cheering and took place in a stadium" (Smith, 2013, para. 19). In this context, taking a selfie was, in the words of the photographer who took the famous image, not a norm violation at all, but "perfectly natural" (Schmidt, 2013). As the *New York Post* remarked, "Who can fake being sad for that long, especially when there are fun new people to meet?" (Smith, 2013, para. 19). The difference between this South African memorial service—a long celebration in a stadium—and the somber occasions familiar to the journalists and observers in countries with different traditions of memorialization is essential in understanding the disconnect between the moment in which the photograph was taken and the aftermath of its coverage.

### **Who Can Take a Selfie?**

Despite the intense moralizing that accompanied the normative policing of the Selfiegate image, selfies were also depicted as a somewhat universal practice; the coverage that defended the image described taking selfies as a popular and fun activity "for just about everyone" (Beard, 2013, para. 1). In the United States, selfies were also described as irresistible—so much so that "even world leaders can't resist taking funeral selfies" (Lavender, 2013, para. 1). From this perspective, taking selfies is part of being human in this technologically saturated age. A few articles described this photograph as evidence of the world leaders' humanity, "an innocent moment capturing shared memories among friends" (Eachus, 2013, para. 19).

However, selfies were more frequently described as juvenile, frivolous, and narcissistic, reflecting a greater interest in the self than the world. Many news outlets associated selfies with "a youth culture where people are more obsessed with their own self-image on social media than what is actually happening" ("Selfie," 2013, para. 6). In this regard, selfies were constructed as something young people do, and the associated coverage was in keeping with previous media panics around technology in which youth have been depicted as both dangerous and at risk (Baym, 2010; boyd, 2014; Livingstone & Smith, 2014).

Selfies are thus associated with particular social roles and status. For many, they are for young, self-obsessed people who are not concerned with the world around them. These are generally not qualities

people seek in world leaders, and the sharing of this image thus launched a discussion about not just selfies but contemporary world leadership. World leaders are supposed to be paragons of decorum, especially at serious events they attend as representatives of their nations. This viewpoint was consistent across the coverage in all three nations, and Andy Soltis (2013, para. 1) of the *New York Post* echoed a common sentiment when he sniffed, "The president's antics were not fit for a solemn service for the world's most respected human-rights leader." Although some of the coverage defended the leaders for simply doing their job by posing for photographs, most of the coverage took them to task for behaving in a way that was "not very statesman-like" ("Reader Reactions," 2013, para. 7).

### **What Makes a Leader?**

The Selfiegate image opened a debate about the caliber of leaders in a time of geopolitical instability. Leaders, we see, are meant to have gravitas, be selfless, and to always demonstrate appropriate decorum. Particularly on the U.S. and Danish right, the selfie was seen as evidence that Obama and Thorning-Schmidt are not up to the task of leading their nations in a time of global crisis. Danish paper *Berlingske* saw the selfie as a metaphor for the West's solipsistic approach to global politics, "an almost manic focus on ourselves without resolving problems we have created for ourselves and without understanding the new world outside" (Garden, 2013, para. 1). The *New York Post* warned that "the 'look at me' moment confirms we have unserious leaders in a dangerously serious time" who are "acting like indulgent teenagers while civilization [hangs] in the balance" (Goodwin, 2013, para. 11). These narratives draw heavily on the nostalgia referenced by Pearson (1983) and McRobbie and Thornton (1995) in their descriptions of moral panics. In this case, Obama, Cameron, and Thorning-Schmidt were unfavorably compared with leaders such as Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who were credited with "sav[ing] mankind from darkness" (Goodwin, 2013, para. 12).

Selfies also stand in for social and popular media more generally in the coverage, demonstrating the slippage between selfies and the host of technological anxieties they evoke. Obama and Thorning-Schmidt were frequently associated with social media, the implication being that the "Selfie Presidency" (Graham, 2013, para. 7) and the "Prime Minister of the Facebook generation" (Lillelund, 2013, para. 3) are too preoccupied with popularity and image to do their jobs properly. "She checks in, therefore she is," wrote a columnist from *Jyllands-Posten* (Lillelund, 2013, para. 3). "Do you not sometimes wonder if he [Obama] is not the perfect world leader for this age of image and superficiality?" asked Brendan O'Connor (2013) of the *Sunday Independent* (para. 14). "He sometimes seems like someone whose presidency is based on a TV show, that they decided to take the *West Wing* and play it out in reality" (2013, para. 14). These concerns about the disintegrating boundaries between politicians and pop culture are not new. Handwringing about "celebrity politicians" reached a fever pitch in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s (Street, 2004).

### **Race and Gender**

The problems constructed in these articles around Obama and Thorning-Schmidt's leadership skills are not just connected to purported immaturity or solipsism. It becomes clear in the Selfiegate



coverage that when Thorning-Schmidt and Obama took their selfie, they created an opportunity for some to express discomfort with women and Black men as leaders.

In his book about the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Jeffrey Alexander (2010) explained that political leaders are not simply people, but "symbolic vessel[s] filled with what citizens hold most dear":

More than simply a smart, experienced and competent politician, one needs to become a broad expression of the moods and meanings of the nation's democratic life . . . one must become a symbol not only of the civil sphere, but also of some of the extracivil realms that form its boundaries, realms organized around issues such as gender, family, religion, class, ethnicity and race. (2010, p. 18)

Alexander identifies a "discourse of repression" that prevents certain (e.g., non-White and female) persons from "being allowed the privilege of representing the civil sphere in the state" (2010, p. 9). Anxieties about the extracivil realms of gender and race were front and center in the coverage of Selfiegate. The negative associations of selfies were used to undermine Obama and Thorning-Schmidt, and racist and sexist tropes are rampant in the articles.

The racist discourse within our sample took the form of three "very specific, historically racialized narratives" (Gay, 2013, para. 9): the infantilizing of Obama, the portrayal of Michelle Obama as an angry Black woman, and illicit sexual attraction between a Black man (Obama) and a White woman (Thorning-Schmidt). The U.S. and British right pushed an interpretation of the photo that played on all these tropes. Michelle Obama was depicted as furious at President Obama for flirting inappropriately with Thorning-Schmidt. The *New York Daily News* ran the story with the headline "Flirting With Dane-ger: Mrs. O Not Amused by Bam and Pretty PM." The *New York Post* wrote that the First Lady "gritted her teeth in rage Monday as her husband treated Nelson Mandela's memorial like a Justin Bieber concert" and joked with "the pretty blond prime minister of Denmark" (Soltis, 2013, para. 1). Other examples of racist discourse include the *Sunday Independent's* reference to Michelle Obama's "bitchy resting face" (O'Connor, 2013, para. 12) and the *Boston Herald* describing the First Lady as "Moochelle Obama" (Carr, 2013, para. 2). The *Herald* also mentioned the Choom Gang, the clique with whom Obama experimented with drugs as a teenager, and accused Obama of "focusing like a laser . . . on Helle's cleavage" (Carr, 2013, para. 12).

The sexist discourse surrounding Thorning-Schmidt was particularly egregious within the British and U.S. right. The milder coverage compared Thorning-Schmidt to actresses Cameron Diaz and Jennifer Lawrence, and the more offensive coverage turned her into a blatant sexual object. Jan Moir (2013) of the *Daily Mail* described Thorning-Schmidt as "the flirtatious Scandi-blonde who came between the Prez and his wife" in her "silky black hosiery and cocktail party giggles"; she was also described as "an attractive, eyelash batting, cherub-lipped, lush-thighed world leader pulsating with a naked desire to get close to the President in any way possible" (para. 5).

Yet just as some rose to defend selfies as a normal and fun activity, others pushed back on the sexism (and, to a lesser extent, racism) of the discussion. "It's nearly 2014 and here's where we are in the gender wars," writes Cathleen Decker (2013) of the *Los Angeles Times*. "A female prime minister

talking to a male president is presumed to be flirting, and he is presumed to be flirting back" (para. 1). The Danes in particular were offended by these narratives and devoted almost a third of their total coverage of the event to dissecting race and gender bias within the U.S. and British media. An editorial in *Politiken* argued that Thorning-Schmidt had been "slut-shamed" and detailed the litany of absurdly misogynist and sexualized commentary that had been leveled at her:

So what have we learned? Female heads of state must not have legs. Especially not if they are Scandinavian. They must not take selfies. They must not be seen to be having a good time. They must not speak to men that are accompanied by wives. They must not wear skirts. Or tights. They must not like iconic TV series. They must not speak to any men except their husbands. In fact, women should not be heads of state at all—ideally. It's easier that way, isn't it? ("To Slut-Shame a Prime Minister," 2013, paras. 19–20)

In an interview in *Jyllands-Posten*, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg commented that this strand of Selfiegate coverage indicated that women politicians still made many people uncomfortable and that women in leadership positions were judged by different standards than their male colleagues. "Unfortunately, this is a reality that we have to accept," she explained. "Sooner or later, other countries will probably be mature enough to realize that women too are capable of leadership" (Kott, 2013, para. 11). As the coverage of this incident demonstrates, however, entrenched powers are not quite ready to accept that truth, and the coverage itself functions in part as a way of undermining and arguing against it. As Fiske (1996) wrote:

[Public discourse] is language in social use; language accented with its history of domination, subordination, and resistance; language marked by the social conditions of its use and its users; it is politicized, power-bearing language employed to extend or defend the interests of its discursive community. (p. 3)

### **Control, Newsworthiness, and Social Media**

The story of Selfiegate is about the anxieties of change: changing norms, changing technological practice, the changing nature of global leadership. Concerns about another type of change are also evident within the Selfiegate coverage: As noted at the beginning of this article, journalistic practice and standards are evolving, and Selfiegate speaks to the anxieties around those shifts. In particular, Selfiegate sparked a discussion about the role of social media and coverage of social media in journalism.

A prevalent topic within the sample, particularly on the U.S. and Danish left, was whether Selfiegate should have been a story to begin with. Echoing Tumber and Waisbord's (2004b) argument about declining journalistic standards and the tabloidization of the media, this coverage involved considerable handwringing about the newsworthiness of the event. Part of the criticism focused on the "disapproving moralists (who) were lining up to offer their two cents" (Grarup, 2013, para. 10) and the "faux solemnity" with which the incident was treated (Eagan, 2013). Most of the coverage, however, focused on the fact that a "nontroversy" was getting so much attention, particularly in comparison to the

truly newsworthy event of Mandela's passing. "Mandela is dead, and the U.S. and the world have an opportunity to forge the sort of reconciliation the South African leader advocated and practiced," opined Susan Milligan (2013) from *U.S. News and World Report*. "We ought to focus on that, instead of a couple of gestures at the funeral" (para. 7).

For other news outlets, the fact that the picture had gone viral on social media platforms was the story. This thread focused on the changing power dynamics of the press, particularly in regard to their reduced access to world leaders. Alexander (2010) asserts that, when it comes to press coverage of the president, the U.S. public is "incredibly suspicious and skeptical on every level" (p. 15) because of the highly choreographed nature of high-level politics. For some journalists, Selfiegate gained traction because of the candor of the moment; as Eising (2013) put it, "for a second, we feel like we have been pushed in behind the façade of the politicians, where they are not acting a role" (para. 6). This was particularly true when it came to the U.S. press discussing Obama, whose tightly controlled image is highly problematic for the news media; as one journalist commented, "Catching Obama off-guard is tricky: His guards never take the day off" (Smith, 2013, para. 9).

Within both strands of coverage, social media played a key role, as the story took off both on and (ostensibly) because of social media. The press's reaction to this is fraught with ambivalence: On one hand, the media is seen to have more control, especially when it comes to how world leaders are portrayed; as an editorial in *Jyllands-Posten* pointed out, "you don't need a PhD to realize that today's politicians have lost touch when it comes to their public image and that the media is now pulling the strings, for better or worse" ("Editorial," 2013, para. 3). On the other hand, the press is struggling with the perception that their craft is being damaged by the logics of a fragmented media landscape. Cathleen Decker (2013) of the *Los Angeles Times* bemoaned this "truth vs. clicks" state of affairs, arguing that purported non-stories like Selfiegate are created simply to drive traffic, and that this "encourages the most raucous or suggestive explanation for everything, the better to draw viral attention" (para. 10). Whether the tactics of the online media are actually new (or any worse than those deployed in yellow journalism) is up for debate; nonetheless, the fact remains that the Selfiegate coverage reveals certain members of the press to be conflicted about the new role that social media plays—and the power it has—in contemporary journalism.

### Conclusion

At the start of this article, we asked why the photo of Obama, Cameron, and Thorning-Schmidt was the Selfie of the Year of the Selfie. The answer, although not straightforward or simple, is clear: It was an image that simultaneously touched on cultural anxieties about technology, political change, and social mores. According to Kyle Smith (2013) of the *New York Post*,

President Obama was a natural to star in the Selfie of the Year. He's associated with youth; so are selfies. His campaigns leveraged the frenzy and reach of social media: Ditto the selfie. And since much of selfie culture depends on the ironic juxtaposition—the sublime and the ridiculous, the sacred and the profane, the individual and the group—

the ultimate selfie would necessarily show the most powerful man on Earth looking like a dork. (para. 13)

As Smith notes, the story of Selfiegate is also one of conflicting tensions and desires. The stories reveal cultural anxieties about leadership that must be both human but still “better” than other humans. When it comes to social media, the press—at least the Western press—is happy to capitalize on those stories, but does not want to give up the gatekeeping and editorial control of a pre-Twitter era. When it comes to technology, the articles reveal a desire to keep the benefits but none of the discomfort that comes with the inevitable change in social dynamics. In many ways, the Selfiegate scandal is a social selfie: a snapshot of the cultures that covered at a particular moment in time. It may not be entirely flattering, fully in focus, or capture the full picture, but it is nonetheless a reflection of those who wrote and consumed the coverage.

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