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Floorball Dad

This chapter is different from the others. This is partly because the main figure in the case that is described in detail here is an anonymous private individual, partly because the story can be included in the concept of *public shaming*,¹ with some folkloristic elements, rather than in that of a media scandal, although the two are related. Even so, the material is suitable for illustrating enduring relations between the local and the mediated, between text and talk, and between journalism and gossip.

The phenomenon of public shaming is growing. As I wrote in Chapter 1, it may be described as a pronounced increase in the risk of anyone being publicly derided and scandalised – not least through social media, which live in a kind of symbiosis with the traditional ones. On digital forums ordinary people, who do not hold any notable positions of power in society, may be portrayed as idiots, criminals, or simply as disgusting persons. In the informative and entertaining journalistic book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (2015) by British author and journalist Jon Ronson the reader meets them, one by one – the scandalised, condemned, fallen figures. True, some of them have managed to get to their feet again; but others are still lying there, seemingly forever crushed. Ronson takes up internationally known cases, at least in the Anglo-Saxon part of the world. One of them is the best-selling American popular-science author Jonah Lehrer, who was caught out having fabricated facts in some of his books, whereupon two were recalled by his publisher, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (Ronson 2015:12–23). In connection with these revelations, Lehrer was thoroughly dragged through the mud, not least on Twitter; and in Ronson's book he says that not

1 See Chapter 1 for an exposition of this concept.

only his career is over, but his whole life as well.² Another well-known case that Ronson analyses is that of Justine Sacco, the young South African woman who wrote the now infamous tweet, ‘Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!’ (Ronson 2015:45–61). In the book, Sacco claims – and she has said the same thing in a number of interviews – that she wrote the ironic tweet in order to draw attention to and make fun of Americans’ ignorance and racist ideas about South Africa. As she wrote her post, just before boarding a plane from New York to Cape Town, Sacco had 170 followers on Twitter. When she landed eleven hours later, she discovered to her vast surprise that she topped Twitter’s lists of trending hashtags, that she was condemned by Twitter users and bloggers all over the world, and that she had been fired from her job. At the airport she was met by a Twitter user she did not know who snapped a picture of her using a mobile telephone, a picture which was immediately published under a hashtag that had rapidly become popular, #HasJustineLandedYet, with the following text: ‘@JustineSecco HAS in fact landed at Cape Town International. She’s decided to wear sunnies as a disguise’. Later she found that her name had been Googled 1,220,000 times during a ten-day period. Before her startling tweet went viral, her name was Googled on average thirty times a month (Ronson 2015:45–61).

On the whole, nothing new under the sun; public shaming processes have existed for centuries. During the eighteenth century and through the first decades of the nineteenth, such processes were expressed through pillories, stones of shame tied to the feet, public tarring and feathering, and public whippings, to mention a few of many creative manifestations (Ziel 2005:499–522). Walking around with a placard around the neck or writing on the forehead, where

2 However, he seems to have recovered somewhat. In 2016 *A Book about Love* was published by a different publisher, although with devastating reviews as a consequence, among other places in *The New York Times*, where Jennifer Senior reviewed the scandalisation of Lehrer rather than the new book. She writes: ‘In retrospect – and I am hardly the first person to point this out – the vote to excommunicate Mr. Lehrer was as much about the product he was peddling as the professional transgressions he was committing. It was a referendum on a certain genre of canned, cocktail-party social science, one that traffics in bespoke platitudes for the middlebrow and rehearses the same studies without saying something new. Apparently, he’s learned nothing. This book is a series of duckpin arguments, just waiting to be knocked down’ (Jennifer Senior, ‘Review: Jonah Lehrer’s “A Book about Love” Is Another Unoriginal Sin’, *New York Times*, 6 July 2016).

the crime was publicly admitted, were milder versions. In Swedish agricultural society there was a variant intended for so-called whores, that is to say women who had given birth to children out of wedlock and who were for that reason forced to wear a *horklut* ('whore kerchief'), also called a *horluva* ('whore cap'), on their heads – to mark their crime and their low social position (Frykman 1977).

From the latter part of the nineteenth century up until today, public humiliation punishments of this kind have gradually been phased out; but they seem to have been revived in the digital era, where the reach and speed of technology have changed the rules of the game for public shaming in quite a radical manner. To return briefly to Ronson's above-mentioned case: Had Lehrer fabricated facts in a systematic and purposeful manner, or had he merely 'embellished' his texts by adding and subtracting a little in a popular-science book, and in that case, was that really so bad? In the words of *New York Times* journalist Jennifer Senior: 'Errors in even the finest works of nonfiction are ridiculously common.'³ And writing a certainly idiotic but nevertheless ironic tweet, is that really enough for a person to be dragged through the mud, be taunted by the masses, and lose her job? There is no rhyme or reason in public punishments these days, Ronson concludes. In an interview in the podcast *On the Media*, he argues that the audience does not fully understand that an inflammatory public shaming campaign, which often has as its express purpose defending 'the underdog', can end in disaster, namely in a mob mentality that ultimately risks leading to ruined careers and lives for the people who are subjected to a collective administration of justice.⁴

The time has come for the readers of this book to familiarise themselves with a Swedish case of public shaming. This chapter places empiricism in the centre, allowing ethnography to flow while theory is put on hold. This is a tried and tested approach within anthropology. A large number of scholars could be named here, but I find the studies of Michael Jackson, Kathleen Stewart, and, within the media field, Daniel Miller particularly inspiring. I see this chapter as a kind of further development of Ronson's important book, which has no doubt increased general knowledge of the public-shaming phenomenon. Here, too, a case is investigated in

3 Jennifer Senior, 'Review: Jonah Lehrer's "A Book about Love" Is Another Unoriginal Sin', *New York Times*, 6 July 2016.

4 *On the Media*, 'Jon Ronson and Public Shaming', 24 July 2015.

great detail; but the interpretation and the understanding of it are deepened with the aid of scientific perspectives.

The choice of method and the decision to make room for a consideration of this particular case were also occasioned by ethical motives. ‘Floorball Dad’ became a public, if anonymous, figure in Sweden. Swedish media depicted him as an almost incomprehensibly vile person whom other people took the liberty to explain, portray, and condemn. In that way, this chapter might be seen as a description from within, a sort of counter story, which affords insights into events that have not been known to the public before. I was not personally present when, in an unusually cold winter month, the events took place that will now be reconstructed and described. Like most people, I first learned about them through the media. The ethnography on which this chapter is based is made up of telephone calls with key actors, extensive and wide-ranging media materials, material from the authorities, letter and email correspondence, telephone records, press releases, and two recorded in-depth interviews – one with ‘Floorball Dad’ and one with the less well known ‘Floorball Mum’. In the account below they are called *the mum* and *the dad*. All private individuals and journalists in the following account have been made anonymous, as have the sports clubs and the towns in which the events took place. Of course it is possible to uncover the facts of the case – all you need to do is Google them – but the use of fictitious names is a tried and tested technique which researchers can use in order to emphasise the complexity of the context and the chain of events, rather than focusing on the actions of single individuals. As in other parts of this book, emotions lead the way into the analysis.

Confusion

Could the rumour that was now spreading like wildfire have anything to do with us? Could it be our son whom the coach had met? The family who lived in Ängsbacken (fictitious name) racked their brains during those January days. The son of the family, Martin, then eleven years old and equipped with both ball control and a winner mentality, had been deeply disappointed by the loss of a game during the major floorball tournament that had been played during the weekend in the city of Dala. He had run from the field in anger just before the final whistle. His dad, who was also one of the team leaders, and who had driven his son and a teammate to the tournament, walked around in the big arena after the game

looking for the boy. It was not the first time Martin had displayed his athlete's temper, so his dad was not particularly worried. He will soon show up, he thought. But the minutes went by. The players began to be ready to go home. A certain concern began to make itself felt. One of the coaches of the team also participated in the search.

After a while the dad found Martin. He was sulking indoors on a window seat, in his match clothes. The dad gave him a change of clothes and said: 'It's time to go home now.' The boy persisted in his sulk, whereupon the dad added: 'There's no need to be angry with me, I haven't done anything. And you played a smashing game! But let's get the car and go home now. The others are waiting.' But Martin was still angry and disappointed, and threw his club demonstratively on the floor. The dad kept his patience and said: 'Take your stuff now. I'm going to the car now, at any rate!' A well-tested educational trick among parents. Instead of saying that you are leaving, you just do so, whereupon the child follows. Usually. But evidently Martin needed to cool off a bit more. The other player who was to be driven home to Ängsbacken stood by restlessly and waited, whereupon the dad decided to drive the car, which was parked at the back of the facility, around to the front of the building. Yet another reason for not waiting for Martin was that another teammate wanted his sports bag, which was in the boot of the car. While the contents of the car were being rearranged, the dad's telephone rang. One of the team leaders had, once again, found Martin. After a while he showed up with the boy, who got into the car. The drive home could begin. And that was that.

But this is where the story begins. The next day the phones began ringing in the house in Ängsbacken. According to a rumour that had begun to circulate, a boy from the club was supposed to have been left behind in the January cold outside the sports facility in Dala. 'Did you get everybody home with you?' asked the coach on the telephone. 'Certainly, I had my son and another boy in the car as planned', answered the dad and began to ransack his memory for any other boy who might have been left behind by mistake, unlikely as it seemed. A telephone chain was set up within the club. Leaders and parents called one another and checked that everybody had come home in good order after the tournament. Sure enough, no child was missing. But Anders, a coach from another team, claimed that a boy had been left behind alone outside the sports hall. He told a friend who had a blog about the event. The friend, in his turn, sat down in front of his keyboard and wrote that a boy

from the Ängsbacken floorball club had been left behind by his dad. The tone was highly emotional:

When I went home today my friend Anders called me and told me something that makes me feel doubtful about the human race. He met a boy who plays in the Ängsbacken team for boys who are eight to nine years old. The boy stood outside the sports hall in -6°C cold and waited; unfortunately the boy probably didn't know what he was waiting for ...

Anders told me that he saw that the boy was shivering with cold, and that wasn't so strange, because he was wet and stood there in his match clothes. When Anders took him into the arena the boy started crying, his dad had gone off and left him there in the parking lot – BECAUSE HE HAD PLAYED SO BADLY!!!

Anders called the parent, who confirmed that the boy had to fend for himself and that he had left him behind because he had played 'such a bloody bad game'. Now Anders got hold of the parent of another player on the team, who returned to Dala to pick up the boy ... but what happens when the boy gets home to his dad?

I hope YOU are able to answer for this and that you are barred FOREVER from a floorball hall, I'm ashamed on your behalf, floorball dad. My heart bleeds when I hear this, what does one do?⁵

This blog post was mentioned in the web edition of the local newspaper which chose to follow up the story and do two interviews, one with the coach Anders and one with the tournament manager, who supported the coach's story. They both felt that what had happened was unforgivable. Things like this must not happen. You do not abandon your child in another town, having taken him to task and told him to find his way home in the winter cold wearing nothing but his match clothes. That is child abuse. 'I feel sorry for the kid who has to come home to that parent', said the tournament manager in the interview. At the end of the article, it is made clear that a private individual had reported the event to the police (Söderlund 2012).

Then things began to happen. The big national tabloid *Aftonbladet* wrote about what had occurred. The same people were interviewed, but now the tone of voice had become harsher. What had happened was 'deplorable', 'alarming', and 'cruel'. Anders explained that he had hardly been able to sleep because of his worry about the child, describing the incident as 'the worst thing he had ever experienced'

5 The site where this post was published has now been taken down.

(Jönsson 2012). A number of national news articles, news features, columns, and analyses about the case of ‘Floorball Boy’ or ‘Floorball Dad’, as it came to be called, were published during the subsequent two days in, among other places, the major daily newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, the tabloids *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, the free newspaper *Metro*, the local newspapers *Upsala Nya Tidning*, *Göteborgs-Posten*, *Hallandsposten*, *Nerikes Allehanda*, *Smålandsposten*, and *Arbetarbladet*, on the web TV channel *Nyheter 24*, by the venerable ‘TT’ news agency, and on the TV news programme *TV4-nyheterna*. The public-service newsrooms also joined in the reporting: Sveriges Radio *Ekot*, the local Sveriges Radio channels, and the Sveriges Television news programmes *ABC*, *Rapport*, and *Aktuellt*. Throughout the reporting, the coach Anders remained the only primary source.

Back home in Ängsbacken, there was a growing sense that something was seriously amiss. The parents realised that the commotion could have some form of connection to their son, who had talked for a while with a coach from another team during his voluntary absence in the sports arena. Could there have been some sort of misunderstanding? Could the coach be referring to Martin? But according to the reports, Anders was supposed to have borrowed the boy’s mobile phone in order to call the boy’s dad, and Martin had not had his phone with him in Dala. It had been lying at home. In addition, Martin was found indoors, not outdoors, as the coach had said. Representatives of the Ängsbacken floorball club contacted Anders on the phone in order to straighten things out. The dad also picked up his phone and called Anders. He introduced himself with his first and last name, the mobile number being visible on Anders’s display. The dad began by thanking Anders for having taken care of Martin, if it was him Anders had met inside the arena during the search for the boy. He also clarified that they had not left him behind in the way that had been described in the news. In fact, Martin had not been abandoned at all. ‘He went home in the car with me a little while later’, explained the dad, and ended by saying that if Anders had any questions or thoughts he was welcome to contact him at any time; all he had to do was call. ‘I mean, you have my number now.’ But things did not calm down after this, rather the reverse. This is how the dad remembers it:

The day after, something really strange happens, because then he [Anders] contacts the media and says that Floorball Dad has called

him from an ex-directory number.⁶ It's the same Floorball Dad who told Anders a few days earlier that his son had played such a bloody bad game that he could walk home. ... Then it becomes incredibly unpleasant, because then the whole story turns, suddenly it begins to be aimed in a particular direction. I feel, hear, see, and read. He's directing it against me. Now it feels incredibly strange. ... Now he's got to mean me! I call him up again to find out what's going on. But I can't get through. It's completely impossible to reach him.

It was at that moment that Martin's dad became 'Floorball Dad', the point where the evil figure was given a body. The whole thing was based on a misunderstanding, that much was clear both to the family and the Ängsbacken floorball club; but the threads of the story were already beginning to be woven and made to form an intricate pattern, so exciting and poignant that many people neither wanted nor were able to refrain from following its development. Initially, the denials from the club led nowhere; social media went along with the reporting of the established news distributors. On Twitter speculation about the case was in full swing, and Flashback Forum was in a lynching mood.

The old man should be bloody glad nothing happened to the boy ... And what the hell are you thinking when you leave a little ten-year-old alone in the first place ... The bloody idiot should lose his right to be a parent. Anybody know who he is?⁷

This is a classic Flashback move that recurs in many cases where a person, guilty or not, is singled out on the forum: Give us their name! Where does the idiot live?! Can someone publish the address?! We're going to beat the living daylights out of the SOB!! Come on, mates! This is freedom of expression for real! In one of the threads about Floorball Dad – there are three – match lists from the tournament with the first and last names of the boys were published at an early stage, in the hope of being able to make the correct team and name public and expose the dad and his home address to public view and scorn.⁸ Journalists, too, were looking for information on

6 See *Aftonbladet*, 9 January 2012, 'Fallet innebandypojken granskas av åklagare' ('Case of floorball boy examined by public prosecutor'), news article, author: Lisa Röstlund.

7 Thread: '10-åring lämnades utomhus av pappan pga dålig sportinsats' ('Ten-year-old left outside by dad because of bad sports performance'), Member: 'Xiztec', 7 January 2012, #3.

8 More information regarding Flashback is found in Chapter 2 of this book.

Flashback. Even the family that suddenly found itself at the centre of events turned to this site to find out what was actually being said about them. They should not have done that. The dad again:

That was the stupidest thing I did, the stupidest thing our family did. We began reading things on Flashback Forum. It was no fun at all, that; it was brutal. The nasty threat was there, of course. They began writing unpleasant things about looking up who we were. And they were incredibly frustrated, because they usually manage to do this pretty quickly. But they couldn't find out. They threw things out wildly. It's like a competition for them, fun and exciting. I don't think they have any idea what they do to people when they act in this way.

Anxiety, fear, and community

The fear of their anonymity crumbling kept the mum and dad awake at night. The thought that was spinning around in their heads, keeping sleep away, was that their son would suddenly turn into the poor 'Floorball Boy', a child who had experienced something so humiliating and horrible, and that the dad would be transformed into the cruel 'Floorball Dad', an obviously sick individual who should be deprived of the custody of his children. Every morning the parents woke up in fear and thought: 'Now it's happened. Now the tabloid cars and broadcasting buses are outside the door.' They cautiously peered out into the street. It was deserted and quiet.

Even at an early stage of the scandal, the parents were aware that the protection of their identity was crucial for how things would develop. They realised that they could have put an end to the news reporting pretty quickly by going out and telling their story to the media, but that would have been a very risky thing to do. The mum and dad were convinced that certain people would choose not to believe them, regardless of how much time they spent protesting their innocence in public. Many people had already judged them, people who preferred the heart-wrenching story to the truth. The sense of shame that is foisted on a person from the outside, a feeling typical of public shaming, never materialised in their case – the dad was innocent – but what did appear was a fear of what would happen if their names were connected to these alleged events, no matter how spurious they were. The literature on the topic proves them right. The stickiness of naming-and-shaming stories cannot be removed at the drop of a hat. If the family had gone public with their identities, the loss of control over their reputation

and status would have been a clear and present danger (Rowbottom 2013:1–18).

One detail that is particularly fascinating with regard to this story is how the sports association chose to support the affected family. Not everyone knew against whom the accusations were increasingly directed, but quite a few people suspected it; there were enough children, parents, leaders, and coaches for someone to have leaked the information to the journalists who besieged the town. That was how the club chairman, Måns, described the whole incident, as a siege. But there were several witnesses who supported the dad's version, people who had seen with their own eyes what had happened that day in the sports hall in Dala. To the club, it was therefore obvious that the dad was innocent. Because the club chose to protect the family in the steadfast way they did, the pressure on the sports association's representatives became difficult to handle. A great many news teams were parked outside the club premises. Måns's telephone rang incessantly for several days and nights. All the reporters who contacted him wanted the name of the dad. Some of them were particularly stubborn and aggressive, and the leaders of the sports association felt threatened and harassed, said Måns. In addition, representatives of the club were contacted by a leading member of the local government who wanted to meet them in order to be informed about the incident.

In mid-January 2012, in the media-critical public-service programme *Medierna* ('The media'), the First Channel on Sveriges Radio, broadcast interviews with those most closely affected, among others with the dad, even though his voice was disguised on the radio. Additional features about the case of Floorball Dad were broadcast a week later. After each broadcast the hunt was on again, according to Måns. In a document he wrote in connection with the events, he describes the reporters' research techniques in the following manner:

Journalists call parents at home. Through our homepage they find their way to the individual homepages of our training groups. Then they look up the names and telephone numbers for homes and mobiles via [the websites] eniro.se/hitta.se. The journalists are desperately looking for the dad, and when somebody answers they ask, 'Are you the dad?' Even I as chairman am continually having to take calls from journalists who want to find 'the dad'.

The tabloids were especially insistent, claimed Måns. At first the reporters wanted to find the guilty party, but as time went by things turned around. Now it was no longer a matter of exposing someone,

but of giving Floorball Dad the opportunity to tell his version of the story. Somehow, it was only he who could untangle the mess that the social media and news media had created together. In addition, it would be a scoop for the news company that managed to publish the dad's own story, but the newsrooms were not so forthcoming about that. *Aftonbladet's* way of dealing with the issue will have to serve as an illustrative example. This is what a reporter wrote in an email to Måns:

Hello!

I have sought both of you in order to obtain help with getting in touch with the dad.

I know you feel you have been burnt by *Aftonbladet*, but in the present circumstances I ask you to put that aside and instead provide contact information for the dad.

The dad has to be allowed to give his version of the story.

I have never been told 'no' by the dad except via various representatives. I don't feel good about that. We are willing to let him tell his story in any way he wants, either by talking anonymously to me or by writing a letter where he sets down what happened. The letter will in that case be published, completely unedited if that is what he wants.

Many versions abound, and the only way to 'kill' this story is by letting the dad speak.

He doesn't owe anybody an explanation, but by giving his version of the story he can make the other rumours go away. There is a lot of interest, one can't disregard that. We want to straighten it all out, but in order to do that we need the dad's own words. He has never commented on this (other than anonymously without a voice in a radio programme). I'd be grateful if you'd pass this on.

Sincerely,

Anna

The sentence 'there is a lot of interest, one can't disregard that' is the public-interest argument that is often used when publishing titillating, but by no means vital, news of this kind – in the present case, moreover, with dubious credibility in respect of the source (Petley 2013:19–43). This type of email seems to have increased the willingness of the club to protect the dad. Leaders, coaches, and chairman stubbornly refused to give out his name. They formed a human shield around the family. When the dad and the mum related how the sports association stood up for, believed in, protected, and supported them from first to last, they were both clearly moved. The mum:

I also have to give a lot of praise. It's completely amazing how many people actually knew about this. The whole team, all the parents.

There were a whole lot of people who were in on it. And then all the people who weren't in on it and who found out about it. And nobody leaks to the media. Everybody chooses to support us. Nobody leaks my husband's name. Nobody did. Everybody just ... well, kept quiet and supported him. It was completely amazing. Lord, how many good people there are, that's what I feel. The goodness.

A child's sense of vulnerability

Relatives and family tried their best to protect Martin from the reporting in the media and from the continuously ongoing conversation about the boy who was left behind and speculations about what had gone wrong. This proved to be difficult. Every hour of every day was spent talking about what had happened, and a clever lad understands and draws his own conclusions. He was convinced it was all his fault, in spite of his parents' repeated attempts to persuade him that that was not the case. It had all been due to his terrible temper. If he had not become so angry and run off after the game, this whole incomprehensible and troublesome situation would never have arisen. That much Martin understood. He grew quieter and kept physically closer to his parents than usual. The dad again:

I: Can you see him reacting?

THE DAD (D): Yes, he starts being very much so that he likes to climb into my lap and wants to wrestle with me. He acts like a dog who is ashamed. He doesn't quite know how to behave. He's different from how he usually is. So he's absolutely affected by it. Both my wife and I feel that. It's no fun, it's difficult for him. And though we say it all the time, that this has nothing to do with him ... [pause]

I: But he knows that it's connected to ...

D: He knows the whole story, he knows everything. We talk about this around the clock, everybody's talking about this. It's all we ever talk about. Sitting there and explaining to all our relatives. ... No, it's incredibly exhausting, all of it. Then the next round begins, and the pressure gets to be so great that the police have to investigate this.

The police repeated their message in several news media: they would like to get in touch with the dad; they wanted to get to the bottom of the matter, which was now on the public prosecutor's desk – the classification of the alleged crime was 'abuse' – but so far they did not know who the dad was (Röstlund 2012). The police also mentioned the hundreds of telephone calls they had received from journalists, but also from so-called ordinary people. Rarely had a

case been the cause of such great interest from the general public. The police in Dala:

I can't remember any previous event when we've received that many calls, it's completely extraordinary. It's the behaviour that many people have reacted to. And if it happened the way it's said to have happened, then it is shocking. But we don't know that yet.⁹

Once again the family felt that they had a responsibility to try to sort out the questions that had come up, not least in order to support the club, which was going through a kind of crisis. For this reason, the mum took the initiative of writing an email, in consultation with the dad and in his name, to the police in Ängsbacken where they gave an account of the course of events in Dala, and in which they stated that their son might have been mixed up with another boy. Whatever the case, the stories – the mediated one and their own – differed so widely that the incident could not possibly have anything to do with their son. There were several eyewitnesses who confirmed their version, they emphasised for safety's sake, and they provided their contact information should the police want to know more. The tone in the email was obliging and matter-of-fact. Perhaps they would never have sent it if they had known beforehand what the consequences would be.

The police interrogations

Rumours had begun to circulate in the small town. Apparently people who were connected to the family were called in to the police for questioning, one after the other. Gradually the police came ever closer to the innermost circle of the family. Eventually Martin's mum and dad walked around waiting impatiently for their own telephones to ring. There was no longer any doubt that they were suspected of a crime, so they might as well get it over with. Waiting was, in any case, worse. When a police officer finally did call the dad, he felt a certain sense of relief, at any rate initially:

Then suddenly a policeman calls me after all. 'Well, you know we have to investigate this. But I want you to know that we've had your son in for questioning for two hours now in the morning.' [Pause] 'What the hell are you saying?!!' That was upsetting, let me tell you. Incredibly upsetting. And then they told me how everything

9 TT, 9 January 2012, 'Utredning om lämnad pojke' ('Investigation of boy left behind'), news article.

had been done, so I was rather quickly put at ease about that bit. They had to do it that way, and I understood that afterwards.

Martin had been escorted out through the back door of the school. It was done with all due circumspection. None of his friends in the fifth grade suspected anything. A teacher first accompanied him to a secluded room. There Martin was invited to shake hands with a man who introduced himself as his lawyer. The man gave him a business card, which he put in his pocket. Two more people were there. They introduced themselves as police officers, but they were in plain clothes. The three of them escorted the boy out to an unmarked police car. At police headquarters, a lengthy questioning of the boy followed. A child psychologist from the social authorities noted what Martin said and did during the questioning. Because the persons who were suspected of a crime were his parents, neither of them had been contacted. Nor, for that matter, had anyone else – family member, relative, or friend – been informed about the questioning of Martin. When the mum described how she herself was taken in for questioning, just after she had found out that her son had sat alone at police headquarters for two hours, she remembered physical sensations in particular: how her legs and hands shook and trembled, and how she had tunnel vision in the interrogation room. She was unable to focus properly on the questions. All the time her thoughts revolved around her son, whom she had still not been allowed to see.

Later, as required in accordance with official procedure, the family was also made the subject of an investigation by the social-welfare office in the town. The case was quickly dropped. When the parents summed up the course of events, they commended the actions of the authorities and the school. Staff and officials carried out the jobs they were employed to do with respect, discretion, and care. Martin himself was not particularly distressed by the police interrogation; on the whole, it had been rather exciting to be at police headquarters. Nor did the actions of the social authorities leave any marks. The other things – the totality of it, as it were – were worse. The boy was still convinced that he had done something unforgivable in Dala on that day in January, considering all the commotion that ensued. That conviction was hard to dislodge.

The pale cast of thought

In mid-January the public prosecutor closed down the preliminary investigation, and the police published a press release in which the decision was justified and the course of events was described.¹⁰ The

son had been sad when his dad did not meet him at the front of the sports arena where he was waiting. The coach Anders from Dala saw the weeping boy and tried to comfort him. The dad, on his part, sat in the car waiting for his son at the back of the arena, which is where one of the leaders of the club had promised to take him. The dad had never had any intention to leave his son behind in Dala. Whether or not the coach had spoken to the dad over the boy's telephone was not important, according to the police, because it was the dad's actions that formed the basis for the assessment of the case. There was no longer any suspicion that a crime had been committed.

Long before the legal decision was published, reality had caught up with the lie – or, more correctly, caught up with journalism. Less than twenty-four hours after the very first publication in the web edition of the local newspaper, a few source-critical posts showed up on Flashback. In that respect, the writers there were much quicker to reconsider compared to the traditional media on the Internet, as is exemplified by the following posts with their critique of journalism:

I doubt the whole story. I think it's a bluff! This Anders character has faked things to get attention. In the Ängsbacken floorball club they don't have any information about any incident and nobody other than Anders has any info! Fake story!¹¹

Have the media fallen for a bluff? Does the rapidity of the new flow of information make journalists sloppier about checking that the stories stand up before we publish?¹²

This is not the first time that members of the forum, or citizen journalists if you will, display a knack for source criticism.¹³ By

10 Swedish Prosecution Authority, case no. AM-3575-12, 17 January 2012. 'Utredningen om den övergivna pojken läggs ned' ('Investigation about abandoned boy discontinued'), press release from the Swedish Police Authority, 18 January 2012.

11 Thread: '10-åring lämnades utomhus av pappan pga dålig sportinsats' ('Ten-year-old left outside by dad because of bad sports performance'), Member: 'chribsson2', 8 January 2012, #626.

12 Thread: 'Den övergivna innebandypojken från [Ängsbacken, fictitious name] – har media gått på en bluff?' ('The abandoned floorball boy from [Ängsbacken, fictitious name] – have the media fallen for a bluff?') Member: 'bkb1000', 9 January 2012, #1.

13 As an example, it may be mentioned that the Flashback investigators were given the Sveriges Radio award 'Årets medieorm' ('The annual media snake') in 2011 precisely for their source-critical ability and dedication to research, which had led to the revelation that Norwegian nature photographer Terje Hellesø had cheated when creating his internationally acclaimed photographs.

virtue of this powerful net-based crowd-sourcing, which is able to assemble hundreds or thousands of members in one individual thread, Flashback is very good at seeing through underhanded methods, among others those that can be found within established journalism whose shifts, exaggerations, and downright errors are regularly scrutinised. In this regard, one might say that today's journalism is faced with a choice: either it can be transparent and open to criticism from these quarters, and make that criticism visible in its own channels, or it can ignore the criticism by getting on its high horse and only using social media of this kind when such usage suits its own purposes (Noppari et al. 2014).

In a way, it was only to be expected that nuances would appear quickly on the forum, because what is published there is gossip engendered by a number of actors. It is a form of conversation of which one purpose, among others, is to jointly examine issues of this type – that is, matters with a moral resonance – where mulling over something in dialogue with other people is the actual point. Since the essential function of this chatty text form is to test arguments and points of view, preferably on the basis of an apparently real case, 'on-the-other-hand'-arguments are automatically given more space than in established journalism. The reporting of the traditional news media belongs to another genre which cannot be said to be characterised by openness and a testing approach. In spite of the transformation of journalism that was caused by digitalisation, the products of journalism in the form of features, articles, news items, columns, and analyses are still comparatively fixed in shape and rather monological.

In addition, journalism has a documented preference for 'good stories' like this one – that is, local, sensational, entertaining, and personified news with a negative slant which comprises a dimension of unpredictability. The news that works best is culturally familiar and contains elements that confirm our prejudices while offering something unexpected. In this case, the story of Floorball Dad fitted in with earlier debates in Swedish public life about so-called sports parents who urge on their children, putting them under pressure. At the same time, this dad surpassed most people's notions concerning the havoc that a sports parent can create.

In tandem with the prevailing anger against the cruel dad, the Flashback threads overflowed with empathy directed towards the boy. No child should have to endure such treatment! That was the essence of most of the posts. The writers stood up for his dignity and his rights, demanded action and punishment for the perpetrator,

and brusquely rebuked all the ‘net trolls’ who commended the dad for his tough educational strategies. Taken altogether, this is tortuous reading matter. One could say that Flashback promoted the dissemination of the story; but the forum also contributed source-critical perspectives by questioning its credibility at an early stage. Even so, it was the blog of Anders’s friend and Flashback that *Expressen* blamed when the story was about to fall apart. The newspaper excused itself by claiming that the blogger and the forum had pointed to the wrong club – a statement whose most notable characteristic is that it indicates where *Expressen*, and other media too, originally obtained their information (Josefsson 2012).

Many months later, some of the features in Sveriges Television news programmes *ABC*, *Aktuellt*, and *Rapport* were found by the Swedish Broadcasting Commission to have been in breach of the regulations concerning accuracy.¹⁴ During the following spring, the floorball club contacted a psychologist from the Swedish Armed Forces who was an expert in crisis management. Under her guidance, the management, the leaders, and the dad met in order to jointly sum up the situation and process their feelings, reflections, and experiences. This provided a kind of closure. However, the mum still cannot let go of the story entirely. Although several years have passed since the dramatic days played out in the town I have called Ängsbacken, she still, with some regularity, occasionally finds herself looking for information about Floorball Dad on the Internet. She says she is looking for redress. For instance, she wishes that the general public would have been told that the alleged telephone conversation between her husband and the coach in Dala never took place. Martin’s mobile phone had been at home during the entire tournament; consequently, Anders would not have been able to call the dad from the boy’s telephone, which Anders claims to have done. Because this was never made public, the speculations could continue, the mum maintains.

News legends

How should we understand the story about Floorball Dad? What kind of narrative emerges in these flows of communication? The comparatively firm structure, dramaturgical simplicity, dramatic

14 The Swedish Broadcasting Commission, decision of 11 June 2012, reg. no. 12/00116.

content, and drastically presented main characters of the story link it to an older narrative tradition. Is it a modern fairy tale or a tall tale? There are features indicating a connection to both of these genres within folklore, but most of all the story gradually seems to have taken on the form of an urban legend. Unlike the fairy tale, this type of story takes place in a non-fictional world, in a reality we recognise as our own. In addition, it is narrated as though the events that take place are real; and it frequently involves something sensational or frightening which could happen to the readers themselves in their everyday lives (Dégh 2001). Also, both the dissemination and the number of storytellers are more comprehensive in comparison to the fairy tale as a genre, because anybody can pass on an urban legend – no particular rhetorical skill is required in order to relate it. A legend is characterised by its particular form where the world that is portrayed is apparently realistic, but closer examination shows it to be heavily stylised, simple, and pronouncedly visual. It sticks in your memory and is easy to pass on. It also seems as though the vitality of legends is not affected by time. Unlike orally narrated fairy tales, legends are told as much and as often today as in the agricultural society of the past; and then as now, they say something important about the things that move under the surface of the reality in which we live. The overall purpose of legends is to convey knowledge and confirm already established convictions, religious beliefs, and norms, but also to give nourishment to social relationships and conversations (Guerin & Miyazaki 2006).

Folklorist Bengt af Klintberg, the grand old man of Swedish research on contemporary folklore and modern urban legends, makes a very important point at an early stage in a book he co-authored with folklorist Ulf Palmenfelt, *Vår tids folkkultur* ('Folk culture of our time', 2008): 'One must realise', writes af Klintberg, 'that the recorded texts of legends are artefacts; in reality the legend exists as a *continuously changeable, oral communication between people* (af Klintberg & Palmenfelt 2008:17, emphasis added). I would like to underline the meaning of this quotation because I find it particularly significant: a written-down legend hence exists through and because of oral communication which takes place in physical meetings between people, face to face. That is where its actual origin lies, irrespective of the more fixed form it eventually assumes. In addition, af Klintberg emphasises the kinship between legends and rumours; their function is often similar, namely that of conveying knowledge in a situation where there is in fact no official information to rely on. He stresses the newslike and processual character of rumours and legends, i.e.,

how they are created through people's complex and interlinked communication flows (af Klintberg & Palmenfelt 2008:17).

The story of Floorball Dad illustrates this in a striking manner. As in the preceding chapter, we have been able to observe the actual circulation of communication. In this case, too, it becomes almost impossible – and to some extent irrelevant – to draw sharp dividing lines between different types of talk: that which is contained in rumours and gossip spread in the course of interpersonal meetings in the local community; that which is written in threads on Flashback; that which is written in newspapers; and that which is produced by radio and TV channels. Rather, what is fascinating in this context are the intermedial connections which testify to the intrinsic complexity of the media system, where so-called ordinary people exert a not insignificant influence on the duration and dissemination of a story.

However, there are also notable differences. 'Floorball Dad' is not a typical urban legend. For instance, the point of origin of a traditional legend is often hard, not to say impossible, to pin down. There is a form of inherent pointlessness to the question that continually attaches itself to the legend, says af Klintberg: 'Has this happened at some point in real life, and in that case when and where?' (af Klintberg & Palmenfelt 2008:17). This is not the case with the story that is discussed here. Among other things, the course of events can be dated and linked to a specific place, where real, named persons once found themselves. This type of legend hence contains more traces of truth than a traditional urban legend, which in this case made it appear credible. The Floorball Cup actually did take place during a specific January weekend, and the three main actors of the drama – Floorball Dad, his son, and the coach from Dala – really exist and were demonstrably there when the tournament took place. It is also evident that something happened at this point in time in this precise location, something that gave rise to the legend, even if the question of exactly what that was has remained unanswered. I therefore wish to propose the concept *news legend* as a term which helps to capture the essence of a story like this one. The word is connected to already established concepts, such as the English *newslore* and the related *nätlore* ('netlore') in Swedish (af Klintberg & Palmenfelt 2008 and Frank 2011); but *news legend* serves to say something more specific about the particular form of the urban legend and about its relationship to modern journalism, where communication via digital media seems to constitute a distinctive driving force. To a greater extent than a traditional urban legend, a news legend is a hybrid form between news as a genre and the legend as a genre.

To recapitulate briefly, here are some characteristic features of a news legend:

- 1 unlike most other urban legends, it is confusingly similar to a traditional news item and singles out existing individuals, sometimes also naming them;
- 2 in spite of its fictive character, it takes its point of departure in events that can be tied to particular times and places;
- 3 it is disseminated via talk that is transformed into talk–text hybrids, for instance through social media;
- 4 it is reproduced in social media and picked up by established media, which rely more on text than on talk as a source, irrespective of the nature of the text in other respects;
- 5 it fits into the news-evaluation practices and format of journalism by containing unexpected, dramatic, scandalous, shocking, and/or amusing features;
- 6 it is reproduced within journalism itself through, among other things, the phenomenon of passing-down among journalists and other newsmakers.

Passing-down and narrative contagion

This last point calls for some further comment. There are several established source-critical tools that concern dependency – that is to say, how influences of different kinds change and form a person’s depiction of a specific event that he or she has experienced in person – and that can be connected to the course of events surrounding the so-called Floorball Dad. One of the most common forms of dependency is referred to as *narrative contagion* by Swedish social scientists Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldbberg. The expression concerns a form of social adaptation where an influence from other stories that an informant has heard may have affected both the structure and the content of a report made by that informant, a report which is then passed on with new meanings and undertones. The authors emphasise that the persons who have ‘caught’ narrative contagion are themselves usually unaware of the dependency in question. They have, so to speak, adjusted their stories to agree with one another, without knowing when and how this happened (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2008:226–37). Closely related to this is the spreading of rumours, called ‘passing-down’ (*tradera* in Swedish) in the context of source criticism – that is to say, a piece of information is passed on in several stages. Investigating these concepts, Swedish journalism researcher Torsten Thurén writes about urban legends in his classic book *Källkritik* (‘Source criticism’) (Thurén 2005:56ff). These closely

related phenomena are thus interlinked, one after the other: dependency, narrative contagion, passing-down, the spreading of rumours, and urban legends.

The way I see it, a news legend may arise by way of, and because of, narrative contagion and passing-down among journalists and other news providers. The Floorball Dad story supplies a telling example of a pattern of dependency among different media, newsrooms, and journalists, where information about a case is not only shared and retold but also apparently deemed to be credible because some other newsroom or journalist has published it before – a phenomenon that is not strikingly uncommon. Since Sveriges Radio and Sveriges Television broadcast the news, a long line of news producers seem to think it has to be true before giving it space in their own newspapers or broadcasts. And so it continues, at a high pace. To put it in more drastic terms, one could say that journalism sometimes stops *using* source-critical tools and instead *materialises* them.

Joining in this advanced game of whispers as a journalist is associated with certain dangers, however, as should be apparent to everyone. Gossip jeopardises the credibility of individual journalists and newsrooms or, worse, the credibility of journalism *per se*. It can also expose innocent private individuals – who, according to the rules of media ethics, should have enjoyed the most powerful protection – to suffering the full measure of which is hard for an outsider to grasp.

So is the Floorball Dad case a one-off, forming a category of its own, or does the news legend represent an expanding genre where the Internet offers a fertile ground for growth? The book *Newslore* by communication researcher Russell Franks presents evidence suggesting that this hybrid is in the ascendant. Urban legends that find their way in among professional news are hardly a new phenomenon, but one that appears to have seen a certain increase in the digital age (Frank 2011:3–30). The faster legends are spread and circulated, for instance through social media such as Flashback, the greater the possibility that they will find their way into the domain of journalistic news, which then inevitably becomes a part of folklore (Brunvand 1981:153). When this occasionally happens, the status of oral stories is raised, from the rudimentary and popular to the authoritative and authentic (Dégh 1994).

For a journalist, it is perhaps of even greater importance than it used to be to be informed about this type of popular phenomena – that is, about the possibility that very good stories with moral overtones that are easy to retell and spread among many people

may in fact be urban legends. It appears to be especially important because these stories actually look like news and imperceptibly slide between genres. In order to be believed, they move between the incredible, like fairy tales, and the credible, like news. ‘ULs [urban legends] should mimic the details of news (*who, where, when*) to be credible, while being *emotional* and *readable* like a fairy tale to be catchy and memorable’ (Guerini and Strapparava 2016:171; original emphasis).

Fake news as folklore

The ‘news legend’ concept also invites a critical scrutiny of popular expressions such as ‘fake news’. Some fake news is actually folklore, as has been persuasively argued by Russell Frank:

As digital folklore, fake news is a story generated in a non-professional social context that uses the style of news either to parody the style, satirize issues and personalities in the news, or perpetrate a hoax or prank. Not all fake news is folklore, and not all the fake news that is folklore is digital folklore. (Frank 2015:317)

However, the Floorball Dad story does not fit into the scheme described in the quotation from Frank, especially not with regard to the idea that fake news as folklore involves ‘intentionally false reports’ (Frank 2015:316). Rather, the event that this chapter examines in detail underscores the intrinsic interrelations between witness accounts (which could be produced by anybody with a computer; in this case it was a blog post), traditional news reporting, and audience reactions to the news reporting. By way of oral communication such as rumour-spreading and gossiping, this set of interrelations gradually transforms the relevant news item into the form of contemporary legend, or, as I prefer to call it, news legend. Fortunately, new research is emerging within this exciting field. For instance, in 2018 the *Journal of American Folklore* published a special issue which addresses the relationship between fake news and folklore. The ‘fake news’ concept itself calls for careful examination. It affords folklorists an opportunity to evolve in-depth knowledge of how semi-oral, often norm-creating, communication in social forums on the Internet affect societal institutions and civic engagement. In my view, researchers should be less preoccupied with narrow genre definitions and instead focus more on the cultural, societal, and political contexts in which these stories emerge. For instance, folklorist Andréa Kitta provides such a context-based approach in

her highly relevant studies of the growing anti-vaccination movement, calling for greater appreciation within the public-health services of the insights that folklore as a discipline is able to supply (see e.g. Kitta and Goldberg 2017).

Concluding comment

It sometimes happens that the preference of journalism for good stories trumps impartial and true news reporting. On these occasions, journalism's residence within popular culture and the roles of journalists as storytellers are, so to speak, made visible. Yet again, we have seen how gossip that takes place face to face is interwoven with gossip in digital form, and how this text-talk hybrid occasionally not only seeps into journalism but also constitutes its main source. Similarly, one can see how the stories of journalism penetrate into people's everyday lives, giving rise to everyday conversations in the course of interpersonal meetings. If they are exciting or even scandalous, the stories are passed on with raised eyebrows and an amused or concerned, 'Did you hear what they said on the news?' People can then elaborate further on the basis of stories like the one about Floorball Dad. Together with friends and acquaintances, they can reflect on how they themselves and other people have acted as parents toward their children. They can test moral questions, try out their arguments, and finally decide where they themselves stand. In this way, scandals and gossip may be of cultural service. Indeed, the question is whether we could manage without them. But these processes also encompass a kind of exercise of power, and every person who contributes to the dissemination of gossip and rumour should be aware of that. 'The talk surrounding an issue, the media, everybody's voices, the social media. It's frightening how powerful that is', said the dad, and continued:

Just this, that one should think about what one does to other people. And what one says about other people. Perhaps one shouldn't revel in their misery. Because it can hurt a family very much, much more than anyone can ever imagine. That's the only reason why I'm sitting here at all, talking to you, that I hope and believe that it will lead to something good.

The mum and dad described to me how people in their surroundings, unaware of the course of events, can still to this day refer to Floorball Dad as a horrible figure, and on the basis of his dubious actions discuss norms surrounding the education of children, helicopter

parenting, discipline, parenthood, and so on. The retellers of this news legend have at least one thing in common: they are all convinced that the events in the story have taken place and that the story is true.

Even the mere concept 'Floorball Dad' evokes memories and feelings in people. News audiences may not recall the whole story; but many people retain a vague recollection of Floorball Dad as some kind of monstrous parent who did something unforgivable to his child – a memory which assumes the form of *postulated legend*, 'a reference that calls to mind a whole legend' (Dégh 2001:405), as time goes by.

In conclusion, I want to emphasise that this case also affords insights into the nature of human vulnerability in a mediated, digital world. The legend finds support in the digital archives and becomes real and eternal through them, which may explain why the mum continues to look for information about Floorball Dad on the Internet although some years have passed since the events took place. As was pointed out above, she says she is looking for redress; but instead she is reminded, again and again, of the fact that the story about her husband and son has apparently been given eternal life on the Internet. The case brings out the existential anxiety that is attached to digital life. Amanda Lagerkvist writes: '[h]eightedened existential anxieties about the ominous forever of data have spurred urges among the networked generations to be selectively deleted, and recent debates about the "right to be forgotten" warrant our serious attention' (Lagerkvist 2017:105). 'The right to be forgotten' is contrasted with 'the ominous forever of data'. The mum was in this painful position when I met her. She realised that the story of Floorball Dad would live on in the awareness of her fellow human beings, supported by the endless information banks of the Internet.