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Online Citizens, Missing Persons, and the Police: Three Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

The mass mobilization of citizens on the Internet to support both conventional and contentious causes has been adequately documented. The Internet has proven to be a cost effective means to rally timely and widespread support for a topic of interest. Topics addressed by online citizens range from local initiatives to issues of global importance. One mobilization of interest to both social scientists and the public is the movement of online citizens seeking information about missing persons, some believed to be victims of foul play. Left mostly unexplored to date are the types of missing person cases that interest such citizens and the kinds of online tools that these people utilize to keep up with developments on the missing person case of choice. This paper is a preliminary examination of such questions.

The mass mobilization of citizens on the Internet to support both conventional and contentious causes has been adequately documented (Rohlinger, Bunnage and Brown, 2009; Earl and Kimport, 2009; Konieczny, 2009; Rohlinger, Brown and Weinberg, 2009; Schussman and Earl, 2003; Stein, 2009; Carty, 2010; Gustavson and Sherkat, 2004; Atton, 2003; Klein, 2001; and Hatcher, 2004). Topics addressed by online citizens range from local initiatives to issues of global importance (Parham, 2003; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010; Lerner, 2010; Carty, 2009; Brooks-Klinger, 2007; Della Porta and Mosca, 2005; and Capling and Nossel, 2001). One mobilization of interest to the public and to social scientists is the movement of online citizens seeking information about missing persons, some of whom are believed to be or assumed to be the victims of foul play (e.g., Weeber, 2007).

As a public issue, this mobilization is important for several reasons. Families and friends of missing persons understandably seek information about their lost loved ones, hoping to find that person safe and sound; or in the worst of all scenarios, to locate the remains as a means of getting closure for their loss. Locally or regionally, a case may be salient as a matter of general interest to some who live or work in the area where the missing person is being sought, especially if the case has received national media attention. Additionally, some sensationalists hope to “solve” the case and cash in on the media attention. Hobbyists or amateur sleuths may dither in multiple speculations about perpetrators, for amusement if not for profit. Academics and other professionals whose career interests parallel the cases – e.g. forensic scientists, criminologists, sociologists, social workers – feel a need for current information in order to stay abreast of real world developments that come within the purview of their academic specialty (e.g., Godwin, 2005). Regardless of the specific reasons which draw observers to the cases, missing person cases are being discussed by a generalized public in unprecedented numbers in

discussion groups, blogs, and social media sites. The high level of interest in such cases can be found in the relatively high ratings that missing persons shows have received on cable and satellite television.

Relationships between missing persons advocates and online citizens seeking information appear to be mostly functional based upon what we know to date. There are, apparently, very few reports of conflicts between the parties. Aside from the occasional transfer of incorrect information that is frustrating to all parties, missing persons advocates generally support the open sharing of information and welcome online citizens who file reports or keep up with open cases because these citizens may at times provide much needed information or analysis. However, the different types of cases of interest to online citizens have not been satisfactorily explored to date, nor do we know much about the kinds of online tools that are being used and with what frequency. This paper begins a preliminary and exploratory study of these topics.

This paper also deals with relationships between online citizens and the police, relationships which we already know can become strained in certain situations. Police can view people who try to solve cases on their own as vigilantes who obstruct the process of finding the missing person. In missing person cases, the police often recommend that important information that may contribute to solving the case be shared only with the investigating law enforcement agencies and not with any kind of larger audience. Such persons not attached to the investigation have no need to know any of the facts pertaining to the case, according to the police. Also, police agencies tend to discourage the calling in of outside experts to help in the case as such experts can become aligned with news organizations or with clusters of interested citizens, creating distractions and undue pressure. Worse, it is suspected that the true interest of such outside experts is the subsequent publication of articles and/or books about the case. More recently, it

appears that police agencies are softening on this issue, becoming more open to cooperation with online citizens as they pursue open or active missing persons cases.

The author was involved as a participant or observer in three online efforts to locate a missing person being sought by police under suspicions of foul play: the Derrick Todd Lee case (Lee himself was being sought as well as one of his victims, Carrie Lynn Yoder); the Stacy Peterson case; and the search for Caylee Anthony, which ended with the discovery of Caylee's remains in 2008. These cases were prominently featured in the news, but were only a small subset of all the missing persons cases that were of interest to online citizens in the period from 2002 to 2008.

Literature Review

The police are susceptible to public criticism in both the press and in the community for the length of time it takes to find missing persons, especially those thought to be the victims of foul play. This is a difficult task for the police as police data suggest there may be more people going missing than ever before (Krajicek, 2012). Further, time is of the essence, as research shows people missing more than 48 hours are subject to greater harm up to and including homicide. Certain subgroups such as females, both adults as well as children, face a relatively higher risk of being the victims of homicide when reported missing (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs, 2013). It has been suggested that some police departments demonstrate a "a lack of appreciation" for the significance of missing-persons calls and that, as a matter of accident or of policy, they delay investigation for 48 to 72 hours in the expectation that the person had left home voluntarily and might return. For many years this was the prevailing attitude in some departments, especially if the subject was thought to be a runaway or involved in a lovers' quarrel. While police departments are encouraging citizens to automate the police

process with respect to minor crimes (e.g. Ricker, 2012), for example with mobile applications, use of citizen volunteers in the investigatory process is definitely not yet a trend, and is discouraged. Citizens might be enlisted to help in searching a specific area, for example a geographic grid of interest (Stecklein and Bennion, 2012), but are discouraged from volunteering to help with technical aspects of investigations such as interviewing suspects or witnesses, or interpreting forensic evidence. Occasionally, someone who looks too anxious to help the police may be eventually viewed as a suspect in the case.

Theoretical Perspective

Scholars contend that social movements in our current “postmodern” world are much different from ones in earlier eras. Sixties era social movements had “us versus them” (e.g., people versus the state) qualities, and the points of dispute were critical issues with long lasting repercussions such as the participation of the U.S. in the Vietnam War. Today, movements are more likely to be ad-hoc affairs arising over local issues. They are often temporary because once the social problem has been solved or resolved, the movement disappears. Tactics may appear more nonlinear than linear, invoking the imagery of guerilla warfare. They involve what is called “cross over participation” from people in parallel or closely related movements (Handler, 1992). And they are often highly technological movements that are media driven, the powerful media images of the social movement in progress are often more important than what the movement itself actually accomplishes (e.g., Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes, 2012).

An example of a post modern social movement was provided by Rosenau (1992). At the *Carl's Jr.* burger restaurant in Irvine, California, the store was getting the reputation for hiring only white employees and not minorities. A local, ad hoc coalition of groups that found the restaurant's actions offensive joined forces to put local economic pressure on the restaurant until

minority employees began to be hired. The crossover participation of a number of groups – including animal rights activists and disability advocates – helped bring public pressure on the restaurant for improved results. After the restaurant changed its behavior by hiring more minority employees, the coalition disbanded because its goal had been reached.

At a broader level of analysis, postmodern movements are thought to be part of a larger trend toward certain kinds of movements that are peculiar to the postindustrial or advanced capitalist period of history including the peace, environmental, gay/lesbian, student and women's movements. New social movement theorists suggest these newer movements differ in structure, type of constituents and ideology from the "old" movements of industrial society, notably the labor movement. An important process emphasized by new social movement theorists is the creation of collective identity, which refers to the sense of shared experiences and values that connects individuals to movements and gives participants a sense of collective agency or feeling that they can effect change through collective action (Staggenborg, 2011). To the extent that participants in postmodern movements experience a sense of emergent collective identity and feel that their participation, however temporal it might be, is making a difference, such movements also qualify as new social movements.

Three Case Studies

The author was involved as a participant or observer in three cases in which online citizens joined in an effort to help solve a missing persons case. Each case was unique, but a common thread in all was that persons were missing under assumptions of foul play. In the first case, the person primarily sought was the perpetrator of alleged crimes; in the other two cases, the missing persons were assumed to be crime victims.

Derrick Todd Lee. The infamous South Louisiana Serial Killer was identified in May, 2003 as Derrick Todd Lee of St. Francisville, Louisiana (see generally Weeber, 2007; Mustafa, Clayton and Israel, 2009; Stanley, 2005). From 2001 through 2003 he killed five women: Gina Green, Murray Pace, Pam Kinamore, Dene Columb, and Carrie Lynn Yoder, and was a suspected killer in the cases of other women who had disappeared but their bodies had not yet been found. The police knew in August, 2002 that a serial killer was at work due to DNA analysis which showed a common perpetrator in the deaths of Green, Pace, and Kinamore. At about this time, there was a period of ramped up public pressure upon the multi-jurisdictional Task Force investigating the murders to find the killer. Public rallies on the steps of the Louisiana State Capitol in Baton Rouge sponsored by the families of the slain women along with a support group called Citizen's Against the Serial Killer or CASK increased pressure on the police to the boiling point.

Escalating the pressure even further on the police was an Internet discussion group initiated by North Carolina criminologist Maurice Godwin. Godwin, a frequent "alternative expert" sought out by *FOX News*, brought to the table the results of his own investigation of the case using his high tech geographic mapping tool called Predator. Predator calculated information from body dump sites and then projected a limited geographic area where the killer was predicted to next strike. The program relied on sophisticated forensic and psychological theory and drew on real world experience from 107 prior cases whose information had been combined into one large database. When the researcher had all the information available in the case, the geographic mapping capabilities of the program proved to be very accurate (Godwin, 2001, 2005, 2008; Wiltz and Godwin, 2004).

Beginning January 15, 2003, Godwin ran his Internet discussion group on *Yahoo!* with close supervision, being careful not to allow speculative posts or comments to go through uncensored. He did not want his site to be one of unfettered or uninformed drivel, such as the discussion board on *Court TV*. Instead, it would be a source of information based upon scientific analysis, and thus more authoritative than a general discussion board that would typically consists of hundreds of unfiltered comments by persons with limited knowledge of the facts. Participants in the board were allowed to theorize different scenarios or different types of offenders as long as such theorizing was in line with the facts of the case and aligned with trends suggested from the past cases documented in Godwin's database. Speculative comments that did not adhere to Godwin's standards were not published.

The group was praised by some of the victims' family members as a useful hub of important information including breaking news on the South Louisiana Serial Killer case. Even the beleaguered inter-agency Task Force appeared to legitimize the online movement, approaching Godwin on a "back door" basis to find out what he knew about the case (Godwin, 2005). Not long after Lee's apprehension, however, participation in Godwin's Internet discussion group plummeted and within only a few months the group was just a shadow of its former self. There was a widespread belief among group members – which was actually untrue - that Godwin's model failed to predict a viable search zone in the Derrick Todd Lee case. A competing discussion group, founded in part by persons fed up with Godwin's heavy handed moderation, continues to the present. Godwin's group still officially exists but has been essentially dormant since 2005 (Weeber, 2007).

Stacy Peterson. Stacy Peterson has been missing since October 28, 2007. She was reported missing after her sister failed to hear from her after making plans to meet her. Her

husband Drew Peterson said that he last heard from Stacy, his fourth wife, via phone, and that she was leaving him for another man. Police say that Stacy may have left the house in a jogging suit and was supposed to be headed to a relative's home (see generally Armstrong, 2008).

The Illinois State Police claimed that they had pinpointed nine different locations in their investigation and sent a team of investigators and canines to each. So far, their searches have yielded no new clues. Family and friends have organized several searches in the woods and waterways near the Petersons' home in Bolingbrook. They initially called in the Texas-based search team Equusearch to join the hunt. Equusearch, working with dozens of local volunteers, set-up their command post at a church near the Peterson home, doing ground and water searches in the woods nearby, following the Illinois State Police lead. They also launched their drone airplane, often used in these kinds of searches, in an effort to highlight suspicious areas for future searching. Stacy's family continued to search although new leads were hard to come by, and money and resources were running out. In late 2012, new information sparked a renewed effort to find Stacy's remains.

Drew Peterson's third wife, Kathleen Savio, died in March 2004. The death was initially ruled an accidental drowning after she was found in the empty bathtub of the home she shared with Sergeant Peterson. At the time of her death, Kathleen and Drew Peterson were divorced and settling their assets and the custody of their two children. After pursuing Drew Peterson for 1 1/2 years after the disappearance of Stacy Peterson, authorities in Illinois closed in on Peterson in early May, 2009, arresting him on two counts of first-degree murder in the drowning death of Kathleen Savio. Drew Peterson was subsequently convicted during a jury trial in 2012 of killing Savio, and he is currently incarcerated at the Will County Adult Detention Center in Joliet, Illinois.

Caylee Anthony. Caylee Marie Anthony was born August 9, 2005 in Orlando, Florida. Less than three years later, she was discovered dead in the back yard of an Orlando property. She was a toddler who attracted international attention regarding the circumstances of her disappearance in June 2008 and subsequently her death (see generally Fanning, 2009). Her mother, Casey Anthony, was indicted on October 14, 2008, for first degree murder. Police found Anthony's account of Caylee's disappearance suspicious after learning that Casey had not reported her daughter missing for more than a month. The last time Casey Anthony claimed to have seen Caylee was on June 16, 2008, but the child's disappearance was not reported to police until July 15, 2008. On December 11, 2008, the skeletal remains of Caylee Anthony were found near the Anthony home by a meter reader, later confirmed on December 19, 2008 by the county medical examiner to be those of the toddler. The cause of the child's death was listed in the autopsy report as "homicide by undetermined means." Casey Anthony was jailed on July 16, 2008 after having been arrested on first-degree murder charges and the formal indictment came a few months later. Her trial began in 2011 and ended with the surprising verdict that Casey Anthony was not guilty of murdering her daughter. She was convicted on a few minor charges such as providing misleading information to the police; some of these charges were later dropped. She is, as of early 2013, free after the jury verdict.

Data Analysis

In this section I will present the statistics on the utilization of discussion groups, blogs, and social media sites in the three cases of interest. Data for a fourth case in Jennings, Louisiana, is presented for comparison purposes.

In the Derrick Todd Lee case, discussion group postings were by far the most commonplace means of online citizens banding together to provide information and mutual

support and also some criticism of the deliberative speed of the police investigation. Blogs (web sites containing a writer's own experiences, observations or opinions), which were just becoming popular in 2003-2004 as a means of political outreach and opinion forming as interest in the case was winding down, showed a much less active participation, probably due to the newness (at the time) of this form of internet communication. There were no social media posts in this case, as the medium had not yet been developed on a large scale for public use.

Discussion groups were also utilized in the Stacy Peterson case, but to a much smaller extent than was evident in the Derrick Todd Lee case. However, the 17,900 blog postings as of 2009 show the explosion in the growth of the blogosphere at this point in time. Also, there were 559 social media postings, which indicate the incipient use of this form of internet communications among online citizens seeking information about Stacy Peterson and other missing persons. Overall, however, when looking at the total use of the Internet, there was less traffic or online social commentary in the Stacy Peterson case than was observed in the Derrick Todd Lee case.

The Caylee Anthony murder case drew the largest total online postings, 86,498. This total reflects not only a brisk presence on the discussion group circuit but also the continued growth of the blogosphere. In addition, the growth of the use of social media postings to share information also expanded significantly. Therefore, this case appeared at a point in time when all three types of Internet media tools were being utilized.

The Jennings 8 case, though obscure nationally, has shown the explosion of the blogosphere in the period from 2005-2009. As it now stands, this case is similar to the Derrick Todd Lee case in the time period before Lee was apprehended. Eight girls in the town of

Table 1. Internet Media Tools Utilized, by Case

Case	Discussion Group Postings	Blogs	Social Media Site Postings (friends/followings/causes)	Total From All Internet Tools
Derrick Todd Lee (2002)	30,636	854	0	31,490
Stacy Peterson (2007)	1,678	17,900	559	20,137
Caylee Anthony (2008)	61,239	21,800	3,459	86,498
The Jennings 8 (2005-2009)	76*	48,500	898	49,774
Total	93,629	89,054	4,916	187,899

*Data as of November 4, 2009.

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Jennings, Louisiana have been killed since 2005. A single individual is believed to be the killer, and is currently at large. A multi jurisdictional task force similar to the one utilized in Baton Rouge to apprehend Lee is now investigating the eight murders. This case, perhaps because it is located in southwestern Louisiana and far away from a major media market, has not generated much in the way of discussion activity. Social media postings also lagged behind the much more popular Caylee Anthony case. However, the Jennings 8 case does show the explosion in growth of the blogosphere. After adding the blog totals into the final tally, the Jennings 8 case was the second most active case for use of Internet tools behind the Caylee Anthony case.

Discussion

Online citizens seeking information about missing persons have made use of Internet tools as they have developed to organize online and share information. In a sense, the history of

online activism, at least as it appears in the data presented, parallels that of the online tools available. Discussion groups, both the minimally moderated ones such as those on *Court TV* as well as the more carefully moderated ones on *Yahoo!*, were among the first tools used to track missing persons cases, and are still widely used today. As blogs became popular, they proved to be popular among online citizens seeking missing persons as well. The blogs were a way to freely communicate relatively unfiltered controversial content without penalty. And finally, use of social media is also exploding as the Jennings case indicated. At the same time as the newer tools developed, the older tools were not discarded.

In three of the four cases in which data was presented, the victims were attractive, upscale young females struck down in the prime of life. The exception would be the Jennings 8 where the victims were largely lower class. Multiple victims helps bring a higher profile to the cases. There were seven victims in the Derrick Todd Lee case and eight in Jennings. It was strongly suspected that Drew Peterson was a double murderer, having killed both Stacy Peterson and Kathleen Savio. Being in a large media market was an additional factor that helped raise the visibility of a case. The Lee case was followed in Baton Rouge, Lafayette, New Orleans, Birmingham and Atlanta. New Orleanians were interested in the case because of the close proximity to Baton Rouge. In Alabama, residents knew that Lee had probably trolled for cases at least as far east as Mobile, on the state's southern shoreline. Atlanta was where Lee was eventually apprehended.

The younger the victims, the more sensitivity there was to the idea that lives were cut off before they began. The age of Caylee Anthony appeared to be a factor that made her case interesting to a wide audience and cause a rapid acceleration of online activity within a relatively compressed time frame. The death of the infant tugged at the hearts of parents and grandparents

who could not fathom murdering such a beautiful infant. Also, some of the Jennings 8 victims were young girls in their teens.

At some point, interest in a case wanes if there is no arrest (Jennings) or if an arrest is made and a verdict rendered (Lee, Peterson). At this point, speculation about the offender and motives becomes better defined after a jury trial. Though Peterson is behind bars, there is not yet complete closure for the Peterson family as Stacy's remains have not been found. Discussion groups were an important source of information for Peterson's family at the time she went missing, and the continuation of discussions at these sites, though diminished, gives hope to the family that they will get the closure that they need. It was noted that there was a drop off in the volume of the messages posted at about the one year anniversary of Peterson's disappearance. The possible explanations for this are as follows. First, there was concern that Drew Peterson, because he was a policeman with knowledge of homicide cases, may have discovered a virtually foolproof means of disposing of a body. Second, Peterson proved to be something of a media sensation, sparring verbally with the press and displaying a likeable demeanor. He has even developed a Fan Club that corresponds with him while he is in prison. This media emphasis on the popularity of Drew Peterson took some steam away from the efforts to find Stacy Peterson.

The Caylee Anthony case made a strong appearance in all three of the types of Internet media tracked, discussion groups, blogs, and social media sites. The discussion groups were lively ones perhaps because of the dually sensational aspects of the crime: first the tragic disappearance of the little girl followed by speculation on the ultimate fate of Caylee's mother. The blogosphere, thought by some to be preferable to those wanting free speech in the case without the censorship of the moderated discussion groups, was very active with this case. Finally, it was the most active case of all on social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace and

Twitter. Some of the Facebook sites were all purpose sites providing news and commentaries as well as serving as an online shrine to the dead little girl.

Conclusion

Many police agencies are still not willing to accept the help of online citizens in fighting crime or in helping out with missing persons cases. That is the case in Jennings, where the information in that case is being carefully controlled by a law enforcement task force similar to that utilized in Baton Rouge. However, it is possible that there are signs of change. In Orlando, police appeared to be willing to accept information and leads in the Caylee Anthony case, including those provided by online citizens. And it is possible that Facebook is slowly being perceived as a tool that can be used in missing person cases. Especially in the first 48 hours, Facebook can save police time by providing a timeline of where the missing person was, what he or she was doing and with whom. This saves police hours of intelligence gathering about the person's whereabouts in the hours before going missing. When used properly, it can also provide a useful hub of information, as persons who knew of the missing persons whereabouts can post messages to the missing person's facebook page, or another page that is created by the investigators. Thus, Maurice Godwin's dream of utilizing online citizens in investigations may come true, though not in the way that he originally planned.

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