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**THE SEARCH FOR MOLLIE TIBBETTS: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA FUNCTIONS IN MISSING PERSONS
CASES**

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Chancellor's Honors Program

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May 1, 2019

Abstract

On the night of July 18, 2018 Mollie Tibbetts, a twenty-year-old Iowa student, went out for a jog near her home in Brooklyn, Iowa. The next day she did not show up to work, and her family reported her missing. Police began their investigation with her boyfriend, who was the last person police knew had been in contact with Tibbetts. The Poweshiek County Sheriff's Office turned to social media accounts to help uncover information about Tibbetts. As the weeks progressed and Tibbetts was not found, word about Tibbett's disappearance spread through social media to locals and celebrities alike. This thesis focuses on the ways in which social media function in cases of missing persons, specifically through the lens of Mollie Tibbett's case. It gives attention to how social media is used to distribute information, how it affects community mobilization efforts, and how it portrays missing persons cases to the general public in both positive and negative ways. Through a thematic analysis of social media use in the Tibbets case, this thesis seeks to contribute to an emergent and growing research arena: one that examines the role of social media in crime-solving efforts by families, communities, and the police.

Introduction

On Wednesday, July 18th 2018 Mollie Tibbetts went out for a run in her hometown of Brooklyn, Iowa. She was house-sitting her boyfriend Dalton Jack's house, so no one at the home was expecting Tibbetts. The next morning Tibbetts did not show up for work, and one of her co-workers called Jack to ask if he had heard from her. Jack had not, so he proceeded to contact Tibbett's family, who also had not heard from her. At this point Tibbetts was reported missing to the police and the search for her began.

From the beginning social media was used as a major tool in this case. Tibbetts was an avid runner and typically wore her Fitbit, a fitness tracker, on her wrist. Police began their investigation trying to obtain data from Tibbett's Fitbit. On Friday, July 20th, two days after Tibbetts went missing, the Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook page was created, which has now been renamed "Remembering Mollie Tibbetts." The page was used to help distribute fliers and to organize search parties and caused word of Tibbetts' disappearance to spread. Facebook pages are easy sources for the public to help spread and display awareness. By becoming a fan of an organization or liking a page, one can share events and information to the rest of their friends instantly (Veil, Buehner, Palencahr p. 112-113). The Facebook page allowed the community and general public to come together over the disappearance of Tibbetts, as well as to share information.

In crisis situations such as missing persons cases, the sharing of timely and accurate news is important to people. Social media allows information to be shared in these ways which is a positive aspect. Further, the ability of people to interact with this news, i.e. commenting on Facebook statuses and sharing photos and videos has been shown to be preferred over static information. By sharing thoughts, comments, photos, videos, and more, the public is able to create a sort of "relationship of exchange" (Veil, Buehner, Palencahr p. 114). This relationship allows people to feel connected to others in response to crisis situations. Mollie Tibbetts' mother, Sandi Tibbetts Murphy, frequently updated the Facebook group with information on the investigation and outreach efforts for finding Mollie. People posted photos of them handing out flyers to truckers passing through the town. People posted uplifting Christian song lyrics and thoughts and prayers for Mollie's return. Social media allowed people

to form a relationship because they had something in common: they were all looking for Mollie Tibbetts.

This relationship of exchange that is created through the interactive-ness of information sharing is distinct to social media. The main stated goal of social media is to connect people. However, sociologically there is a lot more going on through the use of social media. The ways in which people interact with each other can give insight into why people act in the ways that they do. In general, though, social media aims to connect people personally. Veil, Buehner, and Palencahr (2011), argue that “this humanness makes social media an attractive mode of communication for people who have experienced a crisis and provides an ideal conduit for crisis communicators to display compassion, concern, and empathy” (p. 116). For the community of Brooklyn, Iowa, the Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook group served as a place of refuge for those who felt scared, lost, and confused. Brooklyn, Iowa is a small town and many people said that they never expected something like what happened to Mollie to happen in their town. In searching for answers, people turned to others just like them who had the same questions, and this was possible through social media.

This paper will analyze the ways in which social media, specifically Facebook in this case, help and hurt in missing persons cases. The positives and negatives, facts and opinions will be discussed. Through a thematic analysis of content found on the social media site Facebook, this paper examines the role of social media in crime-solving efforts by families, communities, and the police.

The Case

On July 18th, 2018 Mollie Tibbetts went out for a nightly run, something she often did as she was an avid runner. Her boyfriend Dalton Jack was out of town for work, and she was house-sitting his house for him. Jack snapchatted Tibbetts that night around 10 pm and she replied with a photo of herself that looked like she was indoors. The next day, Thursday, July 19th, Tibbetts did not show up for work. One of her coworkers asked Jack if he had heard from Tibbetts, and when he said he had not he asked her family if they had. Soon after Tibbetts was reported missing.

The Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook page was created on July 20th and was used to distribute information and organize searches. Over the next few days fliers and posters were plastered all over the town of Brooklyn, Iowa as well as on many trucks that passed through the city. Word of Tibbetts' disappearance began to spread as locals and celebrities took to social media to post about her disappearance. Investigators expanded their search by including the many cornfields that surrounded the community of Brooklyn. However, on July 24th volunteer search efforts were called off and the FBI and state investigators took over the case.

On July 26th a witness claimed to have seen Tibbetts at a truck stop in Missouri. This information was one of the key leads that investigators followed, however they eventually ruled out that the sighting was of Tibbetts. Tibbetts' family continued to speak to the public and ask for any information that anyone had on the disappearance of their daughter, and investigators continued their search. The case was operating as a missing persons case and not a homicide.

By August 8th, twenty-one days since Tibbetts went missing, the reward for her return reached \$300,000. People in the town of Brooklyn were convinced that Tibbetts must have left with someone she knew, because Brooklyn was not the type of place where bad things like this happened. On August 13th, authorities created a website for people to submit information and any tips regarding Tibbetts and her disappearance. Authorities received an overwhelming number of tips, even having to get a second server to handle the amount.

By August 17th there still had been no suspects or persons of interest named in Tibbetts' disappearance. On August 18th the Tibbetts family was told to "return to their day-to-day lives and leave them [authorities] in charge of the case" (Inside Edition Staff, 2018). On Tuesday, August 21st Mollie Tibbetts was found dead, and Cristhian Rivera, an undocumented immigrant, was charged with her murder. Police had been following home surveillance footage that showed a car following Tibbetts when she was on her run on the night of July 18th. The clues found here led investigators to Rivera, who confessed to following and killing Tibbetts.

Literature Review

One of the main pieces of work used in my analysis was *Digital Criminology* by Anastasia Powell, Gregory Stratton, and Robin Cameron. *Digital Criminology* examines an emerging field, that of the digital world and the relationship it has with criminology. Social media as well as other forms of digital media are fairly new to our society and thus research on them is limited. This work examines our current digital society by engaging with it from a criminological perspective, something which has been underexamined. Powell, Stanton, and Cameron discuss digital criminology as a field of study that concerns criminological, social, cultural, and technical

theory to study crime, and thus it must be examined from each of these angles. The increasing digital-ness of daily life has opened a new discipline – that of digital criminology. In *Digital Criminology* seven different paths for studying crime, deviance, and justice in this new digital society are outlined. They include digital spectatorship, digital investigation and evidence, digital justice and ‘digilantism’, digital surveillance, digitally embodied harms, digital engagement, and digital social inequalities.

In our new digital society everyday citizens have the ability to react to and interact with crime as it is happening. *Digital Criminology* highlights the immediacy, immersion, and engagement with crime as we experience it. Immediacy refers to the instantaneous availability of information made possible by this new digital society. Immersion can be understood as the integration of crime events into our everyday lives through media. A digital society allows for crime to be everywhere – on our televisions, on our radios, on our computers, and on our phones. This immersion can cause misconceptions of crime as well as cause the public to feel as if they are experts on these crime events. Last, engagement with crime in a digital society includes the ways in which people use various media forms, specifically social media, to involve themselves in the crime. This can come in various forms whether that be liking posts, commenting on posts, or even reading and reflecting on posts.

In using Facebook as a research tool I found multiple articles that helped guide my writing. Work by Veil, Buehner, and Palencahr discusses the ways in which Facebook allows users to interact with each other and create a so-called relationship of exchange. A relationship of exchange encapsulates the ways in which people are sharing information, likes, comments, etc. This relationship is something that is immediately created the second one interacts with

social media in any way. The interaction of users via Facebook is extremely important to this thesis. Being able to see the ways that people interacted on the Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook page was the key data points for my research.

The concept of open justice is also one which must be examined to understand the true impact media can and did have on the murder of Mollie Tibbetts. Open justice practices are those that attempt to allow justice to be accessible and un-mediated to the public. However, Katherine Biber's work on the construct of open justice shows the difficulties that it can present. The Oscar Pistorius trial of 2014 was televised twenty-four hours a day, had a radio channel, and multiple websites providing information on the trial as it unfolded. While allowing these things to take place carried out the concept of open justice, they also presented difficulties. The President of South Africa voiced his concerns stating that although the public would be able to follow the trial in real-time, this did not mean that the media nor the general public were fit to "analyse and pass judgement" on the trial (Biber p. 90). The presence of media, while enabling the justice system to be transparent, also enables the public to make judgements because they feel so informed.

Using Facebook as a research tool is also a fairly new concept as Facebook has not been around for an immensely long time. Work by Wilson, Gosling, and Graham lays the foundation for Facebook as a research tool in the social sciences. Facebook allows social scientists to observe behavior, i.e. basic human interactions such as chatting with and responding to others, in a naturalistic setting. Since social scientists can now observe human behavior in a concrete way, Facebook allows them to gather definitive, measurable data.

As I was analyzing my findings in preparation to write my discussion, the question of “Why this case?” came to mind. I wanted to know why Mollie Tibbetts’ case in particular got so much attention. What I found through the work of Davies, Francis, and Greer was that there is such a thing as an “ideal victim” a term that was first coined by Nils Christie in 1986. Christie’s work, “Ideal Victim (From Crime Policy to Victim Policy), centers around the argument that there are certain persons who are more deserving of holding a victim status than others. Christie outlined five characteristics of ideal victimhood: weakness, carrying out a respectable project, not able to be blamed for where he/she was, a big and bad offender, and no personal relationship between the offender and the victim (Schwobel-Patel 2015). Mollie Tibbetts is categorized as an ideal victim, as she fits into at least four out of the five categories. Mollie Tibbetts is categorized as an ideal victim, argue. Through research studies it has been shown that people who fit the victim profile the best, i.e. Christian, white, females, are often given more media attention and thus their cases get more attention. Furthering my analysis, Martin Innes’ work on status crimes helped me further understand and articulate why Tibbetts’ case got so much attention. Innes introduced the idea of a signal crime. Signal crimes have long-lasting impacts on crime reporting and social policy, as they typically influence not only those immediately affected by the crime but the wider society. Because of the legal attitudes surrounding immigration at the current moment, the fact that Tibbetts was killed by an undocumented immigrant causes her case to have an impact not only on her immediate family and friends but also on wider society. Tibbetts’ case is being politicized, which Meghan Conley writes against. The politicizing of Tibbetts’ death along with her falling into the category of an ideal victim both contribute to the widespread-ness of her case.

Research Questions

How do ordinary everyday actors make sense of missing persons cases on social media?

In what ways does social media help and hurt the progression of missing persons cases?

How is social media used in terms of community mobilization?

How is social media used to spread information during missing persons cases?

Methodology

This paper explores the various ways in which social media influences missing persons cases.

Videos, photos, tweets, and a wide variety of media forms have the power to reveal how

dominant cultural narratives take shape among ordinary everyday actors. They reveal how we

make cultural meaning around crime. I pursue a similar project through an analysis of the

“Finding Mollie Tibbetts” Facebook page. This page was selected because it was created the day

Mollie Tibbetts was reported missing and is currently still active. This Facebook page was also

the main site of information gathering because a direct family member, Mollie Tibbett’s

mother, facilitated it specifically. Facebook was chosen because one is not required to be a

member of this particular page to be able to view the posts. The content gathered through this

Facebook page allowed us to view and analyze the words coming directly from people close to

Tibbetts and those with some distance from the issue across the United States alike. In 2010

Facebook became the most visited website over Google (Wilson, Gosling, Graham 2012). Using

Facebook as a research tool is suitable for the topic of this paper because of a few reasons. For

the first time, social scientists are able to observe basic human interactions such as chatting

with and responding to others without infringing on their privacy or letting them know that

they are observing. Facebook allows researchers to “observe behavior in a naturalistic setting,” (Wilson, Gosling, Graham p. 203). By being able to observe behavior in a concrete way, Facebook allows researchers to gather data on human behavior in a definitive, measurable manner.

Facebook allowed me to also view and analyze the engagement of various persons through comments on the posts, seeing both positive and negative comments. This allowed me to gain a wider knowledge of public opinion because it allowed me to see the disparities between different members of the public. This made my analysis much more thorough because I was able to view multiple sides. Another resource found via the Facebook page was the posting of spatial areas that had been searched by local residents of Brooklyn, Iowa. People posted photos of certain areas highlighting which areas had and had not been searched, influencing community mobilization efforts. These maps not only allowed community members to see what areas had been searched, but also encouraged local members to go out and search. By seeing the action that was being taken via Facebook, others were more inclined to help as well.

Data collection took place between 10 February and 7 April 2019. However, all of the data retrieved from the “Finding Mollie Tibbetts” Facebook page was posted before these dates. The page that was solely used for data collection is still currently active and receiving posts. However, I decided to limit my data to posts that took place while the investigation of Mollie Tibbetts disappearance and death was still active. I felt that the page members’ interactions, comments, and responses during the crisis time fit best into what my research questions wanted to know. Posts including text and photos were screen captured in order to

archive them. I used an inductive research approach and conducted a content analysis. Since my data was not quantitative but instead qualitative, I first began by coding my data very generally as either informative or responsive. From here I went further by taking the informative data and coding it by textual information or spatial information, which mostly included photos. I then broke down the responsive information further by coding it as either encouraging or discouraging, although I still needed to break it down further as all of the posts could not be categorized into the two binary categories. The encouraging data was broken down into posts that contained some form of celebrity endorsement and posts that were monetarily supportive. The discouraging data was further broken down into a post where false information was spread, a post where someone was replying to the spread of false information, and a post that involved trolling. After breaking down each of these categories I was finally able to analyze the data that I had found. Doing this allowed me to start out with data from one specific case, analyze it, and then apply it more generally to reach my findings and conclusion.

When I first collected the data and coded it I was solely looking at it in the form of a manifest analysis. All I wanted to know was what had been said, and from there I continued to code it until each piece of data was in a fitting and wholesome category. However, once the data was coded I began to use a latent analysis approach. I wanted to infer what the page members intended to say, and this took more of a sociological approach than the manifest analysis did. By using both methods of analysis I was able to not only collect factual data but also interpret it in a way that answered my research questions and allowed me to draw my own conclusions.

Findings

The Facebook page “Finding Mollie Tibbetts” was created on July 20, 2018 just two days after Mollie Tibbetts was last seen. The group currently has 57,707 members, although the number fluctuates weekly. When the Facebook page was initially created word of Tibbett’s disappearance had just begun to spread. However, almost immediately there was an outpouring of support on the page.

Initially posts were focused around sharing information, and Tibbetts’ mother was the reigning voice of fact on the page.



Figure 1

From the creation of the Facebook page, Mollie Tibbetts’ mother posted updates on the status of Mollie’s investigation. She appears to be the primary page member who posted updates pertaining to the status of the case. Most others who posted updates were posting them in regard to who they shared posters and flyers with. Tibbetts’ mother informed the members of

the page but also always seemed to encourage them as well. She wrote with hope in her voice and included encouraging words in her posts.



Figure 2

Tibbetts' mother also worked in close contact with the local sheriff's department. By continually sharing their information and the email address for tips, Tibbetts' was able to keep information coming in without having to stop and sift through it all herself. Continually reminding the public of the tip line also helped ensure that police were the first to hear the tips so that no information could be misheard or misinterpreted through other sources.

The other type of posts that were most common in the first few days and weeks of Tibbetts disappearance were posts showing where people had distributed flyers whether that be in stores, on trucks, or even in different states.



Figure 3



Figure 4

The community and people of the Facebook page seemed to be full of energy and desire to spread word of Tibbetts’ disappearance, and the high levels of collectivity were clear.

Thanks to members of the Facebook page reaching out, two celebrities actually tweeted out news of Mollie’s disappearance. These posts shown below highlight the ways in which simply sharing a post is a way for people to feel as if they have helped in the case of missing persons. The responsiveness by these celebrities was sure to be encouraging in terms of Mollie’s disappearance. The point of the Facebook page was to keep people informed about the case but also to spread word of Tibbetts’ disappearance, and these two celebrities helped tremendously with that.



Figure 5



Figure 6

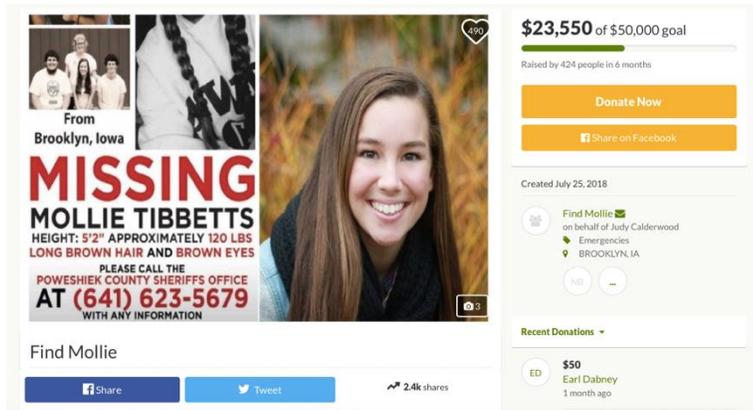
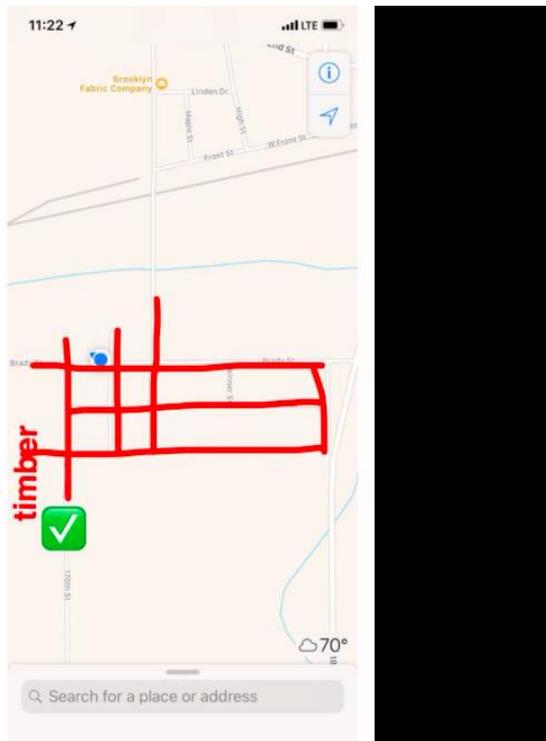


Figure 7

Another type of response to help with the investigation is a monetarily supportive response. This shows a Go Fund Me page, a website that allows social media users to donate money to a cause with a few clicks of a button. While the final reward for Tibbetts rose to over \$300,000, this shows just the beginning steps that people took in response to Tibbetts' disappearance. If people could not donate time to help search for her, they were able to donate money to help with resources.

While Tibbetts' mother was the main voice of textual information, there were various page members who updated the page with spatial information in terms of search parties. Since Tibbetts was missing and was assumed to have been taken somewhere near the smaller town of Brooklyn, Iowa, arranging search parties to comb through surrounding woods and forested areas was another function that the Facebook page served.



In Town Search: Had 5 people looking in this area! Could use some help combing through the alfalfa fields though since it's so wide.



Figure 8

Figure 9

As shown above, members of the page posted maps that either highlighted areas that had been searched or areas that needed to be searched. The use of visual aids help to show community members and search party members exactly what area is being discussed. Using Facebook as a platform for the Finding Mollie Tibbetts page has many advantages to it. People such as Tibbetts' mother can make solely textual posts, while others have the option to use photos or other visual aids in their posts. The ability to interact with posts, i.e. liking, commenting, and sharing, also gives the members the ability to feel as if they are coming together as one in their common goal: finding Mollie Tibbetts.

As the weeks passed, the type of posts on Facebook changed slightly. There seemed to be a trend of more posts centered around prayer and hope for Tibbetts' return.



Figure 10

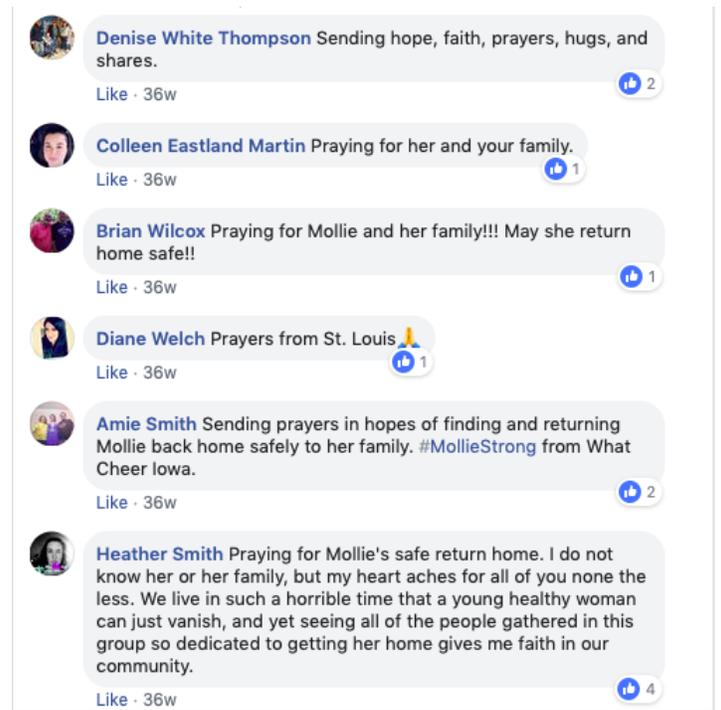


Figure 11

By this time most search efforts had been called off and the case was left in the hands of the FBI and state investigators, so the general public including Tibbetts' family did not have as much information to share. People turned to more uplifting words to keep the spirit of finding Mollie Tibbetts alive during this time. Friends posted to the page as well as complete strangers. The Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook page has an overwhelming majority of positive, informative, helpful, and thankful posts. However, there were also posts found that were not positive, informative, helpful, or thankful. I found three different types of posts that could all be labeled as negative or out of line with the majority of the data. The first type of post was a case of someone intentionally spreading false information through the Facebook page.

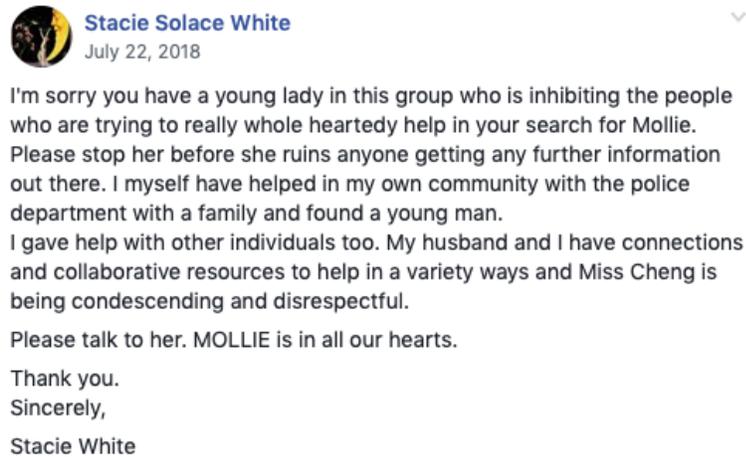


Figure 12

As shown above, this individual wrote this post in response to a Miss Cheng who was being condescending and disrespectful. While Miss Cheng's post has now been deleted, this response illustrates that this Facebook page was not solely used for spreading word of Mollie Tibbetts' disappearance. Since the Facebook page was public, anyone could interact with and post on the page.

The second post that was not contributing to the search for Mollie Tibbetts was one that included discussion of trolling.



Figure 13

Trolling is something that occurs across various social media websites, not just Facebook. Again, this shows another issue with the public nature of Facebook pages. The fact that the page is public is helpful in the sense that anyone can share information which is especially important in missing persons cases. However, a downside to this is illustrated here. People can publicly post or, in this case, laugh at anything. Technically they can be as disrespectful as they want. It is fair to say that the average person would not laugh at or troll a Facebook page targeted towards finding a missing girl, but social media gives that ability to anyone with an account.

The last piece of data that was found to have caused issues is one characterized by the spreading of false information.

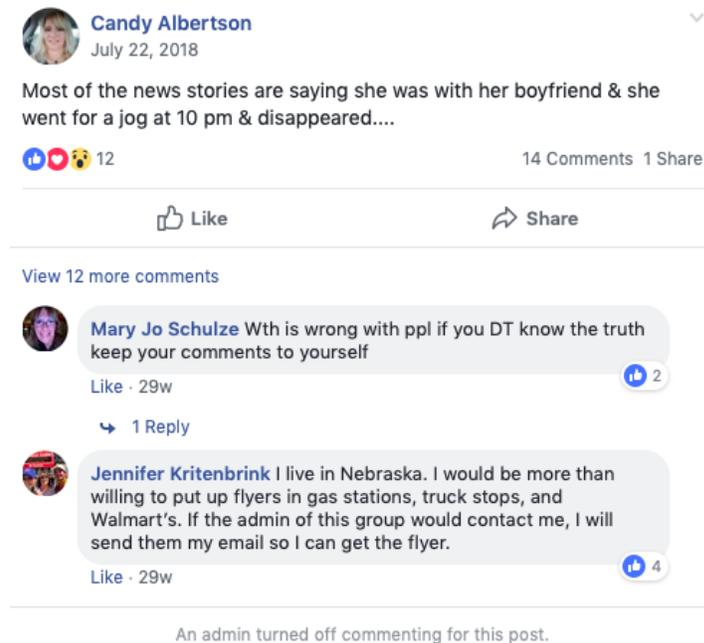


Figure 14

As shown above in the original post and the comments, the spreading of false information is easy to do and easy to inflict conflict. While the original poster may not have known this information was false, by posting it to the public Facebook page everyone on the page can see it and therefore may take it as fact. This can in turn spark controversy and irritation from other members, again, as shown above.

On social media, the spreading of false information can show the difficulty in maintaining a public page such as the Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook page. As a result of the negative comments, trolling, and to reduce conflict, commenting was eventually turned off for most posts on the Facebook page. For instance, the post shown above has had commenting turned off.

Discussion

Digital technology allows for “everyday citizens to engage in their own monitoring, responding, and sometimes investigation of crime events,” (Powell, Stratton, Cameron p. 139). In the case of Mollie Tibbetts, a Facebook page was the primary form of digital technology or social media used by family members, community members, and random citizens. As shown in the data, the Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook page was used to distribute information, send condolences, and allow people near and far to interact with the search for the missing girl. Just as Powell, Stratton, and Cameron write in their book *Digital Criminology*, the Facebook page allowed normal citizens to be a part of an ongoing crime and an open investigation. It allowed everyday people to not only access real-time information, but also respond to that information in whatever way they chose.

Mollie Tibbetts’ mother was the primary distributor of information on the case via the Facebook page. As shown in Figure 2, Tibbetts’ mother often included the police tip line email address in her posts. In the Paris attacks of 2015, police social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter distributed information to the community. While the police themselves were not distributing information via the Facebook page, community members were (Powell, Stratton, Cameron p, 141). One of the upsides to social media in crisis situations is that information can be easily shared while it is still current and relevant. This is especially important in the case of a missing person as every second counts.

While the Facebook page was used to distribute information, it was also used for citizens to release their sympathies. The Boston marathon bombings of 2013 were horrific, no doubt. Met with intense media coverage, the social media outreach during this time was filled

with people expressing their grief. In the case of Mollie Tibbetts, many of the Facebook posts are filled with words expressing grief for the family, as well as words of encouragement. It is an interesting phenomenon, that of posting sympathies online to people we may or may not know personally. The collectiveness made available through online platforms such as Facebook can help lead to more community support, whether that be physical community or online community. Research done via Twitter after the 2011 England riots showed that social media helped in “positive community responses,” (Powell, Stratton, Cameron p. 157). The Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook page helped in a number of positive community responses. While words of encouragement and prayer were posted to the page, search efforts were also organized. Social media allows for online communities to feel connected, but the use of social media to connect physical communities, in this case in the form of a search party, shows just how involved participants can choose to be.

The outpouring of support for Mollie Tibbetts’ case was met with immense gratitude. However, how are these everyday citizens making sense of missing persons cases? Due to advances in digital technology and the use of social media, Powell, Stratton, and Cameron argue that citizen participation in response to crimes is “no longer limited to the roles of victims, eyewitnesses, and bystanders in the immediate vicinity; they are able to participate as crowds from anywhere in the world,” (Powell, Stratton, Cameron p. 149). Social media allows citizens to feel as if they are playing a part in the criminal investigation and aftermath of a crime. While this has positive effects such as outpouring of support and faster spread of information, it can also cause various issues.

As previously discussed, citizens may take to social media during a crime event and begin to give their interpretation of events. In other words, it is extremely easy for false information to be spread. Powell, Stratton, and Cameron refer to everyday people who take to social media to give their opinion as “citizen journalists,” (Powell, Stratton, Cameron p. 154). With the access given to ordinary people via social media, it would be understandable how one might think that they have all of the facts. For instance, on the Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook page Mollie’s mother was the voice of fact on the page. She was the primary sharer of updates for the 57,000 plus member page. However, Tibbetts did not share every detail of the case. In fact, towards the end of the investigation the family was given almost no information. What can and often happens is that everyday citizens think that they have all of the facts and thus take to sharing their own thoughts and opinions, which others often interpret as fact. This is how the spread of misinformation can begin.

In the case of Mollie Tibbetts, the Facebook page was live almost immediately after her disappearance, meaning that for a majority of the investigation there was an online platform of information sharing. When an investigation is still open, especially a time sensitive one such as a missing person, misinformation can be damaging and time consuming. In the case of the Boston Marathon bombings, everyday citizens were also eager to aid in the investigation. However, the citizen journalists in this case contributed to wrongly identifying multiple people as the bombers, causing their lives and families to be attacked, (Powel, Stratton, Cameron p. 144). Social media in the use of disaster response and crime events can have negative outcomes. As shown in Figure 14 when a member of the Finding Mollie Tibbetts Facebook page assumed information was true and posted, they were met with backlash from other members.

The ability of anyone to write anything that they please can lead to false information being spread, wasting of police resources, and conflict.

A similar case to Mollie Tibbetts' is that of Jill Meagher. Meagher was missing and was found to be murdered, and her case stands out because it was one of the first cases in Australia where social media was used as a tool for the general public to follow the investigation and trial. Just one day after Meagher went missing, a Facebook page titled "Help Us Find Jill Meagher" was created. Just as in Tibbetts' case, Australian citizens and people all over the world alike used this Facebook page to show where they spread posters, write words of affirmation, and also share information. These two cases, while similar still have their differences, show the far reach of social media in certain cases.

One question that cannot be ignored is the question of why cases like Mollie Tibbetts' and Jill Meagher became so well-known and had such an outpouring of support. As seen through data gathered from the Facebook page, news of Tibbetts' disappearance was spread throughout the United States. Various celebrities and famous people also shared the news of her disappearance. While it is important to analyze the ways that social media helps in missing persons cases, we cannot overlook the countless cases that never get attention on social media at all. In order to examine which cases get attention and which do not, it is important to highlight the concept of an ideal victim'. Davies, Francis, and Greer, editors of the book *Victims Crime, and Society* define an ideal victim as "a person or category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of a victim" (Davies, Francis, Greer p. 22). Ideal victims are often those people perceived as vulnerable and defenseless, or people who in theory did not deserve and could not prevent the crime from

happening. The ideal victim is also, at least in the United States, typically Caucasian and Christian, and often times female. In the media, homeless people, drug addicts, and people of other ethnicities and religions are typically not given the same attention that those who fit the status of 'ideal victim' are given. In a study done by the Scripps Howard News Service, news reports from CNN and the Associated Press on child abductions from the years 2000-2004 were analyzed. For reference, there were between 53%-54% of missing white children between these four years. However, 67% of missing children's reports by the Associated Press covered white children, and 76% of missing children's reports by CNN covered white children. (Sommers p. 282) The overrepresentation of white individuals is clear here.

Mollie Tibbetts was killed by Christian Rivera, an illegal, undocumented immigrant. After Rivera confessed to Tibbetts' murder, the media and nation alike exploded not with focus on his crime but focus on his immigration status. Immigration is currently a controversial topic in the United States, and the general public along with President Donald Trump have commented on Mollie Tibbetts' case, but only after finding out that an undocumented Hispanic man was her killer. Without excusing Rivera or any of his actions, we must take a step back and also examine the way that Rivera's immigration status has impacted the family of Mollie Tibbetts. By focusing on the legal status of Christian Rivera and not what he did the Tibbetts, the media is allowing the politicization of Mollie Tibbetts' death. In an article written by Meghan Conley, discussion of the politicizing of tragic deaths leads to the conclusion that it is not helpful and has been "emphatically rejected" by the families of those who have been killed (Conley 2019). The politicization of Tibbetts' case has also led to it receiving more awareness, but again, not over the tragic death but instead over immigration status.

Martin Innes, a professor at Cardiff University coined the term 'signal crime' in 2003. Innes defines a signal crime as one that "can have a lasting influence on crime reporting. Signal crimes are those crimes which impact not only on the immediate participants; but also, on wider society, resulting in some reconfiguration of behaviors or beliefs," (Davies, Francis, Greer p. 28). In the case of Mollie Tibbetts, the immigration status of her killer along with the current political attitudes on immigration cause her case to be categorized as a signal crime. Signal crimes also garner more attention, giving another explanation to why Tibbetts' case was so widely recognized.

Social media holds various functions in missing persons cases. It is hard to simply categorize findings into positive or negative, and I think that it is important that readers and future researchers understand the nuances. In general, in missing persons cases social media acts as a resource for people to connect with others during times of crisis, a platform for time crucial information to be shared, and a way for people to interact with this information in any way, shape, or form that they please. However, it is important to keep in mind that each and every missing persons case is different, and the ways that people interact with the details of each case will also vary. Although in the case of Mollie Tibbetts there were people whose goal was to create conflict, social media does in fact help more than it hurts in missing persons cases.

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