

Confronting the digital mob: Press coverage of online justice seeking

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Abstract

This article offers an exploratory account of press coverage of digitally mediated vigilantism. It considers how the UK press renders these events visible in a sustained and meaningful way. News reports and editorials add visibility to these events, and also make them more tangible when integrating content from social media platforms. In doing so, this coverage directs attention to a range of social actors, who may be perceived as responsible for these kinds of developments. In considering how other social actors are presented in relation to digital vigilantism, this study focusses on press accounts of those either initiating or being targeted by online denunciations, and also on a broader and often amorphous range of spectators to such events, often referred to as ‘internet mobs’. Relatedly, this article explores how specific practices related to digital vigilantism such as denunciation are expressed in press coverage, as well as coverage of motivations by the public to either participate or facilitate such practices. Reflecting on how the press represent mediated denunciation will illustrate not only how tabloids and broadsheets frame such practices, but also how they take advantage of connective and data-generating affordances associated with social platforms.

Keywords

Denunciation, digital media, Internet, vigilantism, press coverage

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It's very well naming and shaming but that's not going to get people charged or fined by the police.

Citizen-led justice seeking stands in contrast to state-led and other institutional responses. The above quote, attributed to a local councillor, appears in a newspaper article reporting on a Facebook group in Northeast Scotland. The group uploads and distributes photos of what appears to be bad parking to shame and deter such events. The councillor's statement concedes that this practice is some kind of societal intervention, but one that sits outside acceptable socio-legal options. Beyond this article, the press in the United Kingdom and elsewhere regularly reports on digitally mediated denunciation and shaming. In doing so, it brings together a set of incidents, organisations and practices we can approach from the perspective of digital vigilantism (Trottier, 2017). While these groups are clearly enabled by social media platforms like Facebook as well as mobile devices, the reconfiguration of relations between social actors – such as between citizens as well as citizen–state and citizen–press relations – also emerges as a pressing scholarly and societal concern. The aforementioned article includes terms such as 'vigilantes', 'bullies' and 'victims' in its opening lines, which serve to underscore the grave and potentially criminalised relations between citizens. Such a tone is supported with opinions and quotes that are sourced from the target of shaming, the administrator of the Facebook page, the police and the politician quoted above.

The types of offences that trigger citizen-led justice seeking vary in terms of context and severity. The above article also contextualises practices by making reference to a similar initiative reported on 1 week prior, which solicited its followers to share pictures of intoxicated people in and around Aberdeen. Individual (citizen-led) denunciations against others and coordinated responses have a lengthy history, which has typically been expressed through news reports (Girling et al., 1998). Even when focussing on the Internet as a domestically available technology, as early as 1998 the UK press reported on '[c]omputer hackers (...) becoming cyber vigilantes' against paedophiles. The figure of the cyber vigilante is invoked under curious circumstances, as this article was published shortly after the Press Complaints Commission denounced the role of the press in vigilante-style attacks against child sexual abuse suspects (Butler, 1998).

While Internet-led vigilantism may have been reported in the United Kingdom for over 20 years, during this time, there has been a widespread adoption of mobile devices and social platforms that together facilitate similar kinds of open denunciation. Contemporary digital tools and related cultural practices allow people to intervene in and comment more easily on the lives of others. They extend the temporal and spatial fields of practice for denunciation and shaming, as offending acts and calls for action are both retained and transmitted to a potentially immeasurable audience. Moreover, mobilising audiences involves a wide range of practices and subject positions for them to enact. A digital media user may launch a denunciation of someone by uploading content to a platform. They may otherwise

contribute to that denunciation by commenting on the post, or offering commentary, or uploading additional content, or sharing the content with their own network of peers. Even seemingly passive activities like viewing content or lurking on a platform will likely generate views and other data, contributing to an imagined audience of a denunciation.

Although scholarship typically considers vigilantism – including digitally mediated vigilantism – primarily in terms of citizen–state relations (Burr and Jensen, 2004; Johnston, 1996), the press can be understood as a prominent institutional actor that both reports on relevant events, while operating out of self-interest in seeking revenue as well as agenda-setting on partisan grounds (Chalaby, 1996; Cross and Lockyer, 2006). Digitally mediated vigilantism is made socially meaningful by various participants, practitioners and interested parties. Here also, the press editorialises what is possible and appropriate regarding the latest devices and practices (cf. Haller, 2016). While editorials explicitly assert a position towards mediated shaming, news reports may include seemingly neutral descriptions of events that support particular understandings of these practices. Moreover, the press is simultaneously contributing to the exposure it reports on when directing the newspaper’s own readership to specific cases, groups and practices. It can assist vigilantes by directing public scrutiny towards their chosen targets, all while describing a broader media landscape in which their own power and influence is ‘unperceived or assumed away’ (Walker, 2002: 108). Potentially, we may witness the press readership joining (or perceived as joining) those denouncing and shaming the target of vigilante interventions. Likewise, it may mobilise counter-denunciations against what it regards as inappropriate shaming incidents. While readers would unlikely self-identify as vigilantes in a conventional sense, they may be understood as part of an opinion-holding public (Cushion, 2018) and at least implicitly endorse such interventions.

This article offers an exploratory account of press coverage of digitally mediated vigilantism. It considers how the UK local and regional press¹ renders these events visible in a sustained and meaningful way. News reports and editorials add visibility to these events, and also make them more tangible when integrating content from social media platforms. In doing so, this coverage directs attention to a range of social actors, who may be perceived as responsible for these kinds of developments (either responding to an initial offence, or to the denunciation and persecution that may follow). The press exploits and indeed augments the visibility of those involved in denunciatory events. It simultaneously directs attention to individuals under severe scrutiny and reports on this process, framing the Internet as the main culprit. This portrayal rests on a questionable distinction between the Internet as a clustering of abusive users, and its own readership, who may be reading, sharing and commenting on such articles through the paper’s webpage or social media presence. In considering how other social actors are presented in relation to digital vigilantism, this study focusses on press accounts of those either initiating or being targeted by online denunciations, and also on a broader and often amorphous range of spectators to such events, often referred to as ‘Internet

mobs'. Relatedly, this article explores how specific practices related to digital vigilantism such as denunciation are expressed in press coverage, as well as coverage of motivations by the public to either participate in or facilitate such practices.

Methods

While understood as a digitally mediated process, press coverage of digital vigilantism arguably serves an agenda-setting role in making such practices meaningful. Social media content surrounding such events can itself be removed shortly after a denunciation, either for violating a platform's terms of service, or simply as part of a denouncer's broader strategy. Despite the possibility of removal following public outcry or a negative assessment by an independent regulator, press coverage stands as a potentially more enduring as well as digitally accessible account of events. The UK context in particular offers both recent high-profile cases including anti-paedophile groups alongside a spate of cases responding to comparatively less serious offences that provide an understanding of acceptability in more routinised circumstances. This study focusses on coverage of prominent recent cases. By searching Lexis-Nexis for keywords associated with five such incidents since 2014, I draw upon a corpus of 639 articles. These cases involve user-led denunciations against relatively minor instances of uncivil behaviour in public spaces as well as on digital platforms. I performed an additional query of UK press using search terms related to the above cases such as shaming and vigilantism alongside relevant synonyms. This yielded an additional 559 articles that date back to 1998. While results with a high match were excluded from these searches, many articles shared some overlap in terms of content. Likewise, while articles that only briefly touch upon these practices are included, those that invoke them to consider fictional accounts (e.g. recaps of television programmes featuring vigilante themes) were excluded from the analysis. While the majority of articles are from tabloids, articles from broadsheets are included in the analysis. Tabloids may serve a particular function in making criminal events meaningful in the UK context (Cross, 2014), yet reports and editorials that appear in broadsheets also command a significant readership, and should not be categorically excluded.

While scholarship on mediated shaming and digital vigilantism (Author, 2017; Johnston, 1996) provided conceptual guidance when analysing articles, it was important to remain mindful of emergent patterns in the data that reflect cultural and institutional contexts. When reporting on the cases below, no identifiable details of the individuals involved are reproduced. This includes names of either the target of mediated denunciation, those who initiate these movements, as well as those who comment on them. While maintaining a scholarly interest in the manners in which individuals can be harmed through mediated scrutiny, no further infamy or harm should be brought upon them. This study considers phenomena that are brought together by new regimes of visibility (Thompson, 2005), such that politicians, paedophiles and bad parkers are all equally subject to similar digital media backlash. In particular, the common refrain in press coverage that digitally

mediated naming and shaming ‘could lead to vigilante attacks’ emphasises a coupling between non-journalistic communicative practices and tangible harms.

Reconciling vigilante practices and the press

Exploring mediated denunciation and justice seeking through the lens of vigilantism implies potential for extra-judicial violence. While this remains a possibility when such practices are manifest through digital tools, of particular interest is how this lens calls attention to the expression of norms and collective values (Johnston, 1996). The kinds of values expressed through vigilante activities have typically been understood as hegemonic within a given context (Kasra, 2017), as such practices may simultaneously undermine state authority while reinforcing its underlying principles. Yet we have also seen the emergence of movements, such as #metoo, which seek to direct attention to and challenge forms of sexual harassment and assault that have remained tolerated within institutions like the entertainment industry. The role of denunciation in these cases is especially potent, as it articulates an indictment against behaviours that are no longer meant to be tolerated (cf. Amicelle and Favarel-Garrigues, 2012). Vigilantism – as well as a broader state of vigilance among citizens – is invoked as a means to make others accountable. Instances of citizens targeting other citizens can also be understood from a surveillance studies perspective, notably as peer-to-peer or lateral forms of scrutiny (Andrejevic, 2004). The emergence of digital media technologies in recent years has led to individuals renegotiating their own (self-)scrutiny practices (Trottier, 2012), in conjunction with other social actors such as the state and the press. The possibilities and fears that are evoked in such coverage may contribute to surveillance imaginaries (Lyon, 2018), in other words, representations of the way in which we are rendered visible and accountable through digitally mediated practices. And while citizen-led justice is by no means a new development, the scholarly challenge here is to consider so-called ‘Internet mobs’ in relation to other kinds of mediated publics, such as those assembled through the press.

Prominent cases of shaming and denunciation through the press include categories of targets like war criminals and celebrities, as well as particular offences, such as business fraud and child exploitation (Drury, 2002; Petley, 2013). While user-led-mediated shaming may cover a wider gamut of targets, there is also overlap in terms of actionable offences, as well as related practices like doxing or shaming. In considering press coverage of vigilante practices, we may address a tension that shapes journalistic practices and strategies. On one hand, both tabloids and broadsheets are understood as having political and ideological commitments that they will seek to preserve when reporting on incidents that trigger public denunciation (Antony and Thomas, 2010). Yet journalists may be increasingly reliant upon both the content and the opinions of digital media users when producing the news, and may mobilise contesting and conflicting accounts about new technologies and practices in their reporting. The press is thus conveying statements from multiple kinds of sources, yet this is ostensibly assembled in a

way that maintains a degree of ideological coherence. We can consider this in the context of what Chadwick (2017) calls a 'hybrid media system', in which journalists routinely mobilise digital media to both source and circulate news content. This may be understood as part of a broader response by journalists to cutbacks by furthering 'symbiotic relationships' with 'hyperlocal entities to produce public interest news for local communities' (Carson et al., 2016: 144). As this can include state representatives such as the police, we may consider the extent to which such relations conceptually overlap with surveillant assemblages (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000), in which data collection practices are effected through temporarily sustained networks of institutionally and contextually dispersed actors. In other words, scholars should remain attentive to the confluence between rendering targeted individuals visible, and reporting on the process by which individual targets are made visible.

Digital media users – notably those engaging in mediated shaming and denunciations – matter in contemporary journalistic practices. By calling attention to other forms of unsanctioned justice seeking, tabloids and other newspapers implicitly assert their role and their stake in denunciations. This assertion is marked by an ambivalent condition where newspapers do not have full control over how these practices and these cases are understood, and to a degree depend on content generated in these cases to produce news items. Yet they can contribute to public understandings of these practices based on information that is included or omitted, references that approximate one case to another, and other ways of making these developments meaningful.

Making sense of mediated denunciations

Online justice seeking and denunciations include a broad set of practices. Such incidents do not always involve explicit calls for concrete action, but some expectations of a response may be implicitly communicated when posted to a public forum that facilitates sharing and responding (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Given that these are practices united by loose characteristics rather than an agreed-upon label and institutional or cultural context, it seems important to consider how it is made meaningful, including by prominent media and press actors. In terms of descriptions of incidents, there are explicit moments in which denunciatory events are arranged and likened to each other. A 1000-word editorial published in 2010 warns about what the title calls 'Cyber vigilantes', but are also called 'online' and 'web vigilantes' as well as 'pitch-fork wielding cyber-mobs' further on. The editorial invokes four cases involving backlash against offensive behaviour either caught on camera or knowingly posted online. It underscores the speed with which vigilantism unfolds ('just 24 hours'; 'tracked down within hours') and the disproportionality of the response ('the kind of abuse usually reserved for war criminals'; 'immediately earned the violent hatred of everybody in China'), and also the fact that digitally mediated practices allowed users to pinpoint targets' location ('They found out where she lived, and posted a Google

map of that address'; 'the real trouble started when somebody found out her address'). In comparing cases from China, the United States and the United Kingdom, the author seeks to portray digitally mediated vigilantism as rooted in local cultures and norms, while also characterised by attributes that appear to transcend these contexts.

Other reports offer a broader warning to readers when linking open denunciations to unsanctioned violence. The claim that naming and shaming leads to vigilantism features prominently in coverage of initiatives to publicly denounce a range of targets, including child sexual abusers, drug dealers and young offenders. While these concerns are raised in relation to user-led denunciations, state initiatives are also said to cause 'vigilante action' and 'lead to vigilante attacks'.² As well, the now-defunct tabloid *News of the World* is frequently associated with vigilante reactions after publishing the identities of paedophiles in 2000. Links between public denunciation and vigilantism are manifest over the 20 years of press coverage, and include a range of user and institutional initiatives. Likewise, those quoted as making this link include journalists themselves as well as police and members of civil society. While typically invoked in response to actionable offences like child abuse, such framing may not be exclusively limited to this context. This reporting may still refer to generalised practices, instilling a discourse that naming and shaming broadly results in unsanctioned violence. Largely the reader is left to imagine what may come in response to lesser forms of naming and shaming.

As a prominent expression of denunciation, naming and shaming is presented in press coverage as a crowdsourced emotion, in the sense that it mobilises other actors to bring about disproportionate consequences. Such framing appears to exclude the possibility of reintegrative shaming such as restorative justice (Braithwaite, 1989; Saulnier and Sivasubramaniam, 2015). Reintegration as a process is narrowly discussed, and only as an imagined and unattainable alternative. Such representation is especially relevant when considering use of shame by press in the United Kingdom. While shaming by tabloids is typically framed in terms of 'public interest' (Rowbottom, 2013), this claim – and the language of public interest more broadly – may be invoked for opportunistic ends (Carlson and Berkowitz, 2014). In questioning who is entitled to denounce others, one can understand digital media uptake as a disruption of journalistic practices.

Representation of principal social actors

Press coverage of cases typically begins shortly after the initial denunciation on social media. Articles typically repurpose the text, accompanying images and comments generated in these posts. Initial reports that are centred on the denouncer make use of terms like 'branded' and 'blasted' stressing the force and social harm that the denouncer may exert over the accused target, as well as the possibility of a lasting imprint on the body. More broadly, press coverage employed terms, such as 'posted', 'shared' and 'uploaded' that emphasised the mediated nature of their

actions, and also 'reprimanded', 'accused' and 'slammed', which also point to the socio-cultural implications of making someone else visible in a moralising context.

Articles emphasise the denouncer as generating mediated shaming through their actions, sketching a media landscape in which the press is curiously absent. One report underlines the severity and social reach of such actions when claiming a woman triggered 'a fierce debate after publicly shaming' a professional peer after being sexually harassed by them. A separate newspaper touches upon this theme as well when looking back on this incident, noting 'the entire country got caught up in debating inter-gender office relations when' the denouncer 'raged against his behaviour across social networks'. In stating that the fall-out 'dominated headlines', the press appears to erase its own agency, absolving itself of responsibility in deciding to cover these incidents. It bears noting that this was the case that received the most coverage, and generated the most evident split in opinions. Likewise, many tabloids took an unsympathetic approach to the denouncer, using vitriolic language to claim that she was seeking publicity, and also publicising separate articles about disputes within her family, and potentially sexist comments she had made on social media. Taken together, the press exposes stigmatising details about her to a broader public, while accusing her of desiring such exposure. One can draw parallels between the kinds of information sourcing that took place to generate such articles, and the kinds of doxing practices performed by digital vigilantes, in that media, actors are seeking and publicising personal information about a target that may harm their reputation. The press augments the visibility and vitriol surrounding an incident, and moreover, directs public opinion by contributing to a counter-denunciation against a woman who spoke out against unsolicited harassment.

Coverage of this case also serves to formulate a criticism of a particular understanding of the so-called feminist 'outrage'. When describing the denouncer's actions one tabloid article writes,

instead of giving him the brush-off, she decided to 'call out' (the fashionable vernacular for making a gigantic spectacle of oneself on Twitter) his alleged fascist piggery, over-reacting to what was little more than a rather embarrassing chat-up attempt.

Of particular note is the author's assessment of the so-called call-out culture, as evidenced by the use of scare-quotes as well as the description that the denouncer in this case is making 'a gigantic spectacle of oneself'. While mediated denunciations primarily direct attention to the target being accused of some offence, this statement redirects attention back to the person making the accusation. The press simultaneously renders the denunciator a visible target of derision, while erasing its own responsibility by implying that she wilfully sought such visibility. Given the underrepresentation of female public figures in press coverage (Humprecht and Esser, 2017), it is not surprising that a professional woman rendered visible to a popular audience would receive unsympathetic coverage. The author of the above-quoted article presents a 'brush-off' as what they consider to be a more reasonable alternative to her denunciation. This implies that the lawyer would not have

become the target of such a counter-denunciation had she responded to her target in a more 'civil' and presumably less visible manner. While this case features an especially pronounced counter-denunciation of the initiator, this tendency is seen to a lesser extent in other cases. As with the above, journalists may condemn them directly, but are more likely to express disapproval by way of the quotes of others, be they digital media users or their own readership. In such cases, they may even attribute responsibility to the initiator themselves, noting, for example, that they 'sparked a backlash' in speaking out.

While targets of mediated denunciation may eventually be able to express themselves, in the early stages of press coverage they are typically presented as the passive recipient of online abuse. Given the reliance of the press on the initial accusatory post at this stage, it seems reasonable that it would remediate its representation of the target, even if not directly endorsing such views. Other actors may also be invoked to render the target visible, including bystanders, representatives of relevant organisations, experts and commenters on the original social media post, and also those sourced through press coverage. In reaction to the denunciation of a pair of women deemed to be dressed inappropriately in a grocery store, one tabloid featured an article with the quote "It's lazy, disgusting and slobbish behaviour" in its title. This quote is both attributed to a 'public reaction' later in the title, and further on as coming from 'readers of our sister newspaper'. Targets are also presented as though they should have anticipated such online backlash, based on assumed shared understandings of the composition of the Internet. Even if denunciations to some degree are problematised in the press, there seems to be ambivalence in opinion when including statements that justify their occurrence.

Framing a broader network of participants

In addition to those both initiating and targeted by denunciations, press reports also cover additional social actors who participate in the aftermath of the mediated shaming of the target. The extent to which they participate in denunciation or counter-denunciation may vary, from simply viewing a post, to offering their own opinions, or even additional information about the person under scrutiny. The press may refer to individual commentators by name. Yet it also refers to participants as a type of mass gathering. For example, one article opens by warning the reader: '[i]f you are planning to be nasty to a cat or criticise earthquake victims for keeping your favourite shows off TV, watch out for the internet lynch mobs'. By characterising those witnessing and responding to these cases as 'internet lynch mobs', this statement collapses these actors into a social mass that is both singular and harmful. Vigilante participants are also not explicitly named in terms of their origin, but attributed to an unspecified assembly of actors, that may be similar to other kinds of amorphous crowds, such as tabloid audiences. This amounts to an erasure of the identities of those (admittedly mostly anonymous) participants.

One prominent way that a broader assembly of users is expressed is through metrics. As the activities covered are digital and typically quantifiable, this allows

journalists to point to what appears to be a tangible measure of collective spectatorship and denunciation. In some cases, it is the digital media users themselves who are quantified, as in statements that denunciatory content ‘has been shared by thousands of Facebook users’. In other cases, the online activity itself is foregrounded, as in reference to ‘tens of thousands of views’ or ‘thousands of postings of online vitriol’. For one incident, the amount of times a post denouncing an airline passenger has been shared rises from 50,000 to 61,000 to 100,000 within a 24-hour news cycle. Although we are not able to attribute the doubling of shares to specific factors, it would seem reasonable to consider that national press coverage contributed to this spike in activity. While reporting on the various embodied and digitally mediated actors contributing to this incident, the press does not acknowledge its own role in this production.

Beyond a discursive confluence between people and online activity, reporting on these incidents also expresses further ambivalence about the status of vigilante audiences. This includes the use of prefixes such as ‘virtual’ and ‘cyber’ that serve to qualify participants as intangible. Likewise, terms such as ‘the internet’s “collective hive mind”’ not only refer to such groups as a kind of dehumanised assembly, but also attribute this as belonging to a distinct mediated environment. In terms of social justice, this collective is understood as delivering an ‘immediate and wildly overblown retribution’. Another report on the same case refers to ‘the moronic inferno of the internet’, which accomplishes the same rhetorical purpose in erasing individual agency and characteristics (other than malice), and attributes this *en masse* to a mediated platform.

While press coverage of these audiences portrays them largely as a destructive force, at times it is more restrained, notably when their actions are closely aligned with journalistic practices involving reader responses. Cases that are said to have ‘sparked a national debate’ imply a situated as well as more civilised form of expression. In such cases, the topic of debate is multifaceted, for instance when ‘thousands have commented online’ on issues such as ‘train etiquette, the rights and wrongs of giving up a seat for a woman and whether [the initiator] was in the wrong for posting the internet photo’. Not only are many steps in the incident subject to debate, but it also remains unclear from this statement if this debate is taking place exclusively in the comments section of the newspaper, in the replies to the original social media post, or on another online forums. This quote is followed by a series of comments from both those known to the individuals present at the incident, as well as strangers. While these are largely attributed to the newspaper’s web presence, there is no clear distinction between such exchanges and abusive vitriol, or in other words between fruitful debate and the moronic inferno.

Motivations to name and shame

Press coverage presents a range of tangible and intangible motivations for participating in mediated shaming. The implicit message is that there is no shortage of reasons why people denounce others. Denunciations are often represented as

motivated by offences, which are generalised to broader causes or concerns. In addition to descriptions of the offences themselves, reports may also include references to statements that provide socio-political context to denunciations. For instance, an article frames a particular denunciation as ‘refusing to put up with what most successful women endure every single day and most have long given up trying to defeat’. An instance of sexual harassment is presented as only the latest of a series of pervasive offences that have gone unaddressed. Mediated denunciations appear to be a tangible way to direct attention to under-represented causes. This is also evident when a denouncer seeks to ‘make the public more aware and sensitive towards the needs of disabled children’. Coverage provides context when pointing to specific vulnerabilities of those involved. When considering those who are targeted one denunciator ‘had felt compelled to “out” [target name] because he was a senior figure in the profession and had a duty to uphold laws against sexual discrimination’. While relatively favourable accounts of such incidents would point to potential inequity between parties involved, those that are less sympathetic to denunciations may focus primarily on the social capital and privilege held by the initiator. In either case, practices are presented as rooted in established power relations.

Beyond such contexts, mediated denunciation is also made meaningful in relation to more abstract values and character traits. When expressing support for a recent denunciation involving an incident on a rail journey, one editorial states that they are ‘all for assertiveness, but not when it comes packaged with a sense of entitlement’. Positioning appropriate conduct between these traits, the author advocates ‘to re-set the line between acceptable public behaviour and not’. Such statements appear to support a broader mobilisation on the basis of the values that initially compelled the denunciation in question. Such statements are also presented in terms of national character, for example, when one editorial asserts that ‘[p]eople go wild about such behaviour because we are, after all, a nation built on dress codes and protocol’. While the article itself expresses ambivalence about the case in question, the user-led initiative is situated in a legible cultural context.

The above motivations are not directly linked to digital media affordances. Yet the ability to reach out to a pre-existing or spontaneously assembled community or network stands as a prominent motivation in press reports. One initiator is quoted as motivated by a desire ‘to know how many other women’ had faced similar offences. Even in cases where this does not appear to be the primary motivation, such outreach may be presented as a desirable or at least productive outcome. Another initiator is quoted as having been ‘contacted by hundreds of other parents who say they have had similar ordeals, most of them only recently’. Reflecting on this outcome, this person expresses a hope ‘that by sharing what we experienced it might make people think before reacting like this’. Through such statements, digital platforms are presented not only as viable means to communicate with those sharing similar experiences and beliefs, but also as a potential tool for mobilisation.

Even in presenting digital vigilantism as disproportionate and problematic, it is generally also framed as understandable. While the process and outcomes may be framed as irrational or mob-like, in most cases, its origins are meant to be understood by the reader, suggesting that there is a rational core to such practices. More generally, denunciatory practices and mediated vigilantism are made meaningful in the press through specific forms of ambivalence. Although coverage typically includes a clear sense of concern over ‘digital mobs’, when dwelling on specific cases and weighing offending acts against responses and potential social outcomes, denunciations and related practices are understood as being at least partly desirable. This is especially noticeable when there may be a contextual history of non-response or insufficient response by formal authorities. Such ambivalence is expressed in terms of public approval, for example, when an editorial referencing several incidents states that as ‘over-the-top as these tactics may be, you can understand the temptation. (...) It would be so nice to exact some sort of revenge, if only we weren’t so mature’. Here, the reader is positioned as too mature to engage in mediated vigilantism, all while understanding the appeal and even desiring it to some degree. Institutional actors are also portrayed as having nuanced opinions, for instance, when police are presented as ‘frown[ing] upon this kind of vigilantism, while admitting that, if they had the resources, they’d conduct similar operations’. In this case, the primary barrier to police uptake of mediated initiatives against child sexual abuse seems to be funding, rather than legal or normative concerns. In seeking to establish boundaries of acceptable behaviour, some press coverage arranges various forms of denunciation to call attention to what appears to be a moral grey area:

Slut-shaming is wrong. We all know that – even Robin Thicke could probably hazard a guess in that direction. Ditto fat-shaming. It’s never OK to publically humiliate someone because of their gender, weight or relationship history. But what about shaming someone for being sleazy?

By aligning various forms of gender-based discrimination, such reporting points to the difficulty in drawing a line between acceptable and unacceptable denunciations. It bears noting that depending on how terms like sleazy and slut-shaming are defined,³ this amounts to contrasting denunciation as sexual predation with denunciation of sexual predation.

In taking a more critical stance against mediated denunciations, police are typically presented as a standard of appropriate conduct. This not only includes sourcing quotes from police officials, but also invoking police work as a potentially more acceptable set of practices. This is most evident in the opening quote about a parking group, which goes on to warn readers that

[f]olk have got to be careful with what they put on Facebook, people sometimes don’t know all the facts. People should report inconsiderate and dangerous parking – if the police don’t know they can’t do anything about it.

Here the statement that ‘folk have got to be careful’ is vaguely worded, reflecting the confluence between participation and spectatorship. Even those who may view themselves as the audience may actively contribute to harm, and should exercise restraint. In light of this uncertainty, police work is presented as a more legible and acceptable alternative. This also remains applicable to those who favour these practices. In the context of the same case, the initiator is quoted as claiming that their mediated initiatives ‘have resulted in around 200 police warnings every year, as well as several prosecutions’. Effectiveness is thus linked to the police as an institution, as opposed to framing it as an alternative or autonomous form of self-governance. Positioning mediated denunciations and vigilantism in relation to police work also downplays any parallels to the kinds of pronouncements made by the press itself.

Discussion

Digitally mediated vigilantism appears to disrupt conventional justice seeking, due to a lack of normative guidelines, as well as running foul of legal protocols. Such practices enter public discourse through press coverage, and are thus rendered meaningful. Through its framing, the UK press emerges as a detached yet occasionally opinionated reporter of online denunciations, typically without addressing its own contributions to this weaponised visibility. By conveying ambivalent sentiment through quotes from other social actors, the press expresses mediated vigilance and denunciation as a complex, multi-actor and context-specific set of practices that are contested. Yet this coverage also expresses its own perspective through editorials that belie the press’ largely unacknowledged position as a denouncer. Digital vigilantism is attributed to ‘Internet mobs’. Though the press will occasionally refer to specific commentators, they are addressed as a dehumanised mass that is technologically infused, legion in number and replete with wrath. Within this (counter-)denunciatory content, the distinction between harassment and commentary seems to be maintained when looking at how the broader public is presented. Yet both seemingly overlapping practices are presented as consequences of posting, and, more generally, of the existence of digital media platforms and device. The main difference seems to be when referencing opinions and other forms of content that serve a purpose for the press (cf. Chadwick, 2017). One may question the distinction between thousands of people debating on Facebook, and in the comments section of a newspaper’s website. Press coverage may mobilise the same audience, framing initial participants as attention seekers while directing potentially unwanted visibility in their direction. The press condemns online forums, while reproducing some of their worst features by reporting on such incidents, knowing that this will direct more attention to and engagement with them, as well as publishing vitriolic comments by their (digital) readership.

Returning to the one of the opening examples denouncing and directing attention to public intoxication, the article labels the now-defunct website as ‘sick’ in its headline. Yet the same newspaper includes articles about other members of the public who were publicly intoxicated at work, or on the road, featuring their full

names. While such transgressions are more severe, the decision to publicise in one case and not the other remains open to question. Besides asking which transgressions (and transgressors) should be made public, another critical question is which social actors should be entrusted with this task. Such negotiations remain ongoing, shaped by technological possibilities as well as other factors, such as legal protections and social conventions. One can speculate that user-led denunciations signal an increased democratisation of surveillance. Yet individuals may add to social harms associated with surveillance such as categorical discrimination and a chilling effect on free speech, without challenging institutionalised means of watching over and intervening in the lives of a population. These practices may also serve to reconfigure a kind of court of public opinion, where digital media users assess and denounce those who find themselves under prominent scrutiny. Some of this denunciation is distilled and reproduced in the press, while the broader process is framed as at best ambivalent and at worst as an Internet mob. In context of penal populism, debates and discourses around digital vigilantism (e.g. state or police not doing enough to maintain social order) may enable political actors to impose harsher protocols and standards with regards to criminal offenders and marginalised communities, and also further the boundaries of actionable offences (e.g. what constitutes anti-social behaviour, and which categories of individuals are most likely to face scrutiny).

This study maintains a limited perspective in geographic terms, and also in not centring the experiences of those who are directly involved in such practices. We can speculate that those targeted by such denunciations experience harms in the immediate and prolonged aftermath, which may remain under-represented in both the press and scholarship. Subsequent research should consider press coverage beyond the United Kingdom, and also consider the experiences and perceptions of those who participate in online denunciations. Finally, scholarly accounts of mediated denunciation are not entirely distinct from journalistic ones. A critical consideration of press tactics should also involve a return to reflecting on how we make these practices meaningful, notably in questioning the purpose a word like 'vigilantism' serves as a conceptual lens.

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Notes

1. While both local and national press gave coverage of cases, it was primarily tabloids that were active at the national level. One exception is broadsheet coverage in response to a case denouncing sexual harassment in a professional setting.
2. Invoking terms like vigilante and vigilante action/attacks likely serves a more normative goal of discrediting participants (in terms of how a word like vigilante is received by tabloid readership). While this may differ from the intended scholarly use of such terms, such unintended outcomes warrant further attention.
3. The article in question goes on to describe a bartender who denounced a patron who allegedly groped her.

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