

Title: Watchful Citizens: Policing from Below and Digital Vigilantism

Organizers:

Gilles Favarel-Garrigues	SciencesPo – CERI	
Daniel Trottier	Erasmus University Rotterdam	
Samuel Tanner	International Center for Comparative Criminology	

Call for proposal

In Europe and America, political mobilizations have emboldened citizens to monitor and harass individuals based on categories of suspicion, for instance illegal aliens. These mobilizations in turn have spawned counter-movements seeking to render perpetrators of hate-speech and harassment visible and accountable. Depending on the cause defended and the political context, governments may explicitly or implicitly support citizen groups that publicize and denounce suspected wrongdoing by other citizens. Digital media cultures facilitate the sharing of evidence of offensive acts, but also the shaming of targeted individuals and a broader moralising against criminal or otherwise undesirable populations. Visibility, as manifest through the public and open distribution of a target's personal details, stands as a central feature of contemporary vigilante campaigns.

What is new with digital vigilantism? If the digital sphere is definitely a crucial aspect of this visibility, one also has to consider a more profound transformation in societal participation, or how the population relates to and perceives its authorities when social, political, cultural, religious, national and security issues are at stake. As shown in assessments of late modernity, liberal and neo-liberal politics have deputized citizens by rendering them responsible for their own security, social order and fate, thus leading to a distributed regulatory network rather than strictly top-down governance of society (Bayley & Shearing, 2001). Yet deputized citizens are not only following their authorities' recommendations; they are also self-directed in what they consider the good march of society. According to Walsh's argument (Walsh, 2014), such a transformation in societal participation led to a shift from a *deputization* to an *autonomization* paradigm, referring to the voluntary, or self-appointed, involvement of citizens in the regulatory gatekeeping network. This refers to grassroots mobilization, rather than governments mobilising the public, with groups of citizens spontaneously aligning themselves with authorities' arms and objectives (Walsh, 2008). Autonomization also refers here to a context in which an ideal-typical state claims to monopolize law enforcement functions, in contrast to groups acting strictly autonomously, or as challengers of state law enforcement institutions.

However, underlying these transformations should not lead to underestimate historical continuities with classical forms of citizens' involvement in denunciation, law enforcement and vigilante justice. One of the most recurrent forms of autonomization is vigilantism as a form of societal participation. Even if it is formally unsolicited, vigilantism represents an outgrowth of state activity" (2014: 249). According to Walsh, "while operating without official authorization, the organizations do not perceive their actions as overriding or transgressing the local order but construct themselves as self-anointed guardians rescuing national sovereignty, citizenship and the law's moral sanctity, from cultural elites, moneyed interests, inept bureaucrats and a sclerotic state" (2014: 249).

According to Favarel-Garrigues and Gayer, vigilantism may be defined as "collective coercive practices undertaken by non-state actors in order to enforce norms (social or judicial) and/or to take the law in their own hands – a term that mostly refers to punishing, but also to societal ideals. In targeting the offenders that are external to their community, but also their own offenders, vigilantes are both involved in the fight against crime and social control. Their activities are known because they either are conducted in public, in the name of a community of reference, or because the witnesses to more secretly conducted punishing expeditions spread the information and nourish the group's reputation" (Favarel-Garrigues & Gayer, 2016: 17).

If pioneers' work established a first definition of vigilantism based on history (Brown, 1975; Abrahams, 1998; Johnston, 1996), more recent sociological and anthropological works have focused on vigilante *practices and activities* on the field (Favarel-Garrigues & Gayer, 2016; Pratten & Sen, 2007). More specifically, and considering the recent developments in media and communication, we want to focus on the impacts and interactions between vigilantism and the digital sphere. On this matter, Daniel Trottier defines digital vigilantism as " a process where citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and respond through coordinated retaliation on digital media platforms, including mobile devices and social media platforms. The offending acts range from mild breaches of social protocol to terrorist acts and participation in riots. These offensive acts are not meant as a provocation in the context in which vigilantism is situated. Therefore, the targets of digital vigilantism are typically unaware of the conflict in which they have been enrolled" (Trottier, 2015: 218). Digital vigilantism refers, but is not limited, to a basic principle of "naming and shaming", or through a 'weaponisation of visibility', that is sharing the target's personal details by publishing/distributing them on public sites ('doxing')¹. According to Trottier: "The visibility produced through digital vigilantism is unwanted (the target is typically not soliciting publicity) intense (content like blog posts, photos and videos evidence circulate to hundreds of thousands or even millions of users within a few days) and enduring (the vigilantism campaign may be the first item to appear when searching the individual's name online, and may become a cultural reference in its own right)" (Trottier, 2015: 219). He then argues that: "the emergence of social, geolocated, ubiquitous media has led to a dissolution to any such barrier, to the extent that digital media activity can have lasting consequences in both a local and global context" (Trottier, 2015: 220).

¹ For example, Rddit.com is a well-known platform of discussions where people can easily converge where personal information is posted.

Digital vigilantism implies a paradigm shift with regard to the *context* in which digital media are used, pointing to the end of a yet well-established distinction between online activity and offline consequences (Trottier, 2015; 2016; Reagle, 2015). Digital communication comes with “context collapse”, where the “lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts” (boyd, 2008: 34). As Reagle puts it: “Comment’s reactivity, shortness, and asynchronicity mean that it is especially contextual but that its context also is easily lost as it is forwarded and retweeted” (Reagle, 2015: 79).

The coming workshop, which will launch the International Center for Comparative Criminology’s 2017-2018 scientific season, will focus on *digital vigilantism*. Considering both the raising of the autonomization paradigm and the digital sphere, we will address the impacts of such dimensions on the *practices, activities* and *dynamics* of vigilantism, but also how vigilantism and the autonomization of societal practices with regard to gatekeeping and social control impacts vigilantism. As examples of communications, we would welcome propositions addressing (but not limited to) the following issues:

- How do vigilantes promote and enforce their norms and/or values in practice using digital media?
- How do digital media help, transform and contribute to the coordination of embodied activities in the context of vigilante activities?
- How do digital media contribute to the renegotiation and reassertion of collective (ex: nationalist) identities in the context of vigilante activities?
- How can scholarship contribute to a better understanding of the relation between on- and offline in the context of vigilante activities?
- What link can we draw between digital vigilantism and the social, political and economic discourses of the vigilantes?
- Aside from mediated visibility as social harm, what other outcomes might targets or participants of digital vigilantism face in consequence?
- How can we (re)imagine relations between states (broadly defined to include law enforcement agencies) and vigilant(e) citizens beyond frameworks of contestation/substitution/complementarity? How are digital vigilantism initiatives related to official law-enforcement institutions (cooperation/challenge/conflict)?
- How is mediated visibility understood by vigilantes (but also other relevant social actors such as states, journalists and digital media platforms) as a means to combat criminal and otherwise offensive acts?
- How are specific mediated acts such as online shaming and ‘doxing’ both leveraged and rendered meaningful in the context of vigilante activities?
- How can we articulate social control (low crime) and societal control (high crime) with regard to digital vigilantism?
- What do we know about the commercial dimension of digital vigilantism?

- How are digital vigilantism initiatives related to existing political parties, social movements, associations, lobbies or private firms?
- How do the vigilantes communicate about their activity on the web? How do they show their campaigns on Youtube? How do they edit the videos they post?
- What do vigilantes defend? Legal norms, moral prescriptions, own values and interests?

Practical information

The workshop will take place at **Université de Montréal, 2-3 November 2017**. Proposals should include a title, a clear identification of the author(s), as well as an affiliation and should be no longer than 500-600 words. Proposals may be grounded in different academic and disciplinary perspectives including, but not limited to sociology, political science, anthropology, criminology, media studies, history. They should be sent to samuel.tanner@umontreal.ca by 22nd May 2017. Authors will receive an answer by 1st July 2017.

References

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