

ARMCHAIR DETECTIVES AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF FALSEHOODS:
EMERGENT MOB BEHAVIOR ON THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

'Truth' in today's society is at the center of several ongoing political debates, particularly with the influx of fake news, smear campaigns, and conspiracy theories. The problem with the 'truth' has been further exacerbated by the internet and new media technologies that allow multiple truths and facts to exist and fester, often with real world, offline consequences. My research examines an emergent online phenomenon called 'mob justice,' which embodies the problems and consequences of our 'post-truth' society. Broadly speaking, mob justice online is an episode of collective behavior attempting to be a force of informal control while spiraling out of control itself. Using two large scale cases – the 2013 Boston bombing and the 2015 Bangkok bombing, I analyze how everyday citizens gathered on social media channels to find the bombers in an ad hoc attempt at social justice. Despite using the power of collective intelligence, both cases failed catastrophically, as the swirl of emotions and murky status of facts and rumors caused the online community to accuse, target, and harass innocent people throughout their armchair investigations. However, my findings demonstrate that the online community is not solely responsible for such witch-hunt antics. The online community's interactions with institutional players such as the police and mass media influence what is considered to be fact and falsehood online. Using various methods such as content analysis, actor network theory, and social mechanisms, I map out how statements online progress through a network of interactions to eventually reach the precarious status of 'truth.' I also construct a failure model of mob justice to understand the step-by-step processes and interactions that incite an episode of mob justice stemming from the failure of collective intelligence. The findings as well as the failure model contribute to the dearth of research on this growing phenomenon, and indicate that a typology of mob justice episodes, successful or otherwise, can be created. The research is significant for its implications regarding the power of collective behavior on the internet, how facts and falsehoods are constructed online, and the ever-changing nature of truth in today's society.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2012, US Homeland Security asked the public online to identify a photo of a woman who was suspected to be engaging in pedophilia and child pornography. Within hours of the photo being shared online, Homeland Security received a tip from a user on Reddit that led to her arrest (US News 2012). People gathered on Reddit congratulated the user, and rejoiced in the restoration of justice. The case is just one of many examples of the power of the internet to help state authorities solve crime and ensure social justice is achieved. However, not all stories of collective action online end so neatly. In fact, collective behavior online is often riddled with issues of distrust, emotion, rumors, conspiracy, violence, and the competition for truth.

The internet has changed many things about our world, from the way we connect and communicate with one another, to the way we perceive and understand the world. The development of new media technologies has allowed the continuous overflow of information around the world. Yet the problem of the internet is a contradiction in itself. “For better and worse, we live in a world in which there is simultaneously too much information and too little” (Fine and Ellis 2010:4). The splinter of information from various sources, legitimate or otherwise, has exacerbated the multiple truths existing within our society. “Many groups present the truth about what is happening around us in an attempt to persuade us” (Fine and Ellis 2010:4). Not only has the internet created a home for multiple truths in its echo chamber, it has also enabled online communities to act as a force of informal control, surveilling society’s every move and correcting social injustices as they see fit when state authorities fail to do so.

Truth in today’s age of the internet is also at the center of current debates in American society and around the world, particularly in light of the influx of ‘fake news,’ smear campaigns,

and conspiracies in the 2016 US presidential election, which has been dubbed as the ‘post-truth’ election (Noe 2016). Essentially, truth, which is heavily intertwined with morality, is being overcome by gut reactions and emotion. Moreover, truth is being forcefully exploited as an ideological tool by groups of people online who believe their version of truth and justice is the ‘truest’. What we are seeing happening is that activities carried out online spiral out of control and spill into the physical world, and have real consequences on people’s lives. People receive death threats, get harassed, and have their personal information exposed for the sake of justice. How is this happening? This is the basic puzzle of the dissertation.

While it seems that the events of the presidential election seem unprecedented, the issue is not new. My research looks at mob justice as an emergent phenomenon on the internet, informed by previous forms of popular justice such as European witch-hunts and lynchings in America. Mob justice on the internet is essentially an episode of collective behavior attempting to be a force of informal control, usually while spiraling out of control itself. It is when people band together online in an effort to punish a perceived perpetrator or contribute to the resolution of a social injustice, often with dire or uncontrollable consequences in the real world. At surface value, the perpetrators of mob justice may seem to be emotional and irrational. However, my study sheds light on the deeper processes of mob justice and show that the online community is not solely responsible for mob justice behavior. The online community’s interactions with institutional structures and formal control agents within specific social and historical contexts may inadvertently create an episode of mob justice behavior.

The research draws largely from two major case studies of mob justice – the 2013 Boston bombing and the 2015 Bangkok bombing. Both of these cases followed similar trajectories in producing mob justice behavior in their different cultural, political, social, and historical contexts.

Through an in-depth content analysis of episodes of mob justice, as well as analyses of the processes and mechanisms via actor-network theory, material culture, and social mechanisms, I constructed a model of mob justice, which is then tested on other cases for validity. The research is theoretically framed within social control theory and perspectives on collective behavior. The research is significant for its implications on how facts and falsehoods are constructed and the nature of truth in today's society.

The chapters are as follows: the rest of this chapter is a literature review, which provides an overview of social control theory, collective behavior, sociology of emotion, collective violence, and internet studies. It also provides historical background on old forms of mob justice, primarily medieval European witch-hunts and lynchings in the US during the Civil War. Chapter 2, "Research Setting & Methodology" explains the processes of data collection and analysis. Chapter 3 and 4 detail the empirical findings of the content analysis for the 2013 Boston bombing and the 2015 Bangkok bombing, respectively. The chapters provide deep insight into the inner-workings of the online communities engaged in the unofficial investigation into the bombings. Chapter 5 discusses how facts were constructed in the online communities using actor-network theory and material culture. Chapter 6 uses a social mechanisms approach to theorize a general model of mob justice, showing what key interactions between institutional and non-institutional players inadvertently generate an episode of mob justice. The latter half of the chapter tests the model against four more mob justice cases from the US and Thailand. Chapter 7 is a discussion and conclusion chapter, which answers the research questions that emerged out of the literature on collective behavior as a form of social control.

Literature Review

To understand the processes that lead to collective behavior on the internet, two main theoretical frameworks are used to frame the research. The overarching theoretical framework is social control theory, which descends from criminology and studies on deviant behavior. The companion theoretical framework is the concept of collective behavior coming out of the social movement perspective, particularly studies focusing on mob and crowd behavior. As a supplement to the two frameworks, research on the sociology of emotion, violence, and the internet will also be used. In essence, episodes of mob justice can be studied as a form of informal control enacted by a collective body of people who believe they are representing public interests and normative ideals of social justice. However, internet mob justice, which is the empirical interest in this case, has unique characteristics. The key contribution to our understanding of mob justice will therefore be internet studies. Episodes of internet mob justice may have similarities to old forms of mob behavior, but the internet, as we will see, adds new dimensions and complexities to the phenomenon.

The literature review is structured as follows: “Social Control Theory” will discuss the literature on social control, particularly focusing on informal social control. Next, the section titled “Collective Behavior” will discuss research from the social movement perspective as well as the development of crowd theory. The sub-section, “The Sociology of Emotion and Violence” will add a more nuanced understanding to how mobs act and what motivates them. “A History of Collective Violence” provides a quick look at the history of medieval European witch hunts and lynching in America during the 1800s. “The Internet and the Mob” will discuss the available but minimal literature studying this phenomenon, and tie in with larger internet studies on online communities. The final section will discuss the research questions that arise from the literature.

Before discussing the literature, however, it is important to note that ‘mob justice’ is not a widely agreed upon term; sometimes it is called ‘cyber lynching’, ‘witch hunts’, or ‘mob vigilantism.’ ‘Vigilantism’ is a common word to use; its definition according to Caughey (1957:219) is “group action in lieu of regular justice”; ‘regular’ meaning state sanctioned punishments. However, ‘vigilantism’ also implies a sense of intentionality and purpose; what the empirical cases of my research will show is that mob behavior, or informal sanctions are not always intentional. In fact, it seems to be a side-effect of various institutional and community interactions. Therefore, I have chosen to use ‘justice’ instead of ‘vigilantism’ to imply that the community’s sense of justice is the key motivator for their informal, sometimes violent, sanctions.

Social Control Theory

Social control theory at its broadest conception proposes that there are various agents within society that serve to exert control over an individual or group in order to discourage deviant behavior. The purpose of social control is to socialize individuals into internalizing social norms, the end goal of which is social order and moral cohesion (King and Wheelock 2007; Parsons 1998; Ross 1896; Tyler and Boeckmann 1997; Vidmar and Miller 1980). Agents of control operate at many levels throughout society and social relationships, both formally through criminal law and informally through interpersonal relationships. Primary social groups, such as the family and intimate relationships are effective agents of informal control, not only in deterring crime through the social ties they provide, but specifically relevant to this research, they can also actively enforce social control when formal authority is lacking (Bellair 1997; Chriss 2013; Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Maimon and Browning 2012, 2012; Paternoster et al. 1983; Sampson 1986; Warner and Rountree 1997; Wilkinson,

Beatty, and Lurry 2009). Research on informal control has shown that vigilante efforts are often fueled by a communal frustration at the absence, ineffectiveness, or unresponsiveness of the police, criminal justice system, and ultimately, the law (Abrahams 2002; Brenner 2002; Feenan 2002b; Huggins 1991; Johnston 1996; Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Lee and Seekings 2002; Minnaar 2002; Wilkinson et al. 2009).

For example, Kubrin and Weitzer's (2003) study on neighborhoods of St. Louis, Missouri show that residents engaged in violent retaliatory practices such as physical assault or murder as a way to informally solve problems (i.e. punish violators of cultural and social norms) rather than relying on the ineffective local police. Moreover, such practices were often publicly carried out and supported by the local community, thus legitimizing the use of violence and shame as methods of informal control.

Therefore, there is a contentious relationship between formal (state sanctioned) and informal (community sanctioned) forms of social control. To understand the relationship more, Donald Black's theory of social control from pure sociology is very useful because he expanded the notion of social control beyond the law, as the law cannot explain all aspects of social control (Cooney 1994). As it goes, "despite the popular and scholarly attention law receives, people invoke the legal system relatively rarely" (Cooney 1994:33). It is therefore important to look at informal social control, which pure sociology helps explain.

Pure sociology, as Black (2004:14–15) defines it,

explains human behavior with social geometry – its multidimensional location and direction in social space. It ignores the contents of the human mind, such as thoughts and feelings, and is entirely free of psychology. It also ignores human goals or ends, whether of persons or groups, and is therefore entirely free of teleology. It even ignores the human in human behavior and instead addresses the behavior of social life in the strictest sense, such as the behavior of law, science, art, or supernatural beings. It explains these phenomena neither with characteristics of individuals nor those of collectivities but rather with their social

geometry, such as the social distances they span, their social elevation, and their direction from one social location to another.

The above very long quote explains a number of things about pure sociology. Pure sociology is considered 'pure' because it does not consider psychology, emotion, or ideas of the individual or the collective when examining a phenomenon. It only looks at the placement of social structures in social space. In his influential book, *The Behavior of Law* (1976), Black provides a theory of law and how it functions in relation with social life, and how it varies in 'quantity' and 'style.' By looking at how the parties who are involved in a legal or nonlegal conflict relate to one another in the social space, Black makes a number of propositions about how the law operates. For example, there are horizontal dimensions, which looks at the "degrees of intimacy and integration"; vertical dimensions, which looks at the class stratification between the parties in conflict, and normative dimensions, which looks at the use of laws and customs to define what is deviant in society. Black theorizes that formal and informal control have an inverse relationship; the more informal control an individual receives from family and friends, the less formal control they are faced with (Black 1976:7).

Using the lens of pure sociology, Cooney's (1994) empirical research on homicide looks at how the two systems of social control, formal and informal, treat the crime and those convicted of it. Despite Black's proposal about the inverse relationship between formal and informal control, Cooney found that the relationship was more complex than that. While Black posits that "conflicts between distant adversaries (such as strangers) attract more law and punishment" (Black 1976, 2004), Cooney did not find the same conclusion for informal control. Informal control was rather mild compared to formal control of homicide defendants. The most common method of informal control was avoidance. However, Cooney did discover that both types of social control "respond to the same sociological variables" such as race, social

integration, and so forth. The takeaway from Cooney's research, however, is the difference in breadth between the two forms of control. "Informal social control is confined to smaller segments of social space than law. Law subjects those too distant to be touched by informal order to a common system of control" (Cooney 1994:32). Informal control is confined within a smaller social space, and is enacted within the network of the family, neighborhood, and acquaintances. While the law has broader jurisdiction, "informal social control has a limited ability to exert authority over the wrongdoing of strangers" (Cooney 1994:53).

A particularly relevant aspect of Black's theory of conflict is the horizontal dimension. The horizontal dimension as Black (1976) posited, looks at how integrated or close the two parties in conflict are. He describes this dimension in his recent book *Moral Time* (2011), where he proposes a theory of conflict. For Black (2011), conflict still occurs within a social space but there is an added dynamic dimension of social (moral) time. His theory of moral time predicts when conflicts will occur and to what degree. Within the horizontal dimension, Black theorizes about relational time and distance, and discusses two concepts: overintimacy, "a decrease in relational distance", and underintimacy "an increase in relational distance" (Black 2011:21). It is essentially concerned with the degree of familiarity and intimacy between two parties in conflict. These two concepts relate to how formal and informal control can be enacted. Black states, "Conflict is a direct function of overinvolvement" (Black 2011:22). The more severe the conflict causing a sudden increase in intimacy level, the more severe the legal punishment. Using the example of rape, Black explains that rape between strangers causes more conflicts and draws more severe formal and informal sanctions, rather than rape between intimates (family, acquaintances). Moreover, drawing from Cooney's (1994) findings, the law is able to sanction

such crimes of overinvolvement between strangers more severely even if informal control prevents the social networks of strangers from reaching one another.

Becker's (1955) study on marijuana use and social control also demonstrates Black's and Cooney's points. He finds that an increase in relational distance; that is, the more disintegrated a marijuana user becomes from society, the less effective informal control becomes. However, with strong legal sanctions back in the 1950s on marijuana use, formal control can still take place if a marijuana user is caught. Similarly, Tucker and Ross's study (2008:282) on the use of corporal punishment in families with varying degrees of intimacy concluded that "the more distance, the more potential for violence increases. In settings where people are intimate and culturally similar, by contrast, social control is more likely to involve negotiation and compromise." Tucker and Ross note that not just relational distance matters, but also cultural distance (how diverse the cultural background of the two parties are). "Social control varies by the amount of social distance, the strength of people's ties, and the degree of cultural closeness between the participants. It becomes more aggressive when people who initiate social control are socially distant from the people subject to it" (Tucker and Ross 2008:281).

However, empirical research on informal control shows that the absence of formal control can lead to community justice, and the use of violence as a form of problem solving (Black 1983; Kirk and Papachristos 2011). This is another aspect of the relationship between formal and informal control. Informal control, as so far discussed, has been enacted in tandem with formal control. However, when formal control is absent, it can lead to frustration and action by the community. In some cases, group vigilantism and their practices of informal control are an expression of the failure of formal control agents such as the police and the government. In

these instances, Black's (1976) proposition that informal and formal control have an inverse relationship may be true.

Unable to rely on formal authorities, group vigilantes may arise to protect the interests of the local community. Often beginning out of individual frustration, group vigilantism may eventually morph into structured organizations (Feenan 2002a; Huggins 1991; Lee and Seekings 2002; Minnaar 2002; Senechal de la Roche 1996). The organizational and planned aspect of vigilante groups is important to recognize. Vigilante organizations are "non-bureaucratic and de-professionalized" by nature; they are composed of voluntary, autonomous citizens (Feenan 2002b:3; Johnston 1996). Bound by the common lived experiences of injustice, the organizations are fueled by a strong sense of responsibility to protect their own communities from deviant behavior and to deter more from happening (Feenan 2002a; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Lee and Seekings 2002; McEvoy and Mika 2002; Minnaar 2002). Thus, a "cycle of responsibility and reliance" is created as the local people increasingly turn to informal justice rather than formal authorities (Walklate 2002:71).

Unrestricted by formal criminal justice requirements, vigilante organizations such as 'private police forces' in Latin America (Huggins 1991) or the Salford Firm, a local criminal gang in a small British town (Walklate 2002), are able to conduct their own investigations and carry out immediate and swift justice (Minnaar 2002). With strong support and reliance from the community, the vigilante group is further legitimized and given more authority over the community (Feenan 2002a; Gould 1999; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Lee and Seekings 2002; Minnaar 2002). Vigilante organizations therefore are usually highly localized, such as the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland who "arise from, live within, and depend upon the communities in which they are based" (Feenan 2002a:44), and have trouble gaining legitimacy in

less-integrated communities as seen in the increasingly urbanized towns of post-Apartheid South Africa or urban neighborhoods of Seattle (Lee and Seekings 2002; Warner and Rountree 1997). When integration is low, there is more chance of deviant behavior occurring. Durkheim (1951) conceptualized this condition of society as anomie. With low integration and lack of regulation, both formally and informally, there is a “loosened commitment to prevailing norms” and deviance is more likely to happen (Passas 2006:175). Yet the nature of such conditions is cyclical, as anomie could lead to vigilante behavior.

Although vigilante groups desire to defend society’s moral values and maintain social order, their main tactic is “deterrence based on severe sanctions” (Feenan 2002a:51). In his attempt to define what counts as a vigilante act, Johnston (1996) lists the use of force as a necessary element of vigilantism. Vigilante groups have been shown to use violent tactics, corporal punishment, and intimidation in various settings (Black 1983; Brenner 2002; Feenan 2002a; Felson and Messner 2000; Gould 1999; Huggins 1991; Johnston 1996; King and Wheelock 2007; Senechal de la Roche 1996). However, due to a strong wish for retribution, vigilante groups may start out with community anger but can often dissolve into satisfying personal vendettas (Feenan 2002a; Lee and Seekings 2002). In such situations, the vigilante group may be considered more ‘mob’-like in character and behavior. They become more disorderly, “capricious and dangerously unpredictable” such as in the extreme mob lynchings in the American South in the late 1800s (Jean and Brundage 2002:162). However, as the next sections will show, the ‘mob’ is not necessarily unpredictable nor emotionally unstable.

Based on the two sets of research, from Black’s theoretical perspective on social control to the empirical research on informal control, we can glean a few key points about the relationships between formal and informal control. Formal control has a wider jurisdiction as the

law can apply to anyone in any physical location, near and far. It is a way of providing a standard definition of deviance, although formal control is not immune to the biases and prejudices stemming from social structures such as race and class (Cooney 1994). Formal control can be effective and more severe, particularly when the two parties in conflict are strangers to one another (Black 2011). Informal control can sometimes have an inverse relationship with formal control, which matches with some of the empirical research discussed above. In the absence of formal control or with weak formal control, informal control can also increase. There are various tactics of informal control, from mild ones such as simple avoidance, to emotional ones such as shaming, and violent ones, such as guns and bombs.

While social control theory, particularly from Black's perspective, demonstrates the complex relationship between formal and informal control agents, there is more to the puzzle of understanding the behavior of online mob justice. Pure sociology specifically ignores the psychology, individual and collective, of the mob. The next section discusses concepts related to collective behavior from a social movement perspective, which brings the identity of the individual and collective back into the equation.

Collective Behavior

Collective behavior is a well-studied concept within social movement theory, but it has undergone a number of shifts throughout the decades of research. In 1896, psychologist LeBon (1896) wrote his book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, which became influential in the study of crowd psychology. LeBon examined the behavior of the crowd in various French revolutions and concluded that the crowd is irritable and impulsive, and prone to 'contagion.' Contagion theory, as formulated by LeBon, states that individuals in a crowd lose themselves in the mood and anonymity of the crowd and stop thinking altogether. "A crowd perpetually

hovering on the borderland of unconsciousness, readily yielding to all suggestions, having all the violence of feeling peculiar to beings who cannot appeal to the influence of reason, deprived of all critical faculty, cannot be otherwise than excessively credulous” (LeBon 1896:2). For LeBon, due to the irrationality and impulsiveness of the crowd, “the crowd could not be a meaningful political actor” (Drury and Scott 2013:6).

The idea that the crowd was simply mindless and irrational changed as researchers began studying various social movements and riots in the 1950s and 1960s (Drury and Scott 2013; Marx and Wood 1975). By that time, researchers had begun using the phrase ‘collective behavior’, first coined by Park & Burgess (1921:463) and defined as “the behavior of individuals under the influence of an impulse that is common and collective, an impulse, in other words, that is the result of social interaction”. While this definition still has hints of LeBon’s definition of the ‘crowd’, Park & Burgess believed that collective behavior is not “a psychological unity, nor a ‘single being’, subject to the ‘mental unity of crowds’ (LeBon 1896:296)...The panic is the crowd in dissolution” (Park and Burgess 1921:468). There was more emotion to the crowd than just simply hypnotism. In the 1950s and 1960s, as racial conflicts between whites and blacks increased in America and various riots were taking place, social scientists began to understand that the “the social problem was not the crowd, but deep-seated inequality and racism in US society (Allen 1970; Feagin and Hahn 1973; Fogelson 1970)” (Drury and Scott 2013:7). The emergence of collective violence was not simply a crowd “hovering on the borderland of unconsciousness” (LeBon 1896:2), their actions had a political and social cause. Therefore, there seemed to be both “rational and irrational motivations behind both collective and conventional behavior” (Marx and Wood 1975:367).

Drawing from these new understandings of collective behavior, McPhail, in his influential book, *The Myth of the Madding Crowd* (1991) states that the crowd is in fact, not mindless nor erratic. Crowds are purposive and organized. Yet, like LeBon (1896), McPhail (1991) fails to take into consideration broader sociocultural conditions that spur collective action (Johnson 1992; Oliver 1992). “We know that social change goals, emotions, political opportunities, discursive frames, collective understandings, and a sense of history all matter. What we need to do is look for the ways in which these ‘big’ effects affect the microprocesses”, explains Oliver (1992:1528).

There are two aspects of collective behavior that need more attention: emotion and violence. Part of the misconceptions with crowd and collective behavior come from its use of violent tactics. The discussion of informal control methods in the previous section also touches upon this issue. Collective behavior often times is negatively perceived or face stigma, whether it be because the media portrays it as ‘mindless’ or that it uses violent tactics seemingly without any reason. Moreover, the emotion of collective behaviors, which is often equated incorrectly with irrationality (Aminzade and McAdam 2001; Cadena-Roa 2002; Jasper 2011), is also called into question, as scholars of social movement theory continue to debate how rational or emotional an act of collective behavior is. Aminzade and McAdam (2001:21) write that “an analysis that ignores the emotional dimensions of attachments and commitments is incapable of explaining activists' determination in the face of high risk and their willingness to endure suffering and self-sacrifice, including torture and death”. The two elements of emotion and violence are often treated together, as being emotional could lead one to use unnecessary violence. Nonetheless, the sociological study of emotion and violence has yielded important

understandings of how the two function. As Oliver (1992) urges, we need to study all aspects of collective behavior in order to get the full picture.

The Sociology of Emotion and Violence

James Jasper, an influential scholar in the study of emotions and social movements, discusses the importance of the study of emotion: “an emotional vision is helping us find hidden mechanisms beneath many of the concepts we have taken for granted for so long” (2011). Jasper (2011:286) explains that emotion does not equate to irrationality; rather, it can play a role in motivating individuals, particularly when emotional energy is generated in a crowd setting. The interactive aspect is key here, and harks back to previous definitions on collective behavior, even LeBon’s ‘crowd’. It is the interaction between people that generates emotional energy; people certainly react to the energy of the crowd, but it does not necessarily mean that they lose themselves completely. This is in agreement with Turner & Killian (1957), who believe that the actor is constantly interpreting what is happening and acts accordingly; this notion comes from a symbolic interactionist perspective. In studying the role of emotion in feminist politics, Ahmed (2004:10) similarly states that “Emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made.” Emotion is based on interaction and helps construct personal and collective identities, while maintaining group boundaries (Aminzade and McAdam 2001; Cadena-Roa 2002).

“Emotion is a part of cognition and morality” (Jasper 2011:298). This means that emotion is linked to critical thinking, and in fact, plays a role in forcing actors to be explicit about their goals, political or otherwise. Moreover, emotion is important for sustaining participation in a movement and providing satisfaction for participants along the way (Aminzade and McAdam 2001; Jasper 2011). Emotion is also complex, with many dimensions. Jasper creates a typology

of emotions from reflex emotions (immediately reacting to an event) to long-term emotions (committed ideas related to morals and values). He also discusses the goal of having an impact, that is, “the desire to have an effect on the world is another great family of emotions. In social movements, this desire often comes from a moral vision or ideology which suggests that the world should be different from the way it is” (Jasper 2011:291). Impact sometimes can be the clash of reflex emotion with long-term “affective commitments” (Jasper 2011:297). Explosive events can force us to react immediately while challenging our long-held ideas about the world. Such clashes of emotion constitute a particularly interesting area of research that Jasper calls for in future research, as it uncovers the complexities of human emotion and cognition.

Emotion, therefore, is not irrational, but very much a key part of our cognition and plays a role in our understanding of social experiences. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2013) also engages in the relationship between moral reasoning, instinct, emotions, and judgements. While Haidt does not see emotion and rationality as part of the same whole, Haidt agrees with Jasper in the sense that emotions influence people’s perception about society. People are more likely to act on gut instinct and make judgements before listening to reason (Haidt 2001, 2013). Jasper (2011) would argue that such gut instincts are a key part of cognition. The actual distinctions between cognition and gut instincts are based in heavy philosophical debates beyond the scope of this research, however, we can take the understandings from both scholars in regard to the role of emotion in motivating internet users to become armchair detectives, and eventually, usually, engaging in violent behaviors.

If violence is supposed to stem from irrational emotions, but emotion is not irrational, then what is violence? In his book *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*, Collins (2009) uses microsociology to explain the dynamics of violence in face to face interactions. Collins’ main

thesis about violence is that there are no violent people, just violent situations that people react to. While there are critiques of such a perspective, as scholars such as criminologist Raine (2014) have argued that there is a biological perspective to the propensity for violence, the scope of such nature versus nurture discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Collins' thesis about there being no violent people is certainly qualified by such critiques, but for the purposes of the current study, violent situations will be a key perspective to the emergence of mob behavior. The interactive aspect of violence, in which violent situations encourage violent behaviors, is therefore similar to that of emotion. This echoes Black (2004) and McPhail (1991) in a few ways.

Black (2004) defines 'self-help' as a form of informal social control, in which an aggrieved party takes matters into its own hands to enact informal control. Black (2004) even considers terrorism as an aggressive form of self-help by organized civilians. He explains through the lens of pure sociology,

Violence might appear to be an unpredictable outburst or unexplainable explosion, but it arises with geometrical precision. It is unpredictable and unexplainable only if we seek its origins in the characteristics of individuals (such as their beliefs or frustrations) or in the characteristics of societies, communities, or other collectivities (such as their cultural values or level of inequality). But violent individuals and violent collectivities do not exist: No individual or collectivity is violent in all settings at all times, and neither individualistic nor collectivistic theories predict and explain precisely when and how violence occurs (2004:15).

Black (2004) agrees with Collins (2009) that there is no violent people, simply violent structures or situations. However, while Black wants to ignore the psychological and emotional aspects of violence and only treat it through pure sociology, Collins takes those aspects into great consideration in his study on violence. Collins (2009:22) also explicitly critiques Black's theory of violence and the behavior of law because Black assumes that "violence is easy". Violence, as

Collins continuously shows throughout this book, is actually very difficult even if the motivation to be violent may exist. This leads back to McPhail's (1991) work.

Both Collins (2009) and McPhail (1991) discuss crowd violence. McPhail (1991) states that unanimous action is rare in a crowd; that is, when a crowd is violent, not every single individual in the crowd is equally violent. Rather, it is usually the work of a few extremists who commit violent acts, but end up being seen as representing the entire movement they were participating in. Because violence is not easy, even if individuals see others in a crowd being violent, there is a certain emotional threshold they must cross in order to become violent themselves. Similarly, Collins (2009:34) examines a number of violent acts in war and concludes that "violence has very strong structural limits, by its very nature as the product of an emotional field." In regards to crowd violence, Collins (2009:71) writes,

crowd violence is almost always carried out by a small proportion of persons at the front, throwing stones, taunting the enemy, burning or smashing enemy property. The behavior of most people in riots shows tension and fear, manifested in great caution, and frequently in running toward safety at signs of counter-attack from the other side. The "elite" of crowd fighters, those at the front, also generally shows some manifestations of fear or at least high degrees of tension.

This quote demonstrates Collins' key points about violence. Violence is first and foremost, not easy for those who have been socialized and taught by society that acts of violence are against social norms (and for those who have a lesser biological propensity for violence). Moreover, the kinds of violence Collins is discussing is physical violence imbued with verbal harassment. In the digital world, violence is more often verbal than physical, which will be discussed further in a later section. Nonetheless, if violence does happen, it is perpetrated by a small number of people. The emotional tension in a violent situation is important for those who are violent and for those in the crowd observing. Collins' (2009:8) thesis about violence is that,

violence is a set of pathways around confrontational tension and fear. Despite their bluster, and even in situations of apparently uncontrollable anger, people are tense and often fearful in the immediate threat of violence—including their own violence; this is the emotional dynamic that determines what they will do if fighting actually breaks out.

Therefore, emotion plays a key role in a situation that is tense and fearful. A trigger could cause a person to cross the emotional threshold and become violent, but that does not happen for everyone.

If violent situations are carried out by extremists, then what is the role of the crowd? Collins spends time discussing the various roles a crowd plays in a violent situation; while the entirety of the crowd may not be involved in violence, they certainly are implicit to it. In a crowd with a few extremists who are violent, those who cheer on the violence provide “immediate emotional support”, while those who are “less emotionally energized, less confident, unable to take initiative...give a sense to the leading edge that others will back them up, give a weight of numbers that will help overawe the enemy once the momentum is flowing” (Collins 2009:429–30). Even those who are at the back of the crowd provide “the attention space. Though all they do is look, they look all in the same direction, with wavering interest as it may be; when something exciting happens, their eyes are riveted on the event” (Collins 2009:430). Crowds therefore provide emotional support for violence, and provide comfort or the illusion of support for the extremists. The illusion of support is a key characteristic of the crowd and of collective behavior in general. Turner and Killian (1987) calls this the ‘illusion of unanimity.’ It is defined as when “the silence of dissenters may provide a form of passive support for the emergent norm and contribute to the illusion of unanimity” (Turner and Killian 1987:287). Simply the existence of the crowd, whether or not it is actively supporting the violence, can provide the illusion of support.

A particular useful concept from Collins (2009) for understanding mob violence is ‘forward panic’. This concept relates Collins’ thesis on the role of tension and fear with collective violence nicely. Forward panic is “tension and fear in a conflict situation...The tension is prolonged and built up; it has a dramatic shape of increasing tension, striving toward a climax, waiting to be fully active, then when opportunity comes, it’s an emotional rush” (Collins 2009:86). Yet forward panic is not irrational, despite the violence it could result in. There is always some boundary surrounding violence that prevents it from becoming indiscriminate destruction (Collins 2009:99).

From the literature on the sociology of emotion and studies on violence, we find that the two elements are intertwined and have similar characteristics. Neither emotion nor violence is fully irrational; both stem from one reason or another and are influenced by the social structures that shape the situation. Individuals tend not to be violent themselves, but rather are reacting to violent situations, in which pent up or prolonged emotion can play a role in being the trigger. In many ways, emotion and violence constitute one another. Within collective action, crowds also influence the emotional energy and can be complicit in violent actions, passively or actively. With these understandings of the complexities of emotion and violence, we can apply new ways of thinking to collective behavior as a form of informal social control in the internet age. However, there is one more piece of the puzzle to understanding online mob behavior. Before discussing modern forms of mob justice, we must first look at premodern and early modern forms of mob justice such as medieval European witch hunts to lynching in America.

A Short History of Collective Violence

Witch-Hunts in Europe

In early modern Europe, for almost three centuries from the 1400s to the 1600s, “there was widespread hysteria that malevolent Satanic witches were operating as an organized threat to Christianity” (Boundless 2016). It was essentially widespread moral panic that Christianity and Christians were becoming targets of a malevolent force. The panic over witches came during a time of social and ideological upheaval spurred by the Black Plague and the European Inquisition within the Catholic church (Boundless 2016; Gibbons 1998). Witches became the scapegoat and target for the church and the public who “felt need for the definition of the moral boundaries of society...and enhancing solidarity” (Ben-Yehuda 1980:14). Witch hunts as a form of collective and violent informal control, therefore, provided a way for the people at the time to define or reinforce norms and values that were important to society.

Over the three centuries, approximately 40,000 to 100,000 people were consequently hunted and executed (Boundless 2016). There were many reasons a woman or a man could be accused of being a witch. “It was the women who seemed most independent from patriarchal norms -- especially elderly ones living outside the parameters of the patriarchal family -- who were most vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft” (Jones 2002). Similarly, those who were viewed as heretics were also accused. Simply breaking social norms could lead to accusation of witchcraft, and an ensuing trial. If found guilty, the accused would be “tortured and killed, typically by burning”(Ben-Yehuda 2008). Ben-Yehuda (1980:6) makes an interesting observation that the witch craze seemed to be “most intense in those regions where the Catholic church was weakest”. From the perspective of social control in which the Catholic church was a

form of formal control, witch-hunts were conceivably a form of collective informal control in the absence of formal control agents.

Witch-hunts were even carried to the United States, where the infamous Salem Witch Trials of Massachusetts occurred in the 1600s. However, collective violence in the US is most aptly demonstrated by the history of lynching.

Lynching in America

In 1955, a white woman accused Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American, of grabbing her and making lewd advances (History 2010). In response, “two men beat [Emmett] nearly to death, gouged out his eye, shot him in the head, and then threw his body, tied to the cotton-gin fan with barbed wire, into the river” (History 2010). While the case seems extreme and horrendous, the history of lynching in America, fueled by racist hate, is much more violent. During the Civil War and World War II, almost 4,000 black men, women, and children, many of whom were accused of “minor social transgressions”, were lynched by mobs in the Southern states (Equal Justice Initiative 2015:5; Reuters 2015b).

The lynching of African Americans may seem irrational and erratic, but lynching was incredibly colored by religious and racist ideologies, similar to the European witch-hunts (Bouie 2015; Wood 2011). Historian Amy Louise Wood (2011) explains that lynching was a form of spectacle for whites who feared that blacks were transgressing physical, moral, and racial boundaries during a time of ideological upheaval of the Civil War. The public and collective aspect is a notable characteristic of lynching. Again, simply the existence of the crowd could have provided an illusion of support or active emotional energy, making those who were violent transgressing the law believe they were right.

Beyond the notion that blacks represented a threat to southern whites and their religious beliefs, Beck and Tolnay (1990:526) discuss how “mob violence responds to temporal swings in economic conditions, particularly cotton production, with lynching increasing during times of sparse cotton revenues, and declining with increasing cotton profits.” This economic aspect sheds a broader light on our understanding of lynching as not being only about racial, moral, and religious ideologies; it is also important to consider the larger political, social, and economic conditions that shape the situation of those in the United States. These situations, overloaded with heavy emotions of fear and anger, as well as political instability, all culminated in the lynching of blacks. Unable to rely upon anyone else, whites resolved their own problems with blacks through “the blood rituals of lynching” (Wood 2011:49). It was a violent tactic for whites to solidify and maintain the moral boundaries they believed separated them from blacks.

Moral Panics

From Europe to the United States, we have seen in the examples of witch hunts and lynching that collective violence can be a result of social, cultural, economic, and political conditions. Those engaged in violent behavior were not all violent individuals, rather, most were responding to the moral disorder of their time. Moral panic is a relevant concept that serves as an intermediary between old and new forms of collective violence (i.e. premodern versus the internet age). While witch-hunts and lynchings of blacks have elements of moral panics, moral panics largely play out nowadays in mass media.

Moral panic is defined as “an episode, often triggered by alarming media stories and reinforced by reactive laws and public policy, of exaggerated or misdirected public concern, anxiety, fear, or anger over a perceived threat to social order” (Krinsky 2016:1). In *The Politics of Demonology*, Oplinger (1990) examines large historical instances of moral panics such as the

European witch hunts, the Red Scare, and the Holocaust. These historical examples represent periods of “focused intolerance,” in which specific groups were targeted and intolerance towards them was unusually high (Peffley and Sigelman 1990). Oplinger (1990) views the periods as ‘the mass production of deviance’ through the dramatization of ‘evil,’ embodied in the form of scapegoats such as witches, Jews, and communists. The dramatization of ‘evil’ is a type of moral panic, in which targets are stripped of their humanity and transformed into so-called folk devils, “visible reminders of what [society] should not be” (Cohen 2002:2).

These targets, whether it be gay men with AIDs (Dowsett 2009), NEETs in Japan (Toivonen 2011), or muggers in Britain (Hall et al. 2013), may represent actual systemic and structural problems within the government and society at large, but moral panics can obscure that fact and provide distractions. Therefore, moral panics provide an opportune methodological entry point that allows for research on the relationship between society, mass media and the state. Studies of moral panics examine the phenomenon through a process analysis. In response to sociocultural conditions or the rise of a perceived social problem, scapegoats are labeled as such by mass media and those in power (Goodman 2003). The “burst of attention in the media, focused on an apparently minor phenomenon that could be interpreted as evidence of disturbing social trends” could lead to public anxiety and fear focused on a specific target (Best 2011:39). Yet moral panics may have a short life-span because “media coverage reflects issue-attention cycles: coverage rises when the media learn of some seemingly new, dramatic issue” but declines when the item is no longer newsworthy (Best 2011:39). Moral panics therefore demonstrate the power mass media has in shining a spotlight on a perceived social problem as well as burying it, particularly in times of profound social, political and economic upheaval in society.

Drawing from the history of old forms of mob justice and the concept of moral panics, which demonstrate the importance of mass media, the next section will discuss a new form of collective violence: mob justice on the internet. The first sub-section will discuss notable characteristics of online communities. The second sub-section will discuss specific research on internet mob justice. While the literature on this topic is minimal, they provide key insights into the processes of mob justice online as a form of collective social control.

The Internet and the Mob

Characteristics of the Internet

In order to comprehend the full effect of the internet, it is crucial to first understand the unique characteristics the internet provides that allows for an environment where internet users are empowered to act collectively. The internet as a form of communication has attributes that are different from traditional news media. Internet researchers have discussed these attributes in great detail but I will highlight a few important ones here.

Interactivity is a basic characteristic that allows for interaction between all users of the internet, from producers of content, to consumers of content, and everyone else in between. “Participants have control over and can exchange roles in their mutual discourse” (Ruggiero 2000:15). The internet also instantly connects users from vast geographical distances (Rheingold 2000b). Empowered by the anonymity the internet provides (Postmes et al. 2001), internet users from all over the world engage in flat, horizontal networks of communication (Dimaggio et al. 2001; Lessig 2009; Rheingold 2000a). As there are no physical or visual cues and there is anonymity, the internet is able to strip the user of elite statuses and other characteristics (e.g. race, gender, age). Sassen (2002) has attributed the internet to spurring globalization as well as destabilizing hierarchical structures of modern day society.

Communication on the internet can also happen asynchronously as the internet is a semi-permanent archive of everything and anything ever posted (Ruggiero 2000). Users can respond to a post from over a year ago, or circulate a news article from a decade ago. The hypertextuality of the internet which makes information on the internet “a network of knowledge that is linked to other pieces of texts, images, or videos” (Ruggiero 2000:23), enables users to tap into a wealth of knowledge online from any time and place. This has also been called *searchability* by boyd (2011), as the internet is a searchable network of knowledge. This relates to how the internet is a permanent archive of nearly everything ever posted; boyd (2011) calls this characteristic *persistence*. Perhaps more important is the sheer *scalability* of information on the internet, in which “the potential visibility of content” online can be great (boyd 2011:46). As people post and share information online, it is possible that they are sharing to a large anonymous audience.

With these unique characteristics of online communication, the internet has been able to turn the public into a connected and interactive body. The internet, along with the resources and tools it offers, creates a dynamic environment for everyday citizens to operate in. Citizens can access any information they want, whenever they want, while talking with and interacting with anyone they want.

Collective Intelligence and The Power of the Internet

The internet can encourage community engagement and strong attachments based on similar interests (Brodie et al. 2013; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Wellman and Gulia 1998). Individuals can form online communities can become a powerful political body or collective social movement, demonstrating that the mass has power to influence society (McQuail 2006). From demanding ethical consumption to promoting better business practices via online petitions, online consumers have demonstrated their ability to foster change (Rheingold 2000a; Rief 2008).

However, online collective action need not always be organized or formalized. Oftentimes, internet users will unite for a short period of time until a cause is resolved, then they disband, ready to reform whenever necessary (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008).

What online communities engaging in collective action tend to rely on is the power of collective intelligence. The phrase ‘collective intelligence’ is defined by Pierre Levy (1999) as “a form of universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills... No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity (Levy 1999:13). Other terms such as ‘cognitive surplus’ (Shirky 2010), ‘collaborative knowledge’ (Stahl 2006), and ‘crowdsourcing’ (Brabham 2002) are perspectives that stem from collective intelligence. In essence, knowledge can be created not from one single individual, but from the collaboration of many, including non-human sources such as automated content agents or bots (Niederer and Dijck 2010). The key question in this matter is the true effectiveness of collective intelligence.

There are arguments supporting and criticizing the collective intelligence model, but the majority of the research tends to support it in a cautious yet optimistic fashion. Most of the research is also located in computer science rather than social science. Wikipedia is often cited as the most famous and successful example of collective intelligence. With its ‘free encyclopedia’ tagline, it is based on an “openly editable content” model in which any user can edit any article, regardless of their status as an expert or amateur (Wikipedia 2017). Wikipedia is also part of an amateurization movement, in which experts and professionals have less status and everyday individuals can contribute something of value. It demonstrates the decentralization of knowledge and lack of a hierarchical structure of online communities (Jenkins 2006; Niederer and Dijck 2010).

As more people contribute their knowledge, the more accurate the information on Wikipedia supposedly becomes. If they care enough, each user can contribute something of value and fact-check other users, thereby steering articles away from potential biases, judgements, political leanings, and so forth (Shirky 2011). While Wikipedia is an exemplary model utilizing people's collective intelligence, it is not without its faults and missteps. In cases where speed of information, emotional anguish, and the desire for social justice muddle together, collective intelligence can fail. The failure of collective intelligence is the focus of the mob justice cases that were chosen for this dissertation, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

The research on internet and online communities has shown that they have unique characteristics, from anonymity and asynchronicity to democratization, decentralization, and interactivity. These various characteristics create a space for people online to create communities, engage in collective behavior, use collective intelligence, enact social and political change, and much more. Scholars such as Papacharissi (2002) and boyd (2011) have discussed how social networking spaces create a 'public sphere' or 'networked publics', two related concepts pointing to the creation of a new public through the open structure of the internet.

The next section will discuss the existing but small body of research on internet mob justice. Internet mob justice engages with all the characteristics of the internet discussed – empowered by the network of knowledge on the internet, amateurs attempt to collectively collaborate their power and intelligence for the sake of justice in the place of professional and legal authorities, although they usually fail.

Mob Justice Online

Mob justice, as defined in the small but relevant literature, is the act of people aggregating their knowledge and skills online in order to solve a social injustice or exact punishment on a perceived violator of the laws and norms of society (Chen and Sharma 2011; Gao and Stanyer 2013; Sai and Orito 2011; Tao and Chao 2011; Wang et al. 2010). Rather than relying on professionals or experts, there is trust in the so-called ‘wisdom of the crowd’ that information is more accurate when more people contribute (Brabham 2002; Gao and Stanyer 2013; Howe 2006; Kozinets et al. 2008; Niederer and Dijck 2010). With the power of collective intelligence and a strong sense of justice, mob justice often works outside the law and does not hesitate to break it in the hopes of serving that higher justice. ‘Doxxing’, or document tracing, (posting personal information of a target) and revenge porn (posting sexually explicit material about a target) are some methods of control often used in the hopes of unmasking deviants operating anonymously online (C.S. 2014; Goode 2013; The Economist 2014).

The bulk of the literature on mob vigilantism is located in the ‘human flesh search engine’ phenomenon (HFSE) from China (Tao and Chao 2011). HFSE is “the act of searching for information about individuals through the online collaboration of multiple users” (Pan 2010:2). Motivated by a desire for the ‘truth’ and ‘justice’ in a country of high censorship and corruption (Ong 2012; Wang et al. 2009), the human flesh search engine is often enacted to fight “unethical yet lawful behaviors” (Tao and Chao 2011:2). Transgressions against societal norms that cannot be brought to justice in the criminal justice system are often targeted. A primary example is the ‘kitten killer’ case. In 2006, photos of a woman stomping a kitten to death with high heels were posted online (The Economist 2008). Outraged and frustrated that the law could not prosecute the unknown woman, the Chinese online community crowdsourced their resources and skills to ‘dox’ the woman and exposed her real name, occupation, work place, and home address. She

was subsequently harassed and fired from her job. This case exemplifies the vicious and very real consequences of HFSE, causing many to doubt its potential as a “manifestation of citizen empowerment and civil participation,” (Cheung 2009; Gao 2013; Gao and Stanyer 2013; Sai and Orito 2011; Tao and Chao 2011:1; Wang et al. 2010; Yang and Zhang 2010).

Violence is a characteristic of online mob justice but not in the same fashion as vigilante organizations assaulting and murdering targets outright. Recall the discussion on Collins (2009) as well as the historical examples of European witch hunts and lynchings in the US in which physical violence was the focus. Internet violence typically starts out with verbal abuse and harassment, sending threatening messages, and invading people’s privacy through practices such as doxxing and so forth. Such ideological and symbolic violence can certainly transfer to offline, physical abuse if targets are harassed at their homes, or face real world retaliation such as losing a job. While those accused online are not necessarily burned at the stake, the psychological trauma victims endure are long-lasting with grave repercussions to their self-esteem and social relationships. In light of growing statistics such as 33% of youths nowadays are victims of cyberbullying, youths in particular are at risk of internet violence (NVEE 2016). In essence, the internet has made psychological violence easier.

However, as Ong (2012) points out, it is important to recognize that this phenomenon is not unique to China. The phenomenon requires a wider, global consideration, as well as more qualitative and empirical case studies (Chen and Sharma 2011; Tao and Chao 2011). There have been a few studies done in the Taiwanese and Japanese context, as well as several news articles based on American cases (Bosker 2013; boyd 2012; Nagle 2014; Sai and Orito 2011; Tao and Chao 2011). One notable case is the Dog Poop girl in South Korea, whose dog defecated inside a public train (Krim 2005). When the owner refused to clean up after the dog, Korean internet

sleuths identified her via mobile phone pictures that were taken at the scene. Her personal and familial information was revealed and shared. The amount of online harassment that seeped into her daily life (she became so famous that people were recognizing her on the street) forced her to leave the university she was attending. Similarly, there have been hundreds of incidents in the United States, such as Justine Sacco, a public relations consultant who was harassed for making a racist joke about AIDS (Ronson 2015). Ostracized by the internet and even her own family, Sacco lost her career, her privacy, and suffered severe psychological trauma (Ronson 2016).

While research on the HFSE is illuminating in regard to the motivation behind such collective behavior, it fails to provide convincing analysis of the way in which a case goes awry, and when collective intelligence fails to identify the correct perpetrator. While the frequency of failed collective intelligence in mob justice efforts is not statistically known, such cases have been routinely ignored in previous research. The mob justice cases in the current research are examples of the online collective behaving as though they hold the same institutional knowledge and authority as the police, while failing to identify the correct perpetrator. When collective intelligence fails and the HFSE points its finger at an innocent person, what is happening? What is the process that leads to misidentification and the subsequent traumatic harassment?

To synthesize the many literatures that has been discussed so far, my study on online mob justice will provide a new understanding of collective behavior as a form of social control, as well as the effect of the internet on such behaviors. By connecting theories of social control with collective behavior, augmented by research on the sociology of emotion and violence, I aim to situate internet mob vigilantism in a larger context, where we can see how the practice descends from a long line of historical practices yet has unique characteristics of its own, thereby extending and adding to the relevant literature discussed. The study also compares Thailand and

the United States and has in-depth qualitative analysis, thereby answering the call of current online mob justice researchers. Researchers of social control and collective behavior have disagreed in their disregard or focus on larger social structures and emotion; my research aims to connect the two to provide a more comprehensive understanding of collective behavior as a form of social control. By studying how mob justice efforts fail on the internet, my research also provides a fresh and deeper look at the complexities of collective behavior in the digital age.

Research Questions

The research questions that emerge from the various theoretical perspectives are as follows:

1. What are the processes and mechanisms that lead to an episode of mob justice in which collective intelligence has failed?
2. How has the internet changed the way mob justice occurs? What unique characteristics does the internet add to old forms of collective behavior and informal social control?
3. What are the implications of online mob justice for our understanding of collective behavior as a form of social control?
4. How are facts and falsehoods constructed in the process of mob justice? What does this tell us about the nature of truth in today's society?

To get at the deeper inner workings of internet mob justice, the first research question asks for in-depth empirical evidence from episodes of mob justice. This ties into the literature on social control and collective behavior, which wants an analysis of the social structures and bigger processes that affect micro-processes. The methods used to answer this question will be discussed in detail in the methods chapter. The second and third research questions tie in with

internet studies in order to provide a fresh and different perspective to our understanding of collective behavior as social control.

The fourth question on facts and falsehoods has not been discussed in the literature review. However, the motivations of various examples of collective violence such as witch-hunts and lynchings imply that there is something more to these episodes of contention beyond the reinforcement of norms or moral boundaries. The violent and aggressive enforcement of one group's belief over another in a way is the enforcement of one group's ideas of 'truth' over another. Truth, as we know, is socially constructed and not without violence and emotion. Particularly in the age of the internet where anyone can contribute to the 'truth' (e.g. a Wikipedia article), 'truth' is more socially constructed than ever. Internet mob justice, which is the informal pursuit of truth and justice, walks a fine line between truth and falsehoods.

The next chapter, Research Setting and Methodology, provides an overview of the research setting as well as methods used to answer the research questions.

CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research setting and methodology of the dissertation. The first section, “Case Selection,” describes how the cases were chosen for the main comparative analysis of the study. “Data Sources” describes the social media sites in Thailand and the US that provided data for the analysis. Coupled with that, “Data Collection” explains what method and tools were used to collect the data. The last two main sections, “Content Analysis” and “Additional Methods of Analysis” describe the actual research methodology. Content analysis was main method of analysis for the two bombing cases in the Thailand and the US. In addition to content analysis, actor-network theory, material culture, and social mechanisms provided important analytical tools to analyze the process that leads to episodes of mob justice. The final section, “Outline of Dissertation” provides a preview of the rest of the chapters in the dissertation.

Case Selection

I have chosen to conduct a comparative analysis between the United States and Thailand for a number of reasons. As one of the goals of the dissertation is to create a generalizable model of mob justice failures based on the mechanisms approach, which will be discussed later in the chapter, it was important to choose two countries with drastically different social, political, cultural, and historical contexts. Thailand and the United States have very different historical trajectories. The United States is considered a first world country and the ‘leader of the free world’. Its model of democracy and free speech is often the standard for progressiveness, not only culturally but socially. Thailand, on the other hand, is considered a third world country, albeit on the brink of being elevated from that status. It is the most advanced country in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, the political system and climate within the US and Thailand are drastically different. As of April 2017, Thailand is currently under a military regime led by a

junta, who overthrew the democratically (but corruptly) elected government body. In fact, Thailand has undergone more coups than any other country in the world. The differences in the two countries have created a difference in the operation of formal control agents, which provides for interesting empirical analysis. At the personal level, I was raised both in Thailand and the US, and speak Thai and English fluently. Having the linguistic skills to read both languages allows me to access key online communities.

The main difficulty in conducting this study was choosing a balanced selection of mob justice cases from the two countries. Unfortunately, there is no socially or officially agreed upon term for mob justice, as discussed in the literature review. I could not use ‘mob justice’ as a key phrase or search term in news databases or online search engines. The two bombing cases, and the four supplementary cases in chapter 7 were therefore chosen through purposive sampling. Because of the lack of consensus on what to call mob justice activities, the drastic variation in scale (i.e. the number of people involved), and the lack of predictability of occurrence, it was not feasible to collect cases randomly or systematically. Previous research on the human flesh search engine also did not indicate how cases were selected methodologically for research. Purposive sampling was thus the most suitable method.

As mob justice can happen internally, externally, and across various social groups, I chose the cases based on four main criteria:

- 1) The episode of mob justice event originated in or was largely played out on social media sites such as Reddit or Facebook or Pantip.
- 2) The mob justice episode has sufficient enough scale to spill over into other communication channels (i.e. from social media to mainstream media). This is

necessary in order to capture the interaction between the mob, mass media, and institutional authorities.

- 3) The mob justice episode has effects on the offline world, events, and persons.
- 4) The mob justice episode involves the failed use of collective intelligence, in which online users collaborate but fail to achieve their goals.

As the focus of the research is on how collective intelligence ultimately fails, resulting in the harassment of innocent people and the spread of misinformation, the cases that were chosen must have these criteria. To ensure comparability across the two countries and cultures, I selected the Boston and Bangkok bombings because they were very similar thematically and in their trajectory towards mob justice. However, there are vast cultural and social differences between the two, which allow for description of unique initial conditions. By discovering a common pattern between the two cases, I aim to construct a more general model of how episodes of mob justice occur and fail. Only one case was chosen for each country, because the countries already represent different social conditions. The two cases are large-scale and provided big data for the cases, as will be discussed later in the chapter. By focusing on two cases, I have the time and space to devote detailed, in-depth qualitative description to get at the heart of the process of mob justice. Previous research on this phenomenon has been too broad, and research on social control, collective behavior, and so forth calls for more in-depth consideration of the phenomenon.

To test my model of mob justice, I chose four more mob justice cases, two from each of the chosen countries. By testing the model on additional cases, I could confirm or validate my model and adjust the mechanisms accordingly. The cases were chosen based on the same criteria as the Boston and Bangkok bombings. The US cases were the 2015 killing of Cecil the lion, and

the 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy. The Thailand cases were the 2014 murders of two British tourists in southern Thailand, and the 2015 Single Gateway controversy.

Data Sources

The main source of data for the Boston bombing was Reddit, which played a key role in the online investigation to find the bombers. The Bangkok bombing investigation was spread across two main social media platforms, a Facebook group called CSI LA, and Pantip, one of the most popular websites in Thailand. It must also be noted that the online investigations in question took place in more than just these particular social media channels. Twitter, 4Chan, Facebook, Line, and many other social media and communication apps played a role in the dissemination of rumors. However, due to the limitations of the research as well as the immense amount of data collected, these other social media channels were not part of the core analysis. Therefore, only key social media players were chosen for the research. The following subsections provide background information on the structure of Reddit, Facebook, and Pantip.

US: Reddit

Reddit, the self-proclaimed “front page of the internet” is a social news aggregator (Reddit 2016b). Users of the website can submit any content, be it news articles or memes, for them to be discussed and ranked by the Reddit community. Submissions that are popular would receive ‘upvotes’ (as opposed to ‘downvotes’ when users dislike the content), giving the submissions more visibility on the front page. Hence, it is seen as “democracy in media in action” as the content is curated and voted by users (Nicks 2013). The format is similar to a bulletin board as it consists mainly of text. It is one of the most visited websites on the Internet, with approximately 731 million unique visitors in the year 2013, when the bombing took place (Martin 2013). Although anyone can browse through the site freely, those who want to interact

with the website (i.e. commenting, voting) must register for a username. However, an e-mail address is not required. This has led to users creating multiple or throwaway accounts where they can freely comment without having to worry about the consequences or backlash (Bergstrom 2011). Subreddits are the equivalent of communities on Reddit, with each community being dedicated to a specific topic. They are demarcated by [r/subreddit-title]. Any user can create a subreddit, and users themselves can become moderators of subreddits. Moderators are in charge of constructing and enforcing the rules and guidelines of the community, preventing spam, and scanning through all the submissions and comments and making sure the content abides by the rules. They are also able to ban users as well as delete comments and submissions. There is a subreddit for any topic imaginable. Some are broad such as r/news, which is used to report news coverage on any topic, or r/funny, which posts general humorous content. There are also more specific subreddits such as r/badtattoos, which posts about that topic exactly, or r/bearsdoinghumanthings, which is also quite obvious. There are countless subreddits dedicated to geographical areas, hobbies, music, art, music, books, and so on. Subreddits may be public for anyone to read through, but moderators may also make subreddits private or invite-only in order to control who reads the contents and who can become members. Reddit Metrics reports that there are over 600,000 subreddits (though not all may be active or publicly accessible) (Reddit 2016a).

The subreddits of interest for the Boston bombing are – r/news, r/inthenews, and r/findbostonbombers. The first two subreddits are mainstays in the Reddit community, meaning that they are well-established. As of November 2016, r/news has over 11 million subscribers, and r/inthenews has over 35,000 subscribers. Both are public. r/findbostonbombers was one created in the spur of the moment as the police and the public were looking for the Boston bombers. At

least 10,000 people had subscribed to the subreddit before it was closed, but many more could have been visiting it as the subreddit was public for anyone to read.

Thailand: Pantip and CSI LA Facebook Group

Two major social media channels were involved in the Bangkok bombing online investigation: Pantip, a discussion board and one of the most popular websites in Thailand; and CSI LA, a public Facebook group that gained notoriety for previously failed crowdsleuthing efforts. Both social media channels were involved in online investigation in some capacity. They had both common and unique patterns.

Pantip is a popular discussion board and is one of the top 10 websites in Thailand (Alexa 2016b; Hongladarom 2000). It is a go-to place for many people in Thailand to discuss various topics such as politics, entertainment, business, travel, and current events. One must register for an account with an email address in order to comment on posts or create new ones, but all posts are free for public viewing. Pantip has a set of rules and etiquette that are enforced in order to ensure user accountability. For example, messages critical of the royal family are absolutely prohibited (in accordance with the lèse-majesté law of Thailand's Criminal Code) as well as messages criticizing any and all religions. Up until 2013 or so, Pantip required all users who wanted to register for a Pantip account to provide their Thai National ID number. This tied each user account to a real identity and prevented dummy or fake accounts. It also ensured user accountability and proper etiquette when posting. However, currently in 2016, only an email address is required to register for an account, making it much easier to obtain multiple accounts. At the same time, it also allows non-Thai nationals to register and be a part of the Pantip community.

CSI LA is the name of a popular Thai Facebook page dedicated to critically analyzing current events in Thailand via science and facts. Facebook users who ‘like’ the page can receive updates, but since the page is public, users who do not ‘like’ the page can still read all the posts and make comments via their personal Facebook account. Unlike other Facebook groups, however, only one user – the Admin – can make actual posts. All other users simply make comments on the post. This allows the Admin to maintain control over the general content of the group, as well as who can read the content (he has been known to ban users who disagree with him). The identity of the Admin was not clear for a while, but in 2014, he decided to reveal his true identity in response to people “providing misleading information and linking me [the Admin] to politics” (CSI LA 2014). In addition, he has revealed that he was educated abroad and can speak English, a skill that he often boasts about. Based on an interview conducted with a news channel (unrelated to CSI LA, he appeared on the show as a businessman), he lives in LA (Siamtown US 2013). Despite his real name being known, he is simply referred to as ‘Admin’ by the community.

On CSI LA’s About page, the Admin defines CSI as “Critical Thinking, Skeptics, Investigation” (CSI LA 2016). The name invokes the popular TV franchise *CSI*, which has spin-offs such as *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: NY*, although CSI LA is not the name of any specific TV show. Nonetheless, the Admin’s explanation of what CSI stands for indicates the purpose of the page – to discuss news and current events with critical thinking skills, to be skeptics at all times and investigate the truth using facts, evidence, and science such as in *CSI*.

By the end of 2016, the page had over 700,000 likes. It is unclear when the page was first established but it gained popularity in 2014 when members of the page conducted an unofficial, online investigation to solve the murders of two British tourists in Koh Tao, (southern) Thailand.

During that investigation, CSI LA was seen as a source of news and information for people following the case. The page “soared from a few thousand fans to 267,684” in the span of a few weeks” (Bangkok Post 2014). Their investigation had enough following that news outlets reported on their results. The suspect they named was questioned by the police and put through DNA testing numerous times (Thai Rath Online 2014). The accused was eventually declared innocent. Despite failing in the Koh Tao investigation, when the Bangkok bombing occurred, netizens immediately turned to CSI LA for news, discussions, and the search for truth and justice.

Data Collection

The data for this research came from online sources. The research received approval from the University of Hawai’i’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). As each source described in the previous chapter, Reddit, Pantip, and CSI LA, were set on different platforms, the data collection was carried out differently for each source. In keeping with IRB procedures, I have removed any identifying information and anonymized all the data, with these exceptions: the names of the suspects accused by the online communities; public figures such as news anchors; and political figures. This section describes how the data from each source were collected.

Data Collection: Reddit

The data for Reddit was very hard to come by. Two types of data were needed – the live-update threads which took place in r/news and r/inthenews, and the actual Reddit investigation that took place in r/findbostonbombers. The live-update threads first began in r/news but later were moved to r/inthenews. However, both subreddits are still available for public viewing on Reddit, making it easy to find all the relevant threads to save all the comments into a Word document, then subsequently import them into the Access database for content analysis. There were 21 live-update threads total, all of which had over 200 comments except for one, which was

therefore not included in the analysis. 100 top comments were sampled and analyzed from each thread saved.

However, the r/findbostonbombers subreddit is more complicated. At the time when it was active in 2013, the r/findbostonbombers subreddit was open to the public. After the police arrested Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (his brother, Tamerlan died after being captured during the shootout), the original Reddit user who created the r/findbostonbombers subreddit decided to close it down as the subreddit had become a focal point of media criticism and contained a large amount of personal information.

Therefore, I turned to Archive-It (<https://archive-it.org/>), a service part of the Internet Archive, that crawls through the internet and collects snapshots of millions of webpages every day. While r/findbostonbombers was public in 2013, Archive-It was able to capture the many threads within the subreddit (see Appendix A for list of thread topics). I was able to save the relevant webpages from Archive-It into Word documents, and import the comments into the Access database for analysis. While the Archive-It website seems finicky (a month after saving all the comments, I could not access them again as the website kept returning an error), it served its purpose well. I was able to look through the list of threads in r/findbostonbombers and pull out all threads with over 200 comments. I saved any threads with over 200 comments that were created between April 15, 2013 (the day of the bombing) and April 22, 2013 (the day the Tsarnaev brothers were arrested). There were 15 threads from r/findbostonbombers.

In total, there were 36 relevant Reddit threads. 100 top comments (i.e. comments with the most likes) were sampled from each thread, totaling 3600 comments for content analysis. All user IDs from Reddit were anonymized and turned into sequential numbers, which is how users

will be referred to in the paper (i.e. Redditor #). The comments were not edited, hence, there may be spelling or grammar mistakes.

Data Collection: CSI LA Facebook Group

To collect data from CSI LA, the public group that is housed on Facebook, I used a free scraping app called NetVizz, which is a tool that is able to extract data from particular Facebook groups or pages within a specified period of time (B. Rieder 2013). NetVizz can collect comments and the comment statistics (number of likes and replies) and output the results into an Excel spreadsheet. NetVizz also anonymizes all the data, so no user names are collected unless manually typed into the comments. I collected data from CSI LA from August 16, 2015 (the day before the bombing) to September 30, 2015 (around the time the police concluded their investigation and made an arrest, thus ending the online investigation). Hundreds and thousands of comments were collected, which led me to sample the data to a more manageable size. CSI LA made 26 posts total relating to the Bangkok bombing; I sampled the top (i.e. most liked) 100 comments from each of the posts, totaling 2,600 comments. As the comments are anonymized, any comment I quote will be referred via the Comment ID number automatically assigned by Microsoft Access, where I imported and housed the data. The Comment IDs were assigned to the imported comments chronologically. See Appendix B for the CSI LA thread titles.

Data Collection: Pantip

The Pantip data was collected manually because there was no program available to scrape the discussion board. I first searched through Pantip using their native search engine for keywords in Thai ranging from ‘Bangkok bombing’, ‘Ratchaprasong bombing’, ‘Ratchaprasong blast,’ and other such variations. Ratchaprasong is the downtown intersection where the Erawan Shrine is located. Looking through all the threads that showed in the search results, I narrowed

down the threads to ones that had at least 100 comments or more, so proper sampling could be done. Of the 30 threads related to the bombing, only seven had 100 comments or more. This is likely because Pantip does not have a limit to the number of comments a thread may have (one thread had almost 1000 comments) unlike Reddit. Moreover, the search results continuously showed the same threads that received the most traffic throughout the duration of the bombing investigation.

When sampling the threads, if possible, the first 100 comments were analyzed. If only 100 comments were available, all 100 comments were analyzed. While Pantip has a 'top comment' feature, only 3-4 comments would be listed at the top. Anything after the top comments were listed chronologically. Therefore, it was not feasible to sample the top 100 comments. 700 comments total were sampled from Pantip. The 700 comments were manually copied and pasted into Microsoft Access for content analysis using the same coding scheme generated from CSI LA. This allowed a proper comparison across both social media channels, as they had a contentious relationship. See Appendix C for the list of Pantip thread titles.

As a general note for all data sources, demographic data was not collected for a variety of reasons. Reddit is considered a space of anonymity; therefore, personal identities are not typically tied to a Reddit account. The same goes for Pantip. While Facebook is tied to a real identity, it is part of human subject research ethical guidelines to anonymize the data collected. Moreover, the current research is not examining the userbase and its patterns, as it is more interested in the broader processes of mob justice. Based on previous studies, some general demographic claims can be made, however. The userbase of Reddit is male dominant, with the majority being in the college-age range (Alexa 2016c). Females are underrepresented on Reddit. Facebook has slightly higher female demographics, and even distribution across college

education (Alexa 2016a), although specific statistics for the CSI LA Facebook page is not available. Pantip has even male and female usage, with the majority of users having a graduate education (Alexa 2016b). Based on these statistics, sex-based claims cannot be made about the tendency for mob justice without further research.

Content Analysis

The main method of analysis is content analysis using Microsoft Access, a relational database program suitable for this method. Because there is no previous research to build upon, as the topic of mob vigilantism on the internet is relatively understudied, I generated my own coding scheme. I first did a read-through of the comments and noted major themes and patterns. Using such an inductive reading method allows for natural and relevant categories to be formed. As the Boston bombing analysis was done after the Bangkok bombing analysis, I also built on the Bangkok bombing codes. This way, there would be some continuity between the two cases; using similar codes would make comparisons clearer.

For the Boston bombing, there were 15 thematic codes total; as I conducted the analysis, I refined and added what I needed to each code. The codes revolved around Reddit users' perception of the case – what was the perceived motive behind the bombing? What did Reddit users think of the work of the police, FBI, mass media, and the government? How were the users characterizing the bombers in terms of race, nationality, religion, or general physical appearances? Such codes help to reveal the influencing biases and perceptions on the Reddit users' investigation into the Boston bombing that spiraled out of control within the week it was active. See Appendix D for the Boston bombing coding scheme.

The Bangkok bombing generated 15 thematic codes based on the discussion on the bombing done in CSI LA and Pantip. What were the theories of motivation for the bombing? What was the general opinion of the Thai police, media, and government? How were ideas of nationality, race, and religion invoked in the online discussions? See Appendix E for the Bangkok bombing coding scheme. Some differences in coding do exist between the two bombing cases; for example, discussions about religion were prevalent in Bangkok as the bombing site was a shrine; similar discussions were not apparent in Boston.

Additional Methods of Analysis

The results of the content analysis formulated the substantive case analyses of the Boston and Bangkok bombing chapters. After conducting the content analysis, I further used actor-network theory, material culture, and social mechanisms to map out the network and processes that make up episodes of mob justice. While each of these perspectives form their own theoretical perspectives, they are used in this study purely as methodologies. Together, they were used to analyze 1) how rumors and misinformation were construed as facts in the two investigations via the support of the networks involved; 2) the mechanisms of mob justice and how the various key players in the cases interacted to advance the two bombing cases. While it may seem as though too many methods were used, each of the perspectives contributed something of value to the understanding of how mob justice works and helped answer the research questions. I will discuss each of these perspectives in turn.

Actor-Network Theory

Actor-network theory (ANT) is both a theory and a method, but in this research, it is used purely as a method. ANT is a constructivist approach which does not assume that there are grand truths or larger social structures; rather, it is purely concerned with the observable interactions

within a social network (Latour 2005). ANT treats everything in the “social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located” (Law 2009:141). Therefore, what sets apart ANT from social network analysis is that it includes non-human objects (or ‘actants’ as ANT calls them) in the network of interactions (Banks 2011). There is no methodological distinction between humans and non-humans (Sismondo 2011). “[ANT] conceptualizes both humans and nonhumans as actors, studies connection-making as coterminous with meaning-making, and represents networks from a participant's viewpoint” (Saito 2011:128). In other words, within a network of interactions, humans not only interact with other humans, they also interact with non-human objects. Non-human objects can also serve as mediators between human-human interaction such as computers and other such communication technologies (Latour 2005; Nakajima 2013; Saito 2011). The power of ANT as a method is that it is highly descriptive, as it equates description with explanation (Saito 2011). It is very much a bottom-up, materialist approach of how networks are built via observable interactions between human and non-human actants (Sismondo 2011).

According to ANT, the goal of networks is to become stable (Law 2009). Our understanding and experience of social reality comes from networks which have been stabilized due to long-standing interactions between various actants. An important factor allowing for the stabilization of networks is discourse. John Law (2009), one of the founders of ANT, talks about ‘discursive stability’. Discourses are what allows the initial statement that is made to be possible in the first place; Law calls (2009) this the ‘conditions of possibility’. Statements cannot be drawn out of thin air; they are based in some sort of discourse (or network of discourses). Because of that, the statements seem plausible, acceptable, and sensible to individuals.

An ANT-based approach therefore allows researchers to describe qualitatively the network of observable interactions that make up a network while reducing the social world to material connections (Sismondo 2011). ANT connects well with Black's social control theory, as "objects are defined by their places in networks and their properties appear in the context of tests, not in isolation" (Sismondo 2011:86). For internet mob justice, I apply ANT to map out how a statement of a rumor or conjecture made in the online community moves through a network of human and non-human actants to become 'truth'. ANT can help explain how statements (rumors, conjectures) made within the online communities about the bombings become facts as they connect to sources within the network. The more robust the source (i.e. legitimate), the more 'stabilized' the network becomes, thus allowing the statement to be taken as fact. What happens in the online communities is that when networks become stable (i.e. statements are taken as facts due to the robustness of the network), people take the fact for granted. This is called 'blackboxing' in ANT (Besel 2011). What the ANT analysis of the two bombing cases will demonstrate is that even when facts derived from online statements become blackboxed, the network is actually an illusion. That is to say, the online community believes that the network is more robust than it actually is.

Nakajima's (2013) study on the distribution network of independent (and often illegal) films in China provides an excellent empirical example of how to use ANT as a method. Nakajima (2013) discusses how films, the people of China, and discourses assemble to become part of Chinese civil society despite strict government regulations and censorship of Chinese independent films. First, he discusses the contentious relationship between state and civil society, by explaining how the state censors or prevents independent film distribution. Nakajima provides a descriptive analysis of how independent filmmakers as individual actors react to a censorship

notice issued by the Chinese Film Bureau. The censorship notice acts as a mediator between the filmmakers and representatives of the government, and plays a role in cancelling an independent film festival from continuing.

Second, Nakajima shows how local interactions within the local network of China connect independent filmmakers with consumers around the world. Through the physical medium of the standard DVD as a way to copy and distribute independent films, filmmakers are able to transmit their works to any consumer with the technology to watch a DVD. Additionally, physical stores that provide a space for the sale of independent DVDs also connect filmmakers with consumers in China. Independent films are usually considered illegal because the contents usually critique the oppressive Chinese government. Therefore, stores that sell these DVDs usually have a front business, for example, as a coffee shop. By placing physical hints around the physical space of the legitimate business, such as posters of independent films or in one case, a red curtain to signify the backroom, sellers are able signify to consumers that they sell illegitimate DVDs (Nakajima 2013:394).

What Nakajima's (2013) study demonstrates is a methodological way of applying ANT to map out the network of interactions between human and non-human actants, as well as the role of discourse in creating the conditions of possibility for statements to be made. In Chapter 6, I apply ANT to understand the networks of interactions between actants that evolve from a statement of conjecture to achieve a truthful perception. In conjunction with ANT, which considers the materiality of interactions, I am also using material culture as an analytical method.

Material Culture

Material culture is used to augment the actor-network analysis of the two cases. Material culture is a perspective coming out of critical theory and cultural studies used to analyze the

relationship between people and material objects, particularly how people collect objects and attribute meaning to said objects. Like ANT, material culture is concerned with how humans relate to non-human objects, particularly via the senses – sight, sound, touch, smell, and sometimes taste. How material objects invoke the senses can affect how deeply an individual connects with his or her collection.

The practice of collecting objects is an old one, yet it has traditionally been a private one. As Walter Benjamin (1968) discussed in his famous essay, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting,” the relationship between a collector and the objects of collection is intimate, one that is heightened by the privacy of the practice. Yet the world has changed drastically and dramatically almost fifty years since Benjamin wrote his piece. The world has expanded, developed, and globalized in terms of economy, culture, and technology. With the advent of the internet, virtual collection is a possibility now. Moist and Banash’s (2013) anthology, *Contemporary Collecting*, discusses virtual collections and their relationship with materiality.

A characteristic of virtual collections is the lack of control an owner has over an immaterial collection. Not only does an owner become dependent upon the technology and platforms upon which the collections are housed, virtual objects can be duplicated and edited over and over again. Unlike an original pressing of a rare vinyl, one can copy an MP3 file to hundreds of places without loss of integrity to the file; it would never wear out (Banash 2013; Boon 2013). It is also easy for virtual collections, curated by an individual, to be shared with the public. True ownership of a collection becomes contentious when carried out in a public space such as the internet.

The public aspect of virtual collections creates a moral dilemma for collectors. In the struggle to engage in ethical collecting, the collector must struggle between his or her private desires and the public's desire. Dechaine (2013) characterizes the public and private side of the collector as 'good' and 'real', respectively. The 'good collector' is publicly humble about his or her collection, and must not be overly zealous so as to reveal his or her true self, the 'real collector.' The 'real collector' "represents the unabashed, private self – the swirl of egoism and obsession that, if allowed a public exhibition, would elicit disdain or worse" (Dechaine 2013:71). The ethics of virtual collecting is more questionable however, and deserves more consideration. Ownership of virtual collections is difficult to determine as they are usually public and shared, and are easily duplicated. Virtual collecting, therefore, does not only have implications for people's relationships with objects, but for relationships among people.

What the material culture perspective offers for our understanding of online mob justice is a way to conceptualize the collection of facts and evidence in the unofficial investigations as a type of virtual collection. The virtual collection of facts carried out by the online community is riddled with issues ranging from the validity of the facts, the identity of the community as moral or immoral collectors, and the level of attachment and emotion the community had to the facts of the cases. Material culture helps to show how the sources within the networks are divided and validated, slowly building the actor-network for the statement to evolve from rumors to facts.

Social Mechanisms

Chapter 7 uses social mechanisms as an analytical tool to map out the process that leads to an episode of mob justice. This is a powerful method for creating a causal model of mob justice. While ANT and material culture provides an in-depth look at the inner-workings of the two bombing cases in chapter 5, the mechanisms approach in chapter 6 provides a model for

understanding the complex sequence of events and interactions that lead to mob justice. It is an effective method that allows cases of the same phenomenon to be compared in a systematic way so that a model can be constructed. At the same time, mechanisms can discover the limits of an explanation, identifying which cases fit the mob justice model and which cases do not.

“Mechanisms generate and explain observed associations between events” (Hedström and Swedberg 1998:1). “A satisfactory explanation requires that we are also able to specify the social ‘cogs and wheels’ that have brought the relationship into existence” (Hedström and Swedberg 1998:7). It is a causal analysis that demonstrates how one event stems from a chain of interactions between key players (Sorensen 1998). Like ANT, a mechanisms approach is interested in the interactions within a network of key players; the difference is that it takes into consideration the larger social and historical conditions (which ANT believes do not exist) into the mechanisms of a social phenomenon (Alimi, Demetriou, and Bosi 2015). In essence, a mechanisms-based approach is an effective process analysis. It breaks down how a phenomenon unfolds as a step-by-step, sequential process.

In social movements research, there are three types of mechanisms according to McAdam et al. (2001): cognitive, environmental, and relational. Environmental mechanisms are “externally generated influences on conditions affecting social life” (McAdam et al. 2001:25). Cognitive mechanisms “operate through alterations of individual and collective perception” (McAdam et al. 2001:26). Finally, relational mechanisms “alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks” (McAdam et al. 2001:26). Relational mechanisms will be the most relevant to mob justice, as the results of the mechanisms analysis will show that it is the interactions of key players that cause episodes of mob justice.

The goal of discovering and naming social mechanisms is to construct a causal model that depicts the process of a phenomenon. In *Dynamics of Radicalization: A Relational and Comparative Perspective*, Alimi et al. (2015) describes a number of mechanisms that lead social movements to become radicalized over time. Their case studies include the 1960s Italian extra-parliamentary left movement, the 1940s Greece Cypriot movement, and the late 1990s Jihad and al-Qaeda movement in the Middle East. By using vastly different social, historical, cultural, and temporal examples, Alimi et al. attempt to demonstrate that radicalization occurred across all three movements via similar mechanisms of interaction. That is to say, despite empirical differences between the cases, they contain similar mechanisms of interaction that demonstrate the process of radicalization.

The use of mechanisms in this research models Alimi et al.'s (2015) method. First, the key players of the two bombing cases are described, followed by a detailed explanation of the initial conditions of the cases. Initial conditions are the social, cultural, and historical conditions that contextualize the case. In a way, it is similar to ANT's idea of discursive stability, which creates a condition of possibility for statements to be made. Mechanisms operate similarly – there are conditions that influence the mechanisms of mob justice. Lastly, the actual mechanisms which describe the causal interactions between the key players are described. The mechanisms in chapter 7 draw upon McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) and Alimi et al.'s (2015) glossary of mechanisms.

It is important to keep in mind that mechanisms, while a causal analysis, are “sometimes true theories” (Gudmund 1998:75). As mechanism scholars attempt to generate mechanisms general enough to be applied across a variety of situations, there may be times when not all mechanisms apply. There is a sense of generality to the mechanisms. In essence, they are models

of reality (Gudmund 1998). Nonetheless, the generality of the mechanisms means that they can be applied to a variety of seemingly different cases. Mechanisms therefore provide an invaluable look at the actual process of a phenomenon, regardless of the smaller specifics of the cases.

Outline of Dissertation

Based on the methods described above, the dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 3, “Where’s Waldo?: The 2013 Boston Bombing Analysis” and Chapter 4, “Mano-Social: The 2015 Bangkok Bombing Analysis” are both case analysis chapters based on the findings of the content analysis that was conducted. Each of the chapters provides an in-depth look at the unofficial investigation carried out by amateur detectives in each country to solve the bombings and find the perpetrators. The chapter discusses the motivations of the amateur detectives, their concerns, their theories, their relationships with institutional authorities, and their harassment of innocent people. The findings of the content analysis indicate that the amateur detectives are in a web of relationships with other key players, who contribute to the processes that led to mob justice behavior.

The network of relationships and interactions is further examined in chapter 5, “The Construction of Facts: Actor-Network Theory and Material Culture.” Using the two analytical tools described above, the chapter first examines how the online communities conducting an unofficial investigation dealt with the collection and verification of facts and rumors. The structure of the social media websites that house the communities are found to play a role also. In the second half of the chapter, I map out the networks of interaction that enable a statement to be perceived as factual by the online communities. Legal authorities such as the government and the police, as well as mass media, play key roles in perpetuating and legitimizing statements. Actor-

network theory ultimately illuminates the problem at the heart of mob justice – the nature of truth in today’s society.

With the findings of the previous analytical chapters in mind, chapter 6, “Mechanisms of Mob Justice” proposes a causal model outlining the processes and interactions that lead to episodes of failed mob justice. The model is derived from the findings of the two bombing analyses. The purpose of mechanisms, as explained above, is to find patterns of interaction that can be generalizable to different cases of the same phenomenon. The model is further tested against four more internet mob justice cases: in the US: the 2015 killing of Cecil the lion and 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy; and in Thailand: the 2014 murders of two British tourists down south and the 2015 Single Gateway controversy. Testing the causal sequence of the mob justice episode is important to understanding the fit and limitations of the model. By testing the validity of the mechanisms, we can arrive at a more general, valid, and causal model of the processes that lead to episodes of failed mob justice on the internet.

The final chapter of the dissertation, “The Nature of Truth” answers the research questions outlined at the end of chapter 1 and discusses the larger implications of the research. The nature of truth itself is contentious in cases of mob justice, as different authorities compete to have their version of the truth be the only truth. The theoretical and methodological contributions of the research are also discussed, as the findings and the model of mob justice are new and valuable contributions to the growing literature on mob justice.

CHAPTER 3. ‘WHERE’S WALDO?’: THE 2013 BOSTON BOMBING ANALYSIS

The 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing took place on April 15th, at the 117th running of the marathon. Four hours into the race, two pressure cooker bombs exploded near the finish line only 12 seconds apart. Three people were killed and approximately 264 other people were injured (Wilson, Miller, and Horwitz 2013). Over a dozen people had to receive amputations. The explosions immediately set off a frenzy as people ran to safety while others, including emergency services, ran into the fray to help the hundreds of injured people. As people tried to make sense of the tragedy, they turned to the internet and various social media channels to discuss the incident. One such channel that would become an interesting spotlight in this tragedy was Reddit.

As soon as word of the bombing spread, one Reddit user began what is called a ‘live-update discussion’ thread. The purpose of the thread was to provide reports and updates as instantaneously as possible by gathering news articles, writing report summaries, and providing information on how to help or get help. The success of the live-updates led Reddit to become the go-to place for many people seeking quick information as Reddit sometimes was able to curate information faster than traditional news media outlets such as CNN. The fervent interest in the marathon bombing was not only domestic, but also global. At one point, the live-update discussion threads appeared to have approximately 3 million followers worldwide (Barker 2015). The desire to bring justice to the bombers was particularly fueled by the FBI’s call for any information, photos, and videos from the public. This spawned the creation of the *r/findbostonbombers* subreddit, which focused on exactly that – finding the Boston marathon bombers.

Whether or not it meant to, the r/findbostonbombers became part of a so-called vigilante witch-hunt to find the bombers. As the Redditors combed through any and all related photos and videos taken during and after the marathon, many innocent people were named, shamed, and harassed. The exposure and dissemination of private information led many to criticize r/findbostonbombers for endangering innocent people's lives. Despite the thousands of people involved in the unofficial investigation, Reddit failed to identify the correct suspects, exemplifying a failure in crowdsourcing efforts (or 'crowdsleuthing' as some call it). The FBI ended up identifying the Tsarnaev brothers, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar, as the bombing suspects. In a dramatic police shoot-out and chase through Watertown, Massachusetts, authorities arrested Dzhokhar while Tamerlan was killed. Although jubilant that the suspects were finally arrested, Reddit still recalls the r/findbostonbombers witch-hunt as one of the most shameful events in Reddit history. Alexis Ohanian, co-founder of Reddit, even called it one of the most important events in Reddit history as it demonstrates the "the gift and the curse" of such a democratic and open platform (Nicks 2013).

This case analysis chapter on the 2013 Boston bombing is divided into eight sections. The first section, "The Subreddits" provides a description of the three main subreddits involved in the Boston bombing investigation. The second section, "Processing Grief" discusses the range of emotions Redditors expressed regarding the bombings and its victims. The third section, "Theories of Motive" focuses on the discussion of terrorism in Reddit. The fourth section, "Where's Waldo?" examines the ground up approach in Reddit's investigation to find the bombers as they combed through every photo and video available to them while struggling with mainstream media, who were monitoring Reddit. "Who's Waldo?" takes an in-depth look at Sunil Tripathi, the most famous innocent suspect from Reddit's investigation. The sixth section,

“The Aftermath” is about what happened in Reddit after their crowdsleuthing was declared a failure. Finally, the last two sections, “Reddit VS. The Media” and “The Feedback Loop,” analyzes the relationship between social media and mainstream media, and how such a relationship led to the witch hunt spiraling out of control.

The Subreddits

The timespan for Reddit’s unofficial investigation paralleled that of the official police investigation into the bombing. From April 15th to April 22nd, when the police killed Tamerlan and apprehended Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, Reddit’s investigation took many twists and turns. In only a week, Reddit users combed through thousands of photos, made thousands more comments analyzing the suspect’s physical and moral characteristics and potential motive, and participated, if not spearheaded, a spontaneous witch-hunt against innocent suspects. Due to the short time span, there was very quick turnover of information and updates, which played a role in the messy unofficial investigation as people tried to stay as updated as possible.

Before discussing the unofficial investigation, it is first important to understand the differences and relations between the subreddits that were key players. Three main subreddits were involved with the Boston bombing – r/news and r/inthenews, which provided live updates for what was happening in relation to the bombing, and r/findbostonbombers, which was dedicated to finding any relevant information to capture the bombers.

When the bombing first occurred, a Reddit user started the first live-update thread titled “There was just an explosion at the Boston Marathon - Will use this to live update” in r/news, a subreddit dedicated to US and international news reports. Each thread format consists of the string of live updates in one long post at the beginning of the thread, followed by any number of comments. There was so much interest and information, however, that the thread quickly maxed

out the 10,000-character limit in the original post. As each thread was maxed out, a new one was created. As the week progressed, twenty other live-update threads were created one after another to sort through outdated information, post new information, and allow people to comment. While the live-update threads first started in r/news, they later were moved to r/inthenews, which is a sister subreddit to r/news. It allows for more in-depth analysis as it is “the subreddit for opinion, analysis, and discussion of recent events” and encourages users to discuss events, critique the media, and share photos/videos of the events (Reddit 2016c). It is also possible that due to the number of new threads constantly being created, the live-updates were moved to r/inthenews so as not to flood the r/news subreddit.

r/findbostonbombers was created specifically to answer the call by the FBI for public help. Its purpose was to help the FBI gather information, whether or not the FBI meant for them to go so far. “The FBI kind of opened the door...it was almost like it was put up as a challenge to them [Reddit], and they rose to it...They can be either really helpful or mob rule” (Valdes 2013). It is highly unlikely that the FBI wanted to incite any incidents of mob justice and undue harm, yet that was the general effect of their call for public help. Throughout the Boston bombing investigation, the FBI was publicly dissatisfied with the behavior of the mass media for reporting false news, as well as the public for harassing innocent people. While asking the public for help is necessary, it seems to cause officials more trouble in certain cases.

r/findbostonbombers said it was “dedicated to help find the bombers (and also to clear the names of those who are innocent)” yet the subreddit description stated that “This is nothing more than one single place for people to compile, analyze, and discuss images, links, and thoughts about the Boston Bombing” (r/findbostonbombers 2013). Many in the media dubbed those in the subreddit “armchair detectives” or “online detectives” (Oremus 2013a; The Associated Press

2013; WCVB 2013). Yet it did not seem like the subreddit wanted to spawn amateur detectives, considering the following rules of the subreddit:

1. We do not condone vigilante justice.
2. Do not post any personal information.
3. Any racism will not be tolerated.
4. Theories are welcome but make sure you fact-check your sources.
5. Remember, we are only a subreddit. We must remember where helping ends and the job of the professionals begin.
6. Do not make any images viral. Limit reposting images outside of this sub.
7. Finally keep in mind that most or all of the ‘suspects’ being discussed are, in all likelihood, innocent people and that they should be treated as innocent until they are proven guilty.

These guidelines demonstrate a number of things. The subreddit did not condone vigilante justice, and obviously did not want to get involved with a witch-hunt. The rules expressed an understanding that the subreddit was simply a place of discussion and that the users within were not professionals. Users were encouraged not to share information outside of Reddit or make anything viral; instead, important information should have been sent to the FBI, which indicates a level of trust in the FBI and their professionalism. Whenever a user had discovered clear photos of a potential suspect or discovered seemingly important information such as the brand of the pressure cooker used in the bombing, they were urged by others in the subreddit to submit the information to the FBI. In regards to the discovery of a photograph with two suspicious men setting down their backpacks, Redditor 368 urged the person, “You, sir, need to report this to the FBI immediately.” When the subreddit found another potential suspect, Redditor 1604 wrote, “I agree this theory is mildly convincing. I even submitted the info to the

FBI on their tip page in the very unlikely chance they didn't know about him and no one else submitted it.” Redditor 3618 announced,

IF YOU HAVE ANY PHOTOS FROM THE CRIME SCENES BEFORE OR AFTER THE BOMBINGS PLEASE SEND THEM TO THE FBI They have asked that when emailing or calling you let them know when the picture was taken and where they were taken from and of. This will help them prioritize which images to look at first. Even if you think you have nothing, send it in. Let them decide if there's nothing to see.

The live-update threads also operated under similar policies informed by Reddit’s site-wide policies; particularly of interest is the privacy and personal information related policies.

According to Reddit’s FAQ page found in 2016,

Is posting personal information OK?

NO. reddit is a pretty open and free speech place, but it is not ok to post someone's personal information, or post links to personal information. This includes links to public Facebook pages and screenshots of Facebook pages with the names still legible. We all get outraged by the ignorant things people say and do online, but witch hunts and vigilantism hurt innocent people and certain individual information, including personal info found online is often false. Posting personal information will get you banned. Posting professional links to contact a congressman or the CEO of some company is probably fine, but don't post anything inviting harassment, don't harass, and don't cheer on or vote up obvious vigilantism. (Reddit FAQ)

It is not obvious when this FAQ question was updated; language regarding witch-hunts and vigilantism could have been added after the Boston bombing. Nonetheless, the individual guidelines for the subreddits involved reflect similar sentiments – leave the real detective work to the professionals, protect private information, and avoid vigilante activities.

Despite the similar policies and interest in the same national event, there was a noticeable split between the news subreddits and r/findbostonbombers. While there were certainly crossovers between the two in terms of readership, the live-update threads were more concerned

with reporting the most recent facts while r/findbostonbombers were more concerned with speculating and gathering any clues that would lead to the bombers. One of the moderators of the live-update threads explained, “I really tried to divorce the two subreddits from one another because no new content was being generated in the r/findbostonbombers thread. They were just analyzing the same old pictures and looking closely like it was a Where’s Waldo¹ game” (Barker 2015). Near the end of the entire event when the witch hunt for potential bomber suspects was taking place, those in the live-update threads expressed much shame and embarrassment, while insisting that Reddit is not the place for speculation and detective work. In a live-update thread, Redditor 701 said, “It's one thing to be eager to help. However, I'm pretty sure not a single person posting here is a criminal investigator and so they shouldn't be going around saying who is suspicious based on a single still photograph taken out of context.” Similarly, Redditor 2315 agreed, “Reddit is NOT the FBI for one thing and then to accuse people in such a public forum with the sole purpose to gain internet fame is absolutely despicable. Really a totally shameful display.”

The core difference between the news subreddits and r/findbostonbombers is therefore, facts versus speculation. The basis of the live-update threads was information already reported in the news media or by the police; as the OP gathered and verified information, he would post them accordingly. Subscribers to the live-update threads would be waiting to read the most updated information by continually pressing F5 on their keyboards to refresh the page (a common joke in the threads) as well as combing through various news reports to help the OP gather information. r/findbostonbombers dealt with any and all relevant theories, then used

¹ *Where's Waldo?* is a series of children's book written by British illustrator, Martin Handford, first published in 1987. Each double page spread is filled with intricate colored drawings of a variety of people doing various things. Hidden among them for the readers to find is the character Waldo, who wears a red and white striped shirt.

relevant, verified, or scientific information to inform their theories. Of course, their theories were based on reported facts, and users constantly reminded one another to support all theories with credible sources. However, the users in r/findbostonbombers would continuously and repeatedly discuss information from many different angles to glean any and all relevant (or irrelevant) information. Those in r/news and r/inthenews eventually became wary of r/findbostonbombers' rampant speculation and wild accusations. Despite the clearly stated and straightforward rules, "each of these rules was flouted at every turn" as the week progressed (Meikle 2016). Despite the careful way the subreddits were set up, personal information was spread and a feverish witch-hunt for the bombers took place. The following sections will look at how the witch-hunt came to fruition.

Processing Grief

In the hundreds of initial threads created about the Boston bombing, thousands of photos and videos from the marathon were shared from the public, including graphic ones showing the level of casualty and injuries. Most of the photos and videos came from people's personal cameras and smartphones taken at the event, but Redditors were also taking from news and media reports. The visualization of the marathon and its casualties provoked various emotions in the subreddits. The initial emotional reaction at seeing the real effects of the bombings is important to consider because the emotions continue to color the amateur detectives' biases as their investigation progressed.

There was intense mourning for the victims of the bombing. Seeing one particularly graphic image, Redditor 549 exclaimed, "OMG. You can see the guy who lost both of his legs react at the moment he realizes he lost both of his legs. That's the worst thing I've seen so far." For marathoners, as some users pointed out, injuring the lower half of the body was most

egregious and cold-hearted. “Can you imagine being a marathon runner and having your legs blown off? It would suck regardless of who you are but it's an extra kick in the teeth to them,” said Redditor 2830.

At the same time, however, users were also curiously discussing the specifics of how victims died or were injured, as it led to further understanding of the trajectory and blast radius of the bomb, where the bombs were placed on the street, and how it led to certain types of injuries over others. People were curious as to why the death toll was surprisingly low considering the seemingly powerful impact of the bomb. Redditor 3303 wrote, “Not to be morbidly optimistic, but because of the low placement of the bombs, people tended to not get hit in vital areas.” Redditor 500 explained, “we really need to see more scene 2 aftermath photos. the ability to link Jeff and Krystal [victims] to the brunt of blast 1 helped a lot - we now know potentially where the bag was placed based on scorch marks. if possible, we should do the same for Martin and Lu and blast2. thanks again for your efforts.” As more information came in on who died, users became incredibly fixated on the exact way the victims died – was it a heart attack? Did the victim bleed out? Where was the victim standing at the time the bomb exploded? Redditor 514 complained about the gory details, “How does this have to do with identifying or finding suspects? This is becoming a masturbatory exercise in gore and speculation.” Redditor 515 answered, “This is relatively harmless speculation, unlike those cats forwarding pictures of innocent people everywhere,” indicating that discussing such issues was better than implicating innocent people. It also indicates that for Redditors, understanding how the victims died was one way to process their grief.

There were positive notes, however. Looking at all the images, users would point out who should be noted for their bravery. One particularly touching incident that was repeatedly

brought up was that of Jeff Bauman, a marathon spectator who lost both his legs in the explosion, and Carlos Arredondo, the man who helped save his life. In the now iconic photo, Arredondo runs alongside Bauman who is sitting in a wheelchair, and is pinching a loose artery closed so that Bauman does not bleed out. The story became more touching when Bauman later woke up in the hospital and identified one of the bombers, because he had bumped into him earlier at the finish line and saw the suspect leave behind his backpack (Quinn 2015). Redditor 892 wrote, “Jeff Bauman should never have to buy a drink again in his life. Takes a bullet for Boston and identifies the shooter.” Redditor 1405 agreed, “This man is hardcore, I dont know, I'm all misty over this shit thinking about this, guys a fucking badass. I hope he gets well and gets robo legs and people support him on his road to recovery.” Along the same lines, emergency services personnel were also praised. Redditor 3622 pointed out, “It's amazing that the death toll is still at three considering how much collateral damage was done. A testament to the first responders no doubt,” to which Redditor 3623 added, “And the extreme talent of the doctors and nurses and staff of Boston's hospitals. MGH, BWH, BIDMC, BMC, Children's, they are some of the best hospitals in the world.”

However, when information was released that one of the victims who died was an eight-year-old boy, it was cause for more grief and further angered the group. Considering the fact that one of the bombs exploded very close to the young boy, Redditors surmised that the bomber saw the boy but still decided to plant the bomb. The characterization of the cruelty and cold-heartedness of the bombers was common. Redditor 1461 explained, “That's why its so disturbing to me. He wasn't trying to hurt certain people he considered guilty or deserving. He just put the bomb in the middle of a bunch of innocent people and left.” Redditor 1479, a father, stated, “I don't know why but this is the first pic that had me in tears too. I'm a new first time dad. Can't

imagine. Can't fucking imagine. Feels good to feel something though, wouldn't want to be the heartless piece of shit that could do something like this to innocent people. Must be a worthless existence.”

The emotions of grief and anger, coupled with the idea that the suspects were cruel and heartless, as well as the call from the FBI for the public help, motivated Redditors to join in the online investigation. The intense emotions running through the community were all a reaction to the bombings and further exacerbated by violent imagery being shared throughout the community. The emotions stemmed from a point of reason and are not irrational.

Theories of Motive

In the top 100 comments across various threads that were analyzed, there were no prominent theories in terms of who could be responsible for the bombings. Among the 3,600 comments that were analyzed, only 47 discussed any potential motive for the bombing. Since no group came forward to claim responsibility in the days after the bombing, the matter was up in the air. This does not mean that theories of motive were not discussed, but perhaps they were not upvoted towards the end of the week (since that is when Archive-It took snapshots of the subreddits). It is also likely that conspiracy and outlandish theories were downvoted by the community to avoid visibility. Among the 47 comments, six stated that the attack must have been a form of domestic terrorism. Redditor 3508 stated, “possibility of this being a [1] domestic attack rather than a foreign. Domestic attack seems more likely to me.” Redditor 4282 even commented,

To be perfectly honest, I'd prefer it turned out to be domestic. That means it's more than likely a single crazy person, and won't have any negative effects on international relations/stability. Also, this means that the London marathon,

World Cup, etc. are probably all in no more danger than before. If it's a coordinated international plot, then things are much worse.

None of the comments discussed international terrorism. Rather, they simply discussed terrorism in general, without specifying whether or not it could have been domestic or international. It was highly noted in the media and in Reddit that in President Obama's press conference regarding the bombing, he carefully avoided using the term 'terrorism' (Ghosh 2013:11). 'Terrorism' thus became a frequently used but debated word within the subreddits. Redditor 2933 explained, "terrorism doesn't just mean killing people. By most definitions (the various federal agencies that define it have 20 different definitions), terrorism must include some political goal; so just murdering people by use of a bomb isn't terrorism if you did it for shits and giggles." Yet Redditor 3451 countered, "'Terrorist attack' doesn't mean attack by al Qaeda, it means an attack by any person or group of persons meant to instill terror in the general population and disrupt the flow of normal daily routine." When media outlets began calling the bombing a 'terrorist attack', Redditor 2929 reasoned,

To the people outraged that news networks are calling it a "terrorist attack" without any evidence: terrorism doesn't have to come from overseas, it doesn't have to be someone from the middle east, and it doesn't have to be a religious extremist. Some person(s) planted bombs at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. That's terrorism no matter who was responsible.

The fear of calling it 'terrorism,' as evident in the above quotes, stems from the fear of scapegoating the bombing to Islamic terrorism or the like. Redditor 3004 warned others not to jump to conclusions and to avoid using any definitive terms or phrases.

I just want to point out a few things before people panic too hard: • Do NOT start point fingers at people or groups. There is ZERO basis of who did what. This leads to misinformation on a grand scale much like point 2. •Do NOT make this political. Being political in a time of distress never is a good idea and can further spread bad information.

Reddit user 2982 expressed similar sentiments and implored, “Guys please keep judgements and suspicions of who did it to yourselves for the time being (until we have reliable sources). We have a disaster on our hands and pointing the finger will not help out anyone. Please stay safe, guys.” Even if there were no prominent theories of motive in the subreddits, there were certainly discussions of the race and ethnicity of the bombers as Redditors scoured through photos and videos to find the bombers.

Where’s Waldo?

The witch hunt can be divided into two temporal stages: before and after images of the Tsarnaev brothers were released by the FBI. Before the release, the subreddits were more concerned with finding out what the suspects actually looked like rather than theories of motive. From discussing the potential height of the bombers, to wondering if the bombers had facial hair, Redditors speculated on every detail of the bombers’ physical characteristics. The bombers were assumed to be men. While the nationality of the bombers was not a topic of debate (perhaps it was assumed that the bombers were not ‘American’, considering the discussion on terrorism), Redditors were concerned with the potential race and ethnicity of the bombers. As discussed in the previous section, those who believed the bombing was an act of terrorism were warned by others not to scapegoat the tragedy to Islamic extremists. After the release of the Tsarnaev photos, Reddit’s investigation shifted to identifying anyone who looked like the brothers.

The level of speculation pinpointing any suspicious person with a backpack led to some calling it a ‘Where’s Waldo’ hunt. Redditor 4271 called r/findbostonbombers “Where's Waldo central.” Redditor 4412 also stated in the live-update threads, “You are welcome to post "Find Waldos" here, but there is a subreddit dedicated to the effort: /r/findbostonbombers.” Image 1 was also shared online to poke fun at the indiscriminate scrutiny. Various news media channels

would report on Reddit's investigation, leading many to wonder if crowdsleuthing or crowdsourcing information could truly be that helpful to police investigations, much less be accurate (Davidson 2013; Glynn 2013; Pickert 2013; Valdes 2013; WCVB 2013).

The same debate was also common within r/findbostonbombers. On one hand, many believed that Reddit was the best place for crowdsourced, accurate information, at least better than mainstream media. As Redditor 96 wrote, "Reddit is the BEST source for information. power in numbers imo. If Reddit can find a missed connection from across the world we can help anywhere. We are NOT to be judges and jurors BUT we can be vigilant witnesses." Redditor 120 said that the subreddit must be helping the FBI, "Instead of 100 agents working on it, they have 6,000 free agents working on it." Redditor 1057 expressed amazement, "I'm really amazed at how easy [sic] the resources are coming together. Pleased, actually...While we live in a time of turmoil, it's also a time of damn fine collaboration. In other words, these guys [the bombers] are fucked."

Image 1- Is this the Boston Bomber?



On the other hand, users also expressed that Reddit had gone too far in attempting to find the bombers, and that the platform was not the place for such investigations. Redditor 775 chided,

“I’d like to take a moment to commend all the Redditors here for their hard work the last couple of days “identifying” seemingly every human in the vicinity except the actual 2 real suspects. In the process freaking out many of the innocent people labelled as such. fantastic work all around, FBI agents!” Redditor 2359 said, “I do think there was value in this subreddit, especially for gathering media. But some people took it way farther than many wanted them to.” Redditor 2315 agreed, “Reddit is NOT the FBI for one thing and then to accuse people in such a public forum with the sole purpose to gain internet fame is absolutely despicable. Really a totally shameful display.” Therefore, while the purpose of r/findbostonbombers was to speculate and gather information, the level of action Reddit should take was still contentious. Redditors such as Redditor 1284, who commented, “Guys, we’re becoming a mob here. It might be him, it might not be. Let the authorities figure it out. Internet vigilantism is no bueno,” continued to remind others to not jump to conclusions and to leave the work to the professionals, again indicating the level of trust users have towards the FBI, as well as awareness of the difference between the jobs of amateurs and professionals.

However, Reddit was not the only key player in the hunt for the bomber suspects. As some of the notable suspects from the witch hunt demonstrate, mainstream media played an important role in being the speakerphone for Reddit’s investigation. Three suspects, Blue Robe Guy, Blue Duffel, and White Hat Guy, as nicknamed by the community, demonstrate the relationship between mainstream media and Reddit.

Blue Robe Guy was one of the first suspects found by the Reddit community (Image 2). He became a suspect when the FBI released a photograph showing the remains of the backpack, which was assumed to be the one carrying the pressure cooker bomb. The backpack the Blue Robe Guy was carrying seemed to have the same stripes as the exploded backpack, leading

Redditors to believe he could be the bomber. While data from when Blue Robe Guy was pinpointed are not available via Archive-It, Oremus (2013b) wrote, “Some Redditors noted that Blue Robe Guy appears to be gripping his pack tightly and “trying to look nonchalant.” Another Redditor added that he “fits the profile of the kind of person I think did this” (Oremus 2013b). Such quotes reveal the indiscriminate level of r/findbostonbombers to pinpoint suspects, as well as unspoken biases of a vague bomber suspect profile influencing people’s judgements. The Blue Robe Guy was not personally identified by those online, although some claimed to have tracked down his Facebook page, “where he was defending himself” (Buchanan 2013).

Image 2 - The Backpack and the Blue Robe Guy (Kim 2015)



A pair of men, Blue Duffel and White Hat Guys, became very popular suspects after Blue Robe Guy, and had much worse luck (Image 3). Redditors highlighted these two men in the crowd because there seemed to be a gap where they were standing, possibly indicating a backpack on the ground. Redditor 3975 observed in much detail,

These pictures should be immediately followed up on.... The backpack is visible in one picture and is no longer visible in other pictures. 2. There is a bulge imprinting in the bag, and it seems to be more of an over-sized AND oddly-shaped item rather than a small oddly-shaped item like a water bottle.... 5. I regret to point this out, but they fit the demographics. Clean-shaven, short hair, seemingly of Middle Eastern decent, middle-aged male, well-equipped with professionally made devices, if we're basing it solely off the more visible "Blue Robe Guy." However, if the white-capped guy is a Lone Wolf, then he could EITHER fit the more "stereotypical" demographic, or the other one of white, male, middle class, disgruntled.

Other images show the men with their backpack and duffel bag, however. Redditor 50 commented, "Im not sure if this was posted anywhere yet but while making a info graph connecting some images together I noticed the white hat guy who was with the other fellow with a duffel bag and blue coat actually does have his back pack on in the image with 'no bag.'" Even though they seemed like potential suspects, Redditors still debated whether or not the pressure cooker bomb would be too heavy to carry on just one shoulder in a duffel bag. Others noted that the bags were sagging too much so they are unlikely to be carrying anything heavy such as a bomb (Barker 2015). Image 4 shows one Redditor's analysis.

Image 3 - Blue Duffel and White Hat Men

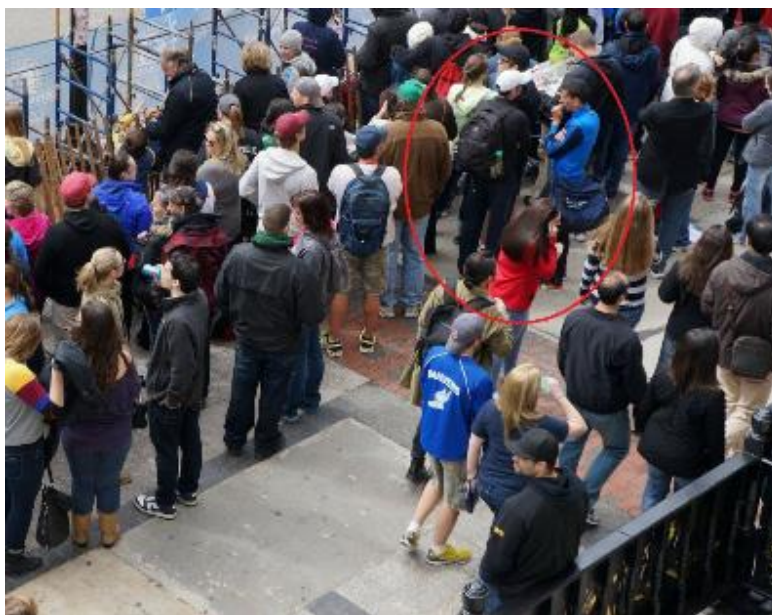


Image 4 - The sagging bags (Barker 2015)



Indications that the media were checking in on Reddit’s investigation became clear when a picture of the two men was printed on the front page of the New York Post saying that they were the bombing suspects (Image 5). Such actions by the New York Post to prematurely name the men as suspects, as well as circulate their images widely, only further deepened the Reddit user’s mistrust of the media. When the bombing first happened, New York Post continuously mis-reported the number of deaths, until those doing the live-update threads explicitly banned New York Post as a credible source. Redditor 2992 vented, “The New York Post is shitting on this story immensely. They also still claim there are 12 dead. This is bullshit sensationalism and outright lying.” Seeing the New York Post once again misreporting the news, Redditor 4999 said, “The mods of /r/findbostonbombers are aware of this and they are scrubbing the subreddit of any allegation that the two were involved, as well as banning future investigations into them for their protection. It is too bad that the New York Post didn't get the memo before this morning's front page. At least the rest of the world is catching up now. Thanks CBS.”

Image 5 - New York Post Front Page on April 18, 2013 (Shapiro 2013)



In response to the New York Post's premature accusations, the two men, who turned out to be college students, felt a wave of panic and went to the police (ABC News 2013). The connection between mass media and Reddit is an important element in the witch hunt, as we will discuss in a later section.

Who's Waldo?

On April 18th, FBI released images of the Tsarnaev brothers at the marathon on April 18th, (see Image 6). Their names and identities were not yet known at the time, and they asked the public to help identify the two men (Smith and Patterson 2013). The FBI reportedly used key witness testimonies, such as Jeff Bauman's, as well as phone records to identify the two suspects. The armchair detectives of r/findbostonbombers thus shifted their focus from hunting any

randomly suspicious person to finding either of the brothers (particularly Dzhokhar) in the crowd as well as identifying them. The FBI's call was answered as "authorities received a 'large volume of calls ... as a result of the photos,' an FBI official said. The FBI's website, moreover, had been inundated with record traffic" (Smith and Patterson 2013). Many of the tips, whether helpful or not, certainly came from r/findbostonbombers.

Image 6 - FBI released images of the bombing suspects (Johnson, Leger Leinwand, and Strauss 2013)



Discussions about on race and ethnicity became more prominent at this point. Seeing the images of one of the suspects, Redditor 1262 lamented, "Looks like I'll be shaving and getting a haircut soon. I look like this guy, just without the nose and chin. Those are fucking horrible." Redditor 1263 also felt the same, "Same. I had friends and family contact me after seeing the first picture released of the white hat guy [Dzhokhar Tsarnaev] telling me to be careful because we look exactly alike, same hairstyle and everything. Ugh its going to be a rough week or two." Redditors debated whether or not the suspects in the images had white or brown skin. Redditor

1261 finally concluded, “i was in denial before, but yeah, definitely brown. selfish of me to say but it's gonna get even rougher for us brown/arab dudes pretty soon.” Redditor 2502 jumped in, perhaps jokingly, “Or African (Sub-Saharan).” When the brothers were finally identified and information was released that they were from Chechnya, Redditor 2216 commented, “I've already started to see posts debating their whiteness... They're Chechens from the Caucasus region, you know, the place the term Caucasian came from? People make me sad.”

Many theories regarding Dzhokhar’s appearances were discussed in the subreddit – was his facial hair real? Was he wearing a prosthetic nose? Was he wearing a disguise? Redditor 1220 noted, “If he is smart, he is not wearing his personal clothes + fake hair + fake nose + fake moustache.” “Redditor 1259 exclaimed, “SOMEBODY HAS TO RECOGNIZE THAT NOSE!!!” (Dzhokhar’s nose became a running joke in the subreddit). One of the Redditors also identified the brand of the hats the suspects were wearing as a Bridgestone golf cap. The hat became such a focal point of the unofficial investigation that many jokes were made about it. Redditor 364 wrote, “Amazon and Ebay are probably wondering why there is so much interest in Bridgestone hats today.” A Redditor even went ahead and created a subreddit called Boston Bomber Hats to discuss what hats the bombers were wearing and what hats they were not wearing.

r/findbostonbombers did actually spot Dzhokhar in a couple of photographs that were then sent to the FBI as evidence. Using photoshop and other photo enhancing techniques, Redditors would spend time cleaning blurry photos as well as possible. On this day, April 18th, however, keep in mind that the identities of the Tsarnaev brothers were still unknown.

The next day on April 19th, the name Sunil Tripathi surfaced on Reddit when a user submitted a link to a Huffington Post article indicating his status as a missing person (Griffo 2013). An old high school classmate of Sunil’s also tweeted a comment regarding Sunil’s

resemblance to Dzhokhar, further fueling the rumor (Madrigal 2013). Where Sunil went missing was also in close proximity to the bombing area. Sunil would fast become the most well-known suspect from the internet's investigation, though, unfortunately for the amateur detectives, he was innocent. Sunil Tripathi was a Brown University student who had gone missing in March, a month before the bombing. His family had set up a Help Us Find Sunil Tripathi Facebook page, urging anyone with information on his whereabouts to contact the family or the FBI, who had become involved in the investigation (see Image 7). The article about Sunil's missing status quickly became the leading article on Reddit's front page (Kim 2015) as many believed that Sunil disappeared in order to plan and carry out the bombing. There was also indication that Sunil had been depressed before his disappearance, leading Redditors to believe that he matched the temperament of a bomber.

Whether or not Sunil Tripathi resembled Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was a subject of hot debate. Redditors also discovered Sunil's personal Facebook page along with the Help Us Find Sunil Tripathi Facebook page, and shared the links and his photos in the subreddit – a violation of Reddit's privacy policy, as well as subreddit's own rules, which banned any sharing of personal information. Such practice of digging up personal information on the internet and then sharing it is called 'doxxing', and is a heavily condemned practice on Reddit (C.S. 2014). As users dug up more information on Sunil, more of his images were shared in r/findbostonbombers. More comparisons were made with the images of Dzhokhar from FBI released footage (see Image 8 and Image 9). Redditor 1671 observed, "I amazed that the missing kid from Brown isn't a suspect...When looking at the photos online there are several with bushy hair and he has the same smashed nose..." Reddit 2253 noted, "those ears are so similar...I'm not saying I know. I

just see a creepy similarity. I hope it's not true. Would be horrible for his family. Sunil's story will probably not have a good ending, no matter what.”.

Image 7 - Sunil Tripathi's Missing Persons poster



MISSING
Sunil Tripathi




MISSING - FBI now involved: Sunil Tripathi (22 yrs) of Providence, Rhode Island, Brown University student. Last seen Saturday morning (3/16/2013) near his apartment off Angell Street. Sunil Tripathi is described as 6-foot-2-inches tall and about 130 pounds.

Sunil left his phone, wallet and other belongings in his apartment. The FBI has joined the search for Sunil Tripathi, in conjunction with the Providence Police Department and the Department of Public Safety. Sunil Tripathi's family are very worried about his safety.

If you know of Sunil Tripathi's whereabouts, have any information regarding his disappearance, contact Providence Detectives at 401-641-8691, or notify the FBI.

Providence Police Department
401-641-8691

Share and print this flier at [facebook.com/missingcases](https://www.facebook.com/missingcases)



Providence Police Department

Image 8 - Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (left) and Sunil Tripathi (right)



Image 9 - Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (left) and Sunil Tripathi (right)



As people became more convinced that Sunil was one of the suspects, they took to the Facebook page his family had set up and began harassing the family severely with comments saying he was the bomber. With the complete destruction of their privacy and the amount of extreme harassment pegging their son as the bomber, the family removed the Facebook page altogether. This action, along with the family's silence on the issue, further convinced those

online that Sunil must have been the bomber. Redditor 2543 said the family could at least release a statement saying

‘It’s not him.’ Not responding is kind of like Ted Kaczynski's (sp?) bro turning him in, you're hesitant, you don't want to, but you know you have to and you're not going to talk about it publicly, at least at first. If it were my kid, I imagine I would want to cooperate and try to find the truth so he could be found without violent incident, rather than denying it.

Redditor 2554 agreed, saying that “silence breeds suspicion... If this were my son, I would be shouting from the rooftops that it is NOT him. It would put it to rest pretty easily.” The media also picked up on the issue, reasoning that if the family removed the Facebook page, it must have been because they recognized Sunil in the FBI suspect photos (Madrigal 2013). Again, there is a back and forth between the media and Reddit.

The theory that Sunil Tripathi was one of the bombers was further solidified later that same day, on April 19th, when a user on Twitter named Greg Hughes believed he heard Sunil’s name mentioned in the Boston police scanner along with Mike Mulugeta as the bombing suspects. “BPD scanner has identified the names: Suspect 1: Mike Mulugeta, Suspect 2: Sunil Tripathi” (Madrigal 2013). While it is not clear who Mike Mulugeta was, because his name was heard over the police scanner, those online and in the media took it to be one of the suspect’s names. The Twitter user also cited Reddit’s transcript of the police scanner as a source, even though there is no indication that the transcript mentioned Sunil’s name (Madrigal 2013). While Hughes’ original tweet may have only had one retweet and a few comments, it somehow eventually was picked up by other Twitter users with a much larger following, such as BuzzFeed journalist Andrew Kaczynski (approx. 80,000 followers), Perez Hilton (approx. 6 million followers), and the hacktivist collective, Anonymous (approx. 1.6 million followers). Each of these accounts tweeted the information to their millions of followers, quickly spreading the

misinformation. Although at the time, it seemed credible that Sunil Tripathi was actually the bombing suspect, no one could produce any soundbite from the police scanner audio mentioning Sunil's name. Redditor 2539 maintained, "All over the scanner they said his name multiple times as suspect." Redditor 2564 reported the same, "Just heard word. He's #2... via Boston Police Scanner."

Even though many users questioned the validity of this claim, noting that they were listening to the scanner the whole time and never heard Sunil's name, the rumor continued to spread as truth. Redditor 2362 was confused, "I've been listening to the scanner all night long, and I never ever heard Sunil's name mentioned." Redditor 2363 agreed, "I was listening ALL night and I never ever hear Sunil's name mentioned either." Redditor 2386 wondered, "How can so many people mishear the exact same thing on a police scanner when it was never actually said?" Whether or not Sunil's name was actually mentioned, Redditors took the possibility of it being mentioned as proof that they were correct. It was a triumphant moment for Reddit, who believed this was proof that crowdsourcing information could lead to the truth. It was also seen as a triumphant moment for new media (the internet) versus old media (mainstream news), especially by Greg Hughes, the man who first tweeted hearing Sunil's name on the scanner,

Hughes himself, the primary source of the information on Twitter, tweeted, "If Sunil Tripathi did indeed commit this #BostonBombing, Reddit has scored a significant, game-changing victory." And then later, he continued, "Journalism students take note: tonight, the best reporting was crowdsourced, digital and done by bystanders. #Watertown (Madrigal 2013).

In fact, it seemed so credible that the moderator of r/findbostonbombers decided to include Sunil Tripathi's name as a suspect, because he viewed the BuzzFeed journalist's tweet as a credible media source (Barker 2015). While the moderator had tried to keep Sunil's name out of the discussion originally, it became overwhelming; he said "It became almost its own beast in

a way” (Barker 2015). Sunil Tripathi’s name became widely publicized in print and television media. The more his name spread online, the more it spread offline, indicating a cyclical feedback loop between the internet and the media. With confirmation from the media and supposedly from the police scanner, Reddit users rejoiced in the knowledge that they actually were able to name and identify the suspect before the police did. Redditor 2576 said, “Lol, I fucking called it! It was him!” Redditor 2579 exclaimed, “Seriously! The individual and the circumstances surrounding his disappearance coincided perfectly with the bombings and the fucking mods wouldn’t even let people post about it.” Redditor 2569 poked fun at the moderators who were previously trying to remove any mention of Sunil’s name before ‘official’ confirmation, “nice job mods censoring what everybody on reddit’s been saying for who knows how long now that turned up being the truth.”

The glory did not last long, however. Only a few hours after the information was spreading on the internet, NBC reporter Brian Williams “confirmed with his sources that two Chechnyan brothers were the primary suspects in the case” (Madrigal 2013). The brothers were Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev.

The Aftermath

With official confirmation that the suspects were actually the Tsarnaev brothers, a wave of shame and embarrassment swept over Reddit. The moderator of r/findbostonbombers issued an official apology in a thread titled “[Mod Note] Despite what was allegedly overheard on a police scanner, Sunil Tripathi was misidentified and is innocent.” His apology wrote,

I’d like to extend the deepest apologies to the family of Sunil Tripathi for any part we may have had in relaying what has turned out to be faulty information. We cannot begin to know what you’re going through and for that we are truly sorry. Several users, twitter users, and other sources had heard him identified

as the suspect and believed it to be confirmed. We were mistaken. This event shows exactly why the no personal information until confirmation rule is in place. Out of respect for Tripathi and his family, I ask that users here please remove any and all links about him. Thank you (Linkins 2013).

The apology was not received very well in the subreddit. “That apology doesn't excuse you for enabling a bunch of armchair detectives to pin crimes on innocents. Leave it to the actual detectives, whose job it is. This subreddit pretty much personifies the worst of reddit, and you should be ashamed for enabling it,” said Redditor 2344. Following the public apology, Redditor 1613 wrote, “Suspect is not the missing guy, authorities confirm him to be Dzhokhar A. Tsarnaev, a chechnyan. Good thing internet detectives harassed the fuck out of this guy's grieving family just in case though!!! Redditor 2355 joked about the misguided self-congratulations, “Reddit crashed under the weight of internet detectives patting themselves on the back.” Redditor 2342 wrote an empty apology, “Sorry about skipping due process and essentially torturing you!”

In hindsight, Redditors began expressing how they knew or always felt that Sunil did not look similar to Dzhokhar at all. Redditor 2379 could not see any resemblance between Sunil and Dzhokhar, “How anyone thought they could conclusively say it was the same guy from 1 insanely fucking low rez picture, blows my fucking mind.” Racial profiling was also cited as one reason for Sunil’s unfortunate involvement in the bombing. Redditor 2202 offered, “Maybe in the future you dumb fucks will stop implicating the first person with the most Muslim sounding name?” Redditor 2229 said, “I - along with basically every South Asian person I've talked to in the last few hours - have been saying all along that Sunil did NOT look like the suspect. Like at all. I'm incredibly disgusted by Reddit right now and the mods' unwillingness to remove references to Sunil posted on this blog. The family had to take down his facebook page because of harassment.”

Since Tripathi family were severely harassed throughout the process as a result of the false identification, much shame was expressed as people wanted to apologize to the family. Redditor 2370 said, “Fuck everyone who went to his family's page and posted rampant speculation. Seriously. If you did that, you're a piece of shit.” Similarly, Redditor 2393 stated, “It was completely disgusting. And even if they had been the right suspects, spewing hate at their friends/families would still have been wrong. Where is the logic in harassing innocents just because of who they have the misfortune of knowing?” Redditors were also comparing Reddit’s failure in the investigation to the failures of the media in terms of reporting accurate information, such as “Wow way to fall apart on the no witch hunting rule, Reddit. CNN's not the only one shitting the bed...” (Redditor 4887). Redditor 2181 made another comparison, “Reddit are more pig headed than racial profiling cops.”

As Redditors expressed remorse and embarrassment over the events of the day, some looked towards the future. Redditor 2312 hoped, “I hope reddit learns from this. I didn't mind the "investigating" but for God's sake, don't accuse anyone before it's 100% sure and leave identification to the professionals.” Yet perhaps the future is bleak for Reddit, for the platform has become well-known as a hotbed for vigilante activities. Redditor 2313 responded, “Don't hold your breath. Reddit will NEVER learn from this. I've been here for some 5 years and these impromptu, well-intended witch hunts have been happening consistently, regardless of how tough the mods get on personal information rules.” Redditor 2515 concluded, “This is subreddit should have never opened. Fucked so many people over.” Reddit has been involved in witch-hunts in the past, and the Boston bombing was no exception. It stood to reason for Redditors who had been in Reddit for a long time that it will happen again in the future.

The amount of scrutiny and criticism against Reddit lead many to wonder if crowdsourcing could be effective at all. Was r/findbostonbombers just the “most amazing source of bullshit witch hunting and circlejerking” as Redditor 1670 stated? Circlejerking, when used within Reddit, is “a pejorative slang term referring to a positive feedback loop which occurs when an idea, belief or meme that is already customary within an online community becomes re-iterated and rewarded in a perpetual cycle” (Caldwell 2015). In other words, Reddit tends to verify its successes by congratulating itself. Was r/findbostonbombers simply feeding into itself? Did the subreddit help the investigation at all? Looking back at the case, one must wonder if Reddit contributed anything to the investigation or if they simply played a role in causing more headaches for official investigators.

Redditor 2171 dismissed the notion, saying, “I’d say it’s obviously delusional to say that reddit was of any help when it comes to identifying and arresting the suspects.” Redditor 2377 expressed, “I think we should leave it as an example of when crowdsourcing fails. In this case, it’s a fantastic example of systematic error and bad data undermining the miracle of aggregation.” Some useful information certainly came from Reddit, particularly Image 10, which shows Dzhokhar Tsarnaev rounding the corner from the explosion. The user who discovered the image was urged by others in r/findbostonbombers to submit the photograph to the FBI. Apart from that, however, in terms of the actual investigation, Reddit certainly played a part in sending the internet and the public on a wild goose chase, from one innocent suspect to another. In the end, the grieving Tripathi family, already going through a troubling experience, was put through another traumatic experience in which their son’s innocence was doubted. Not too long after the investigation ended, Sunil Tripathi’s body was found; it is believed he committed suicide before the marathon (Barker 2015; Bidgood 2013).

Image 10 - Image of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev found in Reddit



Reddit VS the Media

Whether or not it was a common opinion before the bombing, Reddit demonstrated an intense dislike of mainstream media channels such as CNN, BBC, or NBC. Mainstream channels made a number of reporting mistakes in terms of the number of injured and killed, who the FBI was investigating, how much evidence the FBI had collected, and so on. One major mistake made by the media, including CNN and Fox News, was reporting that an arrest had been made when there actually had not been one (Carter 2013). Redditors critiqued CNN heavily, as well as the FBI (Carter 2013). “CNN has lost a lot of credibility among people who care about accurate reporting today,” noted Redditor 4679. Redditor 539 wrote, “CNN has lost all credibility. Well, all the media has in my opinion, just especially CNN.” Redditor 5841 agreed, “I seriously cannot

watch CNN anymore... It's just SO bad.” Redditors also pointed out specific news anchors to criticize. “I can't believe Wolf just described how to make a pressure cooker bomb while decrying that people could find out how to make one on the internet” (Redditor 4510). Similarly, Redditor 5201 said, “This asshole McCaul is making some bold assertions on CNN. He's drawing connections to Al-Qaeda, Pakistan, etc. Total speculation and irresponsibly so.” When the New York Post inaccurately outed the Blue Duffel and White Hat Guys as the bomb suspects, other media outlets also picked up on it. Redditor 5165 was exasperated, “Ugh... Kelly Rippa just showed the NYPost cover with blue jacket/white hat duo. Anyone know how to contact ABC to demand a retraction quickly?”

In opposition to mainstream media, local media channels such as WCVB, Boston's local channel, were highly praised and continuously brought up as better alternatives to CNN and the likes. Redditor 4680 gave praise, “Reddit, WCVB, OP and a quite few others have been freaking amazing with gathering accurate info. I swear the internet conducts a better investigation than the professionals do sometimes.” In all 21 live-update threads, a list of local media websites was included along with encouragements for Redditors to refer to local news and avoid mainstream channels such as CNN and NBC.

In general, however, Reddit viewed itself as being a credible news source, better than the media, mainstream or local. Redditor 4360 praised Reddit, “I just want to say thanks guys for proving to be the number one news source and community helper throughout this whole ordeal. Everyone who is helping out on this has done an amazing job.” Redditor 4367 felt that Reddit was better than local media channels even, “Agreed. I live in Boston and while I appreciate the efforts of the local news, if most of what's being said is speculation, I prefer reddit speculation to reporters trying to desperately fluff. Slightly less confusing this way.” Spirits were high as

Reddit continued to be praised for its work crowdsourcing information and providing a place for people to find comfort and solace from other Redditors, as well as read accurate information.

Redditors also felt that the information gathered and crowdsourced in Reddit was more accurate and reliable than mainstream news media. Redditor 5147 praised the live-update threads, which were often seen as better than mainstream media reporting, “very well compiled. Some real hard work. This is not called a witch hunt. This is crowdsourcing at its very best. An event like this tests the internet as a real community.” Redditor 48 felt the same, believing in the objectivity of the subreddit, “agreed, we're actually doing an incredible job self moderating and staying objective.” Redditor 4107 wrote, “Just want to say thanks for all this tremendous work with the updates. I have stopped reading news sites and all I'm doing is following these update threads.” Redditor 4112 expressed similar sentiments, “Yep, have been F5ing [refreshing] these threads like crazy. Watching BBC News or CNN is no help, they just show the same info on repeat for a few hours. Plus I'm reading what they're reporting at least an hour earlier in these threads!” The subreddits were a major source of instant information for the millions of people following the case and also indicate a contentious relationship between Reddit and mainstream media.

The Feedback Loop

Despite glowing praises from within Reddit (recall circlejerk as a Reddit phenomenon), the witch hunt still happened. Blue Robe Guy, the Blue Duffel and White Hat Guys, as well as Sunil Tripathi were all innocent suspects in Reddit’s investigation. Yet we can also see that Reddit was not the sole source of misinformation, as journalists from mainstream media, users on Twitter and 4Chan, as well as online media personalities with large followings, played a role in spreading the misinformation, further damaging the reputation of the likes of

Sunil Tripathi (Carter 2013; McLachlan 2013; R. Rieder 2013; Shapiro 2013). Those in r/findbostonbombers were quick to point out that fact as well as downplay the influence of Reddit such as “people really think that Reddit has far more influence than it actually does. I think maybe they should take a few days off and realize the TOTALITY of Reddit subscribers (including throwaways) is less than 2% of the US population, and this is a global website” (Reddit 1688). Perhaps it is unfair to only focus on Reddit, yet it cannot be denied that they were a constant source of information for those following the Boston bombing case, as evidenced by the millions visiting Reddit throughout the week.

When r/findbostonbombers began accusing innocent people of being potential bomber suspects, and Sunil Tripathi in particular became the focus of the witch hunt, Redditors began posting comparisons between Reddit and the media. Saying that Reddit was no better than the media it professed to hate was the worst insult to Reddit in a way. Redditor 2351 explained that Reddit had the same pitfall as CNN in trying to be the first to get information, “The very fallacy of major news networks, that fucked up so hard the past few days in rushing to publish for ratings and not for truthful reporting, became the very same actions "Reddit found it first!" the postings in this subreddit is guilty of.” Redditor 2352 wrote, “CNN was racing the internet, and redditors were racing each other.” Redditor 2180 simply stated, “Reddit is literally worse than CNN,” an insult repeated throughout the comments.

Despite the differences between the two, Reddit and the media, there was a feedback loop between them that led the witch hunt, which started in Reddit but spun out of control in mainstream media. Other social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook were also involved. One key player that has not been mentioned was 4Chan, who was a big instigator in the witch hunt alongside Reddit. Redditor 1651 was convinced it was not Reddit’s fault, “People

not associated with Reddit are already posting images on his missing Facebook page. It won't be long before the blow back.” Moreover, there was a split within Reddit regarding who was involved with the vigilante activities. Redditor 102 wrote, “thanks for not calling all of us idiots or lumping the good with the (admittedly) bad.” Redditor 763 pointed out, “Well, to be fair, The New York Post also plastered their faces all over the front page of their paper...” It was not just Reddit’s fault, but also the media. Even if those on Reddit did not want to admit how influential Reddit was, the media certainly was checking on Reddit’s activities and reporting on findings from the unofficial investigation.

The feedback loop between social media online and traditional, mainstream media can be seen clearly, and will be discussed more in chapters 5 and 6. When one misinformation was reported on Reddit, such as Sunil Tripathi’s name being heard on the police scanner, journalists on Twitter with thousands and millions of followers picked up on the news and retweeted it. This led to mainstream media picking up the rumor, further exacerbating the misinformation as it spread like wildfire. The media confirmation led Reddit to believe that they were right in identifying Sunil as one of the bombers. Redditor 1249 even wondered, “Is a subreddit the mainstream news?”, questioning if Reddit was just as good, or bad, of a news source as mainstream media.

In sum, the investigation to find the Boston bombers took place over a very short period of time, a mere seven days, yet every day was filled with new occurrences and updates. As the police, the media, and the public scrambled to find and identify the bombers, Reddit played a key role. In their own unofficial investigation, they argued about the physical characteristics of the bombers, from his race and ethnicity, to his height, to the type of hat and backpack they were wearing. Fueled by the desire for justice as the community and the country mourned those who

died and were injured in the bombing, those in r/findbostonbombers had good, moral intentions. The FBI was asking them, the public, to help, and so they rose to the occasion. Yet the raw anger and sadness, coupled with the torrential downpour of images and videos, led Reddit down a dark path to mob vigilantism. Many innocent people became victims of Reddit's investigation. Perhaps the repercussions would not have been as dire if the Reddit's information and theories stayed within Reddit. Yet Reddit seemed to underestimate its own power and influence, as they were clearly a player in the feedback loop containing other social media sites such as Twitter and 4Chan, and the mainstream media. In the race to find the Boston bombers first, those online and those in the media reported inaccurate information, biased theories, and rampant speculations. Despite the hope that crowdsourcing could lead to the truth and ultimately, justice, it failed.

What the content analysis of Reddit during the 2013 Boston bombing has shown is that the amateur detectives attempting to solve the case had to struggle a number of things – their own emotions of grief and anger, the public's desire for truth and justice, overarching racist and nationalist discourse within society, and their relationship with the mass media and legal authorities. The next chapter moves from Boston to Bangkok, where a bombing occurred two years later. The findings of the content analysis for the 2015 Bangkok bombing will demonstrate a similar trajectory towards mob justice behavior, despite the two cases being in different countries, dealing with different cultural nuances.

CHAPTER 4. *MANO-SOCIAL*:

THE 2015 BANGKOK BOMBING ANALYSIS

On August 17, 2015, a bomb exploded at the revered Erawan Shrine during the evening rush hour in the heart of downtown Bangkok, Thailand. Approximately 20 people were killed and 125 people were injured. Most of the casualties were tourists from Malaysia, China, Hong Kong, and Japan. While Thailand has faced intense political turmoil in the past decades, this attack was considered to be “the worst-ever attack” on the country, according to current Prime Minister (and leader of the military junta), Prayut Chan-o-cha (BBC News 2015a).

In the minutes and hours immediately following the attack, reports of the incident spread on the news and social media. Everyone was hungry for information, any information, and everyone was looking for the bombers. Because the attack seemed coordinated and deliberate (set during rush hour at one of the busiest intersections of the city), it was assumed that there had to be more than one perpetrator. But who did it? No group came forward to claim the attack in the days and weeks that followed. The police and people of Thailand could only throw out theory after theory, however plausible or not.

While the world watched as the Thai police conducted a messy and haphazard investigation (Sherwell 2015b; Tribute Wire Reports 2015), another parallel investigation was occurring online in various social media channels, such as Facebook and Twitter. Dubbed the ‘keyboard sleuths’ or ‘social media sleuths’ by Thai news media (Middleton 2015; NewsAsia 2015), the online investigation was led by concerned, everyday Thai citizens. Facts and theories from news sources in Thailand and abroad were gathered and discussed as the amateur detectives combed through CCTV surveillance footage and photos taken by witnesses of the attack. During

the course of the unofficial investigation, the netizens (citizens on the net) named and shamed a number of people who matched the suspects' descriptions. Many of the innocent people who were accused had to clear their name with the police or talk to the press. While the intentions of the amateur detectives may have been morally justified, their mob-like behavior had real world consequences felt acutely by the innocent people who became suspects. In the end, the keyboard sleuths were not able to identify the bomber and caused more headache for the state authorities, who were already wading through mounds of misinformation and false leads.

Why did the online investigation fail? Such investigative discussions and accusations were littered with various discourses shaped by public opinion regarding the trustworthiness of state authorities, Thai nationalism, racism, and the complex political history of Thailand. All these factors, including the intense emotion sweeping through the nation as it recovered from the bombing, ultimately affected the crowdsleuthing efforts of those online.

This case analysis chapter on the 2015 Bangkok bombing is divided into seven sections. The first section, "The Social Media Channels", discusses the relationship between the two main social media channels that played a role in the online crowd sleuthing – Pantip, a discussion board, and CSI LA, a Facebook group. The second section, "Who Bombed Us?", examines the thought process of those online during the investigation. The netizens' perception of what constitutes a 'true Thai' identity greatly affected their opinions on the bombing as well as the popular theories of motive for the bombing, which is discussed in the third section, "Why Were We Bombed?". The fourth section, "Are We Scapegoating?", discusses the relationship between state authorities and the people of Thailand, shaped by a history of distrust and poor conduct. Such a negative perspective of state authorities is a key motivating factor for everyday citizens to participate in the online crowd sleuthing efforts to find the bombers. The fifth section, "*Mano-*

Social”, describes the concept of *mano* in the Thai internet community and how it affected the investigation. It refers to the act of letting your imagination run wild and jumping to conclusions without any evidence or facts based in reality. The sixth section, “Tangible Emotions”, describes the different types of emotion present in the online investigation. The emotional attachment to the case and the victims of the bombing were certainly an influencing factor in the online investigation. The final section, “The Innocent Suspects”, ties the various elements from the previous section together as influencing factors that led to a type of person, that is, foreigners, being profiled as suspects of the online investigation.

The Social Media Channels

The relationship between the two social media channels is complicated and will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. However, there are some important preliminary characteristics to know. Pantip, being a discussion board in which any user can create posts, mostly had news articles that were being circulated. Sharing information and facts reported from the news was the most common discussion in Pantip, but an online investigation was certainly occurring. Dedicated ‘Pantip detectives’ (Thai Rath Online 2015), spent time marking security cameras in the vicinity of Erawan Shrine on Google Maps to note which cameras would have the most valuable footage, as well as possible escape routes, for example (See Image 11-13). When official footage of the Shrine leading up to the bombing was released by the police, Pantip detectives further discussed the type of bomb used, the bomber’s escape route, what surveillance camera would reveal useful information, and so on. While the discussion revolved around the facts and evidence of the case, Pantip detectives refrained from heavy engagement in any mob activities. In fact, there was a Pantip post titled, “I think CSI LA should vet their information on

the bombing carefully,” which criticized CSI LA’s investigation and practice of spreading misinformation. There was thus a clear divide between Pantip and CSI LA.

Image 11 - Potentially valuable cameras near Erawan Shrine



Image 12 - Important Cameras at Erawan Shrine

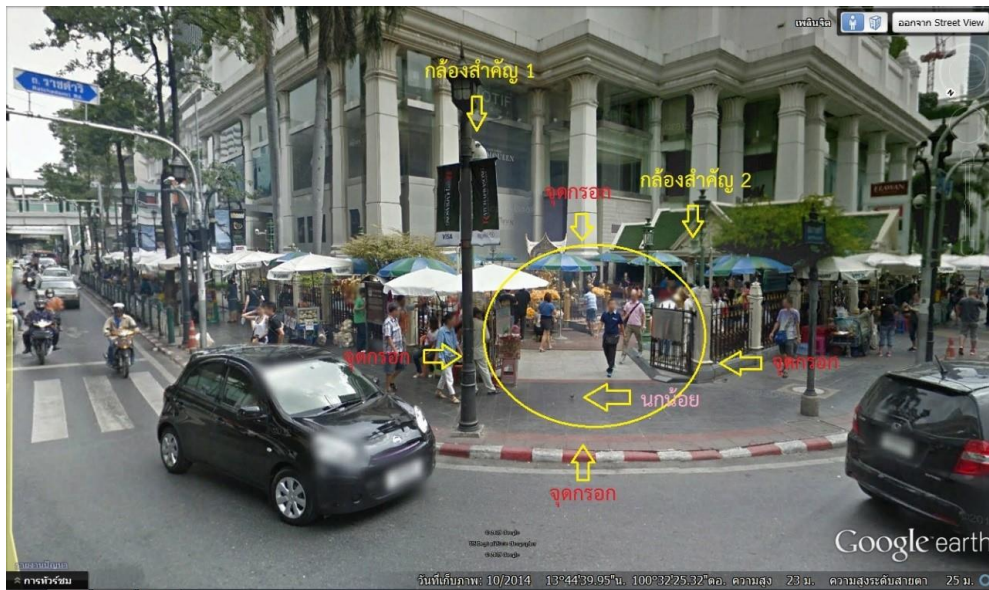
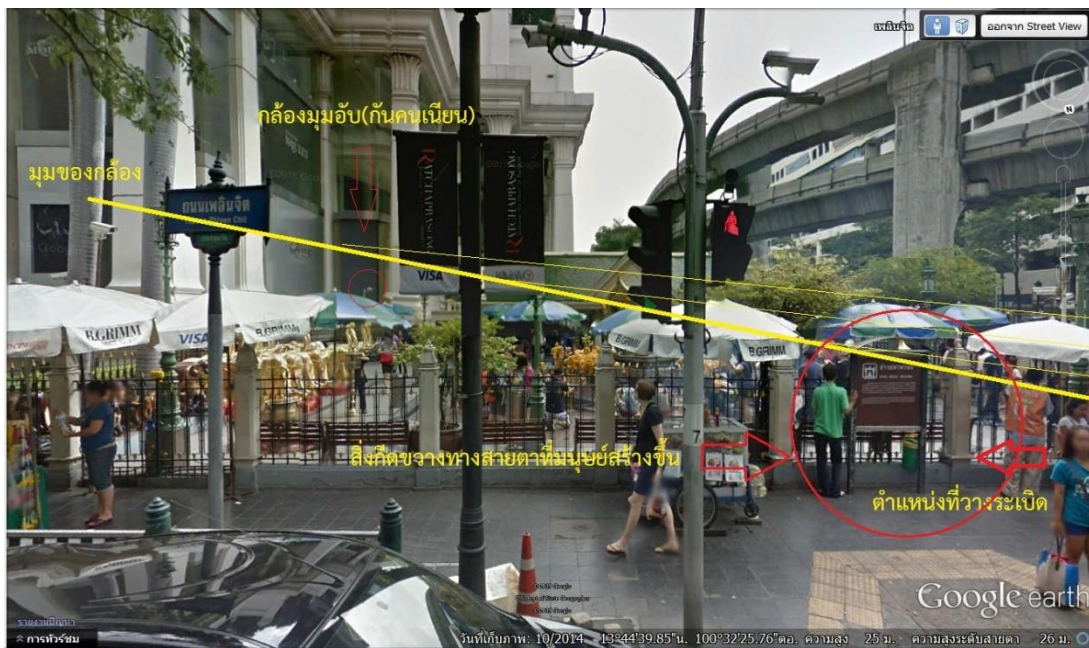


Image 13 - Camera Angles at Erawan Shrine (yellow lines and text) and Bomb Location (Red circle)



As CSI LA is the brain child of the Admin, the content of the Facebook page is determined solely by him. He is the only who can make posts, and those who follow the page, can only comment and react to what he posts. The Admin therefore determined the flow of CSI LA's investigation. Like a head detective, he took pride in collecting information from his 'insiders' (he claimed to know people in the police department). On CSI LA's page, the Admin would post any clues or evidence he was considering, and would ask his followers to help vet the information. For example, when footage of the bomber suspect was released, the Admin posted a slowed down version of the footage to provide detailed descriptions of the bomber's movement. He posited that a specific cellphone was used to set off the bomb. He also made a separate post asking his followers to identify the shirt the bomber was wearing, and to find out if the shirt was being sold anywhere near the Erawan Shrine. Posts made by the Admin, such as "It's time for Thai people to unite and find the bombers," urged his followers to participate in the investigation (CSI LA Thread 12). While the Admin seemingly tried to steer the investigation away from mob-

behaviors, misinformation spread in his page like wildfire. Rumor mongering, outdated misinformation, and rampant speculation were common practices in CSI LA.

With the Admin's leadership and urgings, CSI LA followers became a force in the mob behavior that resulted from the online investigation. As we will see, a number of innocent people became suspects of CSI LA's investigation. Not only were they wrongly accused, they were also harassed and defamed online and offline. These were the practices condemned by those on Pantip, although it is unclear if those in CSI LA had any opinion of Pantip. With the encouragement of CSI LA and Pantip, however, accusations bled through to other popular social media channels such as Instagram and Twitter. While data were not systematically collected from Instagram and Twitter, comments from relevant posts help inform our understanding of the case.

To understand how the online investigation spun out of control, we will first examine the popular theories regarding the motive of the bombing that were circulating online. This will help contextualize our understanding of the reasons why everyday Thai people took to the internet and participated in the online investigation in the first place. These discussions are divided into two sections, "Who bombed us?" and "Why were we bombed?" For many online, the answer to these questions rested on the nationality and race of the bombers, as users debated if a Thai person could have carried out the bombing. Such discussion led to the overall debate over what characteristics, physical or cultural, a person must possess in order to be considered a 'true Thai.'

Who Bombed Us?

One of the initial key questions in the overall bombing investigation was the identity of the main bomber, particularly his² race and nationality. This was a subject of hot debate, which shifted dramatically once CCTV footage of the bomber was released. Before seeing sketches of the suspect released by officials, netizens were concerned with whether or not a Thai person could have carried out the attack in the first place.

Despite bombings being a relatively common occurrence in Thailand, this particular attack was interpreted differently. Throughout the past decade, there have been several instances of bombings that have claimed the lives of over 6,000 people (Lefevre 2016). These bombings have been particularly concentrated in the largely Muslim provinces of southern Thailand; they were reportedly carried out by separatist insurgents who want independence from Thailand (RSIS 2016). At the same time, political unrest and violence were also commonplace due to the contentious politics associated with the now-exiled former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra and his supporters called the Red Shirts³. Nonetheless, the fact that most of the casualties were tourists made the Erawan Shrine bombing unusual from the pattern of previous political bombings. CSI 4056 noted, “They weren’t aiming for Thai people.” Pantip 1019 observed, “This bombing was more violent than any previous bombings done by Thai people, so I think foreigners did it.” Similar, CSI 3 said, “Someone with bad intentions wants to tie this to politics. They are attacking the country and our tourist industry. The red shirts would never do this.” As

² The Thai language does not have gendered pronouns such as ‘him’ or ‘her’ in the English language, so it is unclear whether or not online users were making any gendered assumptions. However, the bomber’s gender was never explicitly questioned.

³ The Red Shirts are the supporters of ex-Prime Minister Shinawatra, who divided the country heavily during his tenure. While the political history of Thailand and the actions of Shinawatra are beyond the confines of this dissertation, it is important to note that the Red Shirts carried out various violent protests in Thailand. They identify themselves in public gatherings by wearing red shirts. This is in contrast with supporters of the current king of Thailand, King Bhumibol, who wear yellow shirts. The two different colored shirts used by the supporters in their various clashes have been called the ‘color wars’ or the ‘color sports’ (in reference to Sports Day at Thai schools, where the student body is divided into different colored teams to compete in sports competitions).

most of the casualties were tourists, and the site of the bombing is a popular tourist spot, it seemed as though the tourist economy and the country as a whole were being attacked. Such an attack was not deemed to benefit any groups in Thailand, political or otherwise. The majority of those online presumed that the attack was not carried out by a Thai person. CSI 48 summed up the argument by saying, “Even if Thais fight, they would never kill one another.”

The sentiment that a Thai person could never have done this to his fellow “nationals” was echoed by many other netizens. Pantip even had a whole thread dedicated to this issue, titled “I don’t believe this bombing was carried out by Thai people” (Pantip thread 5). Pantip 995 asserted, “Thai people could never be so cold-blooded no matter how different our ideals get; these bombers are not even human.” Pantip 880 commented, “Thai people with the same hearts should not be able to commit such acts of violence against one another.” Pantip 915 agreed, “Such violence isn’t in the nature of Thai people.” CSI 530 simply stated, “I don’t believe Thai people would kill each other.” Here, we see indications that the users are employing the racist idea that there exists a so-called ‘true’ Thai (which will be further discussed in the Discussion chapter). CSI 72 questioned, “Why are Thai people trying to blame one another without evidence? This isn’t the time to be divisive... it’s useless to blame each other without evidence.” This comment is reflective of how the netizens wanted to carry out the investigation, to only use evidence and facts. However, their call for “facts” and “evidence” were informed by nationalist and racist assumptions, which, of course, are always political.

The fact that the bombing occurred at Erawan Shrine, a highly revered Hindu shrine, also played a role in the commenters’ logic in terms of the religiosity of the bombers. The shrine was built in 1956 and has remained a popular place of worship, frequented by visitors from all over the world. CSI 92 declared, “Thai people are so superstitious. They would never desecrate a holy

site such as this.” Pantip 794 agreed, “It has to be a foreigner. They have no respect for Phra Phrom⁴.” CSI 1 expressed the same sentiment, “It’s my personal opinion, but anyone who is Buddhist would not dare to attack this spot.” On the flipside, whoever was capable of attacking such a revered site must have been targeting a certain group or had a religious agenda, “Who could kill in a holy site? Uyghurs... maybe” (CSI 79). Pantip 779 observed, “This is not a political bombing.... Either China (Uyghurs) did it or it’s a religious issue.” Religious identity is therefore heavily tied into the authenticity of Thai identity. If a “Thai” person could not have done this, a Buddhist could not have either, and vice versa. In addition, these comments also indicated a popular theory of motive – that the Uyghurs were behind the bombing; this will be discussed in the next subsection.

There were, of course, voices in the community that wondered why people were overlooking the fact that a Thai person could have committed the attack, though they were a minority voice. CSI 597 urged, “Believe it. Thai people are killing each other.” Pantip 839 posted a number of news articles demonstrating violence in Thailand and wrote, “Thai people can be cruel, too.” CSI 1524 complained, “Why are we being so dramatic? If someone said a Thai person did it, I have no qualms about it. People are evil.” Littered throughout the conversation in CSI LA and Pantip were warnings to not jump to conclusions. Pantip 920 warned, “Let’s look at the evidence first before jumping to conclusions. Don’t let your hatred and prejudice lead the way.” Regardless, the question of race and nationality were important across all social media channels.

As for the Thai officials, they avoided making any particular claims regarding the nationality or “race” of the bomber until they obtained the CCTV footage. “Thai authorities have

⁴ Phra Phrom is the Thai name of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation. He is revered in Thai and Hindu traditions. A statue of him sits in the Erawan Shrine, which is a Hindu shrine.

avoided calling the bombing an act of terrorism, which they fear would harm Thailand's image as a tourist destination. For the same reason, authorities said they wanted to avoid singling out motives linked to specific countries or religious groups” (Fuller and Wong 2015). The authorities stayed away from making any claims or theorizing who the bombers were until CCTV footage was finally released, along with a sketch of the main suspect (see Image 14). The man in the yellow shirt was described as a *khaek-khao* by the authorities and any clues on his whereabouts were wanted. *Khaek* as a standalone word is often used to refer to ethnic Indians, while *khao* is the color white. Combined, it is a phrase used to refer to light-skinned Muslims from South and Central Asia or the Middle East.

Image 14 - Sketch of Yellow Shirt Suspect and CCTV Footage Screenshot (Sherwell 2015b)



The newly released images and videos of the bomber carrying a backpack into Erawan Shrine, sitting down, then walking away leaving the backpack behind, sent the netizens into a frenzy. The conversation thus shifted from whether or not a Thai person could bomb the country

to the issue of the word *khaek-khao*. Even with the authorities' official description of the bomber being *khaek khao*, the debate on the bomber's nationality and "race" remained heated. CSILA users began dissecting the man's phenotypical features, clothing style, hair style, height, body type, etc. CSI 2078 decided that the bomber was "too short to be a foreigner." Many others believed the bomber to be wearing a wig and disguise, so that he could quickly change his appearance after the bombing and escape. CSI 1563 generalized, "If he has tattoos, he shouldn't be a Muslim." (Since the Yellow Shirt Suspect was wearing armbands, people wondered if he was covering up body tattoos). CSI 1529 observed, "His clothes look really out-of-date. Like he doesn't know how to dress. Most of the *khaek-khao* I meet like to dress unstylishly." Some commenters wondered why *khaek-khao* was being used when we did not know for sure the identity of the bomber and felt the media were using the term pejoratively. Other commenters had to jump in and explain. "Any foreigner with black eyes, black hair, black facial hair, kind of Indian-ish but with white skin would be called *khaek-khao*. What the hell else can we call them? Don't get upset. The news isn't bringing religion into this" (CSI 1619). CSI 1523 agreed, "Don't over think the phrase *khaek-khao*. Sometimes it's not about religion, just physical looks."

Similar discussions were occurring on Pantip but not at such a scale where it overtook the community discussion. Pantip 1086 mentioned, "A Thai person wouldn't dress like the yellow shirt suspect." The majority of the Pantip commenters questioned the use of the word *khaek-khao* and refrained from using it in the discussions as much as possible. "Why do we think it's a *khaek-khao*? From the photos, he looks like he could be a foreigner from the west, like Europe or America" (Pantip 927). Pantip 929 followed up with, "He looks more like a white guy, not a *khaek*. Though I guess he could be in disguise."

As the netizens grappled with the potential race and nationality of the bombers, certain types of people became suspects in the online investigation (mostly in CSI LA, not Pantip). The innocent suspects who were targeted will be further discussed in the last section of the chapter. To understand the process that led to the innocent suspects, let us look at the various theories of motive circulating the Thai space online.

Why Were We Bombed?

There were a number of theories regarding the motivation for the bombing. My analysis, however, revealed two popular theories. The first theory, as mentioned above, was that it was a politically motivated crime carried out by Uyghurs. Earlier in the year 2015, Thailand repatriated a number of Uyghurs to China, a move that was heavily condemned by the United Nations as Uyghurs have been historically and continuously repressed by the Chinese government (Potter 2015). This move was said to have made the Uyghurs resentful of Thailand. Hence, many people theorized that only a Uyghur would attack the Erawan Shrine, a holy place that is visited frequently by Chinese tourists but is also an important landmark in Bangkok. CSI 1608 posited, “We sent the Uyghurs to China, basically to have them killed... I think this is the *khaek-khao* taking their revenge and rebelling against Thailand.” As the Yellow Shirt Suspect looked to be Middle Eastern and was described as *khaek-khao* by the Thai police, the Uyghur theory was further bolstered. Pantip 816 observed, “I knew it, the bombing wouldn’t benefit anyone in Thailand. It’s more probable that Uyghurs did it.” Pantip 613 expressed shock, “How could the Muslim Uyghurs be so cruel? We have enough Muslim terrorists down in the south, now we have to face those from the outside. I feel frustrated, angry, and sad.” While the implications of *khaek-khao* remained a contentious debate, foreign perpetrators, particularly those with Middle Eastern looks, became a target of the online investigation.

The second most popular theory was that the Red Shirts were the perpetrators. There are two reasons why the Red Shirts became a popular theory for the bombing. First, almost any political or non-political problems are usually automatically blamed upon Shinawatra and his so-called Red Shirt army, because they have previously been identified as the cause of many problems in the past decade. It even became a running joke online to simply blame Shinawatra first before doing anything else, and memes depicting Shinawatra with captions such as “Crap, they’re gonna blame me again,” and “Feel free to blame me” were circulated across all three social media channels. Someone even went as far as to super-impose Shinawatra’s face onto the images of the Yellow Shirt Suspect (Panyalimpanun 2015). CSI 27 quipped, “Can’t figure it out? Just blame the reds and it’s over.”

Moreover, the bomber suspect in the CCTV footage was wearing a yellow shirt. Whether or not the shirt was chosen purposefully is up for debate. However, if the attack was truly carried out by the Red Shirts, having the bomber wear a yellow shirt was seen as a challenge or message as yellow is the color of Thailand’s King Rama the IX. Supporters of the monarchy often wear yellow, particularly on days of celebration such as the King’s birthday (also designated as Father’s Day in Thailand). Even more suspicious was that a member of the Red Shirts supposedly posted a message on his personal Facebook page warning his followers about an impending attack. The day after the attack, he posted another message saying, “Hah! I warned you guys and you didn’t believe me” (CSI LA 2015). The messages were quickly deleted but not before many curious people took screenshots and shared them on CSI LA to be scrutinized by the amateur detectives (this matter was barely brought up in Pantip’s discussion). CSI 41 posted, “I want to know, how could the news agencies and military not know about this beforehand? Why didn’t anyone pay attention to these posts by the red shirts? Only after something happened

are these posts all over the internet.” CSI 43 noted, “Every time there’s a violent incident, the Red Shirts on FB would post before and after they’ve carried it out. It’s so nice they report their movements; we never have to investigate anything.”

The discussion that the Red Shirts could possibly have been behind the attack quickly disintegrated into political debates, with one side blaming the Red Shirts without a shred of doubt or evidence, and the other side exasperated and tired of the so-called ‘color wars.’ Pantip 877 complained, “Those on Facebook aren’t thinking outside the box at all. They’re just blaming the red shirts as usual.” Pantip 666 agreed, “I’m tired of people blaming Thaksin and his Red Shirts.” Those on CSI LA, attempted to point out the purpose of the Facebook group - to find the truth. “This page is a gathering of detectives who want to discuss the case. For detective work, information and images from the crime scene is needed,” said CSI 69. CSI 1618 agreed, “This page is a place to debate using scientific evidence. Any information based in science can be used, but leave the drama out of here lol. It just causes tension; I’m tired of it.” CSI 2 expressed considerable anger on the issue, “#stopitwiththecolorwars!! Why do you have to be such a pain?!...Don’t just point fingers and accuse people. Get some damn evidence first then point fingers. You idiotic red buffalos and your red pages!! People like you who like to remove people from their humanity!!...You’re truly evil!!” In these comments, it is evident that there is a strong desire to maintain harmony and cooperation among those online. Those who would bring politics seen to be of and about “Thai” people into the mix were seen as causing conflicts and friction, dividing the nationalized/racialized group on the basis of their political beliefs. Due to the strong politics underlying the discussion, the role and perception of the state authorities became prominent factors in the investigation, as the next section will show.

Are We Scapegoating?

The motivation for the online investigation is heavily tied to the complex relationship between state authorities and the people, based on historical and questionable practices of scapegoating by the police. This section discusses the underlying concern throughout the online investigation to deal only with scientific evidence and supposed hard facts in order to avoid scapegoating, a practice deemed commonly done by the Thai police. This concern reveals the overall distrust netizens have towards the Thai police and government, which stems from a long history of botched and unfair criminal investigations, muddled with Thailand's complex political history. Such distrust is a key motivator for the netizens to engage in unofficial investigations themselves.

Throughout the investigation online and offline, there was great concern that people were simply scapegoating, trying to find and accuse anyone who remotely matched the suspect's description. Littered throughout many of the conversations were cautions not to scapegoat and not to make accusations until evidence was gathered and verified. "I don't want to see Thai people making accusations without evidence... I want to see Thai people help one another so we can get the evidence and the facts. I want to know the truth" (CSI LA 36). "We can't make any conclusions yet. Don't blame anyone and make a scene. Let's slowly look for evidence and dig deeper" (CSI 91). Pantip 694 warned, "Don't jump to conclusions to satisfy yourself.... Judging who is responsible for the bombing without any evidence makes us look like idiots." Similarly, Pantip 668 wondered, "Here it is again, aren't you guys tired of condemning others without any evidence? I don't know who did it but stop jumping to conclusions already."

For many other commenters, discussing *khaek-khao* and Uyghurs meant scapegoating because people were making sweeping judgments. CSI 1513 wondered, "Why are we

pinpointing *khaek-khao* people? Or do you want Muslims to be the scapegoat of every case?” CSI 537 expressed, “Uyghurs are goats. It’s so believable, everyone is falling for it. PS. Think carefully, look deeply. The game of power is complex.” Pantip 690 wrote, “Find the culprit but don’t get a goat. Search carefully, don’t blame anyone recklessly.” CSI 585 asks, “Do you think this case will have another foreigner scapegoat? Such a big case the whole world is watching. It could negatively affect our tourist industry, our main economy.”

The fear of scapegoating and ultimately its effects on the Thai economy speaks to the historical pattern of scapegoating committed by state authorities. It boils down to a lack of trust in the Thai police and government, which have been incredibly unstable institutions over the past decades. With Thailand holding the record for the most number of coups, more than any other country (Fisher 2013) and having a well-known, long history of corruption in politics and government (Sumano 2015), mistrust in state authorities is widespread. A comic strip (Image 15) that was circulating on CSI LA as well as other social media channels, is representative of the mistrust in the Thai police. In the comic, a Thai police officer, FBI agent, and KGB agent are pitted against one another in a timed competition to catch a rabbit that has been set loose. The FBI uses state-of-the-art technology while the KGB burns down the forest to find the rabbit; they both take too much time and fail the competition. The Thai police officer runs into the forest, and emerges minutes later with a beaten-up goat confessing, “I give up. I’m the rabbit. Please don’t hurt me.” Such a comic is indicative of how the Thai police are perceived.

Image 15 - The Thai police VS FBI VS KGB (CSI LA 2015)



The official investigation led by the state authorities into the bombing was, in fact, not smooth and was ripe for public criticism. Oftentimes, the police and government officials would release conflicting facts, confusing both news media and the public. The news reports themselves were censored and slow, causing netizens to turn to foreign news sources for quick and ‘accurate’ information. (This also indicates distrust in another social institution, the media). When the CCTV footage was released, the public was shocked at the horrible quality of the images. As can be seen in Image 14, the screenshot is very grainy and blurred. This led to criticism of the government as it was evident that they spent little on public utilities and security. Many commenters pointed out that the still traffic cameras had high-definition quality images, so why was such vital footage from the bombing so poor? The situation was further exacerbated as then-Police Chief Somyot Pumpunmuang complained that their investigation was being hampered by broken and poorly placed security cameras, causing a public debate between the police and the local government over who was responsible for installing the cameras (Anusonadisai and Gecker 2015).

CSI LA, in particular, reacted with much shame as they observed the state authorities throughout the investigation. The public blame game caused much embarrassment for CSI LA, who expressed concern that such bad behavior was ruining the image and reputation of Thailand. Their close attention to what the authorities said and did indicates that they were much more critical of state authorities than Pantip. “Please don’t say the cameras aren’t working. This is being broadcast to the world, and it’s not good for Thailand. You can’t lie to the foreign countries because it concerns the safety of tourists” (CSI 544). When the chief said that the police will need some luck to complete the investigation because of the bad cameras, commenters made some jabs such as “I guess you got your position as police chief because of pure luck!!” (CSI 8608) and “Did you go to the fortune teller yet, sir? I hope you have good luck!” (CSI 8611).

Current PM Prayut Chan-o-cha also made a number of comments deemed embarrassing by CSI LA. “Mr. Prayut — who said Friday that he had turned down an offer of investigative help from the Obama administration — has suggested that Thailand’s senior police educate themselves about how to investigate the bombing by watching “Blue Bloods,” a fictional American crime series starring Tom Selleck about the New York Police Department” (Ehrlich 2015). A few days later, in a separate press conference, the police chief lamented not having state-of-the-art camera technology such as CSI, that is, the dramatized television series. ““Have you seen CSI? We don't have that.’ His CSI remark was the second reference to a US crime series by a Thai leader in recent days and did little to encourage confidence about the investigation” (Sherwell 2015b). CSI LA users reacted with much criticism and exasperation. “Can someone just give Mr. Somyot a script? If someone asks this, say that. He’s giving the public a headache” (CSI 8614).

The overall exasperation at the state authorities' behavior, not only throughout the case, but also historically, certainly is one of the reasons why CSI LA users were so eager to engage with the unofficial investigation. "This kind of situation creates instability. The government seems incompetent and the defense of Thailand, the military, doesn't have the trust of the people," observed CSI 524. CSI 32 expressed, "I want Thai people to love each other and learn to search for the truth instead of believing in the rumors that would divide us Thais." "They meant to kill innocent people to make this big news. There are so many detectives here on the web, we need to all look for information and help the officials," urged CSI 64.

While CSI LA did not hold back in criticizing state authorities, Pantip was more forgiving. Pantip 901 wrote, "This case shouldn't be beyond the capabilities of the Thai police. There are many cameras and more photos should be coming out soon on social media." Police support on Pantip came in conjunction with criticism of CSI LA's unofficial investigation. Many on Pantip felt that CSI LA was hindering the official police investigation. Pantip 1289 complained, "Police officers work so hard every day, and now they have to deal with rumors and *mano* news. Haven't CSI LA learned yet from their Koh Tao failure?" (*Mano* is an important concept that will be discussed in the next section). Pantip 1276 felt exasperated, "I don't like CSI LA and the followers. They are always hating on state authorities and police officers." Pantip 1253 felt frustrated, "The police are doing their investigation but CSI LA is trying to take it out of their hands with very messy and inaccurate information. It's causing a lot of confusion for citizens who can't tell what's true and what's false." These quotes demonstrate a number of things regarding the relationship between Pantip and CSI LA and help us understand how the outcome of each group's online investigation was so different.

On the one hand, Pantip in general expressed more sympathy towards state authorities. While there were certainly small hints of fear of scapegoating and police misconduct, for the most part, Pantip trusted that the police would do their job in finding the bombers. Pantip engaged in their online investigation by searching for images of the suspect in various photos, mapping out possible escape routes, and discussing potential theories of motive. Yet their investigation stayed within Pantip for the most part. The Pantip detectives were content with discussing the investigation within their space, but letting the police do the actual investigative work. Pantip 1238 expressed the general sentiment in the community best, “The mess comes from *mano*. The police has all the information, and they’re already investigating. CSI LA and the news media are causing trouble. Let’s just stay still. Call 191 [the equivalent of 911 in the US], if you have information and maybe you could get the 3 million baht reward.” The split between Pantip and CSI LA can be clearly seen at this point as on the other hand, CSI LA was incredible critical and ashamed of Thai authorities. Those feelings coupled with the fear of scapegoating fueled CSI LA’s investigation much more than Pantip’s, and certainly influenced the eventual mob behavior that ensued, much to Pantip’s dismay.

Pantip, which was critical of CSI LA, believed that the hatred CSI LA felt towards state authorities as well as their propensity to rely on *mano* was what led to rumor mongering and misinformation.

Mano-Social

Mano is a very important term in the Thai internet community. As a standalone word in the Thai language, *mano* refers to the heart, mind, or thoughts. On the internet, *mano social* has become a phrase used to refer to the act of letting your imagination run wild and jumping to conclusions without any evidence or facts based in reality. Amateur detectives who participate in

online investigations are prone to *mano social* as they often would come up with wild ideas and theories to explain a crime regardless of the available facts and evidence. When those on CSI LA or Pantip had a theory to discuss, they would often preface their comments with “This is just *mano*” or “I’m just *mano*-ing.” It is a way to place a disclaimer in the comment to warn readers that the thoughts in the post are simply the user’s imagination. “Don’t *mano*” or “stop *mano*” are common warnings online to stop the spread of misinformation and rumors. Pantip in particular was fed up with CSI LA’s acts of *mano*.

In Pantip’s dedicated thread criticizing CSI LA (thread title: “I think CSI LA should vet their information on the bombing carefully”), the majority of the users agreed that CSI LA relies on *mano*. Pantip 1248 wrote dismissively, “I stopped paying attention to that *mano* page a long time ago.” Pantip 1295 agreed, “I unliked this page a long time ago. Such a shitty *mano* page leading witch hunts. Good thing none of their suspects have committed suicide because of their harassment yet.” Pantip 1314 explained that “CSI LA is the gathering place of *mano social*. They’re worthless. A true detective should be investigating on the ground, not just finding evidence from Google.”

The criticism of CSI LA in Pantip did not come from a distance; it became apparent in the discussion that many of the Pantip members used to follow CSI LA’s page. As introduced at the beginning of the chapter, CSI LA became famous for their investigation into the murder of two British tourists down in Koh Tao, an island in southern Thailand. But when Pantip users witnessed CSI LA’s rumor mongering practices, they unliked⁵ the page and stopped following CSI LA. Pantip 1287 wrote, “I was following CSI LA during the Koh Tao case but it seemed like they prioritized imagination and crazy talk over knowledge and truth. I unliked them

⁵ To unlike a page on Facebook is to stop receiving updates and notifications from that page.

immediately and don't pay attention to anything from that page now. It's just *mano*." During Koh Tao when the Admin posted personal information of various people and encouraged a manhunt for innocent suspects, he boasted that because he was in America, Thai law could not hurt him. This irked many people in Pantip and was the cause for their unfollowing since it seemed like the Admin was belittling Thailand. Pantip 1310 commented, "I unliked and reported that garbage page a long time ago. I hated the Admin when he said he was in LA and so Thai law didn't apply to him." Pantip 1228 explained, "I was following CSI LA during Koh Tao but when he posted that because he was in America, the law couldn't hurt him, I unliked the page immediately. He's just trying to be like the CSI TV show."

The way in which the Admin ran the page was the target of most of Pantip's criticism. Pantip users felt that the Admin was encouraging mob behavior and rumor mongering, which would only hinder official police investigation. Moreover, because the Admin controlled the content of the page, he could post whatever he wanted and control the flow of the unofficial investigation. During the Bangkok bombing investigation, for example, the Admin posted a list of passengers on a flight leaving Bangkok the day of the bombing, and asked his followers to check each individual on the list. Pantip 1261 wrote, "CSI LA does not respect anyone's privacy." Pantip 1548 agreed, "Revealing the list of passengers on a flight is an invasion of privacy. Thailand may not care about this issue but other countries take it very seriously." Pantip 1225, who created the Pantip thread criticizing CSI LA, wrote,

Posting the list of passengers online makes me doubt the security of private information in Thailand even more. How is the Admin so confident that the bomber escaped on this particular flight? How did you decide to post such information for your followers to hunt for the bombers? Why didn't you contact the police directly and have them help check the identity of the passengers? Posting the information online would only alert the bombers. I think CSI LA is just trying to make themselves out to be heroes... They're just jumping to conclusions. A good detective wouldn't rush to judgement, but these guys

are all targeting Uyghurs already. ... I want the Admin to think carefully about what information he posts on his page, because he has so many followers, misinformation can spread like wildfire, making it harder to find the bombers. If you get any interesting information, contact the police; don't post on your page and make yourself out to be a hero.

Pantip 1239 agreed, "I unliked and reported that page already. The existence of a page like that causes a lot of chaos for our society. Many people can't do their work properly because of this devilish page. They have lots of followers but spread lots of misinformation without taking responsibility... This page shouldn't exist." The influence of the Admin is therefore very powerful in his community. Pantip 1323 explained what it felt like, "I was following the Koh Tao case also. I felt like I was being brainwashed that the Burmese suspects were definitely scapegoats. When they began accusing other people who supposedly look the same as the guys in the CCTV footage, I couldn't make out whether or not that was true. I started to get confused so I separated myself from the page." The 'brainwashing' aspect is indicative of how easy it is to be caught up in the dangerous flow of the unofficial investigation. Pantip's dislike of CSI LA and their refusal to make any accusations are some reasons why Pantip's investigation did not get out of hand as much as CSI LA's did.

Tangible Emotions

The final element that contributed to the online investigation and its trajectory was emotion. While it is not a surprising finding, emotion played a strong role in the online investigation for Bangkok, just as it did in Boston as discussed in the "Processing Grief" section in Chapter 3. From anger and frustration to sadness and mourning, netizens felt waves of emotion from the moment the bombing happened, to when they saw footage and images of the victims, and when the those related to the bombing were caught. Despite CSI LA's and Pantip's attempts remain calm and review the facts and evidence via a scientific lens, anger and sadness

still seeped through into the investigation. It is without a doubt that the desire to catch the bombers and the rush to do so as fast as possible influenced the online investigation, and influenced the judgment of those on CSI LA and Pantip.

In addition to the fear of scapegoating and the shame felt from poor police behavior (particularly in light of critiques from international media), members of both Pantip and CSI LA were grappling with intense mourning for the victims and anger at the bombers. As members watched and dissected the CCTV footage, many expressed sorrow, anger, and frustration. CSI 58 said, “I’ve never cared about politics but what the bombers have done is evil and vile beyond reason. Life isn’t cheap. Those who died and were injured weren’t anyone, they were just innocent people.” Pantip 53 posted, “Why would they bomb us? Is it for politics? But to trade people’s lives for that...” CSI 73 posted, “I don’t know who did this but he’s despicable. Why did innocent people have to die? I can’t stand to watch it. The body parts scattered everywhere. How much pain are the victims’ families going through? It’s so cruel.” Pantip 85 warned against posting such graphic photos of the victims, “Please don’t post pictures of the bodies. Have some pity for the victims’ families [sad face emoticon].”

Nonetheless, the sharing of graphic images, the appropriateness of which would be debated continuously throughout the investigation, continued to happen. More information kept flooding in from the bombing, be it from news media or from passersby who happened to be taking photos at the Shrine, so it was difficult to censor any photos and footage. When official footage was published, showing the Yellow Shirt Suspect dropping off the backpack, many in CSI LA mourned the victims they could see in the footage. CSI 5062 wrote, “I feel so sorry for the two women sitting next to the backpack... They had no idea that they were just about to die, that they were sitting next to a bomb. Just thinking that depresses me... How could anyone do

this? They are so cold-blooded, they can't be humans". CSI 5072 agreed, "Just seeing the people walking nearby and the people sitting next to the backpack brings tears to my eyes. I hope their souls rest in peace." Pantip 351 mourned, "How cruel to do this to people who came to pray. Nothing so violent has ever happened in Bangkok." CSI 5077 expressed, "I wish I could just scream at them through the screen and warn them to run away, but it's impossible. May every soul rest in peace." Pantip 444 posted, "RIP to all the victims who lost their lives. I get so sad thinking about how that person is going home to his family and then this happened. How would his family carry on? I can't even put it in words." These comments of despair and frustration represent the attachment netizens had towards the bombing as each user attempted to process the tragedy in their own way, yet expressing their sorrow in a public space, thus adding to the social and collective memory of the event.

In response to the bombing, there was also much anger and frustration toward the bombers who carried out this heinous crime. While netizens hoped that the bombers would be caught soon, they did not often talk about how the bombers should be punished by the law. Instead, cursing the bombers were the most common angry reaction. Pantip 362 wrote, "I curse those involved in this tragedy. May they be met with immeasurable pain and suffering, more than what the victims and their families experienced a hundredfold and thousandfold." CSI 78 posted, "No matter who did it, I curse them and their family for generations to come to be met with death and destruction." Pantip 391 felt a mixture of emotions, "Seeing these images makes me so depressed, the tears just keep coming. I hate the bombers. I can't do anything to them except curse for them to die a horrible death for their next ten lives. I'm so vexed that such demons could be born." CSI 14 cursed the bombers, "Those who did this are cruel and unhuman.

I pray that karma gets them, for their lives to end in despair and loneliness. May they fall to hell and burn, may they get slashed with the blades of sin for all their lives to come.”

The Innocent Suspects

So far in the chapter, we have discussed the various elements of the online investigation by the social media channels. The identity of the bomber, his race and nationality, were some of the main debates in Pantip and CSI LA as netizens wondered if a Thai person could be the bomber. In relation to that, various theories of motive were circulated in social media, particularly political motives related to the Uyghurs repatriation by the Thai government and Red Shirts supporting exiled former Prime Minister Shinawatra. Nonetheless, the conviction that a Thai would never kill another Thai remained so strong that when images of the Yellow Shirt Suspect were released, netizens honed in on his foreign and *khaek-khao* appearance. Despite a deep fear of scapegoating and behaving shamefully like Thai state authorities, emotions such as anger and sadness colored the online investigation greatly. Ultimately, these elements culminated in a pattern of profiling innocent people, mostly foreigners, and accusing them as the bombers.

While Pantip steadfastly refused to participate in such mob behavior, CSI LA ended up making a number of false accusations against people who matched the description and physical features of the Yellow Shirt Suspect (the police did also, for that matter). Anyone with light skin, curly hair, and facial hair were potential suspects. The amateur detectives' first suspect, and probably the most well-known one, was an Australian model and actor named Sunny Burns (Image 16), who was an English teacher in Thailand at the time. Burns posted an image of himself on Instagram, telling his friends and family in English that he was safe the day after the bombing. That Instagram image was circulated widely on CSI LA, and people mistranslated his message into Thai, believing that he was telling his followers that the bombing occurred as he

planned. In addition to the mis-translation, people began posting that he was the Yellow Shirt Suspect. “Dear me, you said he was *khaek-khao*, but he’s actually Australian!” said CSI 2056. CSI 2311 wondered, “It’s Sunny Burns, right? Even though the photo doesn’t look like him.” CSI 2549 wrote, “Just because you’re good looking, doesn’t mean we’ll trust you.” On his Instagram post, one user commented, “Why you left your bag,, and few minutes after you go...the bomb was exploited...” (presumably, the poster meant ‘exploded’). Another exclaimed, “Why did u do it?! Now Thailand was very worry!!!!!!!!!!:”

Image 16 - Sunny Burns’ Instagram post after the Bangkok bombing (Burns 2015)



A government employee also took photos of Burns’ immigration information, along with his home address on a blurry immigration center computer. The images were circulated by CSI LA. Such practice of digging up personal information on the internet and then sharing it is called ‘doxxing’, and is a heavily condemned practice (C.S. 2014). Burns himself was only alerted

about the accusations when his fans contacted him. The amount of online scrutiny and accusations became so strong that Burns had to turn himself in to the police to get cleared. He also conducted media interviews to explain that he was not the bomber. In his interview, Burns explained what happened,

I'm nobody in Australia, but in Thailand I shot a movie and the fan club came to me and said: 'Sunny, people think you are a terrorist,' ...I almost died, I am still in shock and really saddened. ...[On] social media they posted my immigration papers, they posted where I lived. I had no other choice but to go to police, people were accusing me of being a terrorist and killing those 20 people, and injuring those 100 people," he said (Ryall 2015).

After his name was cleared by officials, his fans and those who believed in his innocence attempted to remove as much of his personal information as possible, while also asking others to do the same. Yet skeptical netizens continued to circulate his image and private information, wondering if he was the bomber.

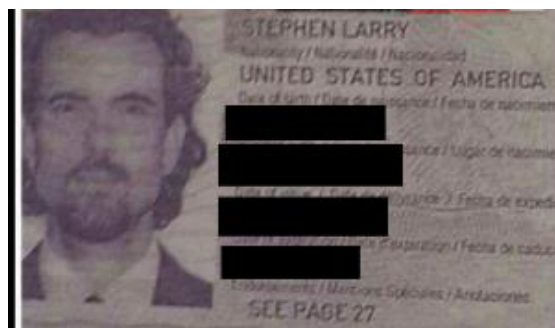
Another popular suspect was a white man supposedly named Stephen Larry. Larry was a French tourist who was caught by Thai authorities at a domestic airport in Thailand. In the haste to find the bombers, authorities were flagging down any foreigner with puffy, curly hair. Because Larry also seemed to have abrasions on his arm, netizens compared his images to the Yellow Shirt Suspect, who was wearing an armband when he planted the bomb (Image 17). Despite Larry being cleared by the authorities and allowed to return to France, images such as Image 17 continued to be shared. However, his true name is not known. Stephen Larry is actually the name on the passport of a man who supposedly looked like the French tourist (Image 18). While some people wondered if it was the same person, it was taken to be accurate and the French tourist was named Stephen Larry online although CSI 4345 had another theory, "1. It's a fake passport!! 2. He's lying that he's French. 3. Same blue shorts and canvas shoes. 4. Same

hairstyle and facial structure...6. Same arm scars. ... 11. He looks worried and frustrated or stressed.” CSI 4466 agreed, “I agree, his facial structure looks really similar to the [yellow shirt] suspect.”

Image 17 - Stephen Larry (CSI LA 2015)



Image 18 - Stephen Larry's supposed passport (information redacted by author) (CSI LA 2015)



In this situation, unlike Sunny Burns', the privacy of two individuals were violated – the French tourist who had his image shared, and the American man named Stephen Larry who had his passport information shared (and by association, also was accused as the bomber). Neither

man was “found” online (as in, their personal social media accounts), but their names and images were defamed heavily online.

A surprisingly popular suspect was the 2013 Boston marathon bomber, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, as he also was of Middle Eastern looks who matched the suspect’s description (Image 19). CSI 2013 wrote, “This is the face of the Boston marathon bomber. He looks like the yellow shirt suspect!!” CSI 2864 was shocked, “He flew all the way to Thailand to bomb us?! Why?!” Other commenters did not realize that he was the Boston bomber, they simply thought he was a man who looked like the suspect. Those who posted on CSI LA seemed to receive Tsarnaev’s images via private text messages from friends. They would post on CSI LA asking if Tsarnaev was the one (without knowing who Tsarnaev was).

Image 19 - Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and the Yellow Shirt Suspect (CSI LA 2015)



What was not apparent to many netizens also, was that Tsarnaev had already been tried and given the death sentence in the US and could not have been involved in the Bangkok bombing. As more and more people commented on whether Tsarnaev was involved in the Bangkok bombing in CSI LA, the Admin had to make a dedicated post announcing, “This man is Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the Boston marathon bomber. He has already received the death penalty and has nothing to do with what happened at Ratchaprasong [Erawan Shrine]. Please stop sharing his photos” (CSI LA 2015). Netizens continued to share his image.

Among the foreign suspects online, there was only one Thai person who was notably accused of looking like the Yellow Shirt Suspect. Those on CSI LA began posting images of a Thai college student named Rangsiman Rome (Image 20). It is interesting that Rome was the only national to be suspected as the bomber, but the reasons for the accusations were based in the political reality of Thailand. Before his real name was known, those on CSI LA speculated with Rome’s photos, which received anywhere from 700 to 800 likes, showing people’s agreement to Rome’s similarities to the Yellow Shirt Suspect. CSI 2309 wrote, “Find this guy. He has the exact same glasses!” CSI 2154 wondered, “Who is this guy? He happens to look too much like the yellow shirt suspect.” Not only did he wear similar glasses (such was the low bar of similarities netizens were looking for), it was eventually discovered that Rome was a student activist and had been in scuffles with state authorities before for staging protests (Editor 2015). Since Rome as a student activist, people wondered if the bombing was politically motivated. It also supported a minor theory that the suspect could have been a Thai person in disguise. CSI 3046 posted, “I think he was trying to disguise himself to look like a foreigner.”

The specific images of Rome that were spread also seemed to be chosen purposefully, such as in Image 20 with his arm raised, to make him seem like an extreme activist. Rome,

catching wind of the accusations, immediately posted on his personal Facebook page saying that he was not the bomber. At the time of the bombing, he claimed to be working in his university's library. Then, not long after his post, CCTV footage from the library showing the time he entered was posted on CSI LA. Even then, people wondered if the footage was edited to show a different time and date. Before things got even more out of hand, Rome pre-empted the mob by going to the police to get his name cleared.

The political climate in Thailand certainly played an influential role in the accusations against Rome. While he did not match the definition of a *khaek-khao*, his accusation was made possible due to his political connections. Since there were still theories that the bombing may have been carried out by supporters of Shinawatra, it made sense that a Thai person could have bombed the country if, and only if, it was politically motivated. Not only did Rome match some of the physical characteristics of the Yellow Shirt Suspect, his political ties made him a target.

Image 20 - Rangsiman Rome (CSI LA 2015)



The number of false accusations CSI LA went through is indicative of how eager they were to pinpoint a suspect, any suspect, regardless of the consequences to the personal privacy or reputation of the accused. As discussed in an earlier section, the Admin of CSI LA did not seem to believe that privacy mattered in the search for truth and justice, which was a main reason why Pantip users stopped following CSI LA. Since the Admin was willing to release the passenger flight list for his followers to vet, his followers participated in similar, if not more extreme, levels of invasion of privacy. By exploiting their positions in the government, birth certificates, passport information, and so on were doxxed and circulated by CSI LA and others online. Indeed, the subject of privacy was so rarely discussed in CSI LA I did not create a 'Privacy' code. The almost complete absence of discussion on privacy indicates how little CSI LA cared about it. The protection of people's privacy was not a major concern in the pursuit of truth and justice. Pantip had more discussions on privacy, but usually in terms of protecting the victims' and their family's privacy in light of the tragedy. In general, it is conceivable that the absence of discussions on privacy is one of the reasons why the online investigation spiraled so out of control. Accusing innocent people was seen as a necessary evil to get at the truth.

The main commonality among the accused, save for Rome, is easy to observe – foreigners, indicating a general aversion to 'Westerners' in CSI LA. With the conviction that a 'true' Thai person could never hurt another Thai person, netizens were convinced that only foreigners could bomb the Erawan Shrine. The one Thai suspect, Rome, became a suspect because he was politically connected, potentially to the Red Shirts movement. In other words, a bombing would only happen if it was politically motivated and directly tied to the color wars. What we can see happening in the process of accusations is a lack of proper evidence vetting and

fact checking. Moreover, the accusations were underlined with racist, nationalist, and political ideologies that contextualize the history of the country.

The content analysis of the Bangkok bombing has demonstrated that those online in Thailand were juggling a number of things – from their desire for truth and justice, their emotions, the theories regarding the motive for the bombing, the hunt for possible suspects, overarching racist and nationalist discourse within Thai society, to the history of contentious relations between the government, police, and media. The amalgamation of these various elements resulted in an episode of mob justice in which innocent people, who fit the stereotypical ‘non-Thai’ *khaek-khao* image, were harassed and defamed.

The Boston and Bangkok bombings have starkly different cultural, social, and political contexts, yet the trajectory of each case was similar, resulting in an episode of mob justice. In each case, there was a tense and controversial relationship with an institutional authority, be it the mass media, the police, or the government. In Boston, the distrust of traditional mass media outlets motivated Reddit to become its own news curator, its own source of truth. In Bangkok, the long history of police and government corruption led those online to conduct their own investigation, as they could not rely upon institutional authorities to find the bombers. Like the Boston detectives, the Bangkok detectives had to rely on themselves.

However, even though the amateur detectives had their own motivations and ways to find and curate information, they were not working in isolation. Both investigations were carried out in public spaces, and the online communities as a whole interacted with those offline. The relationship between the online communities and institutional players was thus an important mechanism in influencing the outcome of the unofficial investigations. Moreover, each case in each country had its own set of existing terrorism, racism, and nationalism related discourse to

contend with. Whether it was on Facebook, Pantip, or Reddit, each of the cases therefore dealt with the competition for truth and pursuit of justice. Sometimes the pursuit was marred by racist and nationalist discourse, while other times institutional actors exacerbated the conjectures, rumors, and accusations, leading to real world harm. The desperate search for the bombers and the emotions swirling around the tragedy of the bombings led to the harassment of innocent people, many of whom were convenient scapegoats, whether or not the online communities would admit as such.

In comparing the results of the content analysis for the two bombing cases, it seems that what is at the heart of the confusion is the very nature of truth. For those online struggling to work with the limited facts available to the public and the ever-growing number of rumors and conjectures pulled from existing social discourses, it was a constant battle to tease out what was fact and what was fiction. While the results of the content analysis can show us what the online communities of Boston and Bangkok grappled with, they cannot show the process through which facts and rumors were curated and validated. The next chapter therefore uses the material culture and actor-network theory perspectives to understand this missing piece. How did the online community collect information and used the material evidence (blurry photos and surveillance videos) to make accusations? How did the amateur detectives discern fact from fiction? At times, what was true one day was false the next. What was the process of validation? The seesaw of fact and falsehood is the analytical focal point of the next chapter; as the upcoming analyses will demonstrate – truth is only as truthful as society wants it to be.

CHAPTER 5. THE CONSTRUCTION OF FACTS:

ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

This chapter provides a theoretical analysis of the two bombing cases by combining two theoretical perspectives: Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Material Culture. Each of these perspectives, as discussed in the methods chapter, enables differing but complementary understandings of the relationship between people and objects. In this chapter, the first section titled “The Virtual Collection” examines how the collection of digital information, that is, the facts of the bombings, was formed, categorized, and verified. The subsection “Structural Issues” discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the social media platforms that were used during the unofficial investigations. However, forming and validating the collection was not an easy path, as amateur detectives constantly debated over the ethical and moral quandaries of conducting a respectful investigation while desiring to know every detail about the bombings. This is discussed in “The Real and Good Collector” section. It also highlights the relationship between immateriality and materiality as the amateur detectives were reacting not just to the facts of the cases but to the reality they represented.

The final section titled “Actor-Network Theory: The Path to Fact” provides an analysis using ANT to show how statements made in the online community become facts via a complex network of interactions between the community, the media, the police. The two analyses from material culture and actor-network theory together provide a comprehensive understanding of the motivation of the amateur detectives and the process through which they pursued social justice. Yet the so-called path to truth is not one the detectives were walking alone, as the ANT analysis will demonstrate that key institutional actors played an important role in influencing the spread of rumors and facts.

The Virtual Collection

Those working on the Boston and Bangkok bombings online faced similar issues in terms of how to collect and organize the influx of supposed evidence and facts. This section compares how the two cases categorized and verified various information from official and unofficial sources. Material culture is concerned with how people understand and collate various collections, digitally or physically. It is a useful perspective to help explain how the online detectives handled the evidence and information available to them. For simplicity's sake, unless stated otherwise, 'Boston detectives/sleuths' and 'Bangkok detectives/sleuths' refer to the online public working on the investigation rather than state authorities.

Immediately following the Bangkok bombing, as both the authorities and the people of Thailand were trying to understand what had happened, there were multiple calls for the public to submit any relevant information. The Thai police urged the public to submit any photos and videos taken around the time of the bombing near the Erawan Shrine intersection, while CSI LA and Pantip concurrently made their own calls for submissions. Many people shared photos taken with their smartphones as well as video footage from the dash cams in their cars on social media. Such information was submitted and circulated much earlier and quicker than any official information from the authorities, yet it was still difficult for those online to make heads or tails of what exactly had happened. News media reports were important sources of information, but official information was slow to come. CSI LA and Pantip users stuck to discussing the most pertinent facts at the time: how many people were injured? How many were killed? What time was the bombing exactly? Have there been any reactions from the authorities? Are roads shut down? Will the next day be declared a public holiday to keep people safe at home? Despite having photos and videos of the bombing, the sleuths were not able to begin constructing a

detailed timeline of the minutes leading up to the bombing and afterwards until the state authorities released more official information, as well as CCTV surveillance footage of the area (Image 21). Collecting media reports and small tidbits from the public was the initial stage of the formation of the Bangkok collection.

Image 21 - Screenshot of official CCTV footage of Erawan Shrine before the Bangkok bombing



In forming the collection of facts and evidence, two categories of information became apparent for Bangkok: official versus unofficial. The Thai state authorities reported official information while the public provided unofficial information. Unofficial information consisted of personal anecdotes from people who were in the area that was bombed, as well as personal photos and videos taken at Erawan Shrine before or after the bombing. While Pantip relied

heavily on official information, often by copying and pasting news articles straight into posts in the discussion board, the members of CSI LA used these two major categories to differentiate between what was verified and potentially unverified. While CSI LA did not begin their actual investigation until official information (namely, the CCTV footage of the area) was released, they were using personal reports to get an idea of the scope of the damage and casualties. Once official information from the media and the government was released, such information was considered verified. Yet there was still doubt even when officials released information. Thai media are censored by the government, leading CSI LA to question whether or not all the facts were being reported (Audjarint 2016). Thus, CSI LA often turned to foreign news sources such as BBC and CNN, as Thai authorities cannot censor foreign news sources. Moreover, Thai authorities have historically been known for their inadequate investigative work (Tribute Wire Reports 2015), and this particular case was no different.

For example, “the [Erawan Shrine] area was hosed down less than 24 hours after the blast, and the bomb crater was patched over in less than 48” (Tribute Wire Reports 2015). Within a mere two days, the shrine was reopened to the public. The cleanup was rushed to assure the public and the tourists that Bangkok was safe. It was particularly important to assuage the fears of the tourists, as most of the casualties were tourists and Thailand’s economy is highly reliant upon the tourist industry. The haphazard cleanup led passersby, including a BBC news reporter, to find bomb shrapnel lying around in the area (BBC News 2015c), leading to criticism that the Thai police did not collect evidence properly. In fact, there was widespread criticism, both domestically and internationally, that the Thai authorities carried out their investigation in a very poor and haphazard manner (Ehrlich 2015; Tribute Wire Reports 2015). The messy official

investigation most certainly influenced how the unofficial investigation was carried out, as the online investigation could only respond to what the officials were doing.

In Boston, there was a similar pattern of evidence categorization, but official information was highly valued, particularly in r/news and r/inthenews and their live-update threads. When the explosions occurred at the marathon, Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit became immediate hotspots for live updates on the bombing. Those who survived the bombing posted on social media that they were safe, along with a description and/or photo of what they witnessed. The Redditor who created the first Boston bombing live-update thread in r/news titled the thread “There was just an explosion at the Boston Marathon - Will use this to live update”. The first live-update thread spawned twenty more update threads, all of which provided vetted information and news sources. See Appendix F for an example live update-thread. Each live-update thread was run by an Original Poster (OP) who would create the thread then gather, verify, and sift through any information related to the Boston bombings. Information deemed accurate and verified (e.g. if the source was an FBI press release) would then be collated into a timeline in the post. Users could submit any relevant information to the OP for verification. While the discussion within the live-update threads was full of personal stories, unofficial photos and images, the main post only held information from official news sources. The OP changed with each new live-update thread, or after several hours, as running one of them was incredibly time-consuming and stressful.

With the way the live-update threads were run, it is easy to see that they heavily valued facts and information from reliable sources such as the police. While mainstream media such as CNN or NBC were cited, there was much ire and exasperation against them in the community. National, mainstream media channels were repeatedly criticized for their inaccurate reports, fear-mongering rhetoric, and slow updates. For example, the New York Post repeatedly printed the

incorrect death toll and the number of injured people from the bombings, to the point that an OP explicitly stated he would no longer consider information from the Post, as they were too unreliable (Barker 2015). As a general trend, therefore, the live-update threads relied more on local media channels rather than national media channels.

Most of the comments in the live-update threads focused on the need for accurate information (the number of deaths, injured), compiling information to help those in need (offers of help from providing rides, meals, a place to stay, mileage for flights in and out of Boston), as well as praise for the emergency services personnel. Yet there was some amount of speculation. Towards the first half of the week, r/inthenews users discussed the type of bomb, the make of the pressure cooker, and tried to identify anyone suspicious with a backpack. They also occasionally referred to and posted links to r/findbostonbombers as a place to read about theories and speculation. Towards the latter half of the week, however, it seemed as though those in r/inthenews were not speculating as much and instead, were criticizing those in r/findbostonbombers for their “embarrassing” witch-hunting antics. r/findbostonbombers on the other hand, relied heavily on both official and unofficial information. Their theories and speculation that were based on official photos and videos were further bolstered by unofficial information shared by those in the Reddit community. It is likely they were also referring to the r/news and r/inthenews live-update threads, though they did not often mention them explicitly.

As demonstrated by the subreddits, the Boston detectives therefore had four, very clear, evidence categories: official, unofficial, local news, national news. Because of the existence of the live-update threads, information was more organized in Boston than in Bangkok. The OP of the live-update threads also changed often, thus allowing for less bias in the way evidence was collected and verified. r/findbostonbombers was not as organized as it focused on speculating

and theorizing about the bombing regardless of the facts. When it was deemed relevant, Redditors would be required to back up their comments with news sources. Indeed, a common question in many of the Reddit threads was simply “Source?” as Redditors wanted comments to be backed up by verified and trustworthy sources. The live-update threads also enabled the Reddit detectives to be less concerned with old or outdated facts as the threads were constantly updated.

Bangkok had no such structure in place, and therefore constantly struggled with outdated information. While Bangkok also categorized between official and unofficial evidence, and, on a lesser level, foreign versus national news, CSI LA and Pantip were not as organized as Reddit. There was no centralized location for vetted information to be collated and organized. The Bangkok detectives simply posted and shared information as they heard or read about it regardless of the validity of the information. Outdated information was frequently brought up as the Bangkok detectives tried to move forward in the investigation. Moreover, in CSI LA in particular, the posts were all made by the Admin. While others could make comments on his posts, he held control over the direction of the investigation. The Admin had absolute freedom to post any information he personally deemed relevant, allowing his personal politics or biases to influence the investigation. Both groups of detectives had difficulties in handling and vetting information, rumors or otherwise. Part of the difficulties came from the structural issues of the social media platforms that were being utilized in both countries.

Structural Issues

Facebook, Pantip, and Reddit all have structural problems that affected the dissemination and validation of information. The Bangkok detectives struggled with sifting through old and outdated information as they did not have a centralized location where the collection was

constantly being updated and verified such as Boston's live-update threads. When theories and speculation were proven to be incorrect, whether by other evidence or media and government reports, one of the main problems CSI LA users faced was the limiting structure of Facebook as a platform itself. The default view for reading comments on Facebook is not chronologically (as in, the newest comments appear at the top), but rather, by popularity. In other words, comments with the most 'likes' and replies (basically, any interaction) would often appear at the top. Comments by the Admin were also immediately given priority (presumably because he is the owner of the page) and would appear at the top. This meant that visitors of the page who wanted to find out the newest information and updates on the case were bombarded by older comments and news and had to sort through thousands of comments for the newest information. Comments that had been around longer would have had more time to garner more 'likes' and replies. There was much confusion over which facts were new or old, and which facts had been verified or discarded. Unlike Reddit, Facebook has no downvote capability that the community can use to bury old information.

Therefore, a common conversation in CSI LA consisted of people asking about older facts or posting older news that they had just heard, and other users telling them that the news was not valid anymore. A primary example of this was when the media reported that the authorities had arrested the bomber at the domestic airport in Bangkok. This led to much excitement in CSI LA, but such joy was dashed when it was revealed to be a wrongful arrest. The man at the airport was cleared and the hunt for the bombers continued. However, the news was continuously brought up by CSI LA users, which caused the investigation to stall as people had to spend time dispelling old information.

Structurally, Reddit was better able to handle evidence than CSI LA, but only because of the live-update threads format. Pantip has a similar structure to Reddit, in that they are both discussion boards where an OP makes a post, and other users reply to the post, thus adding to the thread. Yet Pantip did not use the live-update format. The evidence shared in Pantip was not gathered into the main post of a thread, thus enabling pertinent new facts and evidence to be lost in the thousands of comments that were being made. The struggle to separate outdated and new information on Pantip was as bad as on CSI LA's Facebook group. Moreover, Pantip has a 'top comments' feature, in which comments with the most likes and replies would appear at the top of the thread. The same problem in Facebook would occur wherein older comments that have had time to garner interaction would appear at the top, regardless of their validity.

While it seems as though the live-update threads were Reddit's saving grace, Reddit's actual structure did cause some hindrance. Reddit has its own comment sorting algorithm which it uses to categorize comments into best, top, hot, new, controversial, and old. The default view is the 'best' comments view. These comments are put at the top because they have received the most upvotes from the community, or they have the most replies (Reddit 2009). The idea is that comments with most upvotes have been vetted in terms of quality by the community; that is, the comment was deemed as trustworthy, useful, and relevant. Similar to Facebook, Reddit uses the level of interaction (likes and replies) to determine the popularity of a comment. The difference is the ability for Redditors to downvote comments and determine whether or not a comment should be visible to the community and the public. The Reddit detectives therefore relied on one another to evaluate the validity of various comments and provide proper feedback in ways that would allow the Reddit comment algorithm to accurately organize the comments.

Cleaning up old posts and verifying new ones was therefore a constant process in Boston and Bangkok. In addition to old news, both groups of internet sleuths were also constantly dealing with rumormongering and distrust of information from state authorities (Bangkok) and the media (Boston). It became difficult to tell what was fact and what was conjecture. As demonstrated by the ANT analysis of the networks of statements later this chapter, the path from rumor to fact is fragile and constantly shifting due to the influences of key institutional actors. Before that, however, it is important to understand what was motivating the armchair detectives and the ethical struggles they faced in their attempts to find the truth of the bombings.

The Real and Good Collector

The ‘real’ and ‘good’ collector is a concept in material culture introduced by Dechaine (2013) to discuss the competing identities of a collector. Collectors may face certain levels of public scrutiny if their passion and zealotry for an item is seen to be extreme. Therefore, collectors embody two identities, a public face – the ‘good’ collector, and a private face – the ‘real’ collector. The ‘good’ collector is publicly humble in his or her passion for the collection and holds high standards of ethical collecting practices. The ‘real’ collector, however, is unashamed in his or her passion and is privately willing to break social norms if necessary. In both Boston and Bangkok, the identities of the real and good collectors surfaced throughout the investigations. To understand the relationship between the collection and the collectors, it is important to understand the motivation behind the collectors, that is, the amateur detectives.

For the Bangkok detectives, a distrust of state authorities was very strong. As demonstrated, both CSI LA and Pantip viewed Thai state authorities negatively, although CSI LA was more critical than Pantip. The comic strip widely circulated (Image 15) portraying the Thai police competing against the FBI and the KGB depicts the general perception that the Thai

police are prone to dubious practices of scapegoating and suspect abuse. To that end, the distrust of state authorities was not limited to social media. Corruption is widespread and rampant in “all levels of Thai society” from the public to the private sector (GAN 2015). The Thai police has “a reputation of being the most corrupt institution in the country, partly due to its entanglement in politics and a patronage system” (GAN 2015). Knowing the police and the government’s history of corruption, the Thai public does not trust them. Building upon the distrust, CSI LA, which headed much of the online investigation, was fueled by the desire to be ‘better’ than the police, and to be more scientific in its investigation (hence, the name CSI LA, based on the popular crime TV show). CSI LA therefore worked towards the ‘greater good’, or at least, that is what they believed. There was a strong belief in CSI LA that simply discussing a case or helping to collect the facts and evidence would somehow, eventually, lead to the truth. CSI 3462’s comment embodies this belief:

This is a scientific page. So the users of this page should be analytical and skeptical. We discuss theories and even if those theories wouldn’t hold up in a court of law... they are still theories that use evidence as proof. I believe everyone on this page wants to find the culprit. I believe there are many possibilities so being curious will lead to knowledge and discovery of the truth.

Thus, discussion of theories, particularly using the collected facts and evidence, is encouraged in the community and is seen as the path to the ‘truth’ of any case. This is the good collector identity of online detectives. Driven by the moral pursuit of justice, facts are deemed not for private use or knowledge; particularly in this case, they are for the public to know, interpret, and share. As the goal of the page is to ensure social justice, information should not be censored (as in the Thai media), but publicly shared for all to validate, interpret, and discuss. The relationship between CSI LA and the facts they have collected, therefore, is not an intimate one, as Benjamin (1968) would describe, and not for personal enjoyment. Rather, it is for the purposes of “social

memory”, as Hutchison (2013:32) puts it. By having a public record of their investigation, along with the sharing of facts and evidence, CSI LA was being what they felt was the ‘good collector’ – one that is transparent, honest, public, and working towards solving grave social injustices.

Yet the intensity of emotion involved and desire for the truth often led the Bangkok detectives to shift from the ‘good collector’ to the ‘real collector.’ While the purpose of the page was the pursuit of social justice, CSI LA users were split on how to carry out the investigation morally and ethically. A frequent debate in the community was whether or not state authorities should release footage of the actual moment of the bombing. The footage released by state authorities was edited; they showed the minutes before the bombing and the minutes after the bombing, but not the actual explosion. Some CSI LA users, in their desire for all the facts, wanted to see the actual moment of the bombing to know for sure that the backpack the yellow shirt man left behind was the bomb. This prompted debate, as other CSI LA members argued against such demands, citing sensitivity and respect for the victims and their families as reasons why state authorities should not release such footage. Seeing the actual explosion could cause more trauma to those already reeling Thai public. Similar debates occurred in Pantip in regards to the images of the victims of the bombings. Many graphic images showing blood and torn body parts were posted in the community, although they were hidden under a ‘spoiler’ cut, meaning that readers had to click on the link to see the images. Nonetheless, calls for censorship of graphic images were common. Not only were such images hard to stomach, the amateur detectives felt they were disrespectful to the victims.

Here, we see a clear difference between the ‘good’ and ‘real’ collector. The ‘real collector’ wanted every single fact available and was overly zealous in his or her pursuit of a ‘complete collection,’ so to speak. Even at the expense of the victims’ privacy, the real collector

wants to know everything, from the moment of the bombing to the pictures of the victims' dead bodies. The 'good' collector, in comparison, is guided by morality and a strong ethic that respect for the dead was more important than the desire for the truth. The constant struggle between the 'good' and 'real' collector often led to debates on censorship and what constitutes respectful discussion of the tragedy.

The Boston bombing was no different, and issues of emotion and censorship were common. As discussed in the analytical chapter for the Boston bombing, there was strong emotion tied to the reality the facts of the case represented. Victims of the bombing were mourned, while heroes who arose during the tragedy were lauded. The varying emotional states of the collectors helped form the collective social memory of the tragedy. Graphic images of the victims were shared like in Bangkok, but were discussed in much more detail. Reddit spent a great deal of time discussing exactly how victims died, sometimes in a seemingly cold and distant objective manner. Yet there was no lack of sadness and anger in the community. Calls for censorship of such images and discussion were common from 'good collectors' of the community, but they were often ignored as the 'real' collectors viewed open public discussion of all aspects of the bombing, as paths to the truth and acceptance of the tragedy.

Censorship was therefore a key debate in Reddit's investigation, not just in the graphic images of the victims of the bombing. When it became clear that Sunil Tripathi was not the Boston bomber, as the online mob had originally believed, the r/findbostonbombers moderators imposed a new rule in the community in an attempt to set the situation right. They banned Redditors from mentioning Sunil Tripathi's name in the subreddit. The thread title for the moderators' announcement was, "[Mod Note] Any more posts on the "missing guy" will be removed. Also a reminder, sharing personal information will get you immediately banned." The

request from the moderator to remove any and all information regarding Sunil Tripathi from the subreddit was met with mixed feelings. It felt as though the identity of the 'good' collector, one that is moral and ethical, as well as respectful of those unfortunately involved in the bombing, was being forced upon the Reddit community.

The 'real' collectors of the community therefore took issue with such outright policies of censorship. On one side, Redditors felt that censorship at this point in the investigation was too little too late. Redditor 775 wrote, "[the mod] has told us that "he's been deleting the images and false allegations from the internet", so no harm done even!" Redditor 2175 agreed at the ineffectiveness of the new rule, "Yes, because deleting things from the internet is so super effective." On another side, there was still hope that within the many comments being removed, there could still potentially be useful information. Redditor 1672 pointed out, "By not considering him we've basically given up. I get the mod's point that by now the FBI is aware of the connection and there's no point in creating a frenzy but these guys are still out there, they could blow something up tomorrow." To which Redditor 1674 agreed, "the moderation and censorship here is extremely offputting, ... Im glad I saved the images from the FB before it was locked down - especially the longer bushy haired ones." Other Redditors saw the work in r/findbostonbombers as a testament to crowdsourcing. Redditor 1667 said, "Way to go reddit mods. You shut down the most amazing case of crowdsourcing in internet history." Redditor 1680 also expressed similar sentiments,

I don't understand why the guys on this subreddit are trying to control the hell out of the content. That's the antithesis of the crowdsourcing effect that can be so helpful. Maybe it's him. Maybe it's not. You don't get anywhere by heavy-handedly squashing the debate with sanctimonious proclamations that "I am right and everyone else is wrong so stop it." The point is that when something terrible like this happens, there will always be erroneous assumptions; I thought everyone understood that as part of the process of ultimately getting to

the truth. People need to understand the difference between debating a hypothesis that involves a person versus making an unequivocal statement that such a person is guilty.

The quotes above speak to the motivation behind Reddit's investigation into the Boston bombing. Similar to the Bangkok detectives, the desire for truth and social justice for the victims was strong. While distrust of state authorities was not an issue in Boston as it was in Bangkok, both cases treated their virtual collection of facts and evidence in the same way: the collection was for the public and for the greater good. When instances of censorship were employed in Reddit, the contentious relationship between the identity of the 'good' and 'real' collector became apparent. Censorship and emotional attachment to the reality, as well as the desire for social justice and respect for the victims were conflicting elements that caused the identities of the detectives to shift throughout their respective investigations.

The material culture analysis highlights the relationship between the amateur detectives, the collectors, and the facts of the case, the collection. Yet what is missing in the analysis are other institutional players that also influence the collection as well as the validity of the facts and rumors of the two bombing cases. With each of the bombing cases being of national concern, the amateur detectives certainly could not have acted in isolation. They were relying on institutional actors, and due to the public nature of the online and offline investigation, they inevitably interacted with those institutional actors. The following actor-network analysis maps out the network of interactions that affected the construction of rumors and facts online.

Actor-Network Analysis: The Path to Fact

Since ANT considers human actants (e.g. individuals) and non-human actants (e.g. technology, photographs) to be of equal status within the network, ANT is used in this analysis to map out how claims made online (e.g. rumors, conjectures, theories, ideas) regarding the

bombing move through a network comprised of media coverage, police statements, and social media channels to eventually be considered fact. The more robust, legitimate, and trustworthy the source, the more stabilized the network becomes, until the point where the statement is considered fact. However, networks do not always get to the point where they are stabilized, disruptions can occur and the networks can collapse. As the following network illustrations show, not all networks were as widespread or robust as those online believed.

A key element in mapping out the network for ANT is discourse. According to John Law (2009), one of the founders of ANT, discourse plays an important role in stabilizing networks. The concept, as Law puts it, is called *discursive stability*. Based on Foucault's (1991) concept of discourse and power, in ANT, "discourses define conditions of possibility, making some ways of ordering webs of relations easier and others difficult or impossible" (Law 2009:149). Discourses allow certain interpretations of events to appear to be 'truthful' or 'commonsensical' via ideological codes (Smith 1999). In other words, statements made by actants are generally based in some existing discourse within society, allowing said statements to be possible and acceptable. There may be multiple ways of wording the statement so that it taps into more conditions of possibility and increases its acceptability. Understanding what discourse frames or contextualizes the statements made in online communities regarding the bombings is highly important. It highlights what social, cultural, and historical contexts allow such statements to be possible.

While networks take many different shapes, for this chapter, three examples are used to depict the main types appearing in the two cases. These three networks occurred at key turning points during the Boston and Bangkok bombings, for example, when an innocent person was accused. When an innocent person is harassed, it is when the mob justice effort is failing. As the current research is interested in how exactly such efforts at justice fail, mapping out the process

of claims-making is important to understanding the basis and trajectories of the accusations. The three networks that will be discussed are all different types of networks that demonstrate the range of networks existing within the online investigations.

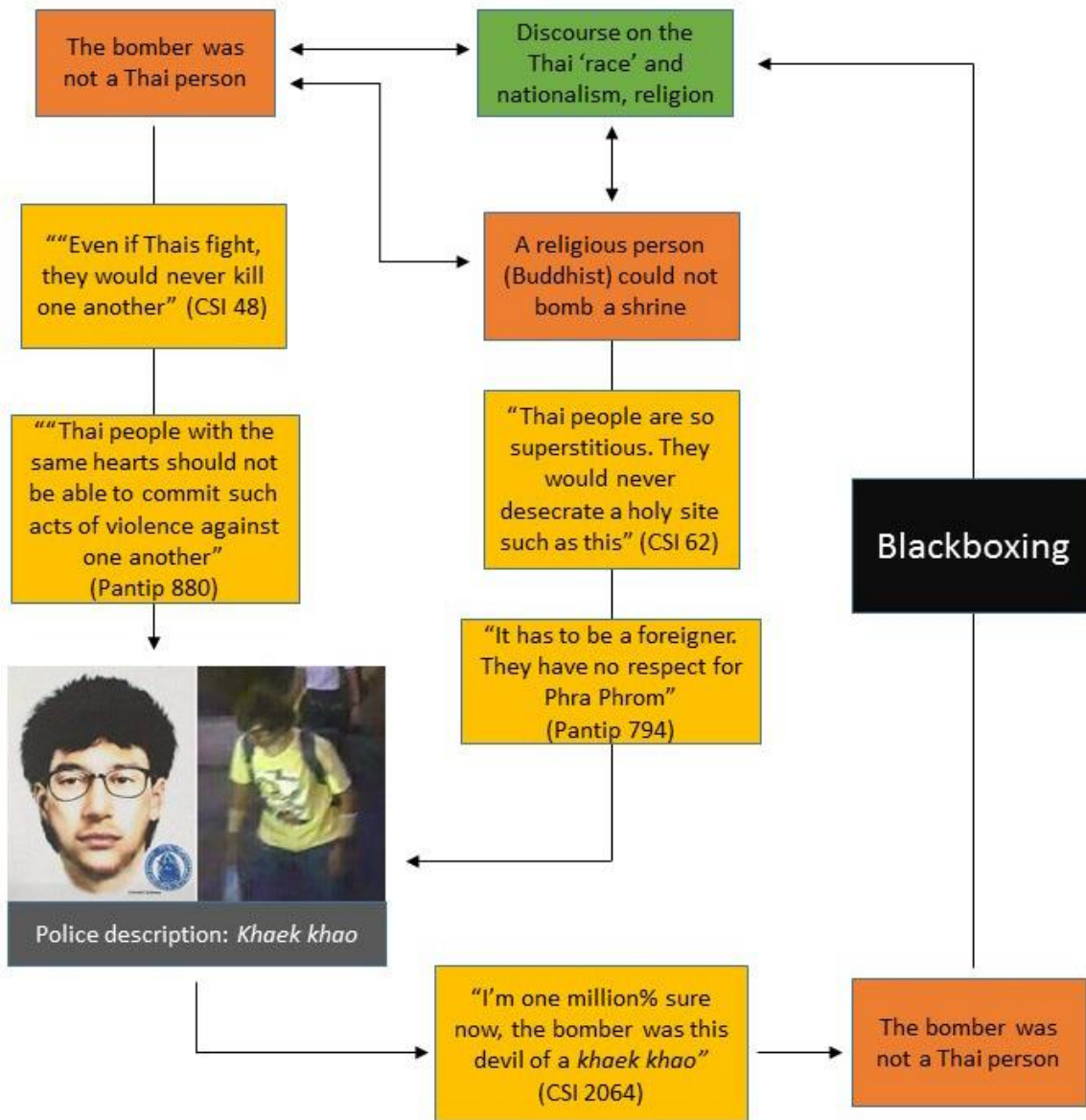
The first example is from the Bangkok bombing, which demonstrates what a robust and stabilized network looks like. Figure 1 is an example of a network that has become stabilized and blackboxed. Blackboxing is a concept in ANT used to describe how claims in a robust network become facts, to the point that they are taken for granted (Nakajima 2013). In Figure 1, there are two statements made online that need to be examined. The beginning statement (starting in the top left corner) is ‘the bomber is not a Thai person.’ The second statement is ‘a religious person (Buddhist) could not bomb a shrine.’ Both statements were made in CSI LA and Pantip in the aftermath of the bombing, as the Thai people tried to make sense of what had happened.

The two statements were made in the context of nationalist and racist discourse existing within the Thai nation-state. In order to understand the conditions of possibility for such statements, we must understand the history of racist and nationalist discourse in Thailand. Despite being a multi-ethnic and racially diverse country (Jory 2002), Thailand has strong hegemonic discourses regarding what characteristics constitute a ‘true Thai’, an inherently racist notion that such an identity exists objectively. As part of a racist nationalist project carried out by the Thai government in the 1930s, the idea of a unified ‘Thai’ race’ was perpetuated (Winichakul 2008). To be a ‘true Thai’ one must speak the Thai language, adopt Buddhism, love the Thai monarchy, and trust the military authority which governed the country at the time (Thananithichot 2011). The nationalist project assimilated minorities living within the country or in bordering areas to the dominant notion of ‘Thai-ness.’ Such discourses continued to be prevalent into the 1970s and were broadened to include even more cultural notions by

nationalists in Thailand. Cultural nationalism was first introduced by a prominent Thai scholar named Chatthip Natsupha in the 1970s. He and his followers established the Chatthip School of thought and based their ideology heavily in left-wing Marxist radicalism (Winichakul 2008:577). Concerned by Thailand's underdevelopment, the Chatthip school critiqued the state for failing to protect the so-called 'essence of Thainess' (Winichakul 2008:587). In light of Siam's name change to Thailand as well as the role Thailand played in World War II, the Chatthip school felt that Thailand was becoming an agent of capitalism and 'Western' thought, at risk of losing the 'essence of Thainess.' There was thus a strong distrust of state authorities running through cultural nationalism.

What is the essence of Thainess exactly? While the Chatthip intelligentsia were vague in their definitions, they based the notion of Thainess on the essentialized idea of the 'Thai village', which goes back to the notion of a shared tradition and heritage (Connors 2005; Winichakul 2008). In this idealized form of the 'Thai village,' the city, capitalism, commercialism, and any other 'Western' influences are removed and "the people" come to be rooted in the "primordial or authentic cultural essence of all Thai people" and live by ideals of communal solidarity and harmony. In the 'Thai village,' people have *nam jai* (the notion of caring and having kindness for one another), practice Buddhism, have respect for the elderly, and are able to adopt a certain amount of outside [Western] knowledge without "jeopardizing other elements of the Thai essence" (Winichakul 2008:581). This culture is believed to be "trans-historical, predating and surviving all particular economic and social formations" (Winichakul 2008:581). Thus, cultural nationalists believe that there is an authentic culture of the Thai people that is 'natural' and 'common' across all Thai people.

Figure 1 - Blackboxing of Thai national identity



The two waves of nationalism in Thailand between the 1930s and the 1970s developed from different perspectives, but generally revolved around the same idealized notion of ‘Thainess’. Beyond the Thai language, those considered to be ‘Thai’ must be Buddhist and love peace and harmony. Cultural nationalism, which pushed for the concept of the ‘essence of Thainess’ is still a strong ideological driving force in Thailand today (Winichakul 2008). Based

in such discourses, the two statements were made possible and acceptable within the online communities. As seen in chapter 5 many people believed that a Thai person could not hurt another Thai person. Comments encouraging Thai peace and harmony were also common. Religion was also considered a key factor, as netizens believed that a Buddhist (who would be a Thai person almost by default) could not bomb a place of religious worship.

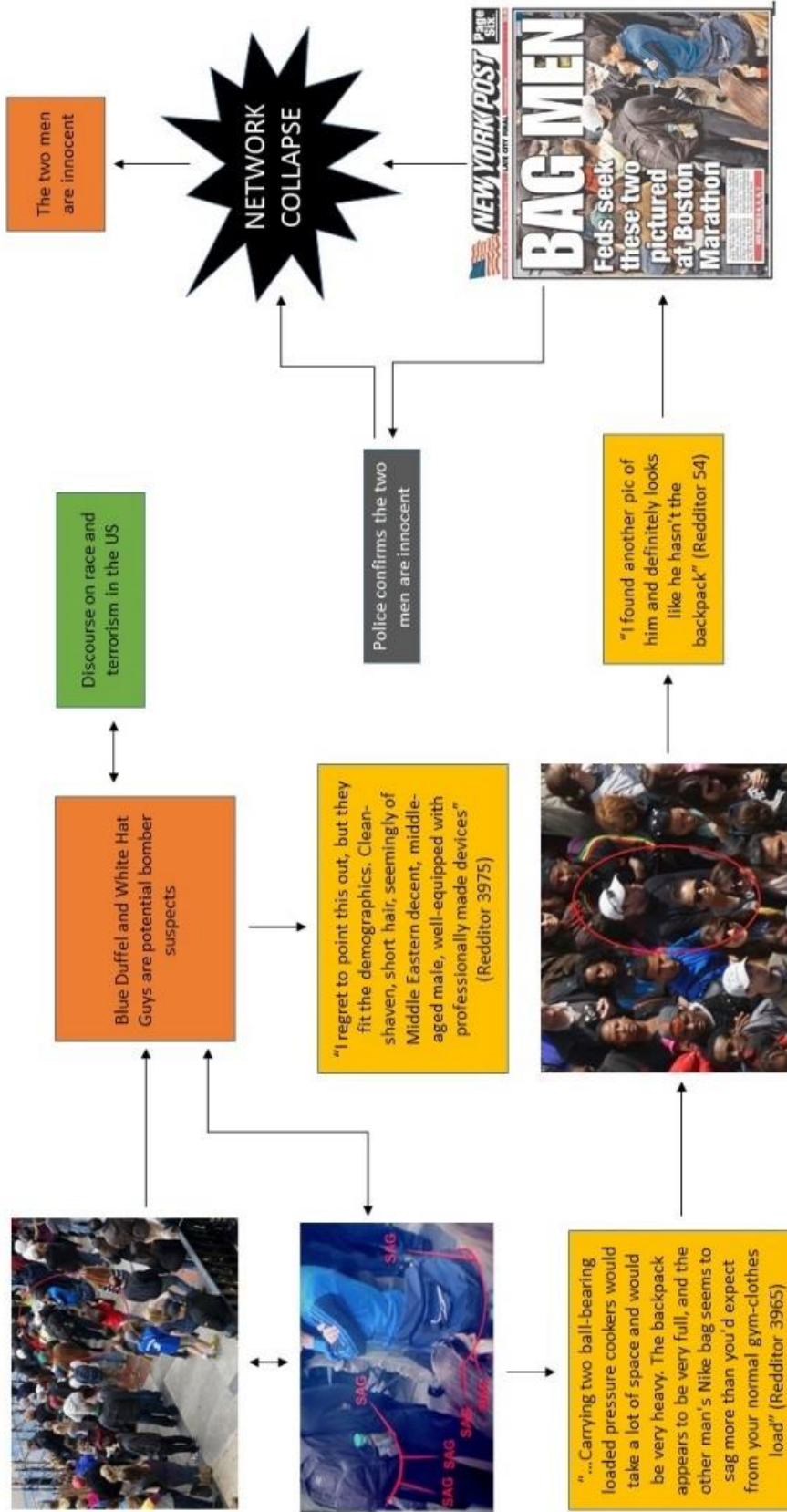
Returning to the flowchart in Figure 1, we now understand how the original two claims were made possible based on existing racial and nationalist discourses in Thailand. The two claims supported one another, hence the bi-directional arrow. The quotes from CSI LA and Pantip below the claims reflect the general discussion in both communities that helped to spread the network. The more people agreed, the more factual the claims seemed to be. The statements were further confirmed when the sketch of the Yellow Shirt Suspect was released by the police, coupled with a description that the man was foreign (i.e. not Thai) and of *khaek khao* descent. The sketch and CCTV footage are considered the non-human actants in the network that mediate interaction between the authorities and the online community. Official confirmation that the bomber was not Thai, made the two claims even stronger. The bomber was confirmed not to be a Thai person, which made sense to the community, as a ‘true Thai’, one who is religious and loves harmony, could not hurt another Thai person, much less bomb a shrine. The network completes itself at this point when the notion that the bomber was not a Thai person was ‘blackboxed’ – that is, fully becomes fact, to the point where it is taken for granted. Now that the ‘facts’ have been supported by networks of people, images, and institutional players, they feed into the existing discourse on Thai race and national identity.

Figure 2 moves from the Bangkok bombing to the Boston bombing. This particular network is an example of what a collapsed network looks like; that is, when a claim does not

necessarily reach the status of ‘fact’. When the bombs exploded at the Boston marathon, there was little indication as to who had carried out the attack. Unlike Bangkok, which had a picture of the suspect a day or so after the bombing, Boston did not have a concrete suspect for almost a week. This led to what some called a ‘Where’s Waldo’ hunt, in which anyone in the photos of the marathon became suspects of the online investigation. The Blue Duffel and White Hat suspects were two of the more well-known suspects from Reddit’s investigation.

Their image in the top left corner, in which one has a backpack and the other has a duffel bag, was circulated widely. The claim, “Blue Duffel and White Guys are potential bombers” was made on Reddit based on the image. However, the claim itself was not made from thin air, it was made in the context of existing racial and terrorist discourse in the United States. Since the September 11th terrorist attacks and the declaration of the ‘war on terror’ in 2001, the United States and various countries around the world have passed legislation to combat terrorism. Those of Middle Eastern descent were not only legislative targets, they became cultural targets with the exacerbation of racist ideologies (Poynting and Mason 2007; Sharma 2006). Such ideologies created a divisive boundary between insiders and outsiders of the country, where insiders viewed outsiders as a threat to the ‘American ideals’ or ‘American-ness’ (Greenwald 2013). However, it is of note that such a trend was not simply confined to the United States, but also arose in the UK, Australia, Canada, and other countries (Bravo López 2011; Frost 2008; Poynting and Mason 2007; Sharma 2006), thus contributing to the ‘global war on terror.’

Figure 2 - The Blue Duffel and White Hat Men are suspects



This process of othering results in the essentialization, stereotyping, and objectification of the victims of such racist discourse. “The concept of "Americans" most definitely does not include people with foreign and Muslim-sounding names like "Anwar al-Awlaki" who wear the white robes of a Muslim imam and spend time in a place like Yemen”, explains Greenwald (2013). Those of Middle Eastern descent, with non-‘American’ sounding names and non-‘American’ physical features were often generalized to be terrorists or Islamic extremists. The very notion that one was a Muslim could also lead to discrimination, as the religious identity and racial identity were becoming mixed up in the general notion of Islamophobia (Bravo López 2011). Scholars have noted this as a form of cultural racism, as religious identity became conflated with racial identity (Bravo López 2011; Stockdale 2004; Verkhovsky 2004). “Islamophobia would be a hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims based on the image of Islam as an enemy, as a threat to ‘our’ well-being and even to ‘our survival’ (Bravo López 2011:569). The media in the United States has also engaged in the dissemination of moral panics by criminalizing Muslim communities (Bravo López 2011; Poynting and Mason 2007).

It is no surprise then, that those of Middle Eastern descent are now often stereotyped as Islamic extremists or terrorists. The accusation of the Blue Duffel and White Hat men arguably falls under such racist discourse related to terrorism in the United States. While the image of the two men was small, Redditors went through the trouble of zooming into the photo to see the two men’s faces, as well as finding the two men in other images. Hence, Redditor 3975’s statement that the two men fit the so-called race and age demographics supports the original statement rather than questions it, because the existing discourses on race and terrorism in the US makes the claim possible.

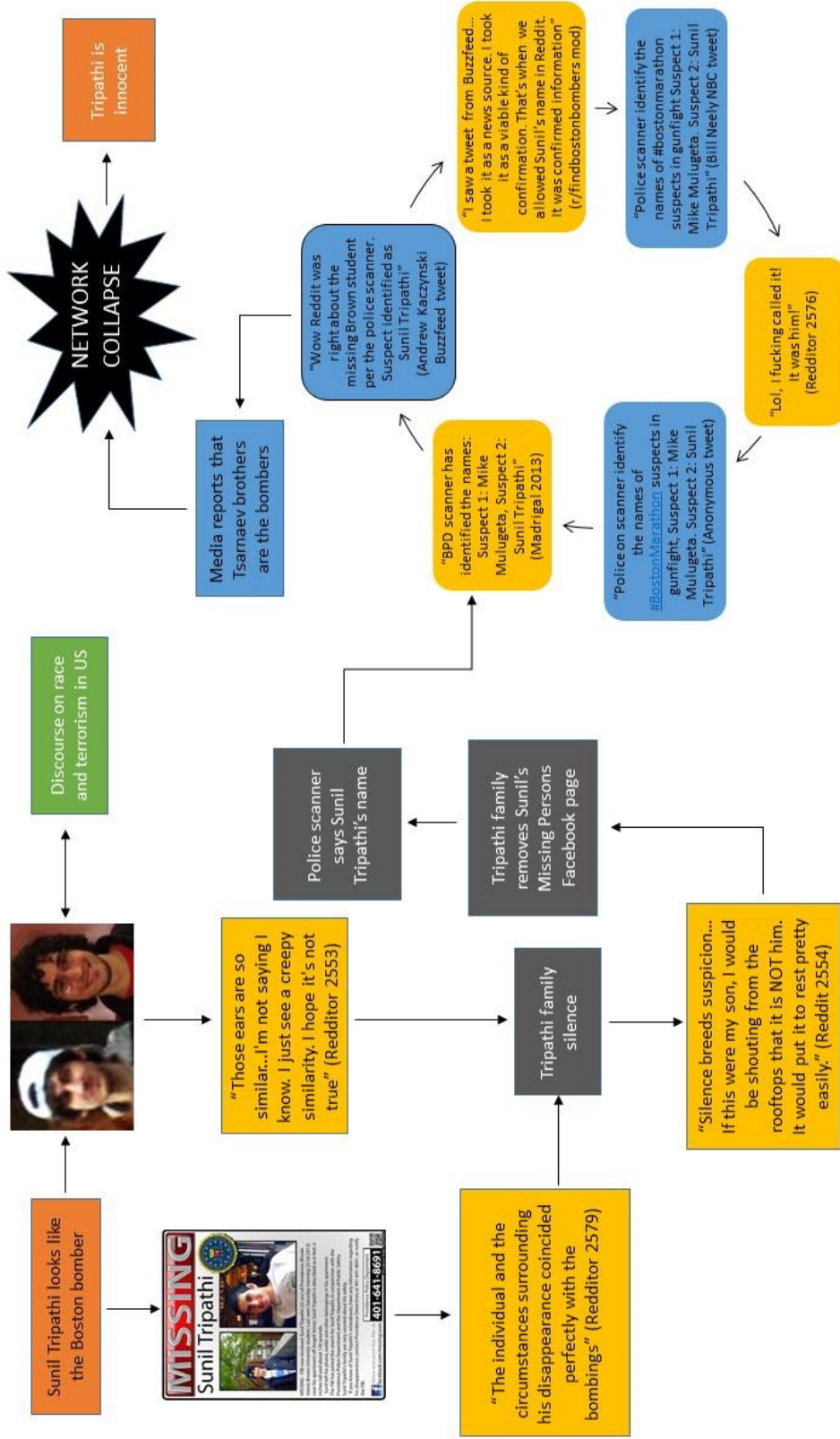
In addition to zooming in on the men's faces, Reddit also zoomed in on the men's bags. While this eventually became a joke of its own, Redditors were intensely concerned with whether or not the bags had enough sag to prove that the contents within were heavy. Since it was known that the bomb was a pressure cooker, Redditors wondered if the bags sagged enough to be carrying the weight of a pressure cooker, as evidenced by Redditor's 3965's comment. The network continued to spread as more images of the men in other situations were found. In the second clear image of the two men, it seemed as though White Hat's backpack was missing. This sparked another intense debate – was the bag really missing? Was it simply placed on the ground in front of the man? Or were the black shoulder straps of the backpack being hidden by the black jacket the man was wearing? While Redditors considered these various possibilities, they were not the only ones concerned with what they had found.

In a shocking move, the New York Post published a photo of the two men on the front page of their April 18th 2013 publication. Labeling them as 'Bag Men', the Post captions the photo with "Feds seek these two pictured at Boston Marathon," essentially accusing the men as the actual suspects, instead of potential suspects brought up by social media. There are several revelations of consequence at this point. First, the fact that the New York Post reported on this indicated that mass media were reading Reddit. This gave more legitimacy to Reddit as a whole, and Redditors began to question if they were a news source. In fact, many Redditors commented that they often turned to Reddit for updated news, rather than watching mainstream media. Second, legitimization from an untrustworthy news source caused the network for the claim to collapse. Recall that Reddit had already sworn off the New York Post as a reliable news source. Seeing the New York Post publish such information, without any validation from other official and reliable sources such as the FBI, led to the collapse of the network. This was further

exacerbated by the revelation that the so-called Bag Men, who were shocked and frightened by the accusations, went to the police and were cleared (Golgowski 2013). Thus, the final statement in the top right corner of Figure 2 has changed to “The two men are innocent.” This incident is a good example of what happens when a network collapses, and the original claim is found to be untrue.

Figure 3 represents the most complex network in the two cases. But it is a model that captures the feedback loop Figure 2 alludes to, between the media and the online communities. Starting in the top left, the claim, “Sunil Tripathi looks like the Boston bomber”, is based on two basic pieces of information. The first is that Tripathi went missing approximately one month before the Boston bombing. He was reportedly depressed and acting strangely before his disappearance. Redditors who were suspicious of Tripathi doxxed his private Facebook page to find more images of him. The edited image comparing the bombing suspect with Tripathi is supposed to show how similar they look. As demonstrated by the two Reddit quotes regarding Tripathi’s disappearance and physical appearance, the claim that Tripathi could be the Boston bomber was based on specific racist and terrorist discourse existing within the U.S. Essentially, the same discourses that enabled the claim about the Blue Duffel and White Hat men also enabled the claim that Tripathi was possibly the Boston bomber.

Figure 3 - Sunil Tripathi's feedback loop



The claim was further stabilized as the Tripathi family remained silent in the wake of the accusations against their missing son. Furthermore, facing incredible harassment from online trolls, the family removed their Find Sunil Tripathi missing persons' Facebook page. These two actions were considered a sign of guilt by those online – if Tripathi was truly innocent, why did they not fight for their son's innocence? The final clinch in Tripathi's supposed guilt as the bomber was when Redditors supposedly heard his name being spoken on the Boston police scanner. This is a point of great contention and debate, as many people said they heard Tripathi's name being spoken, while just as many people maintained that they never heard Tripathi's name. Regardless of whether or not his name was actually mentioned, the mere possibility was enough to send the Reddit community, and those observing it, into a frenzy.

It is at this point that the network becomes most interesting. As denoted by the circular mapping on the right-hand side in Figure 3, the network is no longer spread out across various sources, but feeding into itself. When Redditors began claiming that they heard Tripathi's name on the scanner and celebrating that they were the ones who found the bomber before anyone else, mainstream media channels such as BuzzFeed and CBS began retweeting the information on Twitter. Not only were the mainstream media checking on Reddit, they considered Reddit to be legitimate in the belief that Reddit's information supposedly came from the police. While no one could produce a soundbite from the police scanner speaking Tripathi's name, the claim was credible enough, due to the already existing and stabilized network (the situation revolving around Tripathi's disappearance, the supposed physical similarities, and the actions of the Tripathi family). Moreover, as the analysis in previous chapters showed, the police were a highly trustworthy and legitimate source for those interested in the bombing.

Despite Reddit's reticence in trusting the media, receiving confirmation from the media, in conjunction with the police, was enough to validate their original claim. The media channels confirming Reddit's victory also were ones that Reddit trusted more than the New York Post. For Reddit, the stability of the network seemed widespread across the police, the media, and the various 'facts', yet, in reality, the network was merely an illusion. Instead of a robust network, the network was actually a loop, feeding into itself. The claim only gained more traction as more high profile twitter accounts with millions of followers such as the hacktivist collective, Anonymous, and celebrity news reporter Perez Hilton retweeted the information. At this point, the claimed seemed factual, and various players celebrated Reddit's successful collective intelligence.

Reddit's celebration did not last long, as we know. Not long after the police shootout with the Boston bombing suspects in Watertown, Massachusetts, NBC reported on the true identity of the bombers: brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. The revelation of this fact immediately caused the circular network to collapse on itself. With further confirmation from the police and the media that the bombers were actually the Tsarnaev brothers, the network that Reddit believed to be robust was dismantled. The original claim was thus modified to indicate Tripathi's innocence. The discovery of Tripathi's dead body not long after the whole debacle was further proof of his innocence, as his death was ruled to be a suicide.

What the three figures discussed so far have shown is that the networks for claims made within the online communities could take many shapes and have many paths to becoming factual. Some claims become robust and stabilized to the point where they may be blackboxed into commonsense, factual statements. Other claims face more difficulties in becoming facts, as actions by non-human and human actants affect the network. This is the value of ANT, which

shows the concrete observations that build the network of support in the claims-making process. Even at the point where the claim seems factual, such as in the case of the Tripathi claim in Figure 3, networks can still collapse. ANT has demonstrated that there is actually no such thing as an independent ‘fact’. Facts as we understand them are heavily embedded in a network of beliefs, discourses, imagery, and statements. If the network becomes robust enough, it can be maintained, stabilized, then form our so-called ‘common sense’. However, there is always the possibility for the network to collapse if new information or new actants enter the network. Even blackboxed statements may be unraveled and revealed to be ‘false.’ Such is the shifting and evolving nature of networks and ‘truth’.

Both cases of the bombings in Bangkok and Boston, respectively, mapped out many networks in their search for the so-called truth. The various claims the communities of CSI LA, Pantip, and Reddit made were based on existing discourses and were built on the available information on the bombings, contributed by the media, the government, the police, and themselves. Each statement made had to be validated via the networks made of the aforementioned human and non-human actants. An element that was not represented in the ANT diagrams is the sheer urgency of both cases. Both cases spanned a period of about two weeks at the most, making each day and each hour crucial to the official and unofficial investigations. With the fear that the bombers could escape the city before being apprehended, those online felt rushed to identify the bombers as fast as possible, at the risk of making mistakes and sacrificing the truth.

The material culture analysis of the bombing investigations has provided valuable insight into understanding the relationship between collectors and their virtual collections. The issue of materiality is important to consider, as virtual collections may leave no physical trace when they

are changed or deleted. Digital collections can serve as a form of memory, and there can be emotional attachment to the memory and the materiality it represents, although the relationship between the collectors and the collection in both cases is not as intimate as it was for Benjamin (1968) and his book collection. The detectives had no specific connection between the actual facts of the case, e.g. the make of the bomb, or the escape route of the suspects. Rather, the connection stemmed from the tragic reality the facts represented. Watching footage of the minutes leading up to the Bangkok bombing, for example, the Bangkok detectives who commented often pinpointed specific people they were empathizing with, such as the women sitting next to the backpack, or a small child running in the area. In that moment, knowing what was about to happen to the victims in the footage, the Bangkok detectives felt a strong connection to the victims that crossed the boundaries of immateriality.

For the online detectives, collecting and interpreting the facts was the community's way of dealing with the collective trauma. It allowed them to be proactive in the investigation and not feel as helpless in the wake of a tragedy. In the pursuit of social justice, private interests were not a concern; only public interests were, as facts, no matter how gruesome, were sought out for the collection. By choosing social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, and Pantip as the place to house their collection of facts, the amateur detectives made the information they collected public and shareable. Despite the structural issues of the social media platforms, the detectives endeavored to sift through rumors and facts, bound by their pursuit of social justice. Ideas of privacy were considered but not serious enough to warrant censorship in many instances, which indicates why so many of the innocent suspects in both Bangkok and Boston were doxxed and had their personal information shared. Facts therefore, were not for private use, but for the public to collect and interpret. Personal ownership, in turn, was therefore not possible; the collection

was owned by the whole community involved in the online investigation. There was therefore no owner of the collection; everyone contributed to, duplicated, and shared it as much as possible in the interest of the ‘truth.’

Due to the public nature of the online investigations, key institutional players from the media to the police became involved in the construction of falsehoods online. The ANT analysis of the bombings depicts how difficult it is to discern the ‘truth’, if there is such a thing. By mapping out the path through which claims made online become factual, it is easy to see how precarious the ‘truth’ is. Claims with robust networks of support from images, community members, and the media easily collapsed and were revealed to be unsubstantiated. ANT has also contributed an important understanding of the two bombing cases – there is significant and influential interaction between key players involved in the investigations.

While this chapter focused on the concrete details of the investigations, the next chapter provides a broader perspective of the mechanisms that drive the mob justice process. The next chapter constructs a general model of failed mob justice derived from the bombings then tests it against more cases.

CHAPTER 6. MECHANISMS OF MOB JUSTICE

This chapter uses a social mechanisms approach for a broader understanding of the processes that lead to episodes of failed mob justice. While the previous chapter using Actor Network Theory and material culture perspectives provided specific analyses of the inner-workings of the two bombing cases, social mechanisms provides a more generalized, mid-level analysis between micro and macro by finding the connection between structure, networks and culture (McAdam 2003; Mische 2003). All three elements are important in understanding the process and outcome of a phenomenon. Methods such as network analysis or cultural analysis lack “a way to understand the mechanisms by which network structures and cultural forms interact and change over time in response to contentious interaction” (Mische 2003:259). As McAdam (2003:284) urges, “scholars should invest instead in methods designed to identify and better understand the interactive dynamics that account for the consistent structural findings.” The method recommended is analysis of mechanisms.

The analysis of mechanisms is essentially a process analysis, which maps out how a phenomenon unfolds step-by-step. The goal of the approach is to generate mechanisms that are generalizable to the same phenomenon across sociocultural contexts. What is the process through which episodes of failed mob justice emerge? What interactions between which players become important mechanisms to creating an episode of mob justice? By analyzing the interactions and mechanisms that lead to an episode of mob justice as a process, I will construct a causal model of failed mob justice in the section “The Model of Mob Justice”. The generalizable model of mob justice is based on the two bombing cases in Thailand and the US, in which efforts at justice ultimately fail, thereby providing strong evidence that the two cases follow similar trajectories despite being carried out in vastly different cultural and social contexts.

To further validate its legitimacy, the failure model is tested against four more mob justice episodes in the second section, “Testing the Mechanisms”. The testing phase is important to establish the validity of the model across various contexts, since the model is supposed to be generalizable. It is proof that the type of mob justice of interest in this study has a specific trajectory towards failure and set of mechanisms that can predict its emergence. It is not a phenomenon that erupts randomly, as is generally believed. While the four cases still come from Thailand and the US, they have different scales, different social conditions, and different historical contexts. The American cases include the 2015 killing of Cecil the lion, and the 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy theory about powerful democrats running a child-trafficking ring in Washington, D.C. The Thailand cases include the 2014 murders of two British tourists on Koh Tao, an island in southern Thailand, and the 2015 Single gateway policy passed by the Thai government to censor the internet. These cases were not analyzed in as much depth as the Boston and Bangkok bombings, but enough data were collected for this particular part of the analysis. Each of these cases spawned similarly intense online investigations muddled with emotion and rumors, and resulted in the harassment of various individuals through the failure of collective intelligence. The failure model that I constructed and tested to map out the process of mob justice in this chapter can be used by future researchers of this phenomenon.

The Model of Mob Justice

Key Players

Based on the results of the ANT analysis, a number of key players emerge in the bombing investigations. While they are not active key players, the actual bombers of the Boston and Bangkok bombings are the ones who triggered the events and the ensuing investigations. It goes without saying that the communities on Reddit, Facebook, and Pantip are also key players,

as each community heads its respective bombing investigation. The state authorities such as the police and the government are also key players in that they lead the official investigation, decide what facts get released to the public, and help conclude the case. State authorities also play the role of the legitimizer in many ways, as will be explained later. The mass media (mainstream, local, or international) constitute another set of key players as they cover the official and unofficial investigations. By being the mediator between the online communities and state authorities, mass media play a key role in initiating interaction between all the key players, thus affecting the consequences of the offline investigation. Finally, the last key players are the innocent people who are accused by the online communities of being the bombing suspects. The mechanisms will show how these key players interact, but first, we must understand the initial conditions that contextualized the two bombings.

Initial Conditions

The initial conditions are the social and historical contexts (Hedström and Swedberg 1998). As explained by Alimi et al. (2015), the initial conditions will vary among cases, however, the mechanisms exist in some degree, thus resulting in the same general outcome. While Alimi et al.'s study was on the mechanisms that lead to the radicalization of various organizations, this study looks at how the mechanisms result in mob justice related practices, such as doxxing and harassment, as well as the dissemination of misinformation. Much of the historical contexts have already been explained in previous chapters for the two bombing cases, so I will not go into too much detail.

There is a strong history of distrust of state authorities and mass media in Bangkok. This provides a contentious relationship between CSI LA, Pantip and the other two key players, the state authorities and the mass media. For those in Bangkok, the motivation behind starting the

unofficial investigation was due to the distrust of the police. While Pantip was more lenient, the data showed that CSI LA did not think highly of the police, and in fact, often felt embarrassed in response to various police actions throughout the case. Nonetheless, the online communities still sought out validation from state authorities, as authorities held legal power in the investigation. In addition, the history of political unrest in Thailand is also of high relevance. Thailand has undergone divisive and violent political upheavals, resulting in a number of coups and bombings throughout the past decades. Bombings are, unfortunately, a common occurrence in Thailand. While this particular bombing did not necessarily match the pattern of previous politically motivated bombings, it still triggered similar suspicions and ideologies. The racist and nationalist discourse prevalent throughout the online investigation also informs the initial conditions of the case.

As for the United States, the initial conditions that contextualized the Boston bombing mainly stemmed from the history of terrorism, namely, the so-called ‘war on terror’. While terrorist attacks in the United States have been sparse, 9/11 sparked both a physical and ideological war against the Middle East and ‘terror’ itself. Hence, Redditors investigating the Boston bombing spent much time debating whether or not this particular bombing was an act of terrorism, and what the definition of ‘terrorism’ was. Since the Boston bombing was one of the largest acts of supposed terrorism committed on American soil, the desire to fight terrorism is informed by nationalistic and xenophobic ideologies of the ‘war on terror’. The motivation for investigating the Boston bombing stems from these initial conditions. As the previous chapter on Actor Network Theory also demonstrated, the initial conditions informed the racist and nationalist discourse that pervaded the online investigations, and caused people of certain ethnic groups to be accused of the bombing.

With the key players and initial conditions laid out, the next section will discuss the mechanisms that cause various interactions between the key players.

Mechanisms

As discussed in the methods chapter, “mechanisms generate and explain observed associations between events” (Hedström and Swedberg 1998:1). It is a type of causal analysis that uses the logic of counterfactual dependency (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010). Counterfactual dependency is the logic that if C (cause) does not happen, then E (effect) also does not happen (Collins, Hall, and Paul 2004). E is reliant upon C. In a mechanisms analysis, C is defined as the mechanisms that make up the process leading to E, the resulting mob justice behavior. The two are tied to one another. Mechanisms therefore represent the “cogs and wheels of the causal process through which the outcome to be explained was brought about” (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010:50).

However, mechanisms do not constitute a simple ‘if this, then that’ explanation. They go a step further by telling us “why the counterfactual dependency holds and ties the *relata* (group of related things) of the counterfactual to the knowledge about entities and relations underlying it” (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010:54). Hence, Alimi et al. (2015) formulated their mechanisms analysis to include detailed discussion of the historical conditions and key players, that is, the entities and relations. It is therefore a causal analysis that demonstrates how one event (E) stems from a chain of interactions, or mechanisms (C), between key players (Sorensen 1998). Hence, I have discussed the key players, initial (historical) conditions, and the mechanisms for each of the cases being analyzed in the study.

Lastly, the temporality of mechanisms must also be considered. Causality implies a sequential procedure (C must happen before E), but a mechanisms analysis can become

complicated. Gross (2009:362) notes that “mechanisms unfold in time.” Gross (2009:362) also observes that “a phenomenon that causes another phenomenon instantaneously, with no intervening processes, is unimaginable.” It is unlikely that a social phenomenon is constituted of only one mechanism. Therefore, having multiple mechanisms as part of the process that leads to a phenomenon calls into question the sequential or temporal order of the mechanisms. With the phenomenon of mob justice, the temporality of the mechanisms is usually very short. That is, mob justice unfolds very quickly over a short period of time, usually within a week or two. In terms of sequence, the mechanisms that are proposed here have a general sequential order, although some may happen simultaneously or slightly out of order. Even if mechanisms happen in a different order or at the same time, the outcome (E) of mob justice behavior can still occur (Alimi et al. 2015).

The umbrella cultural contexts emerging from our understanding of the initial conditions are placed at the top of the model. This is to remind researchers that despite how the rest of the model seemingly ignores culture, cultural contexts are still considered in what causes the *triggering event*, the first main mechanism, and the rest of the models. *Triggering event*, in the case of the two bombings, is the actual act of bombing itself. It was carried out by the actual bombers, who are the initial key players who set off the chain of events. The triggering event does not necessarily need to be as large scale as the two bombing cases, but must spark some moral or emotional dilemma in order to inspire online interest. The event should cross some moral and legal boundary, to warrant the interest of the general public as well as institutional authorities. In the case of mob justice events that fail, the *triggering event* must spark a hunt for an unknown perpetrator, thus calling forth efforts to collaborate knowledge online to find the perpetrator.

The Boston bombing was one of the biggest attacks on American soil since 9/11, sparking a debate about homegrown terrorism and the war on terror. It also took place at the Boston marathon, a famous and widely followed annual sporting event that is supposed to celebrate athleticism and city pride. The Bangkok bombing occurred at the Erawan Shrine, a highly-revered location at the heart of the downtown Bangkok. Considering the slew of bombings in Thailand, this particular one was the most violent bombing that had occurred in recent memory. Both bombings caused a number of injuries and deaths. Moreover, no one came forward in either case to claim responsibility for the crime. This left open the question of who was responsible and caused netizens to debate the motives behind the bombings.

The second mechanism is *certification from authorities*. This is a key mechanism first theorized by McAdam et al. (2001). It is defined as “the validation of actors, their performances, and their claims by external authorities” (McAdam et al. 2001:121). In the case of the unofficial investigation, the call for help by authorities inspires and motivates the online community to use the power of collective intelligence. After the triggering event, the authorities, namely the police and the government, begin their investigation and make a call to the public for help and information. The triggering event therefore, has to be complicated enough of a case to warrant the state authorities to seek help from the public. In the case of the Boston bombing, the FBI, which was in charge of the investigation, asked the public to submit photos and tips about the bombing and the bombers. As they did not have a suspect right away, this plea from the state authorities encouraged the online community to comb through the photos for potential bombing suspects. In Thailand, the police released a photo of the Yellow Shirt Suspect a day after the bombing. They needed help to identify the suspect. The Thai police and government asked the

public for help identifying the Yellow Shirt Suspect, causing the online communities to search for anyone who looked remotely similar to the man.

Each of the triggering events therefore, received certification from state authorities. While the state authorities may not have intended for such a large-scale online investigation to occur, their role as a key player in the event was a factor. As state authorities hold legal power, the online communities looked to them as legitimizers of evidence and facts. In Boston, the high trust in the FBI caused Reddit to defer to statements released by the FBI to legitimize their process. Not only did the FBI ask for help, they also opened up a tip hotline, thus creating a space for Reddit to submit any potential information they found in their unofficial investigation. In Bangkok, while there is high distrust of state authorities due to the known history of corruption and abuse of power, Thai netizens nonetheless have to take cues from state authorities, as they hold legal power. When the bombing occurred, the Thai police asked the public to submit photos and dash cam videos taken near the intersection on the day of the bombing. When the Yellow Shirt Suspect's picture was released, the police asked the public to help identify the man, thus legitimizing the online investigation into the bombing.

This third mechanism is not necessarily required to happen, but it was a common factor observed in both the bombing cases. With the tenuous relationship between online communities, state authorities, and mass media, *untrustworthy behavior by institutional players* seemed to play a role in sparking further desperation to succeed in the unofficial investigations. This is not a mechanism existing in previous literature. Seeing state authorities or mass media behaving in a way deemed embarrassing or shameful by the online community motivated the community to work harder and faster to solve the case. Moreover, those online felt reassured by the large number of people involved, and were confident that collective intelligence would prevail over

traditional institutional methods. The online community felt that they could not trust the authorities to carry out their duties. For example, in Boston, when the New York Post repeatedly reported inaccurate information on the number of deaths, Reddit became so distrustful of them that the moderators of the live update threads refused to use the Post as a legitimate source of information. Redditors also critiqued and mocked CNN and NBC throughout the course of the investigation, and blamed mainstream media for inciting widespread moral panic with their 24-hour news coverage. When the New York Post, already an untrustworthy source, claimed the ‘bag men’ to be the actual bombers, Reddit threw their hands up in despair and wrote off mass media altogether. Such embarrassing behaviors from key players such as the media caused the online community to work harder in their unofficial investigation and essentially try to make up for the failures of the mass media.

Likewise, in Bangkok, *untrustworthy behaviors* were observed, which influenced the desire of the online communities to engage in their own investigation. While mass media failed to report information swiftly and accurately, the most untrustworthy and embarrassing behavior was when a Thai news station, Nation TV, staged a reenactment of the bombing. The station dressed up one of their staff members as the Yellow Shirt Suspect and walked through Erawan Shrine with a backpack, inciting panic in passersby (BBC News 2015b). The reenactment was cut short as more people complained and expressed frustration; the station ended up releasing a statement of apology acknowledging the reenactment to be “insensitive and disrespectful to the dead” (BBC News 2015b).

Much of the heat was on the state authorities, that is, the police and government. When police and government officials were fighting over who was responsible for the poor quality of the CCTV footage, CSI LA and Pantip criticized state authorities heavily. Not only was this

embarrassing for Thai people, it was embarrassing for Thailand in general, as there was a heavy international spotlight on the case. The whole nation seemed untrustworthy. Every little statement the government made was critiqued, such as when Prime Minister Chan-o-cha urged the Thai police to model their investigation after fictional American TV shows such as *Blue Bloods* or *CSI*. Although it is ironic that CSI LA themselves were also modelling their investigations after a TV show. While the actions of the mass media and state authorities may not have directly affected the results of the offline investigation, they certainly indirectly influenced and spurred the netizens' desires to be better and do better.

The fourth mechanism, *misidentification of suspects*, is the crux of the mob justice activity. In light of the initial conditions that contextualize the triggering events, as well as the certification from state authorities, the online communities investigating the event ended up misidentifying people as the suspects of the crime in question. This misidentification was based on previously recognized mechanisms such as *provocation*, “acts initiated by one actor with the intention of inciting the response of another actor,” and *vigilantism*, “initiation of provisional law and order activities by a non-state actor outside the control of its government and security forces” (Alimi et al. 2015:288–89). Based on weak or seemingly arbitrary facts, the online community called out someone as a potential suspect and engaged in illegal, informal control practices of doxxing and harassment. This occurred in both Boston and Bangkok.

In Boston, Reddit accused a number of people of being the bombers based on the images they were examining. Not only did the accused face defamation online, if they were particularly unlucky, their private information was circulated. This happened for Sunil Tripathi, in particular, who was doxxed by those online. Moreover, his family was harassed repeatedly and whatever the family did was seen as a sign of guilt. The same could be seen for the Bag Men – when they

were accused online and the New York Post published the picture claiming them to be the bombers, the two young men experienced harassment and feared for their safety. In both cases, the state authorities had to intervene to clear the accused and legitimize their innocence.

In the Bangkok bombing, CSI LA in particular was responsible for misidentifying suspects in the bombing. Sunny Burns and many others who looked vaguely similar to the Yellow Shirt Suspect faced the online swarm as their personal information, passport information and birth certificates were doxxed and circulated. The online harassment accusation of the innocent suspects caused the so-called ‘suspects’ to interact with other key players such as the mass media and the state authorities in order to prove their innocence.

The mechanism of *misidentification*, thus, causes all the key players (except for the actual bombers) to interact. The online community accuses the innocent suspects to be the bombers, causing the innocent suspects to seek help from social institutions. Oftentimes, they would first go to the police to clear their names and prove their innocence. Having their innocence legitimized by state authorities is one way of assuaging the online community. Some, such as Sunny Burns in Bangkok, and the Bag Men in Boston turned to mass media outlets to publicly claim their innocence. While the mass media is not necessarily trusted by the online community, the interaction between the innocent suspects and the mass media can provide further proof of the former’s innocence.

While the *misidentification of suspects* in the two bombing cases was carried out by the online communities, in other cases, it may be the state authorities or mass media themselves who misidentify suspects and spark interaction between the key players. For example, in the Boston bombing, when the New York Post misidentified the Bag Men as the bombers, it caused the Bag

Men to turn to the other mainstream outlets as well as the police to clear their names. While the state authorities in these two cases did not misidentify any suspects, it may happen in other cases.

The *feedback loop* is the fifth mechanism and one of the most complex. It consists of three sub-mechanisms: *diffusion*, defined as “the transfer of information along established lines of interaction”; *brokerage*, which is when actors “link two or more unconnected social sites”; and *scale-shift*, “a change in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging their claims and identities” (McAdam et al. 2001:331, 333). Recall the network maps in the previous chapter from the ANT analysis, which showed the feedback loop between the key players, the online community, state authorities, and the mass media. In the case of Sunil Tripathi in the Boston bombing, the *feedback loop* mechanism builds on the *misidentification of suspects* mechanism. The community of Reddit had accused Tripathi as the bomber, which sparked media interest in him. When his name was supposedly heard on the police scanner, a source of legitimate information, the *feedback loop* kicked in. *Diffusion* occurred as the misinformation spread across the network of interactions; it is constituted by the *brokerage* mechanism, as the spread could only have occurred if there were actors within the networks making connections. It is a circle of validation wherein the mass media used the online community as a legitimate source of information and vice versa, while both key players were basing their claims on the legitimate authority of the police. *Scale-shift* is seen occurring as the misinformation spreads across wider circles within the network, thus providing a level of escalation that peaks in episodes of mob justice. This mechanism is interesting in that it involves and encourages interaction among four key players. In that sense, it is the most powerful mechanism compared to the previous ones described, because it is the one that causes the investigation to spiral out of control as the media and the

online community both celebrate the false conclusion of the case. However, it is important to note that all three sub-mechanisms occur rather simultaneously, thus constituting the *feedback loop*.

The *feedback loop* was not as evident in the Bangkok bombing. The Thai media were continuously reporting on what the online community in Thailand was doing, such as mourning, using the #prayforbangkok hashtag, and helping families and friends of the victims find closure (Kapook 2015). They also reported on factual findings from Pantip's and CSI LA's online investigation, such as the brand of the shirt the Yellow Shirt Suspect was wearing (Teenee 2015) to a conspiracy theory that someone in the Red Shirt faction warned about the bombing on his personal Facebook page (Sanook 2015). Such reports lent credibility and validity to the online communities and their efforts, and motivated the netizens to continue their investigation, knowing that the media were observing. However, the media curiously stayed away from reporting about the accusations made by the online community until those accusations were cleared by the police. This is likely because the media had been part of a messy feedback loop with the online community during the 2014 murder investigation of the death of two British tourists in southern Thailand. This case will be discussed in a later section that also demonstrates the *feedback loop*.

In the end, the police or government must step in and disrupt the *feedback loop* mechanism. This leads to the sixth and final mechanism, the *disillusionment*. *Disillusionment* is “a decline in the commitment of individuals or political actors to previously sustaining belief” (Tilly and Tarrow 2007:216). This mechanism is important in demonstrating that there is a beginning and an end to an episode of mob justice. It is how the episode concludes, mostly through the exposure of seemingly truthful claims as falsehoods. After the *feedback loop* of the

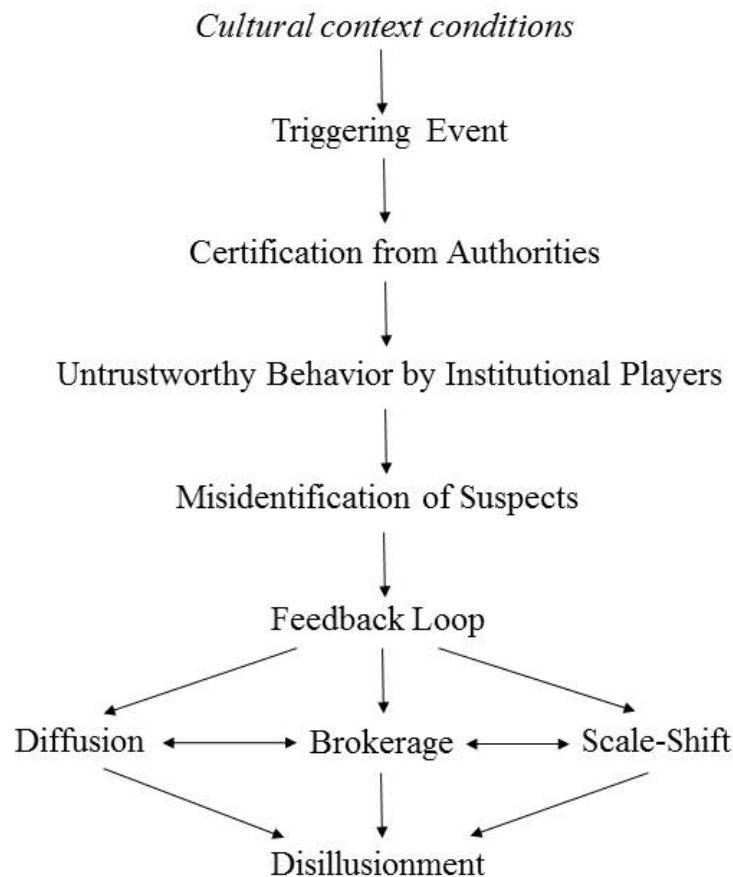
Boston bombing involving Sunil Tripathi, the police concluded their investigation (and the online investigation in tandem) by arresting the bombers and identifying them as the Tsarnaev brothers. The identification of the bombers led the feedback loop to collapse, and both Reddit and the mass media had to adjust their understanding of the bombing accordingly. The Bangkok bombing, likewise, also concluded when the police arrested the Yellow Shirt Suspect without the help of the online community. The suspect was discovered by tracing his cellphone usage. The offline investigation therefore concluded as the online community became disillusioned with their ability to solve the case.

Other conclusion mechanisms could include the simple abandonment by the online community if cases could not reach a conclusion. A key part of the *disillusionment* mechanism for mob justice is therefore action by a legitimate authority such as the police that ultimately collapses the claims-making processes of the online community. If the police do not make an arrest, then the case cannot conclude. Those online who were investigating may eventually lose interest, along with the decline in mass media coverage. The loss of general public interest, therefore, could cause a case simply to be abandoned and forgotten. If the police do conclude the case, it is likely to also dispel public interest. However, cases such as the Pizzagate Conspiracy or even more well known, the Kennedy assassination in 1963 continue to spur public interest despite conclusions from legitimate authorities. *Disillusionment* may well be the most difficult mechanism to observe, as the internet helps to keep memories of difficult and mysterious cases alive.

The six mechanisms described so far explain the various interactions between the key players of the cases. While the description of the mechanisms was based on the two bombing cases, they are certainly generalizable to other cases. To summarize the causal model of mob

justice, the diagram below (Figure 4) depicts the sequence of mechanisms that constitute the process of an episode of mob justice. The model is essentially a *failure* model of mob justice, in which efforts to pursuit social justice collectively fail and entail the harassment of innocent people. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, there are instances in which mob justice succeeds or does not include the misidentification. This harks back to the notion from the Chapter 1 literature review that there are different types of mob justice case. The cases that have been chosen in this study were chosen because they seemed to represent a failure of collective intelligence in the mob justice efforts. The following section tests the model of the mechanisms using four more mob justice cases from Thailand and the US.

Figure 4 - Proposed failure model of mob justice process



Testing the Mechanisms

This section tests the mechanisms of mob justice with four more cases of mob justice in which collective intelligence is a factor. The cases originate from Thailand and the United States. There are two cases per country being tested. The cases from the United States include the 2015 killing of Cecil the lion and the 2016 conspiracy theory surrounding Hillary Clinton and a supposed child prostitution ring in Washington D.C. (also known as the ‘Pizzagate’ online). The cases from Thailand include the 2014 murders of two British tourists down south in Koh Tao and the 2015 Single Gateway incident in which the Thai government proposed a ‘great internet firewall’ similar to that in China. The analysis of each case will follow a similar but condensed structure from what was described above; that is, the key players, initial conditions, and common mechanisms will be discussed. These tests will serve to validate the causal model of mob justice mechanisms in Figure 4.

The 2015 Killing of Cecil the Lion

In July of 2015, an American dentist from Minnesota named Walter Palmer obtained a permit to kill a lion in Zimbabwe, South Africa. With the help of Zimbabwean professional hunting guide Theo Bronkhorst, Palmer shot an elderly lion with an arrow on a farm near the Hwange National Park. The lion did not die, and was tracked down over the next two days. He was eventually shot by Palmer with a rifle, after which “he was beheaded and skinned, his corpse left to rot” (Capecchi and Rogers 2015). The lion that was killed turned out to be Cecil, a local and tourist favorite who was being studied by researchers at the University of Oxford’s Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WildCRU) in order to understand the declining population of lions.

After the killing, the Zimbabwean government received word that a possibly illegal hunt had occurred, thus prompting the government to open up a criminal investigation regarding the

matter. The Zimbabwe Parks & Wildlife Management Authority claimed that the hunt was illegal and identified Palmer and Bronkhorst as the ones who carried out the killing. This dispelled Palmer's anonymity and led the international public, offline and online, from celebrities to conservationists to target Palmer. Palmer himself, along with his family, and his dental practice were continuously harassed until he had to go into "hiding" (Capecchi and Rogers 2015; Mail 2015). Palmer claimed that he was under the impression that the hunt was legal, as he had all the proper documentation. In October of the same year, the Zimbabwean government dropped its case against Palmer, stating that Palmer had the correct permits all along, and that the issue was "internal" (Jongwe 2015). The incident sparked a number of debates regarding the ethics of big game trophy hunting as well as endangered species protection policies.

Key players

The key players for this case therefore are as follows: Cecil the lion, Walter Palmer, Theo Bronkhorst, the international mainstream media who covered the case, the Zimbabwean government, various wildlife conservation groups, celebrities such as Jimmy Kimmel and Mia Farrow, and the online community of various social media sites. Each of the key players played a role in developing the case against Palmer, as Bronkhorst helped Palmer kill Cecil, while the international media, celebrities, and wildlife conservation groups brought a heavy spotlight onto the issues surrounding the killing. The Zimbabwean government played a key role in opening up the criminal investigation against Palmer and Bronkhorst. The online communities of Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, and various other social media sites who were following the case, used the information they had to harass Palmer, his family, and his dental practice.

Initial conditions

The historical contexts that inform the case include the history and debate around the ethics of big game trophy hunting, endangered species conservation efforts, and more broadly, US and South African relations, as well as the economic conditions of South Africa.

While there are many types of trophy hunting, that is, hunting for recreational purposes, big game trophy hunting in particular refers to hunting for large animals. However, with less than 32,000 lions left in the wild, the ethics of the practice is debated heavily (Flocken 2013). Trophy hunting is particularly common in South Africa, and there are debates on both sides on whether or not it generates revenue for the economy. “Hundreds of large animals including lions, elephants and rhinos are hunted in African countries every year” (Tan 2015).

On one hand, supporters of trophy hunting believe that not only does the practice generate revenue for the local economy, it can also help conserve wildlife population and bring awareness to the issues (Sapa 2012). Supporters also claim that the revenue generated from trophy hunting often get awarded to conservation efforts, though this claim is highly disputed (Tan 2015). On the other hand, critics of trophy hunting say that such practices only add to problems endangered species are facing in trying to survive, such as “habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict” (Flocken 2013). Trophy hunting can eliminate healthy male lions who are responsible for breeding and taking care of the pride. US and South African relations also play a role in the prevalence of trophy hunting, as “approximately 60 percent of all lions killed for sport in Africa are shipped to the U.S. as trophies” (Flocken 2013). With Americans contributing heavily to the revenue generated from trophy hunting, South Africans will continue to support the practice of trophy hunting. Moreover, the poor South African economy also forces many to turn to trophy hunting as a means to make a living.

To go back even further, critics of trophy hunting have compared the practice of trophy hunting by wealthy Americans in South Africa to colonialism, which brings in the savage colonial history of South Africa. As one trophy hunting expert Peter LaFontaine stated (Tan 2015),

‘When the government tells a local man in Chad that he can't hunt but then allows a rich, white hunter from Texas to hunt, it's a really terrible message to send... It's colonialistic and sends mixed signals to locals who see hunting is OK when a rich, white guy does it but not OK when a local does it.’

The lax hunting regulations for American hunters, as well as the desire to bring in revenue, be it for the larger economy or the individual, certainly played a role in the case of Cecil's killing. It is why, at the end, the Zimbabwean government admitted that the problem was “internal”, and that hunting regulations and quota permits needed to be re-examined in order to prevent such a killing from happening again in the future (Jongwe 2015).

Mechanisms

The *triggering event* for the case, is of course, the killing of Cecil the lion. With the debate around conservation of endangered animals already in place for the initial conditions, as well as well-known problematic practices of trophy hunting, the death of Cecil struck a chord. The fact that Cecil was a popular lion in the Hwange National Park and was supposed to be protected as part of Oxford University's study also contributed to the emotional impact of the story. Moreover, the circumstances around Cecil's killing were also murky, causing the portrayal of the story in mainstream media to be muddled. For example, much of the news coverage on Cecil repeatedly said that he was lured out of the national park sanctuary, when actually the killing occurred on a farm in the vicinity of the park. The alleged illegality of the killing also called into question Palmer's innocence, which triggered anger in those observing the case.

The *certification from authorities* was key for the public and the online community to accuse Palmer. The Zimbabwean government itself was the one who named Palmer as the hunter, and said that the hunt was illegal (Muchinguri 2015) in the following statement:

On the 7th of July 2015 after receiving a tip-off, our law enforcement officers immediately started investigating the matter and discovered that on the 1st of July 2015, this lion was illegally killed by Dr Walter Palmer, a United States of America national and Theo Bronkhorst, a professional hunter with Bushman Safaris on Antoinette farm in Gwayi River Conservancy.... Let me thank our law enforcement agencies who upon receiving information of the illegal hunt acted swiftly and apprehended the locally based poachers who are now facing the wrath of law but unfortunately it was too late to apprehend the foreign poacher as he had already absconded to his country of origin. We are appealing to the responsible authorities for his extradition to Zimbabwe so that he be made accountable for his illegal actions (Muchinguri 2015).

This was a clearly valid and legitimate government authority accusing Palmer and calling for his extradition from the United States. Such legitimization was enough for the media and the public to believe in Palmer's guilt. For Palmer to then claim his innocence only seemed as though he was attempting to hide the truth. The Zimbabwean government's calling on the United States government to act by extraditing Palmer was interpreted as a call for help, that something needed to be done to Palmer to make him "accountable for his illegal actions," as the statement said (Muchinguri 2015).

What seemed to spur the online community to target Palmer even more were the actions of celebrities who were following the case. This case allows for the expansion of what key players fall under 'authorities' in the mechanism. Celebrities, who claim a status of legitimacy through their charisma and fame can have a powerful voice in the development of a case (Kurzman et al. 2007). The first was Jimmy Kimmel, who publicly denounced Cecil's killing on his late-night talk show, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* on ABC. In his monologue, Kimmel tears up while calling the trophy hunt a "disgusting tragedy" and Palmer a "jack-hole" (Kimmel 2015). While

Kimmel specifically says that he does not encourage manhunts (he encouraged donations to WildCRU instead), the monologue gave Cecil's case a big public spotlight. "Kimmel's monologue was associated with the largest spike in media mentions" regarding the case (Goldman 2016). Kimmel was not the only prominent celebrity to talk about the case, however. Mia Farrow also engaged in doxxing by tweeting Palmer's business address to her over 700,000 followers, bringing more exposure to the case and adding more fuel to the fire (CBS News 2015).

The mechanism of *untrustworthy behavior by institutional players* existed in some way in this case. Or rather, it pre-existed the case. When news of the killing broke out in U.S. media, many Redditors claimed no surprise about this incident. Discussions about Zimbabwe on Reddit included doubts over the integrity of the Zimbabwean government, its ability to prosecute anyone in a fair trial, its failure to protect wildlife in general, and the government's interest in making a profit at the expense of wildlife. However, overshadowing these doubts about the Zimbabwean government was the anger directed at Palmer's actions. Redditors did not seem to question the legitimacy of the government's claim that Palmer's hunt was illegal. Despite a history of untrustworthy behavior, it did not dampen the online community's desire to avenge Cecil.

The *misidentification of suspects* did occur in this case, however, although not in an obvious way. The key question in the case is – was the hunt illegal? Palmer was certainly the only target of the case; the media and the online community were not hunting for anyone else. The misidentification in this case is closely tied to the *certification from authorities*. In other words, it was the Zimbabwean government who misidentified Palmer as a guilty suspect carrying out the illegal activity. As it turned out, Palmer did in fact have all the correct and legal documentation to carry out such a hunt, therefore, the claim made by the government and

subsequently supported by the public and the media was false. This case also has expanded our understanding of the mechanism, as the misidentification does not have to be made by the online community pursuing the case, but by authorities. In fact, such misidentification coming from a player with legal power is perhaps even more dangerous, as it adds considerable legitimacy to the false claim.

Misidentification by authorities can also constitute a form of *untrustworthy behavior*, the previous mechanism. When the Zimbabwean government dropped the charges against Palmer, Redditors attributed the act to the generally untrustworthy history of the government. Redditors also seemed split in their reactions to this news, as some believed Palmer had faced enough harassment from the media and the online community, while others felt that animal activist groups were making a big deal out of nothing.

The *feedback loop* is observable in the case, as the perpetuation of the statement that Palmer's actions were illegal is circulated and amplified by the key players involved. All three sub-mechanisms that constitute the *feedback loop* can be observed. The statement first is made by the Zimbabwean government, then circulated by mainstream media such as the National Geographic, the Washington Post, the New York Times and so on. The mainstream media coverage caused celebrities such as Kimmel and Farrow to pay attention to the case and cast their own spotlight on the issue. Moreover, Kimmel and Farrow publicly supported the claim that what Palmer did was illegal and morally deplorable. The media coverage and celebrity involvement caused *diffusion*, *brokerage*, and *scale-shift* simultaneously. The information about Palmer's activities spread across previously connected and unconnected networks, all the while spreading more and more.

Various conservation groups also played a role in adding legitimacy to the Zimbabwean government's original claim. The president of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) organization, Ingrid Newkirk, released an official statement saying that Palmer "needs to be extradited, charged, and, preferably, hanged" (Newkirk 2015). Animal rights activist Brigitte Bardot (another celebrity, as she was a former actress) described Palmer as a "serial killer" (Jongwe 2015).

It is no surprise then that those online and the general public who were following the case also believed in Palmer's guilt. With Farrow circulating Palmer's business address, people also found that his dental practice had a Yelp business page, causing online users to flood it with negative reviews and harassing messages. With the circulation of his business address, many went to this practice in person to put up protest signs and create a vigil for Cecil, as well as harass Palmer and his staff. "WE ARE CECIL," one read; "#CatLivesMatter," read another. Nearby was a sign with a darker message for the dentist who said he killed the cat: "ROT IN HELL" (Capecchi and Rogers 2015). A Facebook page that is still up as of November 2016, titled "Shame Lion Killer Dr Walter Palmer and River Bluff Dental", was created and has since garnered over 30,000 likes. According to the New York Times, "Dr. Palmer's face was scrubbed from industry websites", showing the extent of the damage the case has done to his personal and professional reputation (Capecchi and Rogers 2015). The harassment ultimately caused Palmer to shut down his practice temporarily and go into hiding.

Finally, the *disillusionment* mechanism of the case was when the Zimbabwean government, the key player who started the case and made the claims in the first place, dropped their case against Palmer. After reviewing his documents and his statements, government officials agreed with Palmer that his "papers were in order", and therefore closed the case

(Jongwe 2015). Meanwhile, the government charged Bronkhorst, the man who led Palmer to kill Cecil, with “failing to prevent an illegal hunt” (Jongwe 2015). It led the online community who was so feverishly convinced by Palmer’s guilt to lose interest in the case and abandon it altogether. Based on the description of mechanisms above, the model depicting the process of mob justice in response to the Cecil the lion killing is as follows. It matches the proposed model in Figure 4, because in essence, the failure of mob justice came as a result of the misidentification on the part of the Zimbabwean government.

Figure 5 - Killing of Cecil the Lion model



The 2014 Murders of Two British Tourists on Koh Tao

In September of 2014, two British tourists named Hannah Witheridge and David Miller, who were travelling separately to an island in the south of Thailand called Koh Tao, were found murdered on the beach. Witheridge was found bludgeoned to death, with signs that she was sexually assaulted, while Miller similarly suffered blows to his head and was drowned (Campbell 2015). Although the two tourists did not seem to know one another beforehand, they had met briefly the night before. According to witnesses, Witheridge, Miller, and their groups of friends were hanging out at a local bar called AC Bar (Reuters 2015a). They left the bar separately but supposedly made acquaintances there. How they ended up dead next to one another later in the night was a mystery.

The hunt for the murderers was immediate and messy, with many police blunders such as mishandling of DNA evidence, untrustworthy government behavior, as well as numerous wrongful arrests. In the end, the police arrested two Burmese migrant workers, who confessed to the heinous crimes. They claimed to have followed Witheridge after she left the bar and began to attack her. When Miller came by to help, the workers killed them both. Yet not long after, the two suspects recanted their confessions, claiming that the police abused and tortured a fake confession out of them (Walker 2014). This brought up century old discussions about the contentious relationship between Thailand and Burma, including immigration issues. Nonetheless, they were both found guilty of murder and as of November 2016, the two remain on death row in Thailand (Charuvastra 2016). As the case involved the murders of tourists in a supposedly tourist friendly country, this case had a heavy international spotlight and threatened the diplomatic relationships between Burma, Britain, and Thailand.

Key players

The key players of the Koh Tao case are as follows: the two tourists, Witheridge and Miller, the Thai state authorities (police and government officials), the Thai mainstream media, the online communities of CSI LA and Pantip, as well as other social media sites, the two Burmese migrant workers, and the other innocent suspects who were accused by the police and the online community. Each of the key players played a role in moving the case forward as well as causing it to spiral out of control, particularly the heavily engaged online communities who found their own suspects and forced the police to respond under pressure.

Initial conditions

The historical conditions that inform the Koh Tao murders include the history between Burma and Thailand, immigration policies and issues, the relationship between the two countries and Britain, the Thai tourism industry, the politics of Koh Tao, and the known corruption of the Thai state authorities.

Burma and Thailand are neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. Since the 1500s and onwards, they have engaged in many battles and wars along their shared borders. It was not until Burma was colonized by the British empire in the 1900s that the conflicts were stopped (CFOB 2016). Nonetheless, due to the historical conflicts, the two countries continue to have a contentious relationship, with both sides essentializing and demonizing the enemy. Children in Thailand, for example, are taught that Burma repeatedly invaded Thailand in attempts to lay siege to the then-capital Ayutthaya, thereby demonizing the Burmese and simplifying the complex history between the two nations (Winichakul 1994). There is a clear racist relationship between the two countries, as those in Thailand discriminate against dark-skinned Burmese

(Farrell 2015). The issue is further exacerbated when looking at contemporary immigration issues.

Immigration has long been an issue between Burma and Thailand as border crossing of illegal workers and refugees is a common practice. Burmese refugees “who have fled armed conflicts and/or horrendous human rights abuse and persecution by the Burmese military” have settled in Thailand since the 1980s (Burma Link 2015). The refugee camps are incredibly restrictive in movement, space, and resources. They receive very little protection from the Thai government despite various humanitarian organizations attempting to intervene. Over 30% of the refugees are also not registered, and are unable to become registered due to government restrictions, forcing them to live in Thailand as illegal aliens (Burma Link 2015). Burmese migrant workers face similar situations. Fleeing the internal conflicts of Burma, they come to Thailand, legally or otherwise, in order to find a better life. Approximately two million Burmese workers currently work in Thailand, working in labor-intensive fields such as construction, with poor pay, little security, and discrimination (Radheya 2014). “Migrant workers are often subjected to bonded labor, in which the migrant is forced to work to repay some form of debt. The system is often abused, and the workers are easy prey for corrupt officials and human traffickers” (Radheya 2014).

Finally, the Thai tourism industry is important to note. As the tourist industry is one of the biggest contributors to the Thai economy, for tourists to get injured or die in Thailand is incredibly damaging. Despite that, foreigners die “surprisingly often” in Thailand. In the same year as Witheridge’s and Miller’s death, 360 other U.K. citizens also died, “but generally they lose their lives through traffic accidents, overdoses and suicides” (Campbell 2015). Such statistics and this particular crime created tension between Thailand and Britain, particularly

because Thailand bungled the investigation many times, and Britain was observing closely. Britain even asked the Thai PM Chan-o-cha to allow Scotland Yard to step in and investigate, such was the untrustworthiness and incompetence of the Thai police. While Scotland Yard reportedly were not allowed to participate in the investigation, they were invited to observe the police investigation (Sherwell 2015a). It was an important gesture to make in order to appease Britain and keep diplomatic relations healthy.

Koh Tao is a popular tourist destination in Southern Thailand, receiving over half a million tourists a year (Campbell 2015). Despite that, the island has little official oversight and is largely run by various family crime syndicates who maintain control of the properties and businesses on the island (Campbell 2015). Tourists dying is not an uncommon problem, and in fact, not long after Witheridge's and Miller's death, three more tourists died on the island under suspicious circumstances (Campbell 2015). The mysterious and violent organization that runs Koh Tao played an important role in the case.

The well-known and documented history of corruption in Thai state authorities has been discussed in previous chapters and will not be discussed again here. It is important to keep in mind that scapegoating has been known to be a common police practice in Thailand, and was a key factor in this case to motivate the online community. Many believed that the police were using the two Burmese migrant workers who were arrested as scapegoats.

Mechanisms

The *triggering event* for the case was the double murders. While foreigners do die often in Thailand, it is rare that they die in such a violent and horrific manner (Campbell 2015). Moreover, the incident involved the gang-rape of Witheridge, which induced more emotional response. A bloody hoe was found near the crime scene and was believed to be the murder

weapon. However, DNA evidence was poorly handled by the local police, instigating an online investigation into the truth of the case (Reuters 2015a).

The *certification from authorities* in this case came from the state authorities appealing to the public for help in finding the murderers. The day after the murders, the police released blurry CCTV footage of a man running barefoot by the beach area where Witheridge and Miller were found dead (Lines 2014). The authorities asked the public to help identify the suspicious man in the video. This spurred CSI LA and Pantip to begin their investigation.

Untrustworthy behavior by institutional players abounded in this case, so much so that there is not enough space in this paper to describe all of it. A few exemplary incidents are as follows. At the beginning of the investigation, Thai PM Chan-o-cha engaged in victim-blaming discourse by saying, “‘Will [tourists] survive in Thailand if they dress in bikinis?’ he asked. He added that they would if ‘they are not beautiful’” (Campbell 2015). This comment enraged both the online community and general public, and was reported in various international news channels.

Similar to the 2015 Bangkok bombing, the police haphazardly cleaned up the crime scene, allowing crucial evidence to disappear while mishandling the available DNA evidence (Campbell 2014). Not only were tourists allowed to visit the particular spot on the beach where the murders occurred, the island was also not closed off to prevent people from leaving before the police could make an arrest (Fredrickson 2014). This forced the police to conduct an island wide DNA test of over 200 people in order to compare with the DNA found at the crime scene (Fredrickson 2014). There were also conflicting reports made by the police itself about the DNA records. “Police have issued conflicting statements about the DNA, including that some was lost or ‘used up’. They later took back that statement, saying DNA samples had not been lost”

(Reuters 2015). The conflict in statements was enough for the British government as well as those observing online to lose confidence in the abilities of the Thai state authorities to conduct a proper investigation. A Change.org petition was even started, calling for then British Prime Minister David Cameron to conduct an “independent” investigation into the murders (Harkins 2014). Over 100,000 people signed the petition.

Such *untrustworthy behavior by institutional players* was repeatedly discussed in CSI LA and Pantip. As with the Bangkok bombing, it harks back to the history of distrust of Thai state authorities, and motivated those online to conduct their own investigation.

Both the online community and state authorities engaged in the next mechanism, the *misidentification of suspects*. The local police arrested a British tourist named Sean McAnna, who was a friend of Miller’s, in connection to the murders. In Pantip’s investigation, they also believed that McAnna was guilty, or at least had vital information regarding the true identity of the killer (Pantip 2014). McAnna made a public Facebook post on his personal page describing what happened the night of Miller’s death. He was supposed to meet with Miller in the middle of the night but fell asleep; he woke to find out that Miller had been killed. This was deemed highly suspicious by the Pantip detectives, as they questioned why the two friends were going to meet so late and so on. McAnna was inevitably harassed and accused by those online as the true killer, causing the police to arrest and question him.

Another *misidentification* was first carried out by the police then followed up by the online community. The police suspected the man seen running by the beach in the CCTV footage released to the public was one of the murderers, prompting the online community to try to identify the man (Lines 2014). One of the key suspects who was accused was the son of the Koh Tao village head and owner of the AC Bar where Witheridge and Miller were last seen (MGR

Online 2014) The son was referred to online by his nickname, Nomsod. As described in the initial conditions, Koh Tao has various criminal organizations running the island, and Nomsod's father is said to be running one of his own. Accusing Nomsod calls into question the entire system of criminal organizations that run the island. CSI LA believed that Nomsod was the man seen running in the CCTV footage, as his height matched the height of the man, and they appeared to be walking in a similar fashion.

Nomsod claimed to be off-island and in Bangkok at the time of the murders, therefore, he could not have committed the murders. As proof of his innocence, his lawyers even released CCTV footage showing him entering Bangkok University, where he was enrolled, on the night of the murders (Charuvastra 2016). Even though this was supposed to clear him, CSI LA dissected the footage and claimed that it was edited. Detailed images showing how Nomsod's shadow did not match his body, and other such information were circulated by CSI LA. The onslaught of online accusations against Nomsod subsequently forced the police to test his DNA four times, in order to prove his innocence (Thai PBS Reporters 2014; Thai Rath Online 2014).

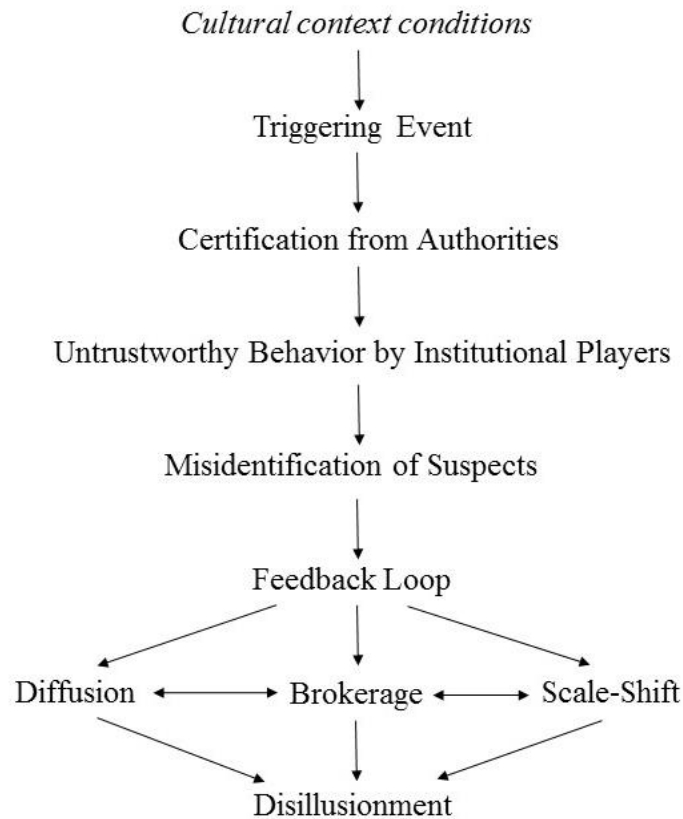
The *feedback loop* is evident in the description of the mechanism of *misidentification*. The police and the online community were reacting to one another multiple times throughout the official and unofficial investigation. Moreover, because Thai media were reporting on what CSI LA was discovering in their own investigation, it gave the unofficial investigation more power and legitimacy, forcing the police to bend under public pressure to respond to the online accusations. Once again, the mass media played a role in *diffusing* and *brokering* the case, and *scale-shift* occurred as more players became involved, including the online community. While CSI LA was ultimately wrong in their accusation and harassment of McAnna and Nomsod, it shows that a *feedback loop* mechanism was present in this particular mob justice case. The media

were feeding on information set forth by the online community, who in turn, were reacting to the police. This is evidence that a *feedback loop* existed.

The *disillusionment* mechanism of the case is unclear. Even though the Thai state authorities arrested the two Burmese migrant workers after a long, drawn out, and messy investigation, doubts remained over the validity of the workers' guilt. The workers confessed to the crimes and participated in an awkward and highly criticized reenactment of the crimes (Drummond 2014). (Crime reenactment is a common practice in Thai criminal investigations; the Bangkok bombing also had a sanctioned reenactment once the Yellow Shirt Suspect was arrested). Yet after they were charged, both workers recanted their confessions and claimed that the police tortured them with boiling water in order to extract a false confession (Campbell 2015). The Thai police rejected these claims, and the two men were found guilty of murder in Thai court. Thus, while the case is closed officially, doubts remain in the general public over whether or not the correct men were arrested. Nonetheless, the official closing of the case halted the online investigation carried on by the Thai internet community.

The diagram of the process that led to the mob justice episode responding to the murders of the two British tourists is as follows. This case fits the proposed model exactly; all mechanisms were accounted for and shown to be an integral part of the process that lead to mob justice. The failure that led to the mob justice once again lies within the key mechanism of *misidentification of suspects*, further exacerbated by the *feedback loop*.

Figure 6 - Murders of two British tourists model



The 2016 Pizzagate Conspiracy

Around the time of the 2016 Presidential election between Republican nominee Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, a conspiracy began brewing on the internet regarding the legitimacy and trustworthiness of the latter candidate. Clinton, who had been struggling through a scandal regarding her use of a private e-mail server while she was Secretary of State, was the center of this alt-right conspiracy. The conspiracy claimed that a local pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong in Washington D.C. was the “potential home base of a global Democratic sex ring” (Sommer 2016). Basing their claims on a WikiLeaks dump of leaked emails from the Clinton campaign chair John Podesta, Comet Ping Pong was thought to be

running a child prostitution ring with the help of those at the top of the political ladder (Sommer 2016). The conspiracy was dubbed ‘Pizzagate’ by those online.

The case further progressed as alt-right media began reporting on the issue, and those who believed in the theory gained traction in social media sites such as 4Chan and Reddit. By the end of November, the r/pizzagate subreddit had over 23,000 subscribers with thousands of daily readers. Meanwhile, the owner of Comet Ping Pong, James Alefantis, as well as his employees were harassed online and received numerous death threats, causing the Washington D.C. police to “to deploy officers to keep an eye on the restaurant” (Editorial Board 2016). Fearing that the witch hunt would spiral further out of control, the administrators of Reddit shut down the r/pizzagate subreddit (Reuters 2016). The story is still ongoing, however, as the community moved to another social media site similar to Reddit called Voat, where they have continued to discuss various pieces of evidence concerning the conspiracy (Cornell 2016). As of December 2016, Voat community had a little over 8,000 subscribers, showing continued interest in the subject. The rejection from Reddit as well as mainstream media only seemed to spur the conspirators further, as they believed a major cover-up was taking place (Sommer 2016).

On December 5th, 2016, the case reached an even greater peak when a man named Edgar Maddison Welch became so caught up in the Pizzagate theory that he went to Comet Ping Pong in person with an assault rifle and shot up the restaurant (Associated Press 2016). Welch “told police he’d come to the restaurant to ‘self-investigate’” (Associated Press 2016). While he came to regret his actions later, “Welch would not completely dismiss the online claims while talking to the newspaper, conceding only that there were no children ‘inside that dwelling’” (Drew and Foreman 2016). The shooting led James Alefantis as well as business

owners in the area to feel “disappointed that the local law enforcement authorities has not previously responded more aggressively to try to stop the harassment related to the fake claims” (Lipton 2016). The incident prompted Hillary Clinton to make a statement about the dangers of fake news, calling it an “‘epidemic’...that poses a threat to democracy... ‘It’s now clear that so-called fake news can have real-world consequences,” Clinton said. “This isn’t about politics or partisanship. Lives are at risk — lives of ordinary people just trying to go about their days to do their jobs, contribute to their communities. It’s a danger that must be addressed, and addressed quickly”” (Chan 2016). Acknowledgement from one of the most powerful politicians in the country, as well as many other powerful actors such as Pope Francis (who himself was a victim of a fake news piece that said he endorsed Trump (Cummings 2016)) cast a strong spotlight on mob justice behavior in the digital age.

The case faced further institutional contact as one of Trump’s aides, Michael Flynn Jr., tweeted about Pizzagate, saying “Until #Pizzagate proven to be false, it’ll remain a story” (BBC News 2016b). It resulted in the Trump campaign letting Flynn Jr. go (BBC News 2016b), but such recognition from an institutional actor continued to fuel the Pizzagate Voat community.

Key players

The *key players* for the Pizzagate case are as follows: the online community of social media sites such as 4Chan and Reddit that instigated the conspiracy, the mainstream media, the alt-right media, the Clinton campaign, Comet Ping Pong and its owner, James Alefantis. Each of the key players played a role in providing legitimacy and traction to the conspiracy, making this case very interesting and also somewhat different from the previous cases discussed so far.

Unlike the previous cases, Pizzagate stemmed from the online community. It began online in response to the initial conditions that will be discussed next.

Initial conditions

There are number of conditions that contextualize Pizzagate, from Hillary Clinton's political history, the various events leading up to the 2016 Presidential election, and the alt-right movement, as well as WikiLeaks, which provided material for the conspiracy to form.

Hillary Clinton was the First Lady of the United States during the 1990s, and subsequently maintained an active political career as U.S. Senator from New York and later, the Secretary of State in the Obama administration (Hillary for America 2016). She became the first woman to be the Democratic Party's nominee for President in 2016 in a historical race against Republican nominee Donald Trump (Dann 2016). During her long history in politics, Clinton has remained a contentious figure. The discussion of her political history is beyond the scopes of this research; however, Clinton is undoubtedly a divisive political figure. Throughout her presidential campaign, her use of a private e-mail server to send classified government documents was a constant controversy (Cornell 2016). At a broader ideological level, her presidential run brought up issues of gender and equality as she tried to break the "highest glass ceiling" (Traister 2016).

Donald Trump as a controversial presidential nominee himself has also inspired a slew of public debates. Of particular interest to Pizzagate is the gathering of the alternative right (alt-right) in his support. The ideologies of the alt-right are difficult to define, as its main characteristic lies in its lack of definition. "The Alt-Right prides itself on its leaderless ethos, using social media to spread its ideology through viral memes and anonymous attacks on its enemies, real and imagined" (Posner 2016). Nonetheless, the loose movement expressed

explicit support for now President Trump, and sees Trump as a legitimizer of its beliefs (Goldstein 2016; Posner 2016). This is essentially a type of *feedback loop* early on, in which two groups ideologically legitimize one another. The alt-right is highly sexist and believes that women are “manipulative figures who are best when submitting to Alt-Right virility”, as explained by an alt-right spokesman (Posner 2016). Women are certainly not fit to rule, and therefore, Clinton should not be president, hence the vindictive backlash by the alt-right against her and her campaign.

It is clear to see that the combination of Clinton’s political career, her campaign against Donald Trump, and the rise of the alt-right movement contextualizes and motivates Pizzagate. Pizzagate is borne out of the alt-right, which gained traction and legitimacy due to Trump’s campaign. With Clinton running against Trump and strong hints from Trump during the campaign that he believes the same things as the alt-right, she became a clear target for the Pizzagate conspiracy.

The final piece of the puzzle is WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks is a non-profit organization, which “specializes in the analysis and publication of large datasets of censored or otherwise restricted official materials involving war, spying and corruption” (WikiLeaks 2016b). WikiLeaks, headed by hacker Julian Assange, is well-known and has been responsible for a number of significant revelations in the past decade, such as the release of the Iraq War Logs and the bible of Scientology (DeVry 2014; WikiLeaks 2016b). What birthed the Pizzagate conspiracy was the WikiLeaks release of over 50,000 emails from the Democratic National Committee (commonly known as the ‘DNC hack’), acquired with the help of the Russian government (Ackerman and Thielman 2016). It was amongst these tens of thousands of emails that the alt-right picked up on Podesta’s emails talking about pizza and Comet Ping Pong,

which led conspirators to believe that ‘pizza’ was a “suspected code word for illegal sex trafficking” (Sommer 2016).

Mechanisms

The *triggering event* for Pizzagate is essentially the DNC hack, which provided the material for the conspiracy. As a mechanism, this triggering event was not as emotionally explosive as an actual bombing or a heinous murder, but it certainly was highly controversial and the main topic for 24-hour news channels for weeks and months. Pizzagate seemed to have built from the long months of the intense 2016 presidential bid. It just needed the right material to form.

The *certification from authorities* is not as strong of a mechanism here, as what really allowed Pizzagate to grow was the *feedback loop* mechanism. Nonetheless, legitimization does happen for Pizzagate at various levels. First, before the release of the DNC e-mails, WikiLeaks tweeted about a Reddit thread that tied Hillary Clinton to Laura Silsby, the former director of the New Life Children’s Refuge. In 2010, Silsby and her organization attempted to cross the Haiti-Dominican Republic border with 33 children to take them to an orphanage (CBS News 2010). When the Dominican Republic authorities arrested them, it came to light that most of the children were actually not orphans. This was seen by conspiracy theorists as an abduction attempt in order to supply children for a child-trafficking ring (WikiLeaks 2016a). The Reddit thread provided the seeds for the larger child-trafficking conspiracy, and WikiLeaks’ tweet provided legitimacy for the concerns of the theory.

Just a few days later, WikiLeaks released the DNC e-mails, which not only demonstrated distrust of the Democratic Party, it also added to the theory about a link between Clinton and child-trafficking, despite the fact that advocacy of children has been at the core of

Clinton’s political career. Considering the fact that the majority of the e-mails were released a few days before the election, it was seen as a direct attack to “harm the Democrats’ chances” for the election (Kopan 2016). While WikiLeaks’ action did not legitimize Pizzagate directly, the hack validated the alt-right’s suspicion of corruption in the DNC and motivated them to find proof in the e-mails. Around the time Pizzagate was gaining traction, however, WikiLeaks provided further legitimization for the theory when they tweeted that the emails showed ties between Clinton and the abuse of children. Flynn Jr, one of Trump’s aides, tweeting about the conspiracy is also a form of *certification*.

Certification can also be seen in a counterintuitive form – that is, the alt-right viewed mainstream denial as a form of legitimization. As Pizzagate became bigger, mainstream media began reporting on the issue. James Alefantis was also talking to the police and to the media to defend his innocence and his pizza place’s innocence. The New York Times, among many other news outlets, covered the story calling the conspiracy a “fake news onslaught” of which “none of it was true” (Kang 2016). While rejection from mainstream media might have quelled the conspiracy for some, for the alt-right gathered in Reddit, it was further legitimacy of their theory. Redditors saw it as a cover-up being carried out by the DNC and the mainstream media. The more the mainstream media rejected the conspiracy, the more fuel it added to the fire.

When Reddit eventually banned the r/pizzagate subreddit for fear of another witch hunt, the community moved to Voat, another social media website. The moderator of r/pizzagate posted in all caps and in bold font, “**GOOD LUCK EVERYONE AND DO NOT STOP, YOU GUYS CAN FUCKING DO THIS, FUCK CENSORSHIP AND FUCK PEDOPHILES!**” (r/pizzagate 2016). In the description of the new Pizzagate community on Voat, a guideline states “Sliding is an effective mechanism used by skills - whereby they flood

a forum with low value distracting content to 'slide' important content. So lets not help the shills” (v/pizzagate 2016b). The term ‘shills’ refers to “a person engaging in covert advertising or propaganda” (r/shills 2016). Mainstream media channels are often referred to as ‘shills’, hence denoting a severe distrust of such institutional players. Therefore, the more the mainstream media denies it, the more it seems like a cover-up to the Pizzagate believers. “Every debunking of its claims...only convinced its believers that they must be right, and that the circle of pedophiles and sympathizers trying to cover up their findings must be even bigger and more powerful than they imagined” (Ohlheiser 2016). One Pizzagate conspirator stated, “To me the ‘fake news’ narrative sounds like censorship on a scale similar to China or North Korea” (v/pizzagate 2016a).

Untrustworthy behavior by institutional players came in the form of the reaction to the DNC hack by the media and government officials. The key to this particular mechanism is that the behavior must fuel some distrust or suspicion against institutional players. The mechanism includes a broader set of behaviors from institutional players that the online community observes and dislikes. Fueled by the distrust, the online community is motivated to continue their investigation even more. Of course, this mechanism is highly subjective, based on the opinions of the online community. As discussed above, the *untrustworthy behavior* that fueled Pizzagate was by the ‘shills’, that is, the mainstream media that was seen as covering-up the truth of the child-trafficking ring. It was also disappointing for the community when Reddit became a so-called ‘shill’ and banned the community.

The *misidentification of suspects* mechanism is the crux of the Pizzagate conspiracy. If one believes that Pizzagate is a conspiracy, then Pizzagate is entirely based on a misidentification. For Pizzagate, “no victim has come forward. There's no investigation. And

physical evidence? That doesn't exist either” (BBC News 2016a). Yet there is a tangible culprit – James Alefantis and Comet Ping Pong. The mechanism certainly brought together the many key players of Pizzagate as the online community harassed Comet Ping Pong, which led the FBI and local D.C. police to get involved, and the mainstream media to cover the story.

Alefantis first noticed that the conspiracy was brewing when he began receiving messages on Instagram accusing him and his pizza place. “...Menacing messages like ‘we’re on to you’ began appearing in his Instagram feed. In the ensuing days, hundreds of death threats – one read ‘I will kill you personally’ started arriving via texts, Facebook, and Twitter” (Kang 2016). Employees of Comet Ping Pong also received similar messages. The harassment was further continued when alt-right media began covering the story, saying that the conspiracy was true. Both online and in alt-right media channels, “photos of the [employees’] children...were used...as evidence that the pizza restaurant was running a pedophilia ring” (Kang 2016). The abuse of private information and the photos of the employees’ children was a key reason for Reddit to ban the entire *r/pizzagate* community, as exposure of private information goes against Reddit’s user policy (Ohlheiser 2016).

As is clear from the descriptions of the mechanisms above, the *feedback loop* was the most influential in developing Pizzagate. It was the echo chamber of the online community and the alt-right media that gave the conspiracy power and legitimacy. Therefore, all three sub-mechanisms of *diffusion*, *brokerage*, and *scale-shift* can be observed. Articles about Pizzagate “appeared on Facebook and on websites such as The New Nationalist and The Vigilant Citizen, with one headline blaring: ‘Pizzagate: How 4Chan Uncovered the Sick World of Washington’s Occult Elite’” (Kang 2016). Indeed, The New Nationalist had its own article titled “The DC Pizzagate Unfolds: Pedophile Scandal Brewing,” in which it describes the possible reality of

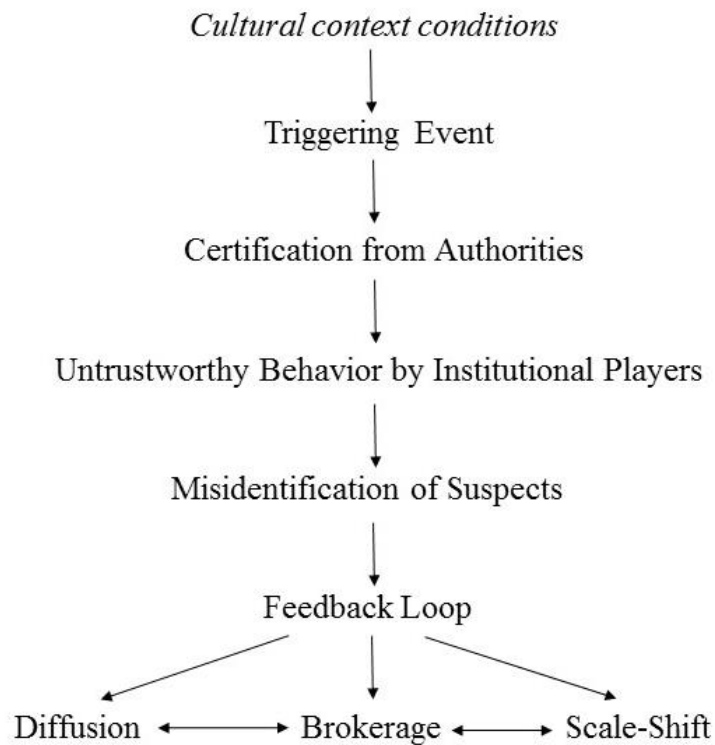
the conspiracy as “horrific and suspicious...It takes a very dark hearted person to just ignore or blow this off as ‘fake news’” (Müller 2016). The New Nationalist’s tagline is “Third Position Nationalism: The Triumph of Good over Globalism”, and describes itself as trying to “draw attention to the problems of western intelligence misconduct and covert action, domestic government repression, police state surveillance” and so on (The New Nationalist 2016). As an alt-right media source, The New Nationalist and other right-wing outlets played a role in the feedback loop of the conspiracy – the more the online community was convinced, the more the alt-right media reported on it, and vice versa. Mainstream media were also part of the *feedback loop*. Despite their efforts to reject and quell the conspiracy, any such action on their part only fueled the conspiracy further. The shooting at Comet Ping Pong shows how convincing the conspiracy became.

Disillusionment as a mechanism was not observed during the duration of the study. The December 5th, 2016 shooting at the Pizza place only seemed to strengthen the resolve of the online community. Even though Reddit banned the community, the community found a new home in Voat, where they were not censored or controlled. Recent posts on Voat included speculations on the connection between child trafficking rings in the US, Japan, China, Haiti, and Canada. It is quite possible that the case may never conclude since any rejection from institutional authorities is perceived as part of a larger cover-up. The case may simply be abandoned as time goes on and other conspiracy theories take the spotlight.

The diagram for the process of the Pizzagate mob justice is as follows. *Untrustworthy behavior* is shown to be an integral part of the process. However, *disillusionment* has not yet been fully observed and is therefore missing from the diagram. The case is still ongoing for those involved in the Pizzagate community; as long as their belief in Clinton’s guilt holds, the case

may never actually 'end'. The failure on the part of the armchair detectives that led to the harassment of the Comet Ping Pong establishment once again lies within the *misidentification of suspects* and *feedback loop* mechanisms, demonstrating how these two are key mechanisms for the model.

Figure 7 - Pizzagate Conspiracy model



2015 Single Gateway Controversy

The final case of the chapter is the 2015 Single Gateway incident in Thailand. This case has many characteristics of mob justice, particularly in terms of the practices of subversion of authorities. However, there are specific elements of the case that set it apart from the previous five cases discussed so far.

In August of 2015, the Thai government approved a plan called the ‘single gateway’, which aimed to “consolidate Thailand's ten Internet gateways into one central government-controlled point” (Lefevre 2016). The plan was called the ‘single gateway’ but it was also dubbed the ‘great firewall of Thailand’, as it was similar to, if not inspired by, China’s ‘great firewall’ (Lefevre 2016; Ramsey 2015). China has a number of policies and regulations in place to regulate and censor the internet, and the Thai government’s attempt to create the single gateway was seen as a similar effort. When news of the single gateway broke, it immediately caused an uproar in Thailand as concerns about censorship, security, and government oversight became central conversations in the public and the media (Lefevre 2015). While Thai internet and media are already censored in some way, this was seen as an extreme stifling of free speech (Lefevre 2015). Thailand had just undergone a bloodless coup the year prior, where the military overthrew the government and a military junta was established. The single gateway plan was understandably controversial particularly in a time of great political instability in the country.

As opposition grew in Thailand, the case began to gain international media attention. The case reached a turning point when the famed Anonymous hacktivist group got involved and declared ‘cyber war’ against the Thai government (Online Reporters 2015), using the hashtag #OpSingleGateway to garner social media attention to the issue. Thailand also created its own hacktivist group called the F5 Cyber Army, which worked in conjunction with Anonymous to coordinate attacks against the Thai government. After numerous hacks on various Thai government websites, and growing public pressure to reject the plan, the Thai government “halted” the plan (Lefevre 2015).

Key players

The key players of the case include the Thai government, the online community in Thailand based in websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pantip, the two hacktivist groups, Anonymous and the F5 Cyber Army, and finally, mainstream media (within and outside of Thailand). The key player instigating the case was the Thai government, which first constructed the single gateway policy. The online community, hacktivist groups, and mainstream media were reacting to the government and its actions.

Initial conditions

The initial conditions that contextualize the Single Gateway incident have been discussed in detail in the previous Thailand cases. The intense distrust of state authorities in Thailand based on their long history of corruption was certainly a piece of history that informed the public's understanding of the single gateway policy. Moreover, the political upheaval in the country the year before, in which the military overthrew the corrupt Shinawatra cabinet, had placed the country's reputation in a precarious light internationally. Despite promises made by the junta and the current Prime Minister Chan-o-cha to "restore order and enact political reforms", the increased censorship within the country did not go without notice (BBC News 2014).

Thailand is not known for its freedom of speech. For example, Thailand has lèse-majesté laws that make it illegal for citizens to "defame, insult or threaten" the royal family (Sabur 2015). The act is punishable up to 15 years in prison. It is also no secret that the Thai media and the internet are monitored and censored. Censorship became more stringent when the military junta took power. The junta "imposed a host of new restrictions on the media, including shutting down certain websites and radio stations in the name of national security" (Aljazeera 2015). The government even forced the cancellation of an international academic forum that was supposed

to discuss the military censorship of the media (Doksone 2015). The military “threatens critics with arrest under martial law” (Doksone 2015). True to their word, the government arrested the deputy director of the Thai Public Broadcasting Service, who attempted to subvert the junta by broadcasting on YouTube (Reporters Without Borders 2014). It was only one instance in a series of other arrests and shutdowns of media outlets. It is therefore not surprising that the Thai government looked to China and their practices of censorship as a model for the single gateway policy.

The history of Anonymous is also of interest here, as they are an international organization that took interest in Thailand. Their practices of hacking government websites and leaking classified information are well-known. In a video addressing the Thai government, Anonymous stated, “Anonymous will not sit idly by and watch another nation construct a Great Firewall, as China has done to keep its citizens from experiencing the competing viewpoints and ideologies that make up free and open discourse online” (Das 2015). The actual organization of Anonymous is not as solidified as it sounds, however. Like the alt-right, Anonymous is a loose organization largely based on the internet. Hiding behind the Guy Fawkes mask, they have the “overarching desire to combat censorship, promote freedom of speech, and counter government control” (Sands 2016). They first gained notoriety in 2008 when they hacked the Church of Scientology website and have since claimed responsibility for a number of attacks on “governments, major corporations, financial institutions, and religious groups” (Sands 2016). Their practices include doxxing and DDOS attacks (Fantz 2012; Hamill 2015).

Mechanisms

The application of the six mechanisms is weak for the single gateway case. The *triggering event* for the case arose when a Thai programmer noticed the policy in a “legally-

binding cabinet order and spread it on social media” (Ramsey 2015). This forced the Thai government to acknowledge the issue and set off a firestorm of public criticism. Other mechanisms are not as applicable. *Certification from authorities* perhaps could be the release of the policy, which makes the threat of censorship legitimate. This is similar to what WikiLeaks does in releasing classified documents; there is no questioning by the online community of the legitimacy of the source. But it is not the same type of legitimization as previous cases, where authorities have called for the public’s help in investigating a case or for finding information. The government certainly did not ask the public for feedback on the single gateway idea.

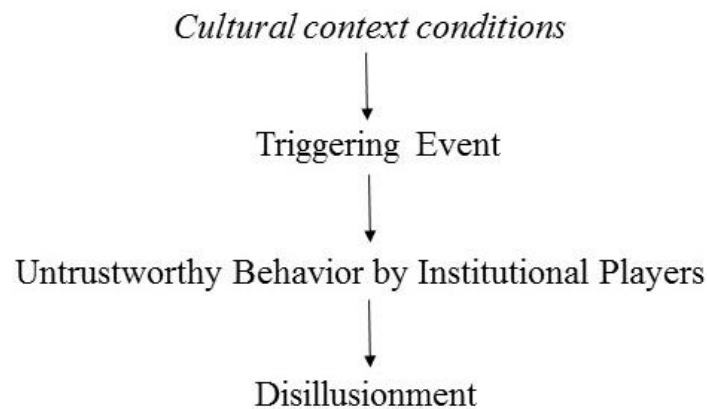
Untrustworthy behavior by institutional players certainly applies, as every action by the junta was considered untrustworthy. The issue was further exacerbated by conflicting reports from the government itself, which was reacting on its feet to the sudden public interest in the single gateway issue. For example, the government stated that the single gateway was simply an idea, “a proposal being studied for its pros and cons, not an actual state project moving forward. It is not an effort to control the everyday use of the internet” (Now26 2015). However, as noted above, the leak of the policy was through a legally binding cabinet order’. “The wording and suggestions made in the order are explicit” (Ramsey 2015). This indicated that the single gateway was more than just an idea.

In an attempt to change the public’s perception on the issue, the government asked the public not to call the plan the ‘single gateway’, as the name was misleading (Saiyasombut 2015). However, the phrase ‘single gateway’ came from the government’s own cabinet order. “Such inconsistencies have only managed to add to the overall confusion on what the status is on the proposed single gateway” (Ramsey 2015).

The *misidentification of suspects* in this case is not applicable. The target of the public outrage was clear: the Thai government itself. There was no confusion or doubt as to who was responsible for the single gateway proposal; Anonymous and the F5 Cyber Army targeted the government accordingly. A *feedback loop* is also hard to apply, as the core of the *feedback loop* was the spread of misinformation. There was little actual misinformation regarding the single gateway proposal, as the actual government order was leaked and available for the public to read. The sub-mechanisms of *diffusion*, *brokerage*, and *scale-shift* can be observed, but not in the same way that other episodes of mob justice have played out. In other words, factual information still spread across connected and disconnected networks, but since it was factual, the resulting collecting action does not constitute mob justice behavior. Bowing under public pressure and the constant DDOS attacks from the hacktivists, the government halted the single gateway plan. This therefore triggered the *disillusionment* mechanism, and the public lost interest in the issue.

The diagram for the Single Gateway controversy is rather small as many of the mechanisms were not observed. The model demonstrates which mechanisms are key in causing mob justice to happen. With *certification from authorities*, *misidentification of suspects*, and *feedback loop* missing, mob justice behaviors are not observed. Essentially, the Single Gateway controversy does not fit the model of mob justice. This will be further explained in the following Discussion section.

Figure 8 - Single Gateway Controversy model



Discussion of Single Gateway Controversy

Why is the Single gateway case different from the other five cases? A unique element of the Single gateway case is that it is not a criminal investigation. The Boston and Bangkok bombings, the killing of Cecil, the murders of the British tourists, and the possibility of a child-trafficking operation were all illegal practices that violated some existing law, legal and moral, for that matter. What the online communities in each of the cases tried to do was to solve the mystery of the case and find out the truth. The armchair detectives wanted to know who committed the crime and how they did it. Single gateway was not a criminal investigation. As a policy passed by the government, it was not illegal. It may have been immoral for reasons related to censorship and freedom of speech, hence the public negative reaction, but it was not necessarily illegal or criminal.

Moreover, there was no mystery in terms of who was responsible. It was a government policy passed by the ruling military junta; they were the responsible party. There was therefore no witch hunt for a suspect or attempt to find a scapegoat to blame. It was clear to the Thai public, Anonymous, and media organizations around the world that the government was

responsible. This made the emotion involved in the case different also. Rather than a complex mix of sadness, remorse, mourning, anger, and frustration, the Single gateway case provoked mainly anger and fear. For these reasons, the case is different from the other comparison cases. Therefore, the model of mechanisms does not fully apply because the case itself is fundamentally different. While it seems as though the Cecil the Lion case similarly had a known perpetrator, the misidentification that occurred on the part of the government, and in turn, the armchair detectives, sets the case apart from the Single Gateway Controversy. It is more similar to the other two cases in that sense.

The Single Gateway Controversy therefore does not represent a failure of collective intelligence and the armchair investigation. Those online correctly identified the government as the responsible party, along with supporting documents. Without the *misidentification of suspects* mechanism, Single Gateway is actually a success. It is therefore a useful limiting case that requires us to redefine the parameters of the mob justice model, and what constitutes the type of mob justice the model can analyze. The model is just one sequence of mechanisms, which opens up possibilities for future research. First, the perpetrator of the *triggering event* must be unknown. It therefore triggers an investigation by official investigators and amateur detectives to collectively identify, pursue, and punish the perpetrators. Second, there must be some sort of misinformation that spreads across the networks of key players that ultimately results in the misidentification of innocent people as the perpetrators. The misidentification and accusation of guilt can consist of general libel, defamation, to doxxing and the release of private information. These elements are what constitute an episode of failed mob justice that the model can explain, which has implications for further research that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Without these elements, the resulting collective action does not count as a failure according to the model.

To recap, the proposed failure model is as follows: starting with *cultural context conditions*, then followed by the mechanisms of *triggering event*, *certification from authorities*, *untrustworthy behavior by institutional players*, *misidentification of suspects*, *feedback loop*, and *disillusionment*. These six mechanisms, coupled with their applicable sub-mechanisms lay out the general trajectory and causal interactions of the process that leads to failure of mob justice efforts. The models that have been depicted for the three test cases (killing of Cecil the lion, murder of tourists on Koh Tao, and Pizzagate) were found to fit the original proposed model of failed mob justice. The model for Single Gateway does not fit, therefore, it does not fall under the type of mob justice efforts the model can explain.

Untrustworthy behavior may be the only optional mechanism among all six as it was not observed in the Cecil the lion case. However, since it does appear in the other mob justice cases, we can conclude that as a mechanism, it can spur mob justice behavior even more if the case itself fits the parameters of mob justice behavior. Again, online mob justice of this kind is defined as an episode of misidentification and harm against innocent people, following an investigation to find an unknown perpetrator. The proposed causal model of failed mob justice (Figure 4) was found to be robust and applicable for the cases that matched the criteria specified.

An aspect of the failure of mob justice efforts that is not captured in the model is the sheer speed and urgency with which the mechanisms occur. In a case sparked by a strong *triggering event*, there is a powerful sense of urgency and desperation by all players of the model to find the perpetrators as fast as possible before they escape. The speed with which the

investigations are often conducted online usually plays an overarching role in how information is collected, vetted and spread.

The final chapter discusses the findings from the four analytical chapters and answers the research questions that were introduced in the literature review chapter. The broader implications of the research are also examined. Now that we understand what failed mob justice and its process are, it is clear that at the heart of mob justice episodes is a conflict between the desire for social control and the confusion over the nature of truth in today's complex society.

CHAPTER 7. THE NATURE OF TRUTH

This chapter answers the research questions that were introduced in the literature review chapter as follows:

1. What are the processes and mechanisms that lead to an episode of mob justice in which collective intelligence has failed?
2. How has the internet changed the way mob justice occurs? What unique characteristics does the internet add to old forms of collective behavior and informal social control?
3. What are the implications of online mob justice for our understanding of collective behavior as a form of social control?
4. How are facts and falsehoods constructed in the process of mob justice? What does it tell us about the nature of truth in today's society?

The sections of this chapter follow the four research questions and will tie the findings in with the main theoretical frameworks of social control and collective behavior.

Processes and Mechanisms of Mob Justice

The first research question, “What are the processes and mechanisms that lead to an episode of mob justice in which collective intelligence has failed? ” has been discussed extensively throughout the analytical chapters. It is important to remember that the mob justice described in this dissertation has four main characteristics: 1) the mob justice episode originated in or largely was carried out by users on social media; 2) it is large-scale enough to involve various institutional players and the online community; 3) it had/has effects on the offline world, events, and persons); and 4) the mob justice episode involves the failed use of collective intelligence, in which online users collaborate their knowledge but fail to achieve their goals.

With these specific characteristics, the processes and mechanisms that were generated in the analysis essentially represent a failure model of collective intelligence and mob justice efforts. The mechanisms discussed in chapter 7 predict the outcome of the mob justice episode. The sequence of mechanisms is a causal analysis of the mob justice episode as a process in which collective intelligence fails.

Not discussed very much during the analytical chapters were the cultural differences between the two countries that formed the empirical basis for the study. Note that the proposed model does include *cultural context conditions* as an umbrella mechanism that leads to the triggering event. Cultural contexts therefore matter greatly for the genesis of the mob justice episode. Based on the thematic codes of the content analyses, it is clear that there were some differences between the two countries, the discourses that were invoked, and societal concerns. A key difference between the two was the distrust of state authorities in Thailand and the trust in the police and FBI in the US. Additionally, Thailand's initial concern after the Bangkok bombing was whether or not the bomber could have been a Thai person. This concern reveals how closely national and racial identity are tied with morality. Those looking at the Boston bombing never seemed concerned with the possibility that the bomber could have been an American. While it may have never even crossed their minds as a possibility, the fact that it did not is a cultural difference between the US and Thailand. The same can be said for religion, as the Bangkok bombing demonstrated how closely intertwined national and racial identity are with religious identity. Being Buddhist and being Thai are not mutually exclusive. With the cultural conditions contextualizing the mob justice episode, the model demonstrates that despite the differences and concerns, there is a common process of mob justice. Alimi et al. called this the "dissimilarities in similarities" (Alimi et al. 2015).

Beginning with a triggering event, the emotions of the online community were affected. Recall what Jasper (2011) explained about the types of emotion. There are reflex emotions, in which the individual reacts immediately to an event, and long-term emotions, which are “affective commitments”, or long-standing morals and values (Jasper 2011:297). A triggering event such as a bombing or a heinous killing brings about a clash of both types of emotion – the public must react immediately, be it with anger or shock. The event also calls into question the public’s social norms, morals, and values informed by existing discourse on race, nationality, religion, identity, and so forth. Such a shocking event can challenge our long-held ideas about the world and how it should be, or at least how we have been socialized into thinking the world should be. It therefore brings up the desire to make an impact, to help fix the problem and make the world how the individual believes it should be. The clash of emotions brought about by the triggering event motivates individuals of the online community, and of course, the general public and state authorities, to make an impact and set the world right again.

However, the online communities involved in the cases are not isolated from the rest of society. They are connected with other key players, namely the state authorities investigating the case and the various media outlets covering the case. It is inevitable for the key players to clash or interact in one way or another as an episode of mob justice unfolds. As the mechanisms show, the online community is not always in control. And as the ANT network maps of statements in the community demonstrate, even the online community’s ideas and conjectures are not in control. Such is the public nature of the internet which the material culture perspective illuminates; nothing occurs in isolation, something is always connected to something else. Through mechanisms such as *certification*, which legitimize the community to initiate and advance their unofficial investigations, and *brokerage*, which connect the key players together,

scale-shift is enacted as the *feedback loop* takes place. The spiraling and widening circle of influence causes problematic discourses and misinformation to spread across the network of key players, culminating in the *misidentification of suspects*.

Suspects were not always misidentified by the online community in the cases so far discussed; it certainly was common, although sometimes authorities misidentified the suspects. Imbued by the ‘illusion of unanimity’ from the rest of the online community and the false network of support, extremists in the community engaged in mob justice behavior. It is not that the entire community collectively engages in mob behaviors. McPhail (1991) explains, unanimous action is rare in a crowd. The episode of mob justice is the actual enactment of informal control. From online practices, such as doxxing, spreading libel, general harassment, sending death threats, and even physically threatening the target with physical violence, extremists morphed the unofficial investigation into an episode of mob justice. It is important to note that the mob justice behavior is just an episode. As Black (2004) and Collins (2009) both discussed, there are no violent people, just violent structures or situations to which people react.

Collins’ (2009) concept of ‘forward panic’ is particularly useful to understanding the result of the emotional build-up in episodes of mob justice. His thesis about violence is that “violence is a set of pathways around confrontational tension and fear” (Collins 2009:8). The official and unofficial investigations certainly were laden with tension and fear, as well as anger and remorse, which only added to the desire to make an impact, to catch the culprit and set the world right again. Collins does not explicitly say that the build-up of such emotions needs to happen over a long period of time, even a couple days could be enough to garner an explosive release of emotion and sometimes, violence. Those who were committed to the investigations, official or unofficial, were checking social media and news sites every minute to find any

updated information. Hence, Twitter and Reddit became huge hotspots for instantaneous news, because news on social media does not need to be vetted by verified sources first. Anyone can post news on social media, and anyone can become a journalist. Such is the democratizing potential of the internet, which in turn, encourages amateurization of professions. Those on Reddit investigating the Boston bombing repeatedly stated that they were continuously hitting the 'refresh' button on their browser and reading every single comment being posted for any potential update on the case. There is thus an intense period of focus building into bottled-up intense emotions that eventually need a release in a forward panic. Not everyone is subjugated to forward panic in the same way, but those who is triggered can react with violence, physical or metaphorical, when a piece of information could lead to a potential target.

Thus, even though each individual making up the crowd of the internet is not engaging in mob justice, the crowd as a whole is complicit in it. Those who agree with the practices of informal justice can provide emotional support to the extremists, while the silent majority provides the illusion of unanimity (Collins 2009; Turner and Killian 1987). Seeing that a post accusing an innocent person as a suspect receives three hundred likes, or a hundred shares, or seeing that the community dedicated to solving the crime has over 10,000 subscribers can provide a false statistical illusion that the majority is supporting the claims. Even if there are vocal dissenters, the characteristics of the internet make it easy to ignore such voices. It is clear that the very nature of the internet itself plays a role in conjuring episodes of mob justice, which leads into the second research question.

The Internet and Mob Justice

How has the internet changed the way mob justice occurs? What unique characteristics does the internet add to old forms of collective behavior and informal social control? In essence,

what is different about informal control on the internet? The internet adds a number of complexities, with its various characteristics from interactivity, asynchronicity, hypertextuality, anonymity, to its horizontal (flat hierarchy) networks of communication, persistence, and scalability.

Interactivity enables the most drastic shift for collective behavior – it changes the relational and cultural distance between parties. The internet both expands and shrinks relational distance at the same time, while increasing cultural distance (Black 2011). As a communication technology, the internet connects people from around the world, allowing people with the farthest relational and cultural distance to connect with one another. At the same time, the internet shrinks relational distance as people from around the world from different cultures and classes are able to connect and have an effect on each other's lives. Black theorizes that an increase in cultural distance will lead to more conflict; the internet is a good empirical example of that. As internet users with cultural distance come into contact, they face more conflict, except that they are actually able to affect one another via the shrinkage of relational distance. Online harassment practices such as trolling or doxxing are acts of both over-intimacy and over-involvement, but without the physicality of a face-to-face altercation.

Therefore, despite increasing relational distance online, informal control can still take place, with dire consequences, because the internet allows for connections to be made globally and instantaneously. What the internet has done for informal control, therefore, is increase its jurisdiction, so that those with the farthest relational distance can still enact informal control on others. Indeed, Black (2004) makes this observation in studying how terrorism has changed with “modern technology, including rapid transportation, electronic communications, and new weapons that offer the possibility of mass violence between people separated by both physical

and social space, those of different regions and nations with different religions, languages, and customs.” Such high speed, constant, and even easy interaction leads to conflict.

Asynchronicity is a characteristic of the internet in which time does not happen relatively. Since the internet is more or less a permanent space to store information, online users can refer to very old information and interact with them as though they are new. The asynchronicity of the internet caused many problems in the online investigation, and is one of the reasons why misinformation can happen so easily. The armchair detectives continuously had to contend with outdated information that was constantly resurfacing. Similarly, hypertextuality, in which knowledge on the internet is a whole linked network, caused there to be too much information at times. Since information could link to more information, new or old, the armchair detectives were dealing with a dearth of official information and an overabundance of unofficial information and conjecture.

Hypertextuality relates to the anonymity and flat hierarchy of the internet. With anonymity, anyone can post information online regardless of their credentials, social status, and expertise. This is part of the general trend of the internet in which knowledge has become democratized, as evidenced by the open collaboration model of Wikipedia (Niederer and Dijck 2010). The flat hierarchy of the internet, bolstered by anonymity, which typically strips an online user of physical appearance, social status, and more, allows anyone to contribute knowledge, be it on Wikipedia or in an online investigation. The democratization of knowledge on the internet has had another side effect, which is the amateurization of professions. As discussed in Chapter 2, experts are no longer needed or relied upon for knowledge and information. Such things can come from everyday internet users and amateurs who want to engage in knowledge production. Anyone can become an armchair detective regardless of their actual expertise in criminal

investigation. In a way, the internet and its tools have encouraged the birth of armchair detectives on the internet. With scalability, the audience of information online can be limitless.

Moreover, the internet has also changed the way people act collectively. It provides a space for temporary groups to gather and disperse. The internet also provides a veil of anonymity. Because of this unique characteristic of the internet, online communities tend to not have a leader. The flat hierarchy and disorganized nature of online communities that carry out mob justice behavior suggests that there is more to the puzzle of mob justice than can be explained by the existing theory of social control. Such is the democratizing effect of the internet. Even without a leader, online communities are still able to act collectively and to achieve political and social change.

It is arguable whether episodes of mob justice do any 'good' for society. A moralistic judgement of mob justice is not the goal for this study, which simply seeks to understand mob justice as a social phenomenon. Yet without a doubt, episodes of mob justice and collective behavior enabled and reinforced by the internet, have caused more complications for society. State authorities trying to conduct criminal investigations must tread carefully when talking to the public (and even among themselves, as the Boston bombing showed how people liked to listen to police scanners). The 24/7 news media circus, desperate for information to fill up air time, must lessen the standard of good news, and rely on the unreliable online community. However, episodes of mob justice may be necessary for society and the individuals living in it. As our discussion of forward panic and the buildup of tension have shown, a release is necessary. The public and the online community desire a way to make an actual impact and gain some form of closure, not only for themselves but for the victims of the various tragedies in question.

Is online mob justice that different from old forms of mob justice, such as the witch-hunts lynchings of the past? The characteristics of the internet have certainly added new complexities to collective behavior and popular justice, but at its core, has mob justice remained the same? At the very least, it seems that the occurrence of mob justice has increased. While it is difficult, if not impossible to quantify this claim statistically, I argue that the internet has made certain types of violence easier. Collins (2009) may disagree with this, as one of the biggest arguments in his book is that violence is hard. However, Collins was discussing physical violence for the most part. With the internet, violence has shifted forms – a simple phrase of harassment can have dire consequences for an individual. Particularly youths, whose identities are vulnerable and are still in the process of being constructed, may be susceptible to online violence (NVEE 2016). The movement to fully recognize such online practices as illegal is still nascent and ongoing. However, the increase in revenge porn, cyberbullying, doxxing, trolling, and hacking practices have led institutional forces to acknowledge the rise in online violence and pass protective measures (boyd 2012; Brail 1996; C.S. 2014; Dredge, Gleeson, and de la Piedad 2014; Goldman 2013; Goode 2013; The Economist 2014).

The anonymity that the internet provides empowers the mob and those engaging it even more. It is also one of the biggest hurdles state authorities must overcome in order to properly police online violence. While tracking IP addresses may be efficient in some way, often the real names and identities of online harassers are not available. At the same time, as violence becomes easier, both to do and to receive, any comment online can be construed as harassment. It is impossible to police every single instance of online harassment, due to the sheer number of people online, and the sheer number of comments that are made. It is telling that Twitter, one of the most popular social media sites online with over 300 million active global users monthly

(Smith 2016), has become a target of criticism for its inability to police harassment (Warzel 2016). Even the CEO of Twitter, Dick Costolo, admitted, “We suck at dealing with abuse and trolls on the platform and we’ve sucked at it for years. It’s no secret and the rest of the world talks about it every day. We lose core user after core user by not addressing simple trolling issues that they face every day” (Tiku and Newton 2015).

The internet is also well-known for its permanence or persistence (boyd 2011). Once information is online and cataloged by giant and powerful search engines such as Google, it becomes exceedingly difficult to get such information erased. For those unfortunate enough to be targets of the online investigations, their reputations are sullied. ‘Erasing’ on the internet practically does not exist, especially with the prevalence of archiving crawlers that collect snapshots of almost all web pages on the internet. It is one reason why I was able to collect data from the r/findbostonbombers subreddit, which was censored and banned by Reddit itself. Two years after the whole community was shut down and all posts made inaccessible to the public, I was able to access a large number of the posts via the Internet Archive website. Thus, if even information made inaccessible by a corporation can still be accessed, what can an individual do? The public aspect of the internet also enables many eyes to be watching the same thing. Celebrity social media accounts with hundreds and thousands of followers may attempt to delete an insensitive tweet, but someone is always watching to take a screenshot and then report it as hard-hitting news. “The internet never forgets, and, in its robotic zeal to collect and organize every scrap of data about everyone, it was beginning to wreak havoc on personal privacy” (Manjoo 2015).

The permanence of the internet has led to interesting social and legal campaigns such as the ‘right to be forgotten’. In 2014,

in a decision that stunned many American internet companies, Europe's highest court rules that search engines were required to grant an unusual right – the 'right to be forgotten...Under the ruling, Europeans who felt they were being misrepresented by search results that were no longer accurate or relevant...could ask search engines like Google to delink the material. If the request was approved, the information would remain online at the original site, but would no longer come up under certain search engine queries (Manjoo 2015).

This surprising ruling grants those online with a past that they want erased to have some power to do so. While it is still possible to spread and share such problematic information, it is one step forward to resolving some of the problems of the internet. Of course, the ruling is not without its controversy as critics wonder what kind of information would be allowed to be erased, such as a criminal history and even more, what would clash with the First Amendment in the US (Streitfeld 2014).

These issues have not been a part of old forms of mob justice. While word of mouth can be powerful, it is not as powerful as a single tweet to the entire 300 million user base of Twitter. The internet thus provides more power to the crowd and to the extremists who want to act. European witch-hunts and lynchings in America have resulted in the violent deaths of thousands of people – harassment on the internet has certainly not resulted in the systematic oppression and annihilation of targeted groups. With violence becoming easier, the definition of violence is also expanding, such that a harassing statement online can be seen as a form of ideological violence. Anonymity is a big part of online mob justice, but it was also a key characteristic of historical forms of mob violence. In a crowd full of unknown faces rioting through a town, one will not know who committed what acts of violence. The lack of accountability that comes with the anonymity of the crowd therefore, has stayed the same, although it can be argued that the internet has made it more difficult for authorities to track the responsible party. While in person, police forces can spray tear gas or fire into a crowd of people to maintain control, online, they cannot

do anything as they do not have the resources for example, to shut down every social media account or send a virus out to all the computers.

With the change in relational and cultural distance, amongst various other new dynamics the internet provides, the internet has thus provided a new aspect of understanding collective behavior online. This leads to the third research question.

Implications of Online Mob Justice

The third research question asks, what are the implications of online mob justice for our understanding of collective behavior as a form of social control? Now that we understand the processes and mechanisms of mob justice when collective intelligence fails, and how episodes of mob justice occur in new form on the internet, how do the findings add to our understanding of collective behavior as a form of social control? Research on crowd behavior has argued both ways about the crowd: some scholars believe the crowd to be irrational, while others believe the opposite. Related to that, researchers have also disagreed about the role of emotion, a controversial human aspect that has both been written off as irrational and been considered a key part of human cognition. Scholars have also disagreed about the best way to research and understand collective behavior; that is, whether larger social structures should be considered or only micro-processes should be examined. Finally, scholars have questioned whether the crowd and the use of collective violence can be effective forms of informal social control.

I have addressed these various disagreements in the literature through my research on online mob justice. My findings show that emotions play an important role in being the trigger switch between non-violence and violence. Emotion is not simply irrational, it is intertwined with cognition and reason, as well as people's understanding of the social world. The clash of how one understands the world and how one believes the world should be can ignite the process

of mob justice. Moreover, individuals and communities are not isolated from the rest of society. Other institutional forces can influence and further advance the processes of mob justice, as seen in the various mechanisms involved. In other words, the online community is not in total control of all the interactions of social life.

Therefore, while the online community can act collectively as a force of informal control, there are many obstacles to overcome. Because they are not fully in control, the intentions of the online community can be misconstrued or transformed into something different from the original intention of pursuing social justice for the greater good. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the repercussions of armchair investigations resulting in mob justice are not usually intentional; rather they are the unintended outcome of various interactions in society. This notion applies to the types of mob justice cases to which the failure model applies. Recall the initial criteria of the purposive sampling discussed in Chapter 2; the incident of mob justice must be large scale and include some form of collective intelligence to find an unknown perpetrator.

Such instances of collective behavior as a force of social control differ from other organized and targeted contemporary examples of collective behavior such as campaigns for ethical consumption and production. Internet mob justice is a different type of collective behavior, riddled with the complexities of the internet, and rendered into a different type of creature. Informal control on the internet can be effective in the fact that, yes, people online can affect behaviors offline. By instigating fear, using personal and private information as leverage, the anonymous crowd of the internet can influence the behavior of those offline. Research on the new surveillance society on the internet and comparisons to Foucault's (1995) concept of the panopticon society are of particular relevance here.

While surveillance is certainly not a new concept and it is an activity that has been carried out by governments and organizations around the world for centuries, the NSA surveillance revelations are one of the few instances that have brought surveillance to the modern-day consciousness. Scholars have long debated how the internet is akin to a ‘virtual panopticon,’ as adopted from Foucault’s ‘panopticism,’ another related concept of formal social control via the use or perception of constant surveillance (Barnes 2006; Brignall III 2002; Gandy 1993; Katz and Rice 2002; Mehta and Darier 1998; Simon 2005). However, online, it can be a vehicle for informal social control. Other scholars call it a form of ‘neo-panopticon’ (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003; Mehta and Darier 1998). Developed from Jeremy Bentham’s proposed institutional building, the panopticon, Foucault (1995:202) theorized that with the panopticon as a prison, inmates would always be under visible surveillance by prison guards and authorities. “The slightest movements are supervised... all events are recorded...each individual is constantly located... all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.” With surveillance as a permanent power, inmates would not dare to plot an escape or plan new crimes because whether or not there is someone up in the guard tower, they have to act as though there is someone constantly watching. The inmate becomes “the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault 1995:202). Thus, panopticism can act as social control in its encouragement of pervasive surveillance and self-monitoring.

Drawing from Foucault’s theory of panopticism, Katz and Rice (2002:272) describes the internet as a panopticon because it is “a constant view of individuals through parasocietal mechanisms that influence behavior simply because of the possibility of being observed.” There is always the chance that one is being observed by surveillance cameras and authorities or mobile phones and fellow citizens. Pan (2010) discusses this phenomenon but takes one step

farther by calling it the ‘participatory panopticon.’ With the current integrated technology, online software, mobile cameras, social media, peer-to-peer surveillance is possible (Andrejevic 2002; Gao and Stanyer 2013). There is an ‘anonymous power’ that the crowd of the internet holds that makes it seem like one is always being observed (Gao and Stanyer 2013). The internet crowd has been given stronger tools of social control, whereby they can monitor and punish norm-breakers. The power of pervasive surveillance is no longer available only to authorities; anyone with a mobile phone and internet connection can have similar power. Moreover, the internet is an almost permanent archive of information ranging from personal data, photographs, comments, news articles, etc. Once a piece of data is online, it is immensely difficult, if not impossible, to remove it permanently.

Online mob justice has therefore demonstrated the capabilities of collective behavior as a form of social control. Empowered by the internet, collective bodies of concerned citizens can enact informal control and use the power of mass surveillance in the process. However, the analyses have also shown that the consequences of such collective behavior are often unintentional. This is a claim that has not been made in previous research on mob justice, which often produces the misconception of mob justice in the mass media. When starting out their investigations, the online communities in Thailand and the US believed they had good moral intentions in their desire to help state authorities (who were trustworthy or otherwise) and bring justice to the perpetrators. Yet through the networks of interaction, not only did the truth get murky, innocent people became unwitting targets. Whether or not the online community had other motivations is out of the scope of the research, as content analysis focuses on what the online users said and shared with others. Based on the content analysis, wanting to help authorities and avenge the victims were main motivations. The reactions of the online

communities after an innocent person had been harassed points to a general understanding that harming innocent people was not an intention of the mob, despite it happening frequently.

The question that arises from this new understanding of mob justice behavior is – whose truth and moralities are being enforced? What the witch-hunts and lynching practices have taught us is that the motivation behind such collective violence is deeply rooted in social and cultural conditions. Whether religious or racial, ideologies about truth and morality are at the heart of collective social control. Truth is essentially a precondition for justice, not just mob justice. Justice is about the clash between competing moralities and truths.

Facts and Falsehoods

The final set of research questions address the overarching theoretical and philosophical implications of the research - how are facts and falsehoods constructed in the process of mob justice? What does it tell us about the nature of truth in today's society? The latter question is particularly relevant to today's society in which the proliferation of fake news online has been a center of a debate surrounding the definition of truth.

The first question – how are facts and falsehoods constructed in the process of mob justice? – is answered by the findings from the ANT and material culture analysis in chapter 6. The goal of that chapter was to show how a statement of falsehood or conjecture progressed through the networks of interactions to eventually be perceived as truth. As a statement moves through the network, it becomes more robust, and ‘truer’. The analysis showed that not only is ‘truth’ socially constructed, it is also highly subjective and murky. A statement that reaches the status of true ‘truth’ is held up by the network of support, illusory or otherwise. The network can be robust or precarious, but is always subject to collapse. The examples of network collapse shown in the network graphs also demonstrate the ever-changing nature of truth online and in

general society. That is to say, a statement that is true one day may be dismissed as false the next day in light of new information or interaction entering the actor-network.

Truth or facts are therefore, socially constructed, subjective, precarious, and subject to change. Besel's (2011) ANT analysis of the climate change debate is a strong empirical example. In 1998, a controversial climate change study was published, showing scientific evidence that climate change was real and being exacerbated by human activities. The study drew heavy political scrutiny from critics and doubters of climate change, forcing climate researchers to "defend the study but also rhetorically invoke the entire corpus of scientific research" (Besel 2011:122). What Besel's study highlights is that even scientific truth is not 'truth' from an objective perspective. As truth is subjective, it cannot only be true in the numbers, it must be supported as truth by the network of scientists who believe in it. For Latour (2005), one of the founding scholars of ANT, science is therefore constructed and subjected as "competing scientists must convince audiences that their particular theory is better through the use of rhetoric, laboratories, and scientific black boxes." For a scientific fact to be accepted as 'truth' in society, it must invoke the networks of human and non-human actants as support. For climate change deniers to deny the results of the study then, they must also deny the network of scientific methods and research, among many other things.

So, what is the nature of truth in today's society? We have seen the characteristics of truth as a social phenomenon, but recent debate on the emergence and influence of fake news have shed more light on the issue. The 2016 word of the year selected by the Oxford Dictionary is telling about how relevant this question is – the word selected was 'post-truth' (Noe 2016). It is "an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'" (Noe 2016).

What ‘post-truth’ gets at is the divide between emotion and belief, morality and truth. The word has further been expanded to ‘post-truth politics’, referring to “a reliance on assertions that “feel true” but have no basis in fact” (The Economist 2016). It is also related to the 2015 word of the year from Oxford – ‘truthiness’. Popularized by late night talk show host Stephen Colbert, ‘truthiness’ is defined as “the quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true” (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). All these words and forms demonstrate the awareness of the subjectivity and precariousness of truth. In Thailand, it would be as though *mano*-social became the basis for political thought. What they also highlight is how truth can be used as an ideological weapon, particularly with the media and the internet as tools of dissemination. As a traditional form of communication, the mass media are incredibly influential in proliferating subjective truths. With the internet as an advanced form of communication, ‘truth’ can spread further and faster than ever.

Post-truth has also been abetted by the evolution of the media. The fragmentation of news sources has created an atomised world in which lies, rumour and gossip spread with alarming speed. Lies that are widely shared online within a network, whose members trust each other more than they trust any mainstream-media source, can quickly take on the appearance of truth (The Economist 2016).

With the internet, it is not just professional journalists or career politicians who can spread their versions of the ‘truth’, anyone with an internet connection can do the same. An ordinary citizen can shout their truth into the echo chamber of the internet and be received by others who believe the same thing. The formation of the alt-right movement and Anonymous are significant examples of this. Both are movements that would have been hard-pressed to form (at least, to a significant size) without the internet or new forms of communication to reach other persons of similar mindset.

The discussion around post-truth and fake news has become prevalent in present day society due to the contentious 2016 presidential election between Republican nominee Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. While Trump ultimately won the Presidency, his campaign, along with his actions since his election, have been riddled with issues of post-truth and fake news beyond propaganda. Trump has been a well-known household name for decades but he entered the political arena around 2011 when he questioned Barack Obama's US citizenship (Jackson 2016). The birther conspiracy became a propelling momentum for Trump, and the claim was not without racist undertone considering Obama is the first black US president. It even prompted Obama to release his birth certificate showing that he was born in Hawai'i. However, the issue did not die down, and it was only in 2016 that Trump admitted Obama was born in the US. He continued the conspiracy however, by "blam[ing] Democratic rival Hillary Clinton for starting "birther" rumors during the 2008 primary against Obama, but there is no factual basis for that claim" (Jackson 2016).

Trump has been called the "poster child for post-truth" (Today 2016) and is credited with increasing the span of the movement towards post-truth (The Economist 2016). Not surprisingly, his administration has also been engaging heavily in the questionable use of 'truth' and 'facts' to make controversial policy decisions and claims about Trump's popularity. The phrase 'alternative facts' uttered by US Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway as she defended Press Secretary Sean Spicer's lies about the size of the crowd at Trump's inauguration has quickly become the phrase to define Trump's administration (Graham 2017). Many question if Trump is living in his own mind and alternate reality (Krieg 2016). When the most powerful man in the country is engaging in post-truth and alternative facts, the consequences of the fluid nature of 'truth' can be devastating.

Another example of this comes from a skit by Saturday Night Live, a well-known satirical TV show. Norman (2016) explains the skit,

‘Why are you defending her, Erin?’ Baldwin’s Donald asks the network interviewer in the sketch. ‘Are you a lez with her? Because I’ve heard from a lot of people that you’re lezzing her?’ ‘That doesn’t even make sense.’ ‘It doesn’t matter, Erin, because I said it. And now half the country believes it.’

And there, beautifully crystallised, is the most blood-chilling lesson from a campaign hardly short on icy tutorials. The truth has become so devalued that what was once the gold standard of political debate is a worthless currency.

What Norman highlights with this example is the devaluing of truth in light of political goals.

Simply by making a controversial and emotional statement, regardless of its factual basis, politicians can engage in post-truth politics and there will be supporters who believe them. This has been further exacerbated by the proliferation of fake news during the 2016 election campaign.

Fake news is certainly not new, but it has become a highly contentious debate and more common with the election.

Not all of the obviously untrue anti-Clinton stories that have floated around the Internet were peddled by conspiracy theorists. Some of them, written by spammers with the intent of fooling unsuspecting web users and getting ad revenue from those users' clicks, have become known as "fake news" stories. Facebook and Twitter helped fake headlines go viral during the campaign (Stelter 2016).

Fake news therefore, is not only a political smear campaign; it is also a business strategy for those who want to capitalize on the emotional tension of the election. News outlets such as BuzzFeed and the Guardian have “traced more than 100 fake news domain names” to a small town called Veles in Macedonia, whose populace make a living out of writing fake news and receiving ad revenue (Banic and Smith 2016). What gives these fake news enough prominence to generate for one teen “at least \$60,000 in the past six months” in 2016 is social media (Banic and Smith 2016).

Facebook and Twitter, as well as other social media sites, have played a role in providing a prominent space for fake news to be viewed and shared publicly (Stelter 2016). A survey conducted in January 2016 by the Pew Research Center showed that 35% of respondents between 18-29 years old named “a social networking site as their most helpful source type for learning about the presidential election” (Gottfried et al. 2016). Facebook was listed as the most popular social networking site for news. Researchers from Stanford University also discovered that “up to 80 percent of middle school students surveyed in the US couldn't tell the difference between sponsored content and a real news story. And more than 80 percent of high schoolers didn't have a problem taking facts from an anonymous Imgur post” (MacDonald 2016). The lack of ability to discern or discriminate between verified and unverified news demonstrates how powerful ads can influence youths on social media. It also demonstrates that even though fake news is called ‘fake’ in order to indicate its opposition with ‘truth’, the fact that there are those who buy into fake news and believe it, then push it onto others as ‘truth’ shows that there are multiple truths in social reality.

The allure of fake news that leads people to believe in it is highlighted by Fine and Ellis (2010) in their book, *The Global Grapevine: Why Rumors of Terrorism, Immigration, and Trade Matter*. Fine and Ellis (2010:4) do not call it ‘fake news’, rather they use the term ‘rumors’ to refer to “an expression of belief about a specific event that is supposed to have happened or is about to happen.” They consider rumors to be a “form of knowledge” (Fine and Ellis 2010:5). To prove their point, Fine and Ellis examine various rumors that exist within different social contexts and events, from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, stereotypes and misconceptions about immigrants, to rumors surrounding the dangers for American tourists travelling to unknown territories. What gives rumors power? Fine and Ellis (2010:5) explain that “rumors have a strain

of plausibility in them.” In other words, rumors exploit the *conditions of possibility* of various existing discourses, informed by pre-existing social and historical conditions. Rumors seem plausible, they seem like they could be true, hence they are circulated and believed in. “Rumors are often wrong but they are rarely insane” (Fine and Ellis 2010:7).

The Pizzagate conspiracy is a notable example of fake news and post-truth based in some realm of plausibility. The analysis of the mechanisms of the Pizzagate case has shown that the conspiracy did not come out of thin air; it is based in previous historical conditions of distrust in Hillary Clinton. Given the existing media and public rhetoric demonizing Clinton’s character, it seemed plausible to some that she could be running a secret child prostitution ring. The conspiracy went through all the mechanisms, ultimately peaking with the shooting inside Comet Ping Pong and public condemnation from Clinton herself. Yet even with mainstream media channels and normatively trusted sources reporting on the falsity of the theory, the believers have only held on stronger. “When lies make the political system dysfunctional, its poor results can feed the alienation and lack of trust in institutions that make the post-truth play possible in the first place” (The Economist 2016). Believers of the theory are embedded in their actor-network support, while engaging in post-truth, which feeds into their distrust of social institutions. It is a difficult cycle to break out of and demonstrates how convincing and widespread different truths can be.

Post-truth is the notion that emotion overcomes facts. Standing back a step, it is essentially the argument that irrationality overcomes rationality, leading to misguided beliefs. However, this research on mob justice, along with the literature on social control and violence, has shown that irrationality and rationality form a slippery slope. More importantly, irrationality is not always the basis of collective behavior, especially because emotions are not irrational.

Emotions, like truth, are based in morality. Truth, is therefore, heavily intertwined with morality. Haidt (2006, 2013) uses the analogy of the mahout (elephant rider) and the elephant, in which the mahout represents conscious intellect while the elephant itself represents gut instinct. When the two are diametrically opposed to one another, conflict typically occurs. Oftentimes, however, the elephant overtakes the mahout – “Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second” (Haidt 2013:53). This explains the proliferation of post-truths in current society, and demonstrates the conflicting nature of morality and truth.

To believe that Clinton was involved in a child prostitution ring or to believe Trump’s assertion that Obama is not a US citizen, one must also believe in the injustice of the political institution which elects these problematic people to positions of power. Hence, the various mob justice cases examined in this study are motivated by the pursuit of truth, a strong sense of justice, and a desire to enact informal control in light of a weak formal control institution. By having a strong sense of morality and vision of how the world should be, individuals and agents of control in society aggressively pursue their version of the truth, no matter the expense. This is in line with what Haidt (2001, 2006, 2013) discusses in his various works regarding morality and truth, where he argues that people tend to make judgements about something before actually listening to reasons or arguments from the other side. “Moral reasoning is usually a post hoc construction, generated after a judgment has been reached” (Haidt 2001:814) Therefore, truth can be used as an ideological weapon when people refuse to listen to other rationales and only focus on reasons that already match their pre-existing judgements.

The content analysis on the Boston and Bangkok bombings in chapters 3 and 4 both had sections discussing the myriad of emotions in the online communities. Emotions are an important factor to consider because they form the rationale for the armchair detectives to pursue social

justice. Emotions form the moral reasoning Haidt (2013) alludes to, and motivates the armchair detectives. It also colors their judgment of right and wrong, as the armchair detectives begin the investigation with ideas of who is responsible for the tragedy, as demonstrated by the way existing racist discourse informs the ANT diagrams of chapter 5. Both Collins' (2009) thesis about how there are no violent people, just violent situations, and Haidt's argument about instincts before moral judgements, make emotions a crucial element of the armchair investigations. Truth is a mix of moral reasoning, emotion, judgements, and other such complex elements.

Oxford historian Fernandez-Armesto (1997) has written extensively about the complex nature of truth in his book, *Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed*. He opens the book with a question, is truth just "a name for opinions which suit the demands of society or the convenience of elites?" Or is truth "changeful or eternal, embedded in time or outside it, universally or varying from place to place?" (Fernandez-Armesto 1997:2). To answer this question, Fernandez-Armesto provides a typology of truth from 'the hairy ball', "the truth you feel", 'the God in the saddle', "the truth you are told", to 'the cage of wild birds', "the truth of reason or the truth you think for yourself", and 'the dream of the butterfly', "the truth you perceive through your senses" (Fernandez-Armesto 1997:6). This typology of truth is helpful to understanding how truth was perceived and utilized in episodes of online mob justice. It seems that in one stage or another, each type of truth existed.

'The hairy ball' is more or less the equivalent of *mano*-social and post-truth. It is the truth felt in the gut, regardless of facts, evidence, or reason. The pursuit of justice based on socialized norms, religious beliefs, and existing discourse is the 'truth that [is] told', the 'God in the saddle.' It is essentially the cultural and social conditions that contextualize and influence the institutional

and non-institutional players of mob justice. ‘The cage of the wild birds’ is based on reason and rationality. As we have seen, emotion and violence are not irrational, and could be categorized under this particular type of truth. In other words, episodes of mob justice come from a place of reason, whether or not that so-called reason is seen as rational by the outside community. Finally, ‘the dream of the butterfly’, truth through the senses can be seen in how the online community reacted and connected to the imagery of the bombings. Whether they were there to witness the tragedy of the bombings in person, or saw the videos and heard the sounds, they connected to the truth of the situation via their senses. This is informed by the material culture perspective, which is concerned with how people understand the material (or now, virtual) world via the senses.

What we can learn from Fernandez-Armesto’s typology and the prevalence of all four types of ‘truth’ in the empirical case studies is that truth is both ever-changing and eternal. ‘Truth’ is constructed, felt, reasoned, taught, and dreamt. ‘Truth’ is also subjective and convenient, as Fine and Ellis (2010:4) write,

Many groups present the truth about what is happening around us in an attempt to persuade us. Such truth claims frequently have an uncertain provenance: when we doubt their claims, they may be labeled rumors or urban legends. And when they harmonize with our belief system and we trust their source, we accept them, act on them, and share them.

When the truth is up for grabs by any group in power, collective action can suddenly turn into mob justice, thus causing harm to innocent bystanders. My study on the mob justice phenomenon on the internet has contributed to our understanding of this particular nature of truth in today’s complex society and the processes that leads to emergent mob behavior on the internet. Future research into such processes is necessary as the world enters the phase of ‘post-truth’ society.

Theoretical Contributions

Before discussing the suggestions for future research, I will highlight the theoretical contributions of my study to the understanding of mob justice as a process, how my findings extend the literature on social control and collective behavior, and advance the methodology of the fields.

The theoretical framework of the dissertation is social control theory and perspectives on collective behavior. The framework was further supplemented by literature on the sociology of emotion, violence, and internet studies. Each of the theoretical perspectives contributed an understanding of how collective behavior can be a force of informal control, what the processes of informal control are, and what obstacles it must overcome. Mob justice may be a term I have chosen, but the phenomenon it describes is based in premodern popular justice forms such as witch-hunts and lynchings. Extended from that, the moral panic literature emphasizes the role of the mass media in contributing to fear and confusion regarding a social problem. Mob justice online is a new form of crowd violence of the past, augmented by the power of new media to spread fear, anxiety, rumors, and misinformation. The debates in the literature over the irrationality of the mob or the powerful influences of emotion on collective behavior indicate the need for more research on how macro structures affect micro processes and vice versa. To get a comprehensive understanding of how episodes of mob justice emerge out of interaction with institutional agents, two large-scale cases of mob justice were chosen: the 2013 Boston bombing and the 2015 Bangkok bombing.

The findings of the content analysis conducted on the Boston and Bangkok bombings discussed in chapters 3 and 4 provided an in-depth look at what the online communities were discussing, what they were concerned with, what discourses were invoked, and how they

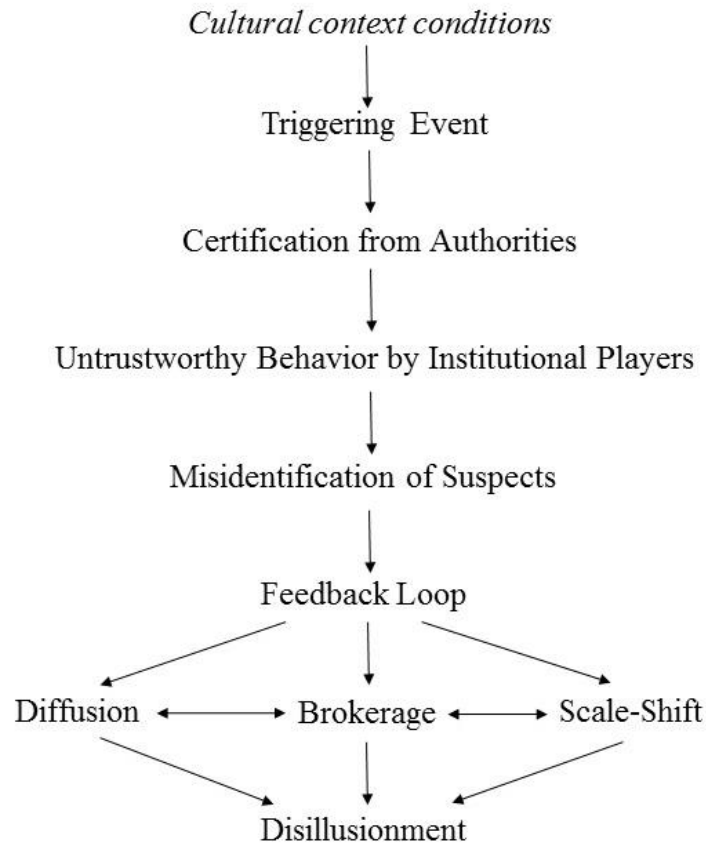
conducted their unofficial investigation. Both chapters demonstrated the struggle between the online community and the institutional authorities involved. In Thailand, the intense distrust of the government, the police, and mainstream media led the online community to rely on themselves for information, thus allowing rampant speculation and rumor mongering. In the US, while the community trusted the FBI, the distrust in the mainstream media was what led them to become a news source for those interested in the bombing. The level of trust carried over to the mainstream media themselves, causing them to consider Reddit a legitimate source of information. Larger historical and cultural contexts of each country were also shown to be influencing factors, as existing discourse on nationalism and racism played a role in who was targeted by the online mob. Both cases depicted the cyclical nature of these networks of relationships, which was further illuminated by the actor-network theory and material culture approaches.

Chapter 5 provided a different type of analysis of the bombing cases by specifically charting how rumors and conjectures progressed through the network of interactions to eventually be achieved as truth (or not, if the network collapsed). By combining actor-network theory, which showed how the network was connected, and material culture, which showed how the online community collected and verified information conceived as a type of virtual collection, I was able to uncover the micro and macro aspects of mob justice. The internal relationships between members of the online community and the information it was working with showed the micro aspect, that is, how the online community constructed its own understanding of the bombings. Actor-network theory in particular helped demonstrate the macro aspect, that is, how the online community was constantly interacting and engaging in a dynamic relationship with larger institutional authorities, and was influenced by existing racist and nationalist discourse as

it targeted innocent people. It was clear at that point that the online communities were not solely responsible for their episodes of mob justice. The ANT analysis also illuminated the core problem at the heart of mob justice – how truth is constructed in society.

In chapter 6, I constructed a model of mob justice by naming the mechanisms of interaction between key players of each bombing case. The model is a valid and empirically backed process analysis for episodes of failed mob justice. The mob justice episodes the model is valid for must meet certain criteria as was described in Chapter 2 – the most important criterion being the failed use of collective intelligence. The model presents one trajectory of mob justice episodes in which collective intelligence fails due to a number of reasons and results in the unforeseen consequence of misidentification of suspects. The model is presented here again.

Figure 9 - Proposed failure model of mob justice process



The model of mob justice depicts the mechanisms of interactions between key players that eventually lead to an episode of mob behavior. The *cultural context conditions* form the umbrella mechanism that contextualizes the mob justice episode in its entirety. The episode is initiated by a *triggering event* which invokes deep emotional and psychological response from the public and institutional authorities. Once the online community receives *certification from authorities* who ask the public for help in solving the crime in question, the amateur detectives begin their investigation. However, neither the official nor unofficial investigation happens smoothly. Oftentimes, the online community must deal with *untrustworthy behavior by institutional players* who are corrupt, unreliable, or incompetent. The distrust is further augmented by the mass media, who engage in misreporting, rumor-mongering, and moral panic discourse. While *untrustworthy behavior* may not be observable in all cases of mob justice, the mechanism appeared in five of the six cases examined in this study. The mechanism can play a role in intensifying the desperate desire of the online community to resolve the case as fast as possible, thereby inadvertently encouraging the following mechanism: *misidentification of suspects* when collective intelligence efforts fail catastrophically. The misidentification mechanism in which innocent people are targeted is also informed by existing racist, nationalist, and other hegemonic discourses.

The crux of the process leading to failed mob justice is the *feedback loop* mechanism. This mechanism is so complicated, that it actually consists of three sub-mechanisms: *diffusion*, *brokerage*, and *scale-shift*. Each of the sub-mechanisms basically spreads the misinformation and misidentification to wider circles, to the point that no one can tell what the truth is anymore. Mass media, legal authorities, and the online community become stuck in a circular interaction in which each player considers the other as a source of legitimate information, thereby muddling

the actual facts of the situation. Those who have been misidentified face further harassment and defamation due to the *feedback loop*.

Finally, *disillusionment* occurs when one of the key players, usually legal authorities, dispel the fog of rumors and make an actual arrest or identify the real suspects. The online community then ends its investigation, apologizes to those who got caught up in it, and moves on to the next public concern.

This model of the mechanisms leading to failed mob justice was created based on the findings of the two bombing analyses. The model was further tested against four more mob justice cases for validity and to define the limits of the model: The 2015 killing of Cecil the lion, the 2014 murders of two British tourists on Koh Tao, the 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy, and the 2015 Single Gateway controversy. The first three of the four cases fit the proposed model very well. The final case, the 2015 Single Gateway controversy, did not fit the model. This was thus a limiting case that provided a good opportunity to further specify the type of mob justice the model can analyze.

Online mob justice events of this type have two defining elements based on the findings of the study. The perpetrator of the *triggering event* must be unknown, thus opening up a wild manhunt by official investigators and amateur detectives alike. The amateur detectives use the power of the internet and collective intelligence to find the truth about the case. In the process of the investigation, misinformation spreads across the networks of key players in a *feedback loop* that ultimately results in the misidentification of innocent people as the perpetrators. The innocent people are then harassed by the online community and risk having their private information exposed via doxxing. These elements are what constitute an episode of online mob justice of interest to the study; that is, mob justice resulting from the failure of collective

intelligence. The mechanisms in the model specify the process that leads to such an episode of mob justice.

The model presented in Figure 4 is the newest contribution to the literature on mob justice. Previous studies have not attempted to analyze systematically the process and mechanisms that lead to an episode of mob justice. My study is the first attempt at such an analysis, and the resulting model of mob justice represents an invaluable contribution to understanding a phenomenon often riddled by moral panic discourse, and general confusion and fear by the mass media. Previous studies have also not touched upon the notion that there are different types of mob justice episodes, with successes and failures. This study focuses on the failures of mob justice episodes in light of optimism surrounding the model of collective intelligence. Showing that collective intelligence can fail, and often with detrimental consequences, is an important perspective that is currently overlooked in the literature.

Moreover, the model is informed by literature on social control, collective behavior, violence and emotions. Mob justice is not an amalgamation of irrational behavior and thought; it is the result of various mechanisms of interaction by various key players. Not all negative collective action is mob justice as the media may want the public to believe – my study has shown that there are limits to what counts as a failure of mob justice. When a messy investigation occurs through the interaction of the police, the government, the mass media, and the online community, online mob justice can fail. Misinformation and rumors are spread and innocent people are hurt in the process. The comparative nature of the findings has also demonstrated how mob justice can happen through similar mechanisms and processes across varying cultural, social, political, and historical contexts. This provides robust empirical evidence to the validity of the mob justice model in Figure 4. The model can predict and map out

how an episode of failed mob justice may emerge if researchers known what mechanisms and signs to look for.

Finally, chapter 7 discussed the research questions and the theoretical implications for the research. The dissertation provided an in-depth look at the processes and mechanisms that lead to mob justice behavior first and foremost. However, the backdrop of mob justice behavior is not ignored – the internet and its characteristics have added new complexities to old forms of mob justice from the times of witch-hunts and lynchings. Those who are physically distant can now instantaneously connect and influence or hurt one another with the click of a button, causing new legal concerns that have never before been discussed. At the heart of the mob justice phenomenon is the construction of competing truths, then using said truths to push specific agendas of justice. While this is not surprising in light of scholarly understanding of the traditional criminal justice system, as well as the discussion of historical examples of mob justice (witch hunts and lynchings) in Chapter 2, such a claim has not been made about online mob justice by previous researchers. It is the confusing nature of truth that spurs the accusations against innocent people.

The findings of the dissertation have also shown that the ‘mob’ in mob justice is not irrational or erratic; their beliefs and their actions and reactions arise within specific social and cultural contexts. Their emotions, which are understood as part of cognition, certainly drive them to become armchair detectives, and for some, drive them to actual violence. This is an important aspect of mob justice that cannot be ignored. Despite the supposed noble intentions of the community based on the results of the content analysis, however, chapters 5 and 6 have argued that they are not full in control of their situation or their actions. Collective behavior can certainly be an effective form of informal control, but the emotions, the social contexts, and the

internet provide roadblocks to their success. Moreover, the negative aspects of mob justice were shown to be a result of the complex network of interactions among investigative authorities, mass media, new media, and the amateur sleuths on the internet. In other words, mob justice is not an isolated phenomenon; it emerges out of the interactions of key players.

The implications of the study as a whole illuminate an important and difficult question – what is the nature of truth in today’s society? The shaky road towards mob justice behavior is riddled with confusion over what is fact and what is falsehood, calling into question what exactly constitutes the ‘truth’. With the proliferation of fake news and debates of how to discern fact from fiction, the ‘truth’ may be undergoing an existential crisis. My analysis illustrated how facts are constructed in online communities on the basis of rumors and conjectures, conjured out of existing racist and nationalist discourses in society. The rumors that abound throughout the many cases all seemed plausible to a certain extent, hence their proliferation. Truth is socially constructed yes, but the cases of mob justice behavior also emphasize the overlapping and tangled nature of truth and morality. As collective bodies, online and offline, attempt to right a wrong, or restore social justice and social order, they invariably impose their own ideas of truth and morality upon others, an action that may have dire consequences to society.

Overall, my study contributes to understanding the phenomenon of mob justice theoretically and methodologically. The literature used to inform the analysis provides a lens to seeing mob justice in a way not previously seen before. Mob justice has a discernable process, and the collective body of people who call themselves amateur detectives are not always engaging in constant mob justice behavior. Mob justice is an emergent phenomenon that occurs after a number of mechanisms of interaction between key players. Like violence and emotions, mob justice is neither constant nor irrational. There is also not just one type of mob justice that

can be generally discussed and understood. There are successes and failures to mob justice online that uses collective intelligence. My study is the first indication that a typology of mob justice episodes can be constructed in future research.

Methodologically, the use of actor-network theory and social mechanisms has allowed for an empirically-sound process analysis, resulting in the creation of a robust model depicting the process of mob justice. Through the cross-cultural comparison, a generalizable failure model of mob justice can be used to test other cases of online mob justice that match the criteria of the model. The model is not a universal model of all types of mob justice, but a generalizable model of one type in which collective intelligence fails and mob justice spirals out of control. Using these powerful new theoretical and methodological understandings of mob justice, future researchers can use this study as a stepping point to further analyzing the complexities of the phenomenon.

Future Research

Future researchers in mob justice should attempt a systematic and representative study of mob justice, as such an endeavor has not been accomplished. Researchers should also continue the cross-cultural, comparative aspect of the analysis. Having two countries to study in this research was highly educational, as it demonstrated that there are common patterns of mob justice behavior across time and space. That is, despite the different contexts, the process that leads towards mob justice behavior is the same, as the failure model of mob justice mechanisms demonstrates. It would be illuminating to see future research conduct case studies across more countries and more cases. More data and more testing can make the model more robust and accurate as further complexities of the phenomenon are discovered. While a quantitative perspective may provide us with more understanding how often episodes of mob justice actually

occur, qualitative researchers should continue to conduct in-depth analyses of the phenomenon. Online communities rarely operate unanimously or in isolation; by conducting in-depth analyses using concrete, descriptive methods such as content analysis, we can learn more about what motivates and affects mob justice episodes.

The cases chosen in this study were of a large-scale nature. It would therefore be interesting to look at the opposite, small-scale cases of mob justice to see if similar patterns and mechanisms still emerge. Can the model be used for smaller-scale mob justice? For mob justice episodes that do not necessarily involve institutional authorities, what are the processes? It could be very different from the cases studied in this dissertation. My research demonstrates that there are different types of online mob justice, and that a typology of the practice can eventually be created in future research.

As the story that opened the dissertation in the introduction demonstrates, there are positive instances of mob justice. While positive mob justice sounds like an oxymoron, and it may require a different label, not all episodes result in the harassment of innocent people. There have certainly been episodes where the online community collectively acts to help someone in need, such as sending pizza in response to a plea posted by a young child with cancer (Grossman 2013), or finding a lost photo of a loved one who died in the 2016 Oakland warehouse fire (CNN 2016), to providing emotional and financial support for a gay couple in Thailand, who fought a long legal battle for their child when the surrogate mother refused to hand the child over (Fernquest 2016). These instances show that online communities can act collectively for good, and not necessarily as a force of violent informal control. Studying more cases in which there were positive outcomes will provide an entirely different perspective of what the collective body of internet users can do when they combine forces. A success model of mob justice, in which

collective intelligence does not fail, would represent a different trajectory invaluable to our understanding of the phenomenon. Another interesting aspect to study would be the long-term effects of mob justice episodes on the targets involved. Ronson's (2016) book titled *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* is a good starting point for understanding what victims of online harassment experience. My research has provided the perspective of those perpetrating incidents of mob justice; it would be enlightening to see a coupling of both perspectives in a future study.

The content analysis in this study analyzed the motivations of the armchair detectives, but only what they publicly admitted. As part of the assumptions of content analysis as a method, the researcher should not make any inferences about anything not present within the actual data, which are the online comments collected for the study. However, it is quite likely that the intentions of the armchair detectives are not as noble as they say. For example, the sheer joy and celebratory comments following the supposed identification of Sunil Tripathi as the Boston bomber depicts a level of competitiveness within the online community. Armchair detectives rejoiced that Reddit 'beat' the FBI and 'beat' mainstream media to the punch. Competitiveness and the desire to be right, as well as gain recognition for being right, were visible elements in the stories of the case studies. Future researchers can highlight this perspective, and conduct in-depth research into the actual motivations of the armchair detectives. While the consequences of mob justice, particularly the harassment of innocent people, may be unintentional, the latent motivations of the armchair detectives may help qualify the consequences more. Future researchers can conduct in-depth interviews or surveys of people who have participated in armchair investigations to get at the deeper motivations.

Lastly, researchers should continue to analyze the implications of mob justice for our understanding of truth and falsehood in today's society. The competition for truth can be a

catalyst for mob justice episodes, as the process analysis of failed mob justice has demonstrated. In other instances of mob justice, small or large, positive or negative, the desire for truth may still be at the heart of what drives amateur detectives to mob justice behavior. Future researchers should consider the nature and status of truth, particularly in today's society where there are competing truths vying for our belief.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: List of Reddit threads

1. The innocent hunt
2. New picture of suspect 2 (white hat)
3. I was at Forum that day, I took a photo of suspect #1 from the back.
4. These are the exact locations of the bombs
5. ANNOUNCEMENT: At this point in time the only photographs that are allowed to be posted in this subreddit are images that may contain the FBI's two suspects - all others will be deleted
6. Jeff Bauman helped identify the bombing suspects
7. More pics of suspect 1 and 2 from FBI Fri: 2AM EST
8. Higher Resolution Pic of Suspect
9. I MAY BE ON TO SOMETHING. Martin Richard (8 year old victim) circled in blue with Suspect #2 in the background and a possible backpack on the ground.
10. Leave the missing guy alone
11. Holy crap! Shits going down right now!!!!
12. They just reported that two middleeastern men hijacked a man and made him drive around the city.
13. Breaking News: Bombing suspect is not Sunil, it's Dzhokhar A. Tsarnaev
14. [Mod Note] Despite what was allegedly overheard on a police scanner, Sunil Tripathi was misidentified and is innocent.
15. [Mod Note] Any more posts on the "missing guy" will be removed. Also a reminder, sharing personal information will get you immediately banned.
16. Boston Marathon Bombings: Compilation of facts and resources as they currently stand.
17. There was just an explosion at the Boston Marathon - Will use this to live update
18. Boston Marathon Explosions - Live Update Thread #2
19. Boston Marathon Explosions - Live Update Thread #3
20. Boston Marathon Explosions - Live Update Thread #4
21. Boston Marathon Explosions - Live Update Thread #5
22. Boston Marathon Explosions - Live Update Thread #6
23. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #7
24. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #8
25. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #9
26. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #10
27. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #12
28. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #13
29. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #14
30. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #15
31. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #16
32. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #17
33. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #18
34. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #19
35. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #20
36. Boston Marathon Explosion - Live Update Thread #21

Appendix B: CSI LA Thread Titles

Note: Some of the thread titles had English translations in them (italics)

1. A bombing occurred at the Ratchaprasong intersection around the Erawan Shrine. 18 people have already been killed and 117 injured. My sincerest condolences to those who have lost their lives. I'm sorry for posting an inappropriate picture of it earlier. *Bomb explosion inside one of Bangkok's most popular tourist attractions killed at least 18 people and injured 117 others.*
2. I hope the CCTV cameras were working and recorded the face of the perpetrators.
3. *A person of interest* This is the photo of the foreign man who is a suspect based on the CCTV footage. He has a bag over his shoulder, which he puts by the gate at the scene of the bombing, then walks out without it. You can see the man is trying to conceal his face by wearing glasses, he may also be wearing a wig. *It seems that he disguised his identity with wig and glasses.*
4. Anyone with this type of photo, please sit in. We need to help the authorities find this suspect. Credit photo to [name].
5. Analyzing the suspect footage in slow motion. You can see the suspect taking off his backpack very subtly and leaves it on the bench. Then he takes out his cellphone from a plastic bag to take a photo, pretending to be a tourist. After that, the suspect walks and runs away. I think the suspect must've used this phone to detonate the bomb.
6. Let's help us check which stores are selling this t-shirt [the suspect wore], and which companies export them. Credit: [name].
7. We found the store that sells the t-shirt. This store is in Jakarta, Indonesia [Credit: name].
8. Decoding the name of the man who warned there would be a bombing since August 13th. Mr. [name]. This is my personal opinion as the Admin, please use your intelligence. 1. The first name comes from a song named 'The last moment'. The music video shows the destruction of statues in the same way ISIS destroyed ancient statues in Iraq. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWjw5zS3LGI>. 2. The last name comes from Phra Phrom, who protects us. 3. He uses the photo of Zhou Enlai, who was the first prime minister of China and the right hand man of Mao Zedong, meaning that the target were Chinese people. *** 86 is the country code for China. Thank you to [name] for bringing this to my attention. *Decoding a message from a man who tried to warn everyone via social media about possible terrorist attack between 13-18 August. (This is just my personal opinion_ it is not a fact) 1. He used the name _[name]_ which is the name of the single with the famous song _The last moment_. The MV shows the woman smash statues like what ISIS did to the ancient statues in Iraq Museum. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWjw5zS3LGI> 2. His last name means blessed and protected by Pra Prom (Hindu Deity) at Erawan Shrine. 3. He used a picture of former Chinese Prime Minister_ Zhou Enlai; it means that the target are the Mainland Chinese.*
9. Did anyone have their dash cam recording at the Ratchadamri and Silom intersection around 7pm on August 17th? Please check your dash cam in case you recorded the face of the bomber.
10. Image from another CCTV camera. I edited it with the previous clip we had. Credit to the Thai police.
11. This is the picture of the 3 Uyghur terrorist suspects who were arrested in Indonesia in September last year. Last month, the Indonesian court sentenced them to jail. The 3

suspects were charged with using fake Turkish passports that were made in Thailand, and for colluding in terrorist plots with Islamic extremists in Indonesia who support ISIS. You can see that the bomber has a similar facial structure and looks like an Uyghur because he looks like a *khaek-khao* in some light, and a half-white/half-Chinese in another. *These are the picture of 3 Chinese Uighurs who got a 6 year sentence over terrorism and fake passports in Indonesia. Their bone structure and facial feature look similar to the Shrine Bombing suspect.*

12. It's time Thai people unite to help find the bomber. CNN has reported that the bomber is not a Thai person, but a foreigner. 1. The motorcycle taxi that dropped him off testified that he was 100% *khaek khao*. 2. The bomber gave him a piece of paper with instructions to drop him off at Lumpini in English. 3. While on the motorcycle, the bomber suspect talked with someone on the phone in a language that was not Thai or English. 4. The bomber did not seem to be in a rush. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/19/asia/thailand-bangkok-bombing/>
13. On the night of August 17, the engine of Turkish Airlines flight TK69 departed from Suvarnabhumi at 10:50pm – the bomber could have boarded that flight. Friends who work at the airport and

Appendix C: Pantip thread titles

1. Urgent!! A bomb exploded at the Ratchaprasong intersection. Tons injured.
2. Urgent! A loud noise like an explosion happened at the Ratchraprasong intersection.
3. I condemn this barbaric act, the bombing at the Ratchaprasong intersection
4. I don't believe this bombing was carried out by Thai people
5. Pantip detectives, who do you think was behind the bombing?
6. Anyone who drove by the Erawan Shrine before the bombing, please check your dash cams.
7. I think CSI LA should vet their information on the bombing carefully

Appendix D: Complete 2013 Boston Bombing coding scheme

1. Bombing motive – the theories regarding the motive of the bombing
 - a. International terrorism
 - b. Domestic terrorism
 - c. Terrorism (unspecified)
 - d. Troubled individual
2. Concern for repercussions
 - a. Damage by the case
 - b. Damage by police behavior
 - c. Damage by government behavior
 - d. Damage to tourism industry/country's economy
 - e. Country has bleak future/don't want to live here anymore
3. Perception of the purposes of the platform (Reddit)
 - a. To gather information and send information to the mods
 - b. A place of gathering for 'detectives'
 - c. A place to speculate
 - d. A place of truth
 - e. General praise
 - f. I dislike the mods
 - g. This is not the place for investigative work
4. Types of discussion in the comments
 - a. Facts reporting from media/police/other sources
 - b. Speculation/theories
 - c. Unanswered questions in the case/need more information
 - d. Nothing to contribute, just watching and waiting
5. Types of emotion expressed
 - a. Anger/frustration
 - b. Sadness/remorse for victims
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Despair
 - e. Gratitude/moved by acts of bravery/kindness
6. Types of evidence used in the discussion to support the theories
 - a. DNA evidence
 - b. CCTV footage
 - c. Social media (Facebook posts, tweets)
 - d. Suspect clothing/physical appearances
 - e. Timeline of events
 - f. Bomb type
 - g. Witness testimony
 - h. Photos
 - i. Backpack
7. Perception of government
 - a. I like the government
 - b. I dislike the government
 - c. The government is trustworthy and will do their jobs

- d. The government is embarrassing and incompetent
- e. The government like to scapegoat
- 8. Perception of the police/FBI
 - a. I like the police
 - b. I dislike the police
 - c. The police are trustworthy and will do their jobs
 - d. The police are embarrassing and incompetent
 - e. The police like to scapegoat
- 9. How should the bombers be punished?
 - a. Curse him/condemn him to hell
 - b. Capital punishment
 - c. Shoot him
 - d. Hang him
 - e. Torture him
 - f. Hunt him down
 - g. Jail him
- 10. Perception on scapegoating
 - a. Do not scapegoat or jump to conclusions
 - b. This is scapegoating
- 11. List of notable Reddit suspects
 - a. Green hat guy
 - b. Blue robe guy
 - c. Blue duffel and white hat guys
 - d. Sunil Tripathi, the missing student
 - e. The Tsarnaev brothers
- 12. Terms used to describe the suspect's race/ethnicity/nationality
 - a. US
 - b. Migrant
 - c. Foreigner
 - d. White
 - e. Black
 - f. Arab
 - g. Brown
- 13. Perception on the issue of privacy
 - a. We should respect the privacy of individuals
 - b. Posting personal information is a violation of Reddit's guidelines
 - c. Privacy does not matter in the search for truth and justice
- 14. Perception of media
 - a. Media is unreliable/irresponsible
 - b. Media is checking Reddit
 - c. Media is doing well/good job
- 15. Perception of mob behavior
 - a. Stop mob vigilantism
 - b. This is embarrassing/we failed in the investigation
 - c. This is not mob behavior
 - d. This is a witch hunt

Appendix E: Complete Bangkok Bombing coding scheme

1. Bombing motive – the theories regarding the motive of the bombing
 - a. International terrorism
 - b. Domestic terrorism
 - c. Terrorism (unspecified)
 - d. Troubled individual
2. Concern for repercussions
 - a. Damage by the case
 - b. Damage by police behavior
 - c. Damage by government behavior
 - d. Damage to tourism industry/country's economy
 - e. Country has bleak future/don't want to live here anymore
3. Comparisons to the 2013 Boston Bombing
 - a. It's a cautionary tale
 - b. Thailand should model the US police investigation
 - c. The bomber is the same person
4. Uses of *Mano-social*
 - a. Don't *mano-social*
 - b. I'm *mano-socialing*
 - c. It's just *mano-social*
5. Religion as an element in the bombing
 - a. A Buddhist could not have done this
 - b. Someone is attacking our religion
 - c. We are not following the Buddha's teaching
 - d. Don't bring religion into this discussion
6. Description of the suspect's nationality
 - a. Thai
 - b. Migrant
 - c. Foreigner
7. Discussion about a Thai person being the suspect
 - a. A Thai person could never have done this
 - b. Why are we overlooking the possibility that a Thai person did this?
 - c. A Thai person must have been involved
8. Types of discussion in the comments
 - a. Facts reporting from media/police/other sources
 - b. Speculation/theories
 - c. Unanswered questions in the case/need more information
 - d. Nothing to contribute, just watching and waiting
9. Types of emotion expressed
 - a. Anger/frustration
 - b. Sadness/remorse for victims
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Despair
 - e. Gratitude/moved by acts of bravery/kindness

10. Types of evidence used in the discussion to support the theories
 - a. DNA evidence
 - b. CCTV footage
 - c. Social media (Facebook posts, tweets)
 - d. Suspect clothing/physical appearances
 - e. Timeline of events
 - f. Bomb type
 - g. Witness testimony
 - h. Photos
11. Perception of government
 - a. I like the government
 - b. I dislike the government
 - c. The government is trustworthy and will do their jobs
 - d. The government is embarrassing and incompetent
 - e. The government like to scapegoat
12. Perception of the police
 - a. I like the police
 - b. I dislike the police
 - c. The police are trustworthy and will do their jobs
 - d. The police are embarrassing and incompetent
 - e. The police like to scapegoat
13. Opinion of CSI LA
 - a. Let's help the Admin; he's trustworthy
 - b. Place of gathering for detectives
 - c. Place to speculate
 - d. A trustworthy place of truth
 - e. I dislike the Admin
 - f. General praise
 - g. Stop investigating; this is not the place
14. How should the bombers be punished?
 - a. Curse him/condemn him to hell
 - b. Capital punishment
 - c. Shoot him
 - d. Hang him
 - e. Torture him
 - f. Hunt him down
 - g. Jail him
15. Perception on scapegoating
 - a. Do not scapegoat or jump to conclusions
 - b. This is scapegoating

Appendix F: Example of Reddit Boston bombing live update thread

[There was just an explosion at the Boston Marathon - Will use this to live update](#) (self.news) submitted 3 years ago * by [supernovasky](#)

For those unused to live update threads, the best way to view them is to switch periodically between sorted by top and sorted by new. The sorted by new lets you get the most recent information, the sorted by top will let you see replies to important comments.

<https://twitter.com/Boston to a T/status/323871088532668416/photo/1>

It looks like there has been a big explosion at the Boston Marathon, with some on twitter saying it looked like a bomb went off. Stay safe.

Update 1: Live video of the finish line: <http://boston.cbslocal.com/2013-boston-marathon-finish-line/>

Update 2: Mass casualty event, potentially more bombs: <https://twitter.com/universalhub>

Update 3: Not for the squeemish: [http://deadspin.com/explosions-reported-at-the-boston-marathon-](http://deadspin.com/explosions-reported-at-the-boston-marathon-473008941?utm_campaign=socialflow_deadspin_twitter&utm_source=deadspin_twitter&utm_medium=socialflow)

[473008941?utm_campaign=socialflow_deadspin_twitter&utm_source=deadspin_twitter&utm_medium=socialflow](http://deadspin.com/explosions-reported-at-the-boston-marathon-473008941?utm_campaign=socialflow_deadspin_twitter&utm_source=deadspin_twitter&utm_medium=socialflow)

Update 4: Boston Fire Dept. scanner: <http://www.broadcastify.com/listen/feed/497/web>

Update 5: Another live feed: <http://www1.whdh.com/video/7newslive/>

Update 6: Bomb Squad en route to Mass Ave. and

Newbury: <https://twitter.com/universalhub/status/323878470750961664>

Update 7: At least one person lost both

legs: <https://twitter.com/JesseRodriguez/status/323878089903964160>

Update 8: Boston PD has reported at least 3 dead.

Update 9: Youtube video of the explosion

itself: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfCK3Ar7Yus&feature=player_embedded

Update 10: State Trooper scanner says more devices potentially at Boylston and Gloucester.

Update 11: Fairmont Copley Hotel on lockdown as per WBZ.

Also, another link to the Boston Fire Dept. Scanner: <http://tunein.com/radio/Boston-Fire-Department-s145668/>.

Update 12: List of scanners in Boston, including police

scanner: <http://www.radioreference.com/apps/audio/?mid=13>

Update 13: Another video of the explosion: <https://vine.co/v/bFdt5uwg6JZ>

Update 14: EMS on scanner reporting for all personnel to be wary of trash containers.

Update 15: Numerous sources including scanners reporting secondary devices have been found unexploded, pleading with people to stay away from the

area: <http://fox17online.com/2013/04/15/secondary-devices-found-unexploded/#axzz2QYzkKA4K>

Update 16: A controlled explosion next to the library in about a minute from now from the bomb squad, also all off duty officers have been called

in. <https://twitter.com/BostonGlobe/status/323886879453892609>

Update 17: Red cross safe register listing, always handy to have: <http://www.redcross.org/find-help/contact-family/register-safe-listing>

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