Introducing Vigilant Audiences

This ground-breaking collection of essays examines the scope and consequences of digital vigilance — a phenomenon emerging on a global scale, which sees digital audiences using social platforms to shape social and political life. Longstanding forms of moral scrutiny and justice seeking are disseminated through our contemporary media landscape, and researchers are increasingly recognizing the significance of societal impacts effected by digital media.

The authors engage with a range of cross-disciplinary perspectives in order to explore the actions of a vigilant digital audience — denunciation, shaming, doxing — and to consider the role of the press and other public figures in supporting or contesting these activities. In turn, the volume illuminates several tensions underlying these justice seeking actions — from their capacity to reproduce categorical forms of discrimination, to the diverse motivations of the wider audiences who participate in vigilant denunciations.

This timely volume presents thoughtful case studies drawn both from high-profile Anglo-American contexts, and from developments in regions that have received less coverage in English-language scholarship. It is distinctive in its focus on the contested boundary between policing and entertainment, and on the various contexts in which the desire to seek retribution converges with the desire to consume entertainment.

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Introducing Vigilant Audiences

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In nearly any context, people are attentive and judgemental when it comes to the affairs of others. Vigilant audiences entail a range of phenomena, span geographic areas and vary in their motivations as well as their affiliations. This watching can escalate to vigilantism if audiences witness something that demands a response. We understand digitally mediated vigilantism to include practices where citizens (or digital media users more generally) are offended by other citizen actions, and retaliate through practices and repertoires that include mobile devices and social platforms (Trottier, 2017). As a global development, digital media audiences denounce and bear witness to criminal and moral offences. They consume footage of these events, but also take a collective role in scrutinising and seeking retribution against targets. Two examples illustrate some of the concerns explored in this edited volume.

First, consider the global response to the Charlottesville ‘Unite the Right’ rally in 2017 (covered in Milbrandt’s chapter in this volume). In response to images of torch-bearing crowds chanting racist and anti-Semitic slogans, it is not difficult to imagine why witnesses denounced these participants, and sought to hold them accountable by any available means. Here, digital media audiences felt compelled to bear witness to racial hatred, in order to prevent future rallies and comparable incidents. As we shall see in later chapters, audiences were asked to share information about the participants, as well as to join in denouncing them. Yet even consuming these images appears to carry social importance, as it involves recognising political developments for what
they are, and recognising white nationalists for who they are, in order to assert that they will not be accepted in society. The backlash against these images can be understood as positive developments as they call out — or openly denounce — troubling instances of racial hatred that could otherwise be normalised and accepted.

We can contrast this case to a second instance of mediated denunciation. Roughly six months before Charlottesville, a sixty-eight-year-old woman in the Netherlands was caught on camera pocketing someone else’s wallet. Camera footage of the incident circulated on a regional crime-fighting programme, and the woman turned herself in to the police. The footage continued to circulate, and ended up on a local video hosting site where it garnered an additional half-a-million views (Baard, 2017; Trottier, 2018). The website includes a comments section where the audience published vitriolic and malicious comments. Shortly afterwards, the woman took her own life. Mediated scrutiny and denunciation led to an outcome that defies any sense of justice or proportionality. Even relatively minor forms of ridicule and shaming can culminate in insurmountable harm, especially for those who may be marginalised or otherwise vulnerable. Shaming in particular is a collective assault on a target’s social standing and self-worth. Much like the Charlottesville backlash, audiences varied in the extent of their engagement with mediated coverage. Yet simply having watched the video contributes to its metrics on the Internet, and contributes to an imagined audience-cum-jury of peers. In both cases, people are consuming images and responding to them in a way that may seem just or at least minimally harmful at the level of any single person’s actions. Cumulatively, they serve a powerful and pivotal role in terms of scrutinising the worth of a fellow citizen.

While these incidents emerged in response to particular events, ranging from shoplifting to white-nationalist rallies, vigilantism may persist through pre-existing groups. Despite the seemingly ‘disruptive’ nature of digital technologies, those who experience the greatest harm may be those who have historically faced social disadvantages and vulnerabilities. Consider the plight of Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia, notably the scrutiny and violence leveraged against women by their families and peers (Gabdulhakov, 2019). Local communities back home consume footage of the abuse of female migrants abroad in response
to accusations that they were seen interacting with non-Kyrgyz men. While digital media technologies allow this harmful and denunciatory content to circulate globally, they also mobilise communities that are locally entrenched. Other examples of such vulnerabilities include the case of sexual minorities who fall target to vigilantes amid a broader social stigma. In Russia, non-heterosexual relations are interpreted as perversion, generating a ‘ripe’ atmosphere ‘for opportunistic uses’ when it comes to ‘moral entrepreneurship’ in vigilante practices (Favarel-Garrigues, 2019, pp. 4, 6).

Longstanding forms of moral scrutiny and justice-seeking are linked up with a connected and pervasive media landscape. It is possible to focus on emerging developments, including large-scale decentralised social coordination among digital media users, as well as the reach of wearable and otherwise socially embedded technologies. These novelties may lead us to believe that users are uniquely empowered through new media practices. Yet we are also witnessing the reproduction and furthering of existing relations and behaviours. Vigilant audiences are an extension of public and pre-digital gatherings like Russia’s comrades’ courts (Gabdulhakov, 2018) and China’s village pact or ‘pidou’ during the Cultural Revolution (Huang et al., 2020), but also other contemporary mediated publics assembled by crime-based reality television (Schlesinger & Tumber, 1993), and a denunciatory tabloid press (Johansson, 2007). We need to consider how these inform and shape citizen-led scrutiny and denunciation through digital media, especially when formal media actors like newspapers and broadcast media also increasingly maintain an audience base on platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Chadwick, 2017).

Digital vigilantes seek job losses and embodied interventions against their targets, and typically express their disapproval through denunciation, shaming and doxing (sourcing and circulating any available information about them, see Douglas’ chapter in this volume). In using the term vigilantism to describe these digitally mediated practices, we draw upon scholarly perspectives that conceptualise an otherwise value-laden label. Moncada points to five core dimensions when speaking about vigilantism, including ‘social organisation, target, repertoire, justification and motivation’ (2017, p. 407). Each of these raises complexities that we will briefly address.
First, vigilantes may be either individually or collectively organised, and as a collective can be formalised or relatively informal (ibid.). Although earlier definitions treated spontaneous forms of self-defence as distinct from vigilantism, the kinds of connectivity afforded to digital media users (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) complicate this distinction. For example, an individual can spontaneously upload footage of racial abuse to their Twitter account, without much forethought about desired audiences or intended outcomes. Yet intended outcomes may be determined later on by an assembly of users who coalesce around this incident. When it comes to gathering an audience around an actionable event, we can consider instances where an audience is pre-assembled in relation to a media franchise (as Driessen does in her contribution to this book), as well as cases like the Charlottesville rally where an audience is brought together afterwards.

Second, (digital) vigilantism is centred on a target, who is deemed to have violated a certain social order. As Moncada (2017) points out, this may involve criminal acts as well as actions and utterances that are morally offensive. It bears noting that the ease with which offending images and videos can circulate online means that these manifestations occur largely outside any single jurisdiction. Moreover, moral denunciations can be an opportunity to seek legal and institutional reform, as has been the case in the #metoo movement (North, 2019). When it comes to selecting a target of denunciation, it is not just the specific individual who may come under scrutiny. Rather, this can spread to a broader category of target. This is once again evident in light of #metoo, where the denunciatory focus includes not only the alleged predator, but also norms and beliefs that serve to tolerate sexual abuse. Yet vigilante acts against members of vulnerable and marginalised communities more broadly can also serve to increase the scrutiny and repression conducted by the community at large.

Third, vigilantes make use of repertoires that ‘range from lethal to non-lethal’ (ibid.). While embodied vigilantism primarily involves physical forms of violence, digitally mediated cases may touch upon cultural or institutional forms of violence (Galtung, 1990) that may severely compromise subsequent life chances for the target as well as those affiliated with them. Here we can consider job loss as a central part of the digital vigilante’s repertoire, which aims to place the target and
their dependents in an economically and socially precarious position. Fourth, vigilantes and their supporters invoke justifications for their activities in order to seek broader legitimation. As they are able to attract a geographically and ideologically dispersed audience, digital vigilantes in particular may fail in convincing these audiences with their justifications, and may in turn trigger counter-denunciations against themselves and their actions. In considering cultural polarisation in the Anglo-American context and elsewhere, certain denunciations and calls for action may be rebuked on ideological grounds, with a sizeable audience turning to the initiators’ Twitter feed in order to call attention to (for instance) ‘problematic’ content. Here too we can consider how categorical affiliations such as gender and ethnicity may enable or constrain attempts to justify vigilantism to a broader audience.

Finally, vigilantes are compelled by motivations that ‘cannot be assumed to align neatly’ with stated justifications (Moncada, 2017, p. 408). These may include closely held values linked to criminal justice, but participants may also seek financial gain (through merchandise sales or ad revenue on their social media accounts). Likewise, one of the key tensions that informs this book lies in the motivations of the wider audiences that participate in vigilant denunciations. We may consider whether there are connections between a desire to seek retribution, and a desire to consume entertaining footage. Put simply, vigilant audiences are characterised by a confluence of entertainment and criminal justice.

We should therefore consider the notion of the audience, especially when highlighting the shift from embodied to digitally mediated practices. We can begin by considering how the audience is understood in contemporary media and cultural studies literature, notably how they may endorse, resist or negotiate with vigilant discourses (Hall, 2001). As stated above, audiences may be ideologically aligned with an attempt to seek (social or criminal) justice, but such events are just as likely to attract bystanders that either reinterpret the meaning or deny the legitimacy of these events. Prior studies on television audiences stress the active role viewers take in ascribing meaning to content (Ang, 2013). In principle, such abilities have only been enhanced by the emergence and popularisation of social media platforms that solicit input and engagement from their users. Not only are digital media users more engaged in domains such as political campaigns (Vitak et al., 2011) and
journalism (Braun & Gillespie, 2011), but it has arguably never been easier for users to watch over and express their opinions about their peers (Andrejevic, 2004). Such scrutiny occurs in real time, for instance when a livestream triggers both supportive and critical comments (see Tanner et al.’s contribution to this volume), but also through the retrospective scrutiny of user-generated content that may span years and transcend any individual context (Trottier, 2012).

Peer-to-peer scrutiny may be manifest in the form of harassment and stalking, but must also be recognised in more innocuous and acceptable forms of listening, lurking (Crawford, 2011) and even orbiting (Stauffer, 2018) that may serve to normalise asymmetrical relations of visibility. In other words, we should be attentive to the range of contexts where digital media users are compelled to make themselves publicly visible (either for intrinsic reasons, such as self-expression, or more tangible goals such as gainful employment), if only because of the kinds of audiences and scrutiny that may emerge in consequence. A personal Twitter account can end up harming its owner if opponents use it to locate and republish discrediting statements. Likewise, review platforms like Yelp or Tripadvisor may be weaponised to denounce and harm the public standing of individuals (Finley, 2015). Digitally mediated scrutiny and denunciation necessarily involve an assemblage of human and non-human actors (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000; Trottier, 2018). While users may temporarily coalesce around an offensive event, we must acknowledge that specific media platforms frequently serve as hubs to coordinate and host such coalescence. Platforms like 4chan and 8chan, specific sub-communities like the Reddit Bureau of Investigation (Myles et al., 2020) and culturally specific news sites like GeenStijl in the Netherlands are closely linked to open denunciations. Although these groups evoke a ‘viral’ reaction among a greater public, they also rely on a core of more closely affiliated users who may invest more time and be more explicitly ideologically aligned.

Contributions to this edited collection address contemporary digital media practices involving users both consuming and participating in the denunciation of other individuals. These engage with a range of (cross-)disciplinary perspectives, including but not limited to sociology, criminology, philosophy, legal, cultural and media studies. While drawing upon cases in the Anglo-American context, this collection also
endeavours to consider developments in regions that have received less coverage in English-language scholarship. These cases often transcend the boundary between policing and entertainment, and one of our goals is to call attention to the confluence between these practices in dispersed contexts. Remaining attentive to social harms that may arise, we seek to privilege the particular contexts when exploring cases. As the opening examples clearly show, what may be considered appropriate or ethical in one context would be inconceivable in another.

In particular, we seek to make theoretical and empirical contributions by considering how particular cases and more general practices are made meaningful. This includes taking into account how digital media users develop denunciatory and shaming practices as well as how the press and other public figures may support or contest them. Because the incidents themselves are by definition mediated, it is important to consider the distinction between providing coverage of a vigilante campaign, and contributing to its ends by invoking a greater audience. We are also concerned with the role that digital vigilantism can play in either contesting or reinforcing categorical forms of discrimination and violence, and how such possibilities are shaped by local cultural contexts. Finally, we consider how vigilante audiences either challenge or further support criminal justice practices such as police investigations.

Exploring Local/Global Tensions in Class-Based Scrutiny and Denunciations

When looking broadly at cases of justice-seeking through digital media, this book is especially concerned with the relations between global developments and local conditions. On the one hand, we are witnessing the use of similar digital practices across cultural contexts. Not only do these practices make use of the same platforms (such as Facebook or Twitter), but they also mobilise comparable discourses or repertoires, including linking instances of sexual violence across countries and industries with the #metoo hashtag (Mendes et al., 2018), as well as connecting accusations that political opponents are funded by George Soros (Weaver & Hopkins, 2018). Paradoxically, despite seemingly greater cultural polarisation, fragmentation and a more inward-looking Internet, recent mediated expressions of nationalism and nationhood
seem in some ways interchangeable. As one example, national identities online draw upon a globalised repertoire when repurposing image macros (memes) across national or ideological lines.

![Local Adaptations of a Global Meme](image)

*Fig. 1.1 Local Adaptations of a Global Meme (unknown creators, unknown dates of creation, published under fair use)*
The cases this book considers are also shaped by local circumstances, and are best understood with at least some consideration of local governments, local press and local values. While having to account for emerging technologies and practices, states may still assert some degree of sovereignty over global information flows. This is partly to make Silicon Valley platforms accountable to local (tax) laws, but also to have some control over those information flows. Recent examples include Russia’s Internet-governing laws, such as the ‘Yarovaya law package’ that expanded anti-extremism legislation to the digital domain; the law on ‘fake news’ that made online criticism of the state a legal offence (The Moscow Times, 2018; 2019); as well as the ‘Great Firewall of China’ that restricts access to American platforms (Xiao, 2019). Governments also shape what is considered legally and morally acceptable, for instance when the UK sought to address ‘social harms’ associated with digital media (Volpicelli, 2019). And while platforms like Orkut and Instagram have steadily been acquired by tech giants like Google and Facebook, in Russia, VKontakte (a social network comparable to Facebook) and Yandex (a search engine comparable to Google) have not only resisted such takeovers, but also appear to flourish (Yegorov, 2019) under what we may consider a kind of digital nationalism. Although domestic platforms in Russia are more appealing to users due to simplicity and content diversity (ibid.), they are also closely collaborating with Russia’s security forces in compliance with the above-mentioned legislation. Even global forms of justice-seeking may be interpreted differently in local contexts. The call to denounce sexual abuse of children is near universal, yet Russia’s Occupy Paedophilia has mobilised under this banner to assault sexual minorities. And while developments in one context can resemble or provide insights for digitally mediated denunciations elsewhere, vigilant audiences are necessarily shaped by local circumstances.

As an example of this, consider the discursive notion of the ‘nice car’ (typically a late-model and high-end foreign vehicle). Drawing from a comparative study that the editors of this book have recently carried out (Huang et al., 2020), nice cars are manifest as an abstract trope that can in turn be spotted and even photographed or filmed in one’s neighbourhood. If that footage is publicly shared, it can serve as an opportunity to denounce the owner, but also a broader category
of individual such as ‘the wealthy’. This may become an opportunity to address misdeeds such as bad parking or aggressive driving, and we might expect that it also becomes a moment to air more general concerns such as growing wealth disparities and abuses of economic privilege. Looking at comparable incidents in Russia, China and Anglo-American countries, we see comparable denunciations shaped both by the affordances of digital media tools, but also by regional factors such as the press and civil society, which may or may not be willing to further mobilise denunciations against drivers of luxury vehicles.

In Russia, mediated scrutiny, shaming and exposure of citizens by fellow citizens are deeply rooted in the country’s history (Gabdulhakov, 2018). In the 1970s and 1980s, amid severe production shortfalls, Soviet society developed a privileged stratum of citizens who could access goods and services through the system of blat — a web of strategic connections and mutually beneficial favours (Ledeneva, 1999). Through social connections of blat socialist citizens could even acquire a foreign-brand (‘inomarka’) vehicle. Such privileges of the select few served as irritants for the greater masses, deepening socio-economic tensions in a state that grounded its credo on principles of egalitarianism.

In contemporary Russia, inequality on the roads remains a pressing issue, though it is possible to distinguish unique features of post-Soviet vigilante justice, characterised by mediated visibility afforded by social media, distrust in police and the prevalence of moral crusades (Favarel-Garrigues & Shukan, 2020, p. 6). In 2010 Russia’s pro-Kremlin youth commissars from the nation-wide Nashi [Ours] youth movement founded several vigilante projects, including StopXam [Stop a Douchebag].¹ StopXam launched its fight against “traffic violations and arrogance on the road” (stopadouchebag.org, n.d.) and quickly gained popularity across the country and in other former Soviet states. Participants approach perceived traffic violators and place stickers on their windshields, reading “I spit on everyone, I drive where I want”; the process of retaliation is filmed, edited and uploaded on the group’s YouTube channels (Gabdulhakov, 2020). StopXam claims to be indiscriminate in who they approach with retaliation; however,

¹ Pronounced as ‘Stop Kham’. Orthography and translation used by the groups is preserved.
participants often feature the ‘rich and famous’, ensuring the popularity of the episodes.

Confrontations between participants and the drivers escalate to verbal and physical altercations, generating added entertainment for the audience. The message that participants send through their practices is that unlike Russia’s police, they are not afraid to approach people who otherwise feel immune on the roads. When marking luxurious vehicles with stickers, participants engage in a performance of class-struggle in which the fearless youth bring to justice those who are used to getting away with misdeeds. Picking up on the cases, traditional media outlets engage in framing of StopXam, law enforcement and other relevant actors, while further exposing the targets (Gabdulhakov, 2020). Additionally, when addressing such phenomena as citizen-led justice movements that instrumentalise social media, platforms such as YouTube enable the circulation of denunciatory videos, making them continuously available to wider audiences. Audience members perpetuate the circulation by sharing content and otherwise reacting to it (comments, emojis, ‘dis/likes’). While StopXam’s retaliatory repertoire is intensified and amplified through (edited) exposure of targets online, YouTube episodes can be monetised to generate an income. Additional funds can be generated through merchandise sales and via state subsidies. StopXam and other vigilante groups in Russia have turned into brands with their own online stores; they have been endorsed by the state through presidential grants in support of their activities (Gabdulhakov, 2018, p. 326). The relationship between vigilante formations and the state, however, should not be perceived as monotonous. Here we can differentiate between state-loyal participants (former Nashi members), state-targeting participants (investigations exposing corrupt officials, etc.) and openly criminal participants (moral police targeting women, migrants and sexual and other minorities). Each cluster varies in their application of legal frameworks; yet even the relationship between StopXam and the state has not been entirely smooth. Over the years of their operation, the framing of StopXam participants by state media evolved from “heroes” to “hooligans” (Gabdulhakov, 2020). The negotiation of trust, support and interests between state authorities and vigilantes are temporally dynamic.
In contrast, the meaning that ‘nice cars’ bear in contemporary China reflects a different context. Before the Opening and Reform, it was considered a ‘bourgeois lifestyle’ to own a private car and only top government officials were equipped with passenger cars (Barme, 2002). Therefore, the word ‘gongche’, which means ‘public service car’, had a connotation of governmental privilege and political power that lingered in Chinese society during the following decade. In addition, to own a private car signifies a better economic status because it requires resources beyond the reach of most citizens (Zhang, 2017). Despite recent economic growth coupled with a growing domestic car market (Wu, Zhao & Ou, 2014), foreign brands such as Audi and Mercedes-Benz are still regarded as privileged commodities. Meanwhile, growing economic disparity also furthers conflicts between social strata in China (Anagnost, 2008).

Such social conflicts are manifest through cases where a vigilant audience scrutinises individuals with ‘nice cars’. Offences typically stem from traffic conflicts, among which cases involving ‘nice cars’ usually solicit a larger degree of attention and denunciation. Such scrutiny is often picked up by mass media and reported with titles that feature a typical pattern: A woman/man (of a certain social identity) + who drives + a ‘nice car’ brand + scratched/hit/injured/beat/ran over/killed + a socially disadvantaged individual. Such titles serve to frame these incidents into conflicts between social strata (Huang et al., 2020). Audiences are also offended when people publicly show off their luxurious cars, even though the target might not have broken any law. Potentially, questions about the legality of their achieved wealth will be raised and crowdsourced investigation will follow. Thirdly (and relatedly), corruption and government-related privilege are linked to ‘nice cars’ due to the enduring connotations evoked by public service cars. The third type of incident has decreased dramatically since Xi Jinping took power, due to the reformation of the public-service car system (Xinhua News Agency, 2014) and the party’s internal anti-corruption campaign.

In these cases, one struggles to distinguish between participants and audience, due to the lack of formal organisation coupled with the interchangeability between these roles when an audience shifts from lurking to reposting and vice versa. As a result, the Chinese mass media
normally refer to the participants/audience as ‘netizens’, or as a faceless mass who are ‘concerned’ or ‘angry’. The media often spotlight the identity of the targets and the social group they belong to, which shapes the public discussion of such incidents. The scrutiny of people who drive nice cars can help expose, punish and deter individuals who either transgress traffic laws or are compromised through corruption, alongside other social injustices in China. However, it can also harm people if the accusation is unsubstantiated, or when a disproportionate punishment results from the incident being framed as class conflict. Interestingly, in recent years, audiences in China have raised questions about mass-media framing when such incidents happen (Ji, 2019).

In Anglo-American countries, class awareness has recently manifested through critical discourses about billionaires and the so-called “1%” in the context of the Occupy movement (Breau, 2014). While roadside offences like bad parking are captured and discussed in localised Facebook groups, there is a curious absence of concern for the political and economic conditions that shape ownership of ‘nice cars’. Upmarket and foreign brands of vehicles are often acknowledged in these groups, and it may be inferred that their owners perceive themselves as above the law. Yet in comparison to China and Russia, there is no broader class-based mobilisation. Discourse on these groups remains localised to specific neighbourhoods, and denunciations against nice cars pertain more to brand preference, rather than social strata. Beyond references to neighbourhoods, vigilant audiences are not mobilised based on perceived economic disparities. Likewise, press coverage of so-called ‘crap parking’ groups focuses more on the novelty of the groups themselves, rather than embracing the class-based framing of their activities as seen in China.

Through these cases we can begin to ascertain a seemingly global pattern of scrutiny and denunciation of the wealthy, by way of their vehicles. These different instances reflect a common desire to express frustration with the owners of luxury vehicles when they breach traffic laws. They also reflect the manner in which public roadways can be contested and politicised spaces (Nikiforov, forthcoming). Yet, in each country, we see socio-political circumstances shaping digitally mediated cultural practices. In Russia and China, user-led denunciations and targeted visibility can escalate into a more cohesive and culturally
significant event, and receive greater public support as well as attention from the press. In countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, similar offences receive negligible attention from a national digital media audience, and typically fail to culminate in something more collectively significant. They may simply be manifest as a series of badly parked luxury vehicles, rather than mobilise a more enduring campaign or attempt at social reform.

Section and Chapter Overview

The following chapters consider cases that appear to involve both justice-seeking and entertainment-seeking. Indeed, the confluence between these desires is a troubling development in citizen use of digital media. Yet it is possible to identify cases where there is a deliberate foregrounding of entertainment as an intended outcome of scrutiny, as well as vigilant audiences that may have already converged around a television programme or movie franchise. In the next chapter, Driessen addresses fandoms as ‘pre-existing collectives’ that hold actors and authors accountable for offences that take place both within and beyond the screen. Such communities are centred around a set of beliefs that may concern casting decisions and issues of representation on screen, but also call attention to the conduct of actors in their private lives. Thus, vigilant scrutiny among audiences spills over from on-screen to off-screen, but also spreads from public figures to less prominent members of the public including critics who may challenge these beliefs. The following chapter by Linton picks up on these themes in considering offence-taking and mobilisation in the context of comedic performances. While all of the cases covered in this book consider offence-taking to some degree, comedy-based forms of entertainment are unique in the sense that they are typically seeking to transgress or at least unsettle moral boundaries. Here, too, scrutiny and denunciation can transcend the boundary between fiction and real life, and, in so doing, reach a broader audience who is not acquainted with the original context of the comedic work.

Culture and class stratifications are reproduced through content that circulates on digital platforms, and these platforms may be compelled to undergo transformations as a result of their association with this content. Jiaxi Hou’s chapter considers the prominence and scrutiny of an
underclass subculture in China, and how its visibility led to denunciations by other communities. Here, the mediated visibility brought about by social media platforms serves both to affirm a community of supporters as well as to incite scrutiny and rebuke from a broader audience. In considering the role of the state and platform in the context of broader socio-cultural circumstances, this chapter presents vigilant audiences as shaped by a multiplicity of actors. Even a denunciatory label like ‘vulgarity’ can be unpacked to refer to a range of offences, targeting not just individual artists but a broader social underclass in the name of collective morality.

A second set of chapters considers how citizenship and broader notions of national identity are produced and expressed through mediated denunciation. National identities are often expressed through exclusionary rhetoric and practices, where outsiders and critical voices are met with retaliation. Likewise, we find instances where shared morality is defended among an online audience that largely corresponds to a national population. Tanner et al.’s chapter considers far-right vigilantism as a transnational manifestation with an emphasis on the tenuous and contested process of technical mediation. By looking at a Canadian alt-right figure’s vigilante activities in Europe, they provide a detailed account of the technical and mediated conditions through which an audience is produced. Audiences are assembled through a range of readily available technologies and practices, yet this process of assembling is tenuous and contested. Even an incendiary media artefact such as a so-called “Molotov JPEG” (Hawley, 2017) is tentative, and may provoke unanticipated outcomes.

Incidents that reinforce commonly held values may be contentious in their execution, provoking controversies and even counter-denunciations. Favarel-Garrigues’ chapter considers how the Russian group Lev Protiv asserts a social order in public spaces, and in turn becomes subject to public scrutiny and controversy. While patrolling and confronting those consuming drugs or alcohol in public spaces, Lev Protiv members bring these offences to a wider public. As such, conventional vigilantism is positioned “in front of a permanent audience” (Favarel-Garrigues, this volume, p. 125), that enhances the scope of the group but also appears to generate a critical backlash. Such controversies appear to fuel the group’s prominence, a striking development even within the post-Soviet context.
Chalfaouat’s chapter addresses digital vigilantism as citizen-led justice-seeking in the Moroccan context. In spite of the potential for mob justice, he considers how citizens can be empowered as a result of recording and denouncing misconduct. In the case of an assault of a teacher by a student, the viral circulation of the footage is both shaped by and acts as a catalyst in struggles between educators, citizens and the government. Local and online media venues also play a pivotal role in circulating and facilitating outrage as well as conflicting accounts of the offence under scrutiny. Of particular interest in this study is the degree to which citizens are compelled to co-produce security as a result of emerging technological affordances, but also through relations with state authorities.

While vigilant audiences may often be associated with social harms and regressive politics, recent examples including the backlash to the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville appear to support more progressive causes. The next set of chapters considers scrutiny and denunciation of hate speech and populism by vigilant audiences. In doing so, these works address an ambivalence whereby otherwise troubling forms of citizen-led justice may be considered acceptable by a wider public. These contributions consider recent cases in order to work towards an understanding of the potential acceptability of these practices in various contexts and circumstances.

Plesničar and Šarf’s chapter considers the backlash to hate speech occurring on social media in the Slovenian context. When seemingly public content on Facebook was republished on a denunciatory Tumblr page, it was re-contextualised, and its authors came under greater public scrutiny. Yet when physical posters of the denunciations appeared in the nation’s capital, a counter-denunciation arose against the anonymous authors of the Tumblr page, and a broader debate emerged about the appropriateness of these tactics. This chapter draws upon a range of data to consider the socio-cultural as well as legal contexts of republishing as weaponised visibility. Not only does this case raise the issue of who is entitled to denounce, but also how the notion of ‘the public’ itself may be context-specific and contested.

Many prominent cases of hate speech are manifest as collective and largely anonymous incidents. Denunciations of events like Charlottesville appropriate images of these events, not only to deanonymise participants, but also to deny the legitimacy of racist and nationalist discourses in public life. Milbrandt unpacks the call for action
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put forth by Twitter account @yesyoureracist, as well as the audience that emerges in consequence of that call. Her analysis evokes asymmetrical relations of visibility that appear to be normalised in Anglo-American contexts, among others. The notion that it is “merely a matter of time before anonymous faces are rendered identifiable” (Milbrandt, this volume, p. 234) suggests a surveillant imaginary (Lyon, 2018) about not only what can be achieved by vigilant audiences, but also the conditions in which this may be permissible.

Douglas’ chapter further explores these conditions in relation to the possibility of Hine’s (1998) understanding of non-violent vigilantism. Deanonymisation of hate speech through doxing is presented as a viable practice, notably when coupled with de-radicalisation programmes and other forms of the potential reintegration of the target. Vigilantism is always context-specific, and even progressive forms of engagement may raise unanticipated outcomes. Yet the arguments considered in this section are especially helpful in beginning to decouple acceptable from unacceptable forms of denunciation.

Finally, vigilant audiences may complicate or otherwise impact police work. Dekker and Meijer provide an account of how European law-enforcement professionals negotiate the boundaries between accepted and unsanctioned online engagements among digital media audiences. These developments are largely made meaningful by notions of community policing, in which local context and collaboration with the authorities are pivotal factors. Established principles of police work are troubled by what is easily available to digital media users. By raising questions of legality and acceptability, these practices reopen debates about the role of citizens in policing, as well as the demands for police accountability that underpin vigilant engagements (Johnston, 1996). Police may generally consider vigilant citizens as an added burden, yet they may also engage in mediated practices that inform and encourage audiences’ sense of criminal justice. Young’s chapter in this section considers mugshot websites in the United States, and in particular the apparent contradictions between shaming arrestees for crime-prevention purposes, and shaming for amusement. Although such initiatives may be state-funded, by making mugshots digitally accessible they facilitate unanticipated and unwanted actions by citizens and other private actors. As such, Young’s focus on new policing initiatives brings us back full circle to entertainment as a mobilising force in citizen justice and shaming, even among formal agencies.
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Ethical Concerns of Researchers Studying Mediated Visibility

The contributors and editors of this collection share concerns over mediated visibility and related social harms. This is a tangible issue for those who experience unwanted scrutiny, and is linked to troubling practices such as harassment, stalking, discrimination and unjust punishment. In studying and directing attention to these practices, we hope for a better understanding of their emergence in order to begin to alleviate related harms. Yet as researchers we also have to be aware of and acknowledge our potential role in producing and reproducing such harms. This involves being mindful of our research data, including how it is gathered and retained, but also how such data can be repurposed. As an outcome of this collection, we hope to draw attention to asymmetrical relations of visibility between social actors. In some cases, these efforts will involve making under-studied practices, actors, negotiations and decisions more visible to our readership. Yet this is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and some aspects of social life are obscured for a reason. As we seek to understand how these cases are publicly manifest, it seems appropriate to direct our attention to press reports and other seemingly ‘official’ channels, but also social media posts and other content that may be publicly available, at least for a limited period of time.

When interpreting such social media data one of the first observations a researcher will make is its volatility. Text, image and video content may circulate widely one day, only to be removed from all public sources shortly thereafter. This is due to various reasons, including targets of harassment requesting the data is removed, social media platforms removing it for violation of terms of service, vigilantes themselves not wanting to attract any further attention, or simply because the hosting website has been neglected. In many cases it would appear that actionable and stigmatising content — and the denunciations that surround them — are invoked and then revoked in a strategic manner. In response to such volatility, it may be tempting for researchers to purposively and aggressively seek out and retain this data. Indeed, this is a practice that has gained cultural traction through the use of the term ‘receipts’, whereby digital media users take screenshots of others’
offences, and retain them for subsequent judgements (Waldman, 2016). Whether researcher or concerned citizen, it is understandable why we may wish to capture and retain evidence of criminal or moral offences, as well as the public outrage that may follow. Yet in (re)publishing this data, we risk bringing further unwanted visibility to those who have already suffered excessively in this regard. While we may otherwise see no trouble in collecting data that are considered public or open source, Young’s chapter on mugshot photography covers one of many examples of supposedly public data being repurposed for troubling ends (see also Zimmer, 2010).

As such, we must consider the possibility of unwanted or otherwise harmful forms of visibility against the targets of, and participants in, digital vigilantism. The term ‘target’ here should be understood in broad terms: not just those originally denounced, but also those who may experience categorical discrimination as a result of the open circulation of these cases. In order to prevent further unwanted scrutiny of private citizens, at times we chose not to include names or other personal information in our reporting, even if this already appeared in the press or elsewhere. This amounts to deciding not to republish names and identities that may otherwise remain searchable. However, this approach is called into question when considering the status of public and quasi-public figures. Both Favarel-Garrigues and Linton’s chapters include the names of members of civil society and comedians who can clearly be understood as public figures. Such decisions are not always straightforward, as even public figures can be subject to unwanted forms of visibility, for example, when details of their private lives are leaked to the public. Moreover, if we treat a YouTube celebrity with one hundred million subscribers as a public figure, how should we approach an aspiring star with a more modest following?

As a result of our concerns with mediated harm, we aim to be careful about what we make visible in this collection. In taking a global approach, we are necessarily calling attention to cases and targets that were previously unknown to at least a part of our readership. Yet in reflecting on these concerns and guidelines, we do not intend to develop an approach that collapses the moral implications of the cases considered in the following chapters. To be clear, there is no moral equivalence between doxing Nazis, and Nazis doxing.
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