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# Social norm or social harm: An exploratory study of Internet vigilantism

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Social norm or social harm:  
An exploratory study of Internet vigilantism

by

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The Internet as a communication technology allows for both interpersonal and mass communication. At times, communication can be kind and caring. At other times, it can be harsh and aggressive. People use their words to show love and care as well as to blame and to punish others. Seeking no other effective avenues, people take out their frustrations online in a way to correct perceived societal wrong doings and engage in social control of the people they feel need to be brought to justice or corrected. By using the Internet to call to action others to punish people for these social infractions, a paradox occurs within privacy, free speech, and the limits of the law.

One event involved 13-year-old Megan Meier in Dardenne Prairie, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. Megan was a victim of a cyber hoax. Lori Drew (mother), Sarah Drew (daughter), and Ashley Grills (Lori Drew's employee) perpetrated the hoax by creating a fake boy online that was infatuated with Megan. As Megan developed trust and other emotions towards her fake admirer, the group of three gained the necessary information they sought and ended this online "relationship". By ending this "relationship", they denigrated, humiliated, and sought to punish Megan. They questioned her need for inclusion by calling her a social outcast, attacked her self-esteem by calling her ugly and generally bullied Megan by ridiculing and attempting to humiliate her. On October 16, 2006, Megan Meier committed suicide. Because of the sensitive nature of the case, authorities from Dardenne Prairie and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch did not release the story for one year.

Incensed about this incident, bloggers took it upon themselves to find and punish the perpetrator. By doing detective work from public files, they figured out who she was, what she did for a living, and where she lived and worked. They then posted them all online. The campaign of retaliation continued with a stream of letters addressed to the advertising clients, urging them to withdraw their business from the firm. It was not long before there were death warnings, bricks thrown through windows, and threats that the mother's house would be set on fire. Police had increased patrols to guard the family as protests were scheduled in the streets where the family resided, at the time of this story.

After the verdict, Drew was convicted on three misdemeanor charges for unauthorized computer access and faces a maximum sentence of three years and a \$300,000 fine (Zetter, 2009). The calls for punishment have not stopped and people still wish harm upon Lori Drew and her actions. Furthermore, the case has been thrown out due to what the judge claimed, "It basically leaves it up to a website owner to determine what a crime is, and therefore it criminalizes what would be a breach of contract." (Abell, 2009)

Described above is a classic case of a phenomenon called by many names e-vigilantism, digilantism, cyber vigilantism, or more commonly, Internet vigilantism.

This thesis is meant to act as a snapshot of society's perception and vigilante reaction to a specific case study: the deception and manipulation that led to the suicide of Megan Meier. Several relevant areas are introduced and discussed in an attempt to explicate Internet vigilantism and how it is framed by society. First, deviance is discussed in the real world and the cyber world. The foundation of vigilantism is discussed, including the psychology behind it and examples. Then, Internet Vigilantism is defined

and reviewed as well with the types of Internet vigilantism and the anonymity needed to either be believed or there for vigilantism to occur. Next, communication that has resulted in aggressive responses is reviewed. Specifically, free speech, guaranteed by the First Amendment, is discussed as it relates to what has been referred to as, “fighting words.” Then, Internet vigilantism is defined and reviewed. Framing theory is utilized to ascertain the perception society holds regarding this specifically and the resulting Internet vigilantism. As a means to study this phenomenon of Internet vigilantism, this study will look at the calls to action that occur online in messages that are allowed from either blog posting or news stories. These calls to action use a form of communication that relies on persuasion to get justice done.

This study aims to understand the emergence of this novel way of using the capabilities of the online media. This thesis offers a record of this specific case study, a detailed articulation of the communication that is referred to as Internet vigilantism and an assessment of how society currently feels about Internet vigilantism.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### *Deviance and Functionalism*

Deviance is explained in a myriad of ways in society from breaking rules to breaking laws. However, there are many ways to explain the actions of an individual or a group. Sociology has looked to understand the purpose of deviance and the positives and negatives to society. Deviance from a functionalist perspective aims to answer how deviance serves a society and how society reacts to deviance.

Structural-Functionalism is a theory in sociology that states that society is a system with a set of mutually interdependent relations. Various parts of that system are dependent upon other parts, and in combination, all the parts work together as a whole. Success or failure of one part has ramifications for other parts and for the entire system (Neuman, 2006, p. 71-72). Society is this system and while deviance is looked down upon, it is an actual and necessary part of society.

The functionalist approach to deviance argues that deviant behavior plays an important role in society for several reasons. Society draws the line between what is deviant and what isn't. Therefore the function that deviance produces is the understanding of rules, norms, and mores. Social deviance is a phenomenon that has existed in all societies where norms/rules/laws are present. Norms are guidelines for action. They inform us how we are to act, toward whom, where and when. Norms are accompanied by values. Values justify norms and provide believable reasons as to why we should conform (Pfohl, 1985, p. 135).

Denoting a behavior or action as deviant clarifies the moral boundaries of a society. This is an important function as it affirms the cultural values and norms

of a society for the members of that society. In addition to clarify the moral boundaries of society, deviant behavior can also promote social unity, but it does so at the expense of the deviant individuals, who are obviously excluded from the sense of unity derived from differentiating the non-deviant from the deviants. Finally, and quite out of character for the structural-functionalist approach, deviance is actually seen as one means for society to change over time. Deviant behaviors can imbalance societal equilibrium; in returning societal equilibrium, society is often forced to change. Thus, deviant behavior plays several important roles in society according to the approach. (Cragun & Cragun, 2008, p. 104)

There are two possibilities for how an individual will act in the face of social norms; conform or break. David Straker (2008) summarized norms as two kinds; there are understood social norms (internalized/implicit) and explicit social norms. Explicit social norms are not always laws (spitting or picking a nose in public). In reality, there is frequently a blend of agreeing and breaking of social norms in the ways people behave. Not all norms are followed strictly day to day. Furthermore, some behaviors in themselves reflect both conformity and deviance at once. Breaking the speed limit, which is technically a legal violation, but which is also conventional, usually on interstates and highways where motorists tend to follow the group.

Norms, including rules of etiquette, are learned through experience in a community. For example, children observe how adults and other children behave, absorb these norms, and learn their community's etiquette at an early age. Having internalized these norms, people value the rules, which control them (Pfohl, 1985, p. 135). This role-modeling process continues throughout life. Other community members correct those who do not conform to expectations. These are implicit norms and "although they sometimes remain unstated and can only be inferred from day-to-day interactions, are often addressed—and sometimes challenged—in society and discussions" (Burnett & Bonnici, 2003, p. 349). Problems arise when people go into other cultures with different norms, particularly when the differences are subtle.



As cited in Preece (2004, p. 58), widely accepted ways of behaving reflect the attitudes and values of a community or society at large - they are its norms (Morton, 2003). Social norms are people's beliefs about behaviors that are normal, acceptable, or even expected in a particular social context (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2006).

Deviance is about the study of many things but in regards about the study it is about two things: conformity and norms. The study of deviance is abject and can be about many things. Norms can change over time, depend on situational context, depend on statuses (time, age, race, gender), and any number of other factors. But it's not all relative. There are forms of deviance (and certain norms) that are about as universal as anything in the social sciences can be, such as when one harms a child.

As cited in DiMaggio et al (2001), technology's effects reflect not its inherent potential, as futurists assume, but active choices that are shaped by technology owners' perceived interests, existing organizational structures and routines, and by cultural norms (O'Mahoney & Barley 1999, Orlikowski & Iacono 2000).

People who want to enforce some preconceived norm to keep society more orderly practice these types of Internet vigilantism. "The problem, however, is that Internet shaming actually destroys social control and makes things more anarchic. It becomes very hard to regulate and stop," according to Daniel Solove, professor of law at George Washington University (as cited in Zetter, 2007). To enforce these notions of norms online, people must do one of two things: either they must remain anonymous, or the ability to remain anonymous, to keep the ability to dole out justice as netizens see fit or let chaos overtake the semblance of society online. While the latter is negative and most would be apt to say not likely, the first is regarded highly.

### *Vigilantism*

Vigilantism arises when some established order is perceived to be under threat from the transgression (or potential transgression) of institutionalized norms (Johnston, 1996, p. 229). Its origins lie in the medieval practice of *charivari* in 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century France. *Charivari* involved public ridicule and the taunting of individuals who had transcended community rules. Similarly, the punishment of deviance within online environments often involves the use of shaming, but within this context, this is done through textual means (Wall & Williams, 2007, p. 404).

Vigilantism is, in other words, a reaction to real or perceived deviance.

According to Johnston (1996), a vigilante act has the following attributes:

1. It involves planning and premeditation by those engaging in it;
2. Its participants are private citizens whose engagement is voluntary;
3. It is a form of autonomous citizenship and as such, constitutes a social movement;
4. It uses or threatens the use of force;
5. It arises when established order is under threat from the transgression, the potential transgression, or the imputed transgression of institutionalized norms;
6. It aims to control crime or other social infractions by offering assurances (or ‘guarantees’) of security both to the participants and to others (p. 220)

Burrows (1976) offer this example of vigilantism:

The Bald Knobbers of Missouri executed two men who had been responsible for the murder of a shopkeeper. Following the execution, a note was pinned to one of the

bodies bearing the vigilante warning to other potential miscreants: ‘Don’t fool with the wrong end of the mule’ (p. 173).

This example bears the hallmarks of a typical vigilante activity: the pursuit of criminal deviants, the righting of a criminal wrong by violent and other unofficial means, and the leaving of a warning—in this case literal—for others who might possess similar criminal dispositions (Johnston, 1996, p. 220).

To ascertain the actions but also the motives of why vigilantes do their vigilante acts helps understand the reasoning for call for actions and those that partake in vigilante justice.

### ***Psychology of Vigilantism***

Different punishment philosophies have been posited to explain the reasoning for underlying punishment goals including deterring others from committing crime, sanctioning individuals who have done harm, and incapacitating criminals from doing future harm to society (McFatter, 1978). The general consensus of crime seriousness among citizens suggests that moral reasoning is a product of socialization and punishment expresses condemnation of value violation (Darley, Carlsmith, & Robinson, 2000).

Research suggests that a number of factors may influence underlying motives to punish a perpetrator including type of crime, crime seriousness, perceived dangerousness of perpetrator, and recidivism (Darley, Carlsmith, & Robinson, 2000) (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002) (Sanderson, Zanna, & Darley, 2000).

These studies found that the default punishment motive was “just deserts” and that perceived crime seriousness, indexed largely by moral outrage, determined punishment severity. Thus, it appears that utilitarian benefits of

punishment (e.g., behavior modification) are secondary to the goal of reasserting community values (Cook, 2006, p. 4). Prosecutors are influenced in deciding whether to prosecute or dismiss a case by the social attributes of both the offender and victim (Boris, 1979). Crime and vigilante situations are often ambiguous and subject to interpretation (GreenBerg & Cohen, 1982).

If crime represents violations of social norms, retribution balances the injustice by reasserting the social value of the law (Cook, 2006, p. 4). The state of mind of the perpetrator determines what is psychologically required to balance the injustice because the crime is only an affront to social values if the crime was committed intentionally (Darley & Pittman, 2003, p. 324)

When a crime is intentionally committed, moral outrage may be evoked and the punishment motive may take the form of “just deserts,” which elicits a desire for punishment proportional to the severity of the crime committed (Cook, 2006, p. 5).

Contempt is generated toward those regarded as lower in the social hierarchy (e.g., failure to fulfill duties; disrespect for authority). Anger is the result of violation of a person’s autonomy (i.e., harm toward person or property). Disgust is the emotion evoked when someone behaves without dignity or strips another of dignity (e.g., child abuse, hate-crimes) (Cook, 2006, p. 5). Darley and Pittman’s (2003) model suggests when moral outrage is high the desire for retribution is the greatest. The exact causal sequence between motivations, cognitions, and emotions of moral reactions has yet to be determined. However, some evidence suggests that retribution is provoked by emotional reactions (Goldberg, Lerner, & Tetlock, 1999).

Goldberg, and colleagues (1999) actually found that unresolved anger (i.e., a perpetrator goes unpunished) carried over to increase sentences for offenders’ accused of unrelated crimes. The findings show the potential for increased anger (moral outrage) to influence the desire for “just deserts” punishment (Cook, 2006, p. 6).

Further research indicates that whether people take part in or approve of vigilante behavior depends not only on the characteristics of the participants and the environmental context of the event. A major factor appears to be whether or not one identifies with either the victim of the vigilante behavior or the person taking part in the vigilante behavior. It appears that a major reason these factors are important is that they contribute to the attribution of behavior as internally or externally caused. If behavior that harms or violates the rights of another person is seen as a response to the behavior of that person (externally caused), it is more often seen as justified. If that behavior is seen as a coming from the traits or attributes of the actor (internally cause), it is more often seen as unjustified (Neapolitan, 1987, p. 135).

If vigilantism is to be studied, then there must be a reason as to why people do vigilante acts. Not only that but there must be a cases in which to study. While vigilantism still exists in the presence it also has gone into places that society considers an extension of itself in the Internet. This leads to a new phenomenon of Internet vigilantism.

### ***Internet Vigilantism***

Acts of Internet vigilantism as a mode of informal regulation within online communities is characterized by the same attributes. In this case, however, force is used to shame or punish perpetrators in some manner. McLure (2000) likens the Internet to the “wild west,” saying it is “a lawless area where people can be controlled through vigilante acts. Because the electronic frontier is still generally a lawless territory, vigilantism is often the preferred—and sometimes the only effective—response to what cyber settlers perceive as crimes against both property and people” (p. 463).

### *Internet vigilantism types*

Badaracco and Useem (1997) first described the phenomena of Internet vigilantism describing of an occurrence of the Intel Corporation and shareholders holding the company accountable for faulty computer chips. Since then, many more cases of Internet vigilantism have occurred and were documented. These cases also can be understood as online calls to action. Internet vigilantes use different techniques as a form of cyber social control. Most types of vigilantism, and thusly Internet vigilantism, rely upon individuals to take it upon themselves social control to correct and invoke a normal aspect of social life in the cyber world.

Social control is associated with the *normative* aspect of social life. [It] refers broadly to virtually all of the human practices and arrangements that contribute to social order and, in particular, that influence people to conform. These practices may be intentional ... or unintentional. It refers more narrowly to how people define and respond to deviant behavior. It thus includes punishment of every kind as well as the demand for compensation by a victim of misconduct, sorcery, gossip, scolding, or facial expression of disapproval such as a scowl or stares. It also includes various modes of intervention by third parties, such as mediation, arbitration, and adjudication. It includes prescriptions, proscriptions, and other kinds of exhortations and promulgations that define how people should or should not behave ... and ... all manner of mechanisms and arrangements for processing people with complaints and people defined as deviants. (Black, 1984, p. 5)

In other words, Internet vigilantes attack people they may not even know in the belief that shame, for example, is necessary to ensure social order. Without the threat of shame, people would transgress norms, making society less orderly and civil. But as

some of these incidents demonstrate, although shaming is done to further social order, it paradoxically can have the opposite result (Solove D. J., 2007, p. 102).

The different types of Internet vigilantism are debatable. There is no single repository to say what is and is not Internet vigilante behavior. This phenomenon is studied on a case-to-case basis. Searching online brings cases about scam baiting, identity theft activism, cyber/public shaming, counter-terrorism, and anti-pedophilia activism.

Scam baiting is practiced in retaliation against those who try to steal or scam money from unsuspecting online users. The scammers often cloak under the guise of people who are in positions of authority (or those related or connected to them) who are in need of a conduit for the safe retrieval of huge amounts of money. Internet users are often promised a substantial reward or commission for helping them navigate some bureaucratic bottleneck to retrieve the large sum. In the process, however, victims are lured into divulging their bank account or credit card number and other confidential financial information. Those posing as wealthy Nigerians in powerful government positions and with a large cache of money that needs to be spirited out of the country before it gets taken away by an exploitative regime are popular examples of this type of scammers. They take advantage of “gullible” members of Internet traffic. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation,

While such an invitation impresses most law-abiding citizens as a laughable hoax, millions of dollars in losses are caused by these schemes annually. Some victims have been lured to Nigeria, where they have been imprisoned against their will, in addition to losing large sums of money. The Nigerian government is not sympathetic to victims of these schemes, since the victim actually conspires to remove funds from Nigeria in a manner that is contrary to Nigerian law. The schemes themselves violate section 419 of the Nigerian criminal code, hence the label “419 fraud,” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008).

Against these kinds of infractions, vigilant citizens practice scam baiting. In this scheme, baiters enter into a dialogue with scammers simply to waste their time and resources. Scam baiters engage offenders in nonsensical dialogues to keep them away from victimizing others. Some call scam baiting the practice of “screwing around with the minds of deserving thieves” (Author, 2008).

Identity theft activism is similar to scam baiting. Those who practice both use the same methods of attack to prevent harm upon those that have had their identity stolen. Those that practice this form of Internet vigilantism do it out of a way to prevent and guard those who identity thieves go after.

Public shaming is another form of Internet vigilantism. A case involving a young woman in South Korea explains the infraction public shaming aims to remedy and how public shaming is done.

A woman was on the subway in her native South Korea when her dog defecated on the train. The woman made no move to clean up the mess, and several fellow travelers got agitated. The woman allegedly grew belligerent in response. One of the train riders took pictures of the incident with a camera phone and posted them on a popular Web site. Netizens soon began to call her unflattering nicknames, and issued a call for more information about her. According to one blog that has covered the story, “within days, her identity and her past were revealed. Humiliated in public and indelibly marked, the woman reportedly quit her university (Krim, 2005, p. D1)

Counter terrorism is another type of vigilantism observed these days on the Internet. Here, practitioners often scour blogs, chat rooms, and message forums in search of potential terrorists. Often, cyber anti-terrorists hand over information gathered to law



enforcement agencies to help them build a case. It is already documented “In the News” section of this thesis.

Anti-pedophile activism is probably the most well known type of Internet vigilantism because of its exposure in recent television programs like *Dateline: To catch a predator* and *Perverted Justice* that have attempted to capture these predators.

“People don’t mind doing (online vigilantism) as long as it doesn’t cost them anything—as long as there’s very little risk of retribution,” says Robert Kurzban, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and author of works on social exclusion and stigmatization. “But when people have to pay a cost to punish others, they tend to shy away from it” (Zetter, *Cyberbullying suicide stokes the Internet fury machine*, 2007)

Online vigilantism is on the rise because the so-called vigilantes can maintain the anonymity that keeps them safe from the repercussions of their actions. The relative freedom this anonymity provides can result to the creation of a mob-like mentality to correct the actions of the wayward and to avenge those who have been wronged. Will these actions result to stricter Internet regulations?

People also partake in Internet vigilantism because they fear no repercussion. Such is the case because the Internet accords users a high degree of anonymity.

Solove (2006) argues that current laws regulating the Internet provide a form of immunity that may lead to irresponsibility and the lessening of privacy protection. Researchers investigating computer-mediated communication and cyber culture have been fascinated by users’ stories of egocentricity and aggressive behaviors online. Similar to real-life Jekyll and Hyde, people seemingly adopt self-absorbed, antisocial,

and abusive behaviors online that are vastly different from how they act in the real world.

(Solove D. , 2006)

The elements of perceived anonymity online, and the safety and security of being behind a computer screen, aid in freeing individuals from traditionally constraining pressures of society, conscience, morality, and ethics to behave in a normative manner. The use of pseudonyms or pseudonymous e-mail or user accounts also makes it difficult for victims to easily determine the identity of offenders, and also presumably contributes to the freedom an offender has on the Internet. Moreover, it is generally not illegal to use textual communication to mistreat, harass, or tease others because of First Amendment protections (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008, p. 134).

With regards to anonymity, what works for transgressors also works in favor of Internet vigilantes. The more people can spread falsehoods or invade privacy without accountability or fear of repercussions, the more likely they are to do so. Anonymous speech can cause reputational harm, and it can undermine the ability of those harmed to seek redress. “Anonymity, therefore, hobbles the pursuit of legal remedies for privacy violations and defamation,” (Solove D. J., 2007, p. 146).

Glenn Harlan Reynolds explains why there is a lack of hefty libel suits against anonymous bloggers, and explains why blogging is its own culture and deserving of its own standards of review by the courts. He argues that such suits are rare because most bloggers do not have deep pockets, the threat of suit is frowned upon by the blogging community, “actual malice” is difficult to prove, and fast corrections of erroneous information are easier than in other media of communication (Reynolds, 2006).

While anonymity reduces control, vigilantes see it as the only form of protection from people (such as hackers, spammers, pedophiles, terrorists) who do wrong. This control is necessary if civility and control occurs online. While there is no physical means to stop someone from getting online, there are many ways to communicate control to others online.

### ***Anonymity***

Within the realm of Internet Vigilantism rests one of the purposes why these people do these acts; they simply will not get caught. This aspect of anonymity causes people to do certain things that they normally would not do otherwise. Anonymity is defined by either not being identifiable or choosing to withhold identifiable information online.

This further complicates things because it allows for false identities and other persona's that people will live through whether name, avatar, or anonymously throughout the net. Therefore the axiom of identity and anonymity must be looked at more closely under a term that acknowledges both: digital identity.

*Digital identity* can be simply defined as the digital information that creates the image of an individually identifiable person. Digital identity is *the means whereby data are associated with a digital persona* (Goddyn, 2001, p. 6). Furthermore it is hard to distinguish between the people who try to hide their identity and those that wish to remain anonymous that willingly take part in online society than those that just want a pseudonym to cause problems.

Anonymity is a method of privacy protection. In this respect, *anonymity is a part of privacy*. A common belief is that those who choose to communicate anonymously via strong cryptography or other cryptographic protections on privacy have 'something to hide', and that normal upright citizens have no need for anonymity (Goddyn, 2001, p. 12). A person can readily create a new persona, blog, website under a pseudonym or can post anonymous comments to blogs or online discussion groups. According to a survey, 55 percent of bloggers use pseudonyms rather than their real identities (Fox & Lenhart, 2006).

Goddyn (2001, p. 15) states that anonymity does four things. Anonymity encourages reporting, information seeking, communicating, sharing and self-help for

conditions that are stigmatizing and/or which can put the person at a strategic disadvantage or are simply very personal. Anonymity allows for the ability to obtain a resource or encourage a condition using means that involve illegality or are morally impugnable, but in which the goal sought is seen as the lesser evil. Anonymity protects donors of a resource or those taking action seen as necessary but unpopular from subsequent obligations, demands, labeling, entanglements or retribution. Anonymity also increases the likelihood that judgments and decision-making will be carried out according to designated standards and not personal characteristics deemed to be irrelevant.

Anonymity can preserve privacy by allowing people to speak freely without being publicly identified, yet it can undermine privacy by allowing people to more easily invade the privacy of others (Solove D. J., 2007, p. 141). By being able to either find out information online or speak freely, this allows for a new age version of mob rules and vigilante behavior to occur.

### ***Communication of Social Control***

Communication across the Internet with, in respect to Internet vigilantism, is through blogs and message boards of various websites. These communications can be construed through various paradigms that need to be protected by the First Amendment. The aspects that come into question are whether the words presented by online vigilantes are protected by the first amendment.

The first amendment protects speech but has been discerned through various rulings that have affect on the Internet culture. The issue is whether or not Internet speech is threatening. The beginning of comes with “The discredited bad tendency test permitted suppression of almost any expression that presented a vague danger to social or personal

interests,” (Lee & Middleton, 2009, p. 44). The expressed interest is similar to the self-defense issue. People need to be protected from physical action, but people also need to be protected from a person’s words. People must be protected from threatening words, and then there needs to be a test on whether words or actions are deemed threatening. Thusly, a clear-and-present-danger test, if applied literally, provides more protection for freedom of expression by prohibiting speech only when there is clear evidence of an incitement to lawless action (Lee & Middleton, 2009, p. 44).

That law review also states that free speech isn’t protected from other aspects: (a) it creates a clear and present danger of imminent lawless action; (b) it constitutes fighting words; (c) the speech, film, and so forth are *obscene*; (d) the speech constitutes *defamation*; (e) the speech violates regulations against false *or* deceptive advertising; and (f) the government can demonstrate a compelling interest (Giles & Leets, 1997, p. 262).

A two-tier theory of free speech (Sunstein, 1993), some expression was protected by the first amendment but other expression was not because it contributes nothing to self-fulfillment or to the robust debate that the first amendment is supposed to foster (Lee & Middleton, 2009, p. 46).

While political, religious and other various forms of speech are protected there are a few that are not. Justice Murphy's opinion for a unanimous Court rejected Chaplinsky's First Amendment argument by saying, in now famous words, that the "classes of speech, the prevention and punishment of which have never been thought to raise any Constitutional problem," included "the lewd and obscene, the pro-fane, the libelous, and the insulting or 'fighting' words - those which by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace,” (568, 1942). Only words that amount to a

slap in the face, expression that constitutes fighting words, are beyond constitutional protection, the court has ruled (Lee & Middleton, 2009, p. 47). The Supreme Court defines fighting words as those that “by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace,” (568, 1942).

However there needs to be a defining point. Expression constitutes fighting words only if it is so offensive as to have “a direct tendency to cause acts of violence by the person to whom, individually, the remark is addressed,” (518, 1972). According to other authors, fighting words constitute “speech that holds no intellectual content to be conveyed to the listener, but is merely a provocative emotional message intended and likely to incite an immediate, violent response,” (Nowak, Rotunda, & Young, 1986, pp. 942-943). Subsequent developments have narrowed the class of fighting words considerably, but at least in theory, the Supreme Court still does not view the presence of "words" as a sufficient condition for testing the regulation of fighting words against First Amendment standards (Schauer, 2004, p. 22).

The first case of the terms “fighting words” originated before the Internet but can still hold some resonance with the new medium.

The fighting words doctrine originated in the case of *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* in 1941. Chaplinsky was convicted for calling a marshal in Rochester, New Hampshire, a “goddamned racketeer and a damned Fascist.” Although the marshal did not strike Chaplinsky, the court said that “goddamned racketeer” and “damned Fascist” were epithets likely to provoke the average person to physical retaliation. Chaplinsky therefore had no first amendment protection because he had uttered fighting words. Fighting words are outside of constitutional protection, the Court said, because they are “no essential part of any exposition of ideas, and are of such slight social value as to step to truth that any benefit that may be derived from them is clearly outweighed by the social interest in order and morality,” (Lee & Middleton, 2009, p. 48).  
In a similar case:

In *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul* (Court, 1992), the Court ruled that the ordinance was an unconstitutional content regulation. Writing for the majority, Justice Antonin Scalia said the St. Paul ordinance was unconstitutional because it prohibited only fighting words based on “race, color, creed, religion, or gender,” while presumably permitting hate speech motivated by the political party, union membership, homosexuality, or other protected interests. “The First Amendment,” Justice Scalia said, “does not permit St. Paul to impose special prohibitions on those speakers who express views on disfavored subjects,” (Lee & Middleton, 2009, p. 48).

What is truly hard to understand and figure out is whether or not Internet threats are true

is to understand the context of the text. The Supreme Court has ruled on that as well.

In *Watts v. United States*, as in other cases, the Court ruled that vague threats, emotional hyperbole, and mere advocacy of violence are constitutionally protected speech. Only “true threats” can be punished. The Supreme Court has not formulated a test for determining when speech becomes a true threat, but the court has said the context is important (Lee & Middleton, 2009, pp. 49-50).

However this is not to say that one can simply use the First Amendment as a protection

for any words or actions that use hate speech. The court said the First Amendment does

not protect violence or speech that incites unlawful action. But speech does not lose

protection, the Court said, “Simply because it may embarrass others or coerce them into action,” (Lee & Middleton, 2009, p. 50).

Only recently have Internet cases come to the Federal Courts and had a ruling in regards to Internet speech and threats.

In an Internet case, a federal appeals court ruled 6-5 that posters and a website could be halted because they threatened doctors who perform abortions. The posters did not advocate that the doctors be physically harmed, but several doctors testified they were terrified, and many quit providing abortions.

The Ninth Circuit ruled that the posters and websites created a true threat that intentionally intimidated doctors, causing them to believe that the Coalition of Life:

In a dissent joined by four judges, Judge Alex Kozinski wrote that the “Wanted” posters and website contained protected expression by speakers who

never threatened to harm a doctor. The posters and web page, Kozinski said, explicitly foreswore the use of violence and advocated lawful means of persuading doctors to stop performing abortions or punishing them if they continued. (Lee & Middleton, 2009, p. 51)

Aspects of and the use of fighting words brings about the phenomena and understanding of Internet Vigilantism. These aspects lead towards an online extension of mob rules when people realize what has occurred and vigilante justice must occur. This extension is known as a call to action.

### ***Calls to Action***

After the events that happened to Megan Meier, the outcry for justice and punishment online was strong. Many of the people who called for justice were performing a “call to action”: words that offer the opportunity for and encourage the prospect to take action. Calls to action are motivations for the visitor to move further into the “sales” process (Eisenberg, Eisenberg, & Davis, 2006). Furthermore the term goes along with specific terms that are used with calls to action with “point of action”: specific locations in a presentation that offer the opportunity and encourage the prospect to take action by providing assurance (that compliance will result in reward) (Eisenberg, Eisenberg, & Davis, 2006).

People seek out online ways to persuade those that can and will punish others by using terms into actions. MIP (mass interpersonal persuasion) builds on an experience designed to change attitudes, behaviors, or both (Fogg, 2008). When calls for action occur, the persuasion that is used is designed to evoke an implicit reaction. Even more, MIP focuses on changing people’s thoughts and behaviors, not simply amusing or informing them (Fogg, 2008).



Calls to action can be implied and studied under various types of influence strategies. Fogg said, “Again, a few words can put powerful persuasion dynamics into play,” (Fogg, 2008, p. 5). Fogg states, “Social influence is a broad area, with flexible boundaries and competing ways to categorize influence strategies,” (Fogg, 2008, p. 5). This ultimately comes down to various types of influence tactics. There are numerous ways to categorize influence tactics however; certain ones tend to lend themselves towards calls to action.

**RQ 1:** What types of “calls to action” exist?

Strategies produced are in accordance with previous studies using the coding scheme of influence choices developed by Hirokawa and Miyahara (Hirokawa & Miyahara, 1986) and by Harper and Hirokawa (Harper & Hirokawa, 1988). This scheme is based on a careful review of a wide range of typologies of influence (Schlueter, Barge, & Blankenship, 1990). Schlueter and company brought it all together by binding Marwell and Schmitt’s 1967 study and Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin’s 1981 study. (See Table 1 for full breakdown)

Each section is based up how persuasion is used to produce rewards. There are four types of communication-based persuasion: Reward-based, Punishment-based, Altruism-based, and Rationale-based.

Reward-based communication entails six different forms to entice people to do what is asked. Ingratiation is where a person offers goods or service before compliance. Promise is where a person promises goods or services in exchange for compliance. Debt is where someone calls upon another the obligations owed to them, to induce compliance. Positive esteem is where a person will use the good will of others to ask for compliance.

Positive moral appeal is where someone says that another will feel better because of his or her decision for compliance. Allurement is where something outside of basic conditions from the asker causes compliance.

**RQ 2:** What is the frequency of “reward-based” persuasion communication in calls to action online?

Punishment-based communication also entails six different forms to coerce others into compliance. Threat is where someone poses a threat to force compliance. Aversive stimulation is where someone is continually punished till compliance. Negative esteem is where others will not think of you in a high standard if you do not comply. Negative moral is where a person will think negatively of himself or herself because they did not comply. Ultimatum is where if action is not taken, others will be hurt, embarrassed or offended. Warning is where people could be hurt, embarrassed or offended if compliance does not occur.

**RQ 3:** What is the frequency of “punishment-based” persuasion communication in calls to action online?

Altruism-based only has four different forms to ask people to do what is asked. Counsel is where a person is asked to help overcome a problem/issue with a group to reach compliance. Favor is where someone rewards a person before requesting compliance. Duty is where responsibility is asked of those to get compliance. Altruism is where a person requests another to engage for them for compliance.

**RQ 4:** What is the frequency of “altruism-based” persuasion communication in calls to action online?

Rationale-based has three forms that logically asked for compliance. Direct request

is where someone asks for compliance. Disguised request is where someone makes an issue or situation worse, when it actually isn't, to gain compliance. Explanation is where someone gives reasons why compliance should occur.

**RQ 5:** What is the frequency of “rationale-based” persuasion communication in calls to action online?

Schlueter, Barge, and Blankenship used their information from two major previous studies and incorporated them together to form their own typology. The information used to understand persuasion and influence were *Dimensions of Compliance-Gaining Behavior* (Marwell and Schmitt, 1967) and *Validation in compliance-gaining strategies* (Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin, 1981).

Invariably the control of the Internet has become so little publicly that people look elsewhere for comfort and stability from the real world into the cyber one. “In the absence of an effective public sheriff, you will have these private ones. (Crews)

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

The purpose of this research is to record the public's response to the Megan Meier case and assess the way in which public opinion, in the form of message board postings, types of persuasion found in postings and frequency of types of postings. Identifying and interpreting relevant communication on the topic can conduct an exploratory qualitative content analysis.

#### *Qualitative Research Methods*

According to Lindlof (1995), qualitative research methods are effective for communication projects seeking to paint a picture of a social issue and to interpret that picture with the words and experiences of the individuals involved. Lindlof (1995) defines the key concepts involved in this type of research:

[This] approach tries to bring us close to the performances and practices of communication. The qualitative inquirer seeks somehow to get inside this action. The research 'instrument' is the human investigator who reflexively becomes part of both the action and the ensuing description. The 'human subject' is the other, whom we respect and from whom we learn much. The 'data' are texts, which change over time as the researcher's interests, knowledge, and abilities change. The 'products' are typically full of voices, stories, events, interpretations, hypotheses, and claims (p. xi).

#### *Message Board Methodology*

Message boards are areas on Internet sites where individuals write messages and express their thoughts and feelings on a particular topic. Posted messages can be original thoughts, independent of other postings, or can be in response to previous postings creating a thread or dialog. Message boards can be "open" allowing anyone can read, post, or respond to messages; or "closed," where in order to read or participate in debates, individuals must register with the site and obtain a password to gain access.

The value of sampling message boards is three-fold; first, they offer a sample of the population not restricted by geography or research constraints such as money and range, and second they allow for genuine expression of thought not restricted by experimental setting or perceived obligations, third, postings serve as archival data available for research.

Gill expressed the differences between blogs and the mainstream media: Unlike newspapers or television news, blogging is not capital-intensive; there is no centralized registry, no editorial oversight. All a writer needs is access to a computer (Gill, 2004). Open message boards are generally perceived and acknowledged by users and members as being in the public domain, freely available to anyone with access to the Internet (Pacagnella, 1997). Gill also goes into how blogs and message boards use the internet to not only change the geography and information received from the communities created online with people communicating across the world.

The network removes a major impediment to developing and maintaining social networks: geography. In turn, these social networks support participatory journalism – journalism that relies upon two-way communication, such as e-mail, chat, message boards or blogs. (Gill, 2004)

Because of this fact, it means that many of the message boards for this study, the writers could be anywhere around this world in which the original issue of Megan Meier came to be known and had to react and thus express themselves online for a purpose.

Message boards allow individuals to articulate their thoughts free of influence or external variables found in laboratory settings. Though interview questions and probes can be used to initiate topic areas, clarify points, and ask for elaboration, as Esterberg (2002) notes, in an interview setting, “[participants] may not be willing to talk honestly or

discuss intimate details about their personal lives if they do not feel some level of trust.”  
(p. 91)

Finally, in posting a message there is “implied license to read or even archive the information it contains” (Mann & Stewart, 2000, p. 46). As such it was not considered necessary to contact and seek consent from the website manager or the individuals posting and responding to messages on the board. The lifespan of messages is variable. Depending on the host and their policy, messages may remain indefinitely or may be removed from the server at a designated or unspecified time.

### ***Collecting and Analyzing Data***

The process for choosing to do this research simple regarding choice of sources, the goal is to look at Internet message boards. Regarding those chosen is different because not all sources are equal nor are they going to have message boards. Ideally sources would be the news leaders worldwide but also those that chose to carry the Megan Meier story. However, while coverage was vast, it did however change once looking for sources that allowed feedback and discussions via message boards. Therefore how sources were chosen were those of googling Megan Meiers in not only a basic Internet search but also an Internet news search through Google dealing with stories started in November 2007 regarding Megan Meier. Furthermore while not all sources are equal it is relevant to state that in the month of November 96 news stories were written worldwide, 101 were written in December 2007. Sites listed as blogs were chosen for the same reasons, coverage of the Megan Meier story and if a message board was allowed for feedback from followers. Such sources that were taken away due to not allowing feedback or a message board took away such notables as CNN, LA Times, Fox news and

NBC/MSNBC in regards to sources. The blogs chosen were not based upon anything in particular, just that my original source for picking the topic was a Wired Magazine article regarding Internet vigilantism. See Table 2 for all sources and number of total postings.

### ***Message Board Assessment***

When looking through the message board postings there are certain trends that come out as a result of people's reactions to the stories and people's reaction to "calls for action" against Lori Drew.

A call for action is, a communication message from an individual calling for vigilante action to occur to another via either online communication (shaming, bullying, etc...) or actual physical occurrences that can be identified as vigilante actions (threats, physical destruction, or violent behavior). Thusly, the communications used will tend towards actions through postings that give information for either communication or physical violence.

The postings can occur many ways but typically they can be coded as such:

1. Positive/Negative- does or does not have a call to action
2. Support/Action against- supports vigilante behavior or action against those that partake in vigilante behavior.
3. Active/Passive- either references the story or does not
4. Continuous thread/Original comment- self explanatory

See Table 4 (Persuasion types coded)

Calls for action are coded as such:

1. Reward-based
2. Punishment-based

3. Altruism-based

4. Rationale-based

See Table 1 (Persuasion types)



## Chapter 4

### Results

It is not hard to distinguish whether or not people want justice based on the words they used to describe an event. Internet vigilante justice is a worldwide occurrence. While it is significant that people take wrong/heinous real world or online events and decide to punish others is the world we live in now. However, the words used online that perpetuate such an event cannot truly be distinguished with a correlation of specific words. However the persuasion used in this study is clearly documented and the number of “calls to action” occurrences in a small sample from 9 websites will be used to see how often calls to action occur, the persuasion used as well as seeing how many people are anonymous when posting and if they garner any response.

Very few people and websites are for true anonymity. To acknowledge other names used, names used online are hard to track and verify even with sign-in restrictions because there are ways to cover an individuals tracks with fake e-mails or multiple screen names. None of the major news sites in the sample (Washington Post, ABC, CBS (2 samples), and the New York Times) have any anonymous posters and require a log in. There are 3 blogs used and 4 samples from those blogs. All three allow for anonymity; however few choose to use it. Those posting under the name of Anonymous or Anon (shorten version) only occurred 25 times. Without the ability to consider repeat postings that is a very small amount considering there were 1577 individual posts in the blogs used. That is less than 1.5% of those posts. Those that responded to an anonymous post were even fewer with only 4 responses total. The name of Anonymous/Anon are either

the name picked out by an individual or a name that is picked out, similar to guest, by the website.

Calls for action out of the sample size 1/10 of all posts equate to 249 total posts. Of those posts 60% did not have a “call to action” (negative), which leaves 40% (positive) to have called for action. Those that made a call for action then either supported vigilante justice or did not. Those that made a call for action nearly 90% (support) involved were supportive of vigilante justice. While only 10% (action against) were against those that called for vigilante justice. In regards to the content of those calls to action those that related to the story were either active or passive. Active meant that they referenced the story. Passive meant either a reply back or no reference to the story. Active references were 65% and passive references were 35%. In all the responses there were few replies to previous posts. This was counted by whether a name or reference to a previous post was given as a continuous post; if none were given they were counted as an original thread.

The persuasions used in these “calls to action” are based of the 1990 Schlueter, Barge, and Blankenship study that used taxonomy of influence strategies. The number of occurrences is as such in Table 3.

The results for reward-based persuasion are small. The number of total occurrences is eighteen, spread over the six different types. Ingratiation occurred 28% of the time with five total occurrences. Promise was the highest ranking reward-based type with eight total occurrences accounting for 44%. Debt and positive-moral only occurred twice, holding only 11%. There was no coding of Positive esteem. Allurement occurred only once, accounting for 6%.

Punishment-based results occurred more often and had the highest number of occurrences. Threat occurred seventeen total times for 19% of the time. Aversive stimulation occurred eleven times accounting for 12%. Negative esteem occurred fourteen times and was 16% of total occurrences. Negative moral occurred twenty-eight times and accounted for 31%. Ultimatum occurred only once and 1% of total occurrences. Warning had nineteen total occurrences, accounting for 21%.

Altruism-based communications were counted thirty-two total times. Counsel occurred six times and was 19% of altruism-based results. Favor was only counted once for 3% of the results. Duty occurred fourteen times, which is 44% of the altruism-based types. Altruism was coded eleven times occurring 34% total times.

Rationale-based results had the second highest number of total occurrences. Direct request had the highest number of calls for action with 41 total accounting for 46% of all rationale-based results. Disguised request only had sixteen-counted accounting for only 18% of all rationale-based results. Explanation had the next highest total count with thirty-two total counted, this accounted for 36% of all rationale-based types.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

This is an exploratory study into Internet vigilantism based upon the statements from those commenting on the Megan Meier case. The information that is sought and understood from this study can only strengthen the understanding of the Internet vigilantism phenomena, however the limits of this study is that it only looks at the Megan Meier case. However, by only seeking to understand what happened in response to this case the study allows for a better understanding of how to prevent and control Internet vigilante attacks.

Research question one asked what types of calls to action exist? A better taxonomy is necessary; however, the taxonomy from Schlueter et al. is a great starting off point. In total the taxonomy used only positive-esteem was not used in any section. With several others not getting more than two counted (debt, positive-moral, allurements, and ultimatum) it is necessary to rethink the addition of a “reward-based” category in something that seeks vigilante justice.

Reward-based typology is not counted all that much with a total of eighteen times counted. An example of Ingratiation comes from the Washington Post group, “say your prayers every night thanking God that you do not have a child that suffers from severe anxiety or depression.” While there is no direct call for action, for vigilante justice, there is a call to action to stop judging Megan Meier thusly in concordance with the nature of the definition. Compliance is asked after the request to say prayers. An example of a

promise is from the Post-Dispatch: "I am going to contact anyone I can get a hold of in the news media to look at this story because something needs to be done." These two examples typify the type of reward-based persuasion types as the posts with calls to action usually had more than one type of persuasion used.

The second lowest was the Altruism based persuasion types. Some postings that show a good example of this type come from the larger Wired article. Duty comes from this type of request; "I want the Meiers to start a civil action so a court can stamp the Drews with guilt in the name of the community. The rest of us need to shun the adult Drews, until they acknowledge the enormity of their action, drop all request to be forgiven, but work to atone and to mitigate any further action that could harm the Meiers." While this acknowledges a punishment based call to action, it also shows altruism that other actions benefit this posters call to action, "I hope everyone in their area makes her life and the life of her entire family a living hell," (Post-Dispatch).

Rationale-based calls to action were and are the easiest to notice. Rationale-based calls to action had the second highest total. A direct request can be negative and direct as, "too bad they don't handle this like in the old days and hang Lori from a tree," (larger CBS source) to "They should give the other people's names. Public opinion will be their justice. Make those hateful people own up to what they have done," (Post-Dispatch). A disguised request was difficult to code because ultimately it is up to interpretation of what constitutes disguised however a few were noticeable, "I cannot believe charges have not been filed This is not "bullying." This was reckless endangerment of a minor and child abuse. This mother should also have her ability to have custody of her own child called into question." The reasoning behind this Post-Dispatch comment is the use of the term

“also” and “question”. The terminology used for a disguised request creates a necessary question in this call to action, with no real overt use of a specific call to action and what should be done but rather asking shouldn't this be done. When explanations were used it was when a commenter explained the reasoning behind their specific call to action. This post from the Post-Dispatch typifies this notion:

Any adult that would do this to another child on purpose is a sick human being, and right up they're next to sex offenders. The work the same way as a sex offender, and the manipulation of a child like that should have laws that deal with sick adults like that. It is like giving a child a weapon, or telling them to hurt other children, that woman told Megan a child to kill herself. You are a bad person and everybody hates you. Have a shitty rest of your life. The world would be a better place without you. That is murder, it is the same as telling a child, to touch them self because it would feel good, that is a CSC crime and punishable by time in prison."

Punishment-based types had the most occurrences and would be suspected due to the nature of this case. Threats were understood as the action in which the person literally used words in which they doled out punishment, “The Meiers are courageous, because if I was in their position, I'd take justice into my own hands- literally. I'd wrap my hands around those other people's necks,” (Post-dispatch). Aversive stimulation was interesting in that it literally was the act of seeking further punishment and how often that occurred. A commenter in the Post-Dispatch wrote, “There names should not only be publicized but they should be ostracized from any contact with any other child/teen. What they did was a criminal act and they should be prosecuted as being responsible for Megan's death. They need to be really careful: as my grandmother always said--what goes around comes around. What they did has left an imprint on their daughter, also, and, subsequently she shares in their guilt." An example of negative moral and negative esteem actually occurred directly in this post (Post-Dispatch), “I can not believe that a grown adult (A mother) would help her child make a fake my space page to mess with a

young girls emotions! What a horrible thing to do to a young girl with a low self-esteem. I am mortified with this women's actions and only hope she has a hard time looking into the mirror every morning knowing she help cause a thirteen year old girl to kill herself. I could see if it was a child doing this to another child, but for god sakes lady you are grown women. My heart goes out to this child's family and I hope one day they find peace again. How do we expect to have a greater future if we do not teach out children compassion and forgiveness? If we our self's show them that is ok to hurt another they will only fall into our foot steps." Ultimatum only occurred once and was difficult to find. The context of the whole passage led to the understanding of an ultimatum but this part is key, "Why should her identity be protected? Why should her reputation be spared? Let her speak, if she has a defense. Only understand, she has already admitted what she has done."

The information gathered from this study shows that there are four common themes in how calls to action worked in this case. First, most people condemn what happened and say that the person who created the problem has a negative moral impact on society. Second, people who made a call to action made it predominately by making it a direct request. Third, most calls to action were understood to be punishment based. Lastly, calls to action were used together to make requests.

Most people were not against vigilante justice as much as they were for justice. With nearly 90% people wanted these people to be punished. This could be from just a simple comment of justice required like, "These people should have a serious I mean serious penalty for doing this..." (ABC sample), to elaborate stories about what should be done, "I live in Berlin, Germany (Europe). And if I could afford it, I would sit in a plane

right now, just 2 visit this nice neighborhood; I would just sit in front of that rotten woman's house forever, just 2 stare at her, making her feel my hatred. Forever” (Blumerle comments). These people are adamant of the absurdity of what happened to Megan Meier's and the outrage is seen in their words. The support is there for justice to be had but it is dependent upon the story or the author on whether or not justice or vigilante justice occurs.

Furthermore, what can be taken from this study is that the information released is crucial to controlling public outrage. Sarah Wells, the woman who first released Lori Drew's name, claimed she figured it out cause no one else would post it. This leads to privacy issues.

Interesting to note is that people who call for justice leave a trail to figure out who they are by registering a name. The idea of anonymity online is a large one with most people wanting to stay anonymous (Fox & Lenhart, 2006) by using pseudonyms versus using a real name. However, Daniel Solove also said what anonymity is, “Anonymity can preserve privacy by allowing people to speak freely without being publicly identified, yet it can undermine privacy by allowing people to more easily invade the privacy of others (Solove D. J., 2007, p. 141).” Therefore the issue is, if there truly is anonymity online and if so what can be done to protect privacy but at the same time punish those that abuse the power that is given. This is the result of a third stage bigger narrative of Internet vigilantism. Those who perform Internet vigilante acts create real world-effects. That the actions from vigilantes have consequences, break the rule of law and are deviant in nature. Further study should be looked at this stage.



The persuasion used is not unlike most forms of calls to action, however this time it is more necessary to look into vigilante repercussions that causes pain whether truthfully or wrongly. The information infers that people ask for punishment as well as condemning the actions for what happened. Most information gathered does not say what to expect other than a call to action could occur. The information needed to understand this aspect within a study would have to be similar cases but also look at the websites used. As websites grow, news changes from central gatekeepers to more individualistic, it is going to be harder to study these cases. Websites themselves that generate calls to action will have to be looked at more closely.

With regards to the research question regarding where calls to action occur more, that is debatable. While the majority of responses were to the initial story in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, blogs nearly produced totally the same amount. When looking at the information of major news sources, those nationally recognized (Washington Post, New York Times, ABC and CBS) the postings gathered did not equal those from the other sources used. The types of persuasion used in regards to blogs versus major news sites as well as major news sources differ very little. There were no significant differences either sub group other than which has the initial story of the Megan Meier's suicide.

This study had a purpose when it was started, to find out why people partake in Internet vigilantism. This study did not go into the psychology or literal understanding of why people do Internet vigilantism. However, it did see how practitioner's used communication to possibly persuade others to help dole out justice. Simply put, Internet vigilantism can happen because of a simple social infraction occurred that people gathered around and justice needed to be served. These social infractions are as small as a

stolen cell phone and leading up all the way to “causing” the suicide of a 13-year-old girl. The people, who see a social infraction and see “injustice” in real life, try to correct this online because of the ability to connect to larger groups through social networking. These groups lead the charge to correct this infraction or injustice and end up doing more damage to their cause than if they went through legal means or more socially acceptable ways to correct this infraction.

The outrage that occurred by what only a few consider small social infractions to large groups of people is something that needs to be studied. With the ability to create online mobs or “flash mobs” in real life causes many more problems than it ever could answer. The problems range from online privacy, journalistic ethics, cyber bullying, and other factors.

Privacy is important to us all and with more and more ways to connect on the Internet; no one is safe to live as free as they choose to live. Any ethical justification towards Internet vigilantism is paramount to someone who must agree that a social infraction has occurred, whether that is a stolen phone to cheating on a spouse/significant other. Information is at the touch of a button to anyone that wants to find it. Sarah Wells figured out who created the hoax that led to Megan Meier’s death. With information becoming more readily available online and thus greater access to information, privacy and protection should be paramount to people’s online decisions. News websites should do a better job of gate keeping the posts on their message boards or cause people to officially register and then be verified. The next logical step would be looking at those trying to incite Internet vigilantism and watch message boards with an editor, similar to what the New York Times does currently.

Some groups claim that Internet vigilantism is protection and justice for those that either no justice occurs or places that normal justice cannot protect society from. There are better ways to show safety and protection that is needed to occur rather than doling out justice to those that infringe upon others. Are there ways to protect society without the necessary call to action, no; but the calls to physically harass or shame those than have been deemed needed to be punished take away from the calls to action that can benefit society more in a more socially responsible way. While trying to punish or protect, energy and information could and should be used to create more legal and structured ways to protect those that need to be protected.

Technology allows for people to be anonymous but with technology comes the ability to also search out those that wish to remain anonymous. With technology no one is farther from a camera than what is in a pocket or purse or on a street corner. In regards to Internet vigilantism, anonymity is that double-edged sword of information. This is what led to the downfall of Lori Drew and others who have become victims of Internet vigilantism. The necessary information to properly punish those that are indifferent to the law is out there.

When discussing anonymity comes the impact of free speech. People have a right to say things that are protected under the first amendment and Internet vigilantism is protected because context is needed to figure out if it is a “true” threat (Lee & Middleton, 2009, pp. 49-50). Therefore a question ensues of what is a true threat towards those online. It is hard to go after someone who only posts as anonymous or the Internet service provider (ISP) because one cannot be found while the other has no bearing on what is said on their service. The legal result of this case truly has some bearing on this because

of user agreements and the creation of Megan's Law (cyberbullying) but still does not reach fully enough to stop the negative things that happen online. Social police online do a good job but it is not able to cover all the internet nor all of the places calls to action could occur. The only resulting outcome that could benefit society is to control the spread of the information needed to dole out Internet vigilantism. The idea is to protect online content more so than it is get rid of it. While this is a novel idea, it would be hard to do and thus not sensible to nearly all Internet users.

Something else to do is to reach out to parents, students and teachers of cyber bullying. The following generations will be "plugged-in" with cell phones, Ipods, and other digital devices. These students need to be taught sooner about proper relational ethics and decorum online. While it will not get rid of cyber bullying, it will help with further understanding and faster acknowledgment of the problem so it can be handled correctly. Recommending elementary school online etiquette is necessary to prevent from similar cases occurring.

The next recommendation would be for journalist to be in the discussion more about the effect of Internet vigilantism has and how their stories can be used. It is not that all stories will have Internet vigilante ramifications but like death notices that are no longer published with addresses, that some information is just not given. While information is online to find out about people, it could protected better from governmental sources. Therefore, journalist should try and protect people from a variety of things that involve Internet vigilantism. These things include protecting sources better, using their stature in the public and issuing a statement stating that the issue is being

dealt with by the authorities, and using their online forum editors to take care of calls to action online.

In conclusion, the flow of information is needed to just be as guarded as the information that changes hands from day to day living. This study also shows that the initial story written about an incident will create calls to action but it takes more than the story to truly cause vigilante acts to occur. Social infractions, whether minor or major, have real life consequences if performed online or in the real world.

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## Appendix

**Table 1:**

### Persuasion Types

<i>REWARD-BASED</i>	<i>PUNISHMENT-BASED</i>	<i>ALTRUISM-BASED</i>	<i>RATIONAL-BASED</i>
1. Ingratiation- Actor's offer of goods, sentiments, or services precedes the request for compliance.	1. Threat- Actor's proposed actions will have negative consequences for the target if she or he does not comply.	1. Counsel- Actor helps to overcome problems that are preventing work from being done.	1. Direct request-The actor simply asks the target to comply.
2. Promise- Actor promises goods, sentiments, or services in exchange for compliance.	2. Aversive stimulation- Actor continuously punishes target, making concessions contingent upon compliance.	2. Favor- Actor rewards target before requesting compliance	2. Disguised request- Actor represents the situational context in such a way that the target is led to conclude the desired action or response.
3. Debt- Actor recalls obligations owed to him or her as a way of inducing the target to comply.	3. Negative esteem- People you value will think worse of you if you do not comply.	3. Duty- It is your duty as a responsible employee of this company to begin work on time.	3. Explanation- offer reasons for asking for the compliance.
4. Positive esteem- People you value will think better of you if you comply.	4. Negative moral appeal- you will feel worse about yourself if you do not comply.	4. Altruism- Actor requests the target to engage in behavior to benefit the actor.	
5. Positive moral appeal- You will feel better about yourself if you comply.	5. Ultimatum- The target's noncompliance could lead to circumstances in which other people become embarrassed, offended, or hurt.		
6. Allurement- Target's reward arises from persons or conditions other than the actor.	6. Warning- The target's noncompliance could lead to circumstances in which other people become embarrassed, offended, or hurt.		

**Table 2:****Data Collected**

News Source	Base- Focus of the story	Date Grabbed	Original Date	First Posting Date	Last Posting Date	Number of Posts
Washington Post (News)	Internet Vigilantism	5-Oct	1/10/08	1/10/08	1/11/08	89
Wired Magazine (blog)	Internet Vigilantism	5-Oct	11/15/07	11/15/07	1/8/09	409
ABC (News)	Megan Meier	5-Oct	11/19/07	11/19/07	9/28/09	245
Wired Magazine (Blog)	Internet Vigilantism	5-Oct	11/21/07	11/21/07	5/15/09	33
St. Louis Post- Dispatch (News)	Megan Meier	5-Oct	11/11/07	11/11/07	4/17/09	947
CBS (News)	Internet Vigilantism	5-Oct	12/7/07	12/7/07	12/9/07	213
CBS (News)	Megan Meier	5-Oct	11/17/07	11/17/07	11/19/07	119
BlueMerle (Blog)	Internet Vigilantism	7-Oct	11/13/07	11/13/07		188
New York Times (Blog)	Megan Meier	7-Oct	11/29/07	11/29/07	12/3/07	281
Total						2524

**Table 3:****Persuasion Frequencies**

	Totals	Frequency within group
<b>Reward-Based</b>		
Ingratiation	5	0.277777778
Promise	8	0.444444444
Debt	2	0.111111111
Positive-Esteem	0	0
Positive-Moral	2	0.111111111
Allurement	1	0.055555556
<b>Punishment- Based</b>		
Threat	17	0.188888889
Aversive Stimulation	11	0.122222222
Negative Esteem	14	0.155555556
Negative moral ultimatum	28	0.311111111
warning	1	0.011111111
	19	0.211111111
<b>Altruism-Based</b>		
Counsel	6	0.1875
Favor	1	0.03125
Duty	14	0.4375
Altruism	11	0.34375
<b>Rationale-Based</b>		
Direct Request	41	0.460674157
Disguised Request	16	0.179775281
Explanation	32	0.359550562



Table 4:

## Persuasion Types Coded

Reward- Based	Washington Post	Wired	ABC	Wired	St. Louis	CBS	CBS 213	Blue Merle	New	Total	Percent of Type	Total Frequency
					Post- Dispatch				York Times			
Ingratiation	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	5	0.278	0.0218
Promise	3	0	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	8	0.444	0.0349
Debt	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.111	0.0087
Positive- Esteem	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.000	0
Positive- Moral	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0.111	0.0087
Allurement	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.056	0.0043
<b>Punishment-Based</b>												
Threat	0	1	1	4	6	1	2	2	0	17	0.189	0.0742
Aversive Stimulation	0	0	2	2	3	0	3	1	0	11	0.122	0.0480
Negative Esteem	3	0	3	3	4	0	0	1	0	14	0.156	0.0611
Negative moral	2	0	6	4	12	1	0	3	0	28	0.311	0.1222
ultimatum	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.011	0.0043
warning	1	1	0	6	8	1	1	1	0	19	0.211	0.0829
<b>Altruism-Based</b>												
Counsel	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	6	0.188	0.0262
Favor	0	0	1		0	0	0	0	0	1	0.031	0.0043
Duty	0	0	3	3	5	1	0	2	0	14	0.438	0.0611
Altruism	1	0	2	3	3	1	0	1	0	11	0.344	0.0480
<b>Rationale-Based</b>												
Direct Request	3	0	8	5	15	3	3	4	0	41	0.461	0.1790
Disguised Request	0	0	2	2	9	0	0	1	2	16	0.180	0.0698
Explanation	3	2	3	11	7	2	2	2	0	32	0.360	0.1397
Calls to action												
	Washington Post	Wired	ABC	Wired	St. Louis Post- Dispatch	CBS	CBS	Blue Merle	New York Times	Total	Percent of occurrence	
Positive	3	1	12	15	48	4	6	7	2	98	0.395	
Negative	6	1	10	25	46	8	15	12	27	150	0.605	
Support Action	3	1	11	11	48	4	8	8	2	96	0.873	
Against	1		2	7	0	0	0	4	0	14	0.127	
Active	4	1	18	26	60	3	17	14	18	161	0.647	
Passive	5	2	4	14	34	9	4	5	11	88	0.353	
Continuous Thread	3	1	1	17	8	2	9	5	3	49	0.197	
Original thread	6	2	21	23	86	10	12	14	26	200	0.803	