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Patterns of media coverage repeated in online abuse on high-profile criminal cases

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Abstract

What relationship do the mainstream media have with online abuse on high-profile criminal cases? This article hopes to make a start at answering this question by examining tweets containing the #McCann hashtag, utilised by a highly engaged community of users to comment on all matters related to the disappearance of British child Madeleine McCann. On #McCann, the child's parents and other players are often singled out as the perpetrators of her disappearance and other crimes, in a blend of harassment, defamation and insults with conspiracy theories, disinformation and a strong anti-establishment vein typical of the posttruth era. Through an experimental digital ethnography blending elements of content and discourse analysis, this research has observed the #McCann conversation and analysed 500 tweets with the hashtag, observing that some of the most offensive theories posted by users on Twitter reprised themes seen in the mainstream media at the time of the disappearance, which resulted in defamation lawsuits by the McCanns and in complaints about unethical reporting at the Leveson Inquiry. This raises questions about the mainstream media's responsibility and duty of care towards people they report on in the digital age, and showcases a symbiotic yet diffident relationship between anti-establishment online users and traditional news media.

Online abuse

This article focusses on abusive online posts shared while commenting on high-profile criminal cases. It refers to this practice as online abuse because it includes a spectrum of behaviours beyond flaming or trolling, the go-to terms utilised to describe nasty and hurtful online behaviour whose definitions have been changing over time. Indeed, the terminology surrounding online abuse has been evolving both in media and technology circles, creating uncertainty about when posts should be regulated. It seems that, finally, online environments are having to deal with the censorship versus freedom of expression dilemma that many newspapers had to face throughout the heyday of the press, albeit on a bigger scale and with increased layers.

This article develops Synnott et al. (2017) research on online abuse on #McCann to focus on the relationship between the abusive posts shared with the hashtag and main- stream media coverage showcasing how social media alone cannot be blamed for the emergence of online abuse. Rather, as it will become clear, this phenomenon is a result of a variety of social and technological circumstances arising together with the main- stream media's influence on audiences at the time of the disappearance.

Recent studies on specific instances of mediated online abuse come from Lumsden and Morgan (2017), who looked at the anti-feminist media framing of flaming incidents. Kreis (2017), too, studied Twitter hostility towards migrants in her study of the #refugeesnotwel- come hashtag, while Hutchens et al. (2015) and Binns and Bateman (2018) examined political online abuse. Jane (2014, 2015) also described the diffusion of 'e-bile', or con- fronting language on the Internet, advocating for new, different research methods set to bring the issue at the forefront of academia. Other research has focussed on the impact and emergence of cyber-harassment (Keats Citron, 2014; Massanari, 2015), doxxing (Snyder et al., 2017), gender-specific trolling (Mantilla, 2015), cyber-bullying (Navarro et al., 2016) and trolling targeting researchers (Campbell, 2017). Journalists, too, explored online abuse: Ronson (2016) focussed on online shaming and Bartlett (2014) explored the dark side of the Internet, including trolling and flaming.

Overused by both the media and research, the term 'trolling' in particular risks to become an inaccurate catch-phrase hindering the regulation of the most vicious abuse (Hardaker, 2010). For Lumsden and Morgan (2017), this trivialises the impact of online abuse, while for McCosker (2014) 'the terms flaming, hating and trolling become increas- ingly ineffectual', and should be taken as a starting point, examined in context (p. 202). Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) lament a

'lack of conceptual clarity' in academic literature about trolling, arguing that using the term incorrectly and imprecisely can hinder regula- tion (p. 1339). Golbeck et al. (2017) argue that the term 'trolling' is often used colloqui- ally, and like this article, they prefer to adopt an overarching term comprising different sets of behaviours. While this research uses the term 'online abuse', they use 'online harassment', which includes 'threats of rape and other violence, intentionally offensive messages (racist, misogynistic, etc.), hate speech, and libelous personal insults' to identify messages that go beyond anyone's right to freedom of expression (Golbeck et al., 2017: 1). Particularly relevant to this article as it affects specific targets is 'direct harassment', defined as 'Language directed at a particular person or group designed to upset them' that might 'make the target feel threatened or intimidated' (Golbeck et al., 2017: 1).

It is this type of direct abuse that can be witnessed in online conversations about high-profile criminal cases, where tweets directed at the individuals involved include defamation, direct harassment and continuous taunting, and are often related to a sense of institutional failure, of concern towards the establishment that is typical of the 'post- truth era'.

The posttruth era

The following section will examine the social circumstances in which online abuse has developed, looking a links between the public's loss of trust towards the establishment with the political changes of our era and the rise of online abuse, disinformation and conspiracy theories.

The advent of the Internet resulted in a wave of optimism enthusing about the variety of possibilities the medium offered. In the late 1990s, *Wired* columnist, Negroponte (1998) predicted the digital age would have improved equality and made territorial divi- sions meaningless. Yet, despite the equalising Internet utopia envisaged by some, the Internet's own infrastructure is now facilitating the spreading of racist and xenophobic messages to the mainstream news and politics (Daniels, 2018). Even the World Wide Web's own founder, Tim Berners Lee, penned a letter on the 29th anniversary of his invention listing the ways in which the net backfired, including conspiracy theories and fake accounts (Solon, 2018).

The convergence of technology and a wave of discontent rising among the Western population in the late 1990s and early 2000s has for Davies (2018) given right-wing populism the opportunity to question the authority of experts and of established beliefs. Davies (2018) argues that after scandals such as the Members of Parliament's (MPs) expenses scandals or the Phone Hacking Scandal in the United Kingdom, together with global leaks on the failures and crimes of public figures, brought public trust in elites to an all-time low, so much that the language of the anti-establishment began fighting cover-ups and being hungry for putting the establishment behind bars.

A 'death of experts' scenario seems to be emerging, as the population becomes tired of being patronised by the establishment and elites, who often end up hiding their crimes. The media, too, are part of that establishment: as Rusbridger (2018) writes, journalists, who should be keeping the power in check, are losing credibility. 'They became part of the problem – an out of touch elite. Lamestream media. Fake news. Failing. They're all the same' (p. 22).

In this scenario, traditional intellectuals and critics fail to resonate with the public, while the most successful 'new' experts can gain ground (Jacobs and Townsley, 2018). When experts cease to be necessary, the floor is left to a cacophony of voices that per- form expertise, truth and virtue. Enter disinformation and conspiracy theories, two char- acteristics of what is becoming known as the 'posttruth' era.

As Cooke (2017) posits, 'we live in a posttruth era – an era in which audiences are more likely to believe information that appeals to emotions or existing personal beliefs, as opposed to seeking and readily accepting information regarded as factual or objec- tive' (p. 212). The appeal of posttruth narratives, and the subsequent diffusion of disin- formation and conspiracy theories, seem to point towards an increasingly popular social pathology where a considerable portion of the population accept emotional stories as real truths to fill an unidentified gap in their everyday lives. The decline in traditional elite and media credibility and popularity became ever so apparent during the 2016 American national election, characterised for Cooke by distrust and disillusionment with traditional media, so much so that, post November 2016, the phenomenon of 'fake news' became a hot topic.

As Wardle (2017) writes, 'fake news' is a broad umbrella term including different news-styled items. 'Fake news' are, for Tandoc et al. (2018), 'viral posts based on ficti- tious accounts made to look like news reports' (p. 138). Their similarity to news reports is so uncanny that a 2016 BuzzFeed survey revealed that they fool American adults about 75 per cent of the time (Silverman and Singer-Vine, 2016). Bunce (2019), how- ever, writes that 'media scholars would prefer the term was removed from the English lexicon, as it is vague and can be deployed to advance a political

agenda', quoting Donald Trump's use of the phrase 'fake news' to refer to media content he does not like (p. 50). She uses the term 'disinformation' to describe the phenomenon, and this article will adopt it hereafter.

Disinformation, unlike in parody or satire, is characterised by the lack of understand- ing between authors and readers that the story is false (Tandoc et al., 2018). Disinformation stories are published on social media or blogs, created in the style of news articles with 'the intention of misinforming', drawing 'on pre-existing memes or partialities' that rely upon 'pre-existing social tension' (Tandoc et al., 2018: 143). However, as Jones (2009) posits, the mainstream media are partly responsible for the birth of disinformative stories – in the sense that either such items are modelled on the structure of the media, using tensions already present and spread by the media itself through legitimate means, or they are mistakenly shared and believed by journalists under increasing time pressure.

Another characteristic of the Internet age, conspiracy theories see the world as a pawn manoeuvred by covert forces. Wood and Douglas (2015) argue that, since the Internet has made free publishing and a monumental reach available to publishers, conspiracy theories have become ubiquitous. For them, believers of conspiracy theories view them as correlated with one another, and this correlation is often connected to 'political cyni- cism' (Wood and Douglas, 2015: 3). Belief in conspiracy theories is often correlated with feelings of uncertainty that follow shocking world events, providing the answers to pub- lic fears and questions (Knight, 2000).

To understand the rise of disinformation and conspiracy theories online however, it is necessary to focus on the change in online news distribution. A 2016 Pew Research Centre report found that nearly half (44%) of Americans received their news from Facebook and Instagram (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016). While audience appreciation and the desire to sell papers ruled the news industry before, now a variety of mysterious technologies seem to determine whether stories are successful or not. For Thompson (2018), journalists (and, this research argues, also audiences) do not know: 'how the algorithms of the major platforms sort and prioritise our content, nor can we reliably predict or influence changes in those algorithms, nor in any sense hold the companies to account for them' (p. 3). It is algorithms that, for Viner (2016), are replacing curated media content with information chosen by our networks rather than by those informed of the facts. Schofield Clark and Marchi (2017), too, write that once Facebook changed its algorithms in mid-2016, prioritising posts from users' friends and families instead of media articles on news feeds, mainstream media took a major hit in terms of online views, with an unexpected success for newcomers, such as more niche websites in the likes of YoungCons and FiveThirtyEight. This algorithm change appears to have coin- cided with the rise of the disinformation phenomenon in 2016, as it allowed what, in online jargon, could be called legit-looking, but not legit news sites to gain popularity.

This article, therefore, hypothesises that the convergence of the decline of the news industry with changes in social media algorithms and an anti-establishment vein taking over global politics has created a fertile ground for those who share abusive posts in conversations surrounding high-profile criminal cases to thrive.

#McCann: online abuse and conspiracy theories on high-profile criminal cases

Research has yet to look at whether the mainstream media's treatment of different cases and their main players might have influenced online interactions discussing their out- comes. Doing so would allow us to understand whether the concept of 'trial by media' (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012) and media power in reporting on high-profile criminal cases has influenced public opinion and social media abuse. This research will make a start towards analysing this relationship by looking at #McCann, the hashtag used on Twitter to discuss matters related to the disappearance of Madeleine McCann in 2007. Already singled out as a hashtag attracting a variety of toxic online behaviours by Synnott et al. (2017), #McCann sees user comment on Madeleine's disappearance, potential kid- napping and/or murder almost daily.

Madeleine McCann, a 3-year-old British child, disappeared from an apartment her parents Kate and Gerry McCann were renting while on holiday in Portugal on 3 May 2007 and her fate has yet to be discovered (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012). The McCann case sits at 'the intersection between news, technology, and community surrounding mediated crime' (Kennedy, 2010: 225). It received 'unprecedented' media attention, with Madeleine becoming the centre of traditional media reports as well as discussion through the developing new media, from websites to YouTube documentaries (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012: 396).

This article argues that the McCann case reached the top of the news agenda for two main reasons. The first one is the idea of missing children as a 'mediagenic image of innocence and a lucrative story', with Madeleine in particular – a blonde, beautiful, angelic child – personifying the innocence of childhood (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012: 395). The circumstances of the case and the victim herself triggered an emotional response from the population and the press, who united in the need to find her, the culprit or an explanation for her disappearance.

Second, Madeleine's disappearance fed into some of the public's most horrific fears: the unknown outcomes of an abduction, and that the most vulnerable citizens might tar- geted by covert forces, two crucial elements in the spreading of conspiracy theories. For Parish (2001), anxieties on the abuse of children are common in the global economy, as they personify a fear of the 'other', of difference, bringing us to look outside of the com- munity that surrounds us to find the unknown perpetrators, both fearing and hoping that the monsters will not be like us or the people we know. These anxieties and fears of the unknown are a symptom of the 'desire to find closure amidst the uncertainties of late capitalism' and they exist to 'provide neat explanations in an untidy and big world where there is no great centre anymore' (Parish, 2001: 6).

Precisely because of these fears, the crime itself was something the public seemed to identify with: an unsolvable case, a need for truth and justice that was never satisfied.

Justice not being done brought about a sense of institutional failure which, as we will see, characterises many of the online conversations on the McCann case: according to James (2001), when the state cannot solve crimes involving children, there is a 'destruction' of institutions such as the nation and the family (p. 83).

However, another element that stirred the public interest in Madeleine's disappear- ance was the suspicion that her parents might have been involved, which shifted public and journalistic attitudes towards them from unanimous support to 'trial by media' (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012: 395). This treatment received by the McCanns at the hands of the press has already been deemed as unethical and worthy of scrutiny by the 2011 Leveson Inquiry into press standards (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012: 412).

The disappearance of a child such as Madeleine, from a respected, middle-class fam- ily, triggered the public's emotion and fear of uncertainty in a changing world, in the year immediately before the economic crash of 2008 and as the Internet was starting to become a prominent media force, one further arena in which the showdown between the parents and their detractors could take place. Considering that the Leveson Inquiry has already condemned this type of behaviour at the hands of the media, this article has cho- sen to examine the online discussion around #McCann to see whether the news media narrative has been repurposed by online abusers, steering the case study chosen by Synnott et al. (2017) into a new direction.

Methodology

As part of a wider PhD research project, for this article I have analysed 500 tweets con- taining the #McCann hashtag posted from 12 to 16 July 2018, a 'slow news' period for the investigation that still provided a wealth of content to analyse.

This research analysed conversational patterns and the behaviours displayed by users on #McCann through an experimental digital ethnography blending discourse and metadata analysis. With the emergence of web technologies, various authors have been utilising the term 'digital ethnography' to describe the online translation of this method, used to observe and understand human interactions, to the study of groups on the web (Ardèvol and Lanzeni, 2016). For Hine (2017), digital ethnography goes beyond the study of the medium, and focusses on the use of said medium is embedded with people's understanding of it.

Considering the rich amount of content provided by #McCann on Twitter – such as pictures, usernames, conversation threads, times and dates of interaction – conducting a mere discourse analysis without observing the patterns through which that discourse is developing would be reductive at best. Indeed, interactions on #McCann do not only provide text: they are a stream of conversations that tells us a lot more than the mere analysis of language.

During data collection, tweets containing the #McCann hashtag were isolated through Twitter mining, a form of data mining and content collection utilising the social network's Application Programming Interface (API), as well as through Twitter itself. Data were col- lected on 16 July 2018 via the RStudio software for data mining together with the Twitter package for Twitter mining. For safety purposes, an ad hoc Twitter account was created to conduct the analysis, asking the software to collect a number of tweets containing the #McCann hashtag. The API scraping produced two types of data: the tweets posted with the #McCann hashtags and the Twitter biographies and metadata of users' profiles. Information was saved, analysed and stored in Google Drive folders and spreadsheets.

The search returned 2000 recent tweets sent by 192 accounts until collection date for a period of just under a week, all containing #McCann and connected to specific pro- files, which have been anonymised for the purpose of this article. The API scraping was targeted to collect an excess of data in case some tweets containing the hashtag were not related

to the case or otherwise unusable, while the analysis' sample size was informed by other similar research analysing Twitter data, for example, Kreis' #refugeesnotwel- come analysis focussing on 200 tweets and Synnott, Coulias and Ioannou's study of 400 #McCann tweets from 37 accounts. This research set out to analyse 500 tweets providing an excess of tweets compared with the studies mentioned above, which already consid- ered 200 or 400 tweets a representative sample.

According to Synnott et al. (2017), there is a fully fledged community of Twitter users commenting on the topic, divided in two camps: the group that views Madeleine's par- ents as responsible for her disappearance (the self-defined anti-McCanns) and the one that views them as innocent (the pro-McCanns). This researcher's Twitter mining experi- ence was consistent with their findings, and all the tweets that were consistent with com- ments on #McCann were collected and added to a private Twitter list on this newly created account. Afterwards, said tweets' reply chains were also analysed just in case something was missed by the Twitter mining software.

The discourse analysis for this article was conducted by working through the first 500 tweets collected and splitting the elements of each tweet in categories through a Google Spreadsheet:

· Full tweet
· Author Username
· Author Name
· Hyperlink To Tweet
· Date and Time of posting
· Stand-Alone, Retweet or Reply To Tweet
· Nouns Used In Tweet
· Adjectives Used In Tweet
· Media Shared (hyperlinks, images, gifs, videos etc) · Verbs Used In Tweet
· Context
· Discourses Included

The categories chosen helped isolate elements of language and media used within the #McCann conversation for the purpose of the experimental digital ethnography, to single out specific discourse elements that, as will be seen, were significant towards under- standing how the users interacted with and viewed the mainstream media.

The media as sources

The following section will discuss this article's findings with a focus on the relationship between users on #McCann and the media, to then analyse new forms of media such as streaming services and 'unofficial' blogs and materials the users draw from. In doing so, this research will show how the media are both a player the #McCann users wish to gain attention from, and an instrument of the establishment in their eyes, used as an informa- tion source and also targeted with online abuse. Looking at the media under this frame- work, this research will explain their influence over the #McCann users' main beliefs and the social circumstances in which they have arisen.

It is useful to examine #McCann users' relationship with media by adapting Emma Jane's (2014) idea of 'lascivious contempt' to this article's scenario (p. 560). For Jane, flaming perpetrators display lascivious contempt towards victims by simultaneously sexualising them and judging them – a behaviour that morphs into something completely new on #McCann, targeting the mainstream media instead. On #McCann, the main- stream media are a way to learn about information from official sources, legitimising users' concerns and interest in the McCann case, but they are also a tool of the establish- ment, that the #McCann users need to get noticed by and that they tag and outreach to multiple times, and that they also condemn for not uncovering the truth.

The relationship between #McCann and the media appears to be a vicious circle. The media are a trigger for more posts and debate – which explains why this research has chosen to focus on a generally 'slow news' period of July 2018. Those who engage with the hashtag often share tabloid articles about the case, adopting a narrative that mirrors scripts of guilt and 'trial by media' showcased in the pre-Leveson coverage about Kate and Gerry McCann – for example, the tendency to dissect every aspect of the parents' behaviour together with accusations of guilt – and taking it up a level with memes and increased editorial freedom over the Internet (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012).

Opportunity theory sees opportunity as the main player in all crimes, with one crimi- nal episode showing other criminals there is a potential to commit another (Felson and Clarke, 1998). Applying this to publications then, when users on #McCann saw national and international newspapers commenting on the McCann case in toxic and accusatory tones, they viewed it as an opening, and engaged with it themselves, taking it up a level.

One of the main characteristics of mainstream media use on #McCann is that, of course, the anti-McCanns will be more willing to share tabloid articles condemning the McCanns and their supporters, while the pro-McCanns will focus on sharing articles and information debunking the antis' theories about their guilt. For example, in Figure 1, the anti-McCanns use a *Birmingham Mail* article criticising the missing people charity, viewed as pro-McCann.

While the anti-McCanns in particular seem to engage both in media sharing and in media bashing, pro-McCanns present a more passive behaviour towards mainstream news, only using it either as sources, or to share updates on the case and prove the McCanns are innocent. They do not seem to refer to rumours once reported about the McCanns' guilt, making the media-bashing behaviour a prerogative of the anti-McCanns. An example of the pro-McCanns' use of media can be found in the sharing of news arti- cles that explain why sniffer dogs used in other criminal case were not infallible, a con- tentious issue on #McCann due to the sniffer dogs barking in the parents' apartment, signalling a potential dead body.

Figure 1. #McCann versus missing people 1.

Figure 2. #McCann and missing people lottery 1.

Missing people cases are another key interest for users on #McCann, with each user camp utilising new cases to compare them with Madeleine's disappearance and to the investigation. Traditional news are of the essence here, as especially for new cases, there would be less of a community like #McCann, producing unofficial sources and keeping the conversation alive.

A further way in which #McCann users share newspaper and web articles is to con- nect random events to the case, or crack a #McCann-related joke. An example of this can be found in Figure 2, where an article talking about a lottery organised by missing people and a sniffer dog charity is dissected and brought back to the McCann case, to criticise Gerry McCann and his views on sniffer dogs.

Overall, news media on #McCann become a tool to connect with other missing people cases, to monitor charities, people, organisations and the authorities to keep up with the developments of the case. The media are a necessary evil that both user camps on #McCann rely on to obtain information, but an evil that they do not refrain from judging.

Contempt towards media

The users' relationship with mainstream media goes beyond the very common use for information purposes, and denotes a certain anti-establishment vein that is a vicious circle on #McCann: users cannot avoid using the mainstream media and they want their attention, but they hold them in contempt for not covering the case correctly. Why are the media not uncovering the McCanns' and their accomplices' lies? This is an aspect where online abuse on #McCann, and the anti-establishment vein reflected in the com- munity, mirrors the circumstances of conspiracy theories. Ironically, as Brotherton (2016) posits, 'real wrongdoing is invariably revealed by whistleblowers, journalists, academics, and officials working inside the very system that is supposed to be irredeem- ably corrupt' (p. 59).

Figure 3. The McCanns and media attention.

If news organisations are not reporting the truth when the truth is clearly out there (in the users' view), then the immediate deduction is they must be hiding something. And, they must be contacted (or spammed) about the case. The author of the below tweet tags *The Guardian* journalist Carole Cadwalladr, who shared a news story about a different investi- gation, asking her whether she had any information on Clarence Mitchell, the McCann's PR and former journalist, accused here of lying and supporting murderers:

@carolecadwalla Any news on proven liar and kiddie killers supporter Clarence Mitchell? #McCann #CostaConcordia #CambridgeAnalitica

The tweet is ironic in its tone, and almost accusatory in its circumstances. It implies that somehow, by not writing about the case, the journalist is complicit in the cover-up. In addition, hashtags such as #CostaConcordia #CambridgeAnalitica used together with #McCann display a need for further attention for the user, who seems to be hoping that, by using topical hashtags at the time of posting (one of them about the Cambridge Analytica data scandal making the news last summer, and the other one about a beloved subject for crime and conspiracy aficionados, the shipwreck of the Costa Concordia cruise) will give him more chances of being noticed.

A further example of how the anti-McCanns view mainstream media as a tool of the establishment is that, often, they refer to the McCann's 'hunger' for media attention. For example, in Figure 3, the tweeter uses the expression 'lavished media attention', con- trasting it with the people of Portugal's painstaking search for Madeleine, as a further opportunity to condemn the McCanns.

Figure 4. #McCann versus Panorama.

Journalism techniques themselves are often questioned on #McCann. The antis argue that the people interviewed by the news media are liar supporters or apologists, and that journalists' jobs should not be to give space to different voices, but to find out the truth. In Figure 4, the user blames the BBC's Panorama for wasting taxpayer money to 'deliberately' misinform and hide cover-ups. The strong accusations are taken further by the patronising and sweary picture that the post shares – 'journalism 101 lesson' and the rain example here show patronising contempt, enhanced by 'f**king'.

This section has examined the contempt #McCann users – and in particular, the anti- McCanns – display towards the mainstream media. Notably, the questions being asked of the media – why are you not covering the truth? – can be linked to general fears con- nected with conspiracy theories: why is the state not doing its job and protecting its citizens? Contempt towards the mainstream media as part of the establishment, therefore, feeds into the general anti-elite sentiment that online abusers and conspiracy theorists have in common.

Unofficial information

Users on #McCann blend the use of mainstream media as sources with the sharing of blogs, transcripts and screenshots of files such as Gerry McCann's now closed blog and the Portuguese Police's translated files. They also share blogs by active members of the community, which become key platforms for the anti-McCanns in particular to publish conjectures and further the conspiracy conversation around the case.

Figure 5. #McCann and blogs.

Much like #McCann itself, these blogs blend the tones of the mainstream media's ini- tial smear campaign against the McCanns with the passion project #McCann has become for its main players. A key example of this is Figure 5 where the user, one of the main influencers on #McCann, praises another for writing a 'fantastic' post further dissecting Kate McCann's book. The word 'dissecting' is actually used by the tweeter himself, show- ing how the users are fully aware of the level of monitoring that goes on with #McCann.

The blog post in question (Figure 6) adds to the pile of material smearing the McCanns, arguing they perform the will to help other missing children but that this help never mate- rialises, and that they are only in for the money. The post continues with a variety of ways in which the McCanns should have used their money, showcasing unnecessary venom.

References to Kate's 'bony arse' in particular seem a gratuitous, needless expression of hate, showing how often, in cases of online abuse, women bear the brunt of the sexu- alised invective, as highlighted by Jane (2014, 2015).

YouTube theories, videos and true crime-inspired documentaries are a further unof- ficial source that is popular with certain users. The thread in Figure 7 shows a user utilis- ing a variety of unofficial information, such as screenshots saved through a PDF from Gerry McCann's now closed blog, and a YouTube video where Clarence Mitchell, the McCann's PR, is said to be lying to the Australian CommsCon Conference. While Gerry's blog here has the task to

keep track of the McCann's actions, while the YouTube video is set to show how Clarence Mitchell has a tendency to lie, and will do so again. Overall, both posts are targeted towards undermining the McCanns and their team and they do so by using unofficial sources.

Figure 6. Unofficial resources.

The *Truth of the Lie* (TVI, 2009), the film originating from former Portuguese Police detective Gonçalo Amaral's book where he accuses the parents of Madeleine's murder, bring- ing them into an MI5 and UK-wide conspiracy, is also a popular YouTube link shared by the anti-McCanns, who treat it as gospel. The book had been the object of a libel battle between Amaral and the McCanns, and it was taken off the shelves by a tribunal in Portugal and it is, therefore, fair to view the documentary it inspired as an unofficial source, considering Amaral was fired from the job shortly after making the McCanns '*arguidos*', meaning suspects.

However, the use of unofficial sources is not a prerogative of the anti-McCanns. The pro-McCanns use them too, focussing on the translations of the Portuguese Police files instead, to show how the case is closed, and the anti-McCanns' obstinacy to show the parents are guilty is misplaced.

The above tweets have shown how on #McCann, the lack of belief in experts has resulted in a cacophony of voices that perform expertise, truth and virtue rather than in any constructive discourse.

Figure 7. Gerry McCann's blog screenshots. **Conclusion**

This article has examined the love–hate relationship between #McCann and the media, the vicious circle of content shared within the conversation, to showcase how the users' attitude towards mainstream news in particular is yet another example of what online abuse and conspiracy theories have in common: an anti-establishment vein and a performative attitude (Knight, 2000; Wood and Douglas, 2015) – in this case, performing the need and desire to look for the truth. Overall, for the anti-McCanns especially, the mainstream media have failed to uncover the truth, and are, therefore, most likely in on the conspiracy to hide what happened to Madeleine. However, in absence of a connec- tion with the family or the authorities, and since the McCann case pre-dates the age of social media as we know it, it appears the users reluctantly need to refer to the news media constantly, without refraining from expressing their contempt towards them.

The anti-McCanns in particular appear to be dying to be noticed by the mainstream media, and in absence of attention, they react with contempt and spamming for having been left out of the spotlight, of the investigation, of the case and, overall, of the estab- lishment, of the people that matter: a reaction that is consistent with this research's hypothesis that both online abuse and conspiracy theories originate from uncertain times. They are not the mere consequences of the emergence of social media, but a result of a variety of social and technological circumstances arising together with the mainstream media's influence on audiences at the time of the disappearance. The anti-McCanns in particular have embraced the 'death of experts', viewing bloggers, tweeters and 'under- dog' public figures such as Gonçalo Amaral as their expert of choice, rejecting everyone else that seems to be part of the patronising establishment.

Despite the climate anti-establishment vein characteristic of #McCann however, the implications of the #McCann conversation and its use of mainstream news raises questions about the role played by mainstream media in high-profile criminal cases such as the disappearance of Madeleine McCann. If the language and stories shared by users such as those on #McCann repurpose media tropes from early on in the dis- appearance – tropes that have been deemed unethical due to the damage done to the McCanns and public debate during the Leveson Inquiry (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012) – mainstream media's responsibility towards their audiences and the people they report on takes on another layer of responsibility in the digital age: when 'trial by media' can be followed by 'trial by social media' through endless posts and harass- ment by users online, engaging in responsible, rather than merely sensational, report- ing becomes even more necessary.

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