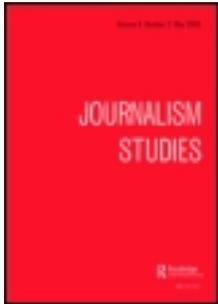


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DON'T YOU FORGET ABOUT ME

An exploration of the “Maddie Phenomenon” on *YouTube*

Julia Kennedy

In June 2008 the search term “Madeleine McCann” generated around 3700 videos on YouTube, attracting over seven million text responses. This research project used generic analysis to allocate videos to categories according to their content. Using critical discourse analysis, the nature of the comments posted in response to the videos was then assessed. Both methods were deployed to explore three broad research questions. First, what kind of content were people uploading to YouTube in response to the case? Second, where did YouTube users position themselves in relation to the dominant discourses of the news media in this case? Third, previous work demonstrates evidence of “collective expressiveness, emotionality, and identity” (Greer, 2004) in virtual communities structured around cases of child murder in the United Kingdom: to what extent were these characteristics of imagined community evident in responses to videos? Results demonstrate that YouTube provides a forum for a broad range of responses to the case, both accommodating and expanding on dominant mainstream discourses. Evidence of distinct imagined communities forming around particular responses to the case demonstrate nuanced and complex patterns of responses to mediated crime through YouTube, as technology erodes the traditional boundaries between producers and consumers of crime news.

KEYWORDS crime news; Madeleine McCann; user-generated content; virtual community; *YouTube*

Introduction

In July 2008, some 15 months after her disappearance from the family holiday apartment in Praia de Luz, British journalists reported the Portuguese police’s decision to close the case of the disappearance of British toddler, Madeleine McCann. This officially brought to a close one of the most publicized manhunts of recent times. The “Maddie Phenomenon” referred to in the title describes the frenzy of media and public response to the case. Leakage from the relatively contained vessels of digitally converged corporate media was relentless; mediation of this narrative of loss occupied spaces far outside the mainstream margins within days. Dedicated news forums sat alongside independent forums and blogs, missing posters of Madeleine appeared in the virtual streets of Second Life, and a plethora of user-generated content was uploaded to sites such as *YouTube* over the weeks and months following her disappearance.

This paper explores the role played by *YouTube* in response to the disappearance of Madeleine McCann within the broader context of the intersection between news, technology, and community surrounding mediated crime. In what ways was it used to extend the dialogic space around this hyper-mediated event? What kind of content did users upload in response to the unfolding narrative in the mainstream media? What kind

of virtual communities emerged around the various perspectives articulated? Finally, what conclusions can we draw about mediated crime, user-generated content and community in late modernity?

News in the *YouTube* Generation

With around 100 million video streams being viewed and some 65,000 new video clips uploaded daily (Thomas and Buch, 2007), the observation that “*YouTube* is significantly changing the way wired citizens are using and consuming mass media messages” (Harp and Tremayne, 2007, p. 1) seems evident.

The freeing up of the ownership of news and the networking of public responses to it afforded by Web 2.0 technologies mark one of the more significant changes in the consumption of mass media messages in a digital era. It is not surprising then that *YouTube* has exploited its potential role in more participatory models of news production and consumption through its dedicated “news and politics” category, and in the bold statement, “We want to see a lot more citizen journalism on *YouTube*” (*YouTube* Editors, 2007). In addition to the site’s potential as a conduit for grassroots journalism is its role as a participatory space for public responses to the unfolding narratives of mainstream news stories. Patterns of news consumption on *YouTube* reflect general shifts in consumer-led news access across the Internet. Users come to sites with a specific news story already in mind to seek or create further information, alternative perspectives, and to participate in a decentralized community of information exchange. As *YouTube* news manager, Olivia Ma puts it, “news is essentially a shared experience” (cited in Gannes, 2009). Drawing on Surowiecki’s (2004) concepts of the importance of collective wisdom in shaping societies, Santos et al. stress the importance of community in *YouTube*, citing it as an example of “the wisdom of crowds” (2008, p. 1).

To date, little work is available on the nature of *YouTube* responses to mainstream news stories. This work seeks to explore the nature of communities accommodated by *YouTube* in response to a particular type of news story—the child abduction narrative.

Crime News and Imagined Communities in Late Modernity

As Beck (1992) [1986]) and Giddens (1991) have noted, the unstable and fragmented social conditions of late-modernity produce manifestations of anxiety around identity and meaning. This is particularly notable around responses to crime and criminality in a digital age. Negotiation of fear and uncertainty around crime intersect with new communication technologies to create “imagined communities structured around collective expressiveness, emotionality, and identity” (Greer, 2004, p. 115).

The mediation of the murder, or abduction of children has always provoked powerful communities of response, as demonstrated by the collective fear and loathing unleashed by the Moors Murders in the pre-digital 1960s. Increasingly, since the murder of James Bulger in 1993 to the McCann case, localized face-to-face communication is augmented or replaced with new forms of digital social contact and community.

The role of traditional mediation in public perceptions of such crimes remains important. Greer makes clear links between the sentiments expressed in communities of online grieving in response to child murder and the popular press’s tendency to construct narrative tropes of the “ideal victim” and “absolute other” in such cases. Virtual

communities of grieving constructed on the foundations of such reductive, populist binaries may appear to challenge the more celebratory claims for the Internet as a democratic forum. The potential of online social networks as important conduits for "the celebration of diversity and the articulation and advancement of alternative discourses" (Greer, 2004, p. 108) is, however, significant. The popular discourses of traditional media forms may remain, but this paper will demonstrate that they are open to re-territorialization in a variety of ways through online communities.

The overwhelming public response to the McCann case on *YouTube* offers an important and accessible corpus for advancing our understanding of the ways in which databases for user-generated content may accommodate both traditional and diverse, alternative discourses in response to this most taboo of crimes.

Methodology: Identifying the Genres, and Exploring the Discourse

This study set out to isolate the varying discourses at play in user-generated video responses to the case, and to explore the kinds of virtual communities clustering around them within the *YouTube* population. To this end, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to define the generic categories for the first stage of the research. A total of 3680 videos were uploaded to the site accessible under the generic search term "Madeleine McCann". The top 10 per cent of those videos by numbers of viewers were sorted according to the discursive position adopted in relation to the case.

Whilst mindful that a genre is "ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world" (Feuer, 1992, p. 144), in isolating "recurrent, typical features in order to establish textual models or prototypes" (Larsen, 2002, p. 118), the aim was to explore the social constructions at play in the user-generated content and its responses.

The case has invoked a number of dominant public discourses around child abduction, parenting, policing, and media responses to missing children in general. These discursive strands were clearly identifiable in the fabric of user-generated content and its responses on *YouTube*, but the texture was enriched by a number of alternative discourses, supporting arguments for virtual spaces as a counterpoint to the narrow range of dominant mainstream perspectives. These included satirical or humorous responses, psychic or astrological perspectives, forensic-based videos, and original music composed and performed in response to the case.

In all, 13 distinctive generic approaches to videos uploaded within the isolated sample were identified. These were subjected to quantitative variables including total amount of responses, amount of videos posted and total number of views. Table 1 offers a brief description of the generic categories emerging, and relevant numerical data, and is sorted according to the number of total responses elicited by each category.

As Table 1 reveals, videos assuming the form of tributes to Madeleine McCann, and those directly expressing hostility to the McCann family produced the most traffic in terms of responses elicited. This was particularly interesting in the case of the hostility videos, which represented only 5 per cent of the overall number of videos posted, yet drew 20 per cent of total text responses, and 24 per cent of total video responses. Since the study was concerned with virtual community formation around the generic discourses, these formed the data for the next stage of the research.

TABLE 1

Generic categorization of videos posted, views, and total responses (sorted in descending order according to total responses)

Genre	Brief description of content	Number of videos	Number of views	Total responses
Tribute	Created in tribute to Madeleine McCann	207	4,742,884	18,759
Hostility	Hostile response to McCanns	28	371,321	6614
Mass media	Clips from existing mass media	70	958,300	3882
Original music	Music composed and performed in response to case	14	329,692	1372
Forensic	Specific focus on forensic aspects of case	10	88,430	626
Psychic/religious	Psychic/religious discourses	10	81,578	543
Humour	Jokes/parody/satire	5	19,142	536
Official	Posted by official organisations	7	490,594	419
Support	Articulating support for McCanns	3	16,681	281
Missing kids	Concerned with missing children in general	10	60,425	231
Mediation	Specific focus on mediation of case	2	7065	108
Art (creative)	Cinematically creative approach	1	2717	15
Competition	Promoting competitions around user-generated content in response to the case	1	179	7

Concerned to analyse the ways in which language is used in social contexts, discourse analysis has been defined as an exploration of “who uses language, how why and when” (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 2). The first 100 text comments posted in response to the top 10 videos (by view count) in both the “Tribute” and “Hostility” categories were analysed using emergent coding. Taking into account the inevitable limitations imposed by purely textual analysis, the aim was to identify dominant discursive themes, and the nature of the interactions between posters.

The Tribute Video

Tribute videos constituted 56 per cent of the total videos posted under the generic search term, attracted more than four and a half million views, and stimulated 56 per cent of texts posted across the overall sample. These videos were generally produced on standard home-editing software, displaying a montage of images of Madeleine taken from mainstream media sources, and employing background music from poignant popular songs. Text embedded into the videos described Madeleine’s disappearance, and implored viewers to help find her. Family and holiday snaps and video footage are standard visual conventions in the mainstream abduction story. Their ubiquitous presence in this generic category demonstrates a high degree of intertextuality with popular news and documentary forms.

The popularity of this genre supports Greer’s (2004) observations of a sense of community based on vicarious participation in the suffering of those affected by child

murder. The lack of a clearly identifiable absolute other, combined with the unsolved mystery of the child’s whereabouts seemed to shift the focus of community consensus in this genre away from vigilantism towards a collective focus on *finding* Madeleine. Many of the videos and responses contain direct addresses to a notional abductor, and to Madeleine herself:

Don’t worry Maddy okay? We are doing everything we can. I am praying for you to return safely. And to you people. Please bring Maddy back. We have money if that is your case, please just bring her back . . . Thank you. (Response to *YouTube*, 2007b)

Others appealed directly to the *YouTube* community to “fight” such crimes together:

Lets get this baby back . . . if everyone of us gave a buck in our own currency . . . we would all have done something not only to get Madeleine back but we would be sending out a clear message to the people who have her—That we will no longer allow these crimes to go on—Please you tubers lets fight them to-gether. Lets do something we can all be proud of!!!!

Such postings and their responses indicate a consensual notion of universality around *YouTube*’s potential reach, and hint at a strong sense of imagined community at work amongst the respondents. This strong consensus emerged around a number of discursive themes framing responses to the case, easing the facilitation of emergent coding for the discourse analysis element of the research in this genre.

Table 2 sets out the broader values and themes identified during the emergent coding phase.

It is clear that the predominant theme in the responses recorded was that of support for the McCann family. Combined with those defending the McCanns and expressing support for the video, the 550 overwhelmingly positive comments constitute 55 per cent of the responses to videos in this genre. The 32 (3.2 per cent) comments demanding punishment for the supposed abductor, referring to paedophiles, alleged sightings of Madeleine, and Madeleine’s appearance were also overwhelmingly positive towards the McCanns.

However, there was also some strong contestation, with 158 (15.8 per cent) comments either directly or indirectly hostile towards the McCanns. These included some direct attacks on the ethos of collective positive thinking underpinning the more community-oriented postings. Implications of naivety, ineffectiveness and failure to address the McCanns’ own perceived responsibility for their plight were common themes:

We do not live in a Care Bear world; it is brutal, and statistically speaking the chances of her coming home are extremely slim. Staying positive is not going to bring her home. It is unfortunate that she was abducted. However, the parents have only themselves to blame. One never leaves a child alone to go out for the evening. For God’s sake, these were toddlers! (Response to *YouTube*, 2007a)

The 26 (2.6 per cent) comments about the policing and forensic aspects of the case ranged from criticism of the Portuguese police in accusing the McCanns to criticism for *not* finding them guilty. The 19 (1.9 per cent) comments about missing children in general displayed some consensus around a perceived unfair focus by the mainstream media on the disappearance of just one child:

TABLE 2
Emergent coding categories and results

Code	Comment value	Frequency
1	Supportive of McCanns	472
2	Blaming McCanns	152
3	Hostile to fellow poster	80
4	Defending McCanns	63
5	Policing/forensic aspects of case	26
6	Class/race	25
7	Praise for video	21
8	Other missing children	19
9	Music accompanying video	15
11	Supportive of fellow poster	15
12	Value neutral address to fellow poster	11
13	Predicting Madeleine's death	10
14	Mediation of case	9
15	Coloboma eye	8
16	Punitive towards abductor	7
17	Spamming/exclusion from forum	7
18	Technical aspects of video production	5
19	Jokes	5
20	Sightings	5
21	Paedophilia	5
22	Overtly sexual/obscene	4
23	Madeleine's appearance	5
24	Critical of McCann PR strategy	3
25	Defending fellow poster	3
26	Hostile towards video	3
27	<i>YouTube</i> general	3
28	Religious	2

Yes it is bad their girl has gone missing. What is worse is the fact that they are craving all the attention they can get, when there are thousands of other missing children in the UK ... The media is too bloody sensationalist and is playing with your minds. (Response to *YouTube*, 2007a)

This debate around the perceived privileged status afforded to this case by the media developed along a number of lines, but most predominately those of class and race:

When you search Madeline McCann (1 person) you get 1,490 results. When you search Starving African Kids (millions of people) you get 71 results. (Response to *YouTube*, 2007a)

The remaining 215 (21.5 per cent) of comments comprised a number of discourses ranging from the technical aspects of video production, music used, alleged sightings, jokes and comments of a sexual nature and debate around *YouTube* itself.

The notable repetition of a number of key words generated a second-stage discourse analysis of this sample seeking to isolate common mythical or linguistic tropes. Table 3 shows some of the words recurring with more or less frequency throughout the postings.

The word "parents" occurred most frequently, registering on 239 occasions across the 1000 comments analysed (made up from the first 100 postings in response to the top 10 videos by view). Alongside notable recurrence of the words "left/leave", "alone/own", "blame" and "fault", the word "parents" was central to the ongoing debate around

TABLE 3
Some of the most frequently recurring words in “tribute” genre

Word	Frequency
Parents	239
Maddie	199
Hope	127
Find/found	122
Pray	117
Home	111
Safe	108
Left/leave	100
Family	81
God	71
Alone/own	70
Sad	60
Cry/tears	52
Sick/sicko	38
Blame	31
We	25
Angel	24
Beautiful	24
Money	22
Innocent	21
Fault	20
Cute	18
Love	18
Police	18
Black	16
Responsibility	16
Let's	15
White	13
Paedo	11

responsible parenting sparked by the children being left alone. Grant notes how identification as a parent seemed to provide a consensual basis from which to demand severe punishment for the killers of three-year-old James Bulger (2007, p. 106). Whilst parental status marked the position from which many posters made their points, identification with Kate and Gerry McCann was markedly less consensual in this sample. Postings tended to divide into either vitriolic criticism, empathetic defence, or a confused mix of both. Many contributors argued defensively that losing Madeleine was punishment enough for the McCanns' fateful decision to leave the children alone, but the following comment broadly represents the emotionally affective tone and sense of individual virtue characterizing responses in this genre:

what her parents are feelin at the moment li don't wish that on anyone, but if i had a kid i would never, ever leave them alone in a room. and the parents were nurses or something weren't they? they should have known better. (Response to *YouTube*, 2007b)

Note how the poster opens with an attempt at empathy, proceeding to putative claims for their own projected behaviour had they been parents themselves, and ultimately reverting to finger-wagging blame. This supports Mick Hume's observations of the schizophrenic, “emotional exhibitionism” characterizing public responses to the

mediation of Kate and Gerry McCann as dual symbols of both abject victimhood and suspect parenthood (Hume, 2007). It also represents the highly individualized, emotionally affective responses that characterized this case in general, leading Tim Black to his somewhat bleak prophecy of “the degradation of the public sphere” (Black, 2008).

In terms of the supposed abductor, the relative popularity of the words “sick” and “sicko” articulate a collective sense of a diseased or perverted individual at large. Despite the fact that “sexual violence against children is most often perpetrated by someone they know” (Kitzinger, 2004, p. 128), the enduring popularity of the stranger-danger myth is shored up by formulaic narratives in the popular press. Intimations of universal threat to readers, an ongoing narrative from abduction to conclusion (very often the tragic discovery of a body), and available imagery from the family album or CCTV footage make these stories hugely attractive to popular journalistic markets. The paedophile becomes a consensual symbol of “absolute other”, a deviant identity that can be pitted against constructions of virtuous identity to establish “a sense of membership and belonging” (Greer, 2004, p. 114). These binary structures characterize allegiances in response to previous sexual murders of young, photogenic children (Sarah Payne in 2001, Milly Dowler in 2002, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in 2003), and become stock repertoires for negotiating anxiety around crime:

These emotional and expressive adaptations—empathising with the victim, demonising and denouncing the other, both articulated and reinforced in mediatised discourses—comprise key constituents of the repertoire people use to negotiate the problem of crime. (Greer, 2004, p. 113)

The idealised construction of Madeleine manifest in the recurrent use of the words “angel”, “innocent”, “beautiful”, and “cute” exemplifies personal identification through symbolic signifiers of perfect childhood:

I miss you, you little angel! (Response to *YouTube*, 2007b)

Such a beautiful little girl... the person who abducted her needs to burn in hell! . . . Please Let Maddy go, give her back to her mummy n daddy. (Response to *YouTube*, 2007a)

Constant references to her as “Maddie” or “Maddy”, despite the family’s dislike for the shortened form of her name, indicate an imaginary collective intimacy with the child. The “Maddie” to whom these videos pay tribute is as divorced from the exigencies of real life as the “sickos” and “paedos” constructed as her putative abductor, and mirrors strongly the sentiments of the popular press. These are effectively expressed in *The Sun’s* headline, “‘Maddie’ perv quiz” for a story published on 10 June 2009 about the police questioning of convicted paedophile Raymond Hewlett in connection with Madeleine’s disappearance.

As with the discourses of parenting, the high degree of consensus and mutual support generally was again disrupted by threads suggesting that the McCann family were profiting financially from the loss of their daughter:

I already know for a fact that the parents pulled in some insane amount of euros for their plight. They should thank god that their child is a cute little blonde girl because if she had some sort of disfigurement then they would get jack shit from this story. (Response to *YouTube*, 2007a)

This expresses a common sentiment that the McCanns were being aided by the media, for whom Madeleine represented the perfect victim for a lucrative narrative of tragic loss. Similarly, comments also addressed suspicion for what was regarded as a manipulative PR machine set up by the family, and supported by much of the mainstream media.

A significant web of threads emerged based on deliberately provocative claims by the poster that they were personally responsible for the abduction, and a number of postings alluded graphically to the imagined sexual nature of Madeleine's supposed demise. These comments often attempted to deliberately disrupt the strong sense of consensus and hope created by the more positively framed comments. It is notable, however, that all dissenting comments were treated with hostility by other posters to the tribute videos, many of them attracting aggressive responses, and being marked as "spam" by other forum users.

From a diachronic perspective, the number of tribute videos uploaded peaked around initial mediation of the abduction itself, and continued steadily up until September (20 per cent of videos posted in May 2007, and 80 per cent posted before Kate McCann being declared *arguida*¹ on 7 September 2007). During this period, activity increased around celebrity interventions such as those by David Beckham, and J. K. Rowling, and to alleged sightings of Madeleine reported in the media.

The Hostility Video

These videos articulated a *direct* antipathy to the McCann family and their conduct throughout the case, and took a variety of structural forms. Some included edited clips from existing mass media with the producer's own perspective embedded into the video via voice-over or text. Others consisted of the producer voicing their opinions direct to camera. Dominant amongst sentiments in this genre were accusations of lying, manipulation and negligence levelled against the McCann family and their entourage.

The 28 hostility videos represented just 7.5 per cent of the entire sample, and attracted just 5 per cent of total views. However, they drew nearly 20 per cent of text responses, and over 24 per cent of video responses in total. Some 82 per cent of the hostility videos were posted in response to other videos, and around 43 per cent attracted video responses from fellow *YouTube* users, giving this genre the most marked incidence of video to video dialogue. Taking into account the high levels of text response, it produced the most dialogic community in general. That this occurred despite the relatively low proportion of videos, and significantly minimal views attracted across the sample as a whole, made the patterns of response in this specific genre all the more notable.

In contrast to the tribute genre, the collective construction of idealized victim and absolute other through a lexicon of binaries, and the articulation of imagined group activity were not immediately discernible here. The character of the exchanges was very different, with many comments (26.2 per cent) directly expressing hostility or support towards the video or the poster personally. Personal interaction *between* respondents was strongly evident, resulting in a less consensual, more dialogic form of exchange.

Producers themselves tended to be much more active in the forum debate surrounding their videos. These social patterns of 'me-centred' networks could potentially be read as supporting Manuel Castells' (2001) vision of contemporary Internet communication as a form of networked individualism. These are distinct from the cohesive communality of Howard Rheingold's (1993) virtual communities, more evident in the

“tribute” genre, although both ultimately extrapolate to democratic revival through the public agora of cyberspace. Alternative readings, however, might relate “the complex series of proximities between free speech discourses, infotainment media and penal escalation” (Grant, 2007, p. 94) in online communications about murder more closely to “technological populism” than to representative democracy or individualism.

This study was particularly interested to test these perspectives in the hostility genre which, initially, seemed to provide a dialogic space for resisting mainstream mediations around the case in line with some of the more celebratory claims for the Internet as an alternative public sphere.

Many of these videos provide a counter-voice to what is seen to be an unquestioning support for the McCanns from certain sections of the media, and establishment in general:

Yeah pick up the phone and ask British Government to stop interfering into this criminal matter, phone Mr Mitchell and ask him just to shut up as everyone is tired listening to him, please phone British Social Services demanding them to condemn McCanns conduct as an example of negligent parenting, phone Sky News and British newspapers demanding a fair coverage of the story and finally give a call to McCanns and tell them to confess! (Response to *YouTube*, 2007f)

Tropes of class inequality, negligent parenting, uncritical mediation of the case, poor policing, and deliberate “spin” from the McCann family were strongly evident in the videos and their responses. This certainly indicates potentially democratic resistance to the dominant discourses unfolding in the mainstream media as the case progressed. From a temporal perspective, postings to the hostility genre tended to align with new strands of forensic evidence and developments in the policing of the case as it progressed in the media. Twenty-four of the 28 videos in this category were posted after 7 September 2007, the point at which Kate McCann was declared *arguida* by the Portuguese police. The period between 7 and 10 September provoked a particular frenzy of reporting in the British media, with reports of Kate McCann’s refusal to answer police questions, Gerry McCann being formally declared *arguido* on the 8 September, and the couple’s high-profile return to their home in Leicestershire on the 9 September. On 10 September, the media reported that the Portuguese police had DNA proof that Madeleine’s body had been in the boot of the family’s hired Renault. These developments appear to have incited much of the activity in this genre, and formed the basis of many of the discussion threads:

Brainwashing has not worked. Read the comments on the online press and you will see the majority of people are against them not answering police questions. (Response to *YouTube*, 2008b)

These are Kate & Gerry’s explanations for DNA & the smell of a dead body (picked up by sniffer dogs) being present in the boot of their hire car after Maddie went missing. The DNA was the children’s dirty nappies in the boot. The ‘smell of death’ was rotting meat that Gerry was taking to the dump. Visit to the pope? 3 hail Mary’s will not wash the blood from your hands Kate and Gerry!!” (Response to *YouTube*, 2008a)

The more dynamic relationship with the unfolding narrative exhibited by these videos also underpinned a clearer sense of democratic debate in the communities of response. It should be noted, however, that many of these videos and responses demonstrated harshly punitive attitudes to the McCann family, and an air of “conspiracy

theory”. Many of the videos mimicked the style of docudrama, employing sinister music, lighting, and aesthetics of the contemporary forensic drama to reinforce their points. In this sense then, Grant’s observations of technological populism and the influence of “infotainment media” was also evident in this category.

Throughout contributions in this category, blatant hostility towards Kate and Gerry McCann and their perceived supporters was often framed as a plea for “justice for Madeleine”. As in the tribute section then, Madeleine is idealised as a victim, but in very different ways. At times, Kate and Gerry McCann themselves are constructed as “absolute other”, naively supported by a compliant media and establishment.

Four of the top 10 videos (by view) in the “hostility” genre were direct-to-camera addresses by the poster. Three of those were by the same person, an ex-user of the *Mirror* forums on the McCann case who achieved some notoriety in the global media as the “woman from Rothley”. She argued vehemently that lenient treatment of the McCanns was a class issue, and that social services would have been quick to punish a working-class family under similar circumstances. The three videos by this poster, all entitled “My Madeleine McCann opinion”, tended to divide the respondents into those directly supporting or attacking her *personally* for her opinions, rather than simply dividing by opinion:

This lady is saying what thousands of decent British parents think—well done!!!!
(Response to *YouTube*, 2007e)

Supportive comments like this indicate a sense of imagined community constructed around consensus on “decent” parenting, for which the poster is celebrated as a courageous spokesperson. Others chose to align with the poster in more clearly articulated terms of class allegiance:

Good on you for speaking your mind, but it’s always been the same way: money and position buy freedom and unaccountability. Even if not guilty of murder, you’d think by now the McCann’s would have been interviewed by a social worker or made to do a “parenting course” due to their neglect. Ha ha! Fat chance. That’s only for people who DON’T have money and position—PARTICULARLY pertinent in a class-based society like England’s. (Response to *YouTube*, 2007e)

Not all of the respondents supported the woman from Rothley’s views. Some actively challenged her right to use this medium to comment on the case at all:

How egotistical and sad must you be to think anyone would actually give a shit about your opinion on a case that has already had too much attention given to it in the first place? Unless you have evidence or something, I don’t see why you’d think the world is owed a crappy webcam recorded video of yourself giving your inner thoughts? What makes you special...? (Response to *YouTube*, 2007e)

“What makes you so special?” challenges the poster’s right to articulate her personal perspective in the absence of “evidence”. Her argument is vilified as irrational and over-reliant on the personal and emotional dimensions of response, similar to critiques of public response referred to in the previous section (Black, 2008; Hume, 2007). Despite such negative responses, its position as an important counter-voice to what were perceived as the reductive narratives of mainstream journalism remained strong amongst the discussion threads:

You've got bigger balls than most of the male "journalists" in the UK media who have played their sorry part in whitewashing this whole case. Well said hen! (Response to *YouTube*, 2007e)

In fact, opinions about the uncritical media attention attracted by this case were endemic across the genre:

the tragic incident shows the stupidity and mindlessness of british media. the quality of democracy depends on the quality of media... (Response to *YouTube*, 2007c)

I... wondered if the Brit press would've been quite so sympathetic—and sycophantic—towards the McScams if Maddie had been found floating face down in the pool after being abandoned by her so-called parents. (Response to *YouTube*, 2007d)

No they haven't been punished at all. The British press fawn all over them as though they were The Virgin Mary and Joseph back to life! (Response to *YouTube*, 2007d)

This common sentiment also finds its way into threads actively celebrating *YouTube* as an important alternative site for critical expression:

Well done, son. A fellow critical thinker. There's far too many sheeple on this earth that believe everything the meedja tell them. If I have one negative thing to say about your rant it would be: get more educated, tone down on the swearing and practise being more funny. But, I applaud your freedom of expression. (Response to *YouTube*, 2007c)

Whilst largely celebratory of the producer's willingness to contest mainstream consensus, this comment again articulates a sense that freedom of expression in user-generated content ought to be more than just a "rant" to be effective. This poster's suggestions for parameters in terms of discursive quality and presentation again draw on a perceived need for rationality ("get more educated, tone down the swearing") alongside the ability to entertain through this format ("practise being more funny").

The much stronger sense of ongoing dynamism in relation to external events that characterized this genre was also demonstrated by comment drawing on other cases involving child abduction occurring over the period of mediation of the McCann case. The disappearance of nine-year-old Shannon Matthews, from her home in Dewsbury, Yorkshire some nine months after Madeleine's disappearance, and the different media treatment of this case generated some interesting threads. Subsequently, Shannon's mother and her partner were found to have orchestrated the child's "abduction" themselves, but when the case broke many *YouTube* posters expressed a strong sense of unequal treatment from the media and establishment in general to the case:

I do not think Mrs. Matthews is going to see the Pope anytime soon either. Gosh, just think of the blanket high profile coverage given to the vicious pair. Top reporters flown all the way out the Portugal from all the channels; interview after interview, the Prime Minister, Becks, Richard Branson, Philip Green, private jets... The media, in the words of Gore Vidal, is "corrupt, stupid and vicious." Crawling to? the rich and powerful is what they do best. (Response to *YouTube*, 2008a)

Attitudes to Fiona MacKeowan, mother of teenager Scarlett Keeling murdered whilst holidaying with her family in Goa in February 2008, were also seen by posters as harsh in comparison to the perceived support given to Kate McCann.

This category was also distinct in terms of a strong sense of community formed in response to what was seen as unfair exclusion from “pro McCann” public debates and forums. This was underpinned by the perception that organized McCann supporters were infiltrating *YouTube* to block or contest anti-McCann sentiments through disruptive posting, or “trolling”.

in the YouTube The number of McTrolls has increased tenfold in the past week—dozens of new names joining YT just to comment on videos about the McCanns. They must be desperate for not being able to control interauts to the same extent they control other media. (Response to *YouTube*, 2008b)

This poster clearly perceives *YouTube* as a space that the “desperate” McCann support team would find more difficult to control than other media forms.

This genre also responded to activity in the wider blogosphere in general. The closing of the *Mirror* forums after alleged pressure from McCann PR representative Clarence Mitchell unleashed a rash of angry responses across the Internet. The anti-McCann site, “The 3 Arguidos”,² taking its title from the naming of Kate and Gerry McCann and expat resident of Praia de Luz, Robert Murat, as official suspects or Arguidos by the Portuguese police, was set up as an alternative site for dissenting voices. Many of the contributors in the hostility category maintained links to The 3 Arguidos site, and the one video in the “competition” category was a montage of entries for a logo for The 3 Arguidos website. A sense of the McCann “PR machine” setting out to control dissenting voices on the Internet remained a strong theme throughout the genre.

Responding to the McCann Case Through *YouTube*: Democracy in Action, or Technological Populism?

Thirteen distinct generic approaches were identified in the top 10 per cent (by view) of 3680 videos uploaded to *YouTube* in response to the case. Alongside around seven million responses attracted by the 368 videos sampled, there was certainly strong evidence of a broad reach of discursive positions within the database. To some extent the potential for increased participation and plurality in the consumption of news narratives aligns with the optimistic predictions of Rheingold (1994) and Castells (2001). This paper has, however, demonstrated the need for caution in extrapolating this to a picture of democratic rational debate around child abduction.

Issues of crime and criminality are particular hostages to the fortunes of mythical structures in news narratives. Contextualizing the findings here within Greer’s notions of virtual grieving in imagined communities allowed the study to explore whether user-generated video might extend discourses beyond the reductive binaries so often employed in popular news frames.

The communities emerging around the tribute videos accommodated *some* dissent in the ranks of respondents, largely concerned with issues of over-mediation of the case in relation to other missing children, and class-based privileging by the media. However, on the whole, these videos and their responses fit quite closely with Greer’s imagined communities formed around consensual anxiety concerning notions of risk in late-modern society. This was repeatedly demonstrated through representation of Madeleine as

idealized victim, and a kind of generic “risk” or “danger” standing in for an unidentified absolute other. This sense of external, diffuse danger invoked by the lack of a known perpetrator was consistently pitched against discourses constructing the family unit as a locus of love and safety in a dangerous world. The fact that Madeleine was actually on holiday with her family when she was abducted does not appear to disrupt the symbolic power of family as sanctuary that characterizes many of the posts, such is the power of its symbolism. This underpinned both those supportive posts imploring the abductor to return Madeleine to the loving safety of her family, and the more critical perspectives vilifying the McCanns for their failure to uphold the symbolic sanctuary of the family unit.

The aesthetic of the videos in this category was highly redolent of the type of tribute videos placed on dedicated online memorial sites. There was certainly evidence here of grieving as “public performance” (Malik, 2008), a vicarious sharing of a distant family’s pain, both consensual and highly emotive in its virtual expression. As in Frank Furedi’s notions of “mourning sickness” articulated in the wake of Princess Diana’s death, social problems are re-articulated in emotional terms in a society where the boundaries between private and public increasingly overlap.

In the 1995 novel *Fullalove*, the late Gordon Burn’s fictional cynical tabloid hack, Norman Miller, refers to the bouquets of the impromptu pavement memorials that mark the site of the latest child abduction or brutal sex-crime as “just another variety of urban utterance” (Burn, 1995, p. 4). That the urban shrine has moved online and become global in the case of the disappearance of Madeleine McCann demonstrates the ability of technology to impact on traditional social rituals. A sense of ritual response around the *YouTube* tributes was imbued by a clear tendency to construct grieving for an unknown child around reductive binaries drawn from the narratives of popular mainstream news media. To some extent then, it is possible to read *YouTube*’s parade of tribute videos to Madeleine as digital bouquets of affective self-expression piling up in virtual spaces rather than the urban pavements of the material world.

Although some dissenting voices in the tribute genre attempted to disrupt the consensual grieving and support, there was little evidence of reasoned debate around the social issues raised by the case. In this category at least then, Rheingold’s (1994) utopian notion of virtual communities, or Castells’ (2001) vision of networked individuals working across cyberspace towards democratic expression were to a large extent superseded by the more populist, emotive type of imaginary community referred to by Greer (2004) and Grant (2007).

The “hostility” genre, however, produced smaller but much more vociferous dialogic groups clustering around user-generated content varying from direct to camera criticisms of the McCann family, to some fairly sophisticated “docu-drama”-style videos. The aesthetic in the latter clearly drew on popular cultural forms of crime programming and fiction.

The marked linguistic consensus of the tribute genre was not present here. This genre was characterized by strident questioning of mass media and establishment compliance. Unlike the tribute genre, where the anonymity of the abductor diffused a desire for penal escalation into a more generalized sense of threat and fear, the hostility genre was marked by harsh punitive sentiment towards the McCanns, and dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system. The tendency here for debate to relate *outside* of the communities of response to external events contributed to a dynamic dialogue extending across time and space. Contributions to the tribute genre appeared more synchronically

fixed around the abduction itself and its immediate aftermath. Although the democratic implications of having a forum to speak out against state and media ineffectiveness, and Castell's vision of networked individuals debating public policy and action across the cyber divide can certainly be used to contextualize some of the discursive phenomena on these forums, the aesthetic of many of the videos and the harsh punitive calls and exclusivity shown to McCann supporters also lends weight to Grant's views of "technological populism" and "penal escalation" (Grant, 2007, p. 95).

This category also raised issues of freedom of virtual speech, with vehement criticisms around exclusion from "pro-McCann" dialogues. This debate took issues of virtual community out into the general blogosphere, linking to and commenting on external sites. To some extent, posters in this genre appeared to view *YouTube* as a necessary space for the expression of unpopular anti-McCann sentiment subject to heavy moderation or silencing in other areas. Given the common tendency throughout the comments analysed in *both* genres to ban or mark as "spam" dissenting voices in their midst, any sense of real free and open debate in the *YouTube* community itself was actively undermined by the way users employed the site's own regulatory mechanisms.

Conclusion

YouTube offered a space for a broad range of perspectives on this case and, in so doing, accommodated viewpoints that in some cases challenged, and in others drew heavily on mainstream mediations. Broadly speaking, however, user-generated content and responses expanded the discursive parameters of public response to the case. Elements of carnivalesque and performative resistance jostled for a voice alongside the more traditional articulations characterizing public displays of grief, loss and vengeance in response to mediated child murder in late-modern life.

Distinct virtual communities clearly emerged, however, around *specific* perspectives isolated in the generic categories. In responses to tribute videos, the community was highly consensual around discourses articulating a general anxiety around risk in late-modern society and, as such, supported Greer's (2004) observations around a desire to frame these narratives in simplistic binary terms. Strenuous efforts to disrupt this sense of imagined community were noted in the responses, however, often employing humorous and graphic sexual content to deliberately provoke conflict. In the hostility videos, community was more dialogic and critical. Overall, both communities of response proved as susceptible to the exclusion or marginalization of dissenting voices as more mainstream mediations. However, the strong thread of criticism around the British media's handling of this case, particularly in the hostility genre, indicates a shift in consumer-producer relations facilitated by sites such as *YouTube*, and supports the Polis Think Tank's observation that many members of the British public "don't trust the media so they go to Internet forums to express their views on the case" (Beckett, 2008).

Distinct features of the case, such as the lack of narrative resolution, the McCanns' own unprecedented use of traditional and new media forms, and their status as the professional parents of a photogenic child who disappeared whilst unattended in a holiday apartment, need to be considered when drawing conclusions about specific responses to this case. Strong threads of debate around class, race, parenting, and perceived "spin" from the McCanns were generated in response to the specific

characteristics of the case. Similarly, the lack of a known perpetrator allowed for a range of symbolic representations of “other”, and a generalized, diffuse sense of risk at large. In the hostility videos at least, blame was levelled firmly at Kate and Gerry McCann, contributing to a schizophrenic approach to the McCanns as dual symbols of victimhood and questionable parenting across the sample as a whole (Hume, 2007).

This paper has clearly demonstrated that there is much potential for insight into the complex relationships between the news narratives of child abduction and audiences emerging through new technological interfaces such as *YouTube*. The various nuances, contestations and allegiances mapped within the broader *YouTube* community in response to this case resist simple dialectical categorizations of *either* rational democratic debate *or* reductive populist binaries. Rather, user-generated content and debate have been shown to extend the terrain of corporate mediation and public response in a number of ways that impact significantly on the production and consumption of news narratives.

As members of the public increasingly answer *YouTube's* rallying call to broadcast themselves, I return to Greer's sense of virtual communities as equally important conduits for “the celebration of diversity and the articulation and advancement of alternative discourses” (Greer, 2004, p. 108), as they are repositories for particular communities of vicarious, affective expression. As journalists and media scholars alike, we have much to learn about evolving forms of public engagement with mediated crime from the consensus, allegiances, and varied acts of resistance that take place in sites such as *YouTube*.

NOTES

1. An “arguido”, or “arguida” if female, normally translates as “formal suspect” in Portuguese law. It denotes someone whose status is more than that of witness, but who has not been arrested or charged. The status allows for a more accusatory line of questioning, but also affords legal protection such as the right to remain silent, and to legal representation (see Graham Keeley's Q & A for *Times Online* for further information (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article2407089.ece>).
2. The 3 Arguidos Forum, <http://www.the3arguidos.net/forum/viewforum.php?f=20&sid=faabbcf7137bb205f11001175de77788>, accessed 10 September 2008.

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