
FAME LEADS TO FOLLY

An analysis into Social media and false accusations

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Abstract

Social media can impact investigations in positive ways, but also negative ways as well. The goal of this paper is to address how Social media impact investigations (specifically in negative ways). The content analysis has given insight into the many ways that this occurs, as well as showing that while the number is low, the fact it exists should be addressed. It was discovered that Social Media influence impacts investigators by placing them under pressure, it convicts people as guilty until proven innocent, and the experiment attempts to discuss why people seem indifferent towards these facts. This study is meant to bring into question, just how much we should let social media affect our thinking when it comes to convicting people of criminal acts (rape, robbery, etc.).

Introduction to Study

Experience

I feel that I've always had a notion for knowing what's right, and what's wrong, even as a little kid. I knew that stealing was wrong, telling the truth was right, that bad people get punished, and that sometimes good people don't. Growing up with a younger sister there was one thing that I hated most of all, and that was getting in trouble for something that my sister did. My father had given me advice about dealing with that incidents like that, he would tell me "If you're not there, your name can't be called." Which essentially meant if you weren't around for to witness the event, no one could blame you for anything. As I got older, I started seeing more and more of people getting blamed for things they didn't do. For example I've seen cases of people being accused of theft in the news, murder, and rape. There are people getting blamed for things and placed in jail only to then get released from jail years later because evidence

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suddenly appeared, or people confess after years of lying. I know how much I hate that feeling, of being blamed for something I didn't do; but it wasn't until high school that I met someone who hated the feeling far, far more than I did. It was a field trip to a small theater for a class field trip where we were shown a short movie presentation called "The Central Park 5".

Intro to Study

Naturally going on this fieldtrip seemed like something mundane, I just saw it as an excuse to get out of class early, but then we saw the movie about those 5 teenage males whose lives were ruined due to a false accusation, pressure from the media, and improper investigation. The class also meet one of the people accused, Raymond Santana. He told us about the experience he went through after he was released from prison, and how hard it was to regain his life after being sent to prison. The "Central Park 5" was a case in New York City 1989, where a young woman was assaulted in the Central Park at night, while jogging alone. During the woman's assault, on the other side of the park, there were several groups of young teens were loitering and eventually it escalated to fighting. The group eventually got separated because the police attempted to round the teenagers up. 5 young men were caught during the police round up and were then brought into custody under the assumption they were involved with the attack on the young woman. They were placed in police interrogation for over 24 hours on ; meanwhile social media was blowing the story out on the news, newspapers, and almost every social media platform of the time, public figure heads such as the police chief David Kravitz, and Pete Hamill from the New York Post, all stating their feelings on the case and putting pressure on the police to find the offender of the assault, anyone in jail for the crime.

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Eventually, due to all this pressure coming from the public, and social media promoting this pressure, the police were able to force a confession from the 5 young men, under the false pretense of them being able to go home afterwards. The 5 teenagers were sentenced to prison, the case was closed, and the public were satisfied...until on December 19th 2002, the actual rapist Matias Reyes came forward to authorities to confess to the crime that occurred that night in Central Park. After reading on this case, I have learned that wrongful convictions can not only come from improper investigations, but also can occur through pressure from public figure heads, political influencers, and social influencers.

After learning about the Central park 5 my sole question is, does social media influence the process of investigations and if so should the media be allowed to be privy of the information or should the media not be allowed to know anything until after the investigation is complete? I will attempt to find instances where the media influences directly or indirectly police investigations. There may be numerous cases which may conflict with the truth because any actual depictions may be covered up in an attempt to dissuade this thesis. This also makes it a little harder to find numerous cases to support this thesis as well.

I feel this is important because if this thesis proves to be true, then this may change everything about how we watch the news or publicly document events. People may complain that the people have a right to know what's happening at all times, there may be complaints that this thesis goes against the constitution of independence, but there may be others that may even believe that this thesis is completely pointless. If the media influences these things in the way I think it may, just think of all the people that may be in prison who are innocent right now, men, women, and kids, all who have had their lives ruined because of forced accusations from

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media influencers giving opinions. I don't believe that freedom of speech should allow something such as this to happen.

Research Question

I want to bring the question into light, should Social Media be able to impact/influence ongoing investigations. It may seem like an obvious question at first glance, but the question delves deeper by looking at not only how social media impacts these investigations, but should Social media even be allowed to take a part in these investigations, for fear of influencing or introducing bias into investigations. If we know it is, then there should also be the question “should it still be permitted?”

Literature Review

Intro

Many researchers have begun to question if the media should be invested or allowed in investigations, despite the potential risks (Cavander, Gray). Repercussions of media involvement have caused many issues leading to false accusations (Mastro, Dana), improper investigations (Findlay, Leah 2015), and both victims and officers having ruined careers (Sobol, James J. Social 2010). This paper will be addressing the question, should the media be allowed to report about ongoing investigations, and analyzing the repercussions both for and against it.

Checked past

History has shown that media influence hasn't always been beneficial to ongoing investigations. The Central park 5 case in 1989 was a case where media influence placed pressure on officers in order to implicate several young African American teens found in the park

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that same night (Sharon L Davies 2006). Both theory and empirical evidence indicate that media exposure contributes to the construction and perpetuation of the heightened fear of victimization at the hands of racial minorities, by disproportionately depicting racial/ethnic minorities as criminal suspects (Mastro Dana 2009).

Bad Lighting

According to the Innocence Project, a national litigation and public policy organization founded in 1992 dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted individuals, 342 people were exonerated as a result of DNA analysis as of July 31, 2016. Out of those 342 people, there were approximately six reasons for these false convictions; Eyewitness misidentification, false confessions or admissions, Government misconduct, inadequate defense, jailhouse informants, or Invalidated/ improper forensic science (Gerald M. LaPorte, 2017). Further, the NRE (National Registry of Exonerations) lists a total of 1,944 exonerations since 1989 and improper forensic science is cited in 24% of ALL exonerations, not just DNA exonerations such as those reported by the Innocence Project.

Just deal with it

Trying to live with this stigma due to social media backlash can be hard for some people, or almost impossible even, and it's even harder to convince others of their innocence. People may believe that the majority of people in prison (or in this case have been to prison) are there because they have been convicted of violent crimes, and a study may or may not come up with

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the same conclusion. Hence, one might well ask, why utilize perception at all, when studies can give us much more accurate results? (Huff, C. R 2007).

Conclusion

Most if not all victims of this media spotlight often face public scrutiny, and hardships because of it. The capacity to relay information to a vast audience through social media has eliminated some obstacles that have historically placed media organizations in the best position to report on court proceedings. This presents significant opportunities to enhance open justice; however concerns have been raised about inaccurate and prejudicial reporting, as well as the impact of social media reporting on the practical capacity of judicial officers to control the publication of information relating to criminal proceedings (Findlay, Leah 2015). In fact, according to mathematical analysis, approximately 33 of 1 thousand men have been placed in jail, for crimes they haven't committed and half of that number had no criminal record prior to their arrest (Risinger, D Michael 2007).

Methods

Materials/ Subject matter: In order to do a thorough analysis on this research question, the Purchase College library and all of its resources (mainly online sources) were used in order to find previous examples of Social media influencing ongoing investigations. The story of the Central Park 5 came from several sources such as Davies, S. L., "The Reality of False Confessions" as well as Chancer L., "*High-profile crimes*" and this is one of the more prominent examples of this question in the thesis. I was also able to find an article from Risinger DM., "Innocents Convicted: An Empirically Justified Factual Wrongful Conviction" showing mathematical statistics on the same subject of media interference. Specifically I researched readings that directly addressed the issue of social media and investigations being linked together, or directly influencing each other to the point said influence could be labeled as bias in the case. After going over the data received, a final conclusion was created.

Design & Procedure

This study was done by using content analysis. Content analysis involves mainly data gathering and examination of each source in order to find common content and themes. With the sources gathered for this study, it was mainly meant to see the amount of times any criminal

investigation has been otherwise impacted by either social media, or public outcry (AKA people's court). The authors make many references towards victims impacted due to this interference, and one author was able to find out the exact numerical data to then find a percentile of people impacted by said media interference. Once I started reviewing all the articles and previous cases, I found that this subject can be broken into two MAIN sections with a sub-section meant to question social views. These sections are split into 1. Incomplete investigations, and 2. The consequences of media influence.

Results

Pressure... Pushing down on me, pushing down on you

Through each article, a common theme was found in each and every case, most of the time the investigators didn't fully conduct an investigation thoroughly. In most cases, if any of the investigations were looked into more, there may have been evidence to exonerate the accused, or in some cases completely expose the accuser of lying. Although most of the time, the accused is accepted at face value, and the victims are pressured into giving false testimonies, or coerced to plead guilty. Many of these often happen because of one main issue, pressure from the press. When there are people who are yelling for justice, it's rare that said justice is actually done the right way; corners get cut, stories don't get fully checked out, and it all leads to someone getting in serious trouble. According to an article by Risinger, data shows that approximately 3.3 percent of people incarcerated, are wrongly incarcerated. Although the number is small, the fact the number exist at all is something that should be looked at.

Guilty until proven Innocent

The second thing witnessed, was that the consequences of the media getting involved in ongoing investigations are far more extensive than what people truly acknowledge. In the Central park 5 jogger case once the story was open to the public during the investigation, there was LOUD public outcry of what to do to the people accused. President Donald Trump himself called them “animals that need to be put down” during an interview with the New York Times in May of 1989 when asked about the question and how he felt. There’s also the case of Brian Banks, where he was accused of rape, and when the information was leaked to his High school (Long Beach Poly), he lost his scholarship, any possible college options, and was sent to prison for 10 years, until march 2009 when he was able to get a confession from the accuser using a hidden camera to exonerate him.

It’s one thing to let people know about current events, but when these current events have a history of being over anxious to pass judgement towards the accused, there has to be a question of whether the people deserve to be aware of everything as it happens. Through analysis it’s seen that institutions like to do this in order to save face or disassociate themselves from the accused or the occurrence, yet there’s almost no concern as to whether the accusation is true, nor towards the accused’s life during the time they are being investigated. Many times, people that are accused are almost always prosecuted immediately before all information is gathered, and only when all evidence is gathered is a conviction made. Why is that? The justice system is supposed to promote justice and fairness in all cases. So why is it, that people are

forced to be exposed before the full story is even gathered? Why is it that judgment is passed before the facts are not all known? This is more likely due to a combination of stereotyping minorities, the belief that all victims should be believed regardless of facts and evidence, and the main issue, of people seemingly not caring enough to do full investigations.

We know, we just don't care

After looking at all the articles, a few videos, and several podcast, it's seen that even though there is a percentage of people that are known to be falsely convicted, many people simply don't care. Perhaps it's because there is a fear of the repercussions; of the idea that the allegation can be true and what trouble that may bring to their lives, regardless of having all the information. Looking at the content more, it's seen that most of the time the media uses fear when describing these events, which influences public opinion even more to the point where they would be willing to believe anything. With the abundance of misinformation, it's no wonder that people are so quick to judge, but is it the peoples fault? Or is it the media centers, the reporters who twist words and cut stories. Are people purposely misgiving information to coerce people into supporting these shoddy investigations? And a blaringly obvious question must be asked after all this analyzing, why hasn't anyone brought this to light? People talk about trivial things every day, but when it comes to the justice system we so rarely discuss any subject matter. The only two conclusions are either there is something preventing people from looking into this, or that we simply believe the statistics are too low to care.

Conclusion

Using Content Analysis, I was able to examine how Social Media impacts ongoing investigations in multiple ways. Through my analysis, it's seen that with police forces under pressure, with people being convicted before the investigation truly begins, and due to lack of awareness and discussion of this issue, Social media can have damaging effects on ongoing investigations. People should be made more aware of this bias found in investigations, so that we can move forward in convicting people of crimes, and in addition to preventing false accusations.

Without the acknowledgment of these issues, it's unjust to convict anyone without someone then exposing the various issues in any and all arrest. Furthermore it can be argued that allowing the media to report on ongoing investigations is an invasion of privacy, and a form of defamation as seen in both the central park 5 case, and the Brian Banks case; especially considering the fact that the investigation is still in progress, and they could be innocent. Although the author Risinger found that there was only about 3.3% rate of false convictions, and the author Henry J goes on to emphasis said statistic, the fact of the matter is that there are so few people discussing the possibility that media coverage may be bad for crime, that no one questions if it should be allowed. When the death penalty is applied, that opens an entire hosts of questions, just how many people may have lost their lives due to this improper practice? Are we willing to lose even more people to it? In the end, ironically the decision is left to the people, the same ones who are the problem by promoting prejudice in this broken system.

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