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# Blog Post #2: Sleuthing Citizen Detectives, an Information Community

Edit

Posted on September 14, 2020 by Corrina

Turn on any of the streaming services to which you subscribe or take a look at your phone's podcast app. Chances are, without even having to scroll or swipe, you will see a show, documentary, or podcast that would be classified as true crime. While on the surface it may seem like these selections fall under the ever-widening genre of true crime, many of these documentaries, podcasts, and books have gotten beneathed from the work of a subset of the larger true crime community: citizen detectives. This group, a global group of amateur detectives—also known as sesh and internet sleuths—who use their wide range of expertise and skills to help solve cold and unsolved cases. According to crowdsourcing, is the information community I will be exploring this semester.

When looking at citizen detectives in terms of Christen and Levinson's (2015) four key angles of community, they fit primarily into the affinity and instrumental angles: they are interested in true crime beyond just consuming it as entertainment (affinity); and they want to help solve cold, stalled, or active cases (instrumental). However, in some instances they meet the primordial and proximate angles, too. Take, for example, the case of Sister Catherine Cesnik and the two detectives, Gemma Hoskins and Abbie Schaub, who were students of Cesnik at Archbishop Keough Highschool in Baltimore at the time of her murder in 1963. Cesnik's murder and the investigation work undertaken by Hoskins and Schaub, who operate very much as a team, are central to Rabinowitz' 2017 documentary *The Keepers*. Hoskins and Schaub's interest in solving Cesnik's murder come about because of their primordial (they were all Catholic) and their proximate (they were taught by Cesnik and they all lived in Baltimore) connections. So, depending on the individual citizen detective's desire to help investigate a particular case, their community may exist at the intersection of all four key angles.

Information is integral to citizen detectives, and how they search for, use, and disseminate information make them an information community. Citizen detectives are, as Fisher and Bishop (2015) define, "a group of entities that share information between information seekers, users, and providers." One great example of this is the late Michelle McNamara and her blog True Crime Diary. McNamara investigated and wrote about many unsolved cases, but she is most well-known for her work on the Golden State Killer, a name she coined for the then-unknown serial rapist and murderer who committed his crimes throughout California in the 1970s and 80s (2015, para. 1 & 3). Her reporting on her search for the identity of GSK is rife with examples showing this integral flow of information between seeker, user, and provider. McNamara's description of her working relationship with one of her fellow amateur detective detectives, nicknamed The Kid, details how they identified potential suspects based off information they gathered from shared police reports and publicly known information about the locality of the crimes, the time frame of the crimes, and the physical descriptions of the suspect. Her team scoured the internet for more information and photographs of their potential suspects; and how they shared with each other their potential suspects and either vetted them in or cast them based on the wealth of other information they gathered (2015, paras. 28-32). In fact, they worked so closely together investigating GSK that The Kid, whose real name is Paul Haynes, helped finish McNamara's book, *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, with fellow citizen detective Billy Jensen and McNamara's husband after her death in 2016.

But I think it's in some of McNamara's lesser known work, namely her blog posts, that you can really see how citizen detectives operate as an information community. In her post titled, "Crowd Sourcing in Wisconsin Cold Case," McNamara shares information about the disappearance of Barbara Nelson in 1969 (2015). She provides links to articles written by a local journalist, she poses particular questions to her readers, and she asks them to provide any thoughts or ideas which she will then pass on to investigators. This call to action is also evident in the podcast *Jensen and Hicks: The Murder Squad*. Every episode, the hosts, Billy Jensen and Paul Hicks, detail the information available on a certain case—biographical information, reports from investigators, evidence from witnesses, detailed descriptions of crime scene photos and autopsies—provide their expert analysis (Hicks is a retired detective and Jensen is an experienced investigative reporter), and ask their community of listeners to contact them with any pertinent information. Jensen and Hicks also provide updates on previously covered cases that have progressed thanks to information provided by their community of citizen detectives. Both McNamara's blog and the Jensen and Hicks' podcast illustrate what Jensen describes on his webpage as crowdsolving, "utilizing the eyes, ears, and expertise of individuals, both locally and across the globe via social media, to aid in the solving of crimes" (2020, para. 2). This process of crowdsolving also shows how this information community's members exist on a spectrum, just like members of other communities. You may be an information seeker, user, and/or provider, who reaches out to people from across the globe by way of the internet and connects with people who may have an affinity, an instrumental, a proximate, and/or a primordial connection to a case who then provide you more information to aid in your shared goal of helping to solve the case.

Perhaps most importantly, though, is how citizen detectives and the act of crowdsolving exemplifies Fisher, Oyarzun, and Durrance's notion for an effective information community (2003). These are, as Fisher and Bishop (2015), state:

- "emphasis on collaboration among diverse information providers";
- "capacity to form around people's needs to access and use information";
- "capacity to explore the information-sharing qualities of emerging technologies";
- "ability to transcend barriers to information sharing";
- and "capacity to foster social connectedness".

To go back to Jensen and Hicks: *The Murder Squad*, you have one host who is a retired detective and one host who is an investigative reporter who provide professional expertise in analyzing the information about a case, who then call upon a wide-ranging group of listeners to provide any information, ideas, or thoughts they have in an effort to collaborate in solving the case. This podcast, along with online forums like Webskills and the numerous sub-Reddits dedicated to specific cases, formed because there was a need to provide a venue for citizen detectives to access, provide, and share information. The wealth of content produced by citizen detectives from podcasts (*The Fall Line*, *Serial*, *Missing Allison Murray*, and *Up and Vanished*, for example), to the aforementioned online forums, to online databases such as The Doe Network—illustrate how this community is designed to document missing and unidentified persons cases, to simply connecting with each other through a social media platform, shows this community's ability to and value in exchange of information—the capabilities of an effective information community. Bishop also allows them to overcome any barriers that may exist to sharing their information with each other by creating many avenues of access to said information. And, lastly, this case of seven and online space for dialogue creates a social connectedness among the global community.

Moving forward in studying this information community, I am interested in examining this group's vast array of information seekers and how they seek this information out, particularly with a Bateman lens. Unedited cases benefit from people who are expert genealogists, researchers, and researchers, which bring about very specific information seeking methods. Additionally, there can be private interactions among citizen detectives online crowdsolving. As has been evidenced in the Delphi murder case, some citizen detectives have dissed private suspects instead of going through appropriate channels to report the information they found. And while Facebook DNA testing was instrumental in solving the identity of GSK, there is a wider concern surrounding what happens to your DNA once submitted to genetic testing companies like Ancestry.com and 23andME. All that being said, I believe there are many avenues to research in terms of this community's information behavior, and while it may be hard to find literature that details this community's information behavior specifically, I am excited to be a bit of a citizen detective myself in trying to track it down.

*References*


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← Another Intro (this time for INFO 200)

Contact Book Review: But What If We're Wrong? We Probably Already Are →

## 12 thoughts on "Blog Post #2: Sleuthing Citizen Detectives, an Information Community"

Sarah Rainey says:
September 14, 2020 at 7:11 am (Edit)

Oh man I can't wait to read what you find out next. great blog post it seems like the new availability of genetic info related to public DNA databases has really given this community a huge boost in recent years.

Reply

Corrina says:
September 16, 2020 at 1:44 am (Edit)

Thank you, Sarah! There's definitely a lot to talk about with this community-I'm excited to see where I go, too. 😊

Reply

Sarah Rainey says:
September 16, 2020 at 5:09 pm (Edit)

I started to watch "The Keepers" last night because of your mention, it's so interesting.

Reply

Corrina says:
September 16, 2020 at 7:36 pm (Edit)

It's so good! And there are bigger implications than you first think at the beginning of the series. I hope you enjoy it! 🙂 I have a ton of true crime series recommendations if you ever need one.

Reply

Michael Stephens says:
September 16, 2020 at 6:23 pm (Edit)

Oh wow! I am excited about this. As a framework, please take a look at the literature around serious leisure. I think it's a great fit.

The Keepers was devastating at times…and so well made.

Reply

Sarah Rainey says:
September 16, 2020 at 6:55 pm (Edit)

Yes, I'm in the devastated phase after last night's episode #7 but curious to see how it all unfolds.

Reply

Corrina says:
September 16, 2020 at 10:44 pm (Edit)

Oh yes, let us know what you think as it all unfolds. @sarahrainey7

Reply

Corrina says:
September 16, 2020 at 10:43 pm (Edit)

Thank you for the tip about serious leisure! I saw that in the module 4 lecture and was like "dingi-dingi!"

And so devastating. But Gemma and Abbie are just the best.

Reply

Sarina Khalaki Williams says:
September 17, 2020 at 9:14 am (Edit)

Wow, Corrina, what a well written and interesting post! Did you see Dont F**k With Cats? That was some incredible citizen detective work! It sounds like you definitely have a sleuth spirit and I'll be interested to see your future research.

Reply

Corrina says:
September 17, 2020 at 5:02 pm (Edit)

Thank you, Sarina! I have seen it! Yeah, that's a really good example of citizen detectives! Thanks you 😊

Reply

Justine says:
December 7, 2020 at 3:57 pm (Edit)

Hi Corrina,

I originally read through your Blog 7 post but did not know what a web sleuth was. I decided to read your Blog 2 post to see what web sleuths were all about. This work has been a fascinating topic to research! I have just recently gotten into true crime stories, and I was beginning to wonder how true crime YouTubers (of their information. I am actually surprised that so much information is available for web sleuths. Just like when you mentioned the Delphi murder case, I figured too much citizen involvement may ruin some situations.

Reply

Corrina says:
December 7, 2020 at 6:00 pm (Edit)

It was pretty fascinating to research webskills+! It is an interesting intersection of cyber vigilantism, entertainment, and information community. I found some pretty interesting resources-it was interesting to see that most of the research was about when webskills+ing goes wrong-like in the Delphi case or the Boston Marathon Bombings. There is also a fascinating phenomenon in China and other Asian countries called a human flesh search engine which is basically a group of netizens ranking and shaming individuals who have done something wrong socially or morally. This can be murder, infidelity, governmental official corruption, etc. And, if you're interested in exploring more true crime, I have a lot of recommendations in a Google Doc that I am happy to share with you, just let me know 😊

Reply

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