

# Indicators of Flaming On High Profile Criminal Cases

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# My paper

- Study at the intersection of criminology and social media studies
- Aim: identifying the typical patterns of flaming, or digitised hate speech, on high profile criminal cases
- Singling out indicators for ISPs to identify disruptive behaviours going beyond legality →  censorship vs freedom of expression

## Facebook bans Alex Jones, Milo Yiannopoulos and other far-right figures

The company has struggled to control far-right hate speech on the platform in recent years



▲ Facebook has banned the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones from its platform. Photograph: Jim Bourg/Reuters

## Instagram's Shadow Ban On Vaguely 'Inappropriate' Content Is Plainly Sexist

The platform's new policy will disproportionately affect women and sex workers.

 By Jesselyn Cook, HuffPost US



HUFFPOST ILLUSTRATION/GETTY IMAGES

**BuzzFeed News**

"A Honeypot For Assholes": Inside Twitter's 10-Year Failure To Stop Harassment

## "A Honeypot For Assholes": Inside Twitter's 10-Year Failure To Stop Harassment

For nearly its entire existence, Twitter has not just tolerated abuse and hate speech — it's virtually been optimized to accommodate it. With public backlash at an all-time high and growth stagnating, what is the platform that declared itself "the free speech wing of the free speech party" to do? BuzzFeed News talks to the people who've been trying to figure this out for a decade.

# Flaming Definition

- Flaming = degeneration of trolling
- Online harassment, threats and repeated, often group-led abuse going beyond mere conversation disruption;
- Often affects protected categories (e.g. gender, sexual orientation, religion, race)
- Silencing strategy = attempt to dissuade targets from engaging in online debate (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017).

# Case for Research

- Flaming = online translation IRL hate speech, which is often regulated through legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 (UK) → use of flaming scripts
- It has long-term consequences, bringing us to accept derogatory statements and demonisation of groups as normal
- Sense of impunity and that if you can *say* anything, you can *do* everything

# Methods

- Analysis of 500 tweets with the #McCann hashtag
- Users post daily, singling out Madeleine's parents + other players as the perpetrators of her disappearance/ 'death' → **Blend of harassment, defamation and insults with conspiracy theories & fake news**
- Experimental digital ethnography blending metadata and discourse analysis
- Observing the conversation to provide recommendations → identify and regulate behaviour that counts as flaming on high profile criminal cases



- Who has the right to discuss a highly private issue in a format that leaves a permanent mark?
- When does conjecture become harassment or defamation?
- When does an apparently innocuous community start committing what is potentially a crime?

# The Background

- Flaming is not an act of a few disenfranchised psychopaths
- Flaming on high profile criminal cases is a social ailment, a way for a fringe of society to come together, to communise, to find closure over such a popular case
- E.g. #McCann is a fully-fledged community involving “influencers” and “trollers”
- They talk to each other daily, often outside working hours & possibly have a normal, everyday life outside of the community



# #McCann: Social Circumstances

- 'IRL powerlessness' on the global stage & distrust towards elites → protest votes
- Internet communities = stage to air their contempt on
- #McCann community on Twitter = opportunity to solve the case → gives them a sense of purpose?
- “Looking for the truth”, need for “justice” → engaging with #McCann is an attempt to right wrongs in a way that the establishment has not been able to right

The people of Praia da Luz were astonished as the behaviour of [#McCann](#) family .. they seen through the lies first hand ... this would explain the attempt to destroy the areas tourism ... the people weren't sucked in by their lies for long so time to discredit

8:45 AM - 16 Jul 2018

4 Retweets 23 Likes



Does a confession require a conscience?

Full post by [\[redacted\]](#) at

[facebook.com/groups/Justice](#) ... [#McCann](#)  
[#SundayBrunch](#)

"We are not the ones who have done anything wrong," Kate McCann repeatedly bannurghed with unbecoming petulance. "It's... the person who... stole a little girl" (note: not "my daughter", not "my precious baby", no just "a little girl", any random "little girl" from whom she was able to instantaneously and entirely detach herself).

"What's done is done," opined her astoundingly supercilious spouse, with a shrug of his shoulders, and an unmistakable air of "I literally could not give less of a fuck."

I've said it before and I have not changed my mind: if anyone here is expecting anyone in this case, particularly the McCanns, to have an eventual attack of conscience, you will be disappointed. There are no consciences involved, sadly.

2:00 PM - 16 Jul 2018

12 Retweets 22 Likes



Pammy the old Pro would have us believe the ex pats and people of Portugal were involved in abducting [#MadeleineMcCann](#) never heard such bollocks in my life these people searched while [#McCann](#) slept , jogged and lavished in the media attention !!!

8:40 AM - 16 Jul 2018

1 Retweet 10 Likes



*“#MondayMadness when you try to brush off cavader (sic) and blood findings as dirty nappies , rubbish and sea bass #McCann”*

# Five Indicators Of Flaming On A High Profile Criminal Case

1. **The context** → parents of a missing child
2. **The content** → the accusations made
3. **The intensity** → over 2,000 tweets with the hashtag sent in less than 2 weeks = taunting
4. **The medium** → constitutes publication; easy to retrieve
5. **The law** → journalists publishing similar content have been charged with harassment or defamation

# Media Law & Circumstances

- Defamation: The McCanns have previously won lawsuits against newspapers or individuals who claimed the same (Express Newspapers 2008; Tony Bennett 2013)
- Harassment: because of the viciousness of the language used, in a delicate context, and in repetition
- Contextual vulnerability of the targets due to the disappearance of their daughter
- Bad parenting, lies, murder and cover-up script (possibly drawn from media reportages and social media conspiracy theories) repeated on other high profile criminal cases

# Recommendations

- Flame trolling on high profile criminal cases, does not only lower the tone of public debate: it undermines the foundation of the Criminal Justice System → jeopardises right to a fair trial
- Need for careful balancing act between freedom of expression and the understanding of the five indicators of flaming outlined above to decide whether some users should be merely banned or reported to higher authorities.

# Thank you!

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