

Why Americans Today Are So Quick to Join Mobs

For those of us not located in or near high-profile protests such as those in Charlottesville, it's easy to sit back, sigh at the problems in the world, and then push them to the back of our minds.

Some, however, though removed from the situation by distance, heartily throw themselves into the fray. These individuals, labeled "[amateur sleuths](#)" by the *New York Times*, appear to extend the mob mentality fostered through protests by using photos, the internet, and various social media platforms to hunt down those involved.

But while these amateur sleuths can pin down the individual they are seeking in record time, they can also do great damage to the innocent. As the *NYT* explains, such was the case with research scientist Kyle Quinn:

A man at the rally had been photographed wearing an "Arkansas Engineering" shirt, and the amateur investigators found a photo of Mr. Quinn that looked somewhat similar. They were both bearded and had similar builds.

By internet frenzy standards, that was proof enough. ...

Mr. Quinn, who runs a laboratory dedicated to wound-healing research, was quickly flooded with vulgar messages on Twitter and Instagram, he said in an interview on Monday. Countless people he had never met demanded he lose his job, accused him of racism and posted his home address on social networks.

Unfortunately, the corrections to the mistakes armchair sleuths make are not shared with the prominence of the original, as the tweet below shows:

Original tweet: 22,800 retweets.

The correction: 155 retweets. pic.twitter.com/813f0YuJyU

– Alex VanNess (@thealexvanness) [August 13, 2017](#)

The question is, why are so many who are removed from the protests so eager to jump into the fight and excoriate those allegedly involved?

There are a number of obvious answers, including the eagerness to be first to uncover a juicy tidbit and break news. The thirst for popularity and the potential fame a discovery can bring to the amateur sleuth may also be a driving force behind this.

But I wonder if there's an overlooked element of fear that plays into this phenomenon of bringing the perpetrators to justice – even if they weren't involved.

This element is well-described by Mark Twain in [A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court](#). In a certain chapter, Twain describes how his lead character, Sir Boss, goes into disguise with King Arthur in order to get the true pulse of the nation. While in disguise, they come across an incident in which the common people run around like mad, hanging numerous innocent individuals allegedly guilty for the death of the lord of the manor. This behavior is even passed on to the children, who attempt to follow their elders' example by nearly hanging one of their playmates.

When confronted by Sir Boss about his part in the hanging of innocent individuals, one of the commoners confesses that such actions are driven by fear. The thought that they will be the next ones to be strung up if they fail to stand up for the innocent causes them to shun due process:

And I will say my say, now, and ye may report it if ye be so minded. I helped to hang my neighbors for that it were peril to my own life to show lack of zeal in the master's cause; the others helped for none other reason. All rejoice to-day that he is dead, but all do go about seemingly sorrowing, and shedding the hypocrite's tear, for in that lies safety.

Are today's internet sleuths in the same boat? Are Americans so eager to avoid being at odds with the social justice, politically-correct mentality which is pervading culture, that they aggressively hunt down alleged transgressors with little care to the innocent individuals whose lives may be ruined through false accusations?

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