The influence of social media affordances and local social discussions on digital vigilantism practices against doctors

BA Thesis

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June 2019

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Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of digital vigilantism practices targeting medical practitioners. It investigates a case of a bereaved mother publicly accusing a Bulgarian pediatrician for the death of her child on the social media platform Facebook. In particular, the study examines the influence of social media affordances on digital vigilantism against doctors, and the dynamic between vigilantism, traditional news media and the local social discussions on the Bulgarian health institution. Digital ethnography is employed as an approach to gain insight into how the mediated communication between vigilantes was shaped by the online and offline context of the event. The study reveals that the successful employment of the affordances of social media platforms, which are built around the connectivity culture favoring the sharing of personalized and emotional messages, can effectively stimulate and facilitate the spread of a digital vigilantism campaign, and make participation in vigilantism practices generally easier. Importantly, the online criticism towards doctors is not an isolated digital practice, but embedded in the wider Internet cultures of health-related personal storytelling, grief support groups and physician reviews, and Bulgaria's traditional journalists' practices of incorporating citizen reporting into their news accounts. Moreover, it is found that the local social discussion on the malfunctioning of Bulgaria's health system provides a favorable context in which the single case of the accused pediatrician can be connected with the public's larger criticism and frustration towards medical practitioners. The study contributes to the body of knowledge on digital vigilantism by providing useful insights on a topic which has remained largely unexplored, namely digital vigilantism practices against doctors, focusing on its complexity and societal implications.

Keywords: digital vigilantism, online shaming, social media logic, social media affordances, viral justice, citizen journalism, citizen reporting, criminal prosecution of medical practitioners

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1. Introduction

This study explores a digital vigilantism case targeting a Bulgarian doctor. It started in November 2019, when a 3-year-old boy died of pneumonia in Sofia. Following the incident, his parents sent a letter to the media in which they accused several hospitals for the tragic occurrence. In response, the Ministry of Health immediately launched a legal investigation. Unfortunately, it was not the first time when the Bulgarian media had to report on such saddening events. What connects this particular case with digital vigilantism practices is that the boy's mother used the social media platform Facebook to name and blame a specific doctor from the pediatric hospital. According to the woman, her son had died because of that doctors' neglect. In a publicly shared Facebook post, she claimed that Dr. G. refused to admit the child for treatment while watching him die. The full name, as well as a photo of the mentioned pediatrician were also included. Moreover, the mother asked other Facebook users to share her post.

This Facebook post gained wide recognition and unleashed a wave of digital vigilantism against the doctor. It quickly circulated around the platform, with 3.8 thousand of users sharing it and hundreds of people liking and commenting. The public accusation of Dr. G. transformed the way citizens perceived the case - from a tragic event they heard on the news to a personalized story of a grieving mother blaming a particular individual for her pain. As a result, many took to the comment section under the post to shame the pediatrician and write violent messages against her. The Facebook post largely contributed to the huge media visibility which the parents, the doctor and the case in general received.

Apart from the many users engaging in the online discussion which was formed around the initial and following two Facebook posts of the mother, the mainstream news media also picked up the event and granted it significantly wider coverage in comparison to other similar disputes. The fact that the doctor's name was disclosed allowed journalists to frame their articles in accordance to the two types of reactions they could include - those who defended the hospital and the doctor, and those who joined the public condemnation of Dr. G. Both the family and the pediatrician were interviewed, as well as lawyers, medical professionals and politicians. Consequently, the popularity of the story led to the association of the particular event with the larger context of Bulgaria's citizens' long-term mistrust in health institutions.

Under these circumstances, the controversy of the doctor's fault in the tragic death of the little boy can be examined in the context of digital vigilantism. Scholars have recognized that digital vigilantism enables civic discourse and supports the expression of criticism and alternative opinions (Cheong & Gong, 2010). Motivated by a desire to restore justice, participants in digital vigilantism take upon the function of policing on their own. Moreover, studies have highlighted the role of digital technologies in such vigilante practices (Trottier, 2017). Social media platforms allow online users to form spontaneous communities and facilitate their collaboration in exposing and publicly shaming wrongdoers. Through collecting and sharing their private information online, vigilantes render the accused individuals visible

and bring attention to their deviant behavior, which can have severe consequences in both the online and offline world. By naming and shaming criminals who have not been punished by the legal system, digital vigilantes can also force authorities to be more accountable. Furthermore, Myles & Trottier (2017) noticed that the actions of digital vigilantes are informed by popular beliefs around the behavior under scrutiny rather than on verified knowledge. Based on this, vigilante practices can be seen as a re-enactment of a specific understanding and outlook on the social reality shared by the participants. Nevertheless, digital vigilantism can also be problematic, especially in regard to verification of information, the vigilantes' motives, the spread of the campaign and the severity of the punishment of the targeted individual (Trottier, 2017; Koseff, 2016).

Therefore, this study tries to answer the following question:

How do the affordances of social media inform both the moral and organizational dimensions of digital vigilantism against doctors, and what is the dynamic between vigilantism, traditional news media and the local social discussions on the Bulgarian health institution?

To answer the question, I will analyze in detail vigilantes' practices on social media, such as how they name and shame individuals assumed to have committed a crime or acted against moral norms. The focus will be on the bereaved mother publicly accusing the pediatrician for the death of her child on a social networking platform, and the violent comments in which online users shamed the doctor. Then, the relation between the vigilante actions and the logic of social media will be closely examined. Furthermore, I will explore how traditional news media contributed to and re-mediated the event. Particular attention will also be paid to how the journalists and the vigilantes conveyed specific opinions and judgments by framing the case. Lastly, I will analyze how the citizens participating in digital vigilantism connected this single case with the social discussion of the wider malfunctioning of health institutions in Bulgaria.

Digital vigilantism has become a topic under heated debate in both academic and popular discourses. Nevertheless, less attention is paid to how medical practitioners are becoming the target of vigilantism on social media platforms. The case of Dr.G. will thus be considered as an exploratory case study. Data for the analysis was manually collected from publicly accessible online platforms. The employment of digital ethnography contributed to the reconstruction of the discursive practices and trajectories of this case.

The next chapter will provide the theoretical background for this study. It will review the conceptualizations of digital vigilantism, social media logic, news media practices and framing, as well as draw the social background of the case. The third chapter will present the methodology of this study, clarifying the methods for data collection and storage, and the techniques for observation and apprehension of digital vigilantism practices online. The fourth chapter will proceed with the data analysis, informed by the theoretical background. The fifth chapter will conclude the study by restating

the findings and answering the research question, as well as discuss the societal implications of this study.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter will review the theoretical conceptualizations on digital vigilantism, aiming to present a general definition of the term as well as an understanding of the practices involved, the possible motivations for participation and the potential negative consequences. Additionally, theories on the logic of social media and its influence on digital vigilantism will be revised. Previous studies on the way traditional news media incorporate citizen-provided content and amplify the visibility of such issues by re-mediating and re-framing them will also be considered. Furthermore, I will explain the concept of framing which will later serve as an analytical tool, as well as the social background needed to contextualize the case and understand the discussion around it.

2.1. Defining digital vigilantism

In order to introduce the concept of digital vigilantism to this study, I have synthesized the definitions provided by previous studies. In essence, vigilantism refers to instances in which citizens seek to take the law in their own hands by identifying and punishing suspected criminals (Koseff, 2016). Moreover, the development of the Internet and digital technologies led to the emergence of digital vigilantism, which allows for the faster and easier apprehension of targeted individuals. Trottier (207) has identified that the starting point of digital vigilantism is usually moral outrage or offense towards an act typically captured and/or transmitted through mobile devices. It is achieved through the mediated coordination of individuals on social networking sites. Such groups are formed temporarily, for example on a platform like Facebook, and do not require any outside relation between the participants. The aim is to render the target visible through the public sharing of personal and sensitive information about them or their family members. Apart from being exposed through the unwanted, intense and enduring visibility, the alleged criminal can also become an object of harassment and other forms of social harm. The ultimate goals of digital vigilantism are legal justice or unconventional modes of justice. The latter usually include punishments such as public shaming and termination of the employment of the victim. In accordance with this definition, the case of Dr.G. can be classified and investigated as an instance of digital vigilantism.

2.2. Digital vigilantism practices

Digital vigilantism involves additional actions apart from chasing criminals and searching for information. A common practice related to digital vigilantism is online naming and shaming. It is defined by Oravec (2019:1) as the *"intentional collection and dissemination of data that are potentially stigmatizing in modes that are widely accessible and in which observers (including members of the*

public) can often add input". In many cases, there is an explicit or implicit appeal for the co-production of shaming and participation in vigilantism, which can be in the form of insulting online comments or even physical violence towards the targeted individual. Vigilantes can also engage in articulating shared norms and values, and expressing their "mediated collective identity" based on solidarity (Trottier, 2017:57). The formation of such ideological collectives includes diverse individuals coming together to express alternative public opinion and challenge the status quo (Kasra, 2017). These digital vigilantism practices are further informed by the broader digital media culture privileging the user-generated content and communities as empowering. Both of these practices can be identified in the case study to be analyzed later. They provide insight into the connection between shaming the pediatrician and using it as an opportunity to also join the collective criticism against the health system in general.

2.3. Functions of digital vigilantism and motivations for participation

Other highlighted aspects of digital vigilantism efforts are their entertainment and psychological functions. Kohm (2009) writes that public humiliation amplified by mass media can blur the boundaries of reality and entertainment. Oravec (2019) argues that the accused individuals who become the targets of online social shaming are only symbolically perceived by the social media users who simply release their frustration towards them, ready to move on to the next available target soon. Apart from serving the function of an outlet for negative emotions, digital vigilantism can be motivated by a variety of reasons. These include community involvement, civic engagement and social responsibility. Online naming and shaming is seen as a way for citizens to exercise peer-surveillance through technology in order to reinforce the socio-cultural norms and promote civic participation (Skoric et al., 2010; Cheong & Gong, 2010). It is employed as a tool for maintaining order in society by publicly humiliating those who have misbehaved. Posting the photograph of an alleged wrongdoer online can thus be compared to the punishment practices of the past, when the torture and execution of criminals was converted into a public spectacle as an exercise of power, or as a message to the enemy (Kasra, 2017).

Expressing disapproval with institutions and officials, as well as bringing attention and media visibility to problems are other possible drives for vigilantes. Digital vigilantism contrasts to earlier forms of disciplining in that the citizens themselves are performing the punishment through shaming due to their dissatisfaction with the work of the relevant authorities. The perceived incapability of the state and the lack of faith in legal justice systems thus forces them to take matters into their own hands by exposing someone's deviant behavior online (Dunsby & Howes, 2019), and possibly using the public reaction as a way to pressure some further action against the offender (Skoric et al., 2010). Consequently, digital vigilantes can also seek to bring attention to problems in the governmental administration, expose the corrupt officials to public scrutiny and demand accountability from the authorities (Cheong & Gong, 2010). It is important to highlight that studies show that citizens generally endorse online naming and shaming for crimes perceived as severe. In such a context, exposing an alleged wrongdoer online is

understood as fulfilling one's moral obligation to protect the community and raise awareness about inappropriate behavior (Dunsby & Howes, 2019). Oravec (2019) also argues that not all public contexts can facilitate effective shaming. There needs to be a possibility for deterrence of a specific group, as well as the ability to attract media attention. Achieving media exposure has also been highlighted by other studies as a motivation for digital vigilantes to continue their efforts (Skoric et al., 2010). These findings will assist me in understanding the possible motivations behind the mother's Facebook publications and the online users' participation in digital vigilantism against the pediatrician.

2.4. The problematics of digital vigilantism

Despite proving helpful in rightfully solving some cases, digital vigilantism can have many potentially negative consequences, as identified by Koseff (2016). The accuracy of such activities is questionable – private actors do not have the required skills and training, nor do they meet the same standards of truthfulness as democratic institutions in identifying criminals. False accusations fueled by misinformation, and leakages of unverified information happen too often online (Trottier, 2017). The motives of the vigilantes can also be problematic, since their actions and decisions may be driven by personal beliefs, subjective determination, anger or irrationality. In other words, their intentions can be egoistic, rather than altruistic – serving their own sense of rightfulness while claiming to work in the community's interest. Such actions might end up being a personal attack and lack the power to deter (Skoric et. al, 2010). Studies have also noted that naming and shaming of individuals who are only suspected but not convicted of a crime can interfere with legal trials, create false beliefs in the public and lead to unnecessary or unfair public outrage (Dunsby & Howes, 2019).

Koseff (2016) also stresses that the punishments produced by digital vigilantism can easily get out of proportion. Since digital technologies remove the organizational limitations which offline communities face, it is considerably more complicated for a group of digital vigilantes to establish an order or have control over the scope and severity of their actions. Furthermore, Trottier (2017) has recognized that digital vigilantism transcends the online/offline distinction, which means that vigilantes may not be aware of the actual consequences of their efforts, especially in the offline world. Despite concentrating on cultural violence, participants can be easily motivated to harass, send death threats or even exercise physical violence towards the target whose geographical location and other personal details are made visible. Together with the fact that no one can control how far information published online spreads, or for how long it circulates, we can see how the consequences of digital vigilantism can be irreversibly long (Skoric et al., 2010). The wide circulation of online data also amplifies the visibility of digital vigilantism campaigns, which contributes to the unexpectedness of their effects. Moreover, the culture of online communication even alters people's understanding of privacy and their perceptions of what can be published without violating another person's rights. Social media encourages users to

provide as much content as possible, and this can lead to the sharing of one's own, or other individuals' personal details without much consideration of laws or legal rules for privacy.

When examining the use of social media in digital vigilantism practices, Miles and Trottier (2017) describe how online publicity achieved through platforms such as Facebook can have both positive and negative effects. Borrowing Thompson's (2005) notion of a 'double-edged sword', they state that on the one hand, heightened mediated visibility enables vigilantes to acquire policing capital, while on the other, it can lead to some concerned citizens questioning the intentions of the group. Their general argument is that moral scandals are constituted by their mediated visibility, rather than simply commented on publicly. The exposure and public condemnation of behavior which would otherwise remain hidden from the audience is thus what creates the scandal. Furthermore, online visibility enables the vigilante organizations to gain the symbolic capital which legitimizes their policing. This can result in the public perceiving the vigilante citizens as having more authority to speak on the problem than the higher institutions, who are low in symbolic capital. In effect, the relationship between digital vigilantes and state authorities is ambiguous – the vigilantism practices are perceived as resulting from the passivity of institutions, while at the same time assisting them in restoring justice.

These insights on the problematics of digital vigilantism will shed light on the critical evaluation of the vigilantism case under examination, and enable a thorough analysis of both the positive and negative consequences of the vigilante practices involved.

2.5. Social media logic and digital vigilantism

As digital vigilantism practices are achieved through the use of digital technologies and participation in social networking sites, it is essential that we recognize the influence of social media's logic on such actions. Trottier (2017) has useful insights on the relation between civic practices and the rules of online communication. First of all, the informational structure of social networking tools facilitates spontaneous planning and coordination very well. In the online world, material, spatial and temporal boundaries can be ignored, which makes the collective action of vigilantes easier and faster. A digital vigilantism event can include actors from virtually any place of the world, and thus spread way beyond its local territory. As a result, a largely distributed network can cooperate in identifying and shaming targets, as well as in engaging in civic discourse and exchanging knowledge (Cheong & Gong, 2010). Undoubtedly, technological affordances provide a larger variety of shaming strategies and means for a broad distribution of information. Ordinary citizens with access to the Internet can report on an incident and interact with others in a collaborative effort to track down the violator, which then usually unleashes a wave of harassment and seeking of punishment. Thus, social networking sites are especially effective for vigilantism purposes because the target can be exposed in front of the community, which can also be encouraged to co-produce the shaming (Oravec, 2019; Skoric et al., 2010). What is more, as Cheong and Gong (2010) have illustrated, new media facilitates changes in the opportunities for civic

participation. The connectivity culture of the online realm provides a space for public discussions where diverse opinions and criticism can be freely expressed, independent of official accounts.

The digital vigilantism practices of this paper's case study took place on the social media platform Facebook. Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) write that contrary to some speculations, Facebook has not lost its popularity among Internet users. In fact, they provide research showing that it is the primary source of finding, reading/watching and sharing news for most of its users. This has important implications for the way in which information is perceived on the platform, where traditional journalistic articles blend with the stream of user-generated content. Whether a piece of information succeeds in reaching a wider public depends on how well it advances through the structure of the site. Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) employ the concept of media logic to explain that for each medium and format, there are certain storytelling techniques and news values which can be used to successfully attract the attention of the audiences. The interpersonal and subjective logic of social media revolves around the concepts of user engagement, 'shareworthiness' and 'virality'. 'Virality' as a concept signifies "the process which gives any information item […] the maximum exposure, relative to the potential audience, over a short duration, distributed by many nodes" (Nahon et al., 2011:1).

This means that the success of a message on social media is defined by how quickly it spreads through the network of users who share it. We can then see the importance of 'shareworthiness' as a desirable value for anyone who wishes to widely distribute a certain post online. Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) indicate that users are more likely to perceive a message as worth sharing if it generates high physiological arousal in them. Emotionally charged messages containing personalized self-expressions are more successful in achieving this than factual, impersonal and objective information. What is more, Wahl-Jorgensen (2016) has pointed out that emotional forms of expression are seen as more authentic and truthful by the audience than detached and distant reporting of events. The authority of objectivism is being replaced by "unrehearsed, unpolished and personal accounts of ordinary people", characterized by immediacy, realism and identification (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016:135).

The fact that emotionally-charged messages are perceived as authentic has important implications for engaging in digital vigilantism practices on social networking sites such as Facebook. Dunsby and Howes (2019) point out that users perceive information on the platform as credible. Furthermore, they argue that the emotional appeal of the messages circulating on Facebook can help in understanding the motivations behind people engaging in digital vigilantism practices like naming and shaming. If users believe in the reputability of social media, a message which resonates with them emotionally can easily provoke further actions from them. Wood et. al. (2018) employ the concept of virality in putting forward the notion of 'viral justice', which is defined as a case of a justice-seeking post by a victim being shared through a large network of users in a short period of time. Once again, the 'affective contagion' is presented as central for capturing users' attention and encouraging them to share the item.

Social media logic is not simply a driver behind digital vigilantes' seeking of 'viral justice' –it can also be seen as transforming the nature of participation in vigilantism. According to Dunsby and Howes (2019), the participatory culture of social media may limit the vigilantism activities to the online sphere. They bring forward the concept of 'slacktivism' – the passive liking and sharing of content online, to show how engaging with naming and shaming practices can be achieved without much effort with the help of a few buttons on Facebook. The findings of their study suggest that users understand liking or sharing a post which accuses a suspect as assisting the criminal justice system or raising community awareness. Consequently, the community of digital vigilantes can express their support without taking steps outside the online sphere. However, it is important to recognize that such actions can still have considerable impact in the offline world.

2.6. *Traditional news media and digital vigilantism*

It is also worth considering the relation between digital vigilantism and traditional news media. The increasing popularity of social media and its logic of 'virality' have also influenced the production and distribution of news. On social media, traditional journalistic reports co-exist with citizen-produced information or footage of events. As a result, news outlets now treat highly-visible online events as sources for their work. On the one hand, citizen reporting is perceived as more authentic and truthful by the audience. Moreover, scholars have highlighted that digital vigilantes can also benefit from the ability to catch the attention of traditional media (Dunsby & Howes, 2019). On the other hand, studies also recognize that this incorporation of social media publications into traditional news does not go unproblematic, as it can complicate the function of the amplified media visibility – from producing an objective report to joining the vigilantism practice of exposure and punishment. Andén-Papadopoulos (2013) explains that a primary task of journalists has become to re-mediate and re-frame issues discussed on social media. Nevertheless, he argues that although user-generated content can supplement professional news narratives and close information gaps, it also challenges the traditional understandings of truth and objectivity. Social media publications offer the subjective insights of involved citizens, which can violate the news outlets' control on credibility. This creates an ambivalence between appreciation of the first-hand experience, and the suspicion of lack of meaningful context and verification. Therefore, newsmakers can never provide a perfectly objective and balanced account of an event if they need to include user-generated materials.

The discussion of the involvement of traditional news media in digital vigilantism practices unfolding online directs our attention to how Bulgarian journalists amplified the case of Dr.G. To understand the relation between the digital vigilantes' actions and mainstream media reporting on the issue, we also need to look at how both parties framed their judgments.

2.7. The power of framing

Framing is an analytical tool to understand how texts communicate certain messages and guide people into thinking in certain directions. Entman (1993) writes that frames can be employed by agents to construct their argument about the definition of problems, their cause and possible solution, as well as to present their moral judgments on the issue. He explains that framing works by highlighting particular pieces of information about the subject and placing them forward as important and more meaningful in order for the audience to notice and perceive them easier. However, he also notices that while focusing on certain aspects of the reality described, frames direct the attention away from others. When a communicator consciously or unconsciously decides what to include in a text, they can influence how others understand and interpret the issue. Another insight provided by Entman (1993) worth mentioning is that even when journalists follow the guidelines for objective reporting, they can still convey a particular framing of the news and thus prevent the audience from forming their own balanced opinion of the event. Therefore, while analyzing the case of Dr. G., it is important to notice how communicators frame their observations by presenting some arguments and omitting others, be it in a Facebook post or a news report.

2.8. Online sharing of health information and legal accusations against doctors

In order to see how the different actors in Dr.G's case constructed their judgments, we also need to consider the social background of the event. Firstly, the presence of online discourses related to health issues and medical knowledge will be reviewed. Secondly, I discuss the consequences brought about by the phenomenon of online physician reviews. Finally, the debates around legal allegations against doctors will be considered.

Studies have addressed some of the major health-related uses of the Internet – as a community for mutual support and exchange of knowledge (Hoybye et al., 2005; Kressler, 2014), as a facilitator of personal storytelling and as an outlet for expression of grief. Health-related personal storytelling online can have therapeutic effects – it can elicit emotional connection and empathy among the audience of users (Yu et al., 2011), serve as an emotional outlet, as well as allow the individual to reflect on their experience and receive support from the community (Briant et al., 2016). Other motivations for sharing health information online can be the possibility to reach a larger audience, let others benefit from the accumulated useful knowledge, or simply express negative feelings related to the situation (Choudhury et al., 2014). Furthermore, academics have also explored digitally-enabled practices of grief expression, with specific attention to bereaved parents. There is a large number of closed online groups where grieving parents can seek emotional support, share information, empower each other and feel less lonely and isolated (Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2015; Pector, 2012). However, open social networking platforms like Facebook are also recognized as a venue for grieving. On Facebook, grief expressions

can become public, and social support can be received by a large audience beyond the immediate friends and family (Rossetto, 2015).

Another use of the Internet for health-related purposes is for finding specific information about medical practitioners. Studies show that patients perceive online reviews about physicians as useful and informative because they represent other patients' experience. Consequently, they are less willing to use the services of a doctor with more negative reviews (Li et al., 2015). The growing phenomenon of online reviews of medics can be very harmful for their reputation and lead to disproportionate damage to their careers, especially in cases where grieving relatives direct their anger towards the doctor (Ahmad, 2010). For this reason, some doctors are trying to constrain their patients from writing reviews – a struggle which is often perceived as an assault on free speech (Woodward, 2009). The potential threat of publicly posted allegations to the reputation of doctors has led to many discussions on the disclosure of physicians' names in complaints, especially in cases of legal proceedings against them (Bismark & Paterson, 2006). On one side stands their right to protect their privacy, while on the other stands the public's interest in transparency around accusations and disciplinary processes. Moreover, the citizens' demand for accountability can be amplified if there is a general sense of mistrust in authorities among them. However, naming the alleged misconducting doctor can indeed have permanent effects despite the outcome of the law process. The physician's reputation will further suffer if the case gets picked up by the news media, especially when the media coverage is premature, unbalanced and creates sensationalism. As can be seen, a bereaved parent expressing their grief to the online community is not an isolated instance, rather it can be connected to the wider context of digital health communication.

3. Methodology

Digital ethnographic research was performed to gain insight into how digital vigilante practices against doctors are informed by social media affordances, as well as how their digital communication is influenced by the offline context. Varis (2016) explains that digital ethnography focuses on producing thorough or 'thick' descriptions of locally situated experiences in their natural, lived context. It is a flexible approach towards describing, interpreting and acquiring in-depth understanding of cultural phenomena and practices enabled by digital media. The research field of digital ethnographers is the Internet, and the data collected by them are the records of online interaction – characters, text messages, images, emojis and other semiotic signs.

This paper uses the case of Dr.G. as an explorative case study. The digital vigilantism practices in this case concern a widely recognized local event and were achieved through digitally mediated communication. Interaction between the vigilantes took place on the social media platform Facebook, where they engaged with the publicly accessible posts of the mother and communicated in the comment

sections under them. Furthermore, this specific event was connected with the broader offline context of Bulgaria citizens' mistrust towards health institutions. Thus, the semiotic activity of the vigilantes can be examined by looking at the posts and comments, where the shared meanings and common patterns of contextualization can be identified. The relation to the local social discussion on health institutions can be further explored by reviewing online articles reporting on the case, published by Bulgarian news media outlets. The biggest national news channels – BTV and Nova, both private-owned, as well as a few other private news agencies, are the main sources of information for Bulgarian citizens, with the latter having more visibility in the online world.

Observation of the digital vigilante practices started with browsing the Facebook page of the mother, followed by a comprehensive reading of the comments under her posts. This allowed for an initial, general understanding of the style and content of the interactions. After an identification of the most common topics and themes explored, screenshots of representative comments were taken. Then, I went on to read some online news articles to follow the relation of the comments to the local social discussion. All of the online data were collected and analyzed manually. The dataset comprises (3) screen captures of Facebook posts, (52) screen captures of Facebook comments and (16) news articles. Only a small portion of them will be directly cited in the study, but they all contributed to the observations and interpretations of the event. All of the data was gathered from publicly accessible online platforms. Because of the persistence and searchability feature of online data, anonymity had to be ensured by hiding avatars and usernames. Moreover, since all materials were originally posted in Bulgarian, they were manually translated into English with the aim of preserving the original meanings as much as possible. Any other personal information included in the comments was also removed from the dataset.

All of the texts and human activities which were observed are public in both definitions as described by Willis (2017). From a technical availability point of view, the privacy settings of all of the Facebook posts and comments are set to 'Public', meaning that they can be seen by anyone with Internet connection. Moreover, we can consider how the subjects involved perceive the privacy of the information shared. We can note that nothing else from the woman's profile is publicly visible besides the 3 posts on the topic, and that in her status update, she appealed to other users to share the post and thus make it viral. The posts have thousands of shares, comments and likes, which means that they have been accessed by many Bulgarian citizens. Those users who address the woman in the comments often do it in a formal manner. In general, the people engaging in the post do not seem to know each other. Willis (2017) uses the guidelines provided by the American Psychological Association (2010) to note that informed consent can be waived in situations where the information is publicly available and users treat it as such.[1] Therefore, we can liken this study to research in a busy public setting where consent by

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[1] American Psychological Association (2010). Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. Source: https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/principles.pdf Viewed on: 18 April 2020.

every subject observed is not necessary. In addition, the Facebook posts and comments are textual in nature, which means that for the most part, we can also adopt the rules of public documentation research, which further justifies the lack of consent by participants.

Since the main goal of this study is to examine the influence of social media affordances and the local social discussion on digital vigilantism practices conducted through online communication, the focus of the analysis will be on understanding the use of language and its relation to the social context. A common qualitative research method for such objectives is discourse analysis, which aims to understand the functions of language and the creation of meaning in different contexts. Jones et al. (2015) explain that discourse analysis studies the way semiotic systems and media affect the kinds of meanings and social purposes people can achieve in different situations, as well as the kinds of social relationships and identities which can be articulated. When applied to the digital world, discourse analysis acknowledges that individuals can perform certain situated actions with the help of digital media tools – both technological and semiotic, to enact their belonging to a particular group. Moreover, the meaning of these digital practices is dependent on the context of use, since it is always influenced by the affordances or constraints of the medium, as well as by the social situation. Therefore, the analysis in this study will be informed by Jones et al. (2015) definition of discourse analysis, and will examine the semiotic elements in the texts, their social and material contexts, the social actions and interactions individuals achieve with them, and finally, the way the texts are employed to reproduce certain ideologies and versions of reality. Consequently, discourse analysis will be used in understanding how vigilantes employ semiotic means to engage in naming and shaming practices and to construct the identity of active citizens concerned with the functioning of Bulgaria's health system. In addition, it will be useful in comparing the meanings and versions of the reality of the event conveyed in the vigilantes' discourse with those of the traditional news media's coverage of the case.

4. Data Analysis

After having set the theoretical and methodological basis of this study in the previous chapters, we can now proceed with analyzing the case of Dr. G. Firstly, I will identify the specific characteristics of the event which lead to its classification as digital vigilantism. I will explore the types of practices enacted by the vigilantes as well as their possible motivations for participation. In addition, I will analyze the potential negative consequences of their actions. Then, the social media affordances employed and their influence on the vigilante practices will be examined. This will be followed by an exploration of how the news media in Bulgaria incorporated the citizen-provided content in their reports and how they re-mediated and re-framed the issues. Finally, I will analyze the connections with the social discussion of the wider malfunctioning of health institutions in Bulgaria.

4.1. Digital vigilantism against Dr.G.

Digital vigilantism is defined as an instance of a morally-outraged citizen or a coordinated group of citizens who seek justice by identifying and punishing an individual believed to have committed a crime with the aid of digital technologies and social networking sites (Trottier, 2017; Koseff, 2016). This is most often achieved by sharing personal information of the targeted individual online and thus exposing their identity and actions through unwanted, intense and enduring visibility. In the case of Dr.G., the moral outrage was first expressed by the parents of a small boy who died of pneumonia. Shortly after the incident happened, they contacted the media with a statement blaming the hospital for inadequately treating them and refusing to help them although their child was in critical condition.[2] No identities of particular doctors were revealed. However, a day after the event was reported, the mother of the deceased child took to Facebook to further voice her criticism. She published the following post (Fig 1.)[3]:

Figure 1. The Facebook post published by the mother

In addition to the post, she also attached a photo of Dr.G. By doing so, the mother identified the doctor as the wrongdoer in the situation, and made her persona visible to the public. It is worth noting that there is an interesting visibility dynamic here. The parents of the deceased boy never showed their faces to the audience. The mother's name became known because of her Facebook profile, but there were no photos of herself, or at least none were accessible by the public. Therefore, their identities remained to a large extent invisible, while the pediatrician's name and photo circulated around the Internet. Moreover, the mother did not include any details about the boy and his health condition in the

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[2] Source: https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/3-godishno-dete-e-pochinalo-v-stolichna-bolnica.html Viewed on 25 April 2020.
[3] Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3422157214491192&set=a.472207309486212&type=3&theater
Data retrieved on 14 April 2020.

posts. The lack of background information in this case further intensified the pediatrician's visibility – she was the only focus of attention.

As a result, after seeing the post, many citizens were immediately convinced of Dr.G.'s guilt. The amorphous crowd assembled against the alleged criminal and formed a group of digital vigilantes whose coordination was enabled by the social networking site. The comment section under the post was flooded with responses, ranging from simply offering their condolences to harassing the doctor and even wishing her death. In accordance to conceptualizations of the goals of digital vigilantism, the citizens were demanding that justice be served – for example by terminating her employment and putting her in jail (Fig.2)[4]:

Translation:

'Dirty freak, jail and never again the right to practice the doctor profession! And to you I offer my condolences and a lot of strength!'

'We have to immediately make a petition against this killer! Jail for life! Bring back the death penalty for child killers!!!'

'Condolences! If you make a petition for the deprivation of her rights, as a doctor I will sign with two hands. I hope there will be a fair trial and that the destruction of our nation will be stopped.'
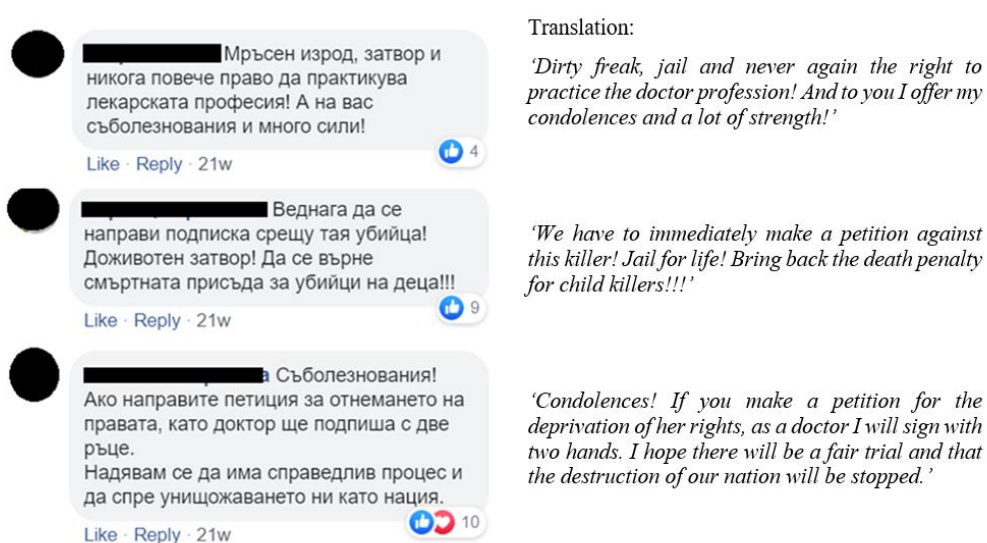
Figure 2. Comments under the mother's Facebook post

However, most of them were advocating for justice in its unconventional modes. The reasons behind most vigilantes seeking to take justice in their own hands will be discussed later. For now, we will look at the content and the sociolinguistic features of the violent comments. It is important to note that these comments have multiple functions. Apart from expressing opinions and ideas for punishment, they also perform the very act of punishment through a speech act. A considerable amount of the commentators employed religious discourse in order to moralize the event (Fig.3.)[5]. By wishing God's punishment upon the doctor, they managed to express their judgments of the assumed wrongdoing and characterized it as a sin. As strong as this sounds, most of the responses were even more violent, insulting

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[4] Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3422157214491192&set=a.472207309486212&type=3   Data retrieved on 14 April 2020.

[5] Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3422157214491192&set=a.472207309486212&type=3 Data retrieved on 14 April 2020.

the pediatrician, claiming that she should be harmed physically or even that she should be killed (Fig. 4)[6].

Strong language, slang, curses and insults were frequently used by the vigilantes. In addition, there is an immense use of exclamation marks, which intensifies the outrageous tone of the hateful sentences. Notably, all of these violent comments are speech acts which execute the punishing through language. To demonstrate, one commentator wrote "I hope everything gets back to her" (Fig.4.). This is a curse, which needs to be performed publicly through a speech act in order to await its consequences. Furthermore, all of the offensive labels aim at shaming and harassing the pediatrician, hurting her, destroying her reputation and even her status as a human being. Some comments include suggestions for killing methods such as execution by means of electric chair, beating her in a dark alley with a baseball bat, cutting her piece by piece or shooting her. There were also volunteers for killing her with their own bare hands. The impressively detailed descriptions of possible killing methods are written so feverishly that it seems as if their authors were almost trying to enact them with words. Accordingly, we can see how the digital practice of posting public comments on a social media platform is an effective method to engage in digital vigilantism against an alleged offender. Simply speaking out against the doctor, insulting or cursing her on Facebook are in themselves performative acts of punishment – the end goal of the vigilantes.
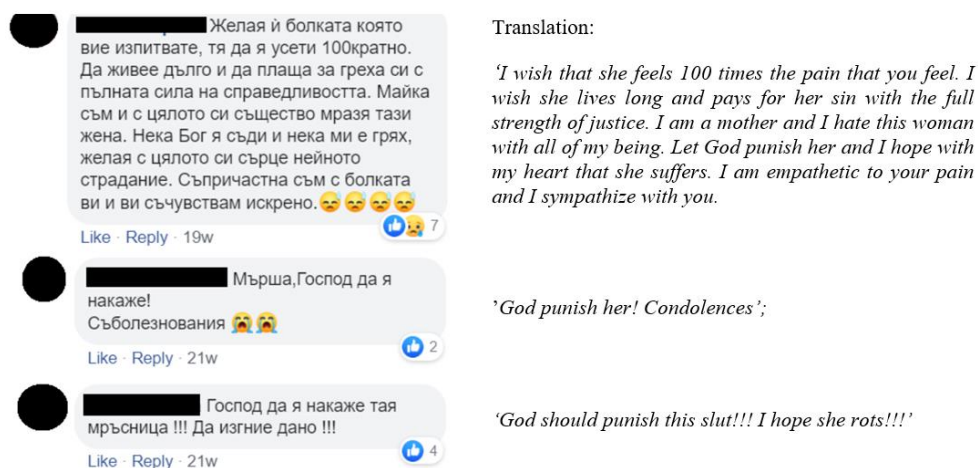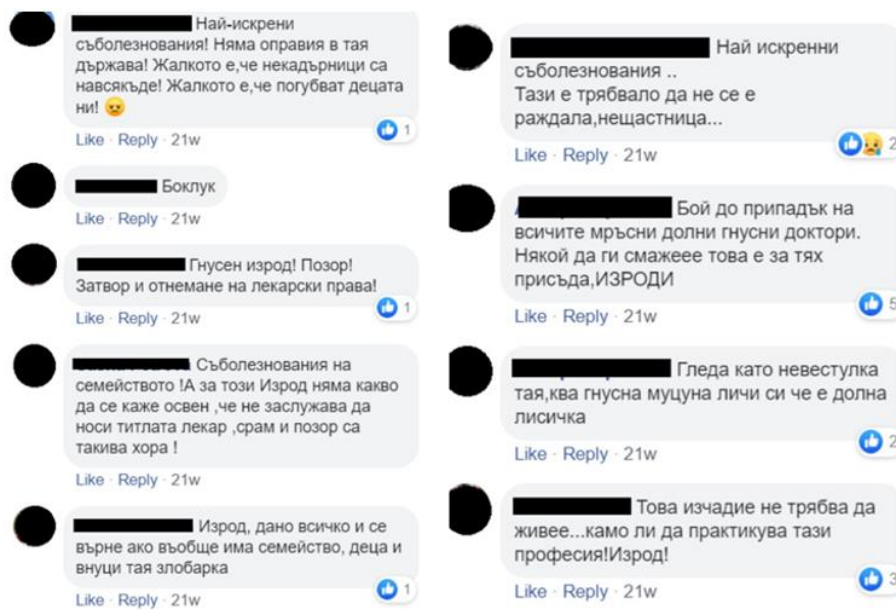

Figure 3. Comments under the mother's Facebook post.

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[6] Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3422157214491192&set=a.472207309486212&type=3 Data retrieved on 14 April 2020

Translation from top to bottom, left column first:

'My most sincere condolences! There is no hope for this country. It is sad that such flops are everywhere! Such a pity that they kill our children!'

'Trash'

'Disgusting freak! Shame! Jail and deprivation of medical rights!'

'Condolences to the family! And for this freak I have nothing to say except that she does not deserve the title doctor, such people are a shame and disgrace!'

'Freak, I hope everything gets back to her if she even has a family, children and grand-children, this vicious woman'

'My most sincere condolences! This miserable woman should not have been born…'

'All of the dirty vile disgusting doctors should be beaten until they faint. Someone to smash them, this will be a verdict for them, FREAKS'

'She looks like a weasel, such a disgusting snout, it shows that she is a vile fox'

'This monster should not live…let alone practice this profession! Freak!'

Figure 4. Comments under the mother's Facebook post

Taking the discussed comments into consideration, it is more than evident that the case of Dr.G. consists of the necessary characteristics to be examined as a case of digital vigilantism. Under those circumstances, we can now proceed to identify the specific digital vigilantism practices performed by the vigilante commentators.
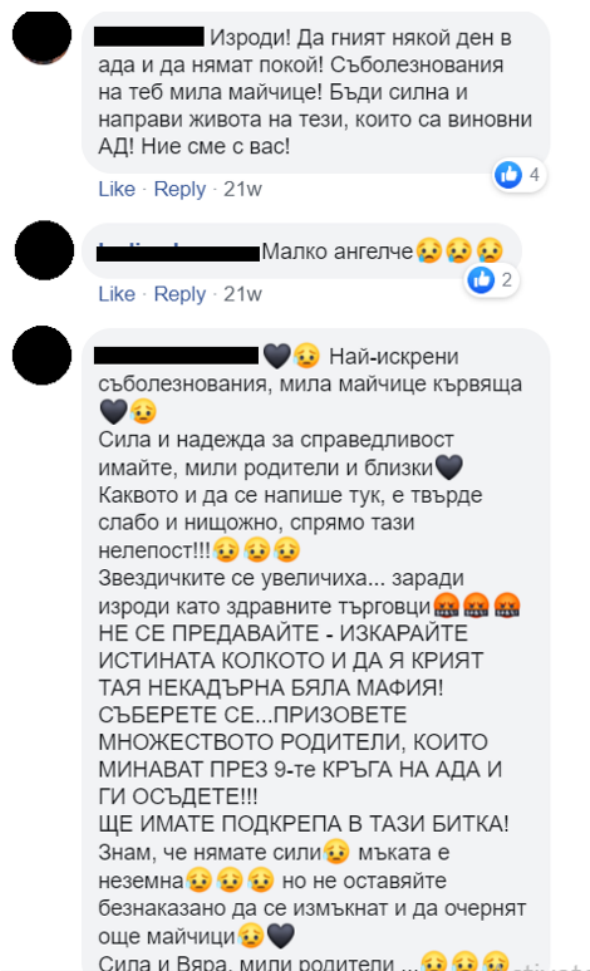
4.2. Specific digital vigilantism practices against Dr.G

As was explained earlier in this study, a common vigilante practice is online naming and shaming in the form of distributing potentially stigmatizing data which are easily accessible and allow the public to add input (Oravec, 2019). One aspect of naming and shaming that was highlighted by previous studies was the often present implicit or explicit appeal for the co-production of shaming and participation in vigilantism. In the case of Dr.G., the first to name and shame the pediatrician was the grieving mother. In her Facebook post, she also added an explicit encouragement for other users to share it. The privacy settings of the post also implicitly suggest that others can contribute to the denunciation of the doctor. As a result, many Facebook users did respond to her emotional appeal by sharing the post and shaming

the doctor in the comments. Some commentators were also advocating the further sharing of the post so that more people can engage with the information and assist in punishing Dr.G. There were suggestions to find her Facebook profile and harass her with direct messages, as well as to find a way to meet her and harm her in person.

Another practice vigilantes can participate in is the articulation of shared norms and values, and the expression of a "mediated collective identity" (Trottier, 2017:57). Correspondingly, the diverse individuals who interacted in the comment section formed an ideological collective standing in solidarity with the grieving family and coming together to fight for justice. Through their comments, they enacted the identity of active citizens concerned with the malfunctioning of Bulgaria's health system. A lot of the people wrote that the medical system does not function correctly, that the treatment received by doctors is often inadequate, and even that most medical practitioners are criminals or 'members of the mafia'. Specifically, the notion of the 'white mafia' is highlighted in numerous comments (Fig.5., Fig. 7.). In this creative use of language, citizens employ the term to describe the community of doctors believed to support each other in their illegal practices. By bringing up this label in the discussion under the mother's post, the vigilantes characterize the targeted individual as a member of this group of villains. Moreover, they position themselves as victims of the 'white mafia', which further strengthens the solidarity of their 'mediated collective identity'. Another shared opinion articulated by the vigilantes is that actions should be taken to prevent incidents like the death of this little boy from happening again, and that they as a community of active citizens should empower each other to battle the criminals. The value of demanding justice despite the unfair and difficult circumstances was especially emphasized (Fig.5.)[7].

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[7] Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3422157214491192&set=a.472207309486212&type=3 Data retrieved on 14 April 2020

Figure 5. Comments under the mother's Facebook post

In the last comment portrayed above, we see not only the potential for empowerment of the vigilantes' participation, but also the appeal to another shared identity articulated in the comments – that of the parents who have struggled in similar circumstances. Notably, more than seven of the commentators under the mother's post shared their own similar dissatisfying experiences with the same pediatrician or hospital, as well as with practitioners from other hospitals. Their stories emphasized the societal relevance of the problem and reinforced the vigilantes' shared values of solidarity and demand for justice.

4.3. Motivations for participation

This brings us to the discussion of the functions of digital vigilantism and the motivations for participation. Studies have stressed that engaging in naming and shaming practices can serve as an outlet for participants to let out their negative emotions (Oravec, 2019). In such a context, writing a negatively-charged comment against the targeted individual has a psychological function. For some people, insulting the pediatrician can help deal with their bottled anger towards medical practitioners, or even

with their own grief over a deceased relative. Some vigilantes can even perceive the shaming practice as a form of entertainment (Kohm, 2009), and use the opportunity to quickly join in on the public condemnation of an alleged criminal before moving on to the next post on their news feeds. This is an example of 'phatic communion', which refers to the social phenomenon of *"communication without content"* (Varis & Blommaert, 2014:33). In this mode of interaction, the content and meaning of the communication is irrelevant - the conversation only serves a bonding function. Thus, writing a comment under the mother's Facebook post can be seen as a social action of expressing emotion and creating a sense of union with the community. This function might be especially relevant for those of the comments which are short and marked with strong, violent language.

Moving on to exploring the motivations for participation in digital vigilantism, there are numerous possible reasons why the citizens who responded to it decided to act against the doctor. Firstly, reporting on a pediatrician believed to have acted against the norms of their profession can be understood as a way for citizens to fulfill their civic duties and take the social responsibility to involve their community in the societal issue. Similarly, the online users who come across this information may decide that engaging in shaming the doctor and advocating for their denunciation and punishment is a form of peer-surveillance and a means to maintain the order in society (Skoric et al., 2010; Cheong & Gong, 2010). By sharing her photo all around the Internet and publicly humiliating her, they might hope that other doctors would not dare to act against the rules because they would fear the consequences of a strong public reaction. For instance, some commentators express that raising awareness about this incident is the way to prevent such things from happening in the future. Furthermore, digital vigilantes can also engage in punishing the wrongdoer because of their dissatisfaction with the work of relevant authorities (Dunsby & Howes, 2019). In such cases they believe that they should take justice in their own hands because the state is incapable or because they do not trust the legal systems do to their work correctly (Fig. 6.)[8]:

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[8] Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3422157214491192&set=a.472207309486212&type=3 Data retrieved on 14 April 2020
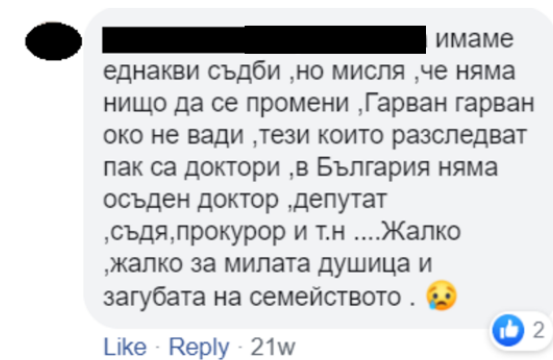
Translation:

'we have similar fates, but I think nothing will change, a raven doesn't take out another raven's eye, the ones doing the legal investigation are also doctors, Bulgaria doesn't have one convicted doctor, member of parliament, judge, prosecutor, etc. ...Such a pity for the sweet little soul and the family's loss.'
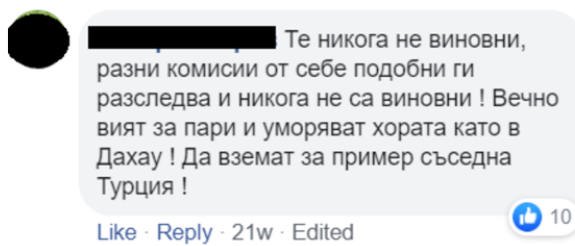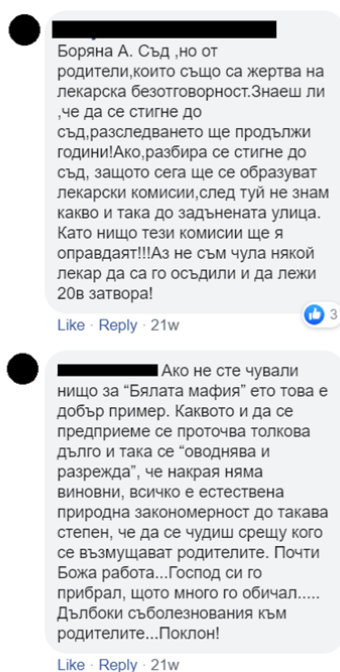
'It is never their fault, committees made of similar people are investigating and they are never found guilty! Always wailing for money and then killing people like in Dachau! They should take example from neighboring Turkey!'

Figure 6. Comments under the mother's Facebook post

In the above example, we can see that both citizens express their disbelief that the accused pediatrician will be judged in a fair trial, because the investigation will be led by other fellow doctors. The top commentator uses a Bulgarian saying about ravens to convey that people who are alike would not judge each other. Building on this argument, the other commentator adds that the medical committees would never find a fellow medical practitioner guilty. Similar arguments are put forward by numerous other vigilantes who write that the health authorities will protect the doctors no matter what. This connects to Bismark and Paterson's (2006) findings that citizens share a general sense that doctors show inappropriate leniency to their errant colleagues. In the comments which can be found below (Fig.7.)[9], we have more remarkable concerns about the functioning of the medical committees. Both citizens share the pessimistic view that such investigations in medical malpractice are usually prolonged and 'watered down', and in the end the alleged criminal never gets sentenced. Notably, the 'white mafia' concept discussed earlier is present again here and in several other comments as well, which shows that the disbelief in the health system is a common view. We will come back to this point in the later analysis of the local social discussion.

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[9] Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3422157214491192&set=a.472207309486212&type=3 Data retrieved on 14 April 2020

Translation:

'Justice, but by all the parents who are victims of the doctor's lack of responsibility. You know what, in order for this case to reach the court, the investigation will last for years! If, of course, it reaches the court at all, because now they will form medical committees, followed by who knows what and then to a dead end. Most probably they will find her not guilty!!! I haven't heard of any doctor being convicted and thrown in jail!'

'If you haven't heard about the 'White Mafia', this is a good example. Whatever they do, it will be so prolonged and 'watered down', that in the end there will be no one found guilty, everything is a natural law until such a degree that you start to wonder who is those parents' resentment directed against. (...)'

Figure 7. Comments under the mother's Facebook post

As a result of the perceived inefficiency of the authorities, the vigilantes decide to take actions towards punishing the deviant individual themselves. Some encourage the formations of petitions, others appeal for the organization of a public protest, while most share the opinion that physical violence is the only effective way to restore justice. There are also commentators who are motivated by the opportunity to expose the corrupt officials by attracting media attention. They believe that increasing the publicity of the issue will contribute to the effectiveness of the vigilantism practices.

4.4. Problematics and potentially negative consequences

Digital vigilantes can participate in the persecution and punishment of criminals for various reasons, which can also be problematic. The self-formed group of active citizens who took upon themselves the mission to put an end to Dr.G.'s career, place her in jail or physically harm her, did not witness the event, nor did they have any verified proof of what had happened. In effect, they were acting out of personal beliefs and subjective judgements. The mother of the deceased boy did not post anything to support the accuracy of her accusation against the doctor – the online users had to trust that she is telling the truth. There were rumors circulating about a video capturing the event, but this was never publicly shared anywhere. Some Facebook users did voice their concerns that blaming a person before the legal investigation has announced their verdict can lead to the false accusation of the doctor. However, all of the comments expressing this alternate view immediately generated a wave of angry responses. The official result of the Executive Agency for Medical Supervision's audit stated that the boy's death was not caused by medical malpractice. After the release of this statement, the mother published a new status update on Facebook in which she wrote that the family does not have access to the audit, and that they

have only received counterfeited medical records from the hospital. Her new post only further convinced the public of the pediatrician's guilt and amplified their mistrust in the authorities.

Despite the lack of any official proof or verification of the accusation, the wide exposure of the incident and the wide online visibility of the vigilantism campaign turned the pediatrician into a criminal in the eyes of many. As became evident by some of the comments exhibited in the previous sections, she became the subject of shaming, harassment, violent insults and death threats. Important to realize is that although the vigilante actions remained mainly online, they did have consequences in the offline world as well. Firstly, she was not allowed to work while the investigation was taking place. Moreover, since her photo and name circulated all around the Internet and media, she could not remain anonymous in contrast to many other accused individuals whose name is not disclosed before the closure of the investigation. In fact, whether the distribution of her personal information on Facebook without her permission violates the right of privacy or not is a controversial issue, but this question was never addressed. The online visibility of the condemnation of a doctor who could have otherwise remained hidden from the audience is what turned the incident into a moral scandal. Furthermore, it had a huge and irreversible impact on her reputation and her professional career, because it left many citizens believing that she 'killed' the boy. In effect, she received a large punishment by the vigilantes, because her name will always be connected with the case and will always influence the way patients perceive her. What is more, after the negative attention which the pediatric hospital received, it was forced to close its emergency help unit for a few months because many of the specialists working there decided to quit.[10]

4.5. *The context of social media: Facebook*

Coming to the topic of the wide online visibility which contributed to the spread of the digital vigilantism campaign, we have to pay special attention to the characteristics of the medium in which it took place, in this case, Facebook. Firstly, the collaborative efforts among the separate users were facilitated by the ability of digital technologies to connect people from different geographic locations. The community of active citizens was formed spontaneously and without specific planning – it included virtually anyone who came across the Facebook post on their news feeds and decided to interact with it. As a result, the vigilantism campaign was distributed broadly and the targeted individual was effectively exposed, because the large social media audience could access the information and contribute to the shaming. Moreover, the affordances of the social media platform increased the opportunity for civic participation. It can be argued that by employing the connectivity culture of the online realm to report on the event, the mother used her civic right to identify a perpetrator, raise awareness about an issue and engage others in civic discourse. Since any Facebook user could like, share and comment on the post, it turned into a

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[10] Source: https://www.mediapool.bg/detskata-bolnitsa-spira-speshniya-priem-zaradi-napuskashti-lekari-news300729.html
Viewed on: 24 April 2020.

public discussion where citizens could freely express their opinion and criticize the health system and the authorities.

Furthermore, the fact that the mother accused the pediatrician of committing a crime precisely on Facebook has important implications for the way other users of the platform perceived the information. Firstly, she employed the social media logic well by asking other users to share her posts, which contributed to them gaining high exposure and achieving 'virality' (Nahon et al., 2011). In two of the three posts she shared concerning the event, she explicitly wrote 'SHARE' at the bottom, which encouraged the audience to use the affordances of the medium to spread the information further in their online networks. The results are in place, especially for the initial and most discussed post where she accused the doctor, which gained 3.8 thousand shares, 937 likes and 377 comments as of April, 2020.

However, it was not only the explicit appeal for sharing that strengthened the 'shareworthiness' and user engagement capabilities of the posts (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). All of her status updates are ridden with emotion and personalization, and manage to evoke strong feelings in the audience. They are unpolished and sound as sincere expressions of feelings and thoughts. Consequently, they seem raw and authentic, and can easily convince others that she is telling the truth. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2016) pointed out, the realism and immediacy of unpolished personal accounts can replace the authority of objectivism. It is indeed remarkable that the Facebook post did not include any proof to support the accusation against Dr.G., and yet because of the author being a devastated mother sharing the story of her tragic loss, it was perceived by others as credible as a professional news article, if not even more credible. In fact, Facebook users often do not differentiate between traditional news and personal updates on the platform, since they are blurred within one stream (Dunsby & Howes, 2019). Because of this, if the emotional appeal of the grieving mother's posts resonates with them, it can easily make them adopt her viewpoint and provoke further actions such as engaging in digital vigilantism practices. Accordingly, the affective contagion motivates them to contribute to the 'viral justice' (Wood et al., 2018). This is especially evident in the comments replying to the few users who demanded that the doctor should not be so quickly and unfairly judged. Such opinions sparked heated arguments, with the vigilantes accusing the commentator of being insensitive to the mother's feelings or even calling them 'stupid' and 'imbecile'. It became evident that not believing the emotional mother's account was unacceptable for the participants.

The comments that people added also strengthen the affectivity of the publications – they are full of personal opinions and expressions of strong emotions towards the accused pediatrician. The style in which most people write consists of either of short, often even one-word sentences, or long strains of thought without the grammatically necessary punctuation. At the same time, there is an overabundance of exclamation marks and sad or angry emojis, as well as an intensive use of informal language, slang,

insulting words and curses. This shows that the commentators are investing a lot of emotionality in their writing.

As a result of the interplay between digital vigilantism and the logic of social media, Dr. G. became the victim of shaming and harassment by a large group of Facebook users who would otherwise not have heard of her name, had it not become viral. Nevertheless, most of them seem to exhibit 'slacktivist' characteristics (Dunsby & Howes, 2019) – we can see that most users only passively shared or liked the post, and considerably fewer citizens left a comment. This can also mean that most participants in the naming and shaming practices performed the social action of being an active citizen without much effort with the help of Facebook affordances. By simply clicking a few buttons, they still managed to express their support and raise awareness of the problem in their community.

4.6. The role of Bulgaria's traditional news media

As a result of online users' perception of the grieving mother's post as worth sharing, the news about the pediatrician accused of neglecting the boy and causing his tragic death quickly started circulating all around the Internet and became viral. The Facebook post was shared two days after the news of the deceased boy was first announced by BTV and Nova– the two biggest private-owned national televisions in Bulgaria. However, the mother was the first to disclose the name and photo of the doctor. The information she published spread around fast and turned the incident into a highly-visible social event, which made it inevitable for professional news agencies to include it in their reports. As was discussed earlier in this study, it was perhaps exactly the heightened media exposure which the vigilantes were aiming at, hoping that it would further increase the awareness of the issue and pressure authorities to resolve it in a fair manner. Indeed, after the mother published the post and started the digital vigilantism campaign, a lot of news media outlets picked up the event, and it became a popular and highly-discussed topic in Bulgaria. The family of the deceased boy even met with the Bulgarian prime minister, after which the directors of three hospitals in Sofia and the accused pediatrician were removed from their positions until the trial proceedings were over.

Nevertheless, we should not perceive this amplified media visibility achieved by the incorporation of social media publications into traditional news as entirely unproblematic. In fact, we should critically examine how professional journalists re-mediate and re-frame issues discussed online. We have to pay attention to how user-generated content is presented, how it challenges the truth and objectivity claims of traditional news reports and impedes their credibility control, and how it can complicate the boundary between objective reporting and participating in digital vigilantism practices.

Even before the digital vigilantism campaign started, BTV and Nova showed a contrast in the way they framed the event by selecting different sources of information and subjects for interviews, and thus emphasizing on different versions of the event. The biggest problematic came from the conflicting position of the boy's parents who were both involved in the incident and the main witnesses. Since they

were the ones to first provide information about the event, the journalists had no choice but to include it in their reports. Andén-Papadopoulos (2013) stressed on the fact that citizen-informed journalism is marked by an ambivalence between the authority of first-hand personal experience on the one hand and the lack of context and objective verification on the other. For this reason, he wrote that user-generated content can supplement professional news narratives, but it still must be perceived as a separate mode of witnessing with its own truth and right claims. Consequently, it is the journalists' jobs to wrap the information provided by the involved citizens into a credible story and produce a meaningful narrative for the viewer, while also trying not to overlook the individual motivations of the participants involved. Nevertheless, this case also shows what Allan (2016) recognized when he wrote that newsmakers can never provide a perfectly truthful and objective account of an event, especially when subjective insights by involved citizens are included. By picking one source of information over the other, they already convey certain understandings and interpretations to the audience.

To demonstrate, BTV chose to tell the story from the bereaved parents' point of view by publishing an emotional interview in which they told the dramatic story of a desperate family begging an ignorant doctor for help.[11] It has to be noted that the parents themselves contacted the agency and thus intentionally wanted to share their account. The family's faces or names were not shown, and the accused pediatrician was still anonymous. However, the inclusion of the personal and embodied experience of the parents already guided the audience into thinking that the doctor is truly guilty, despite the lack of context or proof in the report. The role of framing here is crucial - by publishing a story offering only the subjective insight of the parents, BTV promoted the family's interpretation of the incident. This inevitably directed the attention away from the hospital and doctor's point of view. On the contrary, Nova shared the explanation provided by the director of the pediatric hospital who refuted the accusations.[12] They did not include the personalized account of the parents, but rather stated their claim. As a result, Nova conveyed the contrasting message that the boy's death was not caused by medical malpractice. The trend of BTV and Nova communicating opposite messages continued after the reveal of Dr. G.'s identity. In their following reports, BTV kept getting across the judgement that medical practitioners are poorly qualified and have an unprofessional and inhumane attitude towards their patients. In contrast, Nova framed the issue as an example of why the public's generally negative opinion about doctors affects the work conditions of health practitioners, and that the public outrage is only worsening the problem in the health system. The contradictory framing of the two news agencies was achieved mainly through the selection of disparate sources and interview participants, as well as by focusing on and making salient different aspects of the story.

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[11] Source: https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/roditelite-na-pochinaloto-v-bolnica-dete-pred-btv-lekarite.html Viewed on April 21, 2020

[12] Source: https://nova.bg/news/view/2019/11/15/268741/проверяват-болници-заради-смъртта-на-3-годишно-дете/ Viewed on April 21, 2020

These reports set the initial context in which the Facebook post with the doctor's name could be understood. With the help of this background, the mother's social media publication was even more effective in conveying her judgment on the issue. It provided a face and identity to the previously anonymous pediatrician. In their comprehension of this post, users could be guided towards two contrary positions depending on which version of the story they had adopted from the news. However, this post seemed to only strengthen the family's side of the story, because it revealed Dr.G. as the evil person described by them. Moreover, after the pediatrician's name circulated on Facebook, the journalists could include it in their reports, contact her and her colleagues with questions, and use the public outrage as a motivation to dig for additional information.

The approach of most of the other news agencies was to generalize the information provided by BTV and Nova, and build upon their stories by copying their sourcing practices. A few informational websites directly included the mother's Facebook post and reported on the wave of shaming and harassment in the comments without adding any commentary. Nevertheless, there was one website which published an article explicitly targeting Dr.G. as guilty. The article, whose title translates to 'Is there forgiveness for the robot-doctor who did not save a dying 3-year-old child?', painted the picture of a "lifeless, arrogant, stone-faced woman, who perceives sick children as another annoying patient". [13] The text was written from the personal position of the author, and was full of insults against the pediatrician. Even more intriguing here is the use of sourcing - apart from directly including the mother's social media publication, the whole article was also based on BTV's reports. Specifically, the author was criticizing an interview Dr.G. gave for the television and even attacking the doctor for 'killing' the boy. Accordingly, with the writing in this article, the author joined the group of digital vigilantes naming and shaming the doctor. The comments under it were also highly similar to the ones under the original Facebook post.

We can thus see how the spread of the digital vigilantism campaign resulted in a media hype, which in turn further amplified the issue. The disclosure and circulation of the doctor's identity on social media helped journalists frame their articles in accordance to the two types of reactions - defending the hospital and the doctor, or joining the public condemnation of Dr. G. At the same time, this increased the visibility of the incident, turning it into a moral scandal.

4.7. Connection with the local social discussion

After analyzing how the traditional news media amplified the case and framed their judgements, we can also consider how the vigilantes employed their social background to convey the message of the active citizens joining forces against the corrupt authorities and the faulty health system. On the one hand, the mother's Facebook post can be placed in the larger context of social media platforms being a community

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[13] Source: https://woman.bg/novini/ima-li-proshka-za-lekarkata-robot-koyato-ne-spasi-umirashto-3-godishno-dete.64403.html Viewed on 22 April 2020

for mutual support and exchange of knowledge (Kressler, 2014; Hoybye et al., 2005), as well as a facilitator of personal storytelling and an outlet for grief expression. Digital platforms have been recognized for facilitating practices of grief expression, especially by bereaved parents. On Facebook, there are numerous grief support groups like the 'Bereavement/ Grieving Peer Support Group',[14] or ones specifically created for grieving parents, such as the 'Grieving Parents Healing Hearts Child Loss' group.[15] In Bulgaria, participation in such groups is not very common. Instead, online groups where parents share knowledge and advice each other are much more popular. From this point of view, a bereaved parent sharing the name of the doctor who allegedly refused to treat her child can be understood as the attempt of a deeply saddened person to connect with and inform the community, vent out their feelings and seek empathy and support. It can be argued that the boy's mother was simply trying to find a way to cope with her loss by reaching out to the large social network of Facebook users.

This can be extended to the use of the Internet as a source of information, which includes reading patient reviews of medical practitioners. In addition to participating in Facebook groups, a lot of Bulgarian parents (predominantly mothers) also engage in online forums where they exchange information on all kinds of topics, including their experiences with doctors. The biggest such website is 'bg-mama',[16] which has thousands of threads in which users discuss Bulgarian pediatricians. Moreover, there are websites such as 'superdoc.bg', where patients can leave reviews and also browse doctors based on their scores. As can be seen, online users want to read about someone else's experience with a doctor, especially if they are doubting whether to use their services.

In a similar manner, citizens demand that there should be transparency around accusations and legal proceedings against doctors. As shown in section 4.2., many of the commentators under the mother's post expressed their concerns that the investigation will be kept away from the public and the pediatrician will be left unaccountable for her crime. For this reason, a person may feel obliged to share information about medical malpractice and inadequate treatment with the community, and perceive it as fulfilment of their civil duties. All of this comes to show that digital vigilantism may not always start with the idea of seeking revenge and punishing the offender – it shares blurred boundaries with other practices as well.

On the other hand, the mother's post was largely perceived in the context of the local discussion on the already highly present in Bulgaria's population mistrust in health institutions. In recent years, the media has been reporting numerous cases of citizens blaming doctors and the inadequacy of the system for the deaths of relatives, as well as the even more alarming cases of patients threatening and being verbally or physically aggressive to medical practitioners. The context of Bulgarian physicians popularly believed to be corrupt, unable and neglectful in regards to their patients' well-being stimulates the

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[14] Source: https://www.facebook.com/groups/655797301165073/ Viewed on 24 April 2020.
[15] Source: https://www.facebook.com/groups/GrievingParentsHealingHearts/ Viewed on 24 April 2020.
[16] Source: https://www.bg-mamma.com/ Viewed on 24 April 2020.

connection between the mother's post and general problems in healthcare, visible in the comments (Fig.8)[17]. Users were writing that if all doctors practice their profession the way Dr.G. does, then this speaks of a national problem. Others were expressing their opinion that all medical practitioners neglect patients, treat them inadequately and behave unprofessionally, and that they only care about receiving money. There were also comments justifying the physical abuse towards medics, claiming that they all deserve it.

Translation:

'In this country everything revolves around money. Bribe them or you die in the corridor in front of their office! Corruption! Anarchy!!!'

'Hey, doctor tribe, you deserve to be beaten. Every time some flop gets beaten. Because such are 100% of the Bulgarian doctors, it is worth it. And they complain about one little slap. Which was well-deserved. They should hit you until you stop moving. And they even protect them so that if you hit them it is as if you hit a judge. Where is this squit. Where is the killer. She is a killer, a child killer. This deserves a public execution. Why is the killer hiding? Where do you sleep killer? Don't you have children?'

'Condolences! Dear soul I hope it rests in peace! Huge pain, but this is the healthcare with this mafia before such a thing could not happen we had worthy doctors dedicated to the profession, but now it is full of flops!'

Figure 8. Comments under the mother's Facebook post

As shown above, the mother's Facebook post provided everyone who is dissatisfied with the health system in the country an opportunity to voice their criticism, as well as an outlet to vent their frustration. From the poor punctuation and the use of fervent language, it becomes evident that these people are indeed channeling all of their bottled negative feelings against doctors while participating in the digital vigilantism activities. Everyone who advocated against harming the medic's reputation before

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[17] Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3422157214491192&set=a.472207309486212&type=3 Data retrieved on 14 April 2020

hearing the results of the legal proceedings was attacked by the vigilantes, who all shared the view that in such an inadequate and faulty health system, all doctors are guilty by default.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study conducted digital ethnography research on a digital vigilantism campaign targeting a Bulgarian doctor, which started after a bereaved mother publicly accused a pediatrician's neglect for the death of her child in a Facebook post. The specific practices of the vigilantes were explored. The analysis shows that Internet users engaged in online naming and shaming against the physician by sharing the mother's post and writing hateful comments under it. The findings also reveal that vigilantes conducted the speech acts of insults and curses against the doctor so as to perform the punishment publically. Moreover, through their comments they articulated the mutual disbelief in the legal authorities and perception of doctors as 'white mafia' members, combined with a compassion towards all grieving parents who have suffered from medical malpractice. In addition, they expressed the collective identity of active citizens concerned with the malfunctioning of Bulgaria's health system.

Many of the commentators wrote short but significantly negatively charged comments. The findings suggest that this is an example of 'phatic communion', in which the users express their emotions and solidarity with the community. This study also found that engaging with the identification and punishment of the doctor believed to have committed a crime is perceived by citizens as fulfilling their civic duties. They aim at spreading the information about her, driven by the social responsibility to involve the community in the societal issue. Thus, publicly humiliating the target and raising awareness about their crimes is seen as a means to maintain order in society and prevent similar incidents in the future. Some vigilantes also hoped of pressuring the Bulgarian authorities to take action against Dr.G. However, most of them wanted to punish the offender themselves, driven by their beliefs that medics in Bulgaria are never found guilty or sentenced. There were also participants who sought to expose the doctor by attracting media attention.

Nevertheless, this study shows that there are potentially negative consequences of such vigilantism actions, mainly related to the lack of verification of citizen-provided information and the subjective judgements which take place in such cases. Dr.G. was not found guilty by the Medical Supervision, and the mother of the deceased boy did not publicly support her accusations with any proof. Yet, thanks to the wide social and traditional media exposure of the incident, a big proportion of the audience believed that the pediatrician is a criminal who needs to be punished. What is more, the case of Dr.G. confirmed that even though digital vigilantism takes place online, it can have significant and irreversible consequences in the offline world as well. Despite the lack of verification, the pediatrician was named a 'killer', and was subjected to shame, harassment, insults and even death threats. Additionally, it can be argued that her privacy and reputation were harmed forever.

Another objective of this study was to examine the relation between the vigilante actions and the logic of social media. The digital vigilantism event against Dr.G. took place on the social media platform Facebook, and was thus both facilitated and influenced by the affordances of the site. The mother's post contained an explicit request for other users to share the post. Moreover, its text was raw, emotional and personal, which engaged the users' attention and earned their trust. This is an example of a strategy which goes along social media's rules of 'shareworthiness' and 'virality'. In effect, by posting this emotional appeal and asking for the audience's help in distributing the information, the mother encouraged Facebook's users to exploit the affordances of the medium to co-produce the shaming and increase the campaign's visibility. Moreover, most people only passively liked or shared the post, or typed a one-word insult under it. This comes to show that Facebook's affordances allow for a rather 'slacktivist' participation in vigilantism practices.

Next, my findings confirm that after picking up the story of Dr.G., the Bulgarian traditional news media outlets managed to re-frame and re-mediate the vigilantism event. By reporting on the accusations and the Facebook discussion around them, they inevitably amplified the case's visibility in society and influenced the context in which it was interpreted. The presence of the personal account of the grieving mother in some Bulgarian news already guided the audience into thinking that the pediatrician is indeed guilty despite the lack of proof. Moreover, some journalists even directly joined the vigilantes in harassing Dr.G. For this reason, we can see how the inclusion of the vigilantes' user-generated content complicates the boundary between objective reporting and actual participation in the digital vigilantism event.

Lastly, this study also analyzed how the citizens connected this single case with the wider social discussion of the malfunctioning of Bulgaria's health institutions. Normally, a bereaved parent posting about the doctor who is allegedly responsible for their child's death would be regarded as an example of grief expression and support seeking, as well as a knowledge exchange with the community. In fact, vigilantism is not always sparked by a desire for revenge, but rather shares blurred boundaries with other practices, such as physician reviews in this case. However, the local context in Bulgaria created an environment in which the mother's post could effectively turn into a digital vigilantism against doctors. Bulgarian citizens share a general mistrust in the health institutions in the country, and often blame doctors and the inadequacy of the system for the death of relatives. Aggression against medics is a common occurrence, which explains why so many users were eager to punish the pediatrician in some form. Upon seeing the mother's post, they could immediately connect this specific case with the general problem in healthcare, and adopt the viewpoint that Dr.G. is yet another ignorant and unprofessional doctor.

To summarize, this study discussed how, as a result of the interplay between digital vigilantism and the logic of social media, a medical practitioner can become the victim of shaming and harassment

by a large group of online users. It showed that the successful employment of the affordances of digital platforms can largely contribute to the spread of a digital vigilantism campaign by effectively stimulating and facilitating the mediated coordination of citizens in the identification and punishment of alleged criminals. The characteristics of the medium can transform the way the audience perceives the case – from a tragic event presented on the news to a personalized story of a grieving mother seeking justice for the loss of her child. Moreover, it demonstrated how the local social discussion on the functioning of Bulgaria's health system can influence the perceptions and motivations of the vigilantes. As became evident, a Facebook post targeting a doctor can provide anyone who is dissatisfied with the health system in the country with the opportunity to voice their criticism and vent out their frustration. This can be perceived as a positive consequence for society, shedding light to an important issue in the country and forcing officials to act on it. Although this may be true, it can also be argued that the heightened media exposure of the incident only further complicates the problem. The stories of accused doctors circulating around both traditional and new media effectively confirm people's assumption that doctors in general are inadequate and immoral, and that the health system is not to be trusted.

On the whole, digital vigilantism is a complex phenomenon, bearing close connection with other practices, such as citizen journalism and legal investigation. Moreover, due to the development of technologies and digitalization, it has grown to become a global issue. As such, it has to be critically examined and approached with caution. On the one hand, the possibility for ordinary people to produce and distribute information, to inform their communities and engage in civil discourse is embedded in our romanticized image of the democratization of the public sphere and news production, enabled by social media's affordances (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016). From this point of view, the connectivity culture of the online realm can be seen as emancipating and empowering, allowing citizens to participate in open discussions where opinions and criticism towards authorities can be freely expressed. This is in line with Habermas' (1994) conception of the public sphere as the interactive space where citizens deliberate over issues with the aim of reaching agreement about them. Contributing to this view are Cheong and Gong (2010), whose findings portrayed new media as facilitating opportunities for civic participation and mobilization of public attention to restore justice in the context of power abuse by officials. However, digital vigilantism cases also demonstrate that social media disrupts the equilibrium of visibility in the public sphere and creates a new dynamic of communication, which challenges the idea of a universal public sphere providing equal access to all citizens. As Koseff (2016) has highlighted, cyberspace is marked by anonymity and dispersed power. Visibility in digital vigilantism is unbalanced – against the highly visible individual target stands up the anonymous, amorphous mass of vigilantes. Consequently, it forces us to reconsider the consensus-oriented public deliberation model and recognize that the mediated public sphere has become diffuse, fragmented and trivialized, with discussions often arranged around disagreement.

Further research is needed in order to gain deeper insights into how some vigilantes use of their civic power for private purposes. The boundary between vigilantism and personal attack is a complicated matter, which has to be studied more extensively. Moreover, a specific investigation into the legal aspects and privacy concerns around allegations against doctors is necessary. In general, this paper provides useful knowledge on the still rather unexplored topic of digital vigilantism against doctors. Future studies can build upon this research by conducting interview analysis with vigilantism participants, exploring their motives and conceptualizations of the practice.

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