DIGITAL VIGILANTISM AS A FORM OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT?
A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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The Internet has been presented as a key component of the public sphere in contemporary democracies, where citizens seek information and discuss it, voice their opinions and hold their representatives accountable, decide how to cast their votes and sometimes mobilize in order to effect political change. At stake is the advent of a "Fifth Estate" (Dutton 2009) or a new "networked public sphere" (Benkler 2006) which, in turn, also affects political institutions and actors. Implicit here is a specific conception of the ideal functioning of liberal democracies, whereby political participation is understood in terms of a "civic culture" (Almond & Verba 1963) and defined as a set of activities seeking to influence government and parliamentary action directly or indirectly. Such a conception is driven by strong assumptions of rationality as opposed to "emotional", sentiment-driven involvement. Most of the time, it also implies abiding by institutional frameworks in order to defend a cause, address a specific issue or hold other actors accountable.

The aim of this paper is to shift attention to forms of public engagement and sometimes collective action that fit uneasily with such scenarios. They have to do with various instances of individuals deciding to "take the law into their own hands" online – a practice which relates directly to the notion of *vigilantism*. The focus here is on the ways and means of establishing justice rather than debating issues and how, due to the specificities of the digital environment, visibility may be "weaponized" (Trottier 2016, Loveluck 2016) in order to exert a form of direct punishment.

Drawing on both digital ethnography and political sociology, this contribution will first provide a more precise definition of what is meant by digital vigilantism. I will examine how it relates to other (non-digital) contexts and specifically to the United States political history and political culture, where it has primarily been defined as a form of "establishment violence" (Rosenbaum & Sederberg 1976). I will then provide a typology of digital vigilantism based on a number of case studies, both in the US and in France.

Some of the cases have been the focus of detailed ethnographical work, involving mixed methods of online observation and collection of quantitative data from digital platforms, while others are drawn from secondary sources. I will present both the practices involved and the justifications provided by the actors for these practices, and compare the cases to draw out similarities and differences between them, and with (offline) vigilantism in general. I will also compare the French and US contexts, which present very different traditions and attitudes towards such practices – the US being, as a general rule, readier to accept forms of self-defence as modalities of "community organising". A central question will be to interrogate any predispositions for taking the law into one's own hands, which could be found within "internet culture" and the affordances of the digital environment.

Four different types of digital vigilantism have been identified, which can be associated with a number of "action repertoires" (Rolfe 2005, drawing on Tilly 1986). I have called these:

- *Flagging*: Signalling behaviour that is considered to deviate from social norms in the public sphere, e.g. Facebook groups and Twitter accounts set up to draw attention to bad drivers, both in France and in the US;
- *Investigating*: Crowdsourced online investigations such as those which took place after the Boston bombings in the US, and after the Dupont de Ligonnès mystery in France;
- *Hounding*: Tracking down animal abusers in order to "dox" them (reveal personal information), as was the case with Kenny Glenn in the US in 2009, or a young man who abused "Oscar the kitten" in France in 2014; this also includes a number of Anonymous "Ops" such as Operation Steubenville and Operation Maryville (which sought to expose rapists) and other instances of "naming and shaming";
- *Organized leaking*: Designing and setting up platforms aimed at encouraging the leaking of information, concerning behaviour which is considered uncivil, unethical or otherwise unacceptable. One of the main examples is the WikiLeaks project.

Building on this typology, I will argue that digital vigilantism constitutes an ambiguous dimension of citizen participation, since it challenges a realm generally restricted to an independent judiciary and a controlled police force, and since such practices involve a form of denunciation (Boltanski 2012) which may take a directly coercive edge. A series of further questions will be outlined and addressed: Do such phenomena signal a failure of institutionalised forms of conflict resolution – the press, the judicial system, the police? Or, on the contrary, can they sometimes be understood as a welcome alternative to traditional forms of politics, insofar as citizens are concerned enough to take direct action? How do they relate to other forms of "netroots" political mobilisation (Feld & Wilcox 2008, Kerbel 2009), and do they contribute to building a "collective action space" (Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl 2012) outside institutional politics?

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