

Urgent Callout to Armchair Detectives – Halt Your Dangerous Public Accusations of Innocent Persons!

BY **CHRISTOPHER SALGADO**, CEO OF ALL POINTS INVESTIGATIONS, LLC

“**T**he Reddit staff and the millions of people on Reddit around the world deeply regret that this happened.” (Erik Martin, Reddit General Manager) Eager activity on Reddit fueled a massive and unchecked online witch hunt, resulting in dangerous and incorrect speculation that wrongly delivered highly negative consequences to an innocent person. “My brother was missing, not a suspect, and your speculation destroyed our family while we were searching for him.” The missing brother had committed suicide. Among this devastating loss, the surviving sister was forced to witness these attacks against her newly deceased brother.

“The media convicted me without evidence, and no one could give me my life back.” (Richard Jewell) The conclusion to Mr. Jewell’s heart wrenching story confirmed that once the accusation was made public, the damage was done regardless of what the truth dictated. He was “wrongly linked to the bombing.” (CNN) As a result, Mr. Jewell was subjected to intense scrutiny that aggressively damaged his life.

After being misidentified as the perpetrator by armchair detectives, Edward Jordan was targeted by an angry online mob that loyally abused him and issued death threats. Predisposed to mental suffering and battling depression, Mr. Jordan took his own life in response to the harassment.

The above three scenarios highlight inexcusably damning outcomes to very dangerous pilgrimages conducted by armchair detectives as they wrongly accused innocent persons as being serious criminals.

The first blurb referencing Reddit relates to Sunil Tripathi who was incorrectly publicly identified as a bomber in the Boston Marathon bombing.

The second blurb relates to Richard Jewell being wrongly confirmed as a bomber of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Park Bombing.

The third blurb relates to Edward Jordan who was wrongly accused as the kitten killer in the Netflix docuseries *Don’t F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*.

I’m not against an honest, legitimate attempt to assist law enforcement to identify and apprehend a criminal – especially if it’s in response to a request for crowdsourced support by law enforcement, which happened fairly frequently. However, I am a big opponent to such when it’s not done properly and when it damages the lives of innocent persons. Certainly, if those innocent persons take their own lives due to the wrongful finger pointing, a crowdsourced effort – good intentions or not – can become as wrong as the original offense itself.

I’m not anti-public assistance. I’m anti-public attribution because I’ve seen what happens when unchecked “identification” gets deployed in the online and physical community; the need for facts gets watered down for the sake of being right. Once a name is publicized, the person behind the name becomes a target. If the name is wrong, the damage created is nonetheless immune from being reversed and effectively salvaged. Inevitably, the online mob scene – and sometimes the subsequent real world mob scene that spawns from an online accusation – becomes judge, jury and executioner.

We’ve discussed how this happens but what about the “why”? Why does this occur? Why has this occurred multiple times? This is where I believe the name “armchair detective” is truly deserved.

Well implanted within the minds of many individuals seems to be the idea that two jobs can be filled by anyone without any training or experience: (1) sports coaches and (2) detectives.

Regarding the sports coaches, pay close attention to almost anyone who claims to be a hardcore sports fan and routinely engages in “armchair quarterbacking.” You’ll hear comments such as “Did you see the game last night? We won!” Contrast that with the same person stating “Did you see the game last night? They lost!” The critical focus is their use of “we” versus “they.” When their team wins, it’s a “group effort”; when their team loses, the fan abandons all connections to the team.

This language usage is actually a well-documented psychological phenomenon that has reportedly tied to identity, ego protection and social signaling for decades. The two main elements within this phenomenon are Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing) and Cutting Off Reflected Failure (CORFing).

When fans say “WE won last night,” they’re exercising BIRGing. In effect, the team’s success becomes personalized and the win boosts the fan’s self-esteem and social status. The fan then symbolically shares identity with the team.

When the team loses, fans often switch to “THEY lost,” which is

CORFing. This results from the fan psychologically distancing and protecting their self-esteem. The failure is externalized and applied to the players, coaches, referees or management. Therefore, the fan salvages their identity by breaking the previously self-adopted “we” connection.

Acting in the above methodology honors a tribal psychology that is enabled by the fan because “We” signals a sense of belonging while “They” signals separation during a threat or embarrassment.

While the above actions routinely occur within sports, it exists within politics and other elements of life as well. Essentially, there is a need to be right, to be admired and to belong. Contrarily, there is a fear of being wrong, unwelcomed or embarrassed.

Unfortunately, this behavior also exists within the world of armchair detectives. “WE identified the suspect,” which allows the person to exercise Basking in Reflected Justice – a modified BIRGing but under the same concept – pushing thoughts and/or statements of “We found him” or “We did what law enforcement couldn’t.” These thoughts and statements allow the person to solidify a level of intelligence, competence, a civic virtue and a proximity to justice. The result is the armchair detective psychologically aligning with law enforcement and other related experts as well as victims.

Contrast the above with when the armchair detective’s accusation is wrong, causing harm. The deployed language is “Law enforcement failed to vet it” or “They took it too far.” This is CORFing inside the world of improper OSINT via an armchair detective. The resulting mindset of this dangerous misstep is no individual accountability; any resulting harm is detached from the person’s efforts, effectively denouncing responsibility. Another statement or thought can be “If someone’s life was destroyed, it wasn’t me.” Like the armchair quarterback, the armchair detective finds themselves a proud resident of a Utopian world where their self-declared authority and expertise never faces a duty of care, an obligation to verify data or theories as well as legal exposure due to the anonymity of the internet (caveats considered, of course). This is purely dangerous and can uproot an innocent person’s world. If the impacted wrongly accused is lucky, they simply face an aggressive online mob that trolls their social media, makes threatening phone calls and humiliates their lives within the public forum. If the impacted wrongly accused is unlucky, they are seated at their early grave by the vengeful attacks of the online mob scene.

While I appreciate a true desire to help law enforcement solve the riddle of a crime, it must be done so very carefully and with a bit of modesty. Here’s the raw truth. Are you ready? – You don’t know everything! You can be wrong. Your “evidence,” your theories, your days-long pursuit can be hollow or plain broken. I’ve been in the investigations field for more than 25 years. I’m still learning within my profession!

If your efforts run south, no one gets hurt if the relay of your evidence and theories live in a vacuum. What I mean is that you refrain from making any public accusations against anyone, including identifying someone or even nudging at the identify of someone. If you have a desire to assist law enforcement in a case, kudos to you. I welcome you to jump aboard after engaging in effective training and incorporating safe methodologies that prevent the innocent from being wrongly accused.

Should you have any tips for law enforcement, whether you simply saw something, know something or learned of something via your OSINT efforts, please ensure to relay such information to the proper law enforcement POC (point of contact) or department via closed com-

munication channels: approved phone lines, email addresses or other avenues preserved for reporting information. This way, true detectives, agents or other POCs can review your information, vet it appropriately and engage further as they see fit. The cherry on top, no innocent lives get trampled. This is an incredibly critical methodology and can prevent painful experiences to the wrong persons.

True crime is a hot topic these days. Turn on your preferred streaming service. How many true crime documentaries are in your recommended list or otherwise being introduced to you? Many of us grew up wanting to catch “bad guys” – and girls. Well, the combination of law enforcement’s needs and the power of online sleuthing offers that exact desire to come true! That can be a great thing but we must heed it very carefully. Before any of us runs to the keyboard untrained and with a need to knowingly or unknowingly engage in BIRGing or CORFing, we must ask ourselves “Would we be just as comfortable in saying out loud ‘My accusation killed a loved one’ as we would be saying out loud ‘My accusation helped solved a crime?’”

I’d say the above is a good mental start to ensure you’re on the right track to support the case and not slay any names that surface from your efforts. After all, while the whole “We won; they lost” mindset may annoyingly be allowed in the world of armchair quarterbacks, a CORFing statement from an armchair detective inside a criminal investigation cannot be successfully defended. In those cases, the self-inflicted bullet by the innocent becomes the true victor. **PI**



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