**Vigilantism and the ‘Paedophile Hunter’ Phenomenon: A New Form or Social Justice or Social Harm?**

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This paper was presented at the International E-Conference on ‘Law and Society’, as part of the Social Justice and Equality panel, on 2 December 2022, organised by the School of Legal Studies at REVA University, in collaboration with the School of Justice, Security and Sustainability at Staffordshire University, UK.

Biography of Author:

Charlie Lovatt is an Associate Tutor at Staffordshire University. His research interests include societal attitudes toward sexual violence, vigilantism, cyber crime, child sex offending, and youth justice. He is enrolled on a PhD in Criminology and Policing in January 2023 in which he proposes to observe the activities of self-styled ‘paedophile hunters’ through a zemiological lens.

Introduction:

Firstly, I would like to thank REVA University, the School of Legal Studies and all the members of the Conference Committee for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you all here today. As has just been explained by our esteemed chair of the panel, my name is Charlie Lovatt, and I am an Associate Tutor within the School of Justice, Security and Sustainability at Staffordshire University. The paper which I will present to you now is on the topic of vigilantism, a specific form of vigilantism most commonly referred to as ‘paedophile hunters’, but you may have also heard the terms ‘digilantism’ or ‘organised child abuse activist groups’ to describe their activities. It is this topic which will form the basis of my PhD.

Context:

In recent years, with the emergence of modern technologies, we have witnessed a shift in how sexual offences, particularly those against children, are now being committed. In the case of online child sexual exploitation (OCSE), Claire Lilley, the Head of Child Safety Online for the NSPCC, writing in the *Child Abuse Review* journal, said:

The last [twenty] years have seen an explosion in the availability, ownership and use of devices used to access the internet. There has been a simultaneous increase in the number of people viewing child abuse images. The ease of access to this material online has removed a key inhibitor for offenders. (Lilley, 2017, p.386).

To further support this, in 2018, Owen Bowcott, the legal affairs correspondent for *The Guardian*, reported that the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) concluded that there had been a 700% increase in the number of referrals of OCSE to the Metropolitan Police since 2014 (Bowcott, 2018). Additionally, the inquiry found that one in ten adults had had a sexualised conversation with a child.

Furthermore, in July 2022, Michael Skidmore, Beth Aitkenhead and Rick Muir, senior researchers at the Police Foundation, the UK’s largest policing think tank, authored a report entitled *Turning the Tide Against Online Child Sexual Abuse*. The report found that there had been a 450% increase in sexual grooming offences reported between 2016 and 2021 and the volume of obscene publications offences – most of which relate to child sexual abuse material – had increased by over 800% since 2012.

As OCSE has become more prevalent, the police service has suffered due to budget cuts. Jim Gamble, the former head of the UK’s Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command, stated that there are not enough police officers to combat OCSE and described the phenomenon as an “overwhelming tsunami” (BBC, 2017).

This is corroborated by a 2016 report by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary. The report found that due to budget cuts and the rise in online crime, there were 2,700 registered sex offenders in England and Wales who had not been risk assessed upon their release from prison (HMIC, 2016). Finally, a 2015 report by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner suggested that only one in eight victims of OCSE come to the attention of the police, and those that do, often receive little to no support or the abuse does not stop.

Considering all of this, it is unsurprising to see these self-styled ‘paedophile hunters’ working in tandem with the police. In 2019, Dr Katerina Hadjimatheou, a senior lecturer in criminology, sociology and ethics at the University of Essex, writing in the *Criminology & Criminal Justice* journal, hypothesised that ‘paedophile hunters’ see themselves as filling a security gap in society – a void which has only been exacerbated by police budget cuts and the rise in digitally-enabled crime. And although surveys have shown that the majority of the public would support the police working with ‘paedophile hunters’ if it meant securing more convictions of child sex offenders, there are those within the police service who are vehemently opposed to such partnerships, warning that, because ‘paedophile hunters’ are not regulated nor restricted by legislation, nor is there any oversight, they pose a significant risk to the rule of law, to due process, and threaten to undermine the primary aim of our criminal justice system, namely, to ensure that all criminal cases are dealt with fairly and justly.

Methodology:

Underpinning this research would be the theoretical frameworks of zemiology. Zemiology is the study of social harms. It argues that the legal definition of crime is too restrictive and some of the most harmful activities within society are not considered because they do not fit within this definition of criminality (Yar, 2012). Hillyard and Tombs (2017) argue that the CJS fails to protect people from criminal harms whilst inflicting serious social harms on those who come into contact with the justice system. This research would consider whether, by securing convictions of child sex offenders using evidence collected by ‘paedophile hunters’, a more serious social harm (arguably graver than that of the original crime) is caused which is the perceived reduction in legitimacy and public trust in the CJS. Whilst ‘paedophile hunters’ may be succeeding in securing convictions of child sex offenders, the potential threat to the rule of law, due process, democracy, and human rights cannot be ignored. In this sense, ‘paedophile hunters’ can be seen as very utilitarian but, conversely, also as the hypothetical ‘criminal undertaker’ (hypothesised by Hall and Winlow, 2012) who will undertake, by any means, whatever they consider to be necessary to achieve their goal, regardless of the harms, hurts, and traumas they inflict on other people in the process.

One of the aims of my research is to provide insight into the motivations of these ‘paedophile hunters’ and so I am planning an overt ethnographic study during which I will join several (ideally three or more) social media pages of ‘paedophile hunters’ to document and record, first-hand, my experiences of being a member of this online community. Since the research will be undertaken in the study subject’s natural environment, and not in a scripted setting such as an interview, the research will be genuine, as opposed to the participant merely telling the researcher what they want to hear. This phenomenon is known as “the Hawthorne effect”, whereby participants will modify their behaviour, either on a conscious or unconscious level, in response to their awareness of being observed. However, studies that have recognised the Hawthorne effect as a barrier to research, have alluded to the researcher having a physical presence in the room as the primary obstacle. As I am proposing a online ethnographical study, wherein I join an online social media group, I will have no physical presence, and so the likelihood of participants modifying their behaviour in light of my observation should be minimal. I also plan to interview active-duty police officers about their experiences working with ‘paedophile hunters’ to gain an appreciation for how the rise in vigilante activity has had an impact, if any, on the efficacy of the police service and to determine whether these self-styled ‘paedophile hunters’ could one day be consolidated into the formal criminal justice process and become a legitimate agency of investigation with statutory powers.

Impact:

With the recent rise in cases involving ‘paedophile hunter evidence’ and the regularity with which paedophile hunters make news headlines, an in-depth study into their vigilante activities and motivations is warranted and deserves merit. Currently, however, academic research exploring the ‘paedophile hunter’ phenomenon and questioning their legitimacy, their methods, and their motivations, is scarce. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to new understandings of this under-researched element of criminal justice and criminal investigation. Prior literature (see Hadjimatheou, 2019; Purshouse, 2020) has predominantly focused on the potential infringement on human rights laws that is commonly associated with ‘paedophile hunter’ activities; this research will be the first to provide an in-depth study of the ‘paedophile hunter’ phenomenon from a criminological perspective. This research will have a significant impact on policing and will inform and improve the working relationship between the police and ‘paedophile hunters’. It may inform the police on how to interact constructively with ‘paedophile hunters’. Likewise, it may allow ‘paedophile hunters’ to reflect on their own activities and consider less combative/confrontational ways of enforcing the law, making them a more legitimate element within the CJS. I have already had contacts from Staffordshire Police, Greater Manchester Police, West Midlands Police and GCHQ express interest in my research findings. This research also has the potential to inform future policymakers and lawmakers on how best to achieve the formal recognition of ‘paedophile hunters’ as statutory agency of investigation.

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