**Digital Vigilantism Case: Justice for the Syrian Refugee Family being Terrorized by Neighbors**

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**Introduction**

A few weeks ago, a story was made public about a Syrian refugee family living in Heerlen that was being terrorized by their neighbors for months. The father of the family himself posted the footage of this conflict on Facebook. The videos showed the Syrian family at whom a fire bomb was thrown, whose daughter was being attacked by an aggressive dog and at whom chlorine was being squirted with a water pistol. The videos also contained a short testimonial of the father of the family, who explained his side of the story. The father named Mohamad Sakka clarified that one neighbor started the conflict by accusing them of terrorism. Eventually, some other neighbors chose the side of the violent neighbor and joined him in his atrocities against the refugee family. Mohamad Sakka disclosed that “his children are suffering from anxiety disorders”, because of the terrorizing that worsened over time. He also mentioned that they have filed charges multiple times, but that the local authorities refused to help them (Al Ali, 2020). The conflict between the Syrian family and their neighbors escalated to the extent that the Syrian family fled to Belgium.

In November, the housing corporation of both the family and the violent neighbor, Vincio Wonen, appears to have lost a lawsuit against the Syrian family with the purpose to remove them out of the house (Al Ali, 2020). This lawsuit was initiated by the neighbor who started the conflict. On another note, on Facebook, Vincio Wonen would have told the family to search for a house in Syria, if they did not like the place where they lived at the moment. The exact words were: “We sincerely wonder why you do not use the housing corporation in your own country. If you and other foreigners would do so, we would have less complaints. Let us be honest: full is full!” Vincio Wonen itself claims, however, that this was a false statement on a false Facebook page (Candan, 2020).

The story got picked up by Muslim Rights Watch, an organization that defends the rights of Muslims, who reposted these videos on Facebook. Not long after this, the story about the Syrian family went viral on social media throughout the Netherlands: many people shared the videos within a short period of time, which caused the videos to quickly circulate throughout the social networks of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (Nahon, Hemsley, Walker, & Hussain, 2011). Social media users identified and confronted the inappropriate behaviors of the neighbors and Vincio Wonen, which is called a callout (Trottier; 2017; Wood, Rose, & Thompson, 2019). People expressed their disgust towards the neighbors, while sympathizing with the refugee family. Individuals probably understood the story on social media according to the comments of other people, meaning that virality likely contributed to emotional contagion (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). The story also reached some celebrities in the Netherlands, who reposted the story too and boosted as such the virality of the story. Bas Smit even hosted a fundraising campaign for the refugee family (Candan, 2020). Moreover, the popularity of this issue on social media led to protest actions against racism in Heerlen (Donné, 2020). Only after the complete escalation of the conflict on social media and the accompanying consequences, the local authorities took action.

Nowadays, technology enables citizens to capture moments and share this with others who are absent, which can be described as citizen witnessing. This is a two-step reflexive process which consists of a sensory, private experience and a public statement (Allan, 2016). This public statement is often being posted on social media, since individuals are connected with each other on social media. Furthermore, social media enable individuals across the world to organize themselves and act upon injustice, whenever legal authorities do not take their responsibility to do so. This results in what is called digital vigilantism (Trottier, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). Because of the impact that social media had regarding this vigilantism case in the digital world (e.g., fundraising) and the physical world (e.g., protest actions), and because of the large amount of news articles that were written about this topic, it is of societal and academic relevance to analyze how social media, digital journalism and citizen witnessing played a role in the achievement of these far-reaching effects. Thus, the following question will be discussed in this essay: How did social media, digital journalism and citizen witnessing contribute to the identification and highlighting of inappropriate behaviors towards the Syrian family and what are the consequences of this callout? The main focus will be on social media, since the story went viral on social media.

**Method**

The most important platforms in this analysis will be Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, since the story about the Syrian family went viral on these platforms and large discussions arose on these platforms. Next, articles of the local newspapers 1Limburg and De Limburger will be used in this analysis, since the Syrian family lived in Heerlen, which is located in Limburg. Because of the physical proximity, these newspapers had the opportunity to immediately send journalists to the location. Moreover, articles that discuss the relevance of virality on social media in this matter and both sides of the story will be included in the analysis, since shocking news goes viral easily on social media and often only one side of the story, the most shocking side, is being highlighted on social media (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). These include articles from De Volkskrant, RTL Nieuws, Hart van Nederland, NOS and NRC.

**Process of virality**

For starters, Mohamad Sakka privately witnessed the conflict with his violent neighbors and made a moral assessment of the situation. The father evaluated the conflict as deviating from his norms and values, which is why he captured these moments making use of technology. Next, he shared these videos, a form of user-generated content, on Facebook and turned the conflict with their neighbors into a public statement. The reason for this is that he wanted others, who were not present at the conflict, to judge the conflict from a distance and to raise awareness of the current situation of his family, since the local authorities refused to help them. The Facebook post of Mohamad Sakka did not have much result in itself. However, when Muslim Rights Watch noticed the videos, they decided to repost the videos on Facebook. The purpose of this post of Muslim Rights Watch was twofold: they wanted to raise awareness of racism and Muslim phobia, but the post also served as a call for action towards the local authorities (“The purpose of this video is to seek attention for this case in the hope that the local authorities will take action”).

This is where the process of virality started and the infrastructure of social media contributed to the popularity of the conflict: not long after the post of Muslim Rights Watch, large amounts of social media users reposted the videos within a very short period of time. An important question is why the videos went viral so easily. Firstly, connectivity and emotions are characteristic for social media: social media support users to like, comment on and share the videos of the conflict with others while expressing their emotions. The ecology of social media is one of sharing and collectivity. Users felt the shared social responsibility to increase the visibility of this conflict by forwarding these videos. Many users called others to share the videos as well: “Share this please!” They also tagged ministers and local authorities in their comments (e.g., “@minpres, I hope you see this”, “@ferd.grapperhaus, what are you going to do about this?” and “@heerlenis, we cannot accept this!” ). Secondly, the preview of the videos contained the following sentence: “These videos can be experienced as shocking”. This sentence indicated that the post was about breaking news, which might have stimulated people to watch the videos. This is the kind of content that generates high physiological arousal in individuals and because of the way in which algorithms are designed, this content has the highest chance of going viral (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). Next, many legacy news media reported on this conflict, because virality is a critical news value. This also contributed to the visibility of the story.

**One-sided story?**

This case is a clear example of digital vigilantism, specifically of a callout, since the primary goal of social media users was to identify and criticize the inappropriate behaviors of the neighbors and Vincio Wonen, without revealing identities of the neighbors (Trottier, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). People massively expressed their understanding about shared norms and values by highlighting that these behaviors are inhumane, but happen too often in the Netherlands and do not receive enough attention in the media according to them (e.g., “Get rid of the racists in the Netherlands!” and “Why is there no attention for this in the media???”) The analysis also revealed that the purpose of the callout got extended to raising awareness of Muslim phobia in general (e.g., “Pure Muslim phobia!!!”). It has become clear that most of these posts about the conflict contain the following: (a) expressions of disgust and outrage towards the neighbors and Vincio Wonen (e.g., “This makes me sick”) and (b) expressions of sympathy towards the refugee family (e.g., “We are going to help them” and “What can we do to help?”). One Instagram user even offered very explicit help: “They can stay in my house if they want to spend the night somewhere else.” These expressions have contextualized other social media users’ understanding of the conflict, since most comments contain these expressions. It is therefore likely that emotional contagion may have played a role in the lack of two sides of the story on social media and the amount of sympathy for the family.

With regards to the digital news articles written about this topic, the analysis has revealed that most news articles described this story as an “escalated fight between neighbors”. Nonetheless, some news articles depict the story using words such as “terrible”, “terrorizing”, “riot”, “mistreatment” and “harassing”. One news article (NOS, 2020), that described the story as “a fight between neighbors”, received many negative comments on social media, mentioning that this situation is not just a fight between neighbors, but an act of terrorism.

The videos only show one side of the story and are hard to verify because they display fractured pieces of moments. Thus, inside into the other side of the story is crucial. There has been written one news article about a video, also a form of citizen witnessing, in which a neighbor helped the Syrian family putting out the fire in their garden that was caused by a fire bomb (Hart van Nederland, 2020). The headline of the news article is the following: “Terror neighbor in Heerlen helps Syrian father”. However, this part of the story remains absent on social media. Some other news articles mention that the father has been accused of sexual intimidation and stalking towards women, including his own wife and daughters. These articles also mention that his children’s school requested a restraining order against the father for the same reason (Candan, 2020). Most news articles report on these accusations in an objective manner (e.g., “The neighbors of the Syrian man accuse him of sexual intimidation and stalking”; DutchTurks, 2020). One news article started with the following headline: “Conflict between neighbors in Heerlen turned into national riot: was it discrimination or stalking?”, thereby questioning the cause of the conflict (van der Steen & Ballan, 2020). A few social media users include these accusations in their comments. These individuals either choose the side of the neighbors or remain impartial, because they mention they have too little information to judge this matter (e.g., “What about the sexual intimidation? The terrorizing did not start out of nothing”). This shows that digital journalism has played a minor role in this case: a few individuals have used the news articles about the accusations as input for their discussions on social media, but the greater part of users relied on the way in which the story has been presented on social media, and that is the Syrian family as the victims.

In contrast to social media posts, most news articles mention both sides of the story along with some statements of the local authorities, the lawyer of the family and Vincio Wonen. The accuracy of the news articles is therefore probably higher than that of the social media posts, which could indicate that some factchecking has been done. Statements of the local authorities clarify that they do not approve of the one-sidedness, which the following statement by the city council of Heerlen proves: “Influencers with so many followers should be more aware of distributing a certain version of the story just like that, without acquiring more information.” Also, the spokesman of the police force in Limburg made the following statement: “The Syrian family assumes the role of victims in the video. The card of discrimination gets played very easily” (van der Steen & Ballan, 2020).

**Positive and negative consequences**

The virality of the story on social media had an influence on both the digital and physical side of the conflict. For starters, some celebrities in the Netherlands noticed the story about the family on social media, after which they shared the story too and expressed their disgust towards the neighbors (e.g., “What kind of outrageous behavior is this?” and “This really is too absurd…”). This also contributed to the virality of the story. A positive consequence is that one of them, Bas Smit, took it a step further and hosted a fundraising campaign, with which he collected 30.000 euros for a new house for the refugee family (Candan, 2020). Another positive consequence is that people from across the country traveled to Heerlen to protest against racism (Donné, 2020). On the other hand, there were multiple calls on social media to gather at the house of the violent neighbor in order to destroy and steal things (Van Beek, 2020). Despite these calls, others on social media express that they do not tolerate the violence against the neighbors. One Instagram user included the following sentence in her caption: “Everyone who calls for a crime or invites people to visit Heerlen will be blocked and his comment will be DELETED”. As a consequence of the virality of the story and the destructions and robberies, the local authorities started acting up by investigating the situation and ensuring safety for the family and their neighbors (Hubers, 2020). Furthermore, the local authorities have found temporary houses for both the families outside of Heerlen (Rietjens, 2020).

**Conclusion**

I have illustrated that the story about the Syrian refugee family is a case of digital vigilantism. Social media users have identified and confronted the toxic behaviors of the perpetrators, with the purpose to raise awareness of racism, since the local authorities refused to take action. In particular social media and citizen witnessing have played important roles in the moral and organizational dimensions of this digital vigilantism case. Because of the way in which the algorithms of social media are designed, the videos captured by the father went viral quickly. Digital journalism has played a minor role as the provider of input for discussions on social media, since individuals received most of the information about the conflict from other social media users’ comments. However, the accuracy of news articles about this topic is probably higher than that of social media posts, because both sides of the story are mentioned in these articles. Finally, the popularity of the story had positive (e.g., fundraising) and negative consequences (e.g., robberies at neighbor’s house). These findings about the roles of social media, citizen witnessing and digital journalism offer the local authorities some insight into how to best intervene when this digital vigilantism case, or another one with similar features, escalates negatively.

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