

Article

True Crime Podcasting as Participatory Journalism: A Digital Ethnography of Collaborative Case Solving

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Abstract: True crime podcasts invite their listeners to crowdsource investigations online, solving cases that have fallen through the cracks of the criminal justice system. Through a cultural criminologist lens, this digital ethnography examines The Vanished podcast as a case study of how true crime listeners engage with solving cases in digital community spaces. Previous studies have dismissed true crime fans as pseudo police acting as digital vigilantes. Podcasting communities provide an important public service, working as participatory journalists to investigate the story and report the truth. Rather than depending on law enforcement permission to organize, online crime-investigation communities leverage the Internet's function as an organizing agent for mobilization beyond the parameters of conventional social structures and formal government agencies. Findings reveal a six-step process of case collaboration between podcast producers, active listeners, and family and friends of missing persons. Other communities can apply this unique system to successfully investigate crime, suggesting implications for individuals within marginalized groups less likely to find justice through the formal legal system.

Keywords: true crime podcasts; online community; participatory journalism; crowdsourcing; criminal justice system; case solving



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1. Introduction

After hearing about a murder on the true crime podcast Crime Junkie, two listeners reached out to their father, who was now the chief of police in Odessa, Texas, where the episode's story occurred 20 years prior. The episode detailed the circumstances surrounding a murdered Catholic priest and an Apache Native American citizen imprisoned for the crime. The team's investigation of the closed case discovered missing evidence that led to the release of the incarcerated man, who was fully exonerated of his wrongful murder conviction (St. Martin 2023). This is one of many stories surrounding podcasts and their listeners who help resolve criminal issues the judicial system could not (Horeck 2019). When the Up and Vanished podcast investigated a decade-old cold case, two suspects came forward to turn themselves in and were convicted of covering up a murder (Locker 2017). Listeners of the Bear Brook podcast identified human remains, which helped to convict a murderer (Liptak 2019). There are dozens of similar examples and a growing number of books, movies, and television series based on the crime-solving podcast premise (Goodreads 2021). True crime podcasts report the details of unsolved cases, and listeners join them on the next steps of their investigations.

Roughly half of Americans listen to podcasts, and more than one-third of those listeners say they regularly tune in to the true crime genre (Shearer et al. 2023). These podcasts create social media pages, building tight-knit communities that attempt to solve the crimes they learn about on the shows by sharing information collaboratively online (Childs et al. 2020), also known as "crowdsourcing" (Gray and Benning 2019). These groups sometimes engage in "web sleuthing" (Yardley et al. 2018), or online activity attempting

to solve cases, such as collecting and analyzing digital clues or matching missing persons' reports to unidentified bodies (Havard et al. 2021). This study examines the actions of listeners through a digital ethnographic exploration of the online communities centered around The Vanished podcast, which seeks to find missing persons in the United States. Eight years of community collaboration were observed on the six social media platforms built by the longform investigative podcast, asking one central question:

How do true crime podcast communities attempt to solve crimes?

Building on the foundational work of Boling (2019), this paper explores an online podcast community as a unique ecosystem capable of bringing the audience alongside the journalist as a collaborator instead of a passive receiver.

This research responds to Jenkins's (2014) call for a more nuanced account of participation mechanisms by examining how specific groups leverage new media affordances and structures of participatory culture. Focusing on the actions of podcast fans within The Vanished community, this project uses social networking theory to illustrate how influence spreads. Through a cultural criminologist lens, it analyzes how listeners frame crime and justice, exploring their transition from fans to investigative reporters and how this new role challenges traditional journalistic boundaries.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Background

2.1. Overview of True Crime Podcasting Literature

Podcasting is web-based audio production (Hammersley 2004) mobile phone users quickly adopted owing to widespread iPhone application use (Bottomley 2015). The "true crime" genre of podcasting hit top charts with breakout podcast Serial, which drew a great number of listeners to investigative narrative storytelling surrounding crime (Vogt 2016). Crime reporting is nothing new, but the in-depth investigative journalism afforded by longform podcasts allows listeners to dive deeper into cases and begin to examine the circumstances surrounding them. Battles and Keeler (2022) explored the idea of a "golden age" of podcasting, where, unlike traditional radio shows, true crime podcasts encourage audiences to question police work and hold the criminal justice system accountable.

There is a sense of immediacy among true crime listeners to step forward and solve cases as soon as possible. This urgency was apparent as far back as Serial's 2014 investigation into the murder conviction of Adnan Syed. "Syed's future might depend on the listeners' attention to detail. Although the show is not interactive as such, it directly addresses the listeners through imperatives, commanding them to stay focused and assist the host on her quest for truth" (Chassagnol 2018, pp. 137–38). The creators of Serial did not ask listeners to play the part of police but to join podcast host Sarah Koenig on her journalistic investigation for the truth.

Social media abet and amplify collaboration between true crime podcast listeners. These digital spaces are a centralized location for fans to discuss theories, provide tips and personal insight, and advocate for justice (Hernandez 2019). Although anyone can create a social media group on their own, the crucial component in this dynamic is the unified platform that podcasts create for fans. "True crime podcasters are creating an environment like no other medium. They are not telling the story, they are building an active community and allowing the audience to be a part of the conversation" (Boling 2019, p. 175). Producers establish pages across multiple social media, regularly updating and interacting directly with listeners. They also create detailed websites that feature case files, videos and photos from the case, maps of key locations, and even police and court documents. Diligent maintenance and expansion of the podcasts' online presence is how producers build an active community, consistent in the content they provide and the interaction they facilitate. The co-creation of true stories with an active audience is known as "participatory journalism" (Vos and Thomas 2023). By using the information collected by audiences and clues provided through social media groups, true crime podcasters are on the cutting edge of developing a system of functional participatory journalism that simultaneously creates a better product and a more engaged audience.

2.2. Systemic Issues

Online crime-solving is connected to the growing perception that the law is falling short, prompting new methods of investigation (Johnston 1996). In 2023, unsolved killings reached an all-time high, with detectives often handling two dozen or more cases at a time, overwhelmed and underfunded (Westervelt 2023). More than half of women have little or no trust at all in the police's ability to keep them safe (Batchelor-Hunt 2023), and only 17% of people place great trust in the U.S. criminal justice system (Saad 2023). Online true crime communities are forming to meet the needs of victims and their families in ways the criminal justice system in the United States has not.

Individuals within marginalized groups are even less likely to find justice through the formal legal system (Bach et al. 2021). Many podcasts highlight systemic issues related to race, sexuality, and gender (Beck 2021). They provide publicity for cases that traditional news outlets have ignored. "The podcasts create an online community of listeners who can use public platforms to create change in the investigations and court trials of these crimes" (Pâquet 2021, p. 430). True crime podcasts give a voice to members of society who mainstream media have often stereotyped as criminal. Longform podcasting provides a narrative platform for underrepresented groups to be seen as the victim instead of always the perpetrator (Sherrill 2022).

2.3. Issues Within the True Crime Genre

Although the potential for new and emerging technology to promote equity and inclusion is great, critics say podcasts that cover crime can harm the very people they are attempting to help. Echoing more traditional true crime reporting of the past, podcasts overrepresent crimes against white women and girls (Slakoff and Duran 2023). "...all too often, true crime has reaffirmed conservative notions of justice, promoted problematic tropes, and neglected people of color and other marginalized communities in the stories they tell" (Hernandez 2019, p. 88). The true crime subculture may feed a "danger narrative" that protects white people and perpetuates harmful stereotypes against people of color (Webb 2021). The conversations surrounding podcasts failing to adequately cover social issues are often addressed by podcast hosts themselves. My Favorite Murder is a longtime true crime hit with a socially progressive agenda (Green and Michael-Fox 2023) through which the hosts discuss topics such as Black Lives Matter protests, gun regulation, and seeking help for mental illness (Pavelko and Myrick 2020).

Beyond social issues, scholars also warn of the negative legal repercussions of podcasts, noting the potential to interfere with ongoing police investigations and damage future trials (Davis 2019). The systemic impact of true crime content was demonstrated through the popular podcast *The Teacher's Pet*, which simultaneously helped and hindered a murder trial in Australia. The podcast's investigation stirred up enough evidence for police to arrest and charge a man with murder. Then, the defense took the case to the highest court, arguing that the podcast prejudiced jurors. The Australian government made the podcast unavailable to Australian listeners, attempting to allow for a fair jury selection. This process delayed the trial, during which time several witnesses died (Turnbull 2022). Despite the lengthy legal battle, the case was eventually tried in front of a judge without a jury and the defendant was found guilty and convicted of murder (Victor 2022).

2.4. DIY Policing

Although the connection between the law and true crime podcasts is complicated, the relationship is not always negative. "DIY policing" is the co-production of public security between citizens and police (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006), which often involves organizing online to find and share information. This collective interaction, known as crowdsourcing, has been proven to act as a deterrent for citizens who are considering committing criminal offenses (Ariffin et al. 2014) and contributes to creating a safer society (Estellés-Arolas 2022). Recent studies show the concept of collaborative activities between police and citizens is becoming more widely accepted within formal justice systems. During a roundtable

discussion with law enforcement officials, researchers found that police appreciate online crime fighting if it remains similar to communities' offline collaboration with police. As long as citizens bring their crowdsourced information to the formal justice system instead of attempting to take matters into their own hands, police are becoming more open to working with people seeking information online (Dekker and Meijer 2020).

Citizens have been encouraged to investigate crimes in several contexts. Loeffler and Bovaird (2020) created a public services model of community policing that allows for input from everyday citizens, much like what is happening online through social media pages of podcast communities. Partnerships between citizens and official government agencies often come with suggestions that police allow the public to crowdsource the data but not the actual criminal investigation (Ackerman 2013), while some believe that both are feasible with strategic safeguards in place (Brabham 2013). Many citizens may wish to provide the police with any information they find, but what makes online crime-investigating communities unique is that citizens do not need law enforcement permission to organize. With the Internet as the "organizing agent", people no longer need conventional structures or formal organizations in order to mobilize (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

2.5. A Culture of Participation

Both critics and proponents recognize that community-driven participation has its limits, largely defined by the platforms that host crowdsourced interactions. Kelty (2017) argues that digital participation culture resists traditional representation, favoring a push for more direct democracy. Although masses of users converse on any manner of topics, their participation in this digital dynamic is inherently political. "Participation is about power, and, no matter how 'open' a platform is, participation will reach a limit circumscribing power and its distribution" (Kelty 2012, p. 29). While social media create new pathways for public engagement, the platforms ultimately control whose voices are amplified and which issues gain broader visibility.

Yet the voices of average users on social media continue to resonate strongly. The influence of cultural elites has been disrupted by the collective opinions of popular culture, resulting in what Bolter (2014) calls "Popular Modernism" (p. 23). He describes current media culture as a diverse "plenitude," where there is no single dominant cultural narrative, but rather a vast array of subcultures. Social media's democratizing affordances include "the breakdown of hierarchy" that allows individuals to bypass traditional media gatekeeping to reach wide audiences (Bolter 2019, p. 80). The potential of such affordances is a convergence culture (Jenkins 2006) in which audience engagement and fan participation are not an afterthought to media producers, but essential in the creation process.

Digital subcultures are not merely isolated and insular communities interested in a singular topic. Research on K-pop fans found that fans who crowdsource on social media can have significant economic impact (Oh et al. 2018). The work that fans can accomplish through crowdsourcing is due to "technical competence, genre-knowledge and unparalleled devotion of the otherwise untrained Internet crowd" (O'hagan 2009, p. 94). Whether seeking entertainment with likeminded fans or advocating for serious criminal reform through activism, online communities can create meaningful impact through the organizing power of the internet.

2.6. Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

The struggle between the legal system and its citizens is reflected in the field of cultural criminology. This "qualitatively oriented social science" (Wickert 2019) uses a mix of law and sociology to engage with the power relations of justice and injustice. This theoretical framework focuses on the social and cultural processes by which "criminal" situations are defined and their consequences understood (Ferrell 2013) In particular, "crowdsourcing criminology" is a subfield of scholarship that studies how online communities and social media provide everyday citizens with opportunities to participate in crowdsourced investigations (Gray and Benning 2019).

While the theoretical approach remains centered in criminology, the discussion of the findings entails sensitivity to context in social network theory, through which social media users are viewed as nodes connected by ties that represent relationships or interactions (Borgatti and Halgin 2011). Each node's position determines its access to information and resources, social capital, and ability to influence and be influenced by others within that network (Butler 2001). The Vanished creates meaning through cultural criminology and enacts change through social networking. The main question driving the research was as follows: what are community members doing to solve cases within these online spaces? Observation of social media users on the various official The Vanished pages raised three research questions:

RQ1: Who is posting on these podcast community platforms?

RQ2: How are people interacting with content and with each other in these online spaces?

RQ3: What actions are podcast community members taking to solve the cases provided by the podcast?

3. Methodology

To investigate the growing online culture of crime solving, this project intentionally sought a true crime podcast community that mobilizes on public platforms. Drawing on the work of Myles et al. (2020), popular Reddit true crime forums were searched for potential case study subjects. Reddit users suggested rephonic.com (Rephonic 2023) (accessed on 27 September 2023) as a tool to find all active podcasts related to former true crime hit podcast Up and Vanished to connect to other podcasts centered on crime-solving and online community building. The final podcast was selected to meet the following criteria to align with the listening culture and production practice of Up and Vanished: (1) actively working to solve unsolved cases; (2) ethical storytelling; (3) small, independent production; and (4) quality investigative journalism.

3.1. The Case Study

This search led to The Vanished, a true crime podcast that explores the stories of individuals who have gone missing. Each episode is a 60-to-90-min longform story about one person who is currently missing in North America, averaging between 150 and 250 thousand listeners per episode. The Vanished "provides a valuable public space where relatives and strangers alike can gather, mourn, rage, hypothesize, and hope" (Hamilton 2020). Rather than the producers selecting popular cases to rehash, friends and family submit a request for the podcast to cover the case of their missing loved one. Host Marissa Jones said, "A lot of our cases are not the ones that make the national headlines. So, to have the chance to give these families a voice is very rewarding" (Baker 2019). Jones selects cases that families have been told are "not sensational enough," noting that podcast listeners care about cases of minorities and social outcasts, unlike the "missing white woman syndrome" (Slakoff and Duran 2023) perpetuated through sensational true crime coverage.

Many individuals who have been featured on the podcast have been found, both alive and deceased (Figure 1). Other cases have moved forward without the body of the missing person, often leading to arrests, charges, and even murder convictions. The cases take place all over North America but feature mainly in the United States.

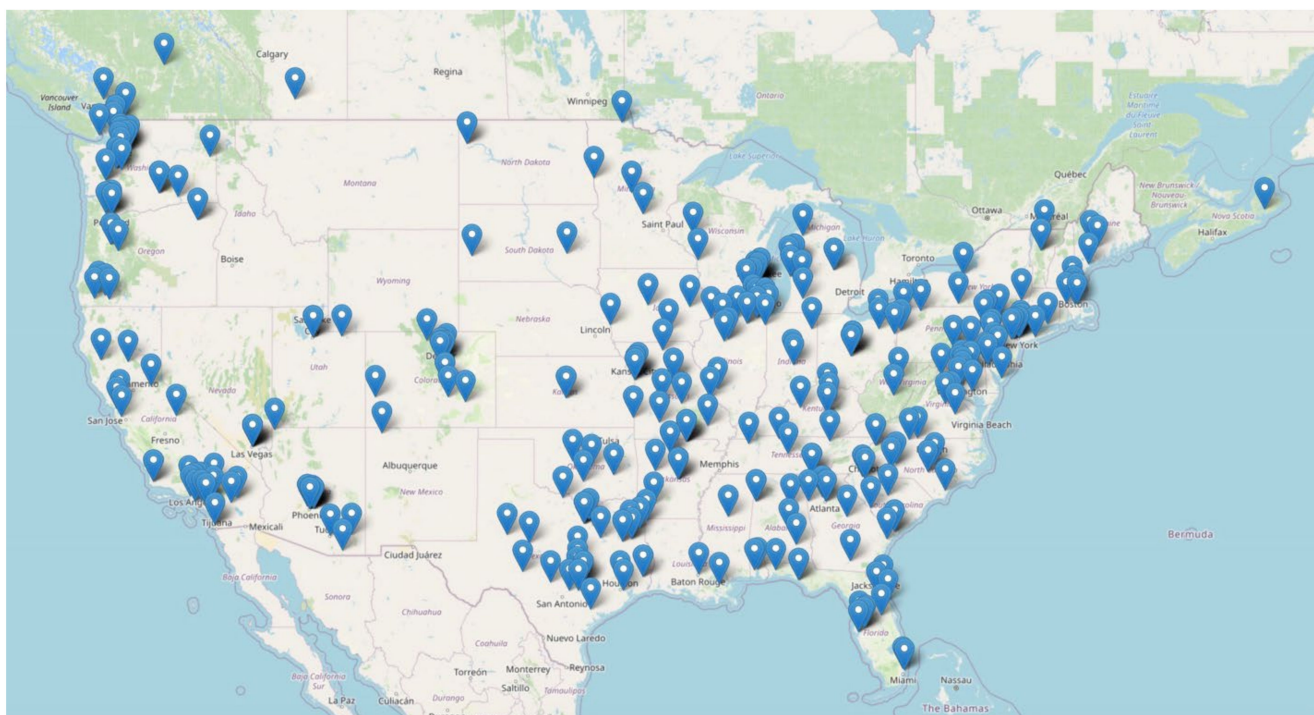


Figure 1. Map of the locations of the 321 missing persons cases featured on The Vanished podcast. Click through to see an interactive map of each case and its corresponding episode.

3.2. Digital Ethnography

The exploratory nature of this paper was intended to study the community that formed around The Vanished podcast by observing online behavior as an outsider. Research was conducted in a manner that remained curious and open to noticing patterns while remaining dialogically distant to avoid impacting the content. Brennan calls this approach the complete observer, sometimes referred to as non-participant observer (Brennen 2021).

The digital ethnographic approach lends itself well to this outside-in perspective, focusing on the cultural and social domains of human interaction through the Internet technologies they use (Elon University 2020) in order to “provide rich, holistic insights into people’s views and actions, as well as the nature (that is, sights, sounds) of the location they inhabit, through the collection of detailed observations. . .” (Reeves et al. 2008). By observing The Vanished community through digital ethnography, their unique subculture emerged more explicitly through comprehensive and detailed notes on all relevant aspects of the community. This enabled the assembly of a broader perspective of the system’s function as a whole.

This project centers around users’ activity across each of the digital platforms connected to The Vanished podcast. Our concentration was on the online community members within the podcast’s social media pages, not the podcast’s content itself. To follow a contextualist approach, as modeled in Schellewald’s (Schellewald 2021) digital ethnography, care was taken to avoid excessive focus on the content of any one individual post on these social media pages. Instead, observation remained focused on the community responses to the posts and their placement within the broader background of the podcast community on their quest to find missing persons.

Initial websites observed included each public platform connected to The Vanished: Reddit, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, X, and the podcast’s own website comment section. The reach was intentionally broad so that data collection would be driven by the content discovered on various websites, thus mitigating assumptions about which platforms held more significant community sway. After two months of observation, the focus eventually shifted to the most active community spaces: (1) Facebook, with 72,000 followers and

66,000 likes; (2) Instagram, with 31,000 followers; and (3) the Podcast's website, thevanishedpodcast.com (accessed on 27 September 2023), which had unique user interactions but no user numbers publicly available.

3.3. Fieldwork

Initial fieldwork followed the procedures of digital ethnography established by Proctor (2020). These methods include using private web browsers, wiping caches of data, using "incognito mode" on search engines to search for websites, and establishing new email accounts to create new social media accounts. These actions enable scholars to observe digital spaces with as little algorithmic influence from the researcher as possible.

Fieldwork took place over the span of five months, beginning on 1 November 2023 and concluding on 31 March 2024. Observation lasted between 30 and 90 min per day, totaling 150 h total. Detailed Excel spreadsheet notes were generated according to the field diary methodology of Schellewald (2021) appropriate for digital ethnography. In total, 362 pages of field notes covered the posts on each social media page of more than eight years of content, including thousands of posts and tens of thousands of comments, all of which took place from 1 January 2015 through 30 March 2024.

The digital field diary was built in the following manner: each individual social media website was given its own separate spreadsheet. On each spreadsheet, the vertical axis listed individual posts labeled by the date they were posted. The horizontal axis listed details of the type of post, numbers of likes and comments, content within the post, and researcher observations on the social media users' interaction with the post, as well as observations on users' interactions with each other. After discernable patterns emerged, the notes took a more concise shorthand form, focusing only on adding to previously established categories and collecting anomalies that did not fit into previous patterns. To ensure qualitative validity, an additional round of data analysis was conducted. This involved thoroughly reviewing and reorganizing the extensive notes using the platform [Airtable.com](https://airtable.com) (accessed 20 July 2024). A computational code was developed to scrape data from The Vanished website, which allowed for unbiased cross-referencing of episodic information and removal of duplicate data from the fieldnotes.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Prior to field observation, The Vanished podcast was contacted through their submission portal to notify the producers of the study. The podcast was also notified when the work was completed, offering the entire paper for their review. All the materials examined during the research process were public, posted on platforms intended to be seen and interacted with by as many people as possible. There was no need to pry for information, request access to private groups, or hide any aspect of collecting the open data. No individual user profiles were accessed, nor did any interaction occur with online users or podcast content. The project did not include any interaction or intervention with human subjects or include any access to identifiable private information.

4. Findings

To best highlight what actions The Vanished community took to solve cases, it is necessary to define who is considered a part of that community. Active participants posting across the six social media platforms connected to The Vanished fell into one of the following categories: podcast creators, podcast listeners, family and friends of the missing persons featured on the podcast, or accounts dedicated to finding missing persons (often run by the family and friends of the missing persons). Each of these subgroups interacted with the others, asking and answering questions, forming interpersonal relationships, and working toward the same goal—to find the missing persons featured on the podcast (Figure 2). The official The Vanished social media pages were not merely fan pages intended to discuss the podcast; they were cultivated spaces formed for the explicit purpose of crowdsourcing cases in order to help resolve them.

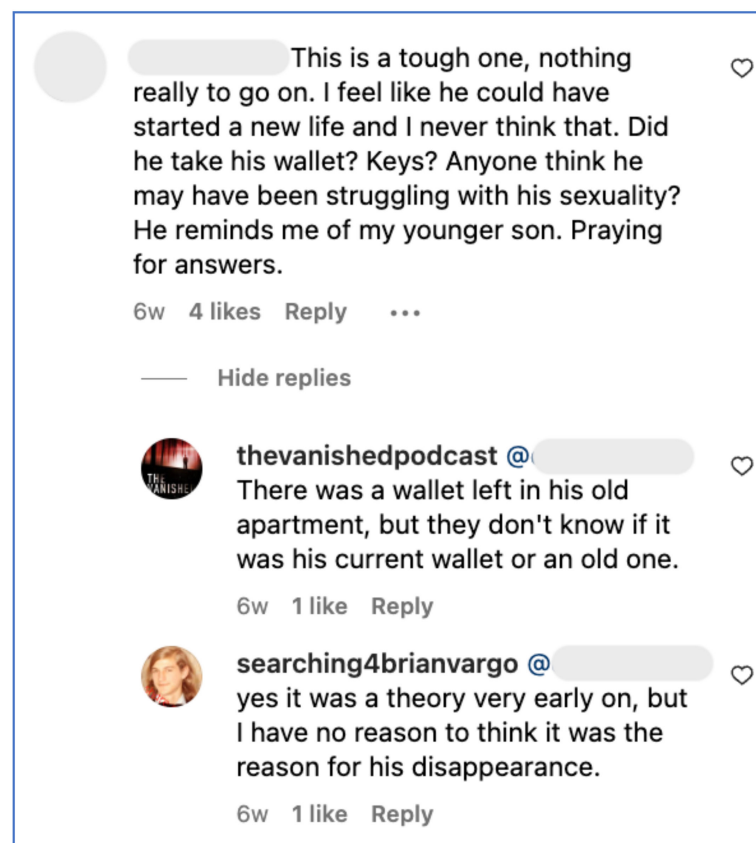


Figure 2. Instagram interaction between a listener, the podcast, and an account run by the family of a missing person.

Field observations revealed a clear system of how The Vanished community members set about solving the cases. This community work was accomplished in a cycle that can be broken down into six steps: (1) initial investigation, (2) community discussion, (3) case amplification, (4) real-life action, (5) family collaboration, and (6) formal momentum. The cycle began when the podcast released an episode featuring an in-depth investigation into the case of a missing person. Listeners then gathered online to discuss the case and provide input, hoping that any small amount of information might be helpful. The community amplified the case with social media tactics such as “sharing” and “tagging”. The family and friends of missing persons collaborated with the podcast and listeners to discover helpful ideas within the crowdsourced information. Formal and informal investigators then gained access to new leads that may impact the outcome of the case. The following section discusses the findings that emerged during each step in the process.

4.1. Step One: Initial Investigation and Community Guidance

The first step in the process of crowdsourcing cases was for The Vanished podcast to produce a longform investigative episode on a missing person. Family and friends of missing people requested for their cases to be covered by the podcast, submitting a form on the official website. Once a case was covered, the podcast posted the episode link and description on each of their official social media pages. Without the detailed and well-produced podcast, there would be no community space to discuss the cases. The podcast episode and official social media posts made by The Vanished provided a foundational understanding of each case as a launching point for participatory journalism from the larger community, which was guided by the podcast producers as they maintained open and honest communication with the group.

What stands out among these findings is how frequently the podcast posted across the different community platforms, directly engaging with the listeners in an open back-and-forth dialogue. The podcast host frequently answered user questions, provided pictures and updates from cases, and responded to community members. One Instagram user commented on a podcast post, saying that it would have been nice to hear from law enforcement. The Vanished responded, "They are very tight lipped about this case. The DA's office has the case, they didn't return our calls. That was not surprising, that has been our experience whenever a DA's office holds a case". The Vanished host was careful to remain neutral and fair in each episode, presenting their investigative pieces through the voices and perspectives of many, including law enforcement. Within the context of the online community, the host was much more personal and likely to give away more of their own personal opinion regarding certain aspects of the cases covered.

This created a hyper-intimate space for the community, removing the traditional distance between producer and listener. One X user wrote, "some things are not adding up-She was a home healthcare nurse with a daughter to support but had a super expensive SUV and thousands of cash in her car? The boyfriend is def shady". The podcast responded, "No, it doesn't add up. One niece mentioned that she believed there was some kind of scamming going on". These small additional details helped to expand the context of each case for community members, along with building the interpersonal relationship dynamic between the listeners and podcast.

4.2. Step Two: Community Discussion and Case Ideation

The most common interaction among The Vanished online community members was to partake in the many active and ongoing discussions, which took place in the comment sections of individual posts made by official The Vanished social media accounts. These discussions included speculation of missing case details, questions asked for case clarification, professional expertise on a subject mentioned in the episode, and personal insights into the situation from anyone who lived close to where the case took place. In confirmation of the true crime podcast literature, a great deal of listeners hopped online to speculate about cases. Most comments were innocuous, trying to lend any small insight that might aid in the overall understanding of the case. Comments such as, "That looks like a right-handed written note with a left handed signature". Speculation covered topics such as potential routes missing persons may have traveled, suspects who may have been involved, and analysis of policework.

On Instagram in particular, many comments communicated who-done-it theories or expressed frustration at an aspect of the case. One Instagram user commented, "The cop just 'happened' to have stopped by the school and it just happened to be unlocked and oh look he just happened to be carrying a camera when he found evidence that they have never uncovered UNTIL the daughter had the case reopened 20 plus years later???? Hmmm. Ok". Speculations were often addressed by the podcast, family and friends of the case, and other podcast listeners. Although the comment-thread discussions held both agreements and disagreements, they often led to new ideas which grew owing to group brainstorming and a growing understanding of the case taking place in these public spaces.

Almost all social media posts contained listener questions. These questions were answered by the podcast, family and friends, or other community members who might have expertise in that area. One Instagram user commented, "He had to have gone down in the plane? I can't remember, do they have any idea where the plane went down?" The podcast responded, "The FBI files only say South America". Another Instagram user asked a question and was answered by other listeners who shared their internet searches, links to news articles, and the podcast's suggestion to look into the newspaper archives.

A great deal of audience motivation appeared to stem from a genuine desire to help. This was demonstrated through the actions of users providing their unique expertise for the case. A clear example of this type of insight came through a Facebook user who commented on a missing truck driver:

I'm a truck driver and I can say with certainty that my company can track me through the gates of hell if they want. . . . His company would have looked for their missing equipment. . . his loads would have been documented so he could receive pay for those runs. Fuel station receipts should be looked into if he was using a company account. These are all viable tracking possibilities. Just a few suggestions and I will keep my eyes open on the road.

This depth of insight into the specifics of truck driving is not readily available to the average person. Such details might be missed in the initial police investigation, and most likely would never occur to the family of a missing person who wishes to pursue the investigation further after the police have stopped. In another example of community members lending their expertise to online discussions, one Instagram user helped to clarify some questions about gathering DNA, commenting, "A Funeral Director apprentice here and the chances of getting DNA from cremated remains is extremely unlikely. Maybe one day, but not at this time". These tips may seem small on their own, but within the context of mysterious cases, any additional perspectives provided by a professional can be considerably helpful.

Most discussions included tips and corrections from people who lived close to the missing person's case, many of whom provided details to help the discussion stay accurate. One Instagram user clarified the unlikelihood of the missing person walking from one location to the next, writing, "No one would walk from Brighton to Roslindale. Ever". This comment stopped a line of community speculation that would otherwise be superfluous. The geographical understanding might be obvious to people from the area, but the police assigned to the case might not know the neighborhoods in question. Such a slight misunderstanding can be passed around through formal news reporting and even to private detectives hired by the family. One sentence on social media becomes a tool of tremendous clarification during the investigation.

The families and friends in The Vanished community are often unfamiliar with the areas in which their loved ones go missing. One local commented directly to a family member of a missing person, "A lot of people go through Brawley to go to Glamis in Imperial County. Glamis is an off roading area for sandrails, quads, motorcycles, razors (side by sides) so that may be a community to put flyers on Facebook. You never know if someone saw him wondering the area. The Glamis store is very popular. . .". The family member responded and thanked the local for their suggestions. Social media affords the opportunity of everyday citizens to establish local contexts, setting the scene for the disclosure of privileged information.

Each official podcast community page established by The Vanished across all six Internet platforms, thus, serves as a tool for people to submit information they might not feel comfortable sharing directly with law enforcement. One Instagram user said they tried speaking up about facts missing from a suspect's alibi. "My brother's ex had been dating Carl around the time of your sister's disappearance. . . He said a lot of things to my brothers ex and she may or may not know more than she's said. . . no one in my family went to the police. . . You can PM [private message] me". Many true crime podcasts establish social rules for such situations, discouraging listeners from privately contacting families, who may be inundated with suggestions from people from all over the world. In this case, the user publicly commented to the family. If the family was interested, they knew who to reach out to for more information.

Many of these types of comments were anonymous, with someone creating a generic social media account so that their identity could not be traced. An anonymous user on the podcast website commented, "Check the bottom off Portuguese Point". These types of tips could possibly be false or incomplete, but they function much like someone calling a police tip line without wanting for the police to record their identity.

4.3. Step Three: Case Amplification Through Social Networking

An important part of the cycle of case solving is the intentional amplification of each case through social media tactics. Community members “shared” podcast episodes and their case details within their own personal social media networks, within larger true crime groups, or on missing persons social media pages. They also “tagged” other social media accounts of organizations or politicians who might be helpful in gaining some traction on the case.

A key component of the online community dynamic was the “sharing” of the podcast’s posts to amplify the audience reach of its stories. Posts were shared dozens, hundreds, or thousands of times. Most of these shares went onto missing persons’ pages or individual user pages. Some of these episodes were shared to pages dedicated to solving true crime. A Facebook user tagged the missing person page of the person featured on the latest *The Vanished* episode in order to encourage them that their story was being shared all across the Internet. “@Justice for Ginger [tagged] I just posted the link for the podcast on Websleuths. I hope you get answers about your mom”. This dynamic included other types of true crime groups, as well as missing persons groups that feature stories from a particular geographical location, such as “Wisconsin Missing Persons Advocacy, Inc,” and “THE VANISHED & MISSING INTERNATIONAL GROUP” on Facebook.

Tagging is the act of creating a link to a social media profile. When you submit the link through a comment, the tagged profile receives a notification, bringing their attention to the post they were tagged in. The *Vanished* community tagged several different types of profiles: organizations that could help search for the missing person, individuals who might understand a specific legal or professional aspect of the case, and politicians or police departments in order to pressure them to act in favor of the case. An Instagram user commented, “I’d be interested to see if @adventures_with_purpose could help search the ponds identified by Dorothy’s sons as a potential location of her car and remains”. Another Instagram user asked, “Has @geocaching (the company) been contacted? If they were actually geocaching, this collects data around who has been in the area and logging caches both before and after Alex went missing”. The newly tagged profiles then received notifications bringing their attention to the case, at which point they could choose to actively participate in the investigation or not.

Sometimes, community members would tag local law enforcement, news organizations, or politicians. One Facebook user tagged a politician, “hey @Ed Gonzalez. i know you’re running for election with @Harris County Sheriff’s Office. where is kay-alana? why won’t you speak to her family?” The *Vanished* podcast rarely put out direct calls-to-action, yet community members acted of their own volition to seek out key legal and political players, attempting to pressure them into responding to the case.

4.4. Step Four: Taking Action Offline, From Virtual to In-Person

Although *The Vanished* never told listeners to do so, case discussions occasionally included comments describing how community members were taking action within their real everyday lives to investigate the case. This was especially true with those who were tangential to the case in real life, such as a neighbor or co-worker connected to the missing person. On the podcast’s official website, one listener commented that they asked around about a case in real life. “I just listened to the episode and asked his former coworkers if they knew he was missing. None of them had heard anything about it. The town he moved from seems like a logical place to look for anyone he might contact but they have not been contacted by law enforcement. I just wanted his family to know it hadn’t been a thorough investigation”. These types of tips are helpful for families who may not know what aspects of the case the police have or have not covered. A police department might easily miss relevant case information during their initial investigation. The affordance of this Facebook community is a manner of submitting those tips directly to the family of the missing person instead of waiting for the police to conduct a formal interview, which often never happens for witnesses who are only incidental to the case.

Virtual to in-person action was evident. For example, after becoming confused by details of a case, one listener resolved to visit the physical location where a missing person was last seen. The listener lived in the area, so they walked to the specific address and reported information that advanced the investigation. “2903 and the neighboring buildings seem to be abandoned”, they noted. “On the backside there’s an overgrown, fenced off garden. They just started construction for a building on that corner, that would explain the discovery”. The discovery in this case pertained to the nature of evidence related to the missing person’s disappearance. Although in-person visits to potential crime scenes are generally not advised, there was no official crime at the time of this investigation, and the space was open to the public. The description provided by the community member helped to clarify the discussion of the case, ultimately moving it forward toward other topics.

4.5. Step Five: Collaboration from the Loved Ones of Missing Persons

Family and friends were active in sharing personal stories, as well as additional details that may have not been featured during the podcast episode. This was especially prevalent on the podcast’s website, where many episodes feature the comments of people who knew them well. One user wrote, “I’m the oldest daughter of Virginia Erickson. I still remember the disappearance as if it was yesterday. I was 13. There were family members and a few of dad’s friends that know what happened and won’t talk”. This same episode had several different family members echo this sentiment, some of them calling on people to come forward to the police.

Family and friends were active in each of the online spaces. They were able to gather new information, community support, and a significantly wider reach. Families can filter out what might make a new lead and take this information to formal investigators. One Facebook user commented that they were sharing the story with their network in Illinois. They encouraged the family to check places for themselves. “Check with the hospitals and homeless shelter trust this you can do your own investigation people tell me I do better investigation than fbi. . .” Often, these types of comments were made directly in response to friends and family members and would include a back-and-forth discussion between community members and the loved ones of missing persons. Those interactions looked like this:

Facebook user: Is there a friend of the family that is within law enforcement? I feel like this disappearance is a little too clean.

Family Member: Not to our knowledge.

User: . . .it could be someone with that type of uniform. Even a security guard.

Family: It definitely could be. Anything is possible.

User: Police also still have her car. . . Hopefully you can get a private investigator to help. Hope you get answers.

As with this interaction, family and friends often directly answered listener questions to clarify community discussions surrounding the case (Figure 3). Social media provided a platform to publish information that might not have made the cut during podcast editing. Sometimes, family members replied to listeners to give updates on the case in those discussions where listeners were invested. On the podcast website, the daughter of a missing woman responded directly to a listener, “We have 2 new detectives on board that listened to the podcast and really want to help us out”. She then provided their names and contact information so that the active participants could directly communicate with the formal police. This step of active cooperation from friends and family was the key to pushing their case into the sixth and final step of case collaboration.

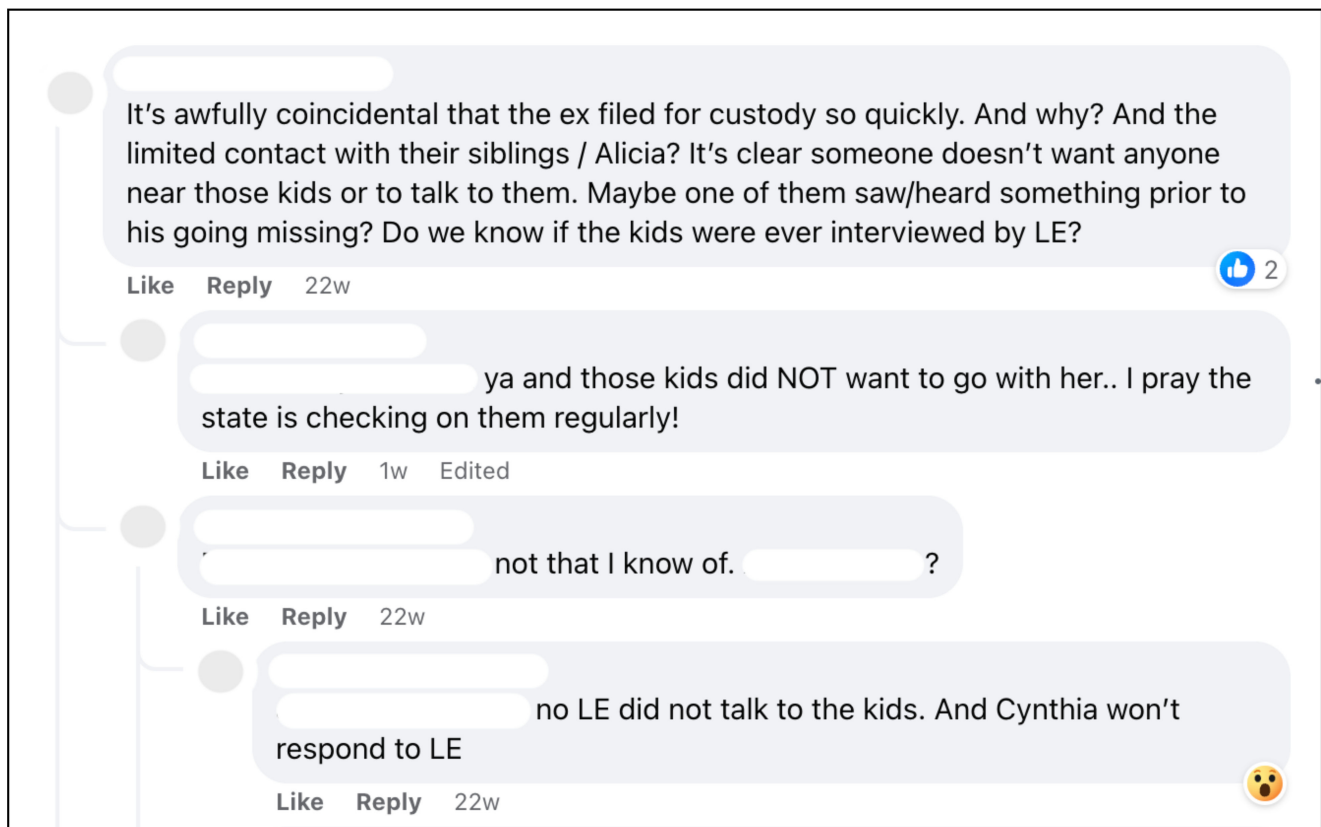


Figure 3. Two family members answer questions and comments from two listeners on Facebook.

4.6. Step Six: Formal Momentum and Detectable Movement in the Case

The final step in this cycle was for the case to move forward in any small way in real life. This could include families thanking the community for leads, police departments reaching out to work with community members, or the case being officially solved. The ultimate outcome of this cycle was often the collection of crowdsourced data by the formal legal system. A family member shared an update on Instagram, "The detective at Columbus police is looking into when they might have rented cabin". These small updates provided by the family or the podcast were a form of encouragement for the community to keep going, despite the slow pace of progress in many cases.

Whether or not the sixth step was successful depended on each individual case and who led the formal investigation. The daughter of a missing woman commented on the official podcast website under the episode featuring her mother's case. "There's a couple of new detectives on board that had listened to the podcast. My momma's case was at the bottom of the case load and has made its way back up due to the podcast. They couldn't believe that not much was done with finding her..." Not only did these detectives listen to *The Vanished*, but they were also willing to actively engage with listener participation during the formal investigation through the podcasts' crowdsourcing system.

Families often hired private investigators to pursue listener leads when the police chose not to pursue the case any longer or were uncooperative with the families. One Facebook user commented, "PLEASE push the detective to do the work and request resources to search where you found her clothing..." A family member responded, "Im trying to push as of now im saving and raising money for my own searches... They will only contact me to ask how my search is going and if I have any new updates". The updates provided to the formal investigators were dependent upon the family members' access to the community's crowdsourced investigation. Unless police were directly monitoring *The Vanished* social media pages, they only received the information that family and friends filtered through as valid and worth the attention of law enforcement.

One police department posted on social media to directly thank The Vanished for helping solve a case by finding a missing person safe and sound. “FPD detectives. . .recently worked with The Vanished Podcast on one of our missing person cases from 2017. . . After the podcast aired, several people came forward and helped provide his location. . .We wanted to take the time to thank the podcast and the people who reached out to us about this case”. This was just one of 74 missing persons who had been found so far after their cases were featured on The Vanished (Figure 4). Measuring the influence of the podcast community on those investigations is impossible considering the inability to control for external factors, yet the overall impact is clear.

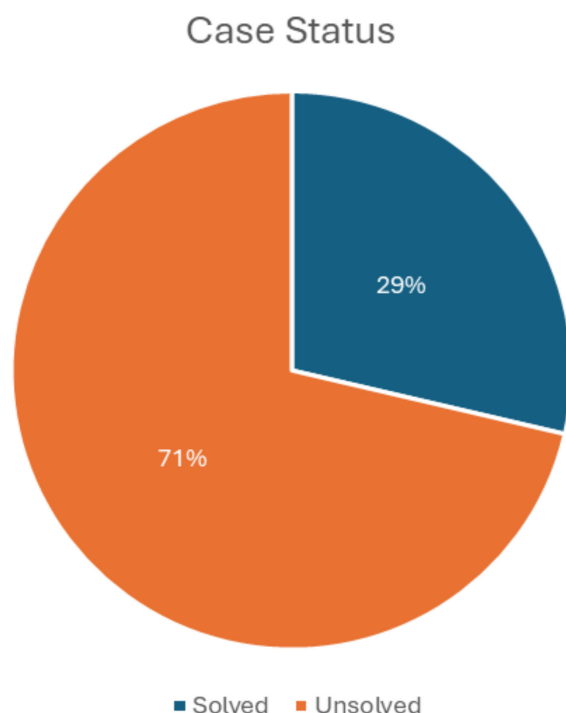


Figure 4. Pie chart of the solved status of all 321 missing persons featured on The Vanished podcast.

As of 1 July 2024, nearly 30% of the cases featured on The Vanished had been solved (Figure 5). Out of 321 individuals, 11 people had been found safe, 63 had been found deceased, and 18 had been ruled “solved” by the court system, despite never being recovered (Figure 6). Police acknowledgment of the help provided by the podcast was ultimately inconsequential to the larger effort of the community as a whole. The work being accomplished might not always have tangible results, but there was a continued sense of the potential for new insight and unexpected case movement around the corner. Cases have unexpected breaks decades later in some instances, and the community did not expect instant gratification for the work they contributed. The final step of the cycle of case collaboration was measured not through formal numbers of cases solved, but by the communities’ definition of success: active care for the person missing and their loved ones and continued focus on cases that would otherwise fall through the cracks of a criminal justice system overwhelmed by sheer caseload and low manpower.

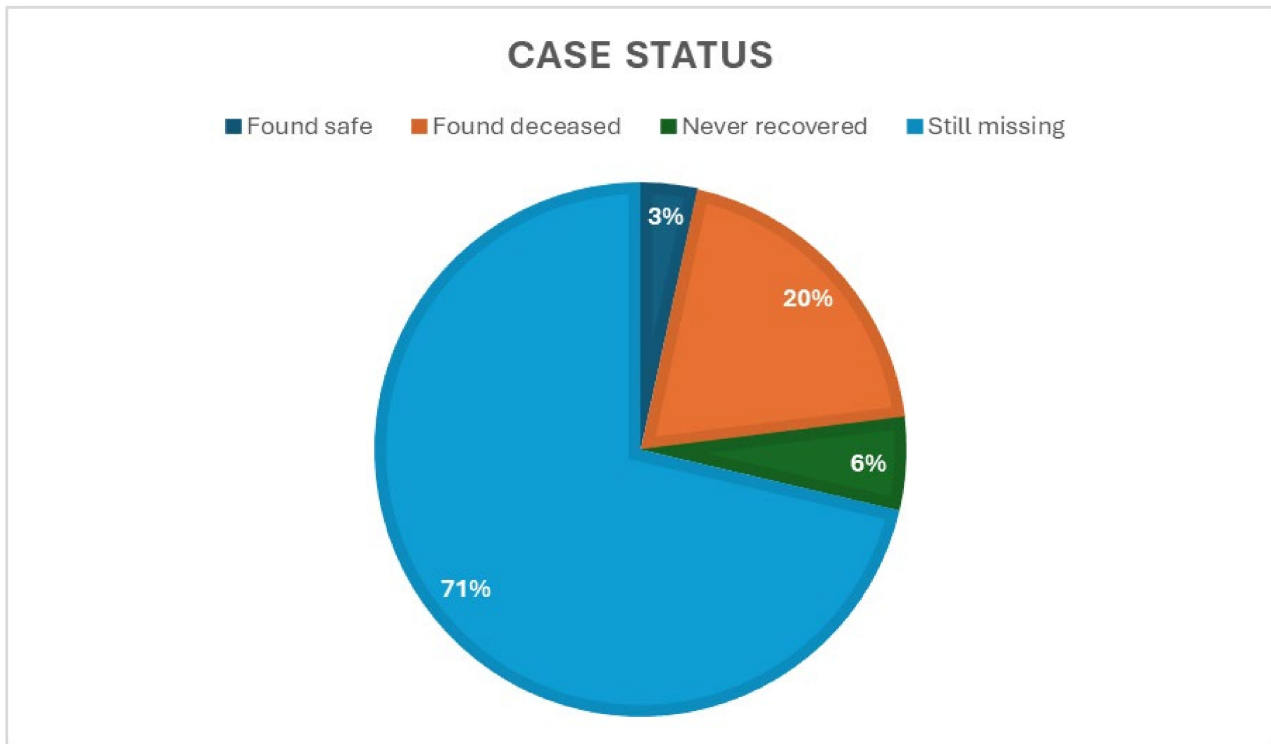


Figure 5. Pie chart of the current status of cases featured on The Vanished podcast as of 1 July 2024. Out of 321 cases, 229 remain unsolved. A total of 11 people were found safe; 63 were found deceased; 18 were never found but are legally considered solved due to court rulings.

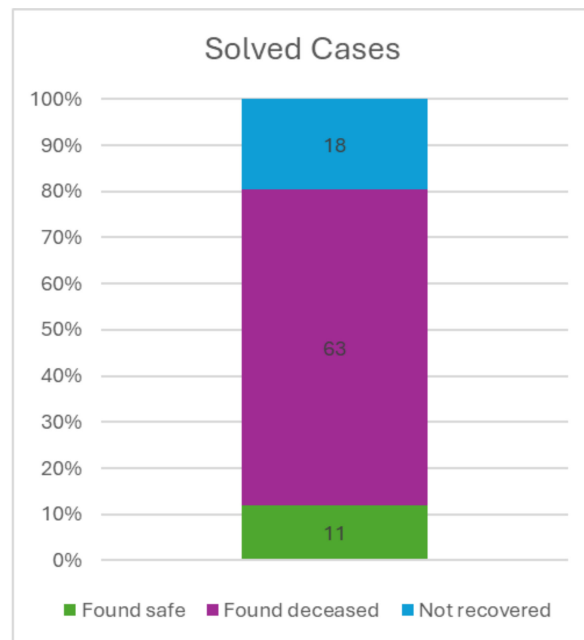


Figure 6. Bar graph of the categories of the 92 cases that were “solved” after being featured on The Vanished podcast. A total of 11 people were found safe; 63 were found deceased; 18 are legally considered solved, despite never being recovered.

4.7. Return to Step One: The Cycle Continues

These six steps often led to movement within the investigation of individual cases, but even when they did not, the cycle continued. At the end of the six-step cycle, private and public investigators received new sources of information and additional public pressure

to solve the case. The podcast would then produce a new investigative story, prompting a new cycle of case solving. The Vanished also produced many follow-up episodes from previously covered cases, featuring new information from the community's crowdsourcing efforts and continuing to push the cases forward.

With episodes released nearly every single week, there is plenty of content for listeners and always a new case to investigate. However, since the material sits on a public platform that is asynchronous, anyone can access all of the content that has ever been posted at any time. As such, these steps are not clearly accomplished within a specific timeframe, as is also true with the investigation of crime offline. However, when a new episode is published, the first week is most often the most active for steps one, two, and three. The podcast is posted, the discussion surrounding the case begins, and attention for the case is amplified through social networking. It may take a few weeks or months for the case to gain a wide enough reach for steps four, five, and six to occur. Regardless of the length of time it takes for new details to come to light for each individual case, one finding was consistent across the board: all six steps took place, and this system created a clear cycle of successful community collaboration.

5. Discussion

The main question driving this research was as follows: what are community members doing in order to solve cases within these online spaces? Answering the question entailed investigating and defining who was considered a part of the community, how they interacted, and what actions they were taking to solve cases. The results show a unique ecosystem of participatory journalism held in balance by the podcast producers. The findings contribute to the literature in two main areas. The first addresses the collaborative cycle by highlighting the significance of social networking and cultural criminology. The second explains the potential bearing of this study on the field at large.

From afar, the six-step cycle of collaborating on cases initially appeared organic. After much observation, it became apparent that it was deliberately grown through the eight-year effort of The Vanished podcast host Marissa Jones, who remained an active and integral part of the process. Without the initial investigative story to draw listeners to these online groups, there would not be a central location for many of these cases and the families connected to them. Without the hard work to build and maintain peace and order, these platforms might not be as healthy and collaborative. The podcasts' official pages push out content that draws other accounts with their ability to share within their networks. They also answer user questions and moderate the comment section to maintain a balance of public collaboration. Without this organizing agent, the system would not function. The podcast invited listeners to participate in the investigation and organized the group effort as community members collaborated on moving the story forward, with the overarching goal of reporting the truth and seeing the positive impact in real life.

In terms of Social Networking Theory, The Vanished podcast is the "central node" on each website. The bulk of listener-driven activity surrounding the podcast took place within the official platforms provided by The Vanished. There were breakout discussions and individual user posts on their own social media pages, but the greatest amount of action was confined within the podcast's designated online spaces. The online presence of The Vanished acted as a central hub of information for hundreds of investigations that would otherwise be limited in their capacity to reach larger audiences, thus building the social capital demonstrated through social network theory. The individual nodes of users and pages that were connected to the central node of the podcast each had their own social reach. Every time a podcast episode was shared on social media, it had the potential to reach tens of thousands of new users. For example, one Facebook post was shared 1.2 thousand times. The post could then be viewed by each Facebook user individually connected to those 1.2 thousand accounts that shared it. The reach depended on how many friends or followers each independent Facebook account had. Some may only have a few dozen. Others would have thousands or even millions. If the separate exposure of share

numbers is added together, the overall reach is significantly higher. Social networking theory establishes how platforms enable the rapid exchange of ideas, which can foster community activism, facilitating collaborative investigations within The Vanished social media channels. Technological affordances promoted participatory action, creating a dynamic in which users and technology worked together to find the truth and spread awareness of each case.

True crime fans did not merely discuss and share cases; they shaped social narratives around crime and justice. This community response was created over time through each critique or compliment of police efforts, each shared update on a court case, and each theory about why a case slipped through the criminal justice system. Comments on fan pages accumulated, building a shared understanding and collective framing of justice. Social media's technological affordances gave voice to previously marginalized cases, allowing families to seek justice within the true crime podcasting subculture, reaffirming the cultural criminology literature on how everyday people engage in and influence crime discourse.

Listeners who communicated through the podcast's social media do not appear to view themselves as police, jury members, or judges. With the consideration of crowdsourced criminology, the online community members surrounding The Vanished podcast acted as investigative journalists, not investigative law enforcement. The members did not try to find criminals or punish them. While discussion occasionally included accusations of criminal behavior, the bulk remained focused on the victims and their families. Community members wanted to find out the truth. They also wanted to share that truth with the families connected to cases, the public, and law enforcement. Whether or not someone was caught or punished seemed to be irrelevant compared to the inquiry for truth. The Vanished listeners who joined fan pages may not have initially intended to act as investigative journalists. However, as they engaged with the online community, they participated in established norms, including the six-step cycle of collaboration. While not all users took part in every stage of the cycle, many engaged through actions such as sharing, liking, and commenting. These cumulative efforts created a co-investigation that the community implicitly agreed upon. Through the unwritten norms of The Vanished social media pages, the collective goal emerged: uncovering and reporting the truth behind each podcast case. This process gradually transformed the fans from passive listeners to active investigative reporters, expanding the traditional boundaries of journalism.

In confirmation of previous findings, it appears that true crime podcast listeners are seeking entertainment (Rodgers 2023). However, community members can be entertained while also pursuing justice. They speculated on social media while also volunteering their free time to solve cases. They took crime seriously while enjoying the process of investigation. In fact, speculation was an integral part of the case-solving cycle. Discussion would be impossible if people were unable to piece together theories, state out-of-the-box ideas, or share their suspicions. These speculations led to new perspectives and sometimes even new leads for the official investigation. Some of the concerns scholars have raised about the quality and management of crowdsourced information (Gray and Benning 2019) are addressed through the podcast's approach of first providing a foundation of investigative journalism and then actively guiding community participation. The Vanished maintains a focus on evidence-based investigation and active public engagement, providing a practical example of how the theoretical framework of crowdsourcing criminology can be effectively applied in the context of true crime podcasting, and potentially offering a model for future participatory crime-solving initiatives.

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

This study underlines a major issue within the U.S. legal system: American citizens feel they must take up the task of solving their own cases. However, it also highlights a major affordance of technology: the power of online crowdsourcing to bridge systemic gaps. Findings also show the power of participatory journalism to improve and expand investigative reporting. The Vanished is an example of a thriving true crime podcast

community committed to the public service of solving cases, finding missing persons, and making the world a safer place. Even the aspects of true crime communities that have been considered negative by past studies, such as entertainment and speculation, hold an important place within these communities and the work they do. Together, true crime podcast communities' online actions collectively push unsolved cases forward, one social media post at a time.

While this study focuses on a single community, there are potential implications for the broader field of true crime podcasting and participatory journalism. The six-step cycle of case collaboration identified here may serve as a model for understanding how other podcast communities function and contribute to investigative reporting. This framework could be applied to analyze the effectiveness of different podcasts in facilitating audience engagement and case progression. Moreover, results highlight the complex system that true crime podcasts operate within, providing insight into the dynamics between podcast producers, listeners, families of missing persons, social media, and the criminal justice system. These findings challenge simplistic notions of true crime audiences as passive consumers or amateur detectives, instead revealing a more nuanced picture of collaborative crime investigation.

The Vanished serves to exemplify the online crowdsourcing of true crime podcast communities. This is limited in scope and cannot fully express the wide range of these online communities and the work they are accomplishing. Future research can expand on these findings to see if they are applicable in a variety of true crime contexts. Another constraint of this project was the methodology of digital ethnography. While the position of the researchers as a distant observer allowed for extensive and in-depth textual analysis of a subculture, the personal perceptions of the podcast and its community members remain limited. Future research should take this into consideration. To expand the collaborative community model, future research can consider the public and private investigators who collect information from crowdsourced data. Future research should include in-depth interviews with podcast listeners, especially the prominent nodes within these communities who are highly active and influential. The more perspectives that researchers can examine in this unique area, the higher likelihood there is to implement a more streamlined process that combines collaboration between families and the power of crowdsourcing while also meeting law enforcement standards. Whether or not those standards should be reinforced is one of debate in the field of criminology and should be explored within the context of podcasting and the impact of their community justice efforts.

True crime podcast communities have begun to fill gaps in the criminal justice system with their own unique insight, attention to detail, and willingness to share within their networks. True crime podcasts are uniquely situated to connect police, the court system, victims of crimes, and traditional reporting on crime. These communities are holistically providing an important service to the public during this initial phase of rapid development in participatory podcast journalism. The potential for criminal-case collaboration is vast and worth serious consideration.

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