

## Social media 2013 year in review: vigilante justice

By Heather Loney  
Global News



Images are viewed taken from a security camera of persons of interest in the twin bombings at the Boston Marathon during a news conference on April 18, 2013 in Boston, Massachusetts.

*Spencer Platt/Getty Images*

TORONTO – While online vigilante justice wasn't necessarily on the rise in 2013 (it seemed to peak in 2012), experts say there certainly was more awareness of it this year.

With stories that elicited outrage (think Rehtaeh Parsons' death following an alleged rape, the Boston Marathon

bombings and news of a sex ring in New Zealand where teenage boys lured girls into having sex, then bragged about it online), came stories of digital vigilantes looking for justice.

But it didn't always end well for these online crusaders. "These cases illustrated that online vigilantism is generally not a good idea," said Matthew Johnson, Director of Education at MediaSmarts.

Unlike in law enforcement and journalism, Johnson said there are fewer checks on social media.

"It's not to say that police and journalists don't make mistakes, but there are checks on them, and these don't exist when a particular theory takes the imagination of an online community."

## **The hunt for the Boston Marathon bombers**

On April 15, 2013 two pressure-cooker bombs exploded at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring over 260.

Photos from the scene – in the hours leading up to the explosion and in the aftermath – spread like wildfire on social media.

As police searched a city in lockdown for suspects, users on Reddit began to mobilize. The "subreddit" Find Boston Bombers was created and thousands of users pored over photos, making loose connections to individuals in the photos to the only crime scene evidence released by the police – pressure cookers and a black backpack linked to the explosions.

The well-intentioned efforts quickly devolved into a witch hunt, with innocent people being wrongly identified as the bombers.

The Reddit user who started the subreddit said that the photo hunt was "a disaster," adding it was naive to think the conversations and theories emerging within Reddit wouldn't spread outside of the site.

Reddit's general manager Erik Martin said on a blog post that the activity on Reddit following the bombings was polarizing.

Some Reddit users offered help after the bombings, providing information, donating relief funds and arranging housing and transportation for those affected by the bombings.

However, "though started with noble intentions, some of the activity on Reddit fueled online witch hunts and dangerous speculation which spiraled into very negative consequences for innocent parties," Martin wrote.

The incident "showed the best and worst of Reddit's potential," said Martin.

Johnson said it showed us that it's a mistake to focus on particular platforms when discussing online vigilantism – "what's important is the online community that forms," he said.

"There was a community that led to these strengths and weaknesses [on Reddit]. When we had people offering to help in productive ways, that did go viral and it really did inspire other people," said Johnson.

But, he added, because it was a decentralized community, there was no way to reign it in when things got out of control.

## **Anonymous and justice for Rehtaeh**

Around the same time as the Boston Marathon bombings, a similar hunt for guilty parties was taking place north of the border.

Seventeen-year-old Rehtaeh Parsons was taken off life support on April 7, 2013, three days after she tried to commit suicide.

Parsons' family said that in November 2011, the teen was raped at a party by four boys. They said she was then bullied for months after a digital photo of the alleged assault was passed around her school in Halifax.

On April 9, just days after Rehtaeh's death, her mother Leah said she was dissatisfied with how the RCMP handled the case. The police had said there were no grounds to charge the boys.

Later that night, Justice Minister Ross Landry said his department would review the case - reversing his initial statement that there would not be a review.

Landry originally backed up the RCMP's handling of the case, saying: "In regards to the issue of second-guessing the police at every case, no, I'm not going to do that."

As public outrage grew in the days following Rehtaeh's death, the hashtag *#opjustice4rehtaeh* gained traction. Many appealed to Internet hacktivist group Anonymous to go after the teens.

On April 10, Anonymous issued a letter demanding the provincial government take immediate legal action against the boys. They said that within mere hours, they had identified two of the four the boys – adding it would only be a matter of time before they had identified all of them.

"We encourage you to act fast. If we were able to locate these boys within 2 hours, it will not be long before someone else finds them.

We do not approve of vigilante justice as the media claims. That would mean we approve of violent actions against these rapists at the hands of an unruly mob. What we want is justice. And that's your job. So do it."

The next day, Anonymous issued an update, saying that all four boys had been identified and that several teams of investigators had begun looking into Rehtaeh's case since the previous morning. The group continued to express shock at how the adults in this case handled the investigation, calling Landry's investigation reversal purely an "act of public relations damage-control."

The group stressed that what they were able to accomplish in just a few hours was not due to a complex and technical investigation.

"This wasn't some high-tech operation that involved extracting private messages from someone's Facebook account. Dozens of e-mails were sent to us by kids and adults alike, most of whom had personal relationships with the rapists. Many recalled confessions made by these boys blatantly in public where they detailed the rape of an inebriated 15-year-old girl. Recent statements by police and prosecutors that there simply wasn't enough evidence to make a single arrest should be viewed solely as an admission of incompetence on their part."

Currently, two teenage boys are facing child pornography charges, but the case has been adjourned until the new year.

A review of how police and Nova Scotia's Public Prosecution Service initially handled the Rehtaeh Parsons case has been delayed until the court cases against two teens charged in the matter are settled.

Johnson said it's significant that what we saw in this case was not actual vigilante justice, but people calling for it.

"One of the reasons why online vigilantism is so appealing is because people feel powerless online, they feel like a spectator," said Johnson.

"The fact is that, what does make a difference is people acting like a community."

## **Roast Busters teen sex ring**

In November, police in New Zealand issued a warning against anyone seeking vigilante justice against a group of teenagers who lured young girls into having sex, then bragged about it online.

The so-called “Roast Busters” – who were publicly identified last month – were reportedly on the police’s radar since 2011. Police said initially that no action was taken against the Roast Busters because their victims were reluctant to make a formal complaint.

Local media outlet 3 News reported that several vigilante groups popped up online, threatening to take action. *The New Zealand Herald* reported that an online vigilante group offered a \$4,000 reward for video footage of the teenage boys involved in the alleged sex ring.

While police said that the public outrage was understandable, violence against the Roast Busters would not be tolerated.

## **Where do we go from here?**

Johnson said one thing that we need to do is build a sense of efficacy online – teach people that they can make a positive difference in their online communities.

Johnson said he hopes we will see an increase in discussion of these topics in schools and institutions. MediaSmarts has been working to teach students, educators and parents how to view the online world through an ethical lens.

With things like “cyberbullying and sexting – we’re paying a lot more attention to the reasons why people are able to justify these actions to themselves, why these actions are normalized,” said Johnson.

And when people online do feel powerless, they can work to build positive community norms by reaching out to each other – “take positive steps that will prove to be more successful than vigilante actions,” said Johnson.

*With files from the Canadian Press and Global News’ Nick Logan.*

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## **Heather Loney**

### **Coordinating Producer**

Heather is a digital journalist with an eye for content strategy and new media and an affinity for environmental, civic and urban issues.