

Canucks Riots: Turn your neighbours in?

by kevin harding - Friday, June 17, 2011

<http://politicsrespun.org/2011/06/canucks-riots-turn-your-neighbours-in/>

Yesterday, [I wrote about the narrative of division that's going around in the traditional media and social media following the Vancouver Riots](#). Jasmin [wrote about the standard leap-to-blame-the-anarchists reaction that also came up](#).

But now I'm getting kind of creeped out by the digital witch hunt that's taking place, with a huge amount of websites and facebook groups that were created overnight, dedicated to taking pictures of the stupidity that happened in downtown Vancouver and effectively crowdsourcing the identification. In the end, it kind of feels like a call towards digital naming and shaming, or an online rush to name names and turn your neighbours in.

Never mind the fact that these websites are replete with horribly racist, sexist, ableist, and other kinds of disgusting comments about the people pictured in them - many of them, of course, pictured doing rather illegal things - but the very nature of an open website where anyone can post an image -- with no restrictions *that it actually be of the Vancouver riots* -- and people will clamor trying to scour Facebook and Tumblr and so on, trying to 'identify' people that they think they can see. There are a number of images posted that have absolutely nothing to do with the Vancouver riots: I saw, on one Facebook group, a set of photos from the Chinese repression of the Uyghur riots in recent memory and the Jasmine uprisings in Beijing.

Potentially worse is that people named in stories or on the internet may not have been the people in the photos; it may not even be the case that they were there.

This kind of online witch hunt is dangerous. Yes, there should probably be justice done - but let's leave it to the police to do that. Even then, there's problems - Jasmin rightly noted that the police tend to leap towards blaming "anarchists," maybe without sometimes checking who it is that they've actually arrested. I'd wager that this attempt towards naming your neighbour (to be a Justice Hero Superstar!) doesn't exactly do any good towards taking apart the destructive and divisive narratives of racism and sexism and so on.

It gets even more troubling when you consider that there are a host of laws that are aimed at ensuring that there's actually something considered *justice* to be *administered*. In particular, there's the idea that people are technically innocent until proven guilty - and I'll strongly say that an HD photo of you lighting a car on fire is strong evidence of such - but you still deserve to get the chance towards a fair trial.

In particular, there's a little something called the Youth Criminal Justice Act that prohibits **anyone** from naming someone underage who is charged with a crime. It's an attempt to allow people, who, in the innocence of age, do really stupid things, to have a life after they make amends. It doesn't apply if you're charged with adult crimes that would result in an adult sentence, and so on. It's also why you hear all

these media reports that "the suspect could not be named because he is underage."

Well, when you have a digital witch hunt or an online naming spree, these protections of justice don't seem to apply. I was really troubled today to see James Moore, the Minister of Canadian Heritage, post a story that named a 17-year old suspect. The story explicitly says that the accused is a member of an **under-18** water polo team. But at the same time, there's no real evidence presented that the person named is the person in the photo. Here's a screen grab of the Minister's facebook page. *I've blurred the kid's name because it could be against the law to publish it:*



Here's the relevant portion of the Youth Criminal Justice Act:

PART 6
PUBLICATION, RECORDS AND INFORMATION

Protection of Privacy of Young Persons
Identity of offender not to be published

110.(1) Subject to this section, no person shall publish the name of a young person, or any other information related to a young person, if it would identify the young person as a young person dealt with under this Act.

And here's a [few links](#) to news media that are refusing to publish the kid's name, *provided that the two stories are the same*. Note that the VPD is claiming that they don't think that there will be any 'vigilante justice,' though the commenters on Moore's facebook page seem to be cheering for exactly that.

Imagine if the young person Moore named turned out to be not the person in the photo? The site that Moore links to doesn't appear to be a traditional news organization, with requirements and ethical obligations for verifying sources and names and allegations.

Online witch hunting is effectively using social media for state surveillance. You are being asked to turn in your neighbours if you think you see them. It's ridiculous. And it throws the whole justice system into disrepute.

Moore says:

"All I did was say "Meet [redacted]. Not against any act."

And:

"Social media has its evils, this is among its good"

I don't know if I agree with him. We're surveilled by the state a lot already; with CCTV everywhere and the VPD and Toronto Police Service videotaping anyone who dares attend a protest. This riot wasn't a protest, no, but to ask you to name names and allow the creation of a system of vigilante crowdsourced identification? And for a Minister of the Crown to name names, in contravention of the law?

I'm not too sure if that's the best idea. Especially from a political party that wants to be the party of justice.