Justice Online: TikTok, Platform Properties and the Fight for Familial Conviction

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Introduction

This article explores video sharing application TikTok and its use in the quest for judicature concerning missing person Alissa Turney as conducted by sister Sarah Turney. Alissa disappeared from Phoenix, Arizona on 17 May 2001, her stepfather, Michael Turney, quickly becoming a prime suspect in the investigation. It aims to explore the platform's impact upon the structure, delivery, and content of non-fictional crime-centred social network media, as creators reframe appeals for action into short-form entertainment. It will be shown how Turney uses TikTok to regain control of the narrative surrounding her sister's disappearance, reclaiming power from traditional forms of media through independent content creation. Turney utilises an unconventional approach towards death and grieving to adapt justice efforts towards an individualised *and* communal endeavour, implementing online calls to action aimed at viewers, inviting and rewarding them for promoting and engaging with her content. While much of death studies focuses on the grieving process made possible through the affordances offered by social media, this article will instead focus on Turney's intersectional use of death, grief, entertainment, and justice. From the perspective of death as understood and represented from a true crime perspective, it will be shown how Turney uses new media to create videos and interact with viewers in order to bring attention to and affect real change for Alissa's case.

The Case of Alissa

Alissa disappeared from Phoenix, Arizona on 17 May 2001, initially classed as a missing persons case due to a note found in her room stating that she left for California. On that day, police records detail how Alissa informed her boyfriend that she would be leaving school early because her father, Michael Turney, was picking her up. Michael phoned the police later that afternoon to inform them that after having lunch together, the two argued before he dropped her off. He stated that Alissa had disappeared without taking her clothes, phone, or car, informing officers that she may have travelled to stay with her aunt in California. On May 24 2001, Michael then told police that Alissa had called from a payphone in California but immediately hung up. Alissa did not withdraw money from her bank account after her disappearance, and never appeared at her aunt's location.

In 2006, serial killer Thomas Hymer falsely confessed to the murder of Alissa, which led detectives to interview Alissa's friends and former boyfriend, who revealed that Michael was consistently verbally abusive and had allegedly been sexually abusive towards her. Police found that Michael would spy on Alissa during her time at work, and seized multiple contracts between the two, including one which had Alissa sign off that Michael did not molest her. In 2008, Michael refused to let police search Alissa's room, and would only allow access to a photocopy of the note left after her disappearance. According to police documents, Michael was consistently un-cooperative with the investigation, and has still never partaken in a formal police interview.

In 2010, Michael was imprisoned after a police search within his home uncovered pipe bombs and a manifesto detailing his plans to detonate them at his previous place of employment, showing his capability of enacting murder. Despite this conviction, he would not confess toward any wrongdoings in relation to his daughter. Cable news networks covered the case, interviewing the Turneys as they vouched for Michael's innocence. As Sarah found more information about Alissa's past and disappearance, such as the home video footage to be discussed, she shifted her perspective towards advocating for the imprisonment and conviction of her father, partaking in numerous true crime podcast appearances and articles to spread the story of her sister's case. Turney maintains her online presence across multiple platforms, working to explore the circumstances preceding and following Alissa's disappearance, providing exclusive coverage of home video footage and disseminating information detailing the mishandling of the case by authorities.

TikTok as a Site for Justice

TikTok is a video creation social media site and application which launched internationally in 2018 after merging with parallel social media site, Musical.ly. The Digital 2020 Global Overview Report found that the application boasts 800 million monthly active users (Kemp, 2020). Melanie Kennedy (2020, 1070) notes that the application is 'predominantly a site of youth culture', the biggest stars to emerge embodying youth, beauty, and energy, as seen in the various dance videos that reach virality. TikTok features the traditional platform properties made conventional through other social media sites: users are able to like, favourite, and share videos, as well as follow those users who catch their attention. Turney made her migration towards TikTok after being informed by police that they were at a loss for ways to move forward with the case, advising that her best chance at achieving justice would be to gain media exposure (*Hear the entire story,* 2020). As such, Turney began posting on TikTok in April 2020, with a video briefly surmising the backstory of her family (*True story,* 2020).

In an interview with The New York Times, Turney explained how she was drawn to TikTok as a potential platform for gaining justice due to much of the content's 'dark humour', noting that she '[felt] like there was not another platform where [she] could be as expressive'

(Fortin, 2020). Briefly comparing Turney's justice efforts between her YouTube and TikTok content, it is seen that she achieved greatest success through her efforts on the latter platform. Turney mostly used her YouTube channel for its streaming capabilities, creating long-form live content that could explore the case in depth. These videos received few views in comparison to the significant reach of her TikTok campaign, which can be attributed in part to the differing algorithms which govern the platforms. TikTok presents users with an endless queue of algorithmically recommended content, meaning that potential viewers are forced to watch and engage with new content through its spotlight on this 'For You' page. Compare this to YouTube, where users may not be presented with the video in their recommendations if they have not already searched for information on the case or true crime generally. Further, users are then required to actively engage with the content through clicking through to view the video, an additional factor which leaves greater choice for viewers in *not* viewing her content. Turney, through TikTok, is able to make her content favourable to the algorithm *and* potential viewership through implementing trending audios which are likely to show up on a significant number of users' For You pages due to having viewed other videos that have used the same audio. Turney's decision to use TikTok, acting as an independent creator, thereby played a significant part in the expansive reach of her justice campaign.

Death, Grief and Social Media

This article will be primarily focused on the use of new media in the creation of true crime judicial content. Nevertheless, what follows is a brief summary of scholarship related to death and grief online. If Turney's efforts are seen through the academic lens of death studies, it is shown how her relation to death and crime is not anomalous, with untraditional methods of grief and mourning holding great prevalence across the internet as a whole. Walter writes that bereavement occurs in 'a social context that promotes some ideas of grieving and pathologises others' (1999, xiv; see also Rossetto et al. 2015, 990; Gibbs et al. 2014, 263). Scholars have focused on the role of digital technologies in enacting a shift away from 'institutionally mandated and sometimes rigid protocols' surrounding processes of grief (Arnold et al. 2018, 5; also Acker and Brubaker 2014, 2, 9). One significant change which occurs through grieving on social media concerns how 'personal mourning processes' are witnessed as 'public grief expression', where the public and private increasingly intertwine (Rossetto et al. 2015, 991). While often people find the social media memorialisation process to be conducted in poor taste through the 'hyper-individualised responses' which are considered to 'trivialise the event' (Arnold et al., 2018, 5; also Rossetto et al. 2015, 981, 986), the extensive ways that social media allows people to express grief on their own terms is arguably nothing short of revolutionary.

The intersection of death and social media has been explored extensively. Gibson (2015, 10) notes that social media allows the re-enfranchisement of grief in a culture wherein mourners must accept the 'gradual silence around their bereavement descending upon offline relationships'. Other academics have taken notice of this 'sequestration' of death in modern society (Walter et al. 2011-2012, 3), in which, while death is more visible through media, the intimate witnessing of death and dying is no longer frequently experienced within the home and is 'often deferred until adulthood due to longer life expectancies' (Gibson 2011, 918). Scholars praise the intersection of grief and social media in its capability for 'deprivatising' and re-enfranchising grief through the creation of a mourning community (Gibson 2015, 10-13; Walter et al. 2011-2012, 3, 12-14; Rossetto et al. 2015, 984-985). Social media allows the creation of 'communities of mourning' where grief expression is accepted, supported, and reciprocated (Gibson 2015, 12; Gibson 2011, Rossetto et al., 2015, 984-985). Walter et al. (2011-2012, 12-14) describe how the process of grief has become 'more public…re-emerging as a *communal* activity' across social networks. Social media allows grievers and their audience to connect and offer and seek support and be 'witness to each other's grief, feelings, and experiences' (Rossetto et al. 2015, 984-985). Gibson highlights this as 'the rise and significance of intimate mourning between strangers' (2015, 13). The connected world of online media thereby lends itself to a rise in interactivity surrounding grief. Public expressions of grief allow and encourage interaction between viewer and 'performer', which Gibson describes as fostering 'a mutual process of catharsis' for the two in the expression and witnessing of grief (2015, 6, 9; also Rossetto et al. 2015, 991). This article explores how creation allows Turney to express her grief through the fight for Alissa's justice, shifting to the online world as the offline no longer provides the support needed due to the disenfranchisement of grief discussed. In a sense, creation allows Turney to reinvigorate Alissa's presence in the world with a new sense of life, as will be explored shortly.

Walter et al. (2011-2012, 17-18) describe how 'new communication technologies' often work to give the dead increased 'social presence…social interaction and identity'. They describe how social media allows mourners to commune with the dead through posts addressing their deceased actors directly, changing the realms of grieving to occupy a space which is both public and social yet private and intimate (Walter et al. 2011-2012, 18; Rossetto et al. 2015, 981-982). Online grieving situates bereavement as both a private and public experience, as death is brought beyond the immediate bereaved family towards a larger general audience in its placement within the 'everyday life of social networks' (Walter et al. 2011-2012, 2; Gibson 2011, 923; Arnold et al. 2018, 4). The dead are then able to retain their life through the surviving images of their lived existence, captured and disseminated across the internet, often able to 'supplant and overcome death as negative signifier' (Gibson 2011, 920). Moreover, such an image 'aligns and inscribes sameness' between the deceased and their audience (Gibson 2011, 920), working to establish a connection between the dead and the new public witnessing these displays of grief. Many scholars have similarly explored how the grieving process does not reach a finite point of closure (Gibson 2015, 13; Walter 1999, xiii; Arnold et al. 2018, 9), social media working to 'extend [the process of grief] in a publicly declared way' while also extending the limits of the 'posthumous biography' to allow its ongoing authoring from 'intimates, friends and strangers alike' (Arnold et al. 2018, 4, 9).

Gibson (2011, 921) examines how death exists largely in our society by its presentation, or representation, through media, standing in contrast to the real-life witnessing of death in past societies. Its representation through media often follows that it must be 'tamed or contained by genre', that its presentation must fit established models of how best to visualise and approach the process of dying (Gibson 2011, 919). However, she also notes that the rise in new media has led to such distinct genre boundaries becoming 'increasingly blur[red] or…hybridised' (919). Arnold et al. (2018, 8-13) note that affordances of social networks are both shaping and are shaped by the human experience of death as unfolded across platforms. Platforms influence how mourners are able to express their grief online but mourners in turn are able to establish how platforms are used for such 'potential commemorative act[s]' (Arnold et al., 2018, 13). It will thus be shown how Turney uses new media platform TikTok to approach and represent her sister's disappearance from ways dissimilar to that seen in traditional media or across other social networking platforms *and* in ways dissimilar to the traditions surrounding death itself.

Scholars agree that the changes brought to the rituals of death and grieving through its online manifestation lends itself to conflict (Walter et al. 2011-2012, 14-15; Rossetto et al. 2015; Gibbs et al. 2014, 263; Walter 1999, xiv; Arnold et al. 2018, 5). There can be a 'disturbance' felt as ‘death and everyday banality’ are mixed together, be that through televisual broadcasting schedules or through the variety of content posted on social media feeds (Walter et al. 2011-2012, 15; Gibbs et al. 2014, 263). Gibbs et al. (2014, 263) note that social media grieving creates tension through the typical ‘profane casualness’ associated with social media use, standing in opposition to the traditional ‘formality’ of the ritualised grief model. Rossetto et al. (2015, 986, 990) describe various grief-related situations that can cause conflict. They use the term ‘bandwagon mourners’ to describe those who make some feel as if their expressions of grief are ‘disingenuous’ due to their perceived disconnect or distance from the deceased. They additionally explore the concept of ‘depersonalisation’ which people may feel if they believe that posting on social media about a death diminishes ‘the personal and serious aspect’ of its occurrence (Rossetto 2015, 981). Aspects of conflict and discomfort surrounding ‘irregular’ forms of death and grief expression will be explored in Turney’s use of TikTok and its conventional memetic output. Turney uses an untraditional approach to this representation through the use of often comical trending audios on the platform, an act which situates her content as often jarring and tonally dissonant, in attempts at gaining maximum audience engagement.

Gibson (2011, 926) also examines how certain deaths can become a media event in their own right. Certain spectacular or highly publicised instances of death and dying place death ‘as an event within media and popular culture rather than something that has its proper place, first and foremost, outside or beyond it’. Such publicisation raises questions of moral integrity, especially when commerciality is concerned. Gibson (2011, 926) writes that controversy and morally questionable material often directly correlates with greater commercial success, and thus content surrounding death must interact with ‘the transgression of moral and representational boundaries without then normalising and undoing the boundary that is the basis of its potential commercial success'. Such an idea will be explored in Turney's innovative approach to death through the representation of her sister's disappearance on TikTok. Turney's memorial and judicial actions take an untraditional format in line with the untraditional mode of death endured by Alissa. Arnold et al. (2018, 10) define 'bad deaths' as those which are deemed to have occurred unnaturally, a person taken 'before their time', tragedies which are 'more inclined' to draw responses from the media, public, and politics. Alissa could not be conventionally grieved as her death was never concrete, instead remaining in continuous existence as a missing person. Arnold et al. (2019, 9) write that 'to the extent that digital media afford a constant present, the death and its memorialisation becomes something other than a pivotal point gesturing to a past and to a future'. The link between bad death and social media is once again present: there is no set 'death' for Alissa as there was no finality in her disappearance. Alissa's resurrection and 'life' on the internet by way of Turney's content defies the distinction between past and future that traditional death and the grieving process typically calls for. Desjarlais (2015, 656) writes that 'the tempo of a good death is obstructed' through bad deaths as 'unable to die, a person is stuck between lives'. Turney's documentation of Alissa mirrors such notions – unable to traditionally grieve, Alissa lives on in Turney's TikTok content, where Turney seeks closure by calling for the indictment of her father in Alissa's disappearance.

Turney's 'hyper-individualised response' is indicative of the independent content which she creates, as she is able to provide details on Alissa's character which only one with a deeply held connection to the victim could conjure. Turney's memorialisation of Alissa mirrors a sentiment from Arnold et al. (2018, 5): 'a response to death that purports to recognise the individuality of the deceased rather than the requirements of tradition or institutions'. This shows that Turney's pursuit of justice independently has advantages in allowing a representation of Alissa's life to be constructed and contextualised by a loved one who can bring Alissa's representation fully into being through the routes of personal memory and expression, a memorialisation process not possible to this extent through the traditional routes of televisual true crime, a comparison to be demonstrated in the next section.

Independent Creation and Memory

Scholars have noted the benefits of the shift from legacy media towards self-branding and individualised creation witnessed online. Creators are freed from the 'top-down dynamic' of legacy media (Khamis et al. 2017, 198-200), affording them autonomy and circumventing the traditional venues of institutional gatekeeping apparent within traditional media and its 'production methodologies and economics' (Strangelove 2010, 29). Khamis et al. (2017, 199-200) highlight how platforms have served a particularly vital role in providing tools and viewership to aid in the transition of power between traditional and independent media, with youth in particular favouring online media over its legacy counterpart. Turney, by taking a non-traditional route, is able to construct judicial content that is unlike that seen in legacy media.

Briefly comparing Turney's content to television coverage of Alissa's case using news programme *20/20 on ID,* it is shown the stark contrasts between the two true crime formats. The television report uses hyper-stylised editing in the deployment of fast cutting, zooms, pans, and animated transitions, setting up the dissemination of case information as concerned with being both informative and entertaining. The television report provides details on Alissa's case in a long-form single-episode format, standing in contrast to Turney's content which provides information on Alissa and the case through short-form videos, encouraging viewers to seek out additional information by actively engaging with Turney's TikTok page of content. Comparing Turney's involvement in the two, she acts as only a talking head within the television report, utilised in order to provide details of the day Alissa went missing and, surprisingly, featured defending Michael against allegations rallied against him in the disappearance of Alissa. This offers a significant difference compared to Turney's independent content as here she is reduced to talking head snippets where the information she provided to the interviewer is cut to include only that which is most relevant to the building of the case narrative. Turney enacts greater autonomy in the construction of her TikTok videos as she can control what information is included in the finalised version of the content. Turney achieves greater individuality through the independent routes of justice taken on TikTok, acting as a main draw to the content rather than a side character. This works to get audiences more invested in her as a creator and viewers therefore may be more likely to care about Alissa's case actively and intimately, a process of self-branding that will be explored in depth within the final sections of this article.

Despite Turney's defence of Michael within the television report, it remains similar to her current content as it largely frames Michael as the suspect through delivering the audience with reports of his suspicious behaviour throughout his time as Alissa's stepfather. They both use home video footage and family pictures to build a background of Alissa's lived experiences, especially similar in that they are both utilised to give seemingly benign dialogue and actions from Michael sinister framing, such as a video clip of Michael pestering Alissa to wake up while she pleads for him to leave her alone. Where the television report expands on its informative angle in a way which Turney does not is in its utilisation of other perspectives on the case from those close to Alissa, such as friends of hers, family members, and even Michael himself, interviewed in his own defence.

The television report acts to provide more focus on the details of the case rather than on Alissa as a person with a lived history. Background information is provided on Alissa but only to give context to the details of the case, the focus most prominently on the unusual circumstances surrounding her disappearance. Turney's content stands in contrast to the representations of Alissa constructed through the televisual example as it at once acts to memorialise and celebrate the life of Alissa *and* call for her justice through the dissemination of case information. This can be seen most prominently in Turney's use of memory within the construction of her videos. Walter et al. (2011-2012, 18) foreground the internet's ability to "democratise memory", harkening back to "pre-modern memory" when archives and histories were constructed by the public rather than official authorities. Turney is seen throughout her content repurposing the past in three senses: the digital, the contextual and the emotional.

Turney's digital and contextual repurposing often presents simultaneously. Home video footage is featured in order to prove her father's guilt, VHS footage morphed into the vertical shorthand form of the TikTok video, captions appearing to aid in dialogic and contextual understanding. Pini (2009, 71,88-89; also Austin 2013, 4) writes that the 'home mode', content made within or surrounding the familial, holds within itself an aura of 'evidentiality'. While typically, home videos are considered insignificant cultural forms of creation beyond those who they involve (Pini 2009, 72, 91), within the realms of true crime the evidential nature of its existence shines through: viewers are encouraged to delve deeper, searching for and constructing interpretations and meanings within the presentation of the past. Such constructions can then become fraught with certainty through the home mode's 'connotations of authenticity' brought in both its form and content (Austin 2013, 8). Such creations are used to vilify Michael, seemingly benign moments from their past garnering new meaning due to the awareness of proceeding events.

One video shows Turney filming her father and sister, a caption appearing to inform the viewer that ‘there was obviously a lot of tension between them’ (*1997 Home Video Footage PT. 1*). In another, Alissa, as a child, is shown telling Turney that their father is a ‘pervert’ (*Please don’t forget*). Buckingham et al. (2011, 153) write that home videos are situated within a continually adapting process ‘whereby the present speaks to the future, to a point in time when we know that the meanings of what we watch will have completely changed’. Pini (2009, 91) agrees with these assertions, stating that such video production acts as an ‘always-in-process bringing into being of a particular ‘story’’. Actions within Turney home video TikToks are repurposed through both the digital and contextual, the future of the Turney’s informing and shaping how past actions are interpreted. As Turney reaches into her familial past to provide context to Alissa and Michael’s fraught relationship, she invites viewers along, granting them access to her lived existence through its digital capturing and re-presentation.

Turney also enacts systems of memory in utilising properties exclusive to the platform itself. The duet function exists on TikTok to enable users to incorporate other creators’ videos within their own, most traditionally represented in a side-by-side format. One such of Turney’s involves her duetting another creator’s skit concerning siblings. Turney silently sits to the side of the original video, mouthing and gesturing towards moments which remind her of Alissa (*#duet with kallmekris*). Such creation on Turney’s part allows her to gain traction on the platform both in terms of the exposure gained through form, here as a duet, *and* through the route of memory-as-content, as utilised previously. Jenkins et al. (2013, 27) write that the memetic format of viral videos engaged in ‘repurposing and recirculating is eroding the perceived divides between production and consumption’. Turney, through her independent route of content creation, is instead able to occupy the role of *user*, which in itself can enact the dual roles of creator and viewer, producer and consumer, allowing Turney to greater ingratiate herself by using the platform in ways relational to her audience.

The past is also repurposed emotionally through memory, with Turney able to take advantage of the unlimited access granted to her through the extremely personal connection she holds towards Alissa and her case. Turney uses such emotional ties to access information that would not be possible through traditional media’s at-a-remove investigative approach, using this to create content which centres Turney herself as a main draw in the content. One such video involves Turney in vlog format, visiting a fast-food chain to try a readded menu item which, as Turney explains to the camera, Alissa loved during her time working at the restaurant *(Thank you @jackinthebox*). Turney uses the memory of her sister to bring her existence into immediate being by way of the emotional impact sharing in something her sister loved creates within Turney herself. The utilisation of memorial content also works in the interests of self-branding, Turney’s central draw stemming from her own personality and experiences, a theme which will be expanded upon in a later section. What is important here is that such banal information would likely not be covered within an investigation conducted by legacy media true crime, omitted due to the lack of relevance towards the case. Turney, however, is able to use such mundane memory to build a representation of Alissa as a lived person, strengthening intimacy ties between Alissa, the audience *and* herself. Robards et al. (2018, 88) write on social media’s archival capabilities, in particular its ability to host “intimate and significant” records of the banal. Intimacy proves vital in ensuring sustained interest in a case, and Turney frequently uploads content which follows this construction, using her increased independent access in order to represent and share the minute details of her and Alissa’s lives. Through the routes of independent media creation, Turney is able to reappropriate memory to create content which provides intimate access towards Alissa’s case and Turney’s own processes of grief.

Turney’s content occupies a space wherein it can fluctuate between memorial and judicial intention. While its primary aim as content published on social media serves to reach a public with the intention of raising awareness, it must too provide catharsis for Turney in the expression and remembrance of both the monumental and mundane moments of Alissa’s life. Turney is able to document her sister’s life and death in a format where she is not forced to reduce Alissa to her tragic disappearance, instead able to (re)create an enriched concept of her sister as a lived human being. The acts of memorialising and seeking justice mutually reinforce one another in this instance, wherein the bringing into being of Alissa as a lived individual acts to enhance intimacy ties between Alissa, her case and the audience, all in the hopes of virality and the raising of awareness.

Trending Content and Algorithmic Obligation

While it has been shown how Turney’s independent creation offers greater freedom in the construction and dissemination of Alissa’s narrative compared to the institutional routes of legacy media, it must be noted that platforms are not without their own restrictions. Jiang Xiao Yu (2019, 34) found that TikTok analyses multiple user criteria in order to provide ‘highly personalised [content] recommendations’ on the application’s ‘For You’ page. Acker and Brubaker (2014, 4) found that a platform’s content is thereby determined by the ‘co-constitutive role of a system’s affordances and its underlying infrastructure in the creation, maintenance, and structure of an individual’s social media data’. The concept of affordances must be explicated, defined by Hutchby (2001, 5) in relation to technology as ‘functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object’. Affordances of platforms act to both shape and be shaped by human interaction – they work to ‘set limits’ on what actions are possible involving the given artefact (Hutchby 2001, 5, 17). TikTok users are therefore not *required* to structure their content along restrictive lines emblematic of the strict control within traditional media but are nevertheless *encouraged* to conform to typical platform practices in order for their content to be recognised and disseminated by the recommendation algorithms which dictate the flow of content on the application.

Research has focused on how TikTok’s algorithmic recommendation system holds disadvantages in its assessment and filtering of content. Acker and Brubaker (2014, 7) note that platforms are always biased towards ‘privileg[ing] certain types of use with particular ends’, often towards commercial or expansive goals. Yu (2019, 29) has expressed how it may often lead to ‘vulgarisation and homogenisation’, while Kennedy (2020, 1073) warns of ‘algorithmic suppression and spectacularisation’, where only particular content is heavily pushed. In March 2020, the platform itself came under fire from news outlets and the general public when it was found that the creators of TikTok instructed the algorithm to suppress posts from users who did not meet conventional standards of beauty, accounting for factors such as weight, youth and disability (Biddle et al. 2020). This proves that independent content created on platforms is not wholly restriction-free, as content must still pass through the deterministic gaze of a higher authority, albeit this time through the automatic, inhumane, and unemotional parameters of an algorithmic recommendation system.

Much of Turney’s TikTok content is structured in the conventional format most users follow. Turney will address the camera in a well-lit midshot, lipsyncing to an audio already established as popular on the platform. The filming of these videos seems to take place within the confines of her home, with Turney wearing casual clothing and make-up. Turney situating her content within the home, alongside representing herself as a ‘regular’ person through her costuming and makeup, works to make her relatable to her audience in order to enact ingratiation and enhance engagement. What is important here is that specific decisions made in the production process help appeal to the algorithm as users’ have established certain features as qualifying as conventional of the TikTok audiovisual format, and thus the algorithm will favour future videos which follow these conventions due to their proven success in the past.

In one video, Turney is seen complaining that TikTok has ‘shadowbanned’ her content, a colloquial internet term used when one believes that a platform is deliberately suppressing their reach (*If I could*). Such claims cannot be proven or disproven, as the nature of shadowbanning follows that a platform implicitly suppresses certain users without offering explanation. However, the fact that Turney addresses her concerns around suppression shows that she continually monitors the engagement and reach of her content through the metric systems supplied by the platform. This lends weight to the following argument concerning Turney’s deliberate engagement in and close following of platform trends and conventions to appeal to the algorithmic determination of the application. The For You Page’s curation based on the data-mining technology of the recommendation system can easily lead to ‘information cocoons’, where users are ‘only immersed in their existing knowledge structure and interests’ (Yu 2019, 35). As such, Turney is required to structure her content alongside the pre-existing trends of the platform, adopting its forms and conventions in order to successfully increase viewership.

The conventional method of TikTok video creation involves users structuring a video around a popular audio, enacting, or subverting the trend with which it is attached. This showcases platform vernacular in action, defined by Gibbs et al. (2014, 257) as ‘shared…conventions and grammars of communication, which emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users’, as the ‘allowances and limitations’ of the platform inspire creative forms of expression. This falls in line with typical memetic enactment on the internet. Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017, 483) define an internet meme as ‘digital items with common characteristics that are imitated and reiterated around the web’. Burgess (2008, 6) similarly states that memes are ‘recognisable via this process of repetition, these key signifiers…part of the available cultural repertoire’. Milner (2017, 2) writes that meme construction and dissemination is ‘premised on participation by reappropriation’, a form which has flourished through the heightened participatory nature of media on the internet.

Turney’s introduction to the platform uses popular audio of a girl saying, ‘It’s not easy being the disappointment of the family but someone had to do it so here the fuck I am’ (*True story),* the trend attached incentivising users to share their embarrassing, shameful or unconventional traits in a self-effacing humorous fashion popular within online youth culture. Turney lip-syncs along to the audio while a caption reveals her own personal ‘shame’ – ‘When your dad killed your sister and your family hates you for fighting for his prosecution’. The video lasts only the length of the audio, short even for the platform’s standards, acting to grab interest from users scrolling through the endless feed of content comprising their ‘For You’ page. The lack of detail into the case or who Turney is referring to is intended to inspire users to navigate towards her profile and view additional content in order to gain greater context surrounding the information revealed. This thereby works to boost Turney's overall viewership, which will in turn raise the likelihood of her content being promoted to further potential viewers.

Turney's trend use is important not only in appealing to the algorithmic determination of the platform, but in its ability to enact ingratiation. Memes can often function as 'cues of membership', where 'meme literacy', a great understanding of their creation and application, 'influences users' status in online communities' (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017, 485-486). Jenkins (2013, 227) notes that people are encouraged to share content when it contains 'cultural activators'. Turney is incentivised to include such culturally known elements as she engages in affiliation with the platform's demographic. Marwick and boyd (2011, 147; also Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) define affiliation as 'the process of publicly performing a connection between practitioners and fans using language, words, cultural symbols, and conventions'. Turney must enact meme construction in order to place herself as 'belonging' within the TikTok community, ingratiating herself with an audience already well-versed in communicating through the creation and dissemination of application-specific memetics.

Turney uses much of her TikTok content to provide an in-depth exploration into Alissa's case within the allocated short-form structure that the platform allows. One such video is set to the trend audio which plays: 'got my heart broken and had a whole personality change check', users prompted to show footage of themselves before and after a significant event in their lives in order to document a change in their personality (*Did you know*). Turney, however, uses the trend to document the progression of Alissa's case. The video proceeds chronologically, showing Alissa's childhood spent alongside her father, screenshots showing articles covering Michael's other charges, true crime podcasts covering Alissa's disappearance and an article Turney wrote condemning her father, before ending on an article exploring Turney's use of TikTok. Turney thereby forces her narrative to fit the trend, not following its use wholly conventionally – the focus is not a personal one but instead on the specifics of the case - but incorporating the audio regardless of its slight irrelevance to capitalise on its current trending status.

Alongside case-centred videos, Turney frequently uses humour to grab the attention of those flocking to the application for entertainment. Jenkins et al. (2013, 204; also Knobel and Lankshear 2005, 7). write that humour is 'a vehicle by which people articulate and validate their relationships with those with whom they share the joke'. Turney regularly brings out humour in her content through the use of anomalous juxtaposition. Knobel and Lankshear define such structuring as the 'incongruous coupling of images' which are 'deliberately provocative' (2005, 11; also Shifman 2014, 90). Turney placing the serious reality of her sister's case alongside light-hearted trends works to shock viewers, capture attention, and inspire pursuit into her greater backlog of more serious case-driven content. One video sees Turney following a trend where the audio is used to enact the process of moving on after an awkward scenario (*Definitely not)*. Turney's caption provides context for the video: 'POV: You're on a 1st date & make the mistake of answering the 'what's your family like?' question…'. Again, Turney is vague in the details she gives about why such a scenario is awkward, implicitly inviting uninformed viewers to seek out further content in order to discover the details for themselves.

Turney's use of humour in the pursuit of justice may be judged by some to be in poor taste, as the light-hearted tone of such videos may be seen as trivialising, which could result in lessening the judicial impact. Seltzer (2007, 39) writes that ‘modern violence makes visible the strange and unprecedented *intimacy* of modern technologies of representation and reproduction’. This helps to understand why Turney’s TikTok use may be unsettling, as she is forced to balance personal performance, light-heartedness, and humour with the serious gravity of her sister’s case. Turney is forced into such a position not just through the platform vernacular and its recommendation system, but also through the expectations of an online audience. Viewers primarily flock to applications such as TikTok for quick-form entertainment, resulting in a need for Turney to balance revelations into the details of her sister’s disappearance alongside humour and personality engineered to appeal to the application’s core demographic and its recommendation system.

Memetic usage has frequently extended towards the pursuit of civic action. Jenkins et al. (2013, 220-221) explore how such methods can involve utilising controversy in order to garner attention, deliberately shifting from the ‘sobriety’ of traditional media conventions through a ‘defamiliarizing’ process which is undertaken to ‘inspire the further spread and discussion of their media’. In fact, Berger and Milkman (2012, 197) have found that ‘content that evokes high-arousal emotions’ is more likely to reach virality, be those emotions positive or negative. These concepts ring true in the case of Turney’s content, as she at once makes both the trend and her sister’s case unfamiliar through the incongruity conjured in the juxtaposition between the two. Those only familiar with the trends will be jarred at their use in relation to a serious matter, whereas those familiar with Alissa’s case will be jarred at its placement within a humorous context. This evocation of heightened emotion in both senses acts to make Turney’s content stand out from the excess of content provided in the never-ending scrolling system of the ‘For You’ page, towards the ultimate aim of maximising viewership.

Turney thereby must balance the implementation of site-specific trends with the continuation of her own self-branding, brought through in the focus on herself seeking justice for Alissa. While Turney's explicit self-branding as a creator on 'advocacy TikTok' will be explored soon, what is shown here is how it is necessary for creators to engage with the algorithmic and audience-determined topics which dominate the platform on a fleeting yet powerful basis. Turney uses her and her family's extra-ordinary personal history to stand out from the plethora of other users engaging in such trends, at once conforming to and deviating from the expected use of certain audio affordances.

Audience and Action

Turney's strategies for increasing viewership act as part of a judicial process deliberately situated on the participatory platform of TikTok, focused on enlisting help from users in making progress towards her father's indictment. Arnold et al. (2018, 4) write that grieving on social media 'implies the interpolation of witnessing and the construction of a public'. Marshall (2010, 39) has found that social media content enacts a dual function as 'a form of cultural production and a form of public engagement…simultaneously a media and communication form'. The online space has increasingly invited viewers to interact with produced content, creating the 'collaborative, dialogic space' of social media (Khamis et al., 2017, 196). This increased interaction on, across and between platforms has fuelled what Jenkins et al. (2013, 12) call a 'networked culture', as people interact through and across the internet at an increasing rate. Turney thereby rallies viewer to both witness her grief *and* become part of a collective directly involved in bringing Alissa's case to justice.

Turney frequently uses calls to action within her content, asking users to share videos and engage with her presence across the internet. Shifman (2014, 72) notes participation as a core aspect of memetics, emphasising its particular importance in civic action cases wherein ‘sharing…content is often a means to a different end’. In particular he discusses participation beyond engaging with platform metrics, when users are encouraged to answer calls to action which work to ‘deepen their sense of agency and involvement’ (Shifman 2014, 72, 96). Here Turney is engaging in calls to action both in the sense of social media engagement *and* in reigniting social difference in relation to the case through the routes of exposure. Such appeals enhance Turney’s reach on the platform as the algorithms which govern the application take note of the traffic and engagement which her content acquires, thus increasing the likelihood that her output will be shared with further users on their recommended page.

Turney incentivises her viewers to actively engage with her content, frequently rewarding consistent commitment through the routes of acknowledgement. Shifman (2014, 71) notes that the ‘positioning’ of memetic content - where that content is created and who in particular it is targeting - is important in encouraging its virality. In a video where Turney shows her amazement at her current view count and followers, she directly addresses her audience as ‘Gen Z’, Generation Z, the current youth group and primary user base of the application (*When Gen Z rallies*). Turney states that she joined TikTok specifically to ask for their help in sharing her story, exclaiming how ‘powerful’ her audience are in pushing her figures to such heights. Turney states that she chose TikTok as her platform to partake in judicial efforts in an explicit attempt to reach ‘Gen Z’, deliberately using the colloquial term for this generation when addressing her viewers in order to position them as a collective, emphasising their power *as* a group and encouraging subsequent viewers to join the movement.

The need for Turney to perform intimacy towards her audience prevails across her content. Marshall (2010, 43) identifies how public figures are expected to engage in an audience relationship at a more intimate level than was previously expected. Marwick and boyd (2011, 147-148, 156) also speak of this ‘performative’ intimacy, in which performers must ‘maintain ongoing affiliations and connections’ in order to satiate audiences’ need for increased intimacy. Hjorth and Lim (2012, 478) write of ‘intimate publics’ within ‘an age of mobile intimacy’. They write that the mobility afforded by online technologies works to blur distinctions between the public and private through the increased ‘personalisation’ encouraged on such platforms (Hjorth and Lim 2012, 478). Users are able to feel an ‘intimate co-presence’ through the shared use of applications and platforms despite their geographic, temporal, emotional or physical distance from other active members (Hjorth and Lim 2012, 478). Online media has thus worked to shift intimacy towards ‘a pivotal component of public sphere performativity’ (Hjorth and Lim 2012, 478). This also points to Turney’s turn towards independent creation on social media – it is easier to build a loyal following through the performatively enhanced intimacy offered online than it would be through television appearances, as audiences are offered the opportunity to actively engage with Turney and her case.

The current state of the internet allows fans the chance to directly interact with their chosen public figure, enacting a breakdown of barriers which traditionally separate the two. Marwick and boyd (2011, 148) have found that this thereby ‘de-pathologises the parasocial’ as fans are able to engage in real interaction with their celebrated figure, differing from the one-sided nature of relationships between fans and figures from legacy media. Accompanying this is the increase in collaborative creation enacted between producers, marketers, and the audience online (Jenkins et al. 2013, 7). This is seen in Turney through the direct routes of collaboration she enacts throughout her content. Turney creates response videos frequently, the platform allowing users to select a viewer's comment and create a direct video response, the preceding comment overlaying the reply video to retain context. Turney directly engages with the participatory nature of the internet, performing her active presence towards her engaged audience by making it clear that she reads her comments, enacting interactivity and partially breaking down the parasocial aspect of the viewer-performer dynamic.

However, there is a negative side to this increasingly intimate audience-performer connection. Turney's active engagement within the comments section allows her to encounter negative responses from those unsupportive of her. In one response video, Turney answers a user who claims: 'I think we have the 'right' for an update considering our role in this achievement, just saying….' (*Reply to @lillyhernandez141)*. Turney responds in a stripped-down manner, no audio accompanying her dialogue. She firmly states to her audience that they do not hold claim to unlimited access towards information as it may risk jeopardising the case. Turney ends this video with the statement: 'We aren't here for entertainment, we're here to advocate', directly showing the consequences of taking such judicial efforts to a platform primarily used for entertainment purposes.

Such audience entitlement can be bred through intense intimacy due to the dissolved barrier between viewer and creator, entertainment and reality, as some may feel frequent case updates owed to them with no regard given to the real-life consequences such sharing can bring. As audiences feel increasingly entitled to the intimate and all accessible, the lines between entertainment and reality begin to blur in detriment to the 'performer', as real-life events become a steady stream of content which viewers demand to consume at a consistent and timely rate.

The 'CEO of Justice TikTok'

Turney must thereby work to satiate viewers' intimacy interests through both case-driven and personality-based content. Seltzer (2007, 35) writes that 'crime, mass-mediated interiority, and publicness have been drawn into an absolute proximity', such structuring largely evident in the self-branded nature through which Turney explores her sister's case. Viewers are brought into close proximity with Alissa through Turney as narrator and producer, reaching an understanding of the case by way of close personal anecdotal information. Biressi (2004, 401, 405) has written on how trauma has increasingly become a 'mode of experience' thanks to its hyper focus in the media, in which the true crime genre in particular 'renders private trauma knowable via public narratives'. Desjarlais' (2015, 655) work helps to explain why such morbid content is so enticing, writing on the 'singularity' surrounding some deaths, in which the details of anomalous cases (such as the bad deaths explored previously) grant them a mythic quality which stands in contrast to 'the typicality of cultural discourses and representations' which dictate appropriate and preferred methods of death. Turney conjures value in her content due to the unique story surrounding Alissa's disappearance, information following the twists and turns of the case released across multiple videos to maintain and maximise interest.

However, as Turney has gained influential status on the platform, it has become increasingly necessary to expand her content scope in order to retain public interest. Khamis et al. (2017, 191) define self-branding as the act of 'developing a distinctive public image for…cultural capital'. They note that in this process it is important for individuals to hold a 'unique selling point' in order to draw in audiences (Khamis et al. 2017, 191). Turney has branded herself, in both video content and within her profile biography, the 'CEO of Justice TikTok' *(#stitch with chrisfahmy*; 'saraheturney'), playing into a trend on the platform wherein certain subcultures are given their own 'side' of the platform. What she previously titled 'Advocacy TikTok' (*#duet with kararobinsonchamberlain*), Turney has branded the style of content she creates, branching out from Alissa's case to advocate for a multitude of missing persons and murder cases through exploring their stories in original videos and duets. Simultaneous to this contextual branching out, Turney also branches out digitally, partaking in cross-platform work. Turney runs both a YouTube channel and podcast, Voices for Justice, where she advocates for Alissa and other cases like hers, plugging her ventures frequently throughout her TikTok content (*Hear the entire story*). She then uses the hashtag '#justiceforalissa' to link her content across these spaces, ensuring that her branding maintains its integrity as it travels far from where it began.

Turney may not have enacted such intense work of self-branding if she were to have gone the traditional route of legacy media. As Khamis et al. (2017, 205) explore, 'while all these processes predate and are not exclusive to social media, cumulatively social media intensifies and spotlights their salience'. It is through the work of independent creation that Turney must construct a brand around herself in order to be sought out by those interested in her chosen topics, exposure dictated by recommendation algorithms and users' active pursuit of information. Self-branding 'does not require initial affiliation with the 'already powerful'' (Khamis et al. 2017, 198), aiding Turney's continued goal of enacting an independent route towards justice. Moreover, the 'premium on distinctiveness and visibility grows' in the age of 'media surplus' (Khamis et al. 2017, 194-195), therefore it is beneficial for Turney to transform traits, events, and memory into core aspects of her brand in order to stand out from the slew of content creators fighting for viewership on the platform.

However, when browsing Turney's content it becomes clear that solely focusing on true crime content is not sustainable in maintaining audience attention. While a tone shift between levity and seriousness through the routes of memetic humour assists with engaging audiences, it is ultimately necessary for Turney to transform *herself* into the reason why people habitually engage with her content. Turney must extend herself both within the digital space of the internet *and* through the internal access granted to her psyche. Her content evidences a rising focus on the interiority of her experiences, whether related to Alissa's case or Turney's own daily life, acting out a dissolution of the public-private divide.

Turney adopts the form and conventions of more vlog-style content when covering the aspects of her daily life and routine, while still often linking her present happenings to Alissa. The video mentioned previously that involves Turney visiting a fast-food restaurant provides one such example (*Thank you @jackinthebox*). Berryman and Kavka (2018, 87, 90) note how 'negative affect labour' increasingly features in the construction of engaging content, in which creators engage in 'at once performing, contextualising and reflexively dissecting their state of distress'. Here, Turney makes a display of showing the emotional impact memory and nostalgia have on her in regard to Alissa, acting to ingratiate herself with her audience through negative emotional labour which grants viewers apparent intimate access into Turney's vulnerability. Turney then undercuts this display of emotion through deploying self-deprecatory humour concerning the negative social perception of being witnessed crying in public. After taking her first bite she looks nostalgic, stating that 'they taste like home', before thanking the company for bringing them back onto the menu. This balance of intimate vulnerability with distancing humour is essential in maintaining an audience, drawing them in through performed intimacy while maintaining the light and entertaining tone of conventional TikTok content.

Such blatant displays of emotion and intimacy are shown to reap positive rewards for content creators. Turney later duetted her own video showing that the company privately messaged her on Instagram, wanting to send ‘something special’ as gratitude for shouting them out (*#duet with saraheturney)*. Turney’s efforts have proven similarly successful in inspiring connection from viewers, one video response featuring a user comment claiming that they ‘came for [Turney’s] sister but fell in love with [Turney] as a person’ (*Reply to @lcc1313*). As Turney’s content moves further away from its sole focus on Alissa, she is able to gain notoriety and recognition from the general public and corporations alike, turning her advocacy into an influencer-like career.

Conclusion: Indictment and Influence

Turney’s uses of independent creation, affiliation, community building, and self-branding came at a time when significant progress was achieved in Alissa’s case. On 20 August 2020, Michael was arrested and charged for the murder of Alissa (Crump 2020), Turney covering the announcement on her TikTok through a stripped-down address to the camera, thanking her viewers for their help in pursuing Michael as a suspect (*I can’t believe this*). In the press conference announcing the charge, County Attorney Allister Adel praised Sarah’s efforts in pursuing justice in Alissa’s case:

> Sarah Turney, your perseverance and commitment to finding justice for your sister Alissa is a testament to the love of a sister. Because of that love, Alissa's light has never gone out and she lives on in the stories and photos that you have shared with the community. This passion you have, and have demonstrated for her, during your journey is something that will keep Alissa's memory alive forever (*County Attorney*).

Turney's accomplished goal proves the power of social media content creation in the pursuit of civic action; however, it must be addressed that the attention given by mainstream news sites cannot be neglected. As Turney shows in numerous TikToks, after enough success was garnered on the platform, traditional media outlets began to cover Turney's story, specifically focusing on the fact that she was using an entertainment application to fight for justice. Such cyclical media work shows that exposure is largely dependent on the combined forces of legacy and independent media.

Since Michael's indictment, Turney has focused her attention on advocating for other victim's cases in a cross-platform effort. Turney will duet other users' stories in order to bring attention to them by providing a platform which engages a cultivated audience interested in true crime and civic action. Across the web Turney then provides deep dives into other cases through her podcast, where each week she offers in-depth insight into missing persons and murder cases, many of which remain unsolved. As discussed, Turney continues to fight for civic action precisely through the self-branding necessary to maintain consistent attention online, focusing on true crime and advocacy as her central appeal. However, audience members still yearn for updates on Alissa, the reason why many of them will have initially followed Turney. One user enquired when Turney will be able to discuss her sister's case once again, but Turney informs that she can only do so after the trial has taken place ('Comment' 2020).

Overall, the quest for judicature through online content creation acts as both freeing and constricting for the content creator. While Turney is able to explore her sister's case with apparent autonomy through the routes of personal memory, she is nevertheless encouraged to shape her narrative through the conventions, trends, and vernacular of the chosen delivery platform. While such need for entertainment-alignment may be seen to lessen the impact of Turney's messages, there may be required a need for online grief and death-focused content to be misaligned from the traditional models of grieving in order to maximise the content's reach and accessibility. Had it not been for TikTok and online media, Alissa's case would likely not have experienced such rapid progression, and as such Turney's construction of appeals for civic action as short-form entertainment achieved its required purpose. Through the crafting of judicial efforts into online content, Turney bound together a chosen target audience of younger individuals by way of affiliation and intimacy to aid in exposure, recognition, and significant progress towards justice.

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