A "Chosen" Hope with a "Gingerbread" Outcome: Democratization of (Media) Power in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* as a Metaphor of Online Abuse on High-Profile Criminal Cases

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Some demons thrive by fostering hatred and, and, uh, persecution amongst the mortal animals. Not by, not by destroying men, but by watching men destroy each other. Now, they feed us our darkest fear and turn peaceful communities into vigilantes.
  (Giles, "Gingerbread" 3.11, 00:32:41-58, Espenson & St. John)

Introduction

In the early days of social media, social networking platforms were viewed as an abolition of all barriers, a democratization of information and content creation against the establishment's gate-keeping. However, a decade after their wide adoption by the public, the scenario seems completely

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different: now that social networks have been used to meddle with international politics, to spread hate and conspiracy theories and to harass others, many wonder whether the hopes behind the democratization of online content creation were too optimistic. Using two different episodes of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) Season Seven's "Chosen" and Season Three's "Gingerbread"   as a starting point, this article will showcase the imagined and one of the real outcomes of the democratization of social media content creation with regards to the discussion of high-profile criminal cases online, with a particular focus on crimes against children and related conspiracies.

Buffy The Vampire Slayer as a Metaphor to Understand Human Behavior

Since it first aired in 1997, it quickly became clear that *Buffy The Vampire Slayer (BtVS)* was more than your average TV show. Subverting the over-used trope of the petite, defenseless blonde girl attacked by a monster in an alley, Joss Whedon's show brought a kickass heroine to our screens while sparking debates about feminism, consent, power, and authority (South, 2003).

A variety of authors have debated whether Buffy represents a liberatory feminist figure (Wilcox, 1999; Harts, 2001); others have examined the meaning of power in the Buffyverse (Brannon, 2006); Buffy's relationship with authority (McLelland, 2001) and in particular her relationship with institutions (Buinicki and Enns, 2001). Research has also focused on *Buffy*'s similarity to police shows (Bradney, 2003),

while other analyses argued that the show's vampires and demons represent the failure of reason, science, and technology to solve our society's contemporary problems (Owen,1999).

Amongst the other themes explored by research in analysing the Buffyverse, Raffel shone a light on Joss Whedon's use of advanced technology, "writing plots that include a range of enemies adeptly keyed to the specific dystopian apprehensions about technology in the 1990s" (Raffel, 2017, p. 31).

Through *Buffy*, audiences were presented with complex, real-world themes concealed as the monster-fighting antics of an American teenager. Thus *Buffy* provides plenty of material for social commentary. As Rowley and Weldes (2012) posit, studying pop culture products such as *Buffy* means discussing the real world, since through popular culture   an artifact that is a product of our own culture   we make sense of the real world.

However, research has yet to focus on in-real-life (IRL) translations of *BtVS* episodes such as "Chosen" or "Gingerbread." This paper hopes to do just that, comparing the false hope of democratization of media power "Chosen"   with online lynch mobs following crimes against children "Gingerbread"   to showcase human reactions to crimes against children and the public's relationship with the institutions and strange 'others,' in order to demonstrate how powerlessness in the face of world events and distrust towards authorities "feed us our darkest fear and turn peaceful communities into vigilantes" instead of democratizing power.

"Chosen": The Democratization of (online) Power

A key aspect of "Chosen," *BtVS*' Season Seven series finale where Buffy averts one final apocalypse, defeating the First Evil, is the 'Slayer Activation Spell' (Buffy Fandom Wiki, ND). Tipped off by the First Evil's taunts that she would not survive the apocalypse and would die alone, Buffy changes the rule of who becomes a Slayer. She gets Willow to tap into the essence of the Scythe, the mystical weapon tied to the original Slayer, to rewrite the rule of the "Chosen One" and activate all Potential Slayers across the world, overruling Shadow Men's original magic (Whedon).

The *BtVS* series finale ends on a hopeful note: that a rule made by men thousands of years ago should not determine the power of women and girls all over the world. It is the ultimate gift of democratization. McClelland (2001) argues that Buffy and her role represent the ultimate democratization of power. This argument seems particularly applicable to her choice of extending the Slayer 'gift' through Willow in "Chosen." Buffy and Willow's spell to extend the slaying power across the world is the ultimate challenge to the establishment: the power is no longer "concentrated and controlled," and Buffy has in this way finally beaten the enemy that, for Brannon, she has been fighting all along, "an isolation enforced by a patriarchal structure that feared the power which it bestowed" (Brannon, 2006, p. 1). This article will compare the democritization of the Slayer's powers with the promise of democratization carried through the internet.

The advent of the internet resulted in a wave of technology optimism enthusiastic about the variety of possibilities the medium offered namely, a democratization of flows of information, of communications with power, and a

general idea that all voices would be heard and taken into account. In the late 1990s, *Wired* columnist Negroponte (1998) predicted the digital age would improve equality and make territorial divisions meaningless. Social media in particular became part of that optimism. Described as "the new public square," social media platforms are a space that can be used to interact with friends, family, and potential employers, as well as a tool to voice opinions on political matters, to mobilize around shared issues such as the #MeToo movement or #BlackLivesMatter, to organize protests such as the #OccupyWallStreet movement, or take part in campaigns such as Barack Obama's 2012 run for US President (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017; Smith et al., 2014).

However, that utopia has not been realized. Even the World Wide Web's founder, Tim Berners Lee, penned a letter on the 29th anniversary of his invention listing the ways in which it had backfired: "In recent years, we've seen conspiracy theories trend on social media platforms, fake Twitter and Facebook accounts stoke social tensions, external actors interfere in elections, and criminals steal troves of personal data," also claiming that power concentration among few platforms such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook is harming pluralism and democracy (Solon, 2018). Furthermore, social networks have now also become a freedom of speech arena, where especially women, the LGBTQIA+, racial and religious minorities, and others risk becoming the object of vicious slurs and threats. Miles away from the internet utopia devised by those behind the biggest Silicon Valley companies who saw the net as a force for good and for equality, the internet's own infrastructure is now facilitating the spread of racist and xenophobic messages to the mainstream news and politics (Daniels, 2018).

The internet age has seen a decline in traditional elite and media credibility and popularity partly because of scandals, cover-ups and corruption culminating in the 2016 American national election. In particular, the loss of influence that affected mainstream media triggered the belief that, as Cooke clearly explains, "we live in a posttruth era an era in which audiences are more likely to believe information that appeals to emotions or existing personal beliefs, as opposed to seeking and readily accepting information regarded as factual or objective" (Cooke, 2017, p. 212). In this scenario, "believable fictions" have become more important than facts (Jones, 2009, p. 130).

Another characteristic of the internet age is that conspiracy theorists see the world as filled with pawns maneuvered by covert forces. Wood and Douglas (2015) argue that, since the internet has made free publishing and a monumental reach available to publishers, conspiracy theories have become ubiquitous. Belief in conspiracy theories, for authors like Knight (2000) and Aupers (2012) is often related to fast-paced social and economic change, to uncertainty towards modernity.

At times when societal, political, and economic change happens fast, and when scandals such as Watergate have been affecting the public's trust in authorities, resorting to conspiracy and anti-establishment belief is not uncommon, and it is not a private pathology, but a social ailment of the times (Knight, 2000). The public seems to be moved and enraged by a sense of institutional failure, which permeates *BtVS* and Buffy's relationship with authority as well. Buinicki and Enns write that "From the very first episode of *BtVS*, 'Welcome to the Hellmouth,' the series establishes a pattern in which institutions are shown to be inefficient, inadequate,

and misguided in their efforts to maintain order" (Buinicki & Enns, 2001, p. 1). Throughout the series, Buffy has to rebel against her mother (family) and Sunnydale High's principals (education), fight the police (law enforcement), and drop the old fashioned Watchers' Council (the highest authority even for those initiated to Slayers and vampires) to do her job and save the world, de facto showing their irrelevance (Buinicki & Enns, 2001, p. 1). Owen (1999), too, puts forward the idea that Buffy represents the failure of modern institutions to tackle social problems, using "Ted" (2.11) as an example, in which Buffy is abused by her mother's boyfriend, who turns out to be a robot and a metaphor for the state's failure to solve the problem of domestic abuse. Bradney also points out that, sometimes, "at least at senior level," law enforcement and the authorities in *BtVS* seem "to have some connections with vampires and demons" and to, therefore, be corrupt (Bradney, 2003, p. 1). McClelland (2001), too, views Buffy's power as the proof that traditional law enforcement agencies are powerless and irrelevant.

However, while to fulfil her "Gift" (5.22) as the Slayer, Buffy carries "The Weight of the World" (5.21) on her shoulders and has to bypass traditional authority in saving it, online users' 'gift' of an apparent increase in information and expression opportunities was carried through the deceiving power of algorithms that string anti-establishment promises together without any interest in the greater good. Indeed, to understand the rise of disinformation and conspiracy theories online, it is necessary to focus on the change in online news distribution. A 2016 Pew Research Center report found that nearly half (44%) of Americans received their news from Facebook and Instagram (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Yet Schofield and Marchi (2017) argue that once Facebook

changed its algorithms in mid-2016, prioritizing posts from users' friends and families instead of media articles on news feeds, mainstream media took a major hit in terms of online views. For the authors, this resulted in an unexpected success for "several relative newcomers to news publishing," such as more niche websites of the likes of YoungCons and FiveThirtyEight (Schofield & Marchi, 2017, p. 29), feeding feelings of general discontent and fuelling them with increasingly conservative thought. Therefore, to use "Chosen" as a metaphor, if we see algorithms as the 'Slayer activation spell' of the internet age, we can see that instead of delivering democratization of power, they have delivered the posttruth era and its products.

In this scenario, it seems that, unfortunately, the democratization of means of information did not result in the empowerment we see in "Chosen," but in developments more similar to "Gingerbread."

"Gingerbread": What Happens to Public Debate When Children Are Harmed?

First aired on January 12, 1999, "Gingerbread" is the eleventh episode of *BtVS*'s third season. It starts with Buffy on patrol when her mother Joyce shows up in the hope to bond with her daughter and watch her slay. They are interrupted by a vampire, whom Buffy chases, telling her mother to wait for her. While Buffy is away fighting, Joyce waits for her in the playground and finds the dead bodies of two small children, a boy and a girl, on the merry-go-round with a symbol drawn on their right hands.

At a public protest where Sunnydale residents shout "Never Again," a distraught and angry Joyce Summers laments a problem of silence in the town, which has for her fallen into the hands of monsters, witches, and Slayers   a.k.a. her own daughter. Joyce asks the grown-ups to take some action and founds MOO (Mothers Opposed to the Occult). As Buffy, budding witch Willow, and another teenage witch, Amy, are knocked out and then taken hostage by their parents and a mob of angry residents, Giles and Oz find articles on the internet indicating that every fifty years since 1649, the exact same two children have died

In the meantime, Buffy, Amy, and Willow come to as their parents are about to burn them at the stake at City Hall. The dead children are there to remind the crowd that they have to kill the bad girls, but as Giles chants a spell and throws a potion at them, the boy and the girl turn into one big, ugly demon. Buffy leans over and breaks the giant stake she is tied to so that the demon runs into it and dies. All is well, and the crowd's anger magically vanishes. As usual with *BtVS*, even an episode with no major watershed moments to carry through the plot of the season can provide an excuse for reflection. So, what can "Gingerbread" teach apart from, maybe, don't bring your mother out slaying with you unless you want trouble?

"Gingerbread" contains all the elements of an emotional, initially unsolved, potentially high-profile criminal case: the ideal victims (two blonde, angelic looking children); a horrific crime (a murder, possibly linked to cruelty and ritual sacrifice); and designated suspects, chosen by the crowds merely because of their difference, of their 'other' status.

Studies of ideal victims in both real-life crime scenarios and entertainment have identified clear attributes that victims

should have. Christie views the ideal victim as someone innocent, vulnerable, stainless; for him, a victim is "a person or a category of individual who when hit by crime most readily [is] given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim" (Christie, 1986, p. 16). Children are the ideal characters to embody the victim status: for Davis, they gain almost religious status (Davis, 2001).

The idea of a dangerous 'other' often revisited in criminological theory tends to take center stage at times of heightened anxiety and can sometimes extend to large portions of society. For Parish, anxieties about the abuse of children are common in the global economy, and they are a fear of the 'other,' of difference, of the unknown, "a way in which dispossessed people at the edge of global capital are able to express their fear that their bodies may become parts for wealthy others in the Western world" (Parish, 2001, p. 4). Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), too, find a societal preoccupation with children's organs being stolen, with sexual slavery or satanic abuse of children. However, as Parish posits, these anxieties and fears of the unknown are a symptom of the "desire to find closure amidst the uncertainties of late capitalism" and they exist to "provide neat explanations in an untidy and big world where there is no great centre anymore" (Parish, 2001, p. 6).

In "Gingerbread," the convergence of a heinous crime, ideal victims, and a strange 'other' are set in a scenario of a town that is not 'good,' where citizens have lost their trust in the authorities so much that they decide to mobilize and become vigilantes. Perhaps the situation sounds familiar.

High-profile criminal cases become emotional moments in the discussion of current affairs, presenting a triangulation of players the suspects, the media, the authorities that

become an opportunity for the public to vent their frustration at justice not being done (Are, 2019). For DiBennardo (2018), crimes outside the norm and especially those involving children become more newsworthy due to their entertainment value and therefore receive disproportionate attention. For this author, these crimes are overemphasized as opposed to crimes against adults, with a key difference in presentation. As DiBennardo explains, "Narratives present adult victims (the majority of whom are women) as responsible for their victimization yet discuss the protection of children as a collective national responsibility" (DiBennardo, 2018, p. 6). According to Restorative Justice theory, communities feel wronged, offended, and disappointed by the impact of crime (Maglione, 2017). In high-profile criminal cases that have not been solved, the authorities have not rebuilt social security and brought the culprit to justice. Therefore, ruptured communities are taking center stage, wanting to be part of the solution. For Maglione (2017), under the lens of Restorative Justice it is not only the individual victims and their loved ones that have been harmed: the community as a whole feels the impact of crime. Indeed, community involvement and participation are essential components of restorative justice, as opposed to traditional criminal justice that sees the authorities step in and solve the case. In the "Gingerbread" scenario can be seen a community that has been wronged, offended, and disappointed that takes action to right that wrong.

Online Lynch Mobs, Conspiracy Theories, and Unsettling Events

In "Gingerbread," Joyce Summers laments that Sunnydale is not a good town, that it is in the hands of strange 'others' that

commit awful crimes while the authorities watch, powerless, instead of attempting to punish them. In Sunnydale, the institutions have failed a frustration at the heart of conspiracy belief and discussions of high-profile criminal cases. Indeed, high-profile criminal cases are often a battleground on which the public vents its frustration at the institutions' failure to keep their promises to protect its more vulnerable members, such as children. "Gingerbread" presents the ultimate conspiracy, arising from institutional failure, identifying mysterious culprits and resulting in vigilante justice. The following sections will examine conspiracy theories in their historical and sociological context to provide depth to the events of the episode.

Conspiracy theories are often connected to the public's relationship with power, with the social and temporal space they develop in, and are broadcast through the media, pop culture, and entertainment. They have been examined under different frameworks, such as cultural studies (Fenster, 1999), American studies (Knight, 2000), and psychology (Douglas et al., 2019).

Conspiracy theories have always existed, either in the form of urban legends or as widespread beliefs. Many authors have compared our era's conspiracy theories with those of yesteryear, which were often related to religion and the paranormal. Both Parish (2001) and Douglas et al. (2019) mention witch-hunts, black magic, and occult practices as ancestors of our day and age's theories, linking them to outcomes such as prejudice against certain groups, revolutions, and genocide. Similarly, Aupers reminds us of the Templars, the Illuminati, and the Freemasons as examples of covert societies that have persisted in the popular imaginary, showing how conspiracy belief has now transformed, shifting

from "paranoia about an exotic 'Other' standing 'outside' society to paranoia about modern society itself" (Aupers, 2012, p. 24). Indeed, with modernity, globalization, and the development of science and technology, conspiracies naturally progressed from witch-hunts "to hidden and mysterious conspiracies between governments, secret agencies and multinational companies who seek to conceal information about what is really happening in the world" (Parish, 2001, p. 3). A further element of conspiracy thinking can be found in explanations of certain phenomena, which stop theories from being an idea of a few foolish individuals and turn them into an answer, an explanation of unsettling world events.

A conspiracy theory often becomes an 'us vs. them' scenario, pitting believers against experts and elites. According to Knight, this dynamic began playing out after Kennedy's assassination in the 1960s, causing a "shift from fears about the external infiltration of the structures of power (the classic example here would be McCarthyite anti-communist fears of the 'enemy within')" to the belief that the government itself is conspiring against its own people (Knight, 2007, p. 95). After Kennedy's death, the agencies (such as the state and the military) that were set to be the defenders of the American people began to be seen as plotters   and audiences began to wish for their plots to be unmasked. "The more 'we' know, the less 'they' can control us," writes Parker (Parker, 2001, p. 201), while Clarke (2002) finds a split in conspiracy belief, arguing it is used by populists, adopted by the masses, but very unpopular amongst intellectuals. Here, he identifies a clear anti-elite, anti-intellectual sentiment used ad hoc by populists that becomes key in the 'us vs them' scenario often played out by conspiracy theorists: *we* want to know, but *they* won't tell us.

The twentieth century saw a variety of political and entertainment-focused conspiracy theories reach new, exponential numbers of audiences. Authors such as Douglas et al., Clarke, Fenster, Knight, and Parish mention theories surrounding the assassination of Kennedy in November 1963, the Watergate scandal, U.S. officials' meddling with alien life forms, or the death of singer Elvis Presley as theories that have garnered the most theorizing from the 1960s onward, culminating in recent theories about 9/11 being orchestrated by the Bush administration (Douglas et al., 2019; Clarke, 2002; Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2001; Parish, 2001). Douglas et al. (2019) also argue that governments are not the only organizations that can be believed to carry out secret plots against the masses: indeed, any group that is perceived as powerful and malevolent can be seen as behind a conspiracy.

Conspiracy theories should not be viewed as merely irrational, and their believers should not be pathologized. Aupers, for instance, argues that real-life scandals such as Watergate have brought conspiracies to the forefront of our society, leading him to write that: "[C]onspiracy theorizing cannot simply be dismissed as 'irrational' or 'delusional' since it is supported by real historical events and embodies a radical form of reflexivity, criticism and scepticism about every truth claim" (Aupers, 2012, p. 24). Similarly, the emergence of alternative medicine such as homeopathy and acupuncture has nourished a distrust or at least scepticism towards traditional medicine (Aupers, 2012, p. 24). He adds that the manifestation of distrust (especially in science, the state, multinationals and the media) is now "embedded in the cultural logic of modernity and, ultimately, produced by processes of modernization" (Aupers, 2012, p. 22). Fenster (1999) and Bell and Bennion-Nixon (2001), too, reject the

pathologization of conspiracy theorizing in favor of viewing it as a reaction to uncertainty, a way to take back agency and control and to critique the *status quo*. In short, many modern conspiracy theories and, as it will be shown later on, theories regarding the disappearance of Madeleine McCann carry with them a deep sense of institutional failure.

Previous studies on conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking have found a lack of trust in authorities and government, together with uncertainty about one's future in the dissolution of social bonds, as some of the reasons behind this phenomenon. Featherstone, for instance, views increased individualism in modern society as a factor in the spreading of conspiracy theories, arguing that they are an "effect of the dissolution of social recognition" (Featherstone, 2001, p. 31). Douglas et al. talk about feelings of powerlessness and lack of agency over one's future as a potential reason, writing that "people who lack agency and control may reclaim some sense of control by believing conspiracy theories because they offer the opportunity to reject official narratives and allow people to feel that they possess a better account" (Douglas et al. 2019, p. 8). Conspiracy theories can be highly subcultural or focus on conspiracies against one particular group, especially if the group "thinks of itself as undervalued, underprivileged, or under threat" (Douglas et al. 2019, p. 9; Clarke, 2002).

Leading from distrust in experts and authorities then, a conspiracy would not be complete without the few actors trying to conceal vital information from the many; a conspiracy is carried out through what Keeley calls a "significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons the conspirators acting in secret" (Keeley 1999, p. 116). According to Aupers, it is these "evil agents" who are controlling our lives, bringing counter-conspirators to believe

reality is always "staged" and that "'Nothing is what it seems'" (Aupers, 2012, p. 27). Ironically therefore, the truth that conspirators claim to want to find never seems to be found, or to manifest itself. Under a similar point of view, Fenster finds that the majority of conspiracy theories   such as those related to *The Da Vinci Code*   also rely on a hero figure that does not give up on the search for truth, prompting a variety of would-be 'hero' figures to get involved: "anyone with enough fortitude and intelligence can find and properly interpret the evidence that the conspiracy makes available" (Fenster, 1999, p. 8).

The effects of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing on public debate can be highly damaging. Believers of conspiracy theories have been known to commit terrorist attacks, reject the effects of climate change or reject medicine so much that diseases that were thought to have been eradicated are coming back to haunt the world, with 'vaccine hesitancy' becoming one of the top ten threats to global health in 2019 according to the World Health Organization (Douglas et al., 2019; World Health Organization, 2019). Aupers (2012) warns that the proliferation of conspiracy theories means they have become normalized, and similarly, Clarke (2002) cautions that the erosion of trust in authorities is a result of heightened belief in conspiracy theories, while Knight writes that these views are "no longer confined to right-wing extremists but appealing equally to the left and the silent majority of the centre" (Knight, 2007, p. 99).

Conspiracy Theories and American Entertainment

While it has been argued that the internet is responsible for the spreading of conspiracy theories, it should be noted that,

before the World Wide Web, these beliefs became public knowledge through coverage in the mainstream media, such as newspapers, magazines, TV and radio programs, and films. In particular, American entertainment that gained viewers and popularity through globalization has created an appetite for conspiracy and crime dramas that have influenced public opinion on conspiracies (Douglas et al., 2019; Parker, 2001; Parish, 2001).

Douglas et al. talk about how film genres such as "conspiracy cinema" expose audiences to conspiracies in an entertaining format (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 15). Bell and Bennion-Nixon mention "production, circulation and consumption of conspiracy theories within the broad realm of popular culture," testifying how these versions of fact are newsworthy and entertaining, making them an easy subject to spread amongst globalized audiences (Bell and Bennion-Nixon, 2001: 133). These theories are related to cover-ups and intrigues within American society itself. For instance, Aupers writes about how "real political scandals in the US," such as Watergate, created a vicious cycle of creating conspiracy entertainment this writer calls "paranoia thrillers" in the 1970s (Aupers, 2012, p. 24). For McClelland, too, the underlying justice theme in shows like *Buffy* and, often, in conspiracy cinema too Is typical of American entertainment, which frequently features "schemes of justice, retribution, punishment, and downright revenge that fly in the face of the overloaded, corrupt, politically controlled system of trial and incarceration" (McClelland, 2001, p. 1).

For Mark Fenster (1999), all conspiracy theories are narrated through a dramatic framework, becoming a story with typical pillars that guarantee its success with the public because they appeal to what currently motivates audiences.

Fenster writes: "the motivation in popular conspiracy narratives tends to be a straight-forward, unconflicted combination of revenge (often to right a private wrong), nationalism (restoring public order and a nation's 'honor') and an abstract desire for 'truth'" (Fenster, 1999, p. 114). But this desire for truth often fails to be fulfilled. Just as in popular conspiracy sagas such as *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016, 2018), as Bell and Bennion-Nixon argue, "'The truth' is always in reach but never fully grasped or exposed," and audiences continue searching in the hope to find a closure that appears within reach but always escapes at the last minute (Bell and Bennion-Nixon, 2001, p.139).

The appetite for conspiracy theories can be linked with popular culture, which appeals to the public's thirst for films with happy endings that right wrongs and become cathartic in the backdrop of dissatisfaction in everyday life, leading with storylines similar to the concept of the American Dream. The American Dream is for James "the belief that equality of opportunity exists for all and that there is an all-embracing 'Americanism'" (James, 2001, p. 66). The dramatic, entertainment element within conspiracy theories, the need for closure, for the good to triumph, appears typically American, a result of the spreading of American entertainment throughout the world thanks to globalization. Parker, for instance, identifies the search for truth typical of conspiracy narratives as a leading aspect of conspiracy-based entertainment: "A standard film plot [...] involves the 'fugitive' attempting to find out who framed them, who they can really trust, who is one of 'them.' The resolution is (almost always) a victory for truth, justice (and the American way)" (Parker, 2001, p. 200). 'Americana' and the myth of the American Dream give conspiracy theorists an idea of moral and spiritual superiority,

of being part of the chosen few who know the truth and are working hard for it to be revealed to the masses (Parker, 2001). Consequently then, some of the most popular conspiracy theories involve crucial events of the modern history of the United States, such as the assassination of Kennedy or the 'real' story behind 9/11 (Knight, 2007).

Buffy herself is an adaptation of the typically American superhero. McClelland (2001) writes that while Buffy conforms to the duality of the Clark Kent-Superman binomial featuring a public-facing and a secret, 'baddie'-fighting persona, she differs from the superhero format because her big bads are not (always) mortal criminals, but monsters, making law enforcement not only powerless, but irrelevant. The sense of irrelevance if not of complete incompetence and, even, corruption of the main players in the Criminal Justice System is a pillar of American conspiracy theorism, particularly, as already stated, post-1960s.

It is in this climate that shows like *The X-Files* gained ground, and it is in this climate that *BtVS* episodes like 1999's "Gingerbread" showcased the effects a sense of institutional failure and an anti-establishment vein can have on the public.

"They feed us our darkest fear and turn peaceful communities into vigilantes"

Mothers Opposed to the Occult (MOO) are part of the 'peaceful' Sunnydale community turned into 'vigilantes' by the "Gingerbread" demon, according to Giles. They are also the ultimate metaphor for the public opinion lynch mob, the 'trial by media' and, increasingly, by social media that takes place during emotional high-profile criminal cases. A specific

parallel will compare "Gingerbread" and MOO to a case study of online abuse on high-profile criminal cases the disappearance of British child Madeleine McCann, another angelic-looking child whose fate has sadly yet to be discovered.

Especially in online discussions related to high-profile criminal cases, the issues mentioned above social, political, and economic uncertainty, Parish's "uncertainties of late capitalism" (Parish, 2001, p. 6) are brought to a whole new level, with communities feeling wronged when cases are not solved and culprits are not brought to justice. In response to this feeling of powerlessness in the face of heinous crimes, private citizens become determined to shed that powerlessness and find justice at any cost.

It thus is useful to draw a parallel between the reaction to the children's deaths in "Gingerbread" and real-world reactions to heinous crimes. Greer and McLaughlin talk about "trial by media" and, increasingly, by social media, a form of populist justice where users across the globe begin judging suspects in high-profile criminal cases such as the disappearance of Madeleine McCann (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012, p. 395; Greer and McLaughlin, 2017). Madeleine McCann, a three-year old British child, disappeared from an apartment that her parents Kate and Gerry McCann were renting while on holiday in Portugal on 3 May 2007, and her fate has yet to be discovered (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012). The case received "unprecedented" media attention, with Madeline becoming the center of traditional media reports as well as discussion through the developing new media, from websites to YouTube documentaries (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012, p. 396). Madeleine just like the little girl and boy from "Gingerbread" is a white child, showcasing both the racial

element of perceptions of ideal victims and further examples of lack of racial diversity in *BtVS* (Christie, 1986; Greer & McLaughlin, 2015; Pannekoek & Anderson, 2017).

The McCann case reached the top of the news agenda for two main reasons. The first one is the idea of missing children as a "mediagenic image of innocence and a lucrative story," with Madeleine in particular a blonde, beautiful, angelic-looking little girl similar to the boy and the girl in "Gingerbread" personifying the innocence of childhood (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012, p. 395). The circumstances of the disappearance and the victim herself triggered an emotional response from the population and the press, who united in the need to find her and to find a culprit or an explanation for her vanishing from her parents' home. Just as the death of the boy and the girl from "Gingerbread" causes a public uproar due to their apparent innocence, Madeleine became a profitable news story item because of her photogenic appearance and the mysterious circumstances of her disappearance (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017). This is consistent with Clarke's argument that conspiracy theories have an emotional motivation behind them (Clarke, 2002).

Secondly, in line with Giles' theory that events such as those brought about by the "Gingerbread" demon "feed us our darkest fear" (Espenson & St. John), Madeleine's disappearance fed into some of the public's most horrific fears: the unknown outcomes of an abduction, and that the most vulnerable citizens might be targeted by covert forces, elements that are crucial in the spreading of conspiracy theories. Precisely because of these fears, the crime itself was something the public seemed to identify with: an unsolvable case, a need for truth that is never satisfied. With an unsolved abduction comes a threat to other 'average' families, like the

good people of Sunnydale: according to James, when the state cannot solve crimes involving children there is a "destruction of the very institutions that are the central components in the process of making life meaningful   the nation and the family" (James, 2001, p. 83). Once again, an unsolved kidnapping and justice not being done bring about a sense of institutional failure which, as we will see, characterizes many of the online conversations on the McCann case.

In short, the disappearance of a child such as Madeleine, a white, innocent, and angelic-looking child from a respected, middle-class family, triggered the public's emotion and fear of uncertainty in a changing world, in the year immediately before the economic crash of 2008 and as the internet was starting to become a prominent media force and one further arena in which the showdown between the parents and their detractors could take place.

However, another element that stirred the public interest in Madeleine's disappearance was the suspicion that her parents might have been involved, which shifted public and journalistic attitudes towards them from unanimous support to "trial by media" (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017; Greer & McLaughlin, 2012). Events like high-profile criminal cases with children at their center elicit emotional reaction in communities that become divided, increasingly polarized, and prone to finding solutions, whatever they might be.

Similar to "Gingerbread," elements of Restorative Justice theory can be used to explain the need of users on #McCann to get to the bottom of the case. In high-profile criminal cases that have not been solved, such as the disappearance of Madeleine McCann or the apparently ritualistic murder of the children in "Gingerbread," the authorities have not been able to step in as the saviors, as the *deus ex machina* rebuilding

social security, and therefore ruptured communities are taking center stage, wanting to be part of the solution. Comparing vigilantism in "Gingerbread" at the hands of MOO to the online conversations surrounding the disappearance of Madeleine McCann will further build on the idea of emotional community reactions to heinous crimes.

#McCann is the hashtag used all across Twitter to discuss matters related to the disappearance of British child Madeleine McCann in 2007. The case sits at "the intersection between news, technology, and community surrounding mediated crime" (Kennedy, 2010, p. 225). Already singled out as a hashtag attracting a variety of toxic, abusive behavior online by Synnott, Coulias and Ioannou (2017), #McCann sees users comment on Madeleine's disappearance, potential kidnapping and/or murder almost daily as of 2020. Mendick (2012), too, wrote on *The Daily Telegraph* that the McCanns have "also had to contend with a sustained campaign of harassment conducted by a small band of fanatics convinced they had a hand in their daughter's disappearance."

In "Gingerbread," ordinary citizens unite in a mob to rid Sunnydale of its undesirables, becoming vigilantes. Vigilantism is, for Moncada, "the collective use or threat of extra-legal violence in response to an alleged criminal act," (Moncada, 2017, p. 408). Even if Buffy uses violence in her vamp and demon fighting, she is not a vigilante not even post-Season Three, when she officially 'graduates' from the Watchers' Council's rule "because vigilante justice is the mob violence that is exemplified when Buffy and Willow are nearly burnt as witches in 'Gingerbread'" (Bradney, 2003, p. 1). Unlike the "Gingerbread" mob and unlike other famous vigilante heroes e.g. Batman Buffy does not fight evil out of anger, revenge or trauma: she uses violence because it is

her destiny and duty to fight vampires. She does not particularly enjoy it; in fact, throughout most of Season 1, 2 and 3, she just wants to be a normal teenager.

This vigilante 'mob violence' is often translated into online discussions of high-profile criminal cases mirroring the circumstances of "Gingerbread." In the #McCann scenario, we are witnessing what Jane calls 'digilantism,' or:

> involving putatively politically motivated extrajudicial practices in online domains that are intended to punish or bring others to account in response to a perceived or actual lack of institutional remedies. These include acts which are illegal or legally liminal, as well as practices which are legal and are therefore more akin to other types of advocacy or activism such as awareness raising and lobbying. (Jane, 2017, p. 461)

When it comes to feminists raising awareness of issues that are often overlooked by society, Jane finds 'digilantism' to be positive (Jane, 2017). However, in their need to 'raise awareness' about their content and, therefore, about the supposedly unreported aspects of the McCann case, #McCann users are engaging in digilantism that becomes online abuse due to the use of controversial online techniques to spread the word about what they view as a miscarriage of justice that is going unnoticed (Are, 2019). In short, on #McCann, what looked like Joyce Summers' initial peaceful protest against the unknown murderers of two small children has turned into MOO's lynch mob   online.

A "Chosen" Hope with a "Gingerbread" Outcome

So, where do "Gingerbread" and its online counterparts leave us? This article argues that the build-up of a sense of institutional failure and the increased popularity of anti-establishment thought typical of conspiracy theories in the post-truth era links Buffy's journey as the Slayer with the negative side effects of the democratization of media power. In short, society were given a "Chosen" hope the democratization of media power but something must have gone wrong in the spell and the algorithms, given facilitated polarization, the spread of false information, and the widespread acceptance of conspiracy thought. We were hoping to hold power accountable, but all we are doing now is verbally harassing others online. As Beard writes about Twitter:

> It was supposed to put us directly in touch with those in power, and open up a new democratic kind of conversation. It does almost nothing of the sort: if we tweet the prime minister or the Pope, they no more read our words than if we send them a letter   and for the most part, the prime minister does not even write the tweets that appear under her or his name. [...] Some of the abuse, I suspect, is a squeal of frustration at those false promises, taking aim at a convenient traditional target. (Beard, 2017, p. 36)

Parallels can also be drawn between Buffy's democratization of power in "Chosen" and the mainstreaming of anti-establishment thought. If the mainstream media shared and have contributed to the creation of conspiracy theories,

and if American entertainment has created an appetite for conspiracies in the global public, the culmination and establishment of conspiracy theories within everyday crime narration in the public imaginary has become an 'us vs. them' scenario pitting the public against traditional power. The democratization of power that has happened in "Chosen" has, for better or worse, happened in media content creation with the shift to social networking platforms. However, as with #McCann, in certain discussions on high-profile criminal cases this 'democratization' has seen more of a "Gingerbread" effect on online users than a positive use of the power shared.

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