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Book Review

Lieve Gies (ed.): Trial by Media: Participatory Justice in a Networked World

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Lieve Gies (ed.): Trial by Media: Participatory Justice in a Networked World
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To scholars working at the intersections of media studies, fandom studies, participatory culture, and digital sleuthing, *Trial by Media: Participatory Justice in a Networked World* is a timely and theoretically nuanced addition to debates surrounding justice, publicity, and participation. Edited by Lieve Gies, the volume brings together a wide range of perspectives to examine how public opinion, media practices, and legal narratives intersect under contemporary, networked conditions.

The book grounds its conceptual framework in a now-classic definition by Chris Greer and Eugene McLaughlin, who characterize trial by media “as a dynamic, impact-driven, news media-led process by which individuals—who may or may not be publicly known—are tried and sentenced in the ‘court of public opinion’” (“Trial by Media: Policing the 24-7 News Media Sphere and the ‘Politics of Outrage.’” In: *Theoretical Criminology* 15 [1], 23-46, 27; cited in Gies, 3). This definition functions as a shared point of reference throughout the volume, while being expanded and productively complicated. A major takeaway of the book is that mediated justice actually requires no formal courtroom. As Gies points out, these judgments often unfold when the law is out of reach—either because no technical crime was committed or because the subjects are legally beyond recourse. This decoupling of ‘justice’ from the state is one of the volume’s strongest contributions, reframing justice as a process of circulation and affect rather than a static institutional verdict. Several chapters trace the historical depth of these dynamics, demonstrating that collaborative investigation and public sense-making long predate digital platforms. At the same time, the book remains attentive to what digital media afford: “digital technology may furnish the tools, but websleuthing, true crime tourism, vigilantism and other practices are potentially motivated by a myriad of factors” (11).

The chapters on ‘forensic fandom’ are particularly sharp. The book makes a necessary distinction between traditional fandom (engaging with fictional texts) and participation in true crime. As Bethan Jones and Steff El Maldawi argue, these participants are not necessarily ‘fans’ of a text in the way we talk about Marvel or *Star Wars*; they are often fans of a genre or followers of a specific, unfolding tragedy (cf. 164). This is a productive distinction for anyone trying to understand how the ‘logic of fandom’ is being weaponized in real-world legal contexts.

The book also demonstrates sustained sensitivity to questions of power, visibility, and inequality. The discussion of the ‘Missing White Women Syndrome’ by Deborah Jermyn and Tanya Horeck is particularly incisive, noting that the term “enduringly and powerfully captures the media’s fixation with stories of missing white girls and women, most particularly ‘innocent’ ones who form ideal victims” (Purnell, Derecka: “The ‘Missing White Woman Syndrome’ still plagues America.” *The Guardian* [Sep. 29, 2021]. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/29/the-missing-white-woman-syndrome-still-plagues-america> [Apr. 14, 2026]) despite the empirical reality that Black people disproportionately

go missing. Such interventions prevent the analysis of participatory justice from drifting into abstraction and instead anchor it in material and representational asymmetries.

One of the volume's quieter but highly significant strengths lies in its geographical rebalancing of a field that remains strongly US-centric. While canonical cases of mediated justice—such as the murder of Gabby Petito—reverberate throughout the book as shared reference points within global true crime and sleuthing cultures, *Trial by Media* resists remaining anchored in US case material. Many contributions instead focus on UK and Australian cases, enabling close attention to different legal systems, journalistic traditions, and public cultures. By foregrounding non-US contexts, the volume productively unsettles the implicit universalization of American media-justice dynamics that characterizes much existing research and that has shaped much of pop culture views about lawyers, investigators, etc. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is Maria Stoyanova's chapter, which draws exclusively on case studies from within the European Union, foregrounding how participatory justice unfolds under distinct juridical and regulatory conditions.

The later chapters extend the analysis to advocacy, defamation, and podcast cultures, further unfolding the relationship between media exposure and justice. Maria Rae reiterates that while digital media provide the infrastructure for participatory practices, motivations remain heterogeneous and cannot be reduced to technological affordances alone (cf. 193). Katrina Clifford's contribution, in turn, poses one of the volume's most unsettling normative questions: "If justice is the outcome, can we overlook the path we took to get there?" (212). This question lingers well beyond the final page, encapsulating the ethical tensions that run through the entire collection.

Overall, *Trial by Media: Participatory Justice in a Networked World* succeeds in reframing mediated justice as a participatory, uneven, and deeply cultural process. For scholars of fandom, true crime fandom, web sleuthing, and digital publics, the volume offers not only empirically rich case studies but also conceptual tools for thinking about how investigative practices, narrative engagement, and collective interpretation circulate across media environments. It is a book that does not merely analyze participatory justice from a distance, but implicitly acknowledges that scholarship itself participates in the mediated public sphere it seeks to understand.

