

Depp-Heard case: Mediatization, secondary victimization, and platform logics

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Abstract

This article examines the Depp-Heard case as a paradigmatic instance of mediatized justice in the era of digital platforms, investigating the transformation of secondary victimization processes within a context shaped by algorithmic visibility and online polarization. Treating the 2022 defamation trial as a revelatory case study, the paper adopts a qualitative interpretive approach that combines analysis of audiovisual materials (the docuseries, livestreamed trial excerpts), social media content (memes, hashtags, reaction videos), and online comments, drawing on a netnographic perspective. The analysis shows how the overlap between the judicial court and the “social court” produced a platformized mode of credibility attribution, in which testimony is fragmented, decontextualized, and evaluated as public performance. Platform affordances and engagement-driven algorithmic logics amplify already sedimented misogynistic cultural repertoires, intensifying dynamics of delegitimation and epistemic injustice toward women who report violence. Credibility thus becomes a continuously renegotiated property, exposed to diffuse surveillance and embedded within attention-based economies. The case allows for the advancement of three theoretical implications: the platformization of secondary victimization, the radicalization of the performative dimension of credibility, and the intersection between gender order and economies of visibility. The article concludes that mediatized justice in the digital ecosystem does not merely extend the principle of trial publicity, but qualitatively transforms the conditions of public recognition, with significant cultural and regulatory implications for the protection of women who report violence.

Keywords: Mediatized justice, secondary victimization, platformized credibility, digital misogyny, algorithmic visibility.

1. Introduction

In 2022, the defamation trial between the American actor Johnny Depp and the actress Amber Heard, held in Virginia, took shape as a paradigmatic event of mediatized justice in the era of digital platforms (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Originating from an op-ed published by Heard in *The Washington Post* in 2018, in which she described herself as a survivor of domestic violence, the legal proceedings quickly exceeded the confines of the courtroom to become the object of live streaming, audiovisual fragmentation, massive meme production, and transnational polarization. The case did not concern only two celebrities: it constituted a terrain of public renegotiation of the credibility of women who report male violence in a context marked by the post-MeToo era and by dynamics of backlash (Faludi, 1991; Mendes et al., 2019).

This contribution does not seek to take a position on the factual veracity of the accusations at issue in the trial. Rather, the sociological interest focuses on the dynamics activated from the moment Heard publicly articulated a claim of victimization due to domestic violence and that claim was subjected to global visibility. It is not the verification of facts that constitutes the object of analysis, but the ways in which that claim was received, contested, delegitimized, or reformulated within the digital public sphere.

In this sense, the Depp-Heard case can be understood as a privileged observatory for analyzing processes of secondary victimization (Popolla, 2022; Boskovic & Misev, 2022; Vezzadini, 2012) affecting women who report violence, not only in courtrooms but, increasingly, in digital environments. The intertwining of live broadcasting of the hearings, the technical affordances of platforms, and algorithmic logics oriented toward engagement (Hutchby, 2001; Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gillespie, 2018) produced an overlap between the judicial court and the social court, making particularly visible the social expectations that regulate the public construction of the “credible victim” within the gender order (Connell, 2002).

The article proceeds by first reconstructing the theoretical coordinates through which the Depp-Heard case is analysed: mediatized justice, platform society, secondary victimization, and the gendered distribution of credibility. It then presents the methodological design of the study, clarifying the differentiated use of livestreamed trial excerpts, the Netflix docuseries, social media traces, memes, hashtags, and online comments. The analysis focuses on the emergence of a “double jury”, in which the institutional jury was accompanied and partially overshadowed by a diffuse social jury operating through platform affordances, affective polarization, and engagement-driven visibility. On this basis, the article shows how secondary victimization is not simply reproduced online, but reconfigured through the technical, economic, and cultural logics of platforms. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of this transformation for women who report violence in contexts where judicial publicity intersects with algorithmic visibility.

2. Theoretical framework

The trial took place in a context of advanced mediatization, in which media do not merely represent social reality but actively contribute to structuring it (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). The ecosystem of digital platforms, described as a “platform society” (Van Dijck et al., 2018), is characterized by socio-technical architectures that shape the production, circulation, and hierarchization of content through specific affordances (Hutchby, 2001). Affordances configure fields of possibility that make certain practices more likely than others, facilitating the fragmentation and recirculation of content (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Platforms also operate according to algorithmic logics that privilege content capable of generating interaction and emotional intensity, situating themselves within an attention economy in which visibility constitutes a monetizable resource (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Franck, 2019). Algorithms thus contribute to structuring non-neutral hierarchies of visibility (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018), rewarding polarizing content. Within this framework, the production of content designed to provoke outrage—often described as ragebait—fits into engagement dynamics that transform controversy into symbolic and economic value (Ayolov, 2023; 2025; Shin et al., 2025; Phillips, 2015).

Secondary victimization refers to the set of discursive and institutional practices that subject individuals who report violence to further forms of scrutiny and suspicion (Vezzadini, 2012; Popolla, 2022). In cases of male violence against women, such processes unfold through normative expectations related to the figure of the “ideal victim” (Christie, 1986), constructed as innocent, passive, and morally irreproachable. When the woman who reports violence does not conform to these criteria, her testimony tends to be delegitimized, producing a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007).

In digital contexts, these dynamics take on specific forms, including delegitimization campaigns and the mass production of hostile content (Powell & Henry, 2017; Salter, 2017). These practices intersect with repertoires of popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Jane, 2017) and with the formation of polarized affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015).

3. Methodology

The empirical material combines different types of sources, which are used for distinct analytical purposes, in line with qualitative interpretive approaches that treat heterogeneous materials as analytically differentiated traces rather than as equivalent data points (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Selected excerpts from the livestreamed hearings, together with the Netflix docuseries *Depp v. Heard*¹, are used as contextual material in order to reconstruct the mediated public circulation, reframing, and consumption of

¹ First aired on Channel 4 from 21 May 2023 and released internationally on Netflix on 16 August 2023.

courtroom testimony within a platformed media environment (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2018). The primary analytical corpus, however, consists of digital trace material circulated on social media during and after the trial, including comments, memes, hashtags, and reaction content. Data were collected between 1 April 2022 and 10 November 2023, a period encompassing the trial, the verdict, the docuseries release, and subsequent phases of digital recirculation and mediated reinterpretation of the case.

Particular attention was devoted to comments posted on Facebook under articles published by The Independent. This outlet was selected as a strategic site of observation, without any purpose of interpreting it as a representative sample of news coverage, because it devoted sustained attention to the trial and generated high levels of user interaction on Facebook. It therefore offered a particularly visible setting in which to observe the circulation of public interpretations of the case within an English-language digital news environment. The comments analysed were collected from posts published during key moments of heightened public attention, especially during the hearings and around the verdict. The corpus was constructed through purposive selection (Patton, 2002), focusing on comments that most clearly articulated recurring evaluations of Amber Heard's credibility, interpretations of the trial events, and judgments concerning the legitimacy of domestic violence allegations. The analysis is thus concerned with recurrent interpretive patterns rather than with measuring frequencies or claiming representativeness. In this sense, the case is treated as a revelatory and analytically generative case rather than as a statistically representative one (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

In addition, the circulation of memes and hashtags was explored on Instagram and Facebook through keyword searches based on labels strongly associated with the case, including #JohnnyDepp, #AmberHeard, #JusticeForJohnnyDepp, and #JusticeForAmberHeard, as well as related hashtags emerging from the material itself. These hashtags were used as heuristic entry points for identifying clusters of circulating posts, images, and reaction content connected to the trial, rather than as tools for building an exhaustive or statistically representative sample. Given the algorithmic ordering, instability, and uneven visibility of platform content, the analysis does not claim to capture the totality of online discussion; rather, it examines publicly accessible material as evidence of broader discursive and symbolic dynamics shaped by platform architectures and regimes of visibility (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gillespie, 2018).

The material was analysed from a qualitative interpretive perspective informed by digital ethnographic sensibilities (Kozinets, 2010), with attention to the discursive practices through which users interpreted, evaluated, and contested the credibility of the actors involved. All comments considered in the analysis were publicly accessible. They are cited in anonymized form and, where necessary, lightly paraphrased in order to reduce traceability without altering their analytical meaning. Across the different materials considered, the analysis seeks to identify recurring discursive patterns and interpretive frames through which credibility and victimhood were publicly negotiated in platformed media environments (Goffman, 1974). Particular attention was devoted to the ways in which Amber Heard's self-presentation was read and assessed through culturally sedimented expectations of coherence, sincerity, emotional control, and consistency, recalling Goffman's reflections on the presentation of self and the interactional

management of impressions (Goffman, 1959). In this perspective, hashtags and memes are treated not merely as isolated expressions, but as indicators of broader dynamics of circulation through which narratives, evaluations, and moral judgments travel, gain visibility, and stabilize across networked publics (Papacharissi, 2015; Shifman, 2014).

4. The double jury and the platformization of credibility

The very configuration of the trial contributed to making visible the processes described in the theoretical framework. The authorization of full live streaming of the hearings produced an overlap between the judicial court and the social court, transforming the courtroom into a space permeable to the logics of visibility, commentary, and polarization typical of digital platforms. The proceedings were described as “the most social ever”, not only because of the intensity of media coverage, but because of the coexistence of two arenas of judgment that progressively intertwined.

On the one hand, the jury formally tasked with ruling on defamation; on the other, a diffuse social jury composed of millions of users who, through hashtags, memes, and reaction videos, constructed their own moral verdict in real time. At the very beginning of the docuseries, a voice-over states: “A defamation trial linked to MeToo that makes it to court. It’s a real event!” and shortly thereafter, “In the wake of the MeToo movement, they changed Depp’s life” (voice-over, documentary). What was being discussed in court was not merely a dispute between two individuals; symbolically at stake was the legitimacy of women’s allegations in the post-MeToo context (Mendes et al., 2019). It is the documentary itself that emphasizes, through the voice of an activist against gender-based violence, how unprecedented such exposure was: this would be the first time that video footage of courtroom testimony aimed at reconstructing even a rape was shown in its entirety to a mass audience. Sexual violence testimony, already subjected to the tensions of cross-examination, became circulating material, fragmentable and open to collective judgment.

From the very outset of the trial, dynamics typically attributable to secondary victimization could be observed. In comments published on Instagram one reads: “Real domestic violence victims DO NOT act this way. She is coming off like she has an attitude [...] She is disgusting” (B.A., Instagram comment). In another intervention: “Incredible how AH face has changed and morphed during this trial, from a model into a demonic evil thing...” (M.C., Instagram comment).

Such reactions stage implicit criteria of credibility, invoking normative expectations surrounding the “ideal victim” (Christie, 1986; Popolla & Bagattini, 2024; Bouris, 2007). Another comment states: “She cannot even stop lie when she was caught on it. Also, she remembers everything what Johnny ‘did’ but cannot remember anything what would put her in a bad light...” (A.G., Instagram comment). The expectation of a linear, contradiction-free memory clashes with what the literature on narratives of violence has highlighted, often characterized by fragmentation and discontinuity (Popolla & Bagattini, 2024).

Heard appears as far as possible from the image of the perfect victim: young, sexually uninhibited (and, let us not forget, bisexual), accused of having betrayed Johnny Depp, reactive and, according to the evidence presented, capable of enacting forms of violence herself. Anything but a “perfect wife”, even going so far as to use illicit substances despite her spouse’s history of substance abuse and his evident struggles to overcome it. Above all, according to reconstructions presented during the trial, Heard was herself capable of outbursts of anger, aggression, provocative attitudes; in other words, she did not appear as a totally passive subject.

At the same time, the figure of the perpetrator appears filtered through dynamics of symbolic capital. The fact that Heard did not correspond in the slightest to the profile of the “ideal victim” was associated almost surgically with the socially perceived distance of Depp from the profile of what has been defined as the “ideal perpetrator”.

The perfect abuser, to be deemed worthy of attention and social sanction, must respond to certain characteristics: migrant, racialized, alcoholic or drug-addicted, suffering from severe mental disorders, to name just a few examples. Above all, he must, through these characteristics and his history, displace violence from the everydayness of our lives to a distant elsewhere—geographically, culturally, or in terms of health; he must suggest, in other words, that violence cannot have anything to do with us but is the mark of an alterity that we must and can reject (Popolla, 2022; Ciccone, 2009; Passuello et al., 2008).

Certainly, Depp has a history of alcohol and substance abuse, but his popularity, his power, his wealth, his ability to display empathy and availability toward others and toward his own characters (intriguing but never threatening) have always meant that, deep down, everything was forgiven to this eternal boy. Before returning to Heard, it is necessary to dwell on the characteristics of Depp just listed. In social perception, these qualities distance him from the figure of the typical perpetrator; yet for those who study male violence against women they become irrelevant. Statistics tell us that violence cuts across social groups, and qualitative research reminds us of the manipulative and seductive capacities of perpetrators who, far from being frightening monsters, are socially integrated individuals, multidimensional subjects in whom violence - understood as a potential male social resource - coexists with other socially valued positive traits.

Amber Heard, in the (social) popular jury, was forgiven nothing; neither her past nor her conduct during the trial. Any expression, mannerism, even the way she styled her hair pointed, according to public opinion, in a single unequivocal direction: she was not a “real” victim of violence. Curiously, while any detail concerning Heard, however insignificant to the trial, became proof of her guilt, no weight was given to evidence and testimony that undoubtedly portrayed Depp in a far from moderate light. An example is the messages sent by Depp to his friend and colleague Paul Bettany; text messages filled with resentment and aggression in which, allegedly jokingly, he proposed to burn Amber Heard and then rape her charred corpse to ensure her death. Social media comments following the disclosure of these messages were negligible compared to those that followed the release of a video showing Heard welcoming actor James Franco into the elevator of the building where she lived. She was accused of betrayal and, therefore, of being inclined to lies and deceit.

Certainly, Depp's conduct was also closely scrutinized, but any gesture, even the most contemptuous and disrespectful (laughing during Heard's deposition or that of her witnesses, eating in court, winking at Heard's sister when she was present at the trial), became an occasion for praise and proof of his innocence.

The hostility directed at Heard, and the online violence and insults she endured (and that few recognized), also affected her legal team as well as anyone, famous or unknown, who expressed closeness and support. Similarly, the support and mythologization surrounding Depp extended to his legal team and, above all, to attorney Camille Vasquez. The large group of the actor's supporters contributed to spreading the news of a romantic relationship between Depp and Vasquez, obsessively expressing admiration for the lawyer. In the best patriarchal tradition, Vasquez was contrasted with Heard, highlighting the virtues of the former and the flaws of the latter. Where Heard became a diabolical monster, Vasquez was repeatedly defined as "a real woman", competent, capable, and praiseworthy for her affectionate and maternal attitude toward Depp.

I love that a female attorney is doing the questioning. This way she can't say a man is attacking her. Plus, she is incredible and knows how to handle a hostile Amber. She is amazing. Well played! (M.R., comment to The Independent Post).

During the trial, we thus witnessed a reversal of the roles of victim and perpetrator. Amber Heard was not only accused by Depp and found liable by a popular jury, but was also exposed to public ridicule and blame not only by those who sympathized with Depp, but also by many women who accused her of harming "real victims", those who, because of her, would no longer be believed.

During cross-examination, Camille Vasquez, a member of Depp's legal team, insisted on two brief excerpts that the documentary selects as particularly revealing. In the first, a screenshot of a conversation between Heard and a friend is shown, to which she had attached a photo in which Depp, impaired by substance use, had allegedly fallen asleep holding an ice cream. The message originally sent by Heard, in addition to the photo, contained the outburst: "This is what I have to deal with!" Focusing on this material, Vasquez presses Heard: "You were protecting Mr. Depp?" Heard responds: "I was asking my best friend for help!"

The lawyer repeats: "You were protecting Mr. Depp?" and Heard reiterates: "I was asking my best friend for help. I need it too".

These moments of cross-examination appear perfectly consistent with what has just been described. In the exchange between Heard and her friend, unlike other moments, there is no trace of mockery or aggression toward Depp; the context of the communication seems clear and explicit: "This is what I have to deal with". The photo and the comment appear as testimony seeking comfort from someone with whom Heard had a meaningful friendship. Yet, in Vasquez's insistence and choice of words, the figure to be protected - and the one described as the victim - would be exclusively Depp. Heard, as wife or partner, should have sacrificed herself and focused on Depp's need for help, implicitly accused of prioritizing her own well-being and needs over those of the person who, at that moment, was deemed deserving of support.

Here the repeated question does not concern a material fact, but the moral interpretation of a behavior: the request for help is read and re-signified as a lack of loyalty. The issue, therefore, is not “what” Heard is doing, but to whom she is granting legitimacy as a subject in need of protection. In other words, even when the woman occupies the space of vulnerability and asks for help, she is required to keep the protection of the man as her priority.

Vasquez goes further, attributing to the status of victim of abuse and domestic violence an intrinsic profile of “nobility”, when she accuses Heard of wanting to appear as “a noble victim of domestic violence”. This brief phrase forcefully reiterates what the literature and anti-violence activists have denounced: in order to be believed, the victim of violence must perform her gender in accordance with traditional roles and expectations based on a stereotypical reading of femininity, characterized by modesty and purity, weakness and need (Vezzadini, 2012; Popolla & Bagattini, 2024). Vasquez’s accusation reverberates in comments under posts updating the trial: “Real domestic violence victims are not like this” or “Real domestic violence victims do not behave like this”, reproducing in the digital public sphere the same normative criterion of credibility.

Taken together, these elements allow the case to be read as a device of visibility that simultaneously activates dynamics of moral judgment, practices of entertainment, and circuits of economic valorization. The “double jury” is not merely an effective metaphor: it is a form of informal governance of meaning, produced through the interaction between platform architectures and pre-existing cultural repertoires. The perception of witnessing a “historic” event - a “real event”, to echo the voice-over - legitimized the intensive consumption of the hearings as serialized content, with the consequent normalization of practices of commentary and parody that, in other contexts, would have been perceived as inappropriate.

In this sense, the trial functioned as a machine of decontextualization: excerpts of testimony, individual phrases, hesitations, tears, breaths, glances, pauses were isolated and circulated as autonomous semiotic units, ready to be re-signified according to an already oriented narrative, following logics typical of remix culture (Jenkins, 2006) and participatory circulation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

A crucial consequence of this decontextualization concerns the temporality of listening. Within the judicial dispositif, testimony unfolds within a regulated sequence: questions, answers, objections, reformulations, clarifications. In the digital space, the same testimony is consumed in fragmented form, often without framing, within an accelerated and selective temporality. This transformation produces a “misalignment” between what the person testifying is doing - reconstructing a complex, often traumatic experience - and what the digital audience evaluates - performance, coherence, capacity for immediate persuasion. This friction makes particularly visible the performative dimension attributed to credibility: the woman must not only recount, she must convince, and she must do so according to the implicit criteria of digital attention, which reward concision, dramatization, narrative clarity, and emotional stability (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Papacharissi, 2015).

It is precisely here that processes of secondary victimization assume a platformized form. The literature has shown that secondary victimization can be produced by

institutions, media, and relational contexts, transforming the act of reporting into a further terrain of suffering and responsabilization (Boskovic & Misev, 2022). In digital contexts, these dynamics do not merely reproduce stereotypes: they are intensified by affordances that facilitate instant intervention, replicability of comments, and the production of discursive “evidence” from micro-clues (Hutchby, 2001; Bucher & Helmond, 2018). The platform always makes possible an additional reading, an additional suspicion, an additional irony, in a spiral in which credibility is constantly put at stake. Powell and Henry (2017) and Salter (2017) have shown how, in online contexts, delegitimization can take the form of persistent, coordinated, or simply massive attacks, with cumulative effects that exceed the single episode. The Depp-Heard case shows this commutativity: credibility is not eroded by a single comment, but by a sedimentation of hostile interpretations that, through repetition, become naturalized.

A further issue concerns the translation of credibility into visual legibility. In the cited comments, morality is sought in the body, face, voice, posture, and even in the alleged “metamorphosis” of physiognomy. This search for “signs” embodies a form of popular epistemology that attributes to the body the capacity to betray truth, recalling historical imaginaries of recognizable deviance (Lombroso & Ferrero, 2004). In the digital space, such imaginaries combine with visual culture and the tendency to judge through video fragments, screenshots, and gifs. Secondary victimization, in this framework, passes not only through what is said, but through what is “seen” and decided to be seen. Testimony becomes proof of performance, and performance becomes a moral clue. In this polarized environment, interpretations of the trial drew on conflicts that had already crystallized around the credibility of women’s allegations, extending those tensions into the circulation of digital content. As previously argued in relation to epistemic injustice, credibility here operates within pre-structured hierarchies rather than as a neutral attribute.

To understand why this shift translates into a reputational advantage for the man and a credibility deficit for the woman, it is useful to recall the notion of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). Credibility is not evenly distributed: it is modulated by structural prejudices that influence the “trust” granted to speakers. In the present case, Depp’s celebrity and symbolic capital function as protective devices, while Heard’s figure is interpreted through misogynistic repertoires of opportunism, falsity, or manipulation, made available by a long cultural tradition associating femininity with deceit or seductive cunning (Connell, 2002). The result is a moral hierarchy in which the woman must constantly prove, while the man can be believed by default.

The platformized dimension of these hierarchies is linked to engagement logics. Gillespie (2018) has shown how platforms exercise a form of governance through content selection and visibility, operating through opaque criteria that transform visibility into a stake (Bucher, 2018). In this scenario, content capable of generating outrage, mockery, or emotional identification tends to be rewarded, because it produces measurable interactions. This dynamic is well documented in the literature, particularly in reference to platform cultures that reward and favor practices of provocation and trolling that capitalize on attention (Ayolov, 2025; Yasin et al., 2025; Phillips, 2015). Ragebait fits within this economy as a technique of deliberately producing reactions: denunciation,

testimony, trauma become material for outrage, while outrage becomes fuel for the algorithm (Ayolov, 2023; 2025; Shin et al., 2025).

These logics help to interpret the disproportion between the hashtag #justiceforjohnnydepp, which reached over 20 billion views on TikTok, and #justiceforamberheard, which stopped at around 77.5 million². The quantitative disproportion suggests a symbolic hierarchy in content circulation, consistent with engagement-oriented algorithmic logics; not, therefore, a simple audience “preference”, but the outcome of a circuit in which the more polarizing narrative, and the one better suited to the platformized format, obtains more visibility and thus further production. The hashtag is not merely a label: it is an infrastructure of aggregation and amplification. The digital environment tends to reward short, repeatable, high emotional intensity content; in this sense, the narrative of the “truly innocent persecuted man” may be more easily serialized into memes and clips than a complex reconstruction of domestic and sexual violence, which would require context, time, and listening. Simplification is not only a cultural effect: it is a technical and commercial effect of platforms (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

As the preceding discussion on engagement logics has shown, visibility is not only symbolic but structurally rewarded. Langlois and Slane (2017) are useful here for understanding the economic dimension of reputation. They show how reputation can become an object of circulation and valorization within digital ecosystems, where defamatory or scandalous content generates traffic, data, and monetization. Although specifically focused on revenge porn, this framework allows the Depp-Heard case to be read as a device of “monetizing infamy”, in which creators, commentators, and reaction channels derive value from polarization and delegitimization.

Another passage concerns the effect of “moral superiority” constructed in the narrative following the verdict. The observation that the unconfirmed news of Depp’s renunciation of compensation was read as proof of moral superiority can be interpreted as consolidation of an ethical hierarchy: the male figure is not only perceived as innocent, but as magnanimous; the female figure is not only perceived as guilty, but as opportunistic, for example through the label “gold digger”. Morality is thus retroactively rewritten, converting a legal outcome into a total judgment on the person, with reputational effects that exceed the trial event.

From a sociological perspective, the trial reveals a sequence of transformations in which trauma is reframed as performance and gradually absorbed into circuits of moral evaluation, engagement, and value production. This chain is not gender-neutral: it is grafted onto a gender order that distributes credibility, respectability, and access to compassion differently. Secondary victimization is therefore not merely a collateral effect of the trial: it is a mode of functioning of the digital public sphere when male violence is named and made visible.

Under these conditions, the platform operates as an infrastructure that structures the circulation of judgment. The technical possibility of intervening produces a redistribution

² By 10 November 2023.

of discursive authority: expertise and opinion tend to be placed on the same level, and denunciations of domestic and sexual violence are treated as objects of ordinary debate.

This expansion of voice is not neutral with respect to the economic logics already described. In an attention economy, content capable of generating intense emotional reactions tends to obtain greater algorithmic visibility (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Polarization thus becomes a structurally incentivized resource.

As anticipated, the documentary shows images of live streams by YouTubers, many of whom do not appear to have profiles thematically related to judicial matters, as well as groups of people gathered in living rooms to follow the trial, commenting on every single image, word, and gesture of those present in court.

The fact that subjects who do not professionally deal with gender-based violence take the floor is not marginal, but structural. The platform redistributes discursive authority: the technical possibility of intervening - commenting, reacting, producing content - produces a widespread perception of legitimacy in which expertise and opinion tend to be placed on the same level. Denunciations of domestic and sexual violence are thus treated as objects of ordinary debate, inserted into a flow of content that privileges speed, polarization, and assertiveness.

In this sense, if memes are “a progressive mechanism of appropriation and reconfiguration of themes present in the public agenda by social actors, developed through remix between political content and elements of pop culture within the hybrid communicative ecosystem” (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019, 89, my translation), memes related to the Depp-Heard trial have collected and integrated narratives of contempt, hostility, and denial toward allegations that emerged in the United States through and following the MeToo movement. Within a culture of convergence (Jenkins, 2006), such remix practices do not remain peripheral, but contribute to sedimenting interpretive frames that are reiterated and normalized.

There is, however, a further issue only marginally addressed in the documentary: the possible economic returns - measured in new followers, interactions, visibility, and future collaborations - for those who chose to intervene in what, at the time of the trial, had become a trending and highly polarized topic online. The case unfolded within the economies of reputation discussed above (Langlois & Slane, 2017), in which scandalous or defamatory material circulates not only as expression, but as a resource capable of generating value.

In this environment, the production and amplification of polarizing content are not incidental. They contribute to the accumulation of visibility within platform hierarchies, where attention can be translated into traffic, data flows, and reputational gains for creators, commentators, and reaction channels. The economic incentives for those providing materials related to defamation are therefore far from negligible.

Much of this content is user-generated, requiring minimal investment from those who manage sites, channels, or profiles, while potentially attracting substantial interaction. As Langlois and Slane have shown, the commercial model of the internet rests on the capacity to mobilize affective and emotional reactions and to redirect users across interconnected informational networks. In this sense, controversy does not remain at the

level of discourse: it sustains circulation, reinforces hierarchies of visibility, and feeds monetization mechanisms that extend beyond the single event.

Within this configuration, polarization itself becomes economically productive. Practices of provocation and outrage described in the literature on ragebait and digital hostility cultures (Ayolov, 2023; 2025; Shin et al., 2025; Phillips, 2015) operate in a context where attention constitutes a commodity (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Phillips, 2015; Franck, 2019). Content capable of eliciting intense emotional reactions tends to generate greater engagement and, consequently, greater algorithmic prominence. The delegitimization of the woman who reports violence can thus function not only as a cultural stance, but as a practice embedded in circuits of visibility and value production.

The case reveals an intertwining between pre-existing misogynistic cultural repertoires and technical architectures that render them scalable. Reputation functions as a node within networks of value production rather than as a purely moral attribute. In this sense, online secondary victimization assumes a systemic dimension: it cannot be reduced to individual hostile comments, but is inscribed within an ecosystem that incentivizes polarization and renders controversy economically productive.

Considered in combination, these elements indicate that mediatized justice in the platform era exceeds a mere extension of courtroom publicity. The transformation of testimony into reproducible, fragmentable, and monetizable content alters the very conditions of public credibility. When this transformation concerns denunciations of male violence against women, dynamics of secondary victimization are not merely reproduced, but may be intensified by the combination of misogynistic cultural repertoires (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Jane, 2017) and engagement-oriented technical architectures.

5. Final remarks

The “double jury” produces an effect of anticipatory verdict. Before the formal jury delivers its decision, the social jury has already established a narrative, and that narrative consolidates through mechanisms of repetition, memification, and polarization. In this sense, the case illuminates the performative dimension of mediatized justice: the trial is consumed as a series, and testimony is evaluated as proof of authenticity. This favors a reduction of complexity - typical of domestic violence, often characterized by ambivalence, dependency, cycles, and contradictions - into a binary narrative more compatible with platformized consumption.

The analysis also highlights a paradox: visibility, often invoked as a tool of justice and recognition, can itself become a technology of vulnerability. Testimony made accessible to a mass audience, especially when it concerns sexual violence, can be transformed into an object of mockery and moral evaluation, reactivating forms of control over women’s bodies and speech. This dimension invites a critical reconsideration of the assumption that the “publicity” of a trial is always and necessarily beneficial; within the platform society, publicity can turn into expropriation of narrative, decontextualization, and emotional exploitation (Van Dijck et al., 2018; Papacharissi, 2015).

Finally, the case shows how online secondary victimization cannot be reduced to deviant individual behaviors. It is a socially and technically mediated process in which gendered cultural repertoires, economic incentives, and platform architectures converge. Popular misogyny operates as an interpretive grammar that renders hostility toward the woman who reports violence plausible, while engagement logics make such hostility scalable and profitable. In this sense, online secondary victimization appears as a phenomenon requiring not only cultural or educational responses, but also political and regulatory ones, insofar as it concerns infrastructures of visibility and business models.

The reporting of male violence against women unfolds within institutional and cultural dispositifs while simultaneously passing through technical infrastructures that multiply exposure, fragmentation, and reappropriation. The overlap between judicial court and social court produces a redefinition of the conditions of public recognition. Testimony becomes circulating content, credibility becomes a performance evaluated in real time, and reputation becomes a node within economic circuits that may incentivize polarization and delegitimization. In this configuration, the gender order continues to operate as a structure that differentially distributes trust and suspicion, but it does so within an environment that amplifies its reach.

This contribution suggests that online secondary victimization is not simply the digital reproduction of already familiar dynamics, but a restructuring of them. The combination of sedimented misogynistic repertoires and engagement-oriented logics of visibility produces a dispositif in which female credibility can be continuously questioned and monetized. Understanding this transformation requires attending to the infrastructures through which discourse acquires force and durability.

In a context where the publicity of the trial intersects with platform logic, the issue is not only the factual veracity of the allegations, but the structural conditions that regulate who can be believed and under what circumstances. It is on this terrain - at the crossroads of justice, gender, and digital infrastructures - that a significant part of the possibility of recognition for women who report violence is now at stake.

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