

(Intro music)

Kelsey Reichmann: Welcome to season four of Sidebar, a podcast by Courthouse News. I'm your host, Kelsey Reichmann. Listeners, I'm sure you're tuning in today because you trust us professional journalists to bring you the most accurate legal news of the day. But have you ever read one of our stories and wanted to do some more digging? Maybe it's a story about a missing person or an unsolved murder, the latest political controversy or even the hidden meaning behind Taylor Swift's latest song. In the need to know more, it's easy to fall down a rabbit hole populated by the Nancy Drews of the internet, otherwise known as internet sleuths. A cousin of sorts to reporters, these online investigators dig into the biggest mysteries of our time and, for better or worse, these amateur detectives have carved out their own section of the internet. Sidebar reporter Kirk McDaniel is here, magnifying glass in hand, to explore how the internet sleuth came to be.

Kirk McDaniel: What do you like to do for fun? Everyone has some sort of hobby, something to keep them busy, pass the time or unwind after work. Maybe listening to your favorite podcast is that thing. The internet has played a huge role in changing our hobbies and has provided space for entirely new forms of entertainment to emerge. One such hobby that has grown with the help of the internet, and especially social media, is internet sleuthing. On websites like TikTok, Reddit or Websleuths, yep, that's a website, people post about the latest theories about mysteries, big and small.

TikTok clip: Taylor Swift has been wearing wigs for years. Has wig theory been debunked? I said that Taylor Swift had been wearing a wig and I still think that, but some people brought up some excellent points that might...

KM: Of course, T-Swift has tons of videos made about her. That TikTok video over whether or not she wears wigs got nearly 50,000 likes. Maybe politics is more your thing, though. Well, say no more. Internet sleuths have investigated a certain former presidential candidate over their footwear.

TikTok clip: There's recently been a lot of online speculation about whether or not Ron DeSantis wears lifts inside of his boots.

TikTok clip: He is most definitely wearing heels, so Ron DeSantis' shoes have been looking very weird lately.

KM: I think you get the point that I'm trying to make here. Internet sleuths have their eyes on just about everything, but their key area of engagement is looking into murders, missing persons cases and possible serial killers. That last one hits a little close to home for me. Last year, sleuths took it upon themselves to figure out whether or not a serial killer is running amok here in Austin, Texas. But before we can get into that, we must talk about who or what a sleuth is. Internet sleuths are essentially hobby investigators who use public information to solve cases. For many Americans, their gateway into internet sleuthing is through big cases that capture the public's attention. This was certainly the case in September 2021, when the eyes of the nation were focused on finding Gabby Petito, a 22-year-old social media influencer who went missing while on a four-month-long, cross-country adventure with her fiancé, Brian Laundrie. This case swept the internet, leading sleuths to create content recapping updates and trying to answer the biggest unknowns. TikTok user Miranda Baker posted a video recounting how she and her boyfriend picked up Laundrie in Grand Teton National Park.

Miranda Baker: My boyfriend and I have been in contact with a bunch of different people to help piece together different parts of this case, but we picked him up at Colter Bay, like I said, at 5:30...

KM: Two days after that video was posted, travel YouTubers Jen and Brian Bethune posted a video they captured while visiting the national park, showing Petito and Laundrie's van sitting vacant on the side of a park road. Both videos received millions of views and fueled an army of online investigators whose eyes were on the case. Sadly, Laundrie murdered Petito and went missing himself. He was later discovered deceased in a Florida forest, having taken his own life. Just a year later, another case would capture the same attention, this one in 2022. It was the murders of four University of Idaho students that attracted the hobby detectives. Idaho-based Courthouse News reporter Carson McCullough has been covering the case and told me that internet sleuths clamored to get lost in all of its details.

Carson McCullough: I think perhaps the most important part of the timeline that people forget about is the period of uncertainty, which was after the killings happened, that there was a lot of questions over this terrible, grizzly crime that had happened. And for over a month, and this would have been December of 2022, I believe there was over a month of just countless stories about leads and conspiracies and mysteries and who did it, and it took them a long time before they had any kind of a suspect. And that time period, especially for someone who was here in Idaho as it was happening, was a crazy time because you saw so much speculation and you saw so much just chatter about who did this and who did what, and it ultimately led to an arrest.

KM: The accused, Bryan Kohberger, was a doctoral student who attended a school miles away from the university. The trial date in the case has not been set yet, but prosecutors are seeking a summer start and the death penalty. So, what drives the community? Why is it that the reaction to these crimes is to learn more and dive deeper into their really gut-wrenching details? As much as we may be able to find the answer to that question through psychology, there is more to be said when we look at pop culture.

David Schmid: I think that it's important to emphasize that in some ways, a curiosity about the extremes of human behavior is completely natural and understandable. I think we're always going to be fascinated by people who do things that we couldn't imagine doing. My name is David Schmid and I'm a professor of English at the University of Buffalo. I am originally from England but have been living in the U.S. since the late '80s.

KM: Professor Schmid has written several books about crime media and serial killers in American culture. I asked him why true crime stories seem to be so popular in the United States.

DS: Popular culture in general, and violent popular culture in particular, is very, very good at not making their audiences feel guilty about their interest in violence. We are told, both implicitly and explicitly, again and again, that our interest in the dark side of human nature is not only understandable, it's also valuable. So, for example, take a show like "CSI." The message of that show is that you're being entertained by violence, but you're also learning about forensic science. Or take a show like "Law & Order: SVU." Again, you're watching a show that is based upon the pain and suffering of other people, but that's not what it emphasizes. Instead, we learn about legal procedure, we learn about police procedure. So, popular culture has developed a range of ways to make our interest in the subjects not only legitimate, but also it wants to give us the feeling that it's educational and that we're making almost a positive contribution to society by being knowledgeable about these subjects.

KM: Now, there's a big difference between consuming a piece of media like "Criminal Minds" or your favorite true crime podcast and being an active participant in it. So, how did we get to where we are today, with folks jumping online and taking up the mantle of internet sleuth? Let's first consider that term.

DS: I think that's significant because it places the emphasis on what the internet enabled that did not exist before the rise of the internet.

KM: What about the entertainment factor?

DS: The bottom line is, no matter what kind of true crime we're talking about, we are getting entertainment from the pain and the suffering and the victimization of other people. But I think, with the phenomenon of internet sleuthing in particular, there is a concerted and conscious effort to turn that fact and make it into something positive. So, in other words, if we are going to be entertained by crime and by murder and by victimization, the least that we can do is to try and make that a positive by helping to solve cases that are unsolved.

KM: Anyone can become an internet sleuth. Some people choose more pedestrian topics, like Ron DeSantis' shoes, and some focus on truly the worst parts of humanity. Both have found their place on the web and have no signs of going away, but what can we learn about sleuthing by taking a look at one of the earliest examples of it?

KR: I think for a lot of people it's the morbid fascination and desire to crack the case that may bring them into the niche phenomena that is internet sleuthing, but it's also something much simpler that keeps them coming back case after case.

KM: Absolutely, and to better understand what that is, I had to talk to somebody who really understands what true crime media is and what crowd sleuthing is from the abstract.

Rachel Monroe: My name is Rachel Monroe. I am a writer and a journalist. I wrote a book called "Savage Appetites" about women and true crime, and I am also a contributing writer at The New Yorker based in Texas.

KM: How would you describe your relationship with true crime?

RM: Well, I've had periods of being more and less casual about it, I guess. It's just sort of a genre of media that's like really kind of captured my brain since a young age, since probably like too young an age thinking back on it. But, yeah, definitely a reader of the true crime books, a watcher of the true crime shows and a listener of the true crime podcasts. To a greater and lesser extent, kind of depending on, like, what's going on in my life.

KM: One case Monroe covers in her book involves the earliest version of internet sleuths. They played a pivotal role in the case of the West Memphis Three.

RM: This is three young boys who were found killed in the woods in West Memphis and then three teenagers who were sort of like local misfits, who were put on trial and convicted of the crime. You know very, very little evidence. This is during the era of the satanic panic. So, you know, you had experts testifying that, you know, because they wore black trench coats and listened to Metallica, you know, they

were probably in a satanic gang and, you know, these were like child sacrifices. There are, like a lot of cases like this in the '80s and '90s, right. This one happened to get a lot of attention because some filmmakers made a documentary about it for HBO.

KM: That documentary is "Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills." Here's a clip from the trailer.

Paradise Lost clip: We, the jury, find Jessie Lloyd Misskelley Jr. guilty of second-degree murder, Jason Baldwin guilty of capital murder, Damien Echols guilty of capital murder. This doesn't change anything. Our son was still murdered. Christopher is dead and he was tortured to death by three murdering bastards on a ditch bike. He was eight years old.

KM: This case is one that truly shocks the conscious. The tragedy of the children who were brutally murdered is one that demands justice. However, and this is what the documentary does so well, is focus on how the tragedy gave way to a community turning on these teenagers for the sake of them being different. The young men are Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin and Jessie Misskelley Jr. Jason and Jesse were sentenced to life in prison, while Damien was given the death penalty.

RM: I think there were a lot of people out there who identified with the young men who were convicted. You know, just as just outsiders, right, like weirdo goth metal kids who, just for the mere fact of their like different aesthetic preferences were penned as satanists. And so, I think that HBO documentary like got a lot of people curious about the case.

KM: You may see where this is going now. As the interest in this case grew to obsession, people began doing their own digging into the case. They were, in a way, some of the earliest versions of today's internet sleuths.

RM: The internet is just kind of starting to kick into gear and they would, you know, you search for it online and they're, and they're looking for more. Like I think that's a very common feeling in terms of true crime. You know, you read about something, you watch something, you listen to something and you're like, but I gotta know more. Like there's more there, and at that point there wasn't more online, and so people, people basically banded together and created a community around, you know, getting more information and keeping the case in the spotlight.

KM: This case is a great example of what can be accomplished by a sustained internet sleuthing effort. By keeping the story in the spotlight, new evidence was able to be uncovered, leading to the three's acquittal 18 years after they were sentenced. This case can also be seen as a rare instance where web sleuths played a key role in getting a positive outcome.

RM: You know a lot of these cases it seems to me that we have like relatively few examples of crowdsourcing or online detectives like actually solving cases. It doesn't, it doesn't tend to work. But what does tend to work is that when cases are big online, have this kind of following, have this presence, just keeping the attention on them forces the system to sort of not forget about the case, and so that's kind of what happened here, just like the pressure over decades to keep looking for new evidence, keep, you know, doing new methods of DNA, like all of this stuff is what ended up with the three young men who had been convicted being released from prison. So, it's not that the online detectives didn't solve it, but they like kept it, same thing with a Golden State Killer, right that that had a very active online

following and you know everybody had all these theories about who was the killer. They were all like completely wrong, but having that focus, that attention, is what ended up getting the case solved.

KM: In my conversation with Schmid he actually echoed this very point.

DS: I think that the vast majority of people who participate in internet sleuthing do so with the best of intentions. I believe that they genuinely want to help and that they are motivated by a desire to see justice be done, for the victims to be avenged, as it were, but I don't think they have the ability, the resources or the capacity to do what it is that they want to do.

KM: As much as discussing horrific crimes, investigating cold cases and seeking justice being people's intro into internet sleuthing, what keeps them coming back for more is really quite simple, and that's community. The internet, specifically social media, has completely changed how we meet people with similar interests. Can you imagine a community such as this taking roots in the '50s or '60s, when true crime media alone was seen as trashy or unbecoming of polite conversation? On the World Wide Web, you can find your fellow freaks who were fascinated by crime and have the noble desire to see justice win out. What I find most amazing about these armchair detectives is that, even when a case has been cold for decades or someone they believe was wrongfully convicted is stuck in a cell, they keep the story alive, keep the spotlight shining 'til people in power listen and act. But sometimes sleuthing can go wrong. With bad facts and a viral theory driving the investigation, sleuths can also become what is essentially a true crime rumor mill.

KR: Now, Kirk, you've actually experienced what happens when crowd sleuths come to your town.

KM: Yeah, that's right. Do you ever remember hearing anything about a serial killer stalking the streets of Austin?

KR: No, I don't think that bit of Texas news made it to D.C. What happened?

KM: Well, there was a ton of rumors that caused quite the commotion, but in the aftermath, both the city and the sleuthing community learned a valuable lesson. Throughout the beginning and much of the first half of 2023, bodies began being discovered in Austin's Lady Bird Lake. The lake, which is part of the Colorado River, so it's more of a river than a lake, lies in the heart of downtown. Just walking a couple blocks, one could go from seeing ducks paddling around in the water to some of the city's biggest spots for grabbing some food or a stiff drink. This is also an area that gets a ton of use from both locals and tourists alike. Now, as the body count rose to five in the span of only five months, people became rightfully concerned. That, coupled with little to no information from police, internet sleuths got involved. In no time at all, many of them began speculating that all of this was the work of a serial killer, and thus, the Rainey Street Ripper was born. The name comes from a popular drinking area known as Rainey Street, which is also a very short walk from the banks of the river. If you spend any time on Facebook or TikTok, this may all sound very familiar.

Chance Townsend: I went to Rainey Street with some friends, and it was interesting because, compared to like maybe South Congress or West 6th, it doesn't have the same vibe, I feel like it's lost some of its charm.

KM: That is Chance Townsend. He's an editor for Mashable and lives here in Austin. He is one of the thousands of people who became interested in these deaths and the mystery into just how the bodies

came to be in the lake. Last year, Townsend wrote about the serial killer hysteria in Austin for Mother Jones magazine.

CT: Alright, let's see how much further this can go, and then that's how you get drawn into it.

KM: Take a look on Facebook today and you'll find several groups devoted to finding the supposed serial killer. There's Lady Bird Lake Mysterious Deaths - Does Rainey Street have a Serial Killer? Kind of a mouthful, which has over 4,000 members. There's also similar groups like Lady Bird Lake Serial Killer, which has around 150 members. Did you get the sense that it was more kind of people, kind of in this, the kind of entertainment mindset that like it's exciting to talk about, it's exciting to share these ideas, or that it was more people who were really like in an earnest way, trying to like solve the crimes?

CT: So, it was a curious mix of like, all of those things. So, you have some people who are approaching this from like, I live in the city, I find this fascinating, I want to know more. People who, like, don't even remotely live anywhere in Austin, they're just so curious. They want to like, solve the crime and share their theories. And then there are people who tried to take this opportunity as a way to like make money.

KM: Speculation about a Austin serial killer went full viral.

TikTok clip: Is there a serial killer stalking men in Austin? Since last summer, nine bodies have been pulled from the 416-acre lake, which runs throughout downtown Austin.

TikTok clip: Not only was another body found in Lady Bird Lake, in which we have no details on, but I decided to go to Rainey Street last night.

TikTok clip: Another body in Austin's Lady Bird Lake reignites Rainey Street River Killer fears. At 1:21 p.m. Saturday...

KM: But with this heightened level of engagement online, the theories began to turn to strange places.

CT: True crime groups are very prone to the same conspiratorial thinking that Covid and QAnon groups. So, it is a prime place for very bad actors to try to assert their own right-wing beliefs. There's one guy in that group who's very adamant that there was no serial killer and that all the deaths were just a result of liberal Austin defunding the police. And he would, like, post every day a new homicide that happened in or around Rainey Street to prove this point that like, oh, it's because we defunded the police there's always crime. Actually, the whole span of this series is crazy. It wasn't just a drowning, he said. Every drowning, homicide, carjacking, thefts was all revolved with just like us defunding the police. For a lot of people it's a morbid way to pass the time. It does attract a lot of busy bodies within the space. But, you know, I can't hate on people, like, just trying to, like, just want some joy, but also I feel like this media in particular is very, people, like, just take advantage of the victims and their grief for just curiosity and entertainment. So, there's a weird sadness to it, because there were like people who are like, "Hey, this is my brother, he you know, died around here and can you please help me? I think this is related."

KM: In April of last year, the Austin Police Department came out and sought to quell the rumors by providing their own explanation for the deaths. The killer in these tragic cases was a mix of alcohol and easy access to the water. In a statement, the department said that in the autopsies of the individuals they found no indication of trauma or foul play. So, this wasn't as much a problem of crime in the city as

it was city planning, according to the police. But that didn't stop the sleuths, in large part because they didn't have a good reason to trust the police's account.

CT: Have you, like, thoroughly done the job, right? That just sounds like a lazy excuse, right? So, it's kind of both. You know, that distrust of just a general lack of evidence that base the belief, yeah, of there being a serial killer, especially with the timelines. But the timelines really stretched out, yeah, I'm getting into that, because it was just like the three dudes between, like in a couple months, and then it turned into like 15 dudes for the last 10 years, and you just like, whoa, we're all these people come?

KM: Like anything on the internet that goes viral, the Rainey Street Ripper became something uncontrollable. Here's Rachel Monroe again.

RM: I think the Rainey Street Ripper is like a perfect example of that. You know wanting to, to put these ordinary tragedies into this. That's almost like they don't matter unless they're part of some like huge, elaborate, macabre cover-up thing which I think it's like a real, does a real disservice. If that's like the only thing that we're like looking for or listening to or paying attention to, then that means we end up not actually having a clear picture of what crime really looks like and it means like we're sort of less likely to see what's actually happening, if that makes sense. The more that we kind of train ourselves to think of crime as something that's this super complicated thing. Or you know death, you know these deaths, which many of which were not crimes as far as I can tell. Yeah, we're missing out on, like what can actually be done to make people safer. But there's, you know the again, like the algorithmic incentives, like it or not, nobody wants to hear about city planning on TikTok.

KM: The Rainey Street Ripper had everything a story needed to stick in the public eye and stay there. Here's professor Schmid.

DS: I think whenever you're considering people's interest in true crime in general and the internet sleuthing phenomenon in particular, you have to think about what cases are considered to be mediagenic, what cases are going to attract and keep people's attention. And one part of that puzzle is the enduring appeal of serial killer cases. Serial killer cases especially when you can attach a name to them, like the Rainey Street Ripper, a great example of a conspiracy theory dynamic in miniature. Because once they've received a name, the process of urban legend building can proceed, and I think it's that attraction, it's that figure that really draws people to internet sleuthing.

KM: Looking back on the experience, Chance Townsend sees the craze surrounding the Rainey Street Ripper as the symptom of a deeper problem.

CT: When situations like these arise, it just kind of reinforces to me that like we are led by like very bad people and very bad systems that do not benefit us whatsoever. And I feel like when the average citizen feels like they need to take it in their own hands to solve something that like the police should be solving, you've created a very like disastrous situation that is inevitably going to blow up in your face.

KM: Is something like this, truly, just as it exists, harmful for people on the internet or would you think that there's some good that comes out of it, or is it really hard to tell?

CT: I don't think I've ever seen anything good come of, like obsession with true crime. Mostly it's just harmful because it just creates a headspace of fear that like should not exist in the first place. I actually shouldn't say like true crime content shouldn't exist, but I feel like there's a certain way to do it.

KM: The case of the Rainey Street Ripper is not the only case where we can find people flocking to an eye-catching story and not being careful with their sleuthing. In the University of Idaho murders case, Carson McCullough and I talked about how some sleuths openly blamed innocent people for the murders.

CM: I would say perhaps the most notorious example was the TikTok star, and forgive me if I'm pronouncing her name wrong, Ashley Guillard, and she was a TikToker who had over 100,000 followers on her platform and she, during that month of uncertainty, during that time period of who did it, where did they do it, how did they do it and all those things, she stepped forward and she again claimed to have very easy answers. She had some very bold claims and the crux of them came down to that she was accusing a North Idaho university professor of being behind the murders. She made a couple of references to there being some type of romantic connection between one of the victims and the professor and, quite frankly, after the investigation played out, after everything sort of started to take place and take form, those claims were bogus. I mean, the police never showed a shred of interest in that university professor. She was never charged. She was never, you know, to my knowledge she was never put under any serious microscope because the claims that that social media star had were unfounded and there was no factual basis to any of them. The university professor has since sued that TikToker, also still ongoing, she has sued her for defamation. The TikToker attempted to counter sue, claiming that her statements were guarded by the First Amendment. The judge quickly dismissed that counter suit. And that is a very real reminder of what happens when you have people who don't necessarily put in the work, don't necessarily put in the investigative duties that people expect from them, and then they just come out and say whatever the heck they want.

KM: It would be short-sighted to only see the negative in internet sleuthing and wrong to suggest that it should disappear altogether. Any community, whether on the internet or not, has moments where it goes too far. That much is clear when we look at the Rainey Street Ripper or the University of Idaho case.

DS: So, internet sleuthing, if we're going to think about what potential it could have and what positive effect it could have, I would say it needs to broaden its focus a lot more to include not just cold cases and not just cases that catch the public's imagination, like Gabby Petito or the Rainey Street Ripper, but those cases that are genuinely under-researched, under-investigated. And that's not something that's happened yet, partly because internet sleuthing is still being driven by the entertainment factor more than anything else.

KM: A great example of what professor Schmid is talking about is the space of missing and murdered Indigenous women groups. As the name suggests, internet sleuths and podcasters are using their influence to spotlight cases of Indigenous women in the United States and Canada whose disappearance or murder has gone unsolved. By talking about these cases, people must grapple with the reality of how Indigenous communities are treated, while trying to bring in the kind of attention given to high-profile cases heard on the evening news.

RM: The poverty and the racism and the jurisdictional issues and the failures of the criminal justice system that plague native communities and native populations, end up having this sort of similar result, where you have hundreds of these cases that are unsolved and, instead of thinking of them as kind of each an individual tragedy, realizing that they share these common threads, even just by naming this as a

category, naming this as a problem, you start to kind of see it differently and be able to treat it, think about it systematically, rather than thinking about just a bunch of individual and making people aware. This is something I've seen a lot on TikTok, making people aware that this is an issue.

KM: Another way internet sleuthing is changing for the better is in the moderation of online discussions so as to protect from spreading bad information and preventing any harm to the victim's families.

RM: On these Reddit forums and on these Facebook groups, there are a lot of them that have really strong moderation and self-policing and internal guidelines. Websleuths seems really good at this, you know, not posting the names of somebody unless they have or links to their social media, unless they are named an official suspect by law enforcement, so, you're not just tearing through people's lives for your entertainment. So, I think, just like searching out groups like that that seem to have a strong internal ethic, like very clear kind of code about like why are we doing this? What are we doing it for? What are our rules? You know we're not just doing this for self-aggrandizing reasons or to be voyeuristic, but because you know we just want to put our brains together and help get attention. I think that's this impulse like at its best.

KM: Finally, for internet sleuthing and true crime media to be a force for good, consumers must show that they want to explore underrepresented cases. If a missing person's cold case could get the same attention that the Rainey Street rumors had at its height last summer, that could have had a huge impact. Not only does that send the message that people have not forgotten about the victim, but it also tells law enforcement that justice has yet to be served and they should be doing something. Internet sleuthing may be to many an odd hobby, but it's here to stay, whether it is piecing together the latest Taylor Swift post on Instagram or seeking to right a grave miscarriage of justice. Keep an eye out for what the new viral sleuthing trend may be and stay vigilant not to fall for mere rumors. And while you're supporting us here on Sidebar and at Courthouse News, which we greatly are thankful for, get out there and discover a podcaster or internet sleuth doing their work for good. I highly recommend checking out the We Are Resilient podcast. They're helping tell the stories of missing and murdered Indigenous women and keeping the spotlight on such an important issue. Also, consider how you consume true crime media. Consider its purpose and what the storytellers seek to gain out of telling their story. Ethical true crime exists. It's just a matter of seeking it out. I want to give a big thanks to everyone who spoke to me for this episode. You can read Chance Townsend's article about the serial killer craze here in Austin on Mother Jones and find his reporting at Mashable. Rachel Monroe's work can be found on The New Yorker. Check out her book "Savage Appetites," as well as professor Schmid's publications at a bookstore near you.

KR: And thank you, Kirk, for your reporting. Now that we know the perils and pitfalls of internet sleuthing, hopefully we can sort the truth from rumor to use the minds of our favorite internet detectives for good. For more stories from Kirk and Carson, check out courthousenews.com, and if you liked this episode and wanted to share your thoughts, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. Finally, check out our social media pages for more from your favorite legal news outlet. On our next episode, Amanda Pampuro takes a look at false advertising with a Valentine's Day twist. See you then.

(Outro music)