

# “The Fans of Michael Jackson v Wade Robson and James Safechuck”: Forensic Fandom and the Staging of a Media Tribunal

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## Abstract

This essay analyses fan reactions to the sexual abuse allegations brought forward against Michael Jackson in *Leaving Neverland* (Dan Reed, 2019). In particular, it focuses on fans' production of nonfiction media produced in defense of Jackson, trying to restore the artist's reputation by discrediting his accusers. Based on textual and content analysis of videos by The Michael Jackson Innocent Project (MJIP) and its wider network, this essay positions these videos within the context of documentaries and nonfiction programs produced on the singer. Arguing that the videos represent a form of “forensic fandom,” the essay maintains that fans stage a “media tribunal” against Jackson's accusers to defend the singer. Because of their biased argumentation, however, fans reinforce myths about disingenuous allegations of sexual violence.

## Keywords

Media tribunal, forensic fandom, Michael Jackson, YouTube, sexual abuse

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## Introduction

In early 2019, Dan Reed's *Leaving Neverland* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and shortly thereafter was broadcast on HBO. The two-part documentary chronicles the sexual abuse allegations by Wade Robson and James Safechuck against singer Michael Jackson. Amplified by the #MeToo movement, the press extensively covered old and new allegations against Jackson for a few weeks surrounding the film's release, asking how they could have been overlooked in the first place. As Jackson expert Margo Jefferson contemplated in reaction to the film, the "vulnerable genius was also the calculating paedophile [and that's] what we must reckon with now, what we must refuse to simplify" (2019, n.p.). However, the immediate response to *Leaving Neverland* showed that many fans refused to follow this reasoning. Some fans posted favorable statements about Jackson on social media, wrote defensive blog posts and threatening messages to the films' producers, appeared on television to defend the singer, organized flash mobs and demonstrations, collected money for public poster campaigns, and even sued Robson and Safechuck for defamation (Blistein, 2019; Coscarelli, 2019). To these fans, *Leaving Neverland* is merely a fictional "mockumentary" created by a biased director (Rain, 2019). They followed the established "fandom's party line ... that any allegations amounted to extortion plots by hangers-on hellbent on tarnishing Jackson and exploiting his naïveté" (Coscarelli, 2019, n.p.), claiming that the two men accusing Jackson now also took advantage of the late singer's inability to defend himself as well as the lack of US laws protecting deceased individuals from defamation.

This essay focuses on one form of response to the allegations by a select group of Michael Jackson fans: the production and circulation of counter-documentaries and reportages to *Leaving Neverland*, in which fans attempt to discredit Robson and Safechuck, their families and Reed. Videos produced by, circulated through and associated with the YouTube channel of [The Michael Jackson Innocent Project](#) (n.d.) and its wider network of fan projects with similar goals are at the center of this discussion. Having posted the first video responding to *Leaving Neverland* on January 12, 2019, the MJIP describes itself as dedicated "to fully and wholeheartedly defending Michael's name" and to doing what "mainstream media refuses to do: Tell the truth." By May 2021, the project's YouTube channel had reached more than 17,000 subscribers and a total of 1,824,597 views. The MJIP operates in the contemporary climate of "post-truth," in which "boundaries between lying and truth-telling and, likewise, fact and fiction" are increasingly blurring and "the effectiveness of assertion of a truthclaim in itself becomes the key criterion of truth" (Kalpokas, 2019, p.11 & p. 5). The MJIP is an example for fans trying to maintain their "ontological security" (Williams, 2018) by redirecting blame at the accusers. Delegitimizing them through often regressive commentaries on sexual violence and its survivors, these fan projects are a reiteration of an "alternative influence network" (Lewis, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Although the videos regularly adapt the form and aesthetics of mainstream media outlets, the MJIP and its partners reject "traditional...media norms for establishing credibility in favor of the norms of participatory culture" (Lewis, 2020, p. 204) and, in doing so, functionalize fandom's

“guerilla-style tactics of those with lesser resources to win their battle” for their own purposes (Gray et al., 2007, p. 2). As such, the fans behind the MJIP and related videos merge participatory culture with participatory politics (Jenkins et al., 2016, 2020) by reinforcing myths about disingenuous allegations of sexual violence and by denying the systemic nature of sexual violence.

The videos circulating within this network are either produced by the MJIP or others and then shared on the channel’s playlist. Similarly, videos by the MJIP are embedded on websites such as *The Michael Jackson Allegations* (n.d.), which follows a similar agenda to defend Jackson through defamation of his accusers. Furthermore, the videos are often tagged with the hashtag #MJInnocent (#mjinnocent, n.d.) that leads to similar productions.<sup>2</sup> The videos circulating in this network and under this hashtag range in form from compilation films (using only preexisting audiovisual material) to original journalistic footage by individual fans. The reach of these videos differs, however. Most of them circulate primarily online, where in terms of reception “commentary fields...allow viewer participation and contribute to reinforce the feeling of belonging to a community with shared values” (Sørenssen, 2014, p. 207). On the other hand, Danny Wu’s (2019) independently produced *Square One: Michael Jackson* has also been covered in various print and broadcast media and is available for rent or purchase on Amazon. The arguments brought forward in the videos are based on laborious textual analysis of *Leaving Neverland* and other media reporting, dissecting them to detect alleged inaccuracies or deceptive production strategies. Fan videos also summon further evidence by interviewing alternative witnesses and gathering information from materials such as court files, FBI reports, expert opinions and archival footage. Thus, fans produce and use the films to stage a public trial and “prove”—or act as if they had “proven”—Jackson’s innocence and Robson and Safechuck’s guilt. The videos are an attempt to frame the singer’s accusers as deceits, turning fans themselves into conspiracists and producers of “conspiracy documentaries” (Sørenssen, 2014) as they circulate their own conspiracy theories of the sexual abuse allegations as a widely networked deceit.

Still, the videos are more than the alleged revelation and production of conspiracies, respectively. They compensate for the fact that Jackson will neither be tried for these recent allegations nor see a repeat of the 2005 acquittal, when a jury appointed by the State of California found the singer “not guilty” on all 10 counts brought against him.<sup>3</sup> Taking on the dual role of advocate and judge, fans use their documentary projects to recast the 2005 criminal trial *The People of the State of California v Michael Joe Jackson* as *The Fans of Michael Jackson versus Wade Robson and James Safechuck*.

## Method

This essay examines the defense mechanisms developed by fans to convince audience of the validity of their arguments in a moment of crisis for their community. Based on a textual and content analysis of videos produced by and circulated through the MJIP’s YouTube channel, affiliated sites and the hashtag #MJInnocent, I argue that fans use

nonfiction media to stage a public trial and prove Jackson's innocence and Robson and Safechuck's guilt. The fan-made films discussed in this essay were uploaded to YouTube after *Leaving Neverland* was released in early 2019. They were either produced by MJIP or uploaded by other users and then shared on the MJIP channels. Additional films were considered based on YouTube's recommendations for other videos as well as through the #MJInnocent hashtag. The first section of this essay positions these films within the context of nonfiction media on Jackson and the role it played in the sexual abuse allegations against him. It analyzes the videos as fans' responses to the abuse allegations but also as a criticism of what they perceive to be biased media coverage by mainstream media. The second section argues that these films should be understood as an expanded form of what Jason Mittell calls "forensic fandom" (2007; 2009): a specific research perspective and mode of textual production working with a variety of evidence to convince viewers of Jackson's innocence. The third section then follows Cornelia Vismann's analysis of the role of media in the judicial system (2011) and argues that the videos represent a "media tribunal" that ultimately is directed to present and potential accusers, trying to silence them by showing the repercussions they will face if they come forward. The biased discreditation of Jackson's accusers thus highlights the toxic and regressive potential of fan culture (Proctor & Kies, 2018; Stanfill, 2020).

## Documenting Michael Jackson

Nonfiction media played a crucial role throughout Jackson's career, breaking records just as his music did. Interviews with Oprah Winfrey in 1993 and Diane Sawyer in 1995 became two of the most watched programs in television history, drawing 62 and 60 million viewers, respectively (Goodman, 1993; Orth, 1995). These broadcasts attracted viewers with the promise of rare insights into the person behind the mediated spectacle of an out-of-this-world "King of Pop," who was also marked by "ambiguity surrounding his performance of race, gender, and age ... that defied fundamental categories upon which we understand and interpret human beings" (Scott, 2017, p. 177). Yet, although Winfrey and Sawyer promised insights beyond Jackson's public facade, their interviews arguably raised more questions than they answered about the "myriad and opposing identities from his onstage and offstage personas: real/performance; childhood/adulthood; passivity (life)/aggression (stage); live performance hypersexuality/'real life' interview mode and asexuality" (Vigo, 2017, p. 33). In other words, they substantially contributed to his image as "Wacko Jacko" more than they contested it.

Crucially, nonfiction media about Jackson can be differentiated from that of other celebrities in terms of consequences beyond revenues and public sympathy. Shaw and Bashir's (2003) television documentary *Living with Michael Jackson* showed Jackson holding hands with a 12-year-old boy, explaining that they were sleeping in the same bedroom and defensively declaring that the "most loving thing to do is share your bed with someone." The scene would ultimately spark a second criminal investigation of

child abuse, resulting in his arrest and the abovementioned trial in 2005. Jackson's team tried to control the damage by quickly releasing a "rebuttal" documentary called *The Michael Jackson Interview: The Footage You Were Never Meant to See* (Lachman, 2003). Although the film also provides insights into Jackson's life and career, its primary purpose was to discredit Bashir, who had interviewed Jackson over a span of eight months. Footage that was shot by Jackson's team parallel to the journalist's crew showed previously unseen parts of Jackson's statements. Scenes with Bashir complimenting Jackson on Neverland, his charitable work, his skills as a father, and his unjust treatment by the press thus served as evidence that the portrayal of Jackson was unjust, incomplete and out-of-context. Despite the two films telling contradicting stories, both claim to capture "the truth of the real Jackson" (emphasis by Mital, 2017, p. 141), heavily relying on assertions to "truth" that are traditionally associated with (popular) documentary genres in their promotion and tone (Juhasz, 2014). As a result, *Living with Michael Jackson* and *The Michael Jackson Interview* fail to disrupt the narrative of Jackson being exaggeratedly bad or good, dangerous or harmless, weird or normal, lecherous or wholesome.

Where *Living with Michael Jackson* and *The Michael Jackson Interview* focus on Jackson as an individual, *Leaving Neverland* focuses on child abuse and the perspectives of the accusers. Reed resists an exaggerated portrayal of Jackson; even though he never doubts his belief in Jackson's guilt, he still carefully paints a multidimensional portrait of the singer through interviews with Safechuck, Robson and their families, as well as materials from the families' collections documenting their relationship with Jackson. Demonstrations of the fame and power that Jackson had achieved by the 1980s are contrasted with more private insights into the singer's life with the two families. Photos of Safechuck and Jackson sitting on a bed in a hotel room, a coy birthday message recorded by Jackson on an answering machine, or emotional handwritten faxes to Robson in Australia afford a different perspective on Jackson that resists a presentation of him as either a sex offender or a Peter Pan-like character. *Leaving Neverland* tries not to overcome this tension but puts it at the core of its argument of Jackson's alleged abuse of children. The film approaches Jackson as a pedophile, who did not want to grow up, and whose sexuality and child-like innocence are not a contradiction but are in fact together at the heart of his actions.

Fan-made nonfiction media about Jackson respond directly to these allegations, following others in using YouTube as an alternative public sphere in which to voice disagreement with mainstream media (Gal et al., 2016). On the one hand, films like Larry Nimmer's *Michael Jackson: A Case for Innocence* (Mysterious Jimi, 2019) promises genuine insights into Jackson's life. The film features footage from when Jackson's legal team asked him to film Neverland Ranch for the trial in 2005, providing alternative images to those captured during the FBI raid and widely distributed later. Throughout the film, Nimmer emphasizes that the FBI's portrayal of the property was completely out of line with reality. Interviewing people close to Jackson, such as his sound engineer, about their experience at Neverland, the film tries to restore the "magic" and "innocence" of a place that, according to Nimmer, was

destroyed by the intrusive behavior of the police and its misrepresentation in the media. Nimmer's documentary has a similar narrative to *Living with Michael Jackson* but with a different outcome: Whereas Bashir presented his experiences as disturbing and surreal, *A Case for Innocence* is a "becoming a fan story" (Hills, 2002) that starts with Nimmer entering the Ranch knowing little about the place and its owner, and ends with him convinced of Jackson's innocence and humanity.

On the other hand, fans replicate *Leaving Neverland* and fight the allegations against the artist by collecting incriminating evidence against Robson, Safechuck, and other accusers. For example, *Square One: Michael Jackson* reverses the narrative from *Leaving Neverland*. Focusing on the accusation of sexual abuse against Jackson in 1993, which ended with an out-of-court settlement of \$15 million, the film argues that all of Jackson's accusers exploited his naivety, goodwill and generosity—and continue to use the first accusations as a template for their own stories and strategies in the present. After fans criticized *Leaving Neverland* for not including comments by Jackson supporters, *Square One* interviews family members, people who claim to have heard accusers confess that their statements were false, as well as fans who temporarily lived on Neverland Ranch. Additionally, *Square One* presents glossy images and an emotional score, mimicking the many establishing shots and music used in *Leaving Neverland*. Moreover, fans try to establish more transparent insights into the making of the films, picking up on critiques of Reed's allegedly opaque research method. While Reed is never seen in *Leaving Neverland* and viewers only occasionally hear his questions, *Square One* director Danny Wu is at the center of the film. He documents his process, trying to gain credibility and evoke transparency through insights into the production of the film.

In interviews, Wu emphasizes that he was convinced of Jackson's guilt before he started his research and only changed his mind when engaging in more depth with the case for the film (Hector Barjot, 2020), a strategy picked by other fans to foreground that their conclusions are based on evidence and not blinded by their fandom. Producing their own documentaries and reportages is also a means for fans to respond to films like *Wacko About Jacko* (Leveugle, 2005), which, according to Matt Hills, upholds a "potentially hegemonic symbolic equation ... between fandom and 'blind' devotion" (2007, p. 462). By mobilizing stereotypes of fans as lacking self-identity, being excessively emotional, highly imaginative and irrational, *Wacko About Jacko* frames fans as driven by emotivism. According to Hills, "various fans' defences" of the singer against sexual abuse allegations "are represented ... in highly limited ways" and do "not offer up any impression of rational fan argument" (2007, pp. 466–467). If *Wacko About Jacko* depicts fans as blindly loyal and unable to argue rationally, fans themselves circumvent damaging portrayals of fandom and having their arguments discredited by producing their own documentaries and reportages. As the next sections show, however, fans' depictions of Robson and Safechuck deploy the same negative stereotypes. The notion of emotivism recurs in their discrediting of Robson and Safechuck as irrational fans who could not handle having lost Jackson's friendship, support and attention.

## Nonfiction Media and Forensic Fandom

Fans' intense examination of programs such as *Living with Michael Jackson* and *Leaving Neverland*, as well as their research on the criminal investigation and trial, resembles what Jason Mittell calls "forensic fandom" (2007; 2009). Responding to the increased "seriality, hyperconscious narrative techniques like voice-over narration and playful chronology, and deliberate ambiguity and confusion" in television programs (Mittell, 2009, n.p.), "forensic fandom" describes "a hyper-attentive mode of spectatorship" that requires viewers "to embrace a detective mentality, seeking out clues, charting patterns, and assembling evidence into narrative hypotheses and theories" (Mittell, 2007, n.p.). Mittell positions "forensic fandom" within fiction media's invitation for "viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling" (2009, n.p.), but fans' engagement with nonfiction media shows similar tendencies. Motivated by discrediting critical productions and their makers, fans perform thorough textual analyses to reveal what they consider to be the manipulative selection and montage of images, comments and sounds, one-sided witness statements, twisting of facts and incoherent timelines, as well as any signs of scripting and reshoots. If "forensic fandom" is a demonstration of "corrective ownership" (Mittell, 2007, n.p.), fan collections of evidence for the videos discussed in this essay demonstrate a claim to ownership of Jackson as a private and public figure that is not extended to those who challenge their perspective.

To construct a defense for Jackson, fans drill deep into the narratives and montage techniques of *Leaving Neverland* or previous productions like *Living with Michael Jackson*. Their films present an inventory about Reed's and Bashir's production strategies and use of audiovisual material. According to *Michael Jackson's Innocence [MJ Unmasked]* (JacksonPassion, 2018), Bashir intentionally ignored Jackson's adult friends, who were present during the shooting, and focused instead on the singer's interaction with minors. As the voice-over explains about the selection of clips from the interview, "Bashir uses suggestive and highly manipulative narration, and it seems that his intention from the beginning was to create and feed in innuendo about Michael's relationship with children." Similarly, fans deconstruct *Leaving Neverland* and present arguments about Reed's alleged directorial strategy of deception. *Leaving Neverland's Suspicious Editing* (Collective Learning, 2019a) criticizes Reed's use of materials from Jackson's music videos and concert performances to paint a picture of him being a predatory pedophile by juxtaposing scenes of Jackson thrusting his pelvis in the *Thriller* video with Robson recalling how the music "set him on fire and made everything tingle." The fan-made film identifies such strategies as "psychological manipulative editing" to imply acts of sexual penetration, also by juxtaposing images of Jackson dancing with those of his accusers when they were children. Equally, *Lies of Leaving Neverland* (Kent Olaf Steinhau, 2019) criticizes Reed for not acknowledging that scenes from the films were filmed 17 months apart, presenting it as evidence that the film is heavily scripted and testimonies are not based on actual experiences.

In addition to critiquing the filmmakers, fans analyze Safechuck and Robson's body language in *Leaving Neverland*—as well as in their interviews with other media outlets—to construct evidence that bolsters their defense of Jackson. For instance, *Body Language, Lies, & Receipts: My Leaving Neverland Observations Compilation* (JaDversary, 2019) claims that Robson and Safechuck's "body language is non-verbally telling you the truth, while they are verbally telling you a lie." *Leaving Neverland—Robson & Safechuck versus Real Abuse Victims* (Collective Learning, 2019b) pushes this accusation even further by comparing the poised body language of the two men with footage of people showing less composure in their testimonies about their abuse. The interaction between the two men is also under scrutiny, as fans interpret Safechuck's body language as being pressured by Robson, and thus framing the latter as the "mastermind" behind the crime. Analyses of Jackson's own body language complement these arguments. *Michael Jackson Documentary: Body Language Analysis (Part 2)* (Life Coach Toronto Giovanni Maccarrone, 2019) is a step-by-step body analysis of Jackson in key moments of *Living with Michael Jackson*, including when he talks about sleeping with children in his bed and bedroom. Jackson's body language, the video argues, proves the innocence of his relationship to the boy and thus only Bashir's selective editing and narration is responsible for introducing sexual undertones into Jackson's statements.

Based on their findings, fans construct a narrative of Safechuck and Robson at the center of a conspiracy, operating according to a script based not on their own experiences, but on the 1996 book *Michael Jackson Was My Lover: The Secret Diary of Jordie Chandler* by Victor Gutierrez. Containing imaginary excerpts from the diary of Jackson's plaintiff, the book presented the relationship between the boy and the artist as one of mutual love and sexual desire. Jackson successfully banned further distribution of this book (Author Anonymous in Los Angeles Times, 1998). Nevertheless, 25 years later, the book represents an important source for fans in making a case against Robson and Safechuck, who borrow heavily from the book according to *Leaving Neverland: Echoes of a Pedophilia Apologist* (Michael Jackson Allegations, 2019). The video refers to overlapping stories of Jackson's possession of child pornography, his attempt to have anal contact, and the description of romance between the singer and the boys. Arguing that Gutierrez's book has inspired many of the myths of Jackson's alleged pedophilia, *Echoes of a Pedophilia Apologist* frames Reed's documentary as a sort of adaption of *Michael Jackson Was My Lover*, a work of fiction pretending to be nonfiction.

The kind of "forensic fandom" that fans perform in producing nonfiction media, however, shows their adoption of a "detective mentality" beyond textual analysis to construct their arguments. Throughout the research and production of their videos, fans familiarize themselves with various aspects of criminology and the justice system. They engage with materials ranging from psychoanalytical analyses of abuse traumata, scientific reports of crimes and their scenes, as well as former police investigations, criminal and civil trials, and legislation amendments. One of the central pillars in these arguments is the lack of physical evidence, repeatedly referring to the fact that the FBI



investigated Jackson for over 10 years and never found any corroborating evidence for the allegations of sexual abuse. At the same time, fans follow leads from information given in media interviews, public appearances or legal documents, and discursively transform them into evidence against Robson and Safechuck. *Proof that Michael Jackson is Innocent* (OnlyRihanna, 2019), *Leaving Neverland Debunked* (The Michael Jackson Innocent Project, 2019a), *Leaving Neverland: The Aftermath* (Jin Chohan, 2019), and *Leaving Neverland: Liar Liar Junk on Fire* (The Michael Jackson Innocent Project, 2019) aim to foreground inconsistencies in their accounts, conflicting timelines and the spread of rumors rather than facts. The films scrutinize Robson in particular. Since he was a key witness in the 2005 trial, the films repeatedly feature statements by Jackson's lawyer explaining that Robson's testimony for Jackson's defense was a considerable factor that led to the 2005 acquittal. Robson's previous defense of Jackson as well as his wish to participate in the production of a Jackson-themed show is turned against him, with the videos expressing skepticism around his shift from one of Jackson's most important defenders to an accuser.

But these documentaries are also "forensic" in the sense that fans lay claim to detachment and objectivity in the presentation and evaluation of evidence. "Derived from the Latin *forensis*," Eyal Weizman explains, "the word 'forensics' refers at its root to 'forum'" and forensics therefore is "the art of the forum—the practice and skill of presenting an argument before a professional, political, or legal gathering" (2015, p. 82). With their argumentative structure and attitude, the videos are "addressing a political or judicial public" in the cultural sphere of the forum, where evidence is presented, received and evaluated (Bøndergaard, 2017, p. 3 & 26). "Forensic fandom," thus also describes fans' desire and drive to provide evidence that will prove Jackson's innocence and restore the singer's legitimacy in the court of public opinion. If fans assume the role of detectives to collect evidence in "forensic fandom," they furthermore take on the role of lawyer and judge in their videos.

However, "forensic fandom" should not evoke ideas of impartiality since it is about conviction—not necessarily that of other fans but rather a wider public. Far "from being a detached scientific or judicial practice," forensics "is closely connected with politics ... and governed by pragmatism and shifting political agendas" and "is detached neither from the place and circumstances of investigation ... nor from the public space where the evidence is presented" (Bøndergaard, 2017, p. 10). Since the videos emerge within the context of fan communities' intent to prove Jackson's innocence, they primarily employ evidence that serves their own purposes. By applying their fanon<sup>4</sup> to the debates and legal problems around the allegations of sexual abuse against the singer, fans create a forum in which they stage a virtual trial. As the next section argues, the forum they create represents a "media tribunal" that is less concerned with finding objective "truth" than with establishing what these fans perceive as "true" and lastingly discredit their detractors.

## Fan-run Media Tribunals

Biographers and analysts of Michael Jackson's career and life regularly refer to the frenzy surrounding the 2005 trial and the parallel worlds of the courtroom and media reports. *The People of the State of California v Michael Joe Jackson* was an example for the potential of American jury trials to become popular entertainment with their "astonishing stories; evidentiary spectacle, including the defendants' and witnesses' demeanors; and narratives and images of wronged innocence demanding redress" (Hamera, 2017, p. 80). Over 2000 journalists covered the trial, making it a "media blockbuster" that was covered "in minutest detail, by all major newspapers and TV news shows" (Jefferson, 2018, p. 130). After the verdict, the media was unwilling to accept the acquittal, framing it as a judgement of not "guilty by reason of celebrity" (Nancy Grace cited in Sullivan, 2012, p. 367) and speculating that the jurors do not "even understand how influenced they were by who Michael Jackson is" (Wendy Murphy cited in Sullivan, 2012, p. 367). Later interviews with jury members, who expressed regret for letting Jackson go free (Author Anonymous in NBC News, 2005), fueled the impression that two parallel proceedings took place: The actual courtroom trial and its distorted mediation. Until Jackson's death, these two powers—court and media—fought with different methods and judicial proof over the acceptability of the verdict in public opinion.

The relationship between the official court proceeding and its mediation resembles Cornelia Vismann's differentiation between trial and tribunal in her study of the intersection of media and jurisdiction (2011). According to Vismann, two dispositifs for jurisdiction developed in the antics that are still evident in present-day judicial systems: a theatrical and an agonal dispositif. The former represents the court and its role in state jurisprudence. It is structured to stage past crimes in the present, making them graspable within the dedicated and closed-off space of the courtroom. Conflicts between two parties are negotiated and solved through an impartial judge's deliberation. Operating with the goal of finding the truth according to the code of law, the court's ruling has a binding force. The latter represents the tribunal, which is less concerned with finding the truth than establishing what the winning party considers to be the truth. A tribunal is not bound to the space of the court, operates with extralegal categories and regulations that are established during its proceedings, and can be organized by anyone. Moreover, the tribunal is defined by its wide public exposure, as it is plainly a show process that generates impact by making people watch. As tribunal outcomes are not legally binding, their verdicts primarily serve a pedagogical purpose and need to have a wide reach. Hence, the media play a crucial role in turning the court into a tribunal. The greater the media's role in the proceedings, and the more access it grants the public, the more the theatral dispositif of the court turns into the agonal dispositif of the tribunal (Vismann, 2011, pp. 146–183). Whereas the courtroom trial and the media tribunal occurred simultaneously in Jackson's 2005 trial, the singer's death prevented similar proceedings from coming before a court once again, leaving it solely to the media to potentially convict or acquit Jackson in public opinion.

Coverage of the 2005 case, however, was still dominated by broadcast and print media. The subsequent rise of platforms like YouTube and other social media has given fans new platforms to shape discourses, further lowering the threshold to produce and distribute their own content and participate in civic debates (Jenkins et al., 2016, 2020). These platforms allow fans to mount a media campaign from the bottom up, as is the case with the MJIP and similar projects. Their documentaries keep the debate alive by staging a tribunal against the accusers, defending Jackson by discrediting Robson and Safechuck, and developing a counter-narrative that seeks to frame the plaintiffs as the actual criminals at the heart of a conspiracy theory. Despite fans' criticism of *Leaving Neverland* for offering what they perceive as a one-sided perspective, fans similarly exclude any evidence that could challenge their portrayal of the accusers as frauds: where they see deceptive and manipulative editing by Reed, they juxtapose suggestive images with footage of Robson and Safechuck; and where they identify only circumstantial evidence, they regularly support evidence of inconsistency in the allegations with incriminating rumors. By doing so, fans open a forum for presenting anything that incriminates the men and their families, while shutting out everything else that might strengthen the credibility of their testimonies. As the role of judge and prosecution is merged in a tribunal, removing the neutral moderator (Vismann, 2011, p. 163), the verdict in fans' tribunal against Safechuck and Robson is determined from the outset.

Fans follow the tendency of tribunals "to prevail by all means, strategies, tactics, tricks" and to disempower opponents "thoroughly and definitively" (Vismann, 2011, p. 162 & 160, translated by the author). As continued references to previous accusers and their families show, fans do not stop prosecuting until their version of the truth wins. Yet, their strategies are not new; they are a direct copy of Jackson's legal team. Attacks on the victims' mothers as greedy stage moms that pushed their sons in order to benefit financially and participate in celebrity culture were already central aspects of the defense in 2005, when the "official trial of Michael Jackson [turned] into the unofficial trial of [the accuser's mother]" (Jefferson, 2018, p. 121). At the time, the accuser's mother was described as representing "working-class tackiness," looking "belligerent and shift," and being a "celebritista" (Jefferson, 2018, p. 122). With members of the jury openly contemptuous towards her in interviews after the trial (Jefferson, 2018, p. 123), her case exemplifies the impact of "identity prejudice," where generally less credibility is given to testimonies from individuals on the bottom of social hierarchies (Fricker, 2007). Fans try to mobilize similar "identity prejudices" toward the present accusers' mothers, framing them as equally dishonest, irrational, and greedy for fame and wealth. In the case of the Robson family, this is portrayed drastically. Not only do fans foreground that Robson's mother moved her children from Australia to the United States in order to be closer to Jackson, but they also imply that her and her children's neglect of their husband and father led to his suicide.

Given that tribunals have a "pedagogical" purpose (Vismann, 2011, p. 150), the instructive message that fans are sending with these videos is that of caution to all past, present and especially potential future accusers. The documentaries set an example of

what would happen to any new accusers that come forward. And even though fans may be in no position to legally enforce and execute their verdicts, they make clear that their actions can “be even more devastating than any judicial punishment” (Vismann, 2011, p. 162). As such, the videos try to silence victims of sexual abuse and prevent them from coming forward. Michael Jackson can never be merely “not guilty” to these fans, who use the images they construct of him as a victim to protect their own “ontological security” as fans and ensure his innocence at all costs (Williams, 2018). Rather than coming to terms with the deeply fractured character and legacy of their object of fandom and redirecting the question of what Michael Jackson fandom could look like considering Jackson’s potential systemic abuse of minors, they paint critics as liars. Neither do they give “narrative space for real talk about mental illness: what it looked like or felt like; its symptoms and causes; its many shades and consequences” to understand why Jackson relied on relationships with children throughout his adult life (Jefferson, 2018, p. 134).

Of course, fans have the right to critically evaluate the allegations and seek evidence for arguments in defense of the singer. Yet, the tone of the abovementioned project is an example that challenges fan studies’ preferred narrative of fandom as progressive (Stanfill, 2020). By staging the media tribunal against Robson and Safechuck, fans participate in a discourse of delegitimization that is primarily based on denying victims a voice and disregarding the systemic nature of sexual abuse within the entertainment industry and celebrity culture. Placing blame instead on the accusers and their families, implying motivations such as financial greed and personal revenge, the videos fuel misconceptions such as “that reports of sexual violence are typically false, casting an aura of suspicion over all disclosures of sexual violence” (Kornfield & Jones, 2021). According to spiral of silence theory, “individuals monitor the climate of public opinion to understand whether they hold a majority or minority viewpoint,” with the result that people who believe that their ideas contradict the majority “become discouraged from speaking out” (Blumell & Huemmer, 2017, p. 507 & 506). In their attempts to shift the public opinion in favor of Jackson and to simultaneously silence those with a differing opinion, fans contribute to this spiral by establishing a climate of distrust toward survivors of harassment beyond this specific case.

## Conclusion

After a few weeks of increased attention, mainstream media’s appetite for further exploiting the allegations against Jackson disappeared quickly. *Leaving Neverland* seems to have brought a quick yet powerful confirmation for those who always believed that Jackson was wrongfully let go in 2005. Others might have fallen back into the compartmentalization of Jackson’s persona and lifestyle that had occurred after his sudden death in 2009, separating Jackson the alleged pedophile from “the Michael that ... was universally accepted, the good side, his humanitarian self” (Virgil Abloh, cited in Ferrier, 2019, n.p.). Indeed, *Leaving Neverland* does not seem to have damaged the Michael Jackson brand as anticipated, leaving him among the high-earning deceased

celebrities (O'Malley Greenburg, 2019). For fans, on the other hand, the case has not been settled and new, defensive documentaries and reportages continue to appear on YouTube, keeping the debate alive by continuing the media tribunal against the accusers. By doing so, fans producing these videos send a loud and clear warning that accusers will be met with severe and enduring opposition, confrontation and defamation. The case of the MJIP and related projects thus demonstrate that fandom is also a story of demolishing the reputation, credibility, and experience of those who confront the perspectives of fans as well as their object of fandom.

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### **Notes**

1. Lewis's discussion of "alternative influence networks" focuses on a network of reactionary, far-right scholars, media pundits and internet celebrities, who regularly meet in live debate formats on each other's YouTube channels (2018). In the case of Michael Jackson fandom, live debate formats are also uploaded to YouTube. This essay, however, focuses primarily on the appropriation of documentary and reportage formats as part of this alternative influence network.
2. As of May 2021, more than 3300 videos from 782 channels have been tagged with this hashtag.
3. The charges were as follows: four of child molesting, one of attempted child molesting, four of administering alcohol to enable child molestation, and one of conspiracy to commit child abduction, false imprisonment and extortion.
4. Here, fanon does not mean "facts" about a fictional storyworld that a significant number of fans consider to be true, even though they are not featured in official media texts or other official sources. In this argument, fanon refers to a line of argumentation that draws on what fans perceive to be established facts about the abuse allegations against Jackson and that they regularly mobilize in their videos.

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