Review of *Digital Punishment: Stigma, and the Harms of Data-Driven Criminal Justice* by Sarah Esther Lageson

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empowerment regimes have in place that could aid women who live in childcare regimes.

Ruppaner’s presentation valuably emphasizes how attitudes about women and motherhood shape legislation. Red state legislators who hold more traditional views on gender roles expect women to have a higher birth rate and therefore put more emphasis on comprehensive childcare options. Prior to reading this book, much like many others, I simply assumed that Red states would be the states pushing mothers out of employment. The data in this book prove the contrary.

_Hana Liechty_
_Illinois State University_


It is no secret that criminal justice involvement has massive impacts on life outcomes. Having a criminal record can thwart one’s employment opportunities, financial wellbeing, housing, and involvement in prosocial behaviors, such as voting. Crime always has been able to garner a captive audience, and we now see the growth of documenting criminal records into the digital ecosystem. Dr. Sarah Esther Lageson discusses the growth in digitalizing criminal records from multiple perspectives in this new book, providing a nuanced account of the actors who benefit from and those who are harmed by “digilantism” while reflecting on our country’s cultural views regarding punishment, atonement, crime, and transparency.

The act of posting mugshots on social media is now a routine practice for law enforcement and local jails as they document and publicize their successes. Some may see such actions as inconsequential; however, these mugshots posted by police, courts, jails, and prisons are considered public record, and can be obtained and used easily and cheaply by private websites and individual actors. Such websites have utilized this information so that a simple Google search of a person’s name instantly
reveals their mugshot. The digitization, duplication, and online cataloguing of these records have fundamentally changed the reach of the criminal justice system.

Landlords can run free searches quickly and easily deny housing to prospective tenants based on information they find online. Companies such as BeenVerified and Instant Checkmate have monetized public records into an effective business model, transforming criminal records into commodities under the guise of transparency and public safety. However, these digital records are frequently resharred without checking for accuracy or to see if the information is up to date. As a result, these records can mask the truth or be completely wrong, giving millions of people online scars without much recourse.

Lageson highlights the experience of individuals who have been impacted by physical and digital records. For example, attorneys in midtown Manhattan found that in 45% of cases, the defendant’s criminal records contain at least one mistake. Furthermore, when an error is found, it is an uphill battle to fix. This battle is an arduous process where individuals have to prove the state was liable for the mistakes in their criminal records. This process may include individuals having to travel to pick up documents and, in some instances, pay for their own criminal record to be amended. In cases of individuals trying to get their digital mugshot removed, Lageson shows how challenging the process can be even for charges that were dropped: One individual had to pay for his Instant Checkmate report, review it, and then call the technology company to get the erroneous information removed. Even then, there is no guarantee that the mugshots have not been picked up by Facebook groups or local news sources, which create a whole new set of hoops to jump through in order to get the information removed.

The book shows how many people who have criminal records that range from acquittals to simple arrests feel helpless as they engage with online life. They avoid online dating and must be strategic when applying for jobs as a Google search of one’s name can bring up criminal records or mugshots without much information regarding the charges, amendments, or results. The stigma produced by online shaming legitimizes continued suspicion even in the absence of legal evidence. These
online public records can cause social and personal distress that extend well beyond the punishments of the legal system.

The book’s content is illuminating, and I really appreciate how Lageson provides an analysis of the United States’ social and cultural perspectives on punishment and technology. I also find her viewpoint to be extremely poignant given the volatility of the current political landscape. She highlights the shift toward community policing, which coincided with declining public faith in the criminal justice system and a subsequent lack of rehabilitative efforts. For better or for worse, this deviation has shifted how we view personal responsibility, safety, and punishment. For example, Lageson met with the owners of websites and blogs that post digital mugshots and found that these *digitalantes* felt they were contributing to a noble purpose that increased public safety. To these actors, such efforts feel authentic and draw on Americans’ notions of neighborhood cooperation and social cohesion. However, they also serve to turn people into independent agents of investigation and surveillance. Transparency advocates also adopt this stance, arguing that these websites encourage Crime Stoppers tips and promote arrests and safety. However, there is no available data to support such claims; rather, studies show that public shaming can lead to recidivism.

Although Lageson gives a thorough account of the interactions between punishment and technology, I wish she had shared her positionality in this piece. How does the author’s own intersectionality of race, gender, and privilege impact her research and field work? A reflective section outlining how her intersecting identities impact this project would have provided more context to this novel and important issue. Nonetheless, I thoroughly enjoyed this book due to its relatability. As a social worker working with gang-involved youth and gunshot victims, I see firsthand how online content impacts my clients’ freedom, safety and ability to access resources.

As we often invoke the criminal justice system in our collective struggle to manage our concerns about change, little doubt can be raised regarding the level of destruction that digital artifacts can have on individuals and communities. What *Digital Punishment* shows us is that these accounts of online transgression
should raise serious concerns regarding the veracity and sincerity of *digilantes*’ information. We must question if digital punishment makes us feel safer and reduces crime, or if it simply makes it harder for our neighbors to reintegrate into society.

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Given the possibly dire consequences of climate change, it is hard not to be incredibly pessimistic about the future. Lobbying from heavy industry has ensured that we are not undergoing the massive structural changes needed to transition to sustainability. Even though we require fewer emissions for increased economic growth, total emissions are still increasing globally. However, Thomas Rudel here provides an interestingly positive look at the future, one that does not attempt to trivialize or minimize the potentially devastating impacts of global warming. Instead, Rudel takes a positive view of crises as impetuses to social change. He uses four historical case studies of environmental reforms and revolutions from the 20th century to make his point: (a) the American Great Plains, (b) England, (c) Cuba, and (d) the U.S. state of Maine.

In the 1920s and 1930s, a variety of different factors led to an environmental crisis in the somewhat unsettled western portion of the United States. The “closing of the frontier” was the end to the practice of settlers going west and being granted large parcels of federal land simply for showing up. The number of land titles awarded by the government peaked in the 1910s and declined suddenly afterward, simply because unclaimed land was running out. This decline caged settlers to their individual plots, and the resulting soil exhaustion led to widespread poverty among farmers. The Great Depression of 1929 and the dust storms of the 1930s that followed significantly exacerbated the problem. The U.S. government responded with the New Deal,