SEPTEMBER 22, 2021 / THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GABBY PETITO

[THEME]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Hundreds of thousands of Americans go missing every year. So maybe, like me, you were a little confused when the entire internet seemed to dedicate itself last week to finding just one of them. We reached out to Vox culture writer Aja Romano to figure out what made the disappearance of Gabby Petito different. Why people so quickly became … obsessed.

AJA ROMANO (culture writer, Vox): Sean, I think there are a number of reasons, beginning with the viral social media aspect of the case. She was an aspiring influencer. She hashtagged her, quote unquote “#VANLYFE” on Instagram. She had this supposedly idyllic life where she was road tripping with her boyfriend, the man of her dreams. And from outside, it all looked very picture perfect.

GABBY PETITO (YouTube): I think our plan for today is to just hang out here in this tent.

AJA: But then she abruptly went missing. And I think just that fact by itself was enough to really intrigue people.

<CLIP> MELISSA MONTOYA, WINK NEWS: The search for 22 year old Gaby Petito spans across the

WENDY RYAN, ABC: Country, bringing Gaby Petito home safely. That is her family's goal.

AJA: Then as this case went viral, more people got involved and the Internet's role in solving it, I think, has raised many, many, many questions and sparked lots of discussion about various aspects of true crime and various aspects of the role that, quote unquote, Web sleuths play in harboring or helping investigations.

SEAN: Let’s go back to the beginning of this road trip. Gabby Petito is an inspiring influencer on Instagram. Does she have a big following?

AJA: She did not have a very big following, but she was hoping to substantially increase her following over the summer when she and her boyfriend, Brian, were going to go on this road trip across the U.S.

SCORING IN -- Hot Pot of Coffee

AJA: And she began posting content in July, documenting their trip. They were going through all these national parks, visiting all these, you know, like sand dunes, like just having a really, really nice time, at least that's the impression that you might have gotten from her social media.

Gabby Petito (YouTube): Hello, hello and good morning. It is really nice and sunny today. It’s only 10 o’clock in the morning.

AJA: Except then, abruptly, at the end of August, she went missing.

SCORING CHANGE -- Hot Pot of Coffee to Corner Piece

AJA: She was last spotted by eyewitnesses on, I believe, August 24th. And around then was the last time Gabby’s mother spoke on the phone to her.

SCORING BUMP

AJA: So Gabby is driving this van that she owns. Her boyfriend is with her and he unexpectedly comes back from this road trip without Gabby. He drives the van all the way back to Florida where his family lived and then just refused to say anything about what happened to her or where she was. So Gabby's family growing increasingly concerned, finally reported her missing on September 11th.

Joseph Petito: Whatever you can do to make sure my daughter comes home, I'm asking for that help. There's nothing else that matters to me. Now, this girl right here, this is what matters. That is it.

AJA: So from September 11th, up until today, eleven days later, this case has basically grown out of nowhere, taken over the Internet, and exploded.

<CLIP> MONTAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ABOUT GABBY

AJA: I think to date there’s been, like, hundreds of millions of views of the “#GabbyPetito” hashtag on TikTok. And there’s also been massive searches conducted by the FBI and local law enforcement.

<CLIP> NBC NEWS DIGITAL: Today, the FBI executing a search warrant at the home, Brian Laundrie shared with his parents and his fiancee, Gabby Petito

North Port Police Chief Todd Garrison: Two people went on a trip. One person returned. And that person that returned isn't providing us any information.

AJA: So he was pretty rapidly named a person of interest in the case.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Where does all this extra interest in the case lead?

AJA: Uh, to Utah because that’s where she’s last sighted on August 24th, so keep that date in mind. Because on September 16th, the Moab City Police Department released this body cam footage of police responding to a 911 call that happened August 12.

Moab Police Body Cam: Okay. Turn off your engine and set your keys on the dash. What's your guys’ name?

Gabby Petito (YouTube): Gabby.

Brian Laundrie: Brian.

Moab Police Body Cam: OK, what's going on how come you’re crying?

GABBY: We’ve just been fighting this morning. Just some personal issues.

AJA: And there’s over an hour of footage.

Gabby Petito (YouTube): Yeah. I don’t know. It’s just (cries) some days I have really bad OCD and i just -- I was just cleaning and straightening up the back of the van before and I was apologizing to him and saying ‘I’m sorry i’m so mean.” Because sometimes I have OCD…

AJA: And once this body cam footage is released, then there are suddenly millions of more eyes on this case and millions of people talking about it and about how she was acting and how he was acting in this footage and how the cops responded, especially because now this footage isn't being looked at just as a domestic violence incident, which is how it was initially called in.

Gabby: We just been fighting all morning. And he wouldn't let me in the car before and then I…

Moab Police Body Cam: Why wouldn’t he let you in? Because of your OCD?

Gabby: He told me I need to calm down, yea. but I'm like perfectly calm all the time.

AJA: She's clearly upset in the footage. She spends most of the entire hour crying, just sobbing, while Brian tries to downplay the whole incident.

Moab Police Body Cam: So, tell me what's going on?

Brian laundrie: She just gets really worked up sometimes. I try to really distance myself almost like I locked the car and I walked away from her.

AJA: And we also see the cops coming in for a lot of criticism here because the police in the, the body cam footage, although they responded kind of sympathetically to Gabby and they went out of their way to try and make them separate for the evening. But they also really acted as though Gabby was being histrionic. They sort of like bro-fisted Brian, and, you know, tried to bond with him over how, you know, sometimes women just have these breakdowns.

Moab Police Body Cam: Believe me, if I were to say that me and my wife hadn’t had our fair share of spouts, I’d be lying to you. that I wasn't responsible for it.

SEAN: Where does the body cam footage lead?

AJA: Well, it brought more tips, right? Because you have more people looking at the case and thinking about their own reflections.

<CLIP> Jessica OverYonder, TikTok: So I saw Brian Laundrie parking his van August 26th at spreadcreek...

Miranda Baker, TikTok: Hi, my name is Marina Baker. And on August 29th, my boyfriend, I picked up Brian at Grand Teton National Park at five thirty at night at Culter Bay.

Jessica OverYonder, TikTok: I’m 100% certain that i did see him parking his van and he was very, kind of awkward and confused. And it was just him. There was no Gabby...

AJA: And among them was one tip that probably proved crucial to, to really narrowing the search for, for Gabby.

Jenn Bethune, FOX 13 Tampa Bay: we pulled in. We've got double GoPros. So we have one that faces front and one that faces my husband while he's driving. And the GoPros just keep rolling...

AJA: On September 19th, this couple who had been vacationing in the Grand Tetons on August 27th, remembered that they had captured video footage of a van on the side of the road.

Jenn Bethune, FOX 13 Tampa Bay: And we pass by their van, or a white van. And the white van had Florida plates and we were excited!

AJA: And this was kind of just an extraordinary chance. So many things had to align for this to happen because they went back and they found video footage of this van that was quickly identified as being Petito’s ...

Jenn Bethune, FOX 13 Tampa Bay: … And I ran to my computer, pulled out my footage, scrolled through it, and lo and behold gabby’s van was recorded in there by a complete accident...

AJA: When they actually went to search there, that search apparently was successful because on September 19th, they, authorities announced that they had found a body that they believed matched the description of Gabby Petito.

SEAN: And I believe the autopsy was yesterday -- Tuesday -- what did they conclude?

AJA: The FBI confirmed that the human remains found in Wyoming was Gabby and that this was a homicide.

<SCORING IN>

SEAN: And as far as we know, the last person who saw her alive was Brain Laundrie and no one has any idea where he is?

AJA: Correct. Police have brought in underwater divers to search for him in Florida swamps and other bodies of water around the, the region of his family’s home. I think that pretty strongly implies that the cops in Florida believe he took his own life. And so if that happens, Gabby’s family will never know what happened to her. You know, you think, they only just found out, after a month of searching, that she died. And that she died by homicide. So if he dies by suicide or if he vanishes and is never found then her family will never have any justice for her and they will neve know what happened. So, if something happens to him -- if he vanishes or he dies by suicide then there’ll never be any justice for her. There’ll never be any resolution and her family will never know what happened. So we just have to hope that’s not the case.

[MIDROLL]

SEAN: Aja, Gabrielle Petito isn't the only person who went missing this summer, she wasn't even the only person who went missing at Grand Teton Park this summer.

AJA: She wasn't even the only person who went missing or was murdered in Moab, Utah, in that week. There is a name for this phenomenon.

<CLIP> CSPAN, GWEN IFILL: I call it the ‘Missing White Woman Syndrome’ if there’s a missing white woman, we’re gonna cover that. Every day.

SEAN: I think Gwen Ifill come up with this phrase, may she rest in peace.

AJA: It's almost kind of self-explanatory. But you think about the people that you tend to see on TV, the people whose cases get all the attention, they're usually young, pretty white women who are upper middle class or wealthy, You can think of people like Natalee Holloway:

<CLIP> NANCY GRACE: Welcome back, with me live tonight is Natalee’s mom Beth Holloway, we are taking you calls live

AJA: Lauren Spierer:

<CLIP> CBS NEW YORK: College student from Scarsdale who went missing 10 years ago today. Lauren Spierer was 20 years old when she was last seen early on the morning of June 3rd 2011.

AJA: You know, you know their names because you know their stories, because you have heard their stories in the media over and over again.

SEAN: Is this like a chicken or the egg situation? Like do these stories get covered more because these are the stories that people want covered? Would people want the other stories covered, or would they look away? I don't know who's to blame here. Do you?

AJA: I think it's sort of a continuation of a phenomenon that we have seen throughout pop culture, the powers that be the producers, the people who are in charge of how media narratives get created, assume that the majority audience, white people only want to hear stories about other white people. And this becomes the way that media is created and, and consumed for decades until people really start pushing back against it. The good thing is that you have definitely had people pushing back against this idea within the last two decades. You've had an increasing number of people within the true crime community, from podcasters to investigators who have gone out of their way to really focus and bring attention to cases of marginalized victims.

<CLIP> CBC NEWS FINDING CLEO: Without knowing her birthdate, adopted name, or any basic information about Cleo, our investigation for our podcast has to start here on the Little Pine Nation in Saskatchewan where Cleo’s story begins.

AJA: You've had increasing conversation around, for example, the victimization and denigration of sex workers and the role that that plays in how crimes against them are investigated. And you have all of this conversation becoming more public and becoming more a part of the mainstream.

SEAN: It's interesting to hear you shout out like the greater true crime community as sort of a service to these, you know, coverage blind spots there have been for, for decades because it also feels like maybe there's a dark side to this true crime community? I mean, there's like a podcast that's extremely popular called My Favorite Murder.

<CLIP> MY FAVORITE MURDER ANIMATED: Stay sexy and don’t get murdered. Goodbye!

SEAN: Like, should we have favorite murders, Aja?

AJA: I think this is a very, very timely question that you're asking. You know, I think a lot of people have been asking this since the Serial podcast first sort of jump started the, the new modern true crime phenomenon in 2014. But we can go back even further. If you think about the way that true crime was really marketed in like the 80s, it was like very pulpy books that were like semi fictional -- Anne Rule talking about Ted Bundy. Very salacious titles. Very lurid marketing. And for a while I think that that's all people thought true crime was. But there's been, there's been a lot of deconstruction around that idea over the last decade. And a lot of a lot of work has been done to really drill down into why people are drawn to these stories. And And I think a lot of that has to do with not wanting to become a murderer or a murderee, you know?

SEAN: <laughs>

AJA: Which are both very valid.

SEAN: It's good to be reminded that this isn't necessarily a new phenomenon, though, we currently exist in the sort of confluence of social media and murder and the fascination with true crime, the fascination with true crime predates this sort of confluence of social media and murder sleuthing that we saw in sort of this unprecedented way in the case of Gabrielle Petito. It seems like the sleuthing itself has come under the magnifying glass here and people are examining whether it's a good thing or a bad thing. I mean, internet sleuthing can sometimes verge on what's called doxxing, right -- where innocent people are having their addresses and personal information posted online because some crackpot sitting at home thinks that they solved some case, right?

AJA: Absolutely. And in the very worst case scenarios, yes, this can backfire horribly. But we're talking about a community that has been around for a while, like the actual forum, Websleuths was formed in 1999.

<CLIP> WEBSLUETHS: We want to make sure that when people come to Websleuths.com to read, that when they read a discussion thread that they will get information. They will get thoughtful looks at the evidence.

AJA: And they have very strict rules about what you can and can't reveal.

<CLIP> WEBSLEUTHS: You’re not going to get the drama and the rumors and the baloney you will get in other places.

AJA: The community has been really self policing and a lot of ways. And it's really only when you have a lot of new people coming into the community that don't really have the rules in place for how to engage, that you see things happening like what happened to a person who was wrongfully accused of being the Boston bomber, for example.

<CLIP> CNN, RAVI TRAPATHI: We as a family received literally hundreds of phone calls as well as watching our Facebook page helping coordinate our search just get plastered with these baseless allegations.

SEAN: But that's exactly what's happening right now, right? There's, there's going to be these viral murders and there's always going to be people who sort of jump in to the more experienced Web sleuthing and think they know something when in fact, they're just people with, like, Fios or something.

AJA: <laughs> Exactly. And you're talking about the internet, right? You're always going to have a part of the internet that is sort of untamable and uncontrollable. But does that make the entire internet bad, like a net bad? Like I mean, some people might argue yes. But I think in this case, like, the outcome is very concrete. Like, without the internet, we would not have gotten the the footage of Gabby's van on the side of the road. And this is not the only case that has been solved with the help of Internet detectives. You know, there have been several missing cases, missing persons cases, for example, that have been solved because trained forensic artists decided to join in the search and decided to go through the files of missing cases and make new sketches of these people to try and draw new attention to them and get new eyes on them using new intelligence or new new information, new science, etc. And in some cases, those have been successful and people have been identified because of that work. So I think it's you know, you have a range. You have a range of good, bad and ugly, just as you deal with every other thing that happens on the internet.

SEAN: If this moment is indeed unprecedented, if there’s an unprecedented amount of attention on this one particular aspiring young pretty Instagram influencer, is there a chance that some of that attention might spillover and help solve the hundreds or thousands of other missing person cases across this country, regardless of your social status or race?

AJA: I mean I think that’s the goal, that’s the ideal outcome of this right? Tht people who fall down this rabbit hole will fall down others and when they do that, the chances of those cases being solved will increase. But I think we have to keep in mind that all sorts of things can go wrong, you know?

<SCORING IN> WIND WOBBLES

AJA: So it;’s important to remember that these are real people. These are not caricatures. These are real traumas that they’ve experienced and they’re not there for your entertainment or exploitation so please sleuth responsibly.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Aja Romano writes about culture over at Vox dot com. Our episode today was produced by Hady Mawajdeg and Victoria Chamberlin. It’s Today, Explained.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]