Justice In the Threads:
Analyzing Reddit Discourse Around Rodney Reed's Wrongful Conviction.

1. Executive Summary

Wrongful convictions are a major issue in the U.S. criminal justice system, with estimates suggesting up to 6% of incarcerated individuals may be innocent. As of March 2025, there have been 3,659 exonerations, including many who were on death row. Black men are disproportionately affected by these convictions due to systemic bias, highlighting the need for reform. This project examines how social media influences public discourse and advocacy around wrongful convictions, focusing on Rodney Reed, a Black man on death row in Texas who has maintained his innocence for decades.

2. Data and Methodology

- Data Source: Reddit API (PRAW)
- Date Range: Nov 2019 – Feb 2025
- Tools Used: PRAW, pandas, matplotlib, nltk, seaborn, VADER, LDA, NetworkX
- Steps Taken:
  • Web Scraping
  • Data cleaning and preprocessing
  • Exploratory data analysis
  • Sentiment scoring (posts vs. comments)
  • Topic modeling (posts vs. comments)
  • Network analysis by subreddits

3. Key Findings

- **Engagement Patterns:** There were approximately 15 times more comments than posts collected, suggesting that the majority of discussions occur within the comment threads. Only 8% of comments were made by the original author, indicating a diverse range of voices. Notably, 65% of posts included external links – most frequently to The Intercept, a non-profit outlet known for investigative journalism focused on injustice and corruption.
- **Sentiment Dynamics:** Sentiment analysis showed that the majority of posts (61%) and comments (56%) expressed negative sentiment. Highly positive posts were typically found in media and true crime-oriented subreddits. Positive comments often reflect polite exchanges or respectful debate about the case and Reed's innocence, while negative comments express skepticism towards Reed's claims or frustration with the criminal justice system.
- **Topic Insights:** Peaks in post activity centered around legal proceedings and case details of Reed's case. Additionally, topics such as celebrity involvement – often linked to more positive sentiment – gaining traction during the push for his stay of execution. True crime-focused posts were labeled most negative – possibly due to the frequent use of the word "murder" – yet had the highest

engagement scores. Comment discussions about legal proceedings and case details remained steady until tapering off after April of 2023, following the Supreme Court's approval for DNA testing.
- **Network Influence:** Subreddits r/Austin and r/UnresolvedMysteries emerged as central hubs based on metrics like betweenness, degree, and closeness centrality. This highlights the role of local communities and general interest in amplifying conversation around the case beyond specialized justice forums.
- **Racial Justice:** Approximately 9% of posts and comments explicitly reference race. Posts mentioning race maintained a slightly negative tone and were most common during 2020, a period of heightened racial justice activism. In contrast, race-related comments exhibited more negative sentiment and were distributed more evenly across the timeline.

4. Implications and Reflections

This analysis highlights the significant role that online platforms like Reddit play in shaping public discourse surrounding wrongful conviction cases. The high level of engagement, particularly evident in the comments, reflects the public's deep interest in these cases. Additionally, sentiment patterns indicate a diverse debates characterized by both support and skepticism. The presence of external media links, especially from investigative sources, emphasizes the platform's function as a hub for information sharing and collective sense-making.

Notably, subreddit such as r/Austin and r/UnresolvedMysteries emerged as influential spaces, underscoring the importance of both local communities and societal interest in raising awareness. The patterns observed in race-related posts and comments, particularly their peak during 2020, further reveal how broader societal movements, like Black Lives Matter, intersect with individual cases to shape the narrative and drive advocacy efforts.

From a social data science perspective, this project illustrates the value of integrating sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and network analysis to uncover the complex layers of public discourse. It also raises important questions about the role of digital activism, racial framing, and the ethical use of online data.

While this study offers valuable insights into public discourse on the Rodney Reed case, it is limited to data from Reddit and English-language content, which may exclude other relevant communities or perspectives. Moreover, automated sentiment and topic modeling tools may misinterpret context or sarcasm. Future research could expand by incorporating cross-platform analysis (e.g., TikTok, Instagram), qualitative coding for deeper narrative insights, or by comparing discourse across multiple wrongful conviction cases to examine broader patterns of digital advocacy and racial framing.

5. Explore Further

View full analysis and code on GitHub:
https://github.com/srdodson22/RodneyReed_SocialMediaAnalysis/tree/main