In Chapter 1 of Clay Shirky’s *Here Comes Everybody*, and Nicholas Confessore’s *New York Times* article “Tale of a Lost Cellphone, and Untold Static” Shirky and Confessore discuss the story of a woman who accidentally forgot her cellphone in the backseat of a taxi. Her friend then helped her track down its whereabouts using pictures its new owner was taking with the aforementioned cellphone. The woman who misplaced her phone, Ivanna, and her friend, Evan Guttman, proceeded to do everything in their power to recover the phone. After finding out information about the phone’s new owner, Guttman contacted her, a 16-year-old girl named Sasha, and asked her to return the phone. When she refused, Guttman created a webpage detailing the story of the lost cellphone as well as posting Sasha’s name and address online for all to see. As the story developed, Guttman continued to update the webpage and began to amass a significant online following. The readers then began to alter the story themselves, giving Guttman advice on how to deal with the NYPD as well as driving “by [Sasha’s] family's apartment building, taking videos or shouting out ‘thief’ in front of her neighbors” (Confessore, n.p.). Eventually, due to the large number of complaints the NYPD received from readers of Guttman’s webpage, they were forced to change the status of the phone from lost to stolen property and to visit Sasha’s house, arrest Sasha, and seize the phone. This story is a perfect example of the way in which, in the current technologically immersed culture of today, all kinds of missions can be accomplished through crowdsourcing, such as, in this case, the recovery of a stolen phone. However, while crowdsourcing can often achieve impressive results, it can also be extremely dangerous.

One example of crowdsourcing going terribly wrong was Reddit’s and 4Chan’s attempts to find the perpetrator of the Boston Marathon bombing. In the case of the Boston Marathon bombing, there were aspects that made it a perfect opportunity for crowdsourcing. As a world-famous event with as many as 500,000 attendees per year (Wadhwa, n.p.) television and security cameras could not possibly cover as many angles as the hundreds of thousands of spectators and participants filming with smartphones could. As a result, in their investigation, the FBI asked for help in finding evidence, which the experts at the FBI could then go through in order to find the correct perpetrator. However, anonymous posters to online forums on Reddit and 4Chan took the FBI’s request for evidence as a request for detectives. The situation quickly went downhill as suspects were accused based on extremely shoddy and circumstantial evidence such as a High School Sophomore named Salah Barhoum, whose face the New York Post featured on their front page, calling Barhoum a person of interest (Wadhwa, n.p.). Through no fault of his own, people across the country had connected Salah Barhoum to a horrific act of terrorism, and now people all over the U.S. could put a face to the name, never mind the fact that he had nothing to do with the actual bombing. Another falsely accused victim in the Boston Bombing debacle was Sunil Tripathi, who “was declared to be a vicious murderer because somebody misheard a police scanner” (Wadhwa, n.p.). Tripathi was missing at the time, yet after the identities of the true bombers were released hours later, his presumably distraught family was given nothing more than an apology. Normally when someone is falsely accused in the way Barhoum and Tripathi
were, they can sue their accuser for damages. However, when the accusers are anonymous posters, seeking damages becomes difficult. These types of situations bring up the issue of how far freedom of speech extends on the worldwide web.

The topic of freedom of speech once again brings up the original case of the stolen phone. While, thankfully, none of Guttman’s readers did anything more severe than yell at Sasha’s house from their cars, it could have been far worse. Guttman did a noble thing in assisting a friend to find her misplaced cellphone, but posting Sasha’s address and other personal information was a step too far. Doing so did nothing for Guttman other than to publicly display the knowledge and therefore power he had in the situation, while the harm it could have led to could have been horrific. Given her whereabouts, any of his readers could have gone to her house and attempted to seize the phone by force, maybe physically assaulting her, or worse. Though no physical violence did take place, it very well could have. Posting personal information such as addresses online as Guttman did should be illegal and deemed unprotected speech on the grounds that it is “speech that is likely to lead to imminent lawless action” (Fisher, n.p.). In a similar vein, anonymous posters who accuse others online should be liable in the same way they would be if their posts were not made anonymously. Ideally, the threat of being prosecuted for spreading misinformation online, or for posting personal information, would bring to the attention of the posters the kinds of repercussions their seemingly insignificant posts can have. This would then incentivize online posters to be more confident of the accuracy of their information when posting in relation to a case such as the Boston Marathon Bombing. In addition, it would create a safer environment where no one would be forced to live in constant fear inside their own home.

Works Cited