HACKERS & HATEWATCHERS: TRACING THE ORIGIN STORIES OF DOXING

Jamie Theophilos
Indiana University, Bloomington

Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, doxing—the unauthorized disclosure of personally identifying information online—has become an increasingly prominent and controversial digital practice. From antifascists seeking to "deplatform" far-right figures, to online gamers targeting popular streamers purely "for the lulz," the motivations and political positions behind doxing vary greatly. In some cases, doxing is accompanied by coordinated harassment campaigns that can result in emotional trauma, professional consequences, or even physical danger. As the practice permeates different online spaces, it remains a site of heated ethical debate. Whether used as a direct action tactic to expose oppressive actors in the name of procuring community safety, or as part of an irreverent spectacle that mocks the very notion of online safety, doxing encapsulates the internet's contested relationship with anonymity, accountability, and moral panic: a weapon of visibility in the 21st-century culture wars.[1]

While the basic concepts of privacy invasion and public shaming are not new to human society, the term doxing originates from the early years of the internet's development, coined by hackers and adjacent online subcultural communities as shorthand for "dropping documents." In honoring its etymological roots, the term doxing is particularly useful in defining a distinct era of this practice—one characterized by the rise of computers, social networking, and the profound digital transformation of public and private life. Yet, despite doxing's growing prevalence, an in-depth study of its history and evolution—as a popular term and cultural practice—has remained relatively underexplored. This limited focus constrains not only our understanding of doxing itself

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[1]. Trottier, Daniel. "Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility." *Philosophy and Technology* 30, no. 1 (2017): 55–72. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-016-0216-4.

but also the broader political, social, and technological dynamics it intersects with. Excavating the history of doxing offers an opportunity to analyze how the design, governance, and politics of the internet have shaped, and been shaped by, contentious practices.

Literature Review

Traditional histories of the internet often emphasize technological innovation, corporate milestones, and markers of success that highlight how corporate values have shaped the design of the Internet.[2] However, a question remains regarding the roles that others — such as deviants, dissidents, underground scenes and subcultures— have played in constructing information and communication technologies. This question has been interrogated by various researchers who have sought to identify less recognized but equally pivotal components of Internet development. These alternative histories identify the influence of marginalized and underrepresented communities, such as LGBTQ+ networks, radical activist groups, and non-western communities in shaping online spaces and practices.[3] Together, this scholarship underscores that the internet has always been shaped by who uses it, within particular cultures, contexts and protocols, and for specific purposes. [4]

Among these histories of online communities, hackers represent one of the most influential and complex groups in shaping the internet's design, norms, and cultural significance. While the contributions of marginalized communities highlight the internet's evolution as a shared and contested space, hackers occupy a unique position at the intersection of celebrated innovation and criminalized subversion. From their early role as "heroes of the computer revolution,"[5] to their association with practices like doxing, hackers embody the tensions between openness and disruption that have contributed to the internet's development over time. Within the robust amount of scholarship on hacking subculture, there is minimal research that specifically interrogates doxing. The research, though, that has been written has offered insightful conceptualizations. Several analyses of doxing have involved understanding it as a form of social capital.[6] Comparatively, ethnographer Gabriella Coleman— whose research on hacking communities has predominately focused on the decentralized hacker collective Anonymous— frames doxing within a "politics of transgression and spectacle," tracing

[2]. For examples of scholars that analyze the internet's design and corporate values see: Ankerson (2018); Flanagin et al. (2010); Ten Oever (2021).

[3]. Cait McKinney, Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020; Athina Karatzogianni, Firebrand Waves of Digital Activism 1994-2014: The Rise and Spread of Hacktivism and Cyberconflict. Houndmills, Basingstoke Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Julien Mailland and Kevin Driscoll, Minitel: Welcome to the Internet (The MIT Press, 2017), 141; Anita Chan, Networking Peripheries: Technological Futures and the Myth of Digital Universalism. MIT Press, 2013; Other non-western accounts of internet history include Siles: 2020 and Hong and Harwit: 2022.

[4]. Kevin Driscoll. The Modem World: A Prehistory of Social Media. (New Haven: London, 2022),

[5]. Steven Levy. *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution.* New York, N.Y.: Dell Pub., 1994.

[6].Adam Fish and Luca Follis, "Gagged and Doxed: Hacktivism's Self-Incrimination Complex," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 3281–3300; Peter Snyder et al., "Fifteen Minutes of Unwanted Fame: Detecting and Characterizing Doxing," in *Proceedings of the 2017 Internet Measurement Conference* (IMC '17: Internet Measurement Conference, London United Kingdom: ACM, 2017), 432–44, doi:10.1145/3131365.3131385.

its lineage as a trolling mechanism rooted in the histories of pranking and the transgressive pleasures of uncovering forbidden information.[7]

Discussion & Contribution

Drawing on valuable research on hackers and other alternative histories of the internet, I aim to contribute to the historiography of digital technologies by using doxing as a starting point to examine how early online communities repurposed digital tools and how these practices have evolved into divisive mainstream political sensibilities. This paper focuses on the period from 1987 to 1999, aiming to provide the first in-depth history of the etymology and technical practice of doxing and pinpoint the first use of the term. Contrary to many non-academic journal articles that have offered differing claims, I trace its earliest linguistic developments to BBS boards of the Warez Scene —an underground network of piracy groups emerging in the mid-1980s—where doxing was normalized as part of its culture of leaks, retaliation, and community maintenance.

Additionally, I push to consider the importance of other online cultures in doxing's development beyond hackers, who were also pivotal in shaping its early forms. Groups such as the antifascist network, Anti-Racist Action, originating in 1988, adapted these tactics to expose neo-Nazis—first through zines and later on self hosted websites/ I go on to examine the rise of online vigilante groups, such as pedophile hunters, to demonstrate how doxing became entangled with other moral and political agendas. Alongside tracing these event-based histories, I emphasize the technologies that emerged as central to doxing, such as pastebin sites and people search directories. These technologies simultaneously served as tools for privacy invasion and online harassment, as well as digital security and safety mechanisms. By attending to both the communities and technical infrastructures that sustained doxing, this project illuminates the broader sociotechnical assemblages through which online subcultures have contested and reshaped the politics of privacy and visibility.

This conference paper aims to make two theoretical contributions. First, adopting a sociotechnical, critical cultural approach to doxing as a component of internet history offers a paradoxical history of the internet—one that explores how technologies designed to foster connection have simultaneously enabled deviance, and panic. Second, I highlight how doxing has also been developed as a community safety measure—an often-overlooked practice for protecting online spaces and their members outside law enforcement systems. This dual framework directly intersects with the 2025 AoIR's conference theme of "ruptures," emphasizing how doxing represents both a disruption to conventional narratives of the internet and a reflection of broader societal tensions around safety, security, and justice. By tracing the origins of doxing as both a grassroots tool for community safety and harm, this paper contributes to the conference's mission to examine the fractures and contradictions embedded in internet histories.

Conclusion

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[7]. Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London: Verso, 2014), 35.

This paper is a part of a larger project that traces the lineage of doxing to present the diverse narratives that have emerged around a single term. By offering cross-cultural and historical insights into doxing's transformations, I aim to highlight the complex interplay among user practices, technologies, and digital platforms. Analyzing doxing in this manner reveals how cultural practices and technological assemblages have shaped the precarious balances between anonymity and accountability, spectacle and surveillance, information access and closure, and privacy and publicity. These early developments by antifascists and hackers lay the groundwork for doxing's expansion into new digital battlegrounds in the following decades, offering a a way to interrogate the trajectory of culture wars and online governance of the digital age.

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