

Doxing - What It Is and Why It Should Concern You

April 6, 2019 - You may have heard the term "dox" and wondered about it. It has been used quite a bit lately and is often associated with politicians and political points of view. According to Dictionary.com, the word is a verb and it is defined as, to "search for and publish private or identifying information about (a particular individual) on the Internet, typically with malicious intent." In short, it is bullying on steroids and just about anyone can become a victim of it.

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Of late, doxing has been used to censor political speech and ideas that aren't necessarily popular in some circles. Just yesterday a former congressional staffer with access to computer files plead guilty to doxing five Republican senators for their support of now Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh during his confirmation hearings. That staffer published the home addresses and phone numbers of those senators. Given the country's current political polarization, that information could have proved harmful, or even fatal, to the senators and their immediate families. That staffer is now facing up to 54 months in prison as a result.

But it isn't just politicians who are subject to doxing threats. More and more frequently, it is a practice that is being used on ordinary people when someone else disagrees with them on an issue. Perhaps you like Donald Trump or Elizabeth Warren. They are figures at opposite ends of the political spectrum. And if you live in a liberal enclave like San Francisco as a Trump supporter, you can be doxed. On the other hand, if you live in a conservative community and are a Warren supporter, you too can be doxed. In a matter of minutes, everyone in your home town will then know how ignorant you really are at least in their eyes and they will also have the ability to "correct" you. To make you see the error of your ways.

The information disseminated when doxing someone is really unlimited. Normally it contains names, address, phone numbers and email addresses. But it can include other harmful information such as SSN's, account numbers, etc. Everything that is needed to commit identity theft and create long-term financial harm for victims.

In an era of free-flowing information and political polarization, doxing is absolutely frightening. Its only purpose is to silence decent through fear. It is a form of censorship and it's a coward's weapon because doxers use it rather than taking the time to intelligently articulate an alternative argument. And unfortunately, it is being used by both sides in American politics.

Going back to the Kavanaugh confirmation process, it wasn't just the senators supporting Kavanaugh that were doxed. It also happened to Christine Blasey-Ford; the woman who initially accused Justice Kavanaugh of sexual impropriety. Someone published her information on Twitter and called for protests at her house. She felt so threatened that she actually moved as a result.

We live in a free society, where freedom of both thought and speech should be protected. That freedom comes at a price. For those who are doxed, the price can be high but censoring doxers would probably be just as bad. That said, something does need to be done to stop this process. Perhaps doxers should be held personally responsible for any harm that comes to those whom they dox? That wouldn't make the practice illegal, but it might make people think twice before they publish information that can do real harm to others.

byJim Malmberg

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