



## INTERNET VIGILANTISM, ETHICS AND DEMOCRACY

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### ABSTRACT

*With the rapid proliferation of the Internet and lack of central control, Internet vigilantism or Netilantism has posed a difficult paradox within ethical considerations that include breach of individual's privacy, morality, freedom of speech and paucity of the laws in curbing it. After the advent of social media people often vent out their resentment through the Internet to a certain extent to punish societal offenders and for social control of the people by means of human flesh search engine (HFSE) or doxing and collective action with a view to be brought to justice.*

*This Netilantism phenomenon involves scam baiting, public shaming, distributed denial of service attack, google bombing, identity theft activism, anti-pedophile activism and counter-terrorism. The Netilantism engages concerted activity carried out by the Internet users in order to search for disappeared persons, or punish wrongdoers or corrupt government officials. It is also aimed to verify the credibility of statements made by the government authorities or people.*

*Online vigilantism is going unabated as the so-called vigilantes are able to keep safe their anonymity that bolsters them unhurt from the backlash of their acts. The interrelation between freedom and anonymity enabled the Internet vigilantes to give rise to an unruly attitude to make right the actions of the miscreants and to take revenge against those who violated the prevalent laws. Despite the anonymity that facilitates privacy to speak liberally in public without the fear of being noticed, yet it can vitiate the privacy by sanctioning the Internet vigilantes to march into the privacy of others with ease.*

*While the up-to-date laws pertaining to the Internet allowed a kind of amnesty for the Internet vigilantes, they may pose a threat to the privacy protection of others as Internet vigilantism results real world-effects. The vigilantes are deviant in nature and violate the existing laws through their actions on the Internet that have considerable consequences in real world. It is a double-edged sword, empowers Internet users to confront democratic authorities on the one hand and infringement of personal privacy on the other hand.*

*This paper is aimed to discuss the ethical issues emerging due to Internet vigilantism, as well as possible solutions.*

**Keywords:** Internet vigilantism, Netilantism, HFSE, Doxing, Scam baiting, Anti-pedophile activism, Privacy, Google bombing and Anonymity.

### INTRODUCTION

With the rapid proliferation of the Internet and lack of central control, Internet vigilantism or Netilantism has posed a difficult paradox within ethical considerations that include breach of individual's privacy, morality, freedom of speech and paucity of the laws in curbing it. After the advent of social media people often vent out their resentment through the Internet to a certain extent to punish societal offenders and for social control of the people by means of human flesh search engine (HFSE) or doxing and collective action with a view to be brought to justice. This paper is aimed to discuss the ethical issues emerging due to Internet vigilantism, as well as possible solutions.

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The freedom of Internet in a democratic society is an essential and very important human need as well as a basic human right. While the Indian constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression to its citizens through the Article 19 (1) (a), central and state governments often struggling to curb Internet vigilantism through Information Technology Act, 2000.

The growing Internet subculture has gained little scholarly attention, newspaper coverage to assess its rhetorical, cultural, and socio-historical dimensions of online vigilantism. The dearth of online media research is particularly surprising given the explosion of popular and scholarly rhetoric on cyberterrorism, digital surveillance, and Internet security and safety.

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The considerable increase in Internet coverage has enabled the growth of social media forums that allow the public, including those from lower socio-economic groups, to expose problems and corruption in society (Zhu, Shang, & Hu, 2009). Subsequently, it enabled revolutionary change to the practice and concept of vigilantism, shifting the platform of vigilante activities from the real world to the virtual world. Physical barriers and social status are removed in the virtual world.

## **INTERNET CROWD SOURCING OR HFS**

The Internet crowd sourcing, which is also known as human flesh search (HFS), broadly refers to 'an act of researching information about individuals or any subjects through the often viral and impulsive online collaboration of multiple users' (Yi-Tsen, L, 2011). It indicates to the direct involvement of Internet users collectively tracking down and publishing information on the Internet that may help to punish those who indulged in corrupt practices or immoral behaviors, often with the aim of shaming and punishing them to reinstate legal or moral justice (R. Brown,



1975; Herold, 2011; Ong, 2012; Chang & Leung, 2015;). It has also been argued that netizens sometimes do it just for fun or to fulfill their curiosity (Hatton, 2014).

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While the enraged netizens collectively launch a campaign against the accused individual by leaking his/her classified information which is based on hearsays or from incredible sources, often result in wrong accusations, flaming, cyber-bullying or even issuing death threats them by a crowd-sourced justice-seeking cyber-mob. The outcomes of these acts include public shaming, disclosing private information, personal photos or video files, DDOS attacks, shutdown of personal websites, ousting from employment, detentions and fines.

## PRIVACY & ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

HFS is a powerful punishing tool to deter potential deviants who violate rules (Bu, 2008). However, “over-justice” of netilantism can develop into a tyranny when the victims’ privacy is exploited in an uncontrollable manner with no chance for self-defense. However, some scholars argue that Internet vigilantism can give to public surveillance and enhance democracy.

The Internet vigilantism does not maintain social control but makes things more anarchic because activity in the cyber world is too hard to regulate and stop once it has been initiated (Zetter, 2007). These functions can be achieved only when the netilantes clearly realize their rights and obligations (D. D. Li, 2009; Ruan, 2011).

Although, Internet vigilantes claim HFS engine is an empowering tool for them to achieve social justice, ‘information regarding individuals’ physical features, workplace address, and details of family members may be transferred to illegal organizations and be used in organized crime (Hunton, 2009).’ While a giant network of computers enabled people more likely to express negative emotions, harsh criticism, hatred, and threats in the virtual world than the real world (Suler, 2004), ethical issues involved in it are largely unaddressed.

As there is no obligation or law to reveal true identity of the Internet users, they easily invade privacy of others believing their real identity is anonymous. People argue against netilantism claim that uncertainties and unstructured nature of vigilantism may victimize innocent people (Ruan, 2011).

As the Internet vigilantism is unrestrained from invading individual’s privacy, there is a need to evaluate adaptive prosecution methods. In this process ethical considerations are often taken for granted as no ethics are defined; common moral sense is forsaken. The act of online humiliation



through offensive text and photo, video messages and revealing personal information is a common form of self-justice. This online prosecution can cause in deception calls and death threats. Moreover, these vigilantes often target the family and colleagues of the accused, resulting to the loss of social status.

As privacy is an umbrella term for a wide variety of interests and a serious effort is yet to be made to sort out conflict between privacy and social good. It is obvious that there has been increased concern over protection from unwarranted electronic surveillance and exploitation of personal information. However, the development of widespread communication through Internet made informal methods of privacy protection both insufficient and ineffective.

## SUGGESTIONS

With no effective system in place to control the netilante's activities, there is a serious need to inculcate self-discipline among them; education might be useful to remind netilantes of their responsibility. The government's intervention might be pivotal in educating the netilantes over the ethical issues involved such as disclosure of personal information of others can cause psychological harm and other consequences for the victims.

Furthermore, the IT policies are redesigned in tandem with the emerging technologies and for the privacy policies of websites in order to make them communicate clearly and explicitly for what purpose data are collected, used or shared.

There is a need to augment police and surveillance departments to instill confidence among the public over criminal justice system as netilantism necessarily does not achieve social justice as there is a scope for victimization of innocents. Apart from this, it is clear that the Internet vigilantes never pay attention to the arguments of the victims in defence, the democratic societies ensure them to raise their concerns through various online forums.

## CONCLUSION

While the up-to-date laws pertaining to the Internet allowed a kind of amnesty for the Internet vigilantes, they may pose a threat to the privacy protection of others as Internet vigilantism results real world-effects. The vigilantes are deviant in nature and violate the existing laws through their actions on the Internet that have considerable consequences in real world. It is a double-edged sword, empowers Internet users to confront democratic authorities on the one hand and infringement of personal privacy on the other hand.

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