

# THE ASIAN AGE

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## Dodge the doxers

Jan 19, 2015 - Nandini D. Tripathy



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**The practice of 'doxing' disclosing personal information of an individual on a public platform without his/her consent is a growing menace with youngsters using it to settle personal scores**

How vulnerable would you feel if you knew that anyone could have access to enough information with a few clicks to be able to throw a brick through your window at a moment's notice? With hacker collective Anonymous releasing personally identifying details of members of racist group Ku Klux Klan, the practice of 'doxing', or disclosing personal information of an individual on a public platform without his/her consent, has resurfaced into the limelight with a new debate surrounding it: can doxing for a noble cause be deemed ethical? Given that the practice has also been finding its way to ordinary youngsters on contemporary online platforms, we talk to desi experts and youngsters about the practice and what one can do to guard against it.

"This might surprise you, but a lot of the information that doxers draw upon is information that is already public," cautions Delhi-based IT professional Hemant Khurana. He adds, "For example, if you had an old social media account on a now-obsolete platform like Hi5 or Orkut, can you say with a hundred percent surety that it doesn't still contain pictures, scraps of information or remnants of public conversations that you wouldn't want made public today? Many of us haven't taken the trouble to delete our accounts on such websites still. Even inactive email IDs can do great damage if you simply let them be and hope for them to be terminated on their own. Also, a lot of us tend to use the same email ID to create accounts on a lot of online platforms and if we're not very careful about our privacy settings on each and every one of them, a simple Google search can reveal a lot more about us than we think."

Delhi-based event management professional Saloni Chopra, who has been at the receiving end of the practice not too long ago, shares that one of the ways in which one can unwittingly expose oneself to being doxed is through complacency. She explains, "One of the biggest reasons for the popularity of so many online discussion forums today, I feel, is that they allow you to say and do a lot of things under a pseudonym that you probably wouldn't otherwise. Given that privacy mechanisms on such portals are getting better with time, there are a lot of us who think that a pseudonym is reason enough to set aside caution. Ironically, this can make us the most vulnerable to doxers who are looking for information we're keeping closely guarded only in places where we're conscious of needing our guards up.

That's what happened to me. I was on a discussion forum where I made a couple of friends and in the process of discussing something as inane as our favourite street food, I ended up writing out things that could serve as pointers towards my physical location. A few months later, when I got into a fight with someone else on the forum, I actually found them posting things in other discussion threads about where I live, what I do and even some details about my family members and friends whose social media profiles they had traced

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through some names I had mentioned offhandedly!"

Hemant adds in this context that a few basic steps can be taken to guard against such consequences. "Our posting histories on online forums can lead anyone who cares enough to everything we have ever posted on that particular website, enough territory for them to comb through looking for any hints they can find about your name, location, other social media profiles that they can access, alternate usernames you may have let slip somewhere...anything at all. One very important thing you can do is to avoid interlinking multiple social media accounts. And above all, keep your eyes and ears open at all times," he asserts.

Delhi University student Anurag Pal feels that even if intended with a noble purpose like exposing a racist organization, doxing can render innocent people vulnerable in the process in a way that cannot be justified. "I understand that revealing information about members of a racist group like KKK has its ethical side, but do people not realise that aside from exposing just the individuals they are also exposing their family or friends who might not have anything to do with KKK or its activities or its racist worldview? Making them vulnerable to aggression is not fair. Even on the smaller scale, if something like this happens between two ordinary people over a petty personal spat, I've known people whose friends or spouses have been targeted on online platforms for no fault of theirs. How does that work?" he questions.

In the context of India in particular, cyber expert Pawan Duggal reveals that any act of releasing personal information without a user's consent for vested reasons – noble or otherwise – is legally punishable with a fine and a three-year jail term. He elaborates, "Such an activity does not comply with the parameters of laws anywhere and would be classified as cyber crime. In the specific context of India, personal information is protected by the Information Technology Rules 2011. Indian thresholds for data protection are still less strict than they are in Europe, where the laws are much more absolute in their implications."

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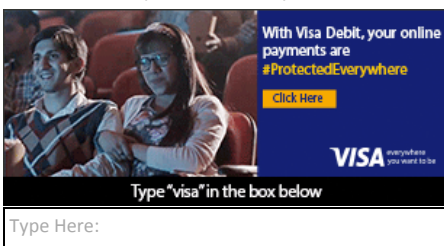
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