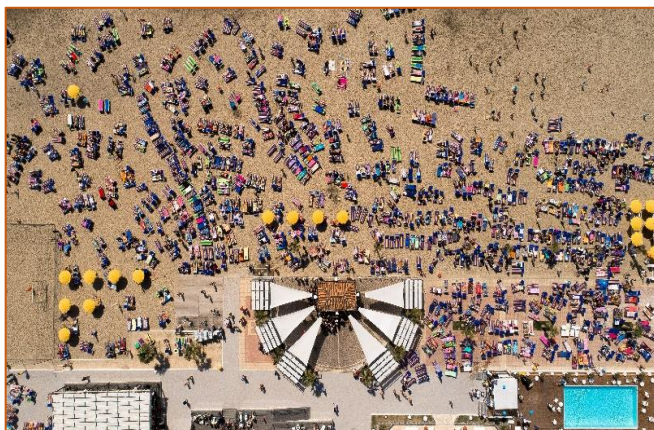




Doxing in the Name of Public Health: The Ethics of Shaming Risky Behaviors in the Time of COVID-19

As protective measures such as social distancing and self-quarantine have increasingly been encouraged, Americans across the nation have begun to adjust to the reality of the novel coronavirus. Especially with spring break around the corner, it became a common priority for everyone to avoid nonessential travel, particularly international trips. However, not everyone took this advice to heart. News stories regarding the coronavirus outbreak highlighted college students from the University of Texas at Austin who



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ignored these exact precautions and visited Cabo San Lucas for the week-long holiday. Upon returning from Mexico, 49 out of the 211 students tested positive for COVID-19 as of April 3 (Proctor, 2020). The public reacted with concern and disappointment towards these spring breakers since these students “ignored the recommendations of the City of both Austin and UT and actively chose to travel to another country to party,” thus making the nearby neighborhood, West Campus, a “hotspot for COVID-19” (Plein, 2020). *New York Times* journalists Montgomery and Hernandez add that “many of them appeared to be under the mistaken impression that young people are not as likely to get the coronavirus” (Montgomery & Hernandez, 2020).

the DAY the #cabo44 article dropped U
-Found out their names, majors, and G
-Flamed them into privating their social
-Started a cypasta making fun of the

[Twitter Screen Capture / Modified](#)

Instagram, such as “Hi here is a thread of why you aren't pissed enough at Cabo44 using math and science,” “2020 sucked A-S-S, then Texas Theta and their selfish members decided to exist,” and “Endangering people’s lives is not baddie behavior!!!,” all of which aimed at shaming the travelling students, ran rampant throughout the blogosphere (Smothers, 2020). This “flaming” (i.e. the online practice of posting insults, typically including profanity) quickly transformed into acts of “doxing” (also referred to as “doxxing”), or publicly identifying the spring breakers involved so as to generate negative attention, as fellow Longhorns themselves demanded accountability. Twitter users quickly uncovered their identities and affiliate organizations, connecting their vacationing hashtags and locations to the controversy. This information was used to highlight inequitable differences between the

As information spread about the confirmed cases resulting from disobeying stay-at-home guidelines, public outcry morphed into online shaming of the spring breakers, and the hashtag #Cabo44 quickly began trending. Posts via Twitter and



“Cabo 44” and others on campus. As one Longhorn pointed out, while low-income students of color have no choice but to self-quarantine, the spring breakers feel more entitled to take risks because they are “more well-connected, more likely to be insured, have more disposable income, [and are] more likely to be supported by their parents” (Smothers, 2020). With the identities of the vacationers thus revealed, an article in the University of Texas’s official newspaper, *The Daily Texan*, called for action to be taken against the offending students by the university, saying: “By definition, they participated in university-defined misconduct and have likely contributed to the exponential growth and spread of COVID-19” (Plein, 2020).

In an attempt to build a movement to spread awareness of the health risk on campus and to hold the “Cabo 44” accountable, doxing intensified across Instagram and Twitter. However, those being doxed eventually fought back and the doxers were soon met with criticism. Perhaps the largest form of pushback against the doxing and public shaming was the response that some students were being falsely identified and accused. For example, when a sorority member of Kappa Alpha Theta published an Instagram photo with the location tag of “Cabo San Lucas,” she was immediately assumed to be one of the Cabo 44. Even though the photo could have been an old one, her comments were quickly filled with harsh criticism. Like many instances of doxing, worries about false identifications are applicable; are all members of a certain sorority or group culpable for the lack of judgment of some members? Additionally, others may worry about the appropriateness of the punishment—shame and internet criticism that follows one’s name around in search results for years—for badly thought-out actions that might not have violated any law. Nonetheless, criticism of those accused of being part of the Cabo excursion spawned more debate and criticism, with names being named and shamed, along with threats of legal action by the students being targeted as part of the Cabo trip.

The Cabo 44 incident highlighted the power of the internet to bring an alleged wrong to the attention of wide swaths of the public. Beyond simply noting the action of travelling during a pandemic, the tactic of doxing attached consequences to the accusation. By being named as one acting irresponsibly in a moment of public health crisis, the students involved potentially suffered emotional harm and reputational damage; many of the names and accusations will still be retrievable years after the pandemic has passed, thanks to the memory of internet search engines. The targeted students likened this large-scale internet assault on their reputations to cyberbullying, whereas their critics saw it as the sort of public reaction to the rights and wrongs of others that the internet—and the public sphere—is famous for in recent years. And if criticism can’t have any harm or edge to it, they might maintain, what’s the use in guaranteeing public spaces of critique and debate? The targets saw an invasion of their normally private lives, whereas critics saw a chance to chastise those acting irresponsibly in public and to prevent future such actions in a time of pandemic by others observing this controversy.

Regardless of which side one falls on, it is clear that the internet’s capacity for public shaming and activism will continue to find new and controversial ways of surfacing in the face of



public health emergencies. With the incredible media pressure on “flattening the curve” and of each person effectively responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, it is understandable that many would view those that break recommended precautions negatively; it is also reasonable that many might want to voice these concerns in an effort to punish transgressions or to prevent future problems. These reactions are understandable, since these risky behaviors threaten more than just those taking the risk. Ethically speaking, however, the question remains: how far can online reactions go in punishing or shaming those violating travel guidelines and other COVID-19 measures?

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the ethical issues with doxing in general? Do these ethical concerns change when it is doxing of individuals allegedly threatening public health?
2. What values are in conflict in the controversy over doxing those that may have acted unsafely during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What foundation does doxing set for others that break the stay-at-home orders to gather in public places, such as parks? Should everyone who violates public safety orders be exposed through online shaming?
4. What are the ethical limits to doxing in the name of public safety, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic? In general, what differentiates doxing from online bullying?

Further Information:

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