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Protecting Healthcare Workers A Resource on Doxing

What is doxing?

Doxing, sometimes spelled 'doxxing', refers to the purposeful release of personal information on the internetⁱ. Doxing comes from the concept of "document tracing" or collecting documents to learn more about a person or companyⁱⁱ. There are varying understandings of what information being released qualifies as doxing, but generally any personal information, even if it is publicly available, that is released with the intent to harm falls under the umbrella of doxingⁱⁱⁱ. While the act of doxing itself is not illegal at the federal level, it can be at the state level; further, the tactics to obtain such information might be illegal. There are different motivations for doxing, including revenge, humiliation, intimidation, or harassment^{iv}. Doxing can have long term impacts on victims due to the release of sensitive personal information, and may cause distress, identity theft, or even physical abuse and violence.

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Why might physicians be the targets of doxing?

Recently, physicians have been the target of doxing due to increased focus on healthcare during prominent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic^v. Online harassment of physicians is not new; a report from 2019 showed 23.3% of physicians surveyed experienced some form of online harassment^{vi}. After the recent Dobbs v. Jackson case and the implementation of abortion restrictions in a number of states, doctors and clinics who provide the procedure have been the target of doxing campaigns. Physicians who provide gender-affirming care are also at the center of doxing campaigns^{vii}. In response to the increasing number of threats to physicians and healthcare systems, three organizations that represent more than 270,000 physicians sent a letter to Attorney General Merrick Garland requesting the Department of Justice investigate those making threats to physicians in October 2022^{viii}.

What are examples of doxing incidents?

Extremism researchers have studied doxing in other domains. In 2014, members of the hacker collective Anonymous hacked the website of the Dallas Safari Club and released members' personal information after they auctioned a license to kill an endangered black rhino in Namibia^{ix}. Later, in 2016, an offshoot of Anonymous leaked personal details of 52 members of the Cincinnati Police Department following the fatal shooting of an unarmed Black man^x. More recently there has been an uptick in doxing incidents against healthcare personnel and physicians^{xi xii xiii}.

2021

A psychiatry resident shared a photo of themselves taking medication for their mental health as part of a campaign to destigmatize healthcare workers' use of medication. This led to concerns about their ability to perform & led to their personal information being leaked online.

2022

A co-director at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's UW Health gender services had personal information about them & their family released in September 2022 after a video they made describing gender-affirming medical interventions for transgender people went viral.

2022

A doctor in clinical obstetrics & gynecology at the Indiana University School of Medicine had their personal information dispersed after it was revealed that they were the doctor who provided an abortion to a 10-year-old rape victim who could not receive the procedure in her home state.

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What can individual physicians or medical systems do?

- Be mindful of your online presence – limit personal information on social media, check privacy settings, and review followers^{xiv}. Remember that this applies to not only you but also to family members
- Engage in good cyber hygiene, such as using secure passwords, a password management system, and two factor authentication^{xv}
- Always contact the sender of an email or SMS before clicking on any links to avoid phishing attempts
- Conduct an internet search of yourself to see how much information is already available online^{xvi}. In addition to Google, other search engines (e.g., Bing, DuckDuckGo, Qwant, Yahoo) may provide additional information. The website haveibeenpwned.com can also be used to check online exposure
- Use services to remove digital content and monitor any information that is publicized^{xvii}. In serious circumstances, digital private investigators and digital forensic experts may be contacted
- Avoid using home address for medical board and other registrations
- Utilize a limited liability company when leasing clinic space to help obfuscate private information
- Create a plan in the event of doxing incidents, to include what accounts are high priority to lock or deactivate and potentially changing usernames and passwords depending on what information was released^{xviii}
- Inform your hospital’s safety team of any incidents and get help reporting if needed
- Report any threats following a doxing incident to your local police department
- Reach out to support groups for medical professionals for help
- Keep track of doxing incidents and what information is released by who, as more states are taking on legislation criminalizing the doxing of healthcare workers^{xix}
- Healthcare systems should review and strengthen their cyber security systems as well as their training of good cyber security practices^{xx}

Resources

American Medical Association <https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/sustainability/physician-cybersecurity>
 CDC <https://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2020/10/cybersecurity/>
 Department of Health and Human Services <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-02-17-1300-emr-in-healthcare-1pwhite.pdf>
 Electronic Frontier Foundation <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2020/12/doxing-tips-protect-yourself-online-how-minimize-harm>
 Federal Bureau of Investigation <https://www.ic3.gov/Media/PDF/Y2015/PSA150421.pdf>
 North Carolina Department of Information Technology <https://it.nc.gov/resources/cybersecurity-risk-management/cybersecurenc/tips/doxing#check-your-social-media>
 PEN America <https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/protecting-information-from-doxing/>
 Relias Media <https://www.reliasmedia.com/articles/providers-can-take-action-to-help-prevent-doxing>
 University of California at Berkeley <https://ethics.berkeley.edu/privacy/protect-yourself-doxing>

NCITE Research

The National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE) is the Department of Homeland Security’s Center of Excellence for research on countering terrorism and targeted violence. Based at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, NCITE is a consortium with 50+ researchers at 26 partner institutions. Currently, NCITE has two teams of experts focused on researching online threats and cyberattacks:



NCITE researchers led by Dr. Tom Holt are investigating ideologically motivated acts of cybercrime and targeted violence that occur through online platforms. They are examining tools and frameworks to recognize and mitigate these online threats.



Dr. Adan Vela and co-PI Steven Windisch are focused on threats to election officials. In their project, they are investigating how online rhetoric can turn into offline violence and plan to develop mitigation tools to help election officials protect themselves.

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