

A study of human flesh search and its social and ethical issues

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Abstract: Human Flesh Search (HFS) is one of the biggest Chinese internet phenomena. It has attracted great interest from IT specialists, legalists, sociologists and criminologists. This essay analyses how HFS works based on a typical case of the “ Kitten Killer” and then the advantages and disadvantages of HFS were canvassed. In addition, the social and ethical issues surrounding HFS will be investigated. Finally, a solution will be presented, concentrating specifically on the importance of keeping a balance between information and power.

With the rising number of Chinese netizens and the development of internet forums, blogs and BBS (Bulletin Board System) technology, freedom of information is becoming more and more common. As a result, a revolution in online search -Human Flesh Search has appeared and grown rapidly in recent years. It is defined as a Chinese internet phenomenon that uses massive computer mediated participation to purify the information from search engines and internet media.

What is revolutionary is the way that humans, instead of machines, actually deal with the search questions and therefore there is increasing accuracy in the search results. That’s why it is considered as a “ human flesh search”, humans do the searching. Here is s an example that can help people understand more deeply how HFS works. Early in the year of 2006, a horrible video of a smiling woman killing a kitten by stomping on it with the sharp point of her high heel, was uploaded and spread through the internet.

Most people were angry at this inhuman behavior, so they turned to the human flesh search engine to find out who she was in reality. They hoped

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justice could be done and their purpose was to punish her by exposing and shaming her in front of her neighbours, families, friends and colleagues. In the Mop forum (<http://dzh.mop.com/>), a user even wrote “ Find her and kick her to death like she did to the kitten! ” With a post asking “ Is there a front-facing photo so we can see her more clearly? ”, the human flesh search had begun.

Netizens traced the e-mail address associated with the site to a server in Hangzhou city. A follow-up post asked about where the video was taken: “ Are users from Hangzhou familiar with this place? ” Locals reported that there was nowhere in Hangzhou that looked like the backdrop in the video. Furthermore, the story was reported on television and in newspapers as the extension of the event, and people all around China saw the kitten killer’s photo. “ I know this woman,” wrote the user “ I’m Not Desert Angel “ four days after the search began. She continued with “ She’s not in Hangzhou.

She lives in a small town in northeastern China. God, she’s a nurse! That’s all I can say. ” Only six days after the first Mop post about the video, the kitten killer was found in Luobei city, and her name Wang Jiao was made public, as well as her phone number and her employer. The perpetrator Wang Jiao and the cameraman who filmed her were fired from what the Chinese call iron rice bowls; government jobs that have a good salary and a work guarantee. From this kitten killer case, it is obvious that the HFS is highly efficient. It does display an awe-inspiring power.

Wang Jiao's life had been ruined in just 6 days. She lost her good job, and it would be almost impossible for her to get a new one. Most importantly, she would be thought of as a cruel, mad person by others and would be hated or treated unfairly in society. She has paid for her mistake. But it is questionable about whether she deserved such severe punishment. This is only one of the cases. There are a number of positive and negative cases which have happened over the last few years. In recent years, the Human Flesh Search has become an international web phenomenon.

From 2001 to May 2010, there were a total number of 405 episodes which had occurred in the world, with 392 taking place in China, 6 in the USA, 2 in Japan, 2 in Korea, 2 in the UK, 1 in France and 1 in Lithuania. (Fei-Yue, et al. , 2010) Figure 1 plots the number of HFS episodes quarterly over this time. (Fei-Yue, et al. , 2010) As we can see from the bar chart, HFS has become more popular in the past 2 years and it is still very popular now. Why is it able to retain its popularity? There must be some advantages to it. The human flesh search has five advantages.

Firstly, due to its "human flesh" feature, the human being can accurately understand the user's search question, and manually collect and sort out information. Therefore, it is more accurate than an automated search machine. Secondly, it gathers the power of crowds to make it easier and quicker to share information, thereby increasing working efficiency. For example, it does a great job in helping people looking for missing relatives after a disaster. Thirdly, it provides a free-speaking space which helps with making better decisions and solving social problems.

Fourthly, the politicians in power are supervised by public opinion which can reduce bribery and corruption. Fifthly, HFS uncovers the scandals, digs out the truth, condemns the “grievances” and therefore plays a significantly deterrent role on violation ethics. These five advantages are the reasons why HFS has not been eliminated by the Chinese government and its popularity increases. However, it also has some undeniable risks. The HFS has some disadvantages that cannot be ignored. Firstly, it can easily exceed the moral bottom line as it is virtual and uncontrollable. Some people might even lie to gain benefit from it.

Secondly, it can cause a conflict of interest among different groups. Thirdly, it can infringe human rights and privacy that lead to harassment. Most importantly, some people’s lives may be seriously and negatively affected by the exposure of their private life and cyber violence. The biggest issue in human flesh search is the invasion of privacy. Privacy is defined as a citizen’s basic right and should be protected despite the fact that a person did something wrong or not. It is obvious that HFS is against the privacy law but people still use it as a way to punish immorality.

It leaves a question about how to avoid this special form of online vigilante justice becoming a trigger of privacy infringement. Another issue we need to worry about is deception in the HFS. It is really hard to distinguish whether the purpose of a posted request is malicious or not. If the requestor has a hidden purpose, it would be so unfair for the person who is harassed by the wrong criticism and condemnation. Studying the advantages and

disadvantages of human flesh search and the issues caused by it, shows that it is important to keep a balance between information and power.

To achieve this, it has something to do with legislation and boundary. China has the highest number of HFS episodes in the world. The main cause of this situation is the lack of legislation leading to the lack of privacy awareness of the Chinese netizens. Although there are some laws in China to protect privacy, the legislation to protect privacy for networks is really weak. This issue is only related to in some relevant laws, such as the “ Computer Information Network and the Internet Interim Provisions on the implementation of the anagement approach”. Article 18 provides: “ Shall not distribute malicious information on the network, send a message in the fraudulent use of others name, violating the privacy of others”.

“ Computer Information Network and the Internet Security Protection and Management Measures” Article 9 states: “ The user’s freedom and privacy of correspondence are protected by law, any unit or individual shall not be violation of the law and violations of freedom and privacy of correspondence of users using the Internet”. The People’s Republic of China Telecommunications Regulations” Article 58 provides that any organization or individual shall not: “ Engage in activities of stealing or damaging others information, and damaging the legitimate rights and interests of others in the use of Telecommunications network”. (Guang&Zechao, 2010)These provisions provided a certain legal basis for the network to protect privacy, but they are too simple and general in terms of theaccountabilityof severe consequences caused by human flesh search.

The punishments provide no deterrent for people who are tempted to maliciously damage others through HFS. Also, the juridical operation is hard to implement. For every HFS episode, a large number of netizens are involved and therefore it is difficult to identify and charge the culprit. In order to avoid the tragedy that may be caused by HFS, it is important for the Chinese to take some action, even though this will be complicated due to the special features of HFS and the current imperfect Chinese legislative situation.

Below are some countermeasures and suggestions for the improvement of the situation that may have arisen through Human Flesh Search use. They are mostly about reaching the balance between information and power. Firstly, some protection can be acquired through legislation. The government should enact a clear and independent law to prohibit unauthorized netizens from stealing and illegally publishing another's personal information. Besides, there should be a specific law for online behavior to control the netizens from deliberate harassment.

Secondly, by using the technology, the network organizations should enhance their supervision and controllability of the forum and information audit. They should keep a close watch on the online activities so that if something inappropriate happens, they would be able to block or stop that immediately. Another important measure is to deal with this issue through internet regulation. The government should introduce a real-name registration system for bloggers and internet forum users. Finally, every netizen should enhance self-protection awareness and preventive measures.

Also, they need to have the ability to distinguish between truth and deception. There must be a balance between trust and skepticism. The Chinese Government can help this by promoting internet safety and setting up some specific consultants. The rising Human Flesh search phenomenon has become a big challenge for both Chinese citizens and government. It has exerted a huge influence to not only network, but also the society. The statistic and situation that have been analysed also show that it is impossible to ban the HFS.

However, it is of the highest importance to make every one realise the possible damages and consequences that HFS could cause so that all can be made aware of it. After a discussion of the advantages, disadvantages , social and ethical issues involved with HFS, it can be observed that a balance between information and power must be achieved. Some countermeasures and suggestions have been provided to ameliorate the negative features of HFS. It is time for people to take action to reduce future possible harm to the lowest degree and to fully take advantage of it.