

Online vigilantism: causes, effects and the need for regulation



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Online Vigilantism - The hero everyone deserves?

History of Online Vigilantism

Ever since the beginning of mankind, there had always been a form of public shaming, however, with social media, it has given public shaming a new form. Online vigilantism or internet vigilantism is the action of an individual monitoring the activities of others, rather than letting the justice system work on their own. The goal of online vigilantism is to enforce or achieve justice through means of unauthorized channels.

In recent years, cases of online vigilantism have been rampant ever since the rise of social media in everyone's lives. With many cases showing the participation of the general public in social issues that are happening in the country, online vigilantism has been debated constantly not only online but also in the media.

What is Online Vigilantism?

Online vigilantism mainly started from the action of doxxing, which is publishing of personal information of a particular subject on the internet (mainly in social media such as facebook and twitter), with malicious intent. The main idea of online vigilantism is to publicly shame their target in order to get a response from the authorities or in the lack of any response from the authorities.

Thesis

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In my opinion, online vigilantism is a double-edged sword, tho there is much justification of the action made by the online vigilantism community, however, the real-life consequences of the act might outweigh the benefits of online vigilantism. Below, we will discuss the reason for online vigilantism, the examples of online vigilantism and also the effects that online vigilantism cause.

Body

Why people resort to online vigilantism?

In general, the public resort to the act of doxxing or online vigilantism when there is an absence of consequences by the authorities. When there is an issue that is posted online, usually in the form of video, the general public that is active on social media wants an immediate gratification or response to the issue at hand. Thus the idea of online vigilantism was ignited when the public takes the matter into their own hands.

When there is a gap that had been left out due to the authorities not being able to respond on time, the online community began to fill up the role of the judge and executioner. This meant that they are willing to do whatever it takes in order to serve justice as they seem fit, which may include exposing personal and private information on the social media in order to “punish” the said target and bring in the mob to berate and intentionally causing hardship to the victim.

Examples of Online Vigilantism

There are countless examples of online vigilantism, especially in recent years. However, below are a number of cases that strikes out the most.

1. Kevin Hart, Oscars (Global)

Kevin Hart, a well-renowned comedian that is loved by all, had been announced to be the host of the 91st Oscars Academy Awards ceremony but just within a few weeks of the announcement. He decided to publicly step down from the opportunity after a series of his old homophobic tweet had been resurfaced on the internet.

The issue had been started by a tweet of a single man who had decided to take matters in his own hand and point out the homophobic tweets that were posted by Kevin Hart more than 7 years before the announcement of his hosting. Although he had spoken of the issues beforehand, this did not stop the community to start attacking and berating the man causing a huge backlash online. This one little action had caused a huge spark of debate in the community which single-handedly affected Kevin Hart's reputation which then he had decided to make the choice of stepping down from the opportunity that he had dreamt of for many years as he believed that it was the right thing to do and not to allow further backlashes.

2. Altercation at Toa Payoh hawker centre(Singapore)

A video had been posted on Facebook showing a couple arguing and shoving an elderly man had been circulated and became viral. The general public had quickly attempted to identify the couple in order to serve justice.

However, amidst the attempt in finding the right couple, there was a mistake made by a Facebook user that had wrongfully accused a lady that was working in UOB as the lady in the said video. The mass began to spread the information of this wrongfully accused lady which included her place of work. This became a huge issue where there were many users that had decided to demand UOB to take action. However, after much investigation that was made by UOB, it has been found that the lady was not the actual culprit.

Although the right couple was then identified and had been fined by the authorities, this showed that a simple mistake could cause a huge issue in society. Thankfully, UOB did not make any rash decision and had decided to make their own investigation to ensure that their staff was not the lady in the video.

The real couple who had been in the video was harassed even after they had been fined by the authorities. Random strangers had been calling and shouting expletives at the staff of the tuition centre that the couple is working at. There were even people who approached the parents of students from the tuition centre and speak ill of the organisation. Worse of all, even the staffs were harassed.

3. Lorry-Cyclist incident(Singapore)

A video that was posted on a Facebook page, Road. sg had gone viral. In the video, a cyclist had purposefully blocked a lorry and preventing it from overtaking. Later, it looked as if the cyclist had struck on the lorry and the driver had reacted by swerving towards the cyclist and knocking him down to the grass patch. Both parties had already been arrested by the police.

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Most social media members had jumped to the defence of the lorry driver and with some even decided to take matters into their own hands and start investigating on the cyclist. It did not take long before a noble cause of identifying the cyclist became a full-fledged harassment. The issue became even worse when the community had identified the wrong person and had already began harassing the innocent party. The company that the innocent party had been working at called DDB's Facebook had been bombarded with a post made by the online vigilante community, to the point that DDB had to make an official response saying that they had the wrong information. Even the innocent party's family had received death threats causing huge distress to him and his family. The damage was already done before they realised that they did not get the right person. It was only until when the innocent party had made a police report before the harassment fully stopped.

4. Boston Bombing (Global)

After the unfortunate Boston Bombing, the internet community decided that they would take matters into their own hands and attempt to find the identity of the bomber. In online forum websites such as Reddit and 4Chan, there were a sleuth of photos posted on their website in an attempt to track the bomber. During their attempts, there were a number of false accusations made even to the point that there were articles made by the New York Post, implying that 2 young boys had anything to do with the bombing which evidently they did not.

The events had caused much distress to the family of the young boys as they had a countless number of emails and calls. Things became worse when

one of the boys' names were posted online which caused News trucks to show up at their home. Making the family fear for the life of their son. The boy had already been missing for 3 months before the event happen and the situation did not make it any easier for the family members that were involved.

5. BMW driver (Singapore)

A severe case of miscommunication gone wrong that had been publicly posted and became a viral sensation overnight in Singapore's online community. A BMW driver had allegedly told an elderly pump attendant that he wanted to top up his petrol only worth of \$10 but the attendant had filled the car with \$135 worth of petrol. The driver then demanded that he did not want to pay for the full amount as he had only wanted \$10 worth.

The debacle was then posted on Facebook by a lady who had witnessed the event. Later, this became a huge viral sensation when the users of Facebook felt the need to implement their own justice. Within hours, information of the driver had been leaked out online and shared among the Facebook community. Even to the point of specifically finding the car that had been used by the driver and harassing the driver by calling and messaging on his personal number. This went on for a couple of day . The driver was then notified of the activities that were happening online and had reported to the authorities in fear for the safety of his family.

Effects of Online Vigilantism

The effects of online vigilantism usually only apply directly to the victim of the vigilantes. In such cases, there may even be extreme consequences.

1. Loss of Income

There are many instances that when the masses had begun witch hunting on a particular person, this may result in the huge loss of income for the target. For example, in the United States of America, a dentist had been a target of huge protest after a photo of him hunting a lion had been posted online and became a huge viral sensation.

This had directly affected his income as his practice of dentistry had certainly become a point where people could publicly shame him especially in online reviews that had been made.

2. Loss of Job

As what had been written above, many online vigilantes will make use of the information that they had gathered on the target to inflict the most amount of damage and generally they will choose to contact the workplace of the target.

With massive pressure from the mob, companies might decide to let go of their staff in order to maintain the reputation of the organisation. This meant that anyone could have their livelihood easily attacked.

3. The innocent party gets involved

There have been cases where an innocent third party had been wrongfully accused. Due to the lack of information gathered by the online vigilantes, there were instances where they had made mistakes

in identifying the perpetrators. This may cause huge implications on the wrongfully accused, not only ruining their reputation online, their livelihood may also be affected.

4. Legal Consequences

Online vigilantism has legal repercussions. If deemed fit, their activities may be considered harassment and will be charged in the court of law. With the updated Harassment Act in Singapore, this is clearly seen as a deterrent for online vigilantism

5. Publicly Outcasted

The target of the online vigilante community will be publicly outcasted especially when their misdeeds had been shared around a countless number of times. This could be very dangerous as it may lead to bigger issues such as depression and even suicide.

Online vigilantism can be a huge mechanism in the social construct to ensure that every misdeed can be reprimanded however, there is always a limit to it. Without the right authority, this meant that there is a possibility of the actions to be illegal especially when it comes to publicizing information that is classified. With such effects of online vigilantism, is it worth the justice that is allegedly been "served"?

There is always a limit to anything that can be done before it crosses the line. With anonymity, there seems to be a lack of compassion in the online platform as many were not given the opportunity to speak out or tell their side of the story.

Regulating Online Vigilantism

Singapore's government had been in debates regarding the issue of doxxing and whether it should be regulated in the harassment act and had just passed the bill on the 7th of May 2019. The act states that the act of publishing a victim's identity will now be considered an offence if it matches one of the following criteria.

1. The publication of the information was made with the intention of harassing the victim
2. The publication was made with the knowledge or intent to put the victim in fear of violence
3. The publication was made with knowledge or intention to provoke the use of violence towards the victim.

Examples that do not constitute in doxxing includes:

1. Identifying perpetrators of crimes which includes traffic offences
2. Posting videos of public dispute in order to give a factual account to the incident that had occurred.

With the new amendment that was made, online vigilantes could be held accountable if they were to maliciously expose information of their victims which will directly deter anyone who wants to begin doing so.

However, should there even be a law made in order to regulate online vigilantism from going overboard?

Unfortunately, it seems that the law that recently had been made is necessary as the mob mentality of online vigilantism had been pretty

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rampant in recent years and there have not been any signs of stopping. With more issues that are posted online such as the latest issue of Ms Monice Baey, who had posted online of the problems that she had been facing where she was a victim to a “ peeping tom” that had recorded her showering. She posted online that she was not happy with the decision that had been made by the authorities and the university as it seemed to be a “ slap on the wrist”.

The online community took notice and had begun bombarding not only the culprit and his family, but even on to the authorities as they demand a heavier punishment for the culprit. Although it seemed to be a righteous move made by the community, there are still proper channels to go through and it had made Singapore Police Force and the National University of Singapore to be a laughing stock.

The incident shows that online vigilantism and participation by the general public is able to directly affect and get a reaction from the authorities. Although the final verdict may not be something that they wanted, the mere response and statements that are posted out by the relevant authorities show that they are listening and there is a certain level of notoriety for the online vigilantes and their community.

Conclusion

Batman or No man

While most people are praising the online vigilantes and saying that their actions are helping to ensure social justice and appropriate actions are to be

taken to the perpetrators, many have too pointed out that we need to consider the actions that are taken by the vigilantes themselves.

Often, online vigilantes do not have full information and have to work with the lack of information. This meant that the possibility of them making the wrong decisions such as accusing the wrong person. Although the intentions may be noble and with the support of many, we have to consider the actions that these vigilantes have taken. More often than not, the perpetrators will become the victim of online bullying without even given a chance to tell their side of the story and even if they do, it will most likely be rejected by the mob.

On the better side, online vigilantism allows the community to debate and discuss the issues that are happening in the community and decide what is best for the community. With better information and with the cooperation of relevant authorities, online vigilantism will be able to help and improve the response level of the authorities

In conclusion, it is possible that online vigilantes can become the knight in shining armour that every citizen needs in order to protect the average citizen and punish the wrongdoers when the right authorities are not able to act on time. However, there is always a limit to the justice that can be served as sometimes it seems that the outrage that had been sparked by the vigilantes might have outweighed the actual crime or action that had been done by the target. With the right regulations that can be implemented by the government, online vigilantism can be the right mechanism that will improve society in general. However, there is still a long way to go for us in

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Singapore and more so on a global scale to find the balance between being overreacting and reacting logically.

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