

Chapter 6

Vengeance Culture Online: A Qualitative Meta-Analysis and Position Paper

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ABSTRACT

Vengeance. Payback. Retribution. Just deserts. Evening up the score. Punishment. If there is an ever-replicating and recurring Internet meme, it is one of revenge. Intimate photos are shared online post-relationship and end up picked up by for-profit pornographic websites. Privy information is leaked into private (narrow-cast) or semi-public or public spaces (broadcast) with massive amplifications of messages into the public sphere. Violent attacks and beat-downs are videotaped and shared on video sharing sites. Flash or cyber mobs are brought together to clean-out stores and to exact vengeance on particular businesses. Information and Communication Technology (ICT), with its nexus of pseudo-anonymity, fast dissemination of information, long-term persistence of data, and mass reach, provides multiple affordances for the exacting of vengeance. The popular culture of anonymous hacktivism and cyber-vigilantism further contribute to the sense of the Internet as an ungoverned and extralegal place. Finally, a general imprudence has meant the easy activation of Internet mobs and individuals to harm-causing rumor-sharing and behavior against others—sparked by doubtful claims or loose storytelling. ICT has enabled the spillover of real-world antipathies and dark emotions into virtual spaces, which then slosh back into the real world. This chapter examines the research in the area of vengeance and how such very human impetuses manifest online. Further, this chapter examines the design features of various ICT platforms and socio-technical spaces that may support vengeance-based communications and actions and proposes ways to mitigate some of these dark affordances.

INTRODUCTION

A Google Search for the term “vengeance” comes up milliseconds later with 81 million hits. A key component of the Anonymous socio-political

hacktivist movement focuses on the pop terrorist figure “V” in *V for Vendetta*, which involves the use of terrorist tactics to correct perceived political wrongs. The online memes—images, videos, and other multimedia—passed between people

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at torrential speeds, offer pieces of culture that are passed contagiously from person to person, highlight take-downs and disses, rants and raves; such memes spread imitative contagions through the culture. The perfect comeback is re-Tweeted and lauded among the Twitterati. This culture is not only in informal cultural spaces. One of the meta-narratives in journalism involves human struggles over power, including the uses of revenge and violence to attain dominance or a new social equilibrium.

Various websites have arisen for people to share others' private information as an act of revenge. These have included stories of others' private ethics and morals; illicit relationships; habits; personalities, and socially transmitted diseases. Manifestations of revenge behaviors abound online: ratings sites (for dates, for instructors, for businesses, and any number of other ratable individuals or entities); revenge and beat-down videos on video sharing sites; and leak sites to spill private and / or hacked information. It is a space for bragging about various acts of mayhem. The insidiousness of such contents is that whether the information is true or not, there will be many who believe in the validity of the data (even professional news sites have been duped by planted and erroneous information). It is all the fog of the moment..every moment.

Microblogging platforms and electronic bulletin boards have been used to organize various hacking "operations" to exact revenge on government organizations, commercial companies, churches, and individuals—who were deemed to have worked at counter-purposes to various hacktivist groups. Individuals and groups are "doxed" or "documented" in order to "threaten, embarrass, harass, and humiliate the individual or organization to further the hacktivists agenda" (Norris, 2012, p. iii). These text-based communications platforms have been used to organize flash mobs to converge on various locations to exact vengeance, the uses of crowd-sourcing to identify individuals who've somehow offended the

public sensibilities of particular groups in order to punish them, and others.

Social media platforms mix the private spheres of people with the public spheres, with much of the various social networks able to be crawled and illuminated. While individuals may be private-casting, they often find their information is shared by those around them. While individuals may be private about their own personalities and what they reveal publicly, much is revealed by their choice of online friends and what they share. This information about social circles and other social data enable the disambiguation of identity (Rowe & Ciravegna, 2008). (This is like the definition of a "black hole" by the light reflectances around them, which defines by absence and light bending in the near-surround). Social media platforms are the venues for prodigious amounts of promiscuous friending and unfriending.

Trolls, individuals who provoke and harass other people online, often use a range of technologies to call out target individuals or organizations. Their pursuit of the LOLS (laugh out louds) at the expense of others strives to wreak havoc and mayhem. Trolls may hoax individuals into giving up privy information and then shame them in public for their gullibility. People are "punked" and digitally recorded in their being tricked, and these images and videos are shared widely. There may be send-ups of individuals, who receive severe public mocking. It may be said that vengeance is a key component of online culture.

The deep intertwining of the virtual and the real means that pure acts of vengeance in physical spaces often leave some digital trails. There may be a mirroring of the physical in the virtual and the virtual in the physical. This article does not suggest that today's information and communication technology (ICT) originates vengeful behaviors. Rather, the research suggests that there are many reasons for people to engage in vengeance. A range of explanatory theories—psychological, social, strategic, and others—is used to explain the prevalence of people's vengeful behaviors.

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