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Local Nazis in your Area: Public shaming and communal disgust in the doxing of white nationalists at Charlottesville



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LOCAL NAZIS IN YOUR AREA: PUBLIC SHAMING
AND COMMUNAL DISGUST IN THE DOXING OF WHITE
NATIONALISTS AT CHARLOTTESVILLE

Abstract

Eagerness to 'name and shame' neo-Nazis after alt-right violence and intimidation at the 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, has revitalised the ethical debate over the practice of 'doxing' (dropping documents) to publicly shame previously unidentified white nationalists. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's politics of emotion to analyse the affective politics of doxing as a weaponised form of public shaming and expression of personal disgust raises urgent questions about the effects and ethics of doxing as an activist practice and form of cyber-harrassment.



Yes, You're Racist

@YesYoureRacist

Following



If you recognize any of the Nazis marching in [#Charlottesville](#), send me their names/profiles and I'll make them famous [#GoodNightAltRight](#)



9:43 AM - 12 Aug 2017

67,639 Retweets 85,702 Likes



2.3K 68K 86K



The social justice-oriented Twitter account *@YesYoureRacist*, dedicated to outing racist individuals since 2012, has been influential during and after the Charlottesville rallies. *@YesYoureRacist*'s posts identifying specific men pictured in the tiki-torch march have garnered tens of thousands of likes and retweets, while also being shared in journalistic media outlets and credited with the exposure of socially unacceptable white supremacists (Sydell, 2017). The practice of doxing Charlottesville protestors challenges the extent to which shame can be expected to "reintegrate subjects" into a social ideal (Ahmed, 2004, p. 106). The current media environment of dispersed personal networks, through which doxing for weaponised public shaming is enacted and disseminated, also complicates the dialectical relationship between witness and subject which Sara Ahmed describes as necessary for the elicitation of shame (Ahmed, 2004). Accounting for the political potential of negative or "ugly" feelings (Ngai, 2005, p. 333) like shame and disgust helps to interrogate social media users' practice of sharing doxed material, especially by mobilising disgust as a source of community-formation in the act of sharing content which shames others. The dual emotional justifications for sharing doxes on social media – eliciting shame in a responsible individual, and affective community-formation through shared disgust at that individual – must be urgently appraised in order to pursue the effective deployment of feelings for political organisation, and "turn emotions into active refusal, into generative action, not short-circuiting again within our own, comfortable worldview" (Zyrzycka, 2016, para. 23).

Public shaming is a form of social control, deployed when a person violates the norms of a given community and others respond by publicly criticising or ostracising them. Recent advances in mobile, digital, and networked communications technologies have drastically altered the methods of social norm enforcement deployed to constrain behaviour (Klonick, 2016), and also the communicative infrastructure which affords the affective conditions of political subjectivity (Wetherell, 2013). Doxing – the intentional, non-consensual, public online release of personal identifying information about an individual, "often with the intent to humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish" – has become an established means of public shaming and credibility-delegitimation in the internet era (Douglas, 2017, p. 199). Regardless of fluctuating terminologies used to describe online shaming (doxing, trolling, flaming, internet vigilantism), the purpose of these actions is to invoke an emotional response in the target which confronts their self-worth and understanding of their place in the world (Klonick, 2016). Doxing is a tactic social justice and anti-fascist activists claim can help vulnerable communities subvert and resist the strategies of white supremacist hate groups and oppressive institutions (Colton et al, 2017). Ostensibly, this form of public shaming works because of the threat of exclusion unless the shameful behaviour is atoned for; the exposure of white nationalist beliefs leads to a turning-away from the shamed subject by other members of civil society (Ahmed 2004). "It's hard to get a job, hard to make a living, hard to have a normal social life when all your friends and family know you believe in ethnic cleansing" (Hankes cited in Blum, 2017, para. 12).

High profile doxer *@YesYoureRacist* has crowdsourced and published the names,

Twitter handles, addresses, places of employment, and universities of a number of “torch-carrying far-right extremists” who attended the ‘Unite the Right’ rally (Oppenheim, 2017, para. 9). The demonstration began on Friday 11 August, ostensibly protesting the removal of a statue depicting Confederate General Robert E. Lee (Collier, 2017). All the Confederate monuments in Charlottesville were erected in the 1920s as the Ku Klux Klan was experiencing a resurgence and new Jim Crow segregation laws were implemented (Abramowitz et al, 2017). The statue and other monuments to Confederate ‘heroes’ and slave-owners were established to materialise and reinforce white supremacy in public spaces and have become contested sites of patriotic pride and shame (Abramowitz et al, 2017). On Saturday 12 August, James Alex Fields Jr deliberately accelerated his car into a crowd of anti-racist counter-protesters, killing one and injuring 19 others (Collier, 2017). Marchers at the alt-right rally also used Nazi and white nationalist slogans and paraphernalia (Victor, 2017). Although not every alt-right attendee self-identified as a Nazi, all marched in solidarity with Nazi groups.

Logan Smith, who runs the *@YesYoureRacist* Twitter account, says others should ‘name and shame’ the white supremacists, especially as they were brazen enough to show their faces and effectively volunteer their identities (Sydell, 2017). “They’re not wearing hoods anymore — they’re out in the open, and if they’re proud to stand with KKK members and neo-Nazis and anti-government militias, then I think the community should know who they are” (Smith/*@YesYoureRacist* in Sydell, 2017, para. 3). Having marched ‘proudly’ in public, shamed participants who have been doxed now wish to hide (Edwards, 2017), having experienced a non-consensual “exposure” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 104).

Rally attendees identified by *@YesYoureRacist* include Cole White, employed at a hot dog restaurant in Berkeley, California, University of Nevada student Peter Cvjetanovic, and Jeff Tefft. White “voluntarily resigned” on Saturday after his employer confronted him, and Cvjetanovic says he has received “violent and graphic” death threats after being identified shouting and holding a tiki-torch aloft in photographs (McAndrew, 2017, para. 3). Tefft’s father posted a letter in a local newspaper disavowing his son and declared that, although he and his family are not racists, once his son’s face and name were posted on social media the family also became targets for harassment (Sydell, 2017).

‘Naming and shaming’ through doxing invokes a moralistic position that is not validated in typical instances of bullying or harassment (Collier, 2017). While tactics of online shaming and cyberharassment can share analogous attributes such as repeated verbal aggression, threats of violence, privacy invasions, reputation-harming lies, calls for strangers to physically harm victims, and technological attacks (Klonick, 2016), online shaming differs from cyberbullying in that shaming specifically delivers retribution for an alleged violation of a normative social ideal. Klonick points out that in contemporary circumstances “online shaming often turns into cyber bullying and harassment the more attenuated the social actions become from the nexus of social norm enforcement” (2016, p. 1034) with persecution lasting for days or even years

after a dox. Harassment from the online shaming also overflowed to innocents who did not participate in the rally. The employers, schools, and families of identified rally attendees were targeted for hate mail and threats, using information revealed through doxing.

In doxing, there is no right of reply; no direct communicative channel to the mob through which targets can 're-cover' through apologetic expressions of regret or shame (Ahmed, 2004). Nor can mistaken targets completely clear their names in the case of misidentification (Victor, 2017). The intention to elicit individual shame which thus encourages ethical social participation cannot be said to be fulfilled through doxing, as most participants in the distribution of the dox will not encounter the 'shamed' individual aside from in the publicly circulated dox itself.

Doxing is also frequently perpetuated by misogynist/racist/xenophobic groups or 'publics' ideologically aligned with the alt-right, with the tactic used against the very people anti-fascist activists seek to defend through doxing alt-right figures (Douglas, 2017). Online shaming is still most consistently deployed against already-marginalised groups (Yomato, 2016), especially LGBT individuals, people of colour, and women (Sobieraj, 2017), thus the amoral practice upholds current social inequities and violence even as it might also be used to protect vulnerable people.

Many social justice commentators perceive the extrajudicial practice of doxing as an understandable response to traditional law enforcement institutions' failure to adapt to the rapidly shifting needs and realities of the digital world (Ellib, 2017). Crowdsourced online shaming seems like a cost-effective, adaptable and democratic technique for combating socially undesirable behaviours and creating an ethical society. However, the distinction between people's justice and "lynch justice" is uneasy, with doxing attempts subject to mercurial mobs' whims and subsequent persecution potentially infinite in duration (Klonick, 2016, pp. 1040-1041). In a misfired doxing attempt, Kyle Quinn, a professor at the Engineering Research Center at the University of Arkansas, was misidentified as a photographed rally attendee who possessed a passing resemblance to Quinn in facial hair and build, and was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with 'Arkansas Engineering' (Victor, 2017). Despite the blunder being revealed within a day, countless strangers accused Quinn of racism, posted his home address on social networks, demanded he lose his job, and threatened his family (Victor, 2017). Doxing is unreliable as a means of exacting proportionally appropriate justice, because online shaming is "(1) an over-determined punishment with indeterminate social meaning; (2) not a calibrated or measured form of punishment; and (3) of little or questionable accuracy in who and what it punishes" (Klonick, 2016, pp. 1029-1030).

Shaming punishments can even cause some targets to form proud communities around their social deviancy (Posner, 2000). Arguably the alt-right/white-supremacist/neo-Nazi assemblage that rallied in Charlottesville is a prime example of this refusal of shame, instead taking pride in their "cry-bully martyrdom" (Phillips, 2017, para. 14) as they marched alongside one another, unmasked. According to

Ahmed, the emotion of shame can only be provoked by awareness of inadequacy based on external disapproval from another, and that witness must necessarily elicit desire or love in order to then elicit a shame response (Ahmed, 2004, p. 105). In this model, being shamed by someone whose opinion and identification the subject is actively uninterested in or opposed to might even have a reversed effect. For a white supremacist, the indignant disapproval of people of colour and ‘politically correct’ white folk may only fuel their pride in their position. For antifascist doxers, the chief challenge from ‘Unite the Right’ white nationalists is their *shamelessness*. That is, in their refusal to conceal their identity or recognise their beliefs as socially undesirable; their proud attachments to Confederate monuments and Nazi symbolism that are typically regarded as sites of grievous [trans]national shame; and their disregard for the condemnation of antagonistic groups. If shame doesn’t *work* in doxing white nationalists, what other affective attachments might doxing contribute to?

Ahmed’s description of disgust can be set to work describing a key affective response which fuels activist projects of social media users who propagate @YesYoureRacist’s doxing. Sharing doxed materials is a speech act which can not only elicit shamed affects in targeted individuals, but also express the limits of one’s own political position and self-image. The distributive magnitude of shaming online changes the affective utility of ‘sharing’ a dox (republishing an original post on one’s online social networks). If the dox is designed to elicit shame in a targeted individual for their failure to adhere to social ideals, the speech act of sharing the dox also expresses one’s own felt disgust at historical wrongs and “bad feelings” represented by the targeted individual (Ahmed, 2004, p. 84). Disgust is a feeling of “badness” that momentarily consumes the subject but is ultimately expelled and ‘stuck’ to the bodies of others (Ahmed, 2004, p. 104). The expression of disgust is one of proximity then and then propulsive rejection (Ahmed, 2004), a pulling-back from close contact with an offensive object that wholly attributes the affective experience of sickening threat to something inherent in the object’s qualities (Ahmed, 2004) Disgust stands its object (in this case the photographed Charlottesville Nazis) in for a border of the self; “an act of substitution that protects the subject from all that is ‘not it’” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 86). In this way the proclamation of disgust by sharing doxed information works to reify an anti-racist moral/ethical position for social media users. Disgust also makes the identified individuals *abject*, and deems them inherently disgust-ing (Ahmed, 2004).

Disgust is performed through speech acts (Ahmed, 2004). Naming something as disgusting produces the “set of affects *which then adhere as a disgusting object*” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 93) and public statements of disgust call “upon others to witness our pulling away” (Elspeth Probyn cited in Ahmed, 2004, p. 95). Disgust is an especially sociable affect because “it seeks to include or draw others *into* its exclusion of its object,” inviting them to take a position on the object (Ngai, 2005, p. 336). An affective community is formed by people united in their sharing of disgust; literally so on Twitter, where the disgusted population is inventoried via retweets of @YesYoureRacist’s posts condemning alt-right Charlottesville rally participants. In doxing, the disgust stuck to the object and declared by the community of disgusted

witnesses subsumes the actual object – who, in the case of doxed white supremacists, are still human beings, although this humanity seems rarely considered in the Charlottesville doxings unless it turns out that the dox falsely accused an innocent individual like Quinn (Victor, 2017).

Disgust is especially prominent in the case of Charlottesville doxings because the affective ‘stickiness’ of negative feelings to Nazi paraphernalia and slogans is so potently “*an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 90). Given the transnational legacies of genocide, slavery, xenophobia and racism that ‘stick’ so disgust-ingly to ‘Unite the Right’ marchers and their chosen Nazi symbolism, the accumulation of affective value and the stickiness of signification complicate arguments for critical reflection on the disgusted public’s rejection of white nationalist ideology through sharing doxes from Charlottesville. Disgust also provides justification for commentators to dismiss concerns about doxed individuals with total abjectifying rejection; “fuck them and the grand dragon they rode in on” (Phillips, 2017, para. 5). But the supposed value of shaming is that it allows for the possibility that the shamed could live up to social ideals, despite prior failure (Ahmed, 2004). Disgust is predicated on a desire for totalising exclusion of the offensive object or individual, but shame allows for a reconciliatory inclusion.

The shaming of white nationalists at Charlottesville is reprocessed through networked social media into an expression of disgust as doxed materials and images are shared. This affective shift from marking a person’s behaviour as shameful to declaring it disgusting is a core problem with the tactical dissemination of doxing materials. While the ethical imperative of shame makes the emotion a “potentially ennobling or morally beatific state”, disgust is a less virtuous emotion than shame, being an explicitly amoral and noncathartic feeling (Ngai, 2005, p. 6). Shaming implies a possible process of reconciliation (Ahmed, 2004); a failure to adhere to a norm but a promise of recovery into a social ideal. But perhaps some shameful acts cannot be forgiven or reintegrated into social equilibrium; shame’s sanitising “discourses of reconciliation” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 113) could thus be constructively tested by disgust.

The sharing of disgust is linked to rage not just via the affective conditions of online ‘outrage culture’ but through shared anger about the ways in which the disgusting saturates the witnesses’ lives (Ahmed, 2004). Disgust at doxed white supremacists forces witnesses to confront the prior contamination of white supremacy in American culture even as they rush to identify the bodies that ‘cause’ the event and thus locate the source of disgust in a few abject individuals – Peter Cvjetanovic, etc. Expressing disgust about, and publicising one’s absolute rejection and disavowal of, the photographed poster-boys of white nationalism may serve as a means for well-meaning white folk to express their shame over white supremacy without confronting our own participation in its more insidious institutional forms (Francois, 2017). In this way the doxed alt-right may become symbolic scapegoats bearing an unspoken stickiness of white liberal shame and self-disgust in complicity with systemic racism. But through evaluating the “intense and unambivalent negativity” of disgust, more

insidious ugly feelings and “politically efficacious emotions” might be accessed (Ngai, 2005, p. 354).

New media outlets and digital technologies have radically changed the terrain on which we enact forms of witnessing and access. The formation of affective communities and political identities within free-market platforms invites the commodification of affect and ideologies, even as they prompt new forms of engagement with conflict and oppression (Zyrzycka & Olivieri, 2017). Individual emotions have become a shareable metric for cultural/political stances, generating “emotional infrastructures” (Zyrzycka & Olivieri, 2017, p. 528) that either conform to patriarchy, racism, xenophobia and oppression, or deploy feelings as “a form of against-ness” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 174) by demonstrating opposition to, for example, racist rallies in Charlottesville. An ethically-motivated response of disgust when confronted with Nazi symbolism makes it difficult to dispassionately assess anti-fascist tactics of resistance against the burgeoning alt-right, even where these tactics reproduce right-wing strategies of violence and harassment. Online expressions of disgust and disavowal are framed as activist forces pushing back against systemic violence, bigotry and economic inequality (Zyrzycka, 2016). @YesYoureRacist and social media users who share the doxes employ the tactic of doxing not just to elicit the interior shame of the white supremacist but to activate the collective disgust of the witnessing community. Both emotional states are intended to enforce a desirable social order. “Negative” affects typically considered undesirable can be socially productive because, despite their felt discomfort, their capacity for oppositional or antagonistic forms of meaning-making can provide a source for critical resistance (Ngai, 2005, p. 3). However ethical antifascists’ intentions may be in doxing or sharing doxed information, this is a form of aggression linked to the exercise of control and desire for power.

 **Yes, You're Racist** @YesYoureRacist 13 Aug
Replying to @YesYoureRacist
By the way, if you enjoy this thread then consider buying me a beer on Patreon #GoodNightAltRight #Charlottesville
patreon.com/yesyoureacist

 **Yes, You're Racist** @YesYoureRacist [Follow](#)

This angry young man is Peter Cvjetanovic, a student at [@unevadareno](https://twitter.com/unevadareno) pic.twitter.com/7rLGJkcT3o
10:45 AM - Aug 13, 2017



 1,926  34,076  32,064 

Image from Selk. Screenshot taken 27/08/2017.

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Course Information

Dr Cherie Lacey's MDIA 403: Mass Media and Popular Culture course at Victoria University of Wellington explores the critical importance of feeling in popular media culture.

Traversing a range of affective and emotional states, from happiness to outrage, shame to compassion, the course considers whether we are now – as many theorists believe – living in an age of emotional non-catharsis. This course is an advanced study of how affect and emotion are activated and deployed in popular media forms, investigating how affect relates to intimate publics, the politics of emotion, and the production of communities and norms. This paper was submitted in semester 3, 2017.