

Doxxing of Residential Information Targeting Vulnerable Groups: Online and Offline harms

About this report

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The report includes five case studies related to doxxing in four countries: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia. Three of the cases are directly related to doxxing of residential information. Due to time constraints, researchers did not have enough time to look up cases that are more relevant. Additionally, cases of residential information doxxing seem to be less common than other forms of doxxing. So, we opted to include two additional case studies: a case study pertaining to the doxxing of sexual harassment victim in Egypt and another case study illustrating how residential information can be easily obtained and used to threaten and dox others in Jordan. We believe these additional case studies can help the Oversight Board better understand the general environment and the threats vulnerable groups and individuals are subjected to in the region. In addition, through the report we referenced other cases mentioned in the media and human rights reports.

The report is divided into five sections. The first section describes the context and the victims mostly like to suffer from the impacts of doxxing, particularly of residential information. The second section summarises the types of information most likely to be doxxed, how and on which platforms. In section 3, the impacts on work, activism, personal life and mental health are summarised, while section 4 details how the victims have been responding to the doxxing and where they think platforms are falling short in their responses. Finally, we present a list of recommendations in the fifth section based on researchers' suggestions and their interviews with victims. The five case studies can be found at the end of the report.

Key Findings

- Doxxing in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia seem to disproportionately impact the most vulnerable groups and individuals in society, including activists, women and

LGBTQ+ people. Interviewees and researchers expressed less concern about doxxing impacting privileged individuals and those in power.

- While doxxing is a problem in the four countries, and across the wider Arab region, doxxing of residential information seems to be less common in some countries. For example, in Tunisia, the doxxing of telephone numbers is more common than that of residential information.
- The publication of copies of ID cards is one of the methods used to dox someone's home address in Egypt and Tunisia, where ID cards contain detailed addresses.
- The case studies and other cases referenced throughout the report happened predominantly on Facebook.
- Residential information doxxing can have some serious and lasting implications for vulnerable individuals, putting their safety at risk and endangering their livelihoods and mental well-being.
- The interviewees described platforms' responses as inadequate and insufficient in their responses to doxxing.

1. Context and victims

Doxxing in the four countries included in this research and the wider Arab region is often used to target vulnerable groups and individuals such as women, human rights defenders, dissidents, minorities and LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming people. The doxxing happens often as part of entire defamatory, hateful and vicious campaigns aimed at discrediting and targeting the victims, for example, for the purpose of silencing them or discrediting them and their activism or work, and the whole movements or organizations they are affiliated with.

The doxxing, particularly of sensitive information such as residential information, puts these groups and individuals—already in a vulnerable position— at additional risks, especially vis a vis those in a position of power.

In Egypt, doxxing affects sexual assault victims if they choose to go public and report to the police, and Case Study 1 details the doxxing a victim after she spoke to the media about the sexual harassment she was subjected to. This case study did not specifically involve the doxxing of residential information, but it does illustrate its devastating effects, as the victim continues to deal with not only the implications for her personal and work life but also its psychological toll.

Additionally, intersectionality is important in understanding who doxxing is most likely to affect in these countries and the rest of the region. For example, women and gender-nonconforming protesters, journalists and activists are more affected than their male counterparts.

For instance, early last year year, in Tunisia, human rights defenders, women, and LGBTQI+ activists who took part in anti-government protests were subjected to a growing number of

social media campaigns of bullying, forced outings and doxxing of their personal information. Case Study 5 discusses the case of one victim who had her personal information doxxed by pages affiliated with police unions. In another example not included in this research, another victim was targeted on social media following her participation in protests. Pro-police unions pages and accounts on Facebook shared her home address and telephone number along with her personal photos and comments threatening her. She also received hundreds of messages on Facebook including bullying comments and death and rape threats forcing her to deactivate her social media accounts.

In Lebanon, during protests ignited by deteriorating economy, austerity and poor public services, several activists were attacked and bullied online and had their personal information doxxed. In Case Study 4, we spoke with a victim whose residential information was doxxed. In another example not included in this study, one victim was doxxed on Facebook after posting posts on the same platforms in which she expressed her support for anti-government protests and criticizing the powerful Hezbollah party and militant group and its ally, the Amal movement party. As a part of a vicious campaign that included insults and threats of rape and physical assault, her phone number in addition to her address were doxxed online.

2. Information doxxed, methods and platforms

The information doxxed usually include telephone numbers, residential addresses, publicly available photos or photos taken without victims' consent, full names and private conversations. Most of the case studies and additional examples mentioned in the research took place predominantly on Facebook, followed by Twitter. In one case (Case Study 2), the doxxing started on Twitter and continued on Facebook. In another case (Case Study 1), it started by and in mainstream media before reaching social media, and Facebook in particular.

Methods deployed include hacking, searching public databases (for e.g., by re-sharing previously available information like photos in intimidating posts or by taking them out of context) and breach of trust (for e.g., by leaking private conversations and information). For some types of information, it was not very clear how the attackers got hold of them.

3. Impacts

In general, the impacts of doxxing can have a devastating effect on people's lives, jeopardizing their work, causing them mental exhaustion and putting their safety and that of their loved ones at risk.

The doxxing of residential information can be particularly stressful and dangerous as it jeopardises the safety of victims in their own private spheres.

4. Responses

Victims have attempted to take certain steps to counter the doxxing, in addition to the threats and hateful speech they were subjected to. Often, however, they lacked the capacity to flag every post. Additionally, the interviewees did not find the responses of platforms—and Facebook in particular—adequate.

Filing complaints to the authorities is not efficient either, particularly when the doxxers are powerful or linked to those in power.

In addition, the lack of (legal) protections and support for women and vulnerable groups suffering from doxxing and other forms of online harassment made it harder for them to complain to the authorities. As our Jordan researcher wrote: “At-risk groups face several barriers to reporting online harm to the authorities: they rarely seek the cybercrime unit’s support, if ever. This is because they require victims to go in person to the station, have lengthy bureaucratic processes, require payment for filing issues, and most importantly there’s a heavy stigma attached especially to females seeking support from the police.”

Public figures

As mentioned above, doxxing in the region seems to affect individuals and groups that are vulnerable, and cases of doxxing—including of residential information—affecting public figures and officials remain largely unheard of. Additionally, researchers and interviewees are more concerned about the disproportionate impacts of doxxing on women, journalists, dissidents, human rights defenders, LGBTQ+ people and other vulnerable communities. As the Egypt researcher noted, public figures “usually have a PR team that has the power to change their online footprint to clear personal information from the web. In addition to a legal team to help protect privacy and reverse the effects of residential doxxing.” [1] [SEP]

One interviewee believes that public figures already have the authority and the power to protect themselves, which makes the at-risk groups more vulnerable and in need of quicker help.

5. Recommendations

- 1. Enhancing responses to abusive behavior, including doxing.** This can include establishing a helpline for doxing specifically and providing a clear way to flag doxing, or circulation of personal data that could be harmful. Responses for individuals working in activism and journalism should be prioritised. Additionally, the company can consider creating additional helplines with civil society organisations working in the region to better support at-risk groups and individuals in cases of doxing.
- 2. Improve process for verification of accounts.** This will allow for better damage control for those affected by doxing.
- 3. Training and awareness campaigns:** Facebook should support more training and awareness campaigns in the region on digital safety. It can also support digital security training for activists and at-risk groups.
- 4. Empower journalists and independent media to better respond to misinformation and disinformation campaigns.** Doxing in the region usually happens as part of campaigns that are filled with hateful speech and disinformation.
Feature suggestion - safety notifications (suggested by SMEX partner, JOSA):
Every-so-often, when a user is about to send a picture (whether taken in-app or not), Facebook should add a pop-up notification asking users to be mindful of what they send and think about how these images could be used to harm them.

Country snapshots

Egypt

Egypt recorded 54.74 million internet users in January 2020. In spite of the wide usage of internet and social media in Egypt, there's a lack of digital literacy and access to legal protection for individuals to know about what's doxing and how they can protect their personal data online.

A common example of residential doxing of regular citizens is individuals taking the initiative of posting a picture of someone's National ID (which includes a detailed address), on the basis of them being a thief. Even though this self-directed effort at raising awareness has its reasons, it's still potentially dangerous to the doxxed individual.

Those who face doxing—including of residential information—include regular citizens involved in conflict with other people and public figures, but marginalised groups and the less privileged usually suffer the most.

Jordan

LGBTQ+ people, and women and girls face an array of harms online. This ranges from extortion, to doxing, harassment, stalking, and much more. Cases remain largely unreported particularly by members of the LGBTQ+ community and women due to the silence, stigma and shame surrounding them.

From September 2020 until September 2021, JOSA dealt with over 120 digital emergency cases, 90% of which came from women. Overall, men don't face the isolation women face in such cases, as they are more able to resolve such issues by seeking external help such as by going to the cybercrime unit.

Lebanon

Doxxing in Lebanon mostly affects journalists, activists and protesters, particularly those opposing and critical of the regime. Women are particularly vulnerable to doxing campaigns. The risk increases for women who are active in public life such as activists and journalists. Previous research by SMEX found that LGBTQ+ individuals and migrant workers are also vulnerable to doxing and its impacts.

Tunisia

Journalists, human rights defenders, women, and LGBTQI+ activists in Tunisia have been subject to a growing number of social media campaigns of bullying, forced outings and doxxing of their personal information. While phone numbers have been the most commonly doxxed information, a number of cases of residential information doxxing were also reported. Most cases reported by human rights organizations, including the case study in this report, occurred between late 2020 and 2021, at the time of social protests. The doxxing of residential information often occurs as part of defamatory campaigns full of hate speech, bullying and inciting violence. Most—if not all—of the previously documented cases occurred on Facebook.