

Trolling, Doxxing and Swatting

No, we didn't just make those words up and, yes, it's time to add them to your vocabulary. From our experience in working with children and young people, we know it's important to speak their language and understand the environments they are growing up in. Trolling, doxxing and swatting all fall under the category of online harassment or cyberbullying and may have originated from within online gaming but have now spread to other forms of digital communications. We don't know how prevalent they may be, but it is useful to examine what they involve, and how we can minimise the harms they may cause.

What do they actually mean?

Trolling relates to purposely disrupting online discussions and causing harm to others. Whilst originally it may have been a way for people to develop relationships and determine the skills of others in online forums, it has now developed into something much more sinister.

Trolling has gathered attention across the media due to attacks on celebrities and quasi-celebrities, as well as the defacing or degrading of online tribute pages to those that have passed away. Whilst trolling still involves some element of humour or camaraderie, it is often the darker side of trolling which is highlighted in the media.

Doxxing (also referred to as doxing or d0xing) involves the public revelation of personal details. It can be used as a form of harassment against someone who does not share your ideas or opinions, by creating a heightened sense of fear through invasion of privacy.

Doxxing has been most prominent in the so-called "gamergate" situation. Gamergate arose after a number of women involved in the online gaming environment (both professionally and as gamers) spoke out about their mistreatment. A number of high-profile female spokespeople have had their home addresses and phone numbers posted publicly, often alongside threats of harm or incitements to violence.

Swatting involves the use of hoax calls to emergency services, often police, intended as a form of harassment against the person whose home is subsequently visited by law enforcement. Some writers on the subject point to its origins in online gaming, as a way of disrupting real-time play or as revenge, but it appears to be broadening its scope and affecting people outside of online gaming.

Not only could swatting cause harm or anxiety to the person being "swatted", but it could also be seen as taking away emergency services from real emergencies. Making a hoax call can actually be a criminal offence.

Who takes part?

So who is it trolling, doxxing and swatting others? Are they hacktivists, cyberbullies or troublemakers? As many of the people involved in these activities use the internet to hide their identity, it is difficult for us to pinpoint exactly who is responsible. What we can do is look at who they target in order to gain an idea of their intentions.

Whilst some may engage in these activities to highlight their world view or to make themselves feel better, the consequential harm to others cannot be overlooked. Again the debate around whether the ends justify the means rears its head in these situations but we must learn from we have experienced through cyberbullying, cyber-racism and the unauthorised distribution of intimate images. As a digital society, we need to look not only at how our actions affect us, but also how they impact upon others.

What can be done to minimise harm?

How can we discourage others from engaging in trolling, doxxing and swatting? There's no easy solution but we need to engage with young people, particularly those involved in communities that encourage this type of behaviour to better understand what is involved and why they do it. Only then can we hope to develop more ethical approaches to dealing with the forces which encourage these activities.

For the broader community, we need to continually promote empathy and putting ourselves in the other person's shoes before we post or comment online. Despite not being physically present to witness the impacts of our actions online, in this day and age no one can argue that they don't understand the real and damaging impacts of online harassment.

Finally, we can try not to engage with those who participate in these activities so that they don't receive the attention they are craving. All users should know how to block and report on all the sites and apps that they use.