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## Blog post #6: The human flesh search engine: NOT a search engine for cannibals

Edit

Posted on November 22, 2020 by Corrina



Illustration by Leo Jung, New York Times Magazine, 2010

In 2006, a video of a woman committing a horrible, reprehensible act of animal cruelty was uploaded to China's Web. The video quickly spread to chatrooms and online forums. At first, users understandably responded with disgust, horror, and anger. Then, users' responses turned more practical: they wanted to know if a front-facing image of the woman could be distilled from the video (Downey, 2010, para. 2) in order to identify her and punish her. Thus, China's human flesh search phenomenon was born.

The internet citizens who participate in a human flesh search are known, collectively, as a human flesh search engine. And while the term as translated conjures an image of a search engine for cannibals (or is it just me?), in China it refers to an online search that is powered by humans rather than computers (Downey, 2010, para. 8). There is no designated platform for human flesh searches—they happen across a variety of internet channels. Human flesh search engines "are grassroots, collaborative efforts to share information online" (Levine, 2012, para. 5).

Importantly, though, a human flesh search engine is "a form of online vigilante justice in which Internet users hunt down and punish people who have attracted their wrath" (Downey, 2010, para. 3). It is a collective search by people for people, usually with a moralistic motivation—although not always. While some human search engines have formed around punishing corrupt government officials, shaming cheating spouses, and identifying legal and social rule breakers, others have formed around finding the identity of an attractive person found on a social media site (Hatton, 2014, para. 20). In most cases, though, a human flesh search engine's aim is to publish personal details of their subject. This can have alarming consequences for one's personal privacy and security, especially those who are mis-identified as wrong-doers or as a desired love interest. Years after her personal information was posted online, one woman, known as "Milk Tea Girl" on the internet, still has admirers breaking into her college dorm room (Hatton, 2014, paras. 20-24). Another man, a taxi driver, was mis-identified as another taxi driver who spat on an elderly woman; all of his personal information was posted online, and he received thousands of aggressive phone calls, some threatening to burn his house down if he did not pay the caller money (Hatton, 2014, paras. 1-10).

As many have argued, human flesh search engines are a response to the current political and societal climate in China, which is shifting from an ethic-oriented to a legal-oriented society (Zhang & Gao, 2016, p. 602). In some ways, the internet is the only place for Chinese citizens to be citizens (Downey, 2010, para. 4) and respond to China's major contemporary debates; in one way "the issues that people are flesh searching really reveal the things that China is going through" (Levine, 2012, para. 13). As one citizen reporter is quoted, "In an undemocratic country, the people have limited means to get information. Information about [the activities of] public power is not transparent an operates in a black box, [but] citizens can get access to information through the Internet, exposing lies and the truth" (Levine, 2012, para. 17). A human flesh search engine is both a way to seek justice and to release the "accumulated discontents of the public" (Zhang & Gao, 2016, p. 602).

The privacy and societal issues raised by human flesh search engines are some of the same issues websleuths face. However, the U.S. and E.U. have certain privacy laws in place that allow for some recourse when someone's personal and private details are posted publicly without their permission. In China, internet governance and privacy laws are nascent (Han, 2018) and subject to its socialist and revolutionary past (Han, 2016). It is interesting, though, to see that regardless of a country's political ideology or governance structure, groups of citizens across the world are employing the internet to crowdsource for justice, however imperfect that may be.

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This entry was posted in INFO 200, Information community, websleuths and tagged global information communities, human flesh search, human flesh search engine. Bookmark the [permalink](#).

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## 6 thoughts on "Blog post #6: The human flesh search engine: NOT a search engine for cannibals"

 Louis says:  
November 25, 2020 at 12:32 am (Edit)

Really fascinating read! Interesting to see the lengths that other users may go to identify others on the web. I think we've all come across this in some form or another, especially on social media when someone has wronged another or someone getting doxed as a result of getting their information posted abroad. But at the same time, it can serve as a powerful method of exchanging information, going as far as mitigating noise that can come from political discourse.

[Reply](#)

 Corrina says:  
November 28, 2020 at 1:32 am (Edit)

Thank you, Louis! Yes, as I was reading about this phenomenon in China, I thought of multiple instances of a human flesh search engine in the States. The Boston Bombing, for example, spurred people on a sub-Reddit to dox individuals who had not committed the bombing and it was devastating to those individuals. Or the couple who put together a Go Fund Me for a homeless man and then kept all the money for themselves—some intrepid and curious internet folks researched and discovered the fraud. Anyways, thanks for your insight!

[Reply](#)

 Sarah Greer says:  
November 29, 2020 at 5:39 am (Edit)

Gosh, this really highlights the dichotomy of the empowerment and vulnerability the internet creates in people's lives. And that poor wrongly accused taxi-driver! I think that one of the scariest things about our constant online presence is that people are beginning to lose their empathy for the horrors they see online. These atrocious acts are becoming more frequent and desensitizing younger generations. It is good to hear about those people that take action against these brutalities (even if the human flesh search engine is innately flawed). Thank you for sharing!

[Reply](#)

 Corrina says:  
December 7, 2020 at 1:29 am (Edit)

It is an interesting dichotomy—and I agree about the desensitizing. There are also some interesting responses by people who have been the subject of such attacks—maybe not an HFSE, but just general online bullying. One anti-fat bias and body liberation activists I follow on instagram did a whole photo series where they dressed up as someone who bullied them online and wrote the bully's most hurtful quote on their body. It was impactful to see the text on the body it was ridiculing, which was dressed as the bully. Perhaps a way to say "your words say more about you than they do about me". Anyways, not exactly HFSE-related, but it was an interesting response that shows how one's "morals" are expressed online and how others respond to them.

[Reply](#)

 Elle Pan says:  
November 30, 2020 at 10:47 pm (Edit)

Thank you for this fascinating blog post, Corrina! It is so interesting to see how online vigilantes in China have risen and are growing (arguably out of control) in the recent decade or so and how it's related to the country's political ideology and nationalism. I'm Taiwanese American, and it's an issue that concerns me, personally. In addition to using human-flesh search engines, it's become increasingly common for Chinese nationalist "netizens" to utilize search engines and social media in finding of potential targets for attack. There have been countless incidents of them targeting organizations, brands, companies, and individuals all over the world and calling for boycotts to punish them when they seem to offend China in an way, shape, or form. One incident that particularly stuck with me was when Chinese netizens got their government to ban an indie Taiwanese video game called Devotion when they found an Easter egg of a Xi Jinping meme, which actually led to Steam banning it in the US, as well (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-47361172>). I'm so curious, and its used, to see how search engine technology in China, and its scale, will progress in the future.

[Reply](#)

 Corrina says:  
December 7, 2020 at 12:49 am (Edit)

Wow—thanks for sharing that article. It was interesting to read about this as a Chinese phenomenon, yet there are instances of human flesh search worldwide. The online hunt and doxxing of innocent people thought to be responsible for the Boston Marathon Bombings is another example of a human flesh search engine going terribly wrong. And while that instance certainly had nationalistic motivations, it seems that aspect is certainly more prevalent in Chinese HFSEs. It's just such a fascinating topic... with some pretty scary implications for the victims.

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