
Police investigation

Cyber hackers interrupt digital town hall on racism

By Matt DeYoung/Grand Haven Tribune
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VanHorssen

Courtesy photo
Shortly after the online meeting began, event organizer Barbara Lee VanHorsen said someone began overriding the microphone, repeatedly blasting racial slurs over the speakers.

“It was probably a recording, using the 'n' word like a jackhammer, over and over,” VanHorsen said. “Then they managed to get in and start drawing on the screen, and putting up images and videos of cross burning and graphic pornography. It was vicious and unrelenting.”

Organizers quickly shut down the meeting, which required a registration to attend. They began to let people back in one at a time.

“We were using all the security protocols, but (the hackers) managed to override everything,” VanHorsen said. “What we've discovered from Zoom, it sounds like someone registered legitimately to attend, got the link and posted that on Twitter, so then anyone could join hitting that list.”

Brian Wheeler, the director of information technology for Grand Haven Area Public Schools, was on the call. He was able to help weed out and remove people, then eventually lock down the meeting so no one else could join.

“The down side to that is, we blocked out some people who had planned to participate,” VanHorsen said. “The good news is, eventually, once we did have everyone weeded out, it was a very good town hall. The speakers were excellent. They remained composed and professional.”

VanHorsen reported the situation to the Grand Haven Department of Public Safety. Director Jeff Hawke confirmed that his department is looking into the incident.

“One of the potential crimes involves the malicious use of electronic means of communication,” Hawke said. “This was recently mentioned by the Michigan attorney general regarding 'Zoom bombing.' If a case is presented, the Ottawa County Prosecutor’s Office will conduct a review and determine what, if any, criminal charges may be issued.

“GVSU had a recent incident very similar in nature,” he added. “Our detective is in contact with (campus police) to investigate the possibility that the suspect or suspects are one in the same.”
“The one thing we all walked away from this with was the reality of the problem of racism,” she said. “It’s here, and this just makes it undeniable. There were a couple of people who came to the conversation a little bit unsure if this was something we needed to talk about in our community, and left clearly recognizing this was an issue we need to address.”

VanHorssen said the cyber attack experience left her traumatized.

“I realize I can walk away from it, but some of the people who were the most calm in managing this were the people of color who unfortunately have grown to expect this kind of behavior,” she said. “They don’t have the option of deciding not to deal with it. After this, we’re more committed and more resolved than ever to continue these conversations that need to take place.”

Monday’s meeting was the first in a year-long series of monthly, virtual town halls. More stringent security measures will be in place in future meetings, VanHorssen vowed.

“For me, the thing that’s so painful is that I worked really hard to create a safe environment for people – to create a place where we can come together and don’t need to agree but we can be respectful of each other,” she said. “To have people who I brought together into a place that was supposed to be safe, and to have them attacked and brutalized, it’s really painful. I apologize to anybody who was hurt by that. I know there were some people who chose not to come back on because they were so upset. It was truly horrible.”

Matt DeYoung