

How to Distribute Radical Shit

Don't Trust Your Printer

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28 March 2025

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Have you ever wondered why your printer is always out of yellow ink, even when you print only in black and white? There's a reason why this always happens.

Your printer is a homing beacon for law enforcement— even offline.

OPSEC and why this matters

Look, maybe you're thinking I'm not best person to be posting on OPSEC (Operational Security). After all, I publicly post on my own website and on social media under the moniker *Revoluciana* and I don't take any effort to hide my identity. I even have my picture up. I'm a likely target for other reasons, anyway. *C'est la vie*. I'm a lost cause. I'm simply trying to post what I can, for as long as I can, while it's still legal and still possible.

whatever

That being said, while I won't call myself an expert on the topic by any means, by the nature of my career history, I do have *some* experience with OPSEC.

That being said, in theory, anything I've posted about, or plan to post about, is legal and fair game anyway, under the First Amendment in the US, where I live... *in theory*. Radical topics are, in theory, legal and fair game to discuss in the US. I may post *radical shit*, but even if I had specific plans to *do crime*, which I don't, obviously I don't, but if I did, *I wouldn't post about it—and neither should you*. In other words, I do take OPSEC seriously, even for myself, and for my own threat-model.

A bit of advice: ***don't post your plans or intentions, even if they are legal.***

In theory, in the US, you have a right to talk about *radical shit*. You have a right to talk about all the things that I attempt to discuss in these posts. You even have a right to cheer for a criminal when they do something illegal.

You *do not* have the right to *incite* people to a specific crime, such as a riot, for example.

in theory

In practice, many regimes around the world punish people for their words. In practice, the US is doing this, too. This has long been the case in the US to varying degrees at different times, but lately it's escalating fast. People are being kidnapped by secret police as they walk down the street and they are being sent to concentration camps in foreign countries to be enslaved under brutal conditions. People are targeted for their words and for who they are as a member of various marginalized, persecuted groups. This is being done not only with the *support* of the current ruling regime in the US, but as a *matter of policy*.

So.

Be careful.

However.

Despite the risks, you still must do something. You still must resist in ways you can, *especially* while these avenues are still legal.

Your printer is a dirty snitch

Since the inception of the printing press, the distribution of radical literature, art, and *agitprop*, have been fundamental necessities to any resistance movement. Words, ideas, and information must flow. In the age of the internet, that is generally easy, except for the fact that everything

you post, share, or message online has your digital fingerprint on it, which can be *troublesome* for a budding activist or revolutionary. There are things you can use to reduce this risk, but the risk is still there.

It may have occurred to you that reverting to paper is a possibility:

- Posters
- Newsletters
- Underground newspapers
- Pamphlets
- Zines– are you familiar with zines? This wiki gives a good description, but doesn't do justice to just how *cool* zines are, and their effect on 20th, and even 21st, century social and political movements. No worries, I want to discuss zines a bit more in the future.

While your gut reaction may be to feel it's a bit *passé* to think of paper as a medium for sharing radical art, info, messaging, and radical literature while we bask in the blue light of Al Gore's information superhighway, you'll notice that none of the things on this list have actually gone anywhere. You can walk around just about any city and find these things, especially if you know where to look. These are still common ways for underground sharing of info and radical materials.

However, my understanding, though possibly flawed with regards to the timeline, is that ever since COINTELPRO, there has been a governmental push to make paper materials easier to trace, especially so that government leakers and whistleblowers are more easily caught. This resulted in a program which ultimately required companies that make printers and copy machines to create processes wherein any printed piece of paper is traceable back to its source, even when the materials are printed offline.

How it works

Typically, each time you print, your printer creates a series of dots all over your printed paper using only the yellow ink. They're small and hard to spot with the naked eye, but they're much easier to see with a black light.

Example image, side by side close-up, with and without black light — on revolucioniana.net

Every single time you click print, it does this. It's why you're always out of yellow ink, and it's why your printer refuses to work even when you're only printing in black and white. It's a requirement for your printer to work. The Electronic Frontier Foundation used to publish a list of printers that they believed didn't have tracking marker capability, but in 2017 they stopped doing so, believing all color printers actually do have the capability.

These dots work *kind of* like the way a QR code does. It essentially creates a picture with information, metadata, embedded in the way the dots are arranged.

Example image of how the dots convey information — on revolucionaria.net

If your printer isn't a color model, such as a black and white laser printer, other methods are very likely used that don't involve color, such as laser intensity or variation in the greyscale.

If you're familiar with the story of Reality Winner, these printing dots played a key role in how she was caught by the NSA after leaking a single document to *The Intercept*.

The point is:

don't trust your printer

Hypothetically, what you could do

☒ The information in this post is all presented simply for educational purposes. What you do with this information is all on you.

First, what not to do

First, if you were hypothetically trying to print something that you didn't want traced back to you, for whatever reason, **don't print it with your printer**. But also, there are some other things you need to think through. This is not an exhaustive list, but these are some of the things that often get posed as options first, and I want to address them.

- Don't print it at the copy store. It will get tracked back to the store, and the date and time make it trivial to just find you on the store surveillance footage or whatever card you probably used to pay for the print.
- Don't use the library, school, work, or community printers.
- Don't use a mail service in your country (though printing from another country is an interesting idea, but still exposes you to people abroad who may still take issue with your print order). Again, same issues.
- Unless you're a tech-security researcher or something, don't bother trying to print without the ink or to bypass it. The issue runs deep. It's not worth your time (if I'm wrong about this and someone knows about a relatively easy option, I would love to know).

Options for what you could do

☒ **Disclaimer:** I can't guarantee any of these solutions would prevent a person from being traced. In the past, US intelligence services even have records and ways of identifying specific typewriters, and it's likely that other governments do, too, so nothing is guaranteed.

As far as options go, I think this is really dependent on what someone would be trying to achieve.

Let's start with some more **tech-centered options**:

- Obfuscation: Instead of trying to remove the printer dots, you could add so many dots that it makes the dataset useless. Someone developed a tool for this. I haven't tested it, and I can't speak for it, but I know it exists and *in theory* it's a wonderful idea. In practice, I don't know what to think, but it's definitely worth looking into if this is your thing. It's called DEDA – tracking Dots Extraction, Decoding and Anonymisation toolkit.
- Outdated Intel: You could potentially pick up an old printer at a second-hand shop. It will still have the tracking dots, but the purchase is not as easily traced to you once it's left its original owner, though depending on the circumstances, not necessarily impossible to trace. On the other hand, is anyone going to go through that much trouble for some radical posters you put up around town? Do you think it's worth it for them at that point? It might be, but that's part of developing a threat-model. Once you have the printer, don't connect it to the internet, and you likely also want to make sure that whatever computer you print from is also air-gapped.
- Outdated Equipment: **old** dot-matrix printers (you might be surprised to hear they still make new ones, but I'm not sure I'd trust them) might not have a way of storing this information within your prints, but it's possible this could be a workaround.
- Weird Setup: Use a CNC machine or a 3D printer with a pen or stylus attached to write on documents. Or you could use a plotter or a Cricut machine.

However, there are **some analog options**, too. For example, if you wanted to put up a bunch of posters around the city, you could just make the posters by hand. Yes, it would take a lot more work to do them each by hand, but a lot less work and worry than the tech options if you're not tech-savvy. But what if you wanted to print something in bulk? Here are some options:

☒ To be really clear, these options still have risks. You would not be broadcasting specific metadata with dates, times, and serial numbers, but you would be using other materials that once you were identified, could still be used as evidence to corroborate accusations against you, especially if some of the materials are rare and could be used to out you, or if you left your documents and stencils sitting out.

☒ Something to consider, though. In the case of the printer, the document itself would point to you. In the case of these analog examples, however, the document itself wouldn't inherently and explicitly point to you. Yes, they could be matched, but only after they found you. The bigger risk is the materials you would use and your process, and their willingness to perform the forensics and investigation to that extent to find you.

Look, if resistance is going to be successful in any context, someone is going to have to share information. A lot of people will need to. And that means risks are simply going to always exist, and for success, risks have to be taken.

- You could get a printing press. They're generally expensive and bulky, but they're an option.

- Stamps and stencils. If you're making posters, you could use an exacto knife and stencil material to cut your own stencils and roll over them to create the posters. You could also probably use a Cricut. You could use magazine cutouts. You could go wild.
- You could learn how to silk screen, especially for posters, banners, and larger things, which is essentially the same process as the original frame-type mimeograph. In fact...
- You could get, or *easily* make, your own frame-type duplicator and stencils (or a bunch of these frames if you are organizing a group). This would allow you to make your own bulk newsletters, pamphlets, and zines.
- You could get a mimeograph machine, make your own stencils, and really move through the printing batches. There aren't a lot of these around, though, and without making your own stencils, it can be difficult to do, but people do it, it is achievable. To get started with this option, a really great resource is Mimeograph Revival.
- You can even make your own mimeograph roller with a paint can.

I want to point out that none of these options even require electricity in order to print.

Now, I can imagine some of you are rolling your eyes at some of these options. However, let's talk about this. Let me give you some perspective.

One of the only reasons that science fiction took off as a genre when publishers weren't interested in printing it is because of a bunch of SF fans who decided to print their own zines and share them, and even sell them— That paint can mimeograph roller idea? This was a process invented in 1945 for the purpose of publishing a science fiction zine, and they fucking *did it*.

Image of mimeograph machine — on revoluciana.net

The mimeograph machine you're laughing about? There was a period called the Mimeograph Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s. The mimeograph machine was already losing popularity to the Xerox machine. However, a bunch of students who had access to mimeograph machines at school and wherever, went on to found Students for a Democratic Society, which was one of the largest forces for change in the US in the 1960s and a key group among what was called the New Left. One of their most important tools was the mimeograph machine. They printed some 20,000–30,000 copies of their manifesto, *The Port Huron Statement*, a document with 25,700 words, essentially the length of a novella. These weren't professionals, they were a bunch of students doing this using mimeograph machines, and *kept distributing more literature*.

Example Image of printed material by Students for a Democratic Society — on revoluciana.net

Those are some serious numbers from regular people like you. Are you still laughing at the mimeograph machine now?. The primary author of that document, by the way, was Tom Hayden, of Chicago 7 fame, a life-long activist and leftist politician.

I want to be clear about a few more things that you should consider.

- People already do this, right now, all around the world. They never actually stopped.

- There is a long history literally everywhere of doing these things in situations like these.
- It's easy– much easier than it might sound.
- It's an organizing activity, and you can't fight fascism alone.
- It's art, and art *cannot* be separated from revolution.
- These are all *fun things to do*, and what good is a revolution if you can't enjoy the world you're fighting for?

Emma Goldman, an anarchist and activist you should definitely discover (if you haven't already) would often say,

If I can't dance, it's not my revolution.

no ends, only means

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Retrieved on 30 March 2025 from revoluciana.net

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