26 Managing Online Harassment in the Academy

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KEYWORDS: Online Harassment, Community, Unregulated Space.

Introduction

Anyone can experience *online harassment*. A recent study by the Pew Research Center found that four in ten Americans have experienced online harassment and abuse (Vogel 2021). However, scholars who engage in public-facing work incur a greater risk of experiencing online attacks because of their heightened visibility and how readily available their information and profiles are. But even among scholars, the effects of online harassment are not equally distributed. Online harassment might be disproportionately experienced by certain communities, and it might also disparately impact scholars in a multitude of ways. In this chapter, we discuss differences in how harassment affects scholars and some strategies for how academics might handle it.

What We Know About Online Harassment

Research on online harassment is not especially well developed, and much of what exists is focused on cyber-bullying of school-age children. Beyond that, few studies of online harassment contain anything close to a comprehensive census of different types of harassment or the nature of their victims. Some studies are largely surveys of online users, asking respondents to self-report their victimhood. These results are nonetheless useful. Somewhat counter-intuitively, men are more likely to report being victims of online harassment than women are; however, women and people of color are more likely to report being harassed because of their sex, race, or ethnicity (Nadim and Fladmoe 2021, Vogels 2021). A recent social network study found that harassment directed at Latinas and Black women often contained racial stereotypes and epithets (Francisco and Felmlee 2021).

These attacks often have a particularly detrimental effect on women scholars and scholars of color, who are more likely than men to react by withdrawing from online public spaces or to self-censor (Chadha et al. 2020, Nadim and Fladmoe 2021, Veletsianos et al. 2018). Actress Kelly Marie Tran was subjected to an online harassment campaign after her leading role in the 2018 Star Wars film "The Last Jedi," leading her to delete much of her social media profile. As she later wrote in a New York Times op/ed, "It wasn't their words, it's that I started to believe them" (Tran 2018).

We wish to provide some advice to victims of online harassment, based both on existing research and on our own experiences. We should first acknowledge that, on a purely normative level, developing a reaction or a prevention plan for harassment isn't something users and scholars should have to do, but it has unfortunately become a necessity. In a better system, social media companies and policing agencies would take greater responsibility for this and not leave the burden on the user. Simply, you should

be able to promote and argue your scholarly ideas online without needing to protect your identity or your life.

Furthermore, departments, institutions, and other organizations where scholars work and collaborate should provide tools and resources for those impacted by harassment. For example, departments and institutions should reassure scholars that they will not be penalized for backlash they might experience due to their public scholarship. They should also engage in public displays of support on behalf of victims by issuing statements. They can help victims of harassment by providing a safe physical workspace and by maintaining an appropriate professional profile for you on their websites, and offering you control over what information is included there (see "manage your experience" below). Lastly, our recommendation is that institutions also provide resources for scholars who might want to seek out counseling and other mental health services. In sum, chairs, deans, administrators, departments, institutions, and organizations where public facing scholars work should proactively work to protect and support scholars who are affected by online harassment.

Approaches for Dealing with Online Harassment

There's no single tried-and-true way to respond to or deal with harassment, in large part because there is a great variety of harassers and there is variation on the level and type of harassment. How one responds to a hostile tweet from a celebrity or high-follower-count Twitter blue check is different from how one responds to similar behavior from a colleague or stranger. It is also the case that one might need to take stronger measures against serious threats of violence or physical harm. It is difficult to provide a recipe for managing harassers because the specific context in which harassment takes place is important to consider when deciding how to manage it.

With that in mind, we provide a series of principles to follow and some specific examples of how the principles might be employed in different situations. While some of these strategies might be useful to some, they might not be for others. Our hope is that in considering these principles, scholars who face online harassment can have a set of start-up strategies and tools from which they might develop a more individualized approach based on their own needs, identities, and gravity of the situation.

Principle 1: Take a Moment

This may be the hardest principle to employ because it does not come naturally to most people. When you experience something harassing, abusive, or targeted in your public social media interactions, we recommend taking a moment to assess the situation and consider your options and potential response. Consider that off-the-cuff responses in the heat of the moment, driven by frustration and anger, may not necessarily be the most appropriate way to respond to the situation or yield the best outcomes. Depending on the kind and type of harassment you might need to take a different approach to deal with it. Taking a moment to assess the situation will provide you with a clearer picture of how to move forward. As you take a moment you might also want to reach out to others for support (see below on "having a squad"). If there is a threat of violence or physical harm, you want to report this to the authorities and the proper office at your institution. If the individual is a colleague, you might also consider your options for how to handle it through informal and formal reporting mechanisms available in your respective organization or university.

Part of taking a moment also means that it's okay to take a break from social media to care for yourself. When the things that we enjoy doing bring negativity and toxicity, this is bound to affect our self-esteem and overall well-being. Take a moment to turn to things that might help in dealing with the attack you have just experienced. We also recognize that many attacks are racialized, gendered, or prejudicial along other lines such as religion, ability, sexual orientation, among others, and as such these are deeply harmful to members of marginalized communities. We urge scholars who have been victims of harassment to do as much as possible to practice self-care and turn to whatever they might need in order to develop strategies for moving forward from the attack they have experienced (see chapter 69 on counseling and other resources).

Principle 2: Have a Squad

Online activity is individual; we conduct it using personal electronic devices and most often do it from personal accounts tied to our known identities. In this way, participating in public, online forums like Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook represents a vulnerability. When we post things, we are often revealing things about ourselves, even when we don't mean to. But just because posting is an individual activity doesn't mean that managing online responses needs to be. You'll have greater confidence in putting yourself out there if you know that there is a group of people who have your back. You'll be better equipped to respond to online harassment if you have a *community* to turn to.

This group doesn't need to be people you are friends with in real life, but they do need to be people you trust to some degree. They should be people who engage on platforms with a similar level of frequency as you, and people or accounts that you would defend or support if they were targeted. This group of people does not need to be like-minded on all things; rather they need to be like-minded about the rules of engagement and social norms of online behavior. Groups like HeartMob[1] have developed in recent years to provide such a resource for online scholars (Blackwell et al. 2017). However, in some cases and depending on the type of harassment, you might want to turn to individuals or friends whom you trust and have your best interest at heart, despite their level of online engagement. This is especially important if the harassment involves a person you know, a colleague or supervisor, or a more serious threat.

Principle 3: Document and Report

Keep a file of particularly threatening or persistent attacks. Do not only save websites or links but take screenshots or save them as PDFs, since some links expire or perpetrators might erase their posts. There are certainly limits to what a police department can or will do in these situations, but to the extent they are able to act, they'll want to know how specific any threats were and how traceable the harassers are. Your campus safety office may be able to help out here, even if this technically occurred off-campus. Local police may be interested, as well. If you're being attacked for work you published in a newspaper or on-line forum, it may be helpful to reach out to the editor or moderator to report the incident, especially if the attack violates the forum's code of conduct. Again, there's no guarantee they'll be able to directly help you or punish a harasser, but the more evidence you can provide, the more helpful they're likely to be.

Principle 4: Manage Your Experience

As we've noted, the managers of social media companies are not great about protecting users, and some companies (notably Twitter) have defined themselves by providing a largely *unregulated space*. But there are still ways to protect yourself while you're on there. Twitter, for example, offers a number of highly useful ways to customize one's account, allowing you to limit who can view your posts, who can comment on them, how much of your personal information they can see, and more. You can block accounts and content you don't want to see. You can report attacks against you and others and possibly get content and users removed in the process.

Managing your experience is not only about customizing your accounts but also taking measures to protect yourself if the threats involve violence or harm. For example, when one of the authors of this piece posts items on Twitter that they anticipate will be controversial or invite trolling or abusive responses, they adjust the settings on the post so that only people they follow are allowed to reply. This strategy significantly reduces the most corrosive response behavior from Twitter at-large.

Also, as a way to manage your privacy, you can request that your organization removes your office location information and any other personally identifiable information from the department or university's directory and websites. You can request changes to your classroom location, office location, among others. While you can't keep the hate from existing, you can limit how much of it gets to you and take measures to protect yourself from any harm.

Public Engagement: The Choice is Yours

If you become the victim of online harassment, you are not at fault regardless of any mitigation strategies you may or may not have followed. We encourage scholars to aggressively curate their social media feeds and control their experience using some of the strategies we have described. However, no scholar should feel compelled to participate in social media to advance their careers. While public scholarship is becoming an increasingly recognized and important medium for academic products, it is still the case that most elements of the academy value traditional peer-reviewed products over most other products, including high-profile media. In short, your dean may be thrilled if you wind up as a CNN Election Night analyst, but publishing books and articles is still the better path to tenure and advancement. Academic social media participation is still mostly a supplement to traditional scholarly work, not a substitute.

There is one approach we would strongly encourage you not to follow: to silence yourself, limit your valuable contributions, or change what you study to appease the harassers. We recognize that some scholars, especially those who are much more vulnerable and for whom the attacks might be particularly harmful and detrimental, need some additional time to self-care. It is perfectly okay to temporarily retreat from public-facing work to care for oneself. Despite all of the challenges and the ugliness, there are still very useful aspects of being an online scholar. Your work, expertise and perspective are incredibly valuable. You can actually engage constructively with journalists, activists, and other scholars about your work. You can gain positive attention that you just don't get from publishing articles and book chapters, advancing your career in valuable ways. You can develop an international support network that can see you through difficult times. But yes, it can at times be an unpleasant and even toxic environment. We hope the above advice can help you make the most of it.

Endnotes

1 https://iheartmob.org

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