Social Media as a Weapon to Harass Women Academics

Numerous articles and op-eds encourage academics to be more active online. They generally argue that being on social media offers many benefits, including enabling scholars to network with colleagues, share their research and conduct public scholarship.

Often such advice is good. But such hypothetical opportunities stand in stark contrast to experiences of harassment that some academics report when they go online. One public scholar for example, recently told us that she received a Facebook message following a TV appearance.

Interviewer: What did the message say?

Zoe (pseudonym): That I should be dragged behind his truck via my septum ring until I was dead. He spent a lot of time on the details.

Such messages take a silent emotional and psychological toll that employers and colleagues rarely understand. And even though online harassment is not always as vicious as the example above, it persistently threatens and impacts women's well-being in a multitude of ways. Zoe is not alone in this. Our research team is conducting a series of studies to investigate women scholars' experiences of harassment on social media. Over three days, more than 250 scholars responded to our call for interviews shared on Twitter and Facebook. Our team has so far interviewed 16 women who have faced harassment, cruelty, abuse, intrusion and intimidation online. Nearly all of them also reported that they know one or more other women academics who were harassed online.

More broadly, some publications have highlighted the targeting of liberal scholars and of underlined(particular fields of study). Several high-profile stories have also appeared in the media (e.g., underlined(here) and underlined(here)), and in response to these and other incidents, the American Association of University Professors has started underlined(monitoring faculty harassment). Other organizations have provided recommendations on underlined(dealing with abusers) and underlined(responding to attacks).

Before beginning our inquiry, we assumed that the people who responded to our interview requests would be women who studied video games or gender issues, as prior literature had suggested they would be more likely to face harassment. But we quickly discovered that women are harassed when writing about a wide range of topics, including but not limited to: feminism, leadership, science, education, history, religion, race, politics, immigration, art, sociology and technology broadly conceived. The literature even identifies underlined(choice of research method) as a topic that attracts misogynistic commentary.

So who exactly is at risk of harassment? They form a long list: women scholars who challenge the status quo; women who have an opinion that they are willing to express publicly; women who raise concerns about power; women of all body types and shapes. Put succinctly, people may be targeted for a range of reasons, but women in particular are harassed partly because they happen to be women who dare to be public online. Our respondents reported that they are harassed because they are women. Because they are women, they become targets.

At this point, if you are a woman reading this, you might be nodding your head, or you might feel frustrated that we are pointing out something so incredibly obvious. We might as well point out that rain is wet. But unfortunately, for many people who have not experienced the reality of being a woman online, this fact is still not obvious, is minimized, or is otherwise overlooked. To be clear, there is a gendered element to how both higher education institutions and technology companies handle this issue.

Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, the same platforms that were once heralded as democratizing spaces destined to broach the distance between the ivory tower and society, often come to be used as weapons to silence and intimidate academics. Thus far, the actions they have taken to mitigate harassment (e.g., software tweaks) have been often nonexistent and at best mediocre. As a result, online harassment continues to impact the ways in which women in higher education can and do participate in online spaces.

Women who have experienced online harassment are often advised to self-censor or "tone it down." To avoid abuse, they are told to be nicer online, to take a break from online activities or to participate online in particular ways, such as by creating multiple accounts, to avoid abuse. Those suggestions are emblematic of broader cultural approaches to avoiding harassment, and they are problematic. They represent victim blaming at its finest. These strategies are the digital equivalent of telling women to dress, behave and interact with others in particular ways, as if they are the ones who are to blame for the misogyny they face. We have to respect that some people may indeed choose to adopt some of these strategies as ways to deal with the problem, but also recognize that they do so because they are the only tools that are readily available.

As online spaces are increasingly used for public scholarship, and as many aspects of work in higher education rely on an individual's distinct skills and reputation, women in higher education cannot avoid using technology or social media, nor can they abandon their identity online. Keeping silent or avoiding online spaces is therefore not an option for most academics. And as public and networked scholarship stands to make positive and sizable contributions to our societies, we must recognize that encountering unsavory audiences online is a fact of life and must be dealt with.

If you are facing or have faced social media harassment, the following strategies may be helpful:

- Employ tools to block individuals and groups. For example, in some cases, a negative mention by a highly followed user generates an onslaught of attacks by that user's

followers. Block bots such as <u>Twitter Block Chain</u> can be used to block all of a user's followers to mitigate mass attacks.

- Bring attention to the harassment you are experiencing in ways that make you comfortable. Some people who have been harassed have shared their experiences with partners, friends, colleagues, their institution and law enforcement. Others have publicly called out the individuals harassing them and brought attention to their abuse.
- Do not take on blame or responsibility for the harassment you experience. Many women are encouraged, in both overt and subtle ways, to take personal responsibility for the way others react to them. Remember, your harasser is to blame, not you.

We can't expect, however, the individual women who have been harassed to completely address this problem. Colleges and universities should provide more support to everyone, but particularly women who navigate fraught online spaces. If you are an institutional administrator or work for a professional organization that encourages, prepares or otherwise advocates for scholars to participate online, take a proactive rather than a reactive stance to this important issue and:

- Organize social media training that highlights this problem and equips scholars with the skills to be safe online. In your training or advocacy, acknowledge the sizable risks that scholars -- particularly marginalized groups -- face when their scholarship reaches broader audiences, stands to disrupt the status quo or touches upon polarizing topics.
- Establish policies to support scholars who come under attack. For example, develop a formal means of reporting harassment or obtaining recourse.

Online platforms have a significant role to play here as well. To address this problem, they can:

- Be more responsive with reports of harassment. For instance, they could dedicate more resources to promptly investigate and act decisively (for example, hiring customer care advocates).
- Develop new technical approaches to keep women safe online. Social media platforms have demonstrated <u>their ability to refine their algorithms</u> to be more effective, but they could come up with much more effective responses by listening more intently to those who have experienced online vitriol.

Scholars' public and online engagement has many benefits. It can enrich society and enable citizens and academics to learn from one another. But online harassment is often used as a weapon to silence public scholars. When this happens, the loss to society is far from trivial, and the problem requires individual, systemic and collective action.