

Online abuse affects men and women differently – and this is key to tackling trolls

October 30 2014, by Claire Hardaker

Four-in-ten internet users are victims of online harassment, varying degrees of severity

Among all internet users, the % who have experienced harassment or not and the % who have experienced more vs. less severe forms of harassment ...



Source: American Trends Panel (wave 4). Survey conducted May 30-June 30, 2014. n=2,839.

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Credit: Pew Research Center

Video games, Jane Austen, and a Welsh footballer: it might seem these three have nothing in common, but all have been the basis for online abuse targeted specifically at women.

Of course, both men and women face [harassment](#) online, and some face it every day. But the cases involving [Anita Sarkeesian](#) and #GamerGate, [Caroline Criado-Perez](#)'s campaign for a woman on a British banknote, and threats toward [Chloe Madeley](#) after her mother Judy Finnigan's comments about footballer Ched Evans, raise the question of whether there is an essential difference between what women and men face online.

While similar concerns are finally being reflected in the growing number of headlines on trolling and cyberbullying, those same thoughts have been [echoing around the Internet](#) and social media for years:

Racism for him, sexism for her

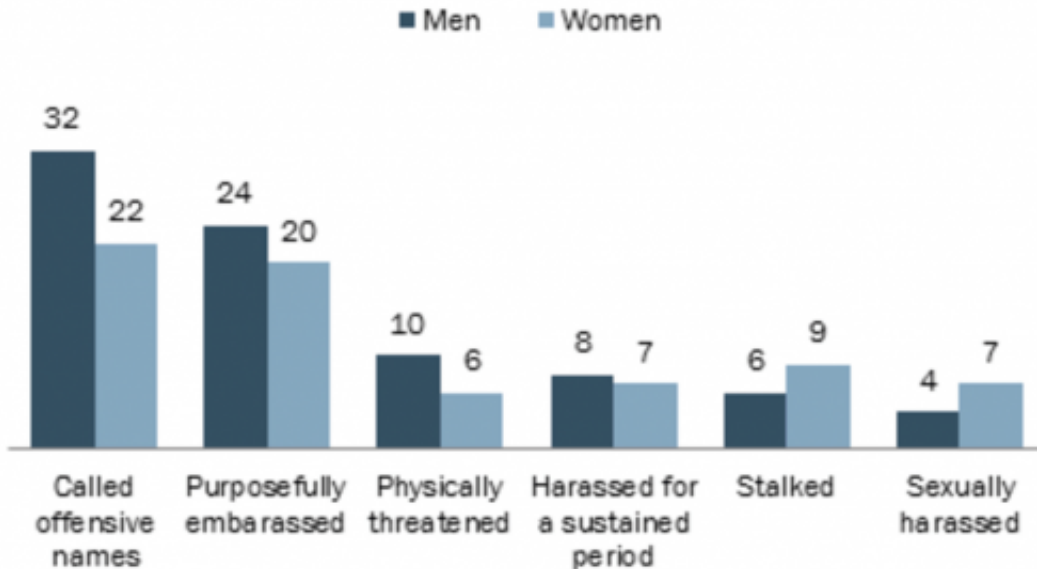
So do women and men face different kinds of [abuse](#) online? According to the Pew Research Center's [study on online harassment](#), the short answer is: yes.

The study chose 2,839 randomly selected participants that were nationally representative of US adults living in households for a self-administered web survey. The results suggest that overall, 40% of online users have experienced mild to severe online harassment, while 73% have witnessed it. More importantly, the survey suggests that women's and men's experiences of online harassment differ quantitatively and qualitatively.

Women experience stalking and [sexual harassment](#) online much more frequently than men. This doesn't mean that men do not receive abuse at all, rather that, according to the Pew study, they are abused in ways that are more likely to be [homophobic](#) or [racist](#).

Men and women experience different varieties of online harassment

Among all internet users, the % who have experienced each of the following elements of online harassment, by gender...



Source: American Trends Panel (wave 4). Survey conducted May 30-June 30, 2014. n=2,839.

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However, the Pew survey isn't without its problems. The categories blur into one another – there is a lot of overlap between categories like "harassment for a sustained period" and "stalking", or "offensive names" and "purposeful embarrassment", or "sexual harassment" and "physical threat". Its US focus also means that the experiences of those elsewhere are not accounted for and there are no directly comparable studies in the UK to give us a cross-cultural perspective. This isn't to say that no

research is being done on this in the UK at all – the University of Bristol is examining [online abuse in teenage relationships](#), and Lancaster University is studying [rape threats on Twitter](#). Though not yet complete, this latter project also seems to confirm that abuse directed towards women online is often sexualised in nature.

Keeping the wolves at bay

But how to deal with online abuse? Unfortunately, despite the fact that the [wolves in the wires](#) have been with us for decades, society has been slow to acknowledge online abuse as a problem and slower still in formulating methods to tackle it. Successfully prosecuting those sending offensive or threatening communications is a [long](#) and [rocky](#) road.

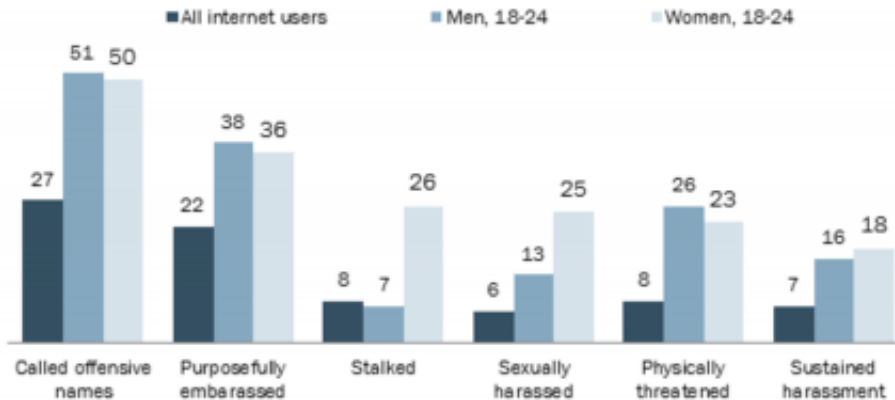
Acquiring data of online abuse is a minefield of ethics and resources and perhaps as a result of this academic research has tended to focus on researching aggression faced by men and women [in offline contexts](#). Meanwhile, in the media the focus has been on celebrity targets of abuse – and since well-funded public figures are much more likely to succeed in bringing legal charges against their online assailants, this may give the false impression that online abusers are easily brought to justice. In reality, there are countless issues with securing a conviction, such as providing [sufficient proof](#), or the cross-border, inter-jurisdictional nature of the internet which introduces [complications](#).

Most recently the [guidelines](#) published by the UK director for public prosecutions have actually made prosecuting offensive online behaviour even harder. These state that cases are unlikely to reach court if the perpetrator expresses genuine remorse for their actions, quickly removes the offending content, did not intend for it to be seen by a wide audience, or has communicated something protected by freedom of expression – however offensive that communication may have been. Unlike celebrities, then, Joe Public – and [especially children and](#)

[teenagers](#) – are likely to lack access to the expertise, support, and resources to deal with online harassment.

Young women experience particularly severe forms of online harassment

Among all internet users, the % who have personally experienced the following types of online harassment, by gender and age...



Source: American Trends Panel (wave 4). Survey conducted May 30-June 30, 2014. n=2,839.

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Modern laws for modern problems

Perhaps in light of this, the secretary of state for justice, Chris Grayling, has recently announced plans that appear to tackle online abuse. He has proposed tougher sentences for "[the baying cyber-mob](#)" including greater time for police investigations. However, while this latter measure would be a positive start, he says nothing about training and resources for officers, and in response to Grayling's proposals, legal experts have argued that what we really need is a better stick, not a bigger one.

In other words, laws need to be reviewed to ensure that they reflect the

changing times, online behaviour, and its effects on society – and we need practical measures that can be taken before pursuing a prosecution, such as a standardised set of effective take-down procedures for offensive content.

Overall, the clear message that we are receiving from women and men online – from this survey, and from our own research – suggests that we need to not only take online abuse more seriously, but also the gendered nature of that abuse.

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