

Trolling and doxxing: Graduate students sharing their research online speak out about hate

November 7 2023, by Alex Borkowski, Marion Tempest Grant and Natalie Coulter



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An [increasingly volatile online environment](#) is affecting our society, including members of the academic community and research they pursue.

Graduate students are especially vulnerable to online hate, because cultivating a visible social media presence is [considered essential](#) for mobilizing their research, gaining credibility and finding opportunities as they prepare to compete in an [over-saturated job market](#).

Our research [has examined the experiences of graduate students](#) who have encountered online hate while conducting their research or disseminating it online, and a wider landscape of university protocol and policies.

This research suggests faculty supervisors and university staff responsible for students' development and well-being are often ill-prepared to support students through online harassment experiences. This means graduate students are left frightened, discouraged and with nowhere to turn for help.

New policies needed to support researchers

Research by communications scholars George Veletsianos and Jaigris Hodson, who are part of the [Public Scholarship and Online Abuse](#) research group, finds that scholars online 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](#)."

Online hatred [disproportionately affects](#) women, [Black, Indigenous, racialized, queer, trans and](#) other marginalized scholars.

New frameworks and policies are required that protect and care for increasingly diverse academic communities to foster equity and diversity.

Impacts and inadequate support

Nearly any discipline or research topic can become a target for harassment: from [English literature to game studies](#) to [virology](#) and [climate science](#).

Online harassment restricts which research projects are able to proceed and who is able to pursue them. It affects [not only researchers' well-being](#) and career prospects, but by extension, their fields of study and members of the public served by it.

Institutions have yet to develop adequate supports for both faculty and students, even as the [pervasiveness of online harassment in academic life](#) has begun to receive greater attention.

Research by Hodson and Veletsianos with Chandell Gosse finds university policies designed to protect community members have not evolved to address the complex forms of harassment that unfold via [social media](#).

Lack of clear and accessible structures, procedures

Research from 2020 by Alex Ketchum of McGill University's Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies on [resources provided by media relations offices at Canadian universities](#) indicates that universities' publicly accessible information about doxxing, trolling and scholarship is scarce. Ketchum addresses challenges related to public scholarship in her book [Engage in Public Scholarship!: A Guidebook on Feminist and Accessible Communication](#).

Without clear structures and procedures for reporting harassment and supporting community members at an institutional level, harassment is treated by universities as isolated incidents without grasping the scale of the issue.

'Bearing witness'

We have facilitated a number of [workshops](#) and [events](#) that foreground experiences of online harassment among graduate students. This work has been done with support from the [Institute for Research on Digital Literacies](#), under the direction of Natalie Coulter.

As part of a multi-stage project titled [Bearing Witness](#), we conducted one-on-one interviews with seven York University students who have encountered hatred in response to sharing or conducting their research online.

To protect participants from further harassment, we invited [student](#) artist-researchers to interpret the anonymized interview transcripts and create original artworks that reflected upon and echoed the stories of their peers.

These stories formed the basis of an exhibition and [panel discussion](#) at [Congress 2023](#), a national conference of academic researchers held at the end of May and beginning of June 2023, and will inform [a symposium](#) on Nov. 7 and a [pop-up exhibition](#) in the Media Creation Lab in the Scott Library at York University.

Researcher experiences of harassment

In our study, participants described receiving threats of physical and [sexual violence](#), directed not only towards them, but to their families and research participants. These encounters severely impacted students' mental health and led them to fear for their physical well-being on campus and at conferences.

Each student we spoke with described feeling under-supported by the university, in particular [struggling to access mental-health services](#).

Participants also said research methods seminars, research ethics board certification courses and conversations with supervisory committees had not addressed the possibility of encountering online harassment.

The online harassment students encountered also derailed or significantly curtailed their research projects. Students reported that the effects of the harassment forced them to drastically alter, if not entirely halt, their course of study and degree progress.

Resources to help protect from harassment

There are many [online resources](#) graduate students can consult to protect themselves from online harassment. Resources [from PEN America](#) and [gaming communities](#) provide cybersecurity tips to prevent doxxing, assess threats and report harassment to platforms and law enforcement.

However, universities must take steps to lessen the burden for individual victims.

Media relations and knowledge-mobilization offices must develop clear protocols for protecting community members and supporting them in the wake of encountering hatred online. It is equally essential that these policies are readily available and easy to locate for scholars in distress.

Important work begins with witness

Faculty must be made aware of the realities of online harassment and available university resources—including campus security, legal clinics and mental health services.

[Supervisors should be prepared](#) to have frank discussions with graduate students about the potential risks associated with their research and

develop a pre-emptive action plan that can be implemented quickly.

This important work must begin with institutions bearing witness to graduate students' experiences. University staff and faculty must listen to individual voices so that the issue of online [harassment](#) can be understood in its full scale and complexity.

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