Curtin University

DISCUSSING ONLINE HARASSMENT:

background and teaching strategies

Make tomorrow better.

Overview

Online harassment can have a significant impact on people who experience it, including their mental and physical health, personal life, and work. It can also affect the learning environment, making it difficult for students to continue their studies. As online communications become ubiquitous, we need to prepare students for the challenges they may face, as well as modelling ways of contributing to safe and inclusive online platforms and cultures. This document provides a background to the problem, strategies for addressing it in your curriculum, and further resources.

WHO IS THIS RELEVANT TO?

This is relevant to all staff, including anyone teaching or supporting students who might need to communicate online as part of their work, or teaching students who will be designing new communications platforms and technologies.

Online harassment is a complex problem and affects people across a range of areas. Students in many disciplines are expected to communicate online as part of their studies, or will go on to work in areas where online communication is a key part of their role. For example, students working in film and television, journalism, professional writing, public relations, marketing, and communications are likely to end up in positions where a large part of their working life is spent online. However, even those in other areas, such as science, design, security studies, management, commerce and theatre studies, might be expected to have a significant online presence and to be able to effectively communicate their work online. *Therefore, we need to prepare students to communicate and interact online safely and ethically.*

Curtin University also teaches across a range of areas where the design of new communications technologies can have an impact on online harassment. Students studying information systems and technology, computer systems and networking, computer science, information management, and cyber security need to be aware of the ways their work might affect the safety of system users. *As such, we need to prepare the students who develop communication technologies to consider at-risk users as a central part of their design.*

WHY ADDRESSING ONLINE HARASSMENT MATTERS TO CURTIN UNIVERSITY

Online harassment affects a significant proportion of internet users and many Curtin students are part of at-risk groups. In 2014 the Pew Research Centre found that 40 per cent of internet users in the United States (US) had experienced online harassment. Of this group, 45 per cent (18 per cent of internet users overall) "had experienced more severe experiences, such as being the target of physical threats, harassment over a sustained period of time, stalking, and sexual harassment."[1] While comprehensive research has not been published in Australia, cultural and technological parallels with the US suggest that we experience the problem on a similar scale.

The impact of online harassment has received particular attention with regards to video game development and criticism. The emergence of Gamergate has lead several female game developers and critics to temporarily or permanently relocate from their homes and cancel public appearances in fear for their safety. However, harassment and abuse is not limited to video game culture. Journalists, activists and academics, particularly women, have been facing abuse, which severely curtails their ability to work effectively or to engage in public spaces. Understanding the risks of online harassment and potential strategies for moderating its effects is therefore becoming a vital part of digital literacy.

Online harassment often grows out of existing power structures[2] in society, which means that online harassment is often "gendered, racialised, queerphobic, transphobic, ableist and classist in nature."[3] Younger people, particularly women[4] aged between 18 and 24 and those who spend more time on social media sites, are also at increased risk. Higher rates of social media use among Australian Indigenous youth mean we should also be concerned about the combination of racial discrimination on platforms like Facebook and the impacts of racism (including more subtle forms of racial stereotyping) on Indigenous people's mental health.[5] Additionally, Islamophobia and other forms of racialised hate in Australia also have an impact online. *Given Curtin's diverse student body, many of our students fall into the demographic groups who are particularly at risk of experiencing online harassment during their studies and later in the workforce.*

To effectively mitigate this risk, we need to ensure that we mainstream discussions of online harassment across courses. Students in all areas need to understand the risks they might face, reasonable protective steps they can take, and relevant legislative and workplace protections when communicating online. Similarly, we need to ensure that all IT and computing students are prepared to design systems that centre the needs of vulnerable users.

WHAT IS ONLINE HARASSMENT?

It is difficult to clearly define online harassment, in part because the context is very important. One report includes the use of offensive names, purposeful attempts to embarrass targets, physical threats, stalking and sexual harassment. Online harassment also often spreads offline.

While harassment is sometimes explicit, such as a message containing graphic threats, at other times it may be more subtle. For example, a harasser may follow or like social media posts as a way to show they are closely monitoring the target of their harassment. Sustained, unwanted contact can be a feature of harassment, but harassers may also encourage others to contact their targets while not engaging with them directly.

Harassment often feeds on other forms of prejudice. This means that online harassment might draw on misogyny, racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or other kinds of discrimination.

Harassment might include:

- **Graphic threats:** these might be couched directly with statements such as 'I'm going to...', or indirectly such as 'I hope someone...'. They may threaten physical or sexual violence and can take place across multiple platforms. Graphic threats can also be made without contacting the target of harassment, such as creating and publicly sharing a game where players can beat up a prominent video game critic. They might take place across multiple platforms.
- **Dogpiling:** coordinated negative attention from multiple different accounts.
- **Orchestration:** harassers might purposefully attempt to bring their targets to the notice of communities known to engage in harassment.
- **Doxxing:** releasing personal details, such as a person's real name – if they use a pseudonymn online – their home address or the name of their employer.

This is not an exhaustive list. Online harassment takes many forms, and as communications platforms change, so does harassment. Forms of harassment emerging in the United States depend on specific conditions, for example swatting has emerged in response to highly-militarised police raids.

WHAT IS SWATTING?

Swatting is when a harasser makes a fake emergency call to police to lure a SWAT team to someone's home.

What is common here is that 'online' harassment rarely remains online, and that harassers frequently draw on existing power imbalances, such as women's vulnerability within male-dominated fields, and seek to reinforce these imbalances beyond the online environment. People experiencing harassment frequently fear for their safety offline and all kinds of harassment can affect their mental health.

WHO PERPETUATES ONLINE HARASSMENT?

Limited research exists about the people who perpetuate online harassment. Stereotypical depictions of young men living with their parents belie the fact that many people who engage in online harassment are older and do so under their real names. This makes more sense when we understand online harassment as part of, rather than separate from, other power structures, including racism, sexism, homophobia and ableism. As teachers, we need to encourage students to engage respectfully online and offline, and challenge embedded prejudices when they are expressed in teaching spaces. We also need to be aware of the ways in which our own embedded prejudices might be affecting our teaching.

APPROACHES TO DISCUSSING ONLINE HARASSMENT

Three key principles should guide a teacher's approach to online harassment: avoid victim-blaming, provide flexible resources and challenge prejudices. Teachers should focus on providing students with the knowledge and support they need to be prepared while also emphasising the many benefits of being a part of online communities.

First and foremost, people experiencing online harassment should never be blamed for their harassment. While there are a number of steps that people can take to mitigate the risks they face online, they are not responsible for the harassment they face if they have not taken these steps. Writing about controversial subjects, using particular platforms, sharing images of themselves or personal details, similarly, are not cause for harassment.

Secondly, discussions of harassment and resources provided to students need to be flexible to take into account the rapidly-changing online environment. A guide to staying safe on a particular platform may be useful, but it will rapidly become out-dated with technological change, new policies and shifts in harassment strategies. Similarly, for students engaged in designing new technologies, a deep understanding of the underlying issues involved in online harassment is necessary if they are to create flexible and responsive platforms that centre on the needs of vulnerable users.

Thirdly, teachers need to be prepared to challenge expressions of prejudice in the classroom and other educational settings, particularly those that emerge in response to discussions of online harassment. Many people believe that their prejudices are shared by others and speaking up can be a powerful part of the process of change. Challenging prejudice can take various forms, such as using narrative and lived experiences, teachable moments that arise from class discussions and other teaching practices that build on students' experiences. This is in keeping with Curtin's commitment to value diversity and promote equity and inclusion.

Tools and resources

There are a number of tools and resources that you might give to students or draw on for your teaching materials.

LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL RECOURSE

Different national and state laws regulate online harassment. Section 474.17 of the Criminal Code Act 1995 makes it an offence to use a carriage service (telecommunications service) to menace, harass or cause offence, and doing so can lead to three years imprisonment and a fine of up to $19,800. Section 474.15 specifically prohibits using a carriage service to make a threat, which can incur a seven-year prison sentence. Racial vilification laws are also relevant to online communications on public, non-password-protected platforms. However, police are frequently unwilling to enforce Section 474.17. Making your students aware of these laws may help them in reporting incidents of online abuse to authorities.

Many workplaces also have policies against employees engaging in harassment, or structures and resources intended to support employees experiencing harassment. It is useful to make students aware of these policies. At Curtin these include the staff and student codes of conduct and resources such as Curtin's counselling services.

UNDERSTANDING PLATFORM CAPABILITIES

Each online platform has specific capabilities that shape the safety of the environment for users. Nearly all platforms allow users to flag or report particular material as offensive. Some platforms allow users to remain anonymous, while others require identifying information, such as a real name. Platforms allow different levels of privacy; some make all content public by default, while others may allow users to create semi-private spaces. In some cases, users have created their own systems to respond to abuse, like the Good Game Auto Blocker, which auto-blocks people who follow more than one given set of Twitter accounts, such as followers of multiple pro-Gamergate accounts, who may target and harass another Twitter user on mass.

If you require or encourage students to use particular platforms, ensure that you're familiar with, and can discuss, the culture on these spaces and specific threats that students might face. Share resources on how to report abuse, as well as other features that might allow them to protect their privacy or prevent unwanted contact.

When thinking about platform design, attention to user privacy and content flagging is vital. Drawing on existing online discussions about platform design and policy can be a good way to highlight common mistakes and to encourage students to consider principles that will protect vulnerable users.

MODELLING HEALTHY CULTURES

As a first step to preparing students to contribute to inclusive cultures of online communication, we need to continue work to build inclusive cultures within academia. Many campuses in Australia face issues of racism, sexual harassment and assault, homophobia and other issues that affect marginalised students and staff. Educators therefore need to take on active roles to make these spaces safer, particularly for at-risk students. Educators can also work to model healthy cultures by defending other academics who come under attack, where possible.

Establishing a code of conduct can be a good way to do this. Codes of conduct are increasingly being used for conferences and other spaces, including online. You can draw on existing templates to create your own, or use them as starting-points to develop a code of conduct collaboratively with your classroom.

SAFER SPACES AND CONTENT WARNINGS

Discussing online harassment can be difficult for some students, especially if drawing on research that highlights the intensely visceral nature of sexist, racist, ableist, transphobic or other abusive content. Providing content warnings before discussions, and on specific readings, can help students to manage their participation more effectively.

Effective moderation of discussions – not only of online harassment, but in learning spaces more generally – plays a large role in building productive dialogue. It is important to set clear guidelines for discussions to help make space for marginalised voices, and to value diversity and inclusion.

The classroom is not always a safe space for everyone. However, educators can work towards it being safer for marginalised groups and can try to ensure that expressions of prejudice are challenged in productive ways.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS EXPERIENCING ONLINE HARASSMENT

Harassers frequently contact employers and other people with power over their targets, so providing support to your students can have a significant impact. You may also need to consider adjustments to assessments that expose a student's personal details: be careful about the information you require students to share publicly.

Don't tell students 'not to feed the trolls' or to 'just ignore it'. Instead, encourage them to document the abuse and, depending on the severity of the harassment, consider referring them to legal authorities, counselling, or other relevant services.

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3. Kelley, N. A DIY Guide to Feminist Cybersecurity. Safe Hub Collective. tech.safehubcollective.org/cybersecurity/
4. Lindsay, M and Krysik, J. (2012). Online harassment among college students. Information, Communication and Society, 15:5, 703-719, DOI.
5. Montgomery, H. (2014). The Internet: The Benefits, Problems and Legal Difficulties for Indigenous Australians. IndigLawB 36; (2014) 8(14) Indigenous Law Bulletin 19. www5.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ILB/2014/36.html

Further resources

There are a number of guides available which may be useful to draw on:

ONONYMOUS
This website provides resources that are focused on activists, journalists and people in oppressive regimes.
ononymous.org

THE CRASH OVERRIDE NETWORK
A support network and assistance group for targets of online harassment. It also hosts useful resources.
crashoverridenetwork.com

STINE ECKERT'S GUIDELINES FOR BLOGGING
These guidelines are intended to support women to start, and continue, blogging.
stineeckert.com/safe-blogging

THE FEMBOT TOOLKIT
The website provides guidelines for protecting your privacy online.
fembotcollective.org

TAKE BACK THE TECH
This site maps violence against women online and allows users to submit reports of online harassment.
takebackthetech.net

SPEAK UP AND STAY SAFE(R)
This blog post includes guidelines on protecting yourself from online harassment by protecting your privacy online and offline.
onlinesafety.feministfrequency.com

ASHE DRYDEN
Offers suggestions on how to deal with harassment, and provides support to others.
ashedryden.com

TACTICAL TECHNOLOGY'S MANUAL OF GENDER AND TECH
This online resource is comprehensive and gives advice on supporting others as well as protecting yourself online.
gendersec.tacticaltech.org

HEART MOB
A new tool to report harassment and get support.
iheartmob.org

WOMEN'S MEDIA CENTRE SPEECH PROJECT
This website provides relevant definitions, further readings, and tools and resources.
wmcspeechproject.com

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