# We should never minimize online harassment

Skip navigation

Home

IN MY OPINION

Treating a woman scholar's experience of harassment as insignificant is the first step to normalizing it.

By SHANDELL HOULDEN & GEORGE VELETSIANOS | JUN 13 2018

While an academic goes about her public online activities, someone calls her a stupid c*nt, tells her they hope she is raped and wishes her a gruesome death. Or maybe they just tell her she is dumb and should get back in the kitchen. Or that she should smile or exercise more. Perhaps they do this in response to an opinion she expressed, or a research paper she published, or perhaps it is simply because of her gender, race or sexuality.

Lest you think these statements are ludicrous, browse a sample of the messages sent to University of Pennsylvania professor Anthea Butler. Or read about the experiences of other women academics like Cambridge University's Mary Beard, who was lambasted for daring to suggest that Roman Britain was more diverse than has historically been represented; Tressie McMillan Cottom of Virginia Commonwealth University, whose blog posts on racism, sexism and normative beauty ideals have been targeted for harassment; author and editor Kelly J. Baker, whose writing on white supremacy and the rise of the alt-right has been the cause of much online abuse; and scholar Audrey Watters, whose critical analyses of the use of technology in education often make her a target.

By putting voice to their experiences, these women are doing the important public work of calling attention to online abuse and asserting the significant impact of such violence. They do this in spite of the fact that online harassment is often interpreted as deserved, is trivialized or even disavowed as a form of legitimate violence. What can we do to support women in this position?

## Researching online harassment

Shortly before the chain of events that started with the Harvey Weinstein revelations and developed into the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, we started a research project documenting and examining experiences such as the ones described above in order to understand the kind of harassment that women scholars face online. This research comes at a time of growing interest in targeted online abuse more generally. See, for example, the recent Amnesty International campaign on women and #ToxicTwitter, or the efforts by the American

Association of University Professors <u>to call out faculty harassment</u> This work intersects in significant ways with questions of academic freedom and free speech on campuses both in Canada and the United States, issues that are also gaining broader awareness.

In the course of our work, we discovered that online harassment is frequently minimized, both by the wider public and by the individuals who experience it. This can be true in even the most egregious cases, and remains true in spite of the many women vocally protesting this abuse and demanding that it be taken seriously. We tend to treat online harassment as far enough away from our "actual" day-to-day lives as to consider it non-threatening, barely worth noticing, or at least not as bad as harassment that happens face-to-face. (Not incidentally, Roxane Gay's <u>new book</u>, a collection of first-person essays on rape, assault and harassment, is titled *Not That Bad*).

## What is "bad enough"?

This raises the obvious question: How bad does online harassment have to be before it's considered bad enough? Is it bad enough when it makes scholars reconsider what they post or don't post online? Is it bad enough when it makes them feel anxious? Is it bad enough when it impacts their ability to go about their day? Is it bad enough when it disrupts their capacity to do their work? Or, is it bad enough only when they receive threats of physical harm, and those threats become credible? Where do we draw the line?

The point isn't to create a hierarchy of harassment. Rather, we need to understand what happens when we create these hierarchies through minimization, and what the consequences of doing so are. This means drawing a distinction between minimization at the individual level and at the level of the broader culture. If I tell you my experience of being harassed is simply annoying, rather than something threatening or traumatizing, to some degree I control my narrative, and this is a good thing. It's a form of coping. Respect that.

But, minimizing it at a broader cultural level does something much less helpful. By creating a hierarchy of harassment, the expectation becomes that harassment worthy of the name requires that your life and livelihood needs to be threatened in a palpable way – through <u>doxxing</u>, or the release of stolen private images, or directly contacting your employer to demand for your termination – before it counts as bad or real enough. In other words, if you're not subject to the degree of violence experienced by someone like <u>Kathy Sierra</u>, who was driven offline in fear of her life, your experience of online harassment might somehow be viewed as less serious or less valid.

Minimization is a process embedded in the structures of power tied to gender, sexuality, race and so on, and perpetuates a culture that seeks to maintain itself. It perpetuates a culture that resists disruption. In other words, minimization is a tool of the status quo. Consequently, when we treat someone's experience of online harassment as insignificant, we act in ways that maintain the very system that perpetuates harassment and that makes it harder for individuals to speak up. It becomes easier for us to get used to the abuse and to normalize it, a reality that

recent research into exposure to online abuse appears to confirm. Importantly, as other research shows, all things being equal, if this is true for women targeted by harassment, it is even more true for people of colour, whose harassment is even less likely to be seen as such.

Fortunately, this very minimization has come to be challenged by the aforementioned movements and others who are documenting the myriad ways sexism and harassment occur. These movements show that harassment doesn't have to be extreme to be severe. Rather, it can be what happens in small ways, in the day to day, as a slowly growing accumulation that degrades and wears women out over time.

The last point is especially important for women scholars, whose jobs involve public engagement (required or volunteered), and who are already in a work environment often overburdened with emotional labour and fraught with inequality.

If the well-being of all scholars and the desire to support expansive public and online scholarship in all its forms is legitimately an aim of the contemporary university, and if the degradation and too-frequent silencing of marginalized scholars is to be taken seriously, collectively we need to disrupt minimization. We need to acknowledge that online abuse appears in many guises, and we need to respond to it decisively.

*Shandell Houlden is a PhD candidate at McMaster University and a research assistant at Royal Roads University. George Veletsianos holds the Canada Research Chair in Innovative Learning, and is a professor in the school of education and technology, at Royal Roads. The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable work of their two team members, Chandell Gosse and Jaigris Hodson. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.*