Curtin University

COMMUNICATING ONLINE:
safety and ethics

Make tomorrow better.

Background

Communicating online is likely to play a significant role in your studies, work and social life. Building a web presence is often a valuable experience, which will do a lot to help you connect with others who share your interests and who are influential in your field. Unfortunately, some people experience harassment online. This fact sheet outlines a few steps you can take to protect your privacy online, and how to manage and document harassment if you do experience it. It also provides some strategies to help prevent harassment if you're involved in designing or managing online spaces.

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.

Protecting yourself online

There are good reasons to share your work online, establish a web presence and use platforms like Twitter and LinkedIn to network. In many industries, it might be a vital part of your career.

There are a few steps you can take to manage the risks of online harassment when setting up an account on a new platform:

• Read the platform's privacy policy and code of conduct.

• Do some background research to find out if the platform has had recent privacy breaches and to learn more about the kinds of behaviour you might expect on it.

• Look for privacy controls: some platforms give you limited options, while others might allow you to set up different levels of access. Be aware that some services will make changes that affect your privacy without notification. If so, check your settings regularly.

• Be cautious about the information you share: some sites will ask for your full name, date of birth, location and other details. Only share what you're comfortable with.
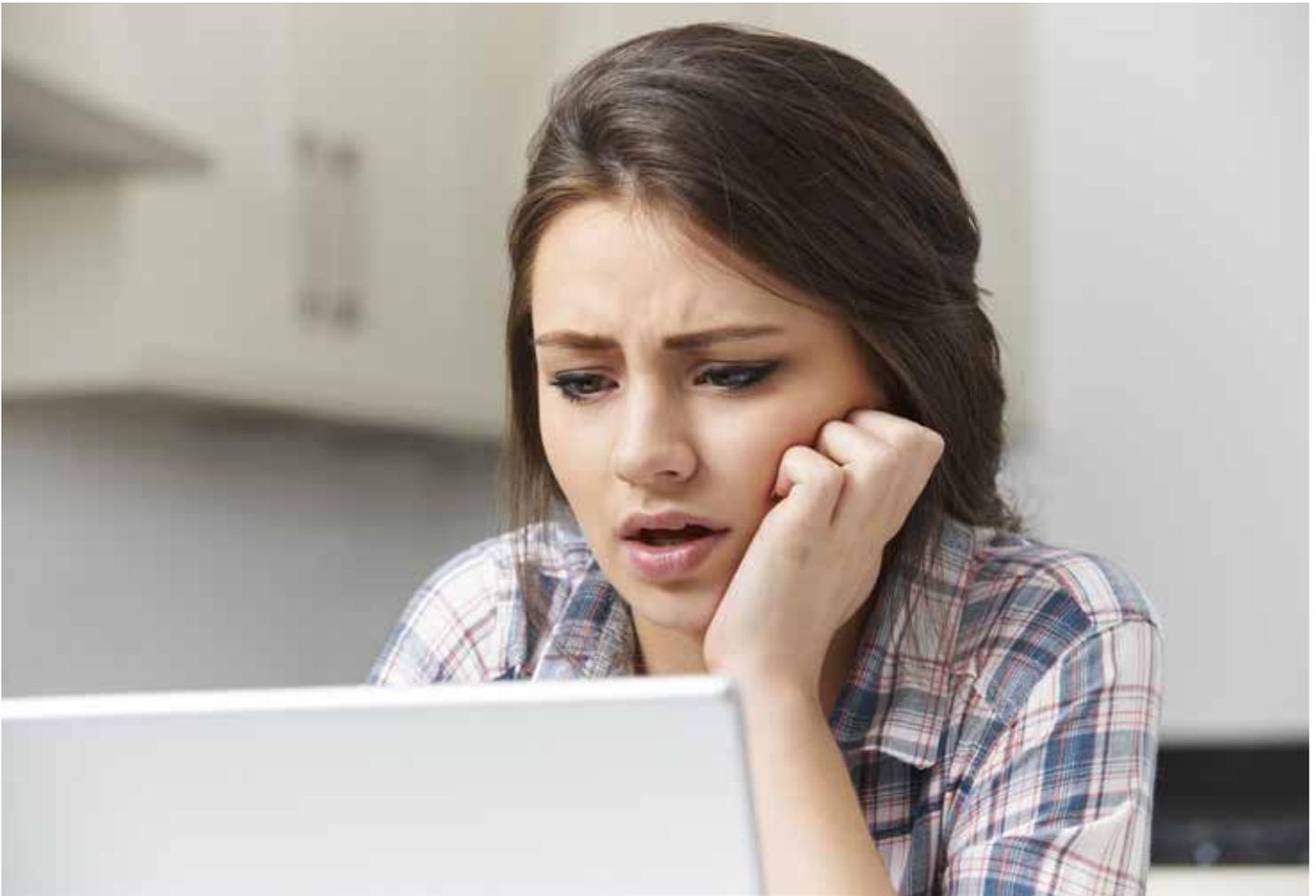
What to do if you experience online harassment

If you do experience online harassment, it's not your fault. There are several steps and many support services that can help you respond. If you experience harassment in a learning space or on a platform you're using for your studies, let your lecturer know about it.

If the harassment you experience only comes from a single person, and is not sustained, you may be able to manage it by blocking them. Most social media platforms will give you some way of preventing particular users from contacting you and a way to report abusive behaviour.

You may need to take further steps if you experience sustained harassment across different platforms, from multiple people or if you receive threats that make you worry for your physical safety. These include:

• Documenting the harassment by taking screenshots, recording links and keeping any emails. If this process is distressing, you may want to ask a trusted friend to help.

• Reporting your harassers for abuse if the platforms you're using have reporting systems.

• Increasing the privacy settings on your accounts and blocking harassers.

• Contacting the police, particularly if you have received direct threats.

Any harassment can be distressing. If the harassment you experience is affecting your studies, contact Curtin's counselling services so that they can help you to work out a support plan.

Communicating ethically online

You need to ensure that you engage respectfully with others online. Curtin University, like many universities and workplaces, has a code of conduct for students, as well as one for staff. This means you should think carefully about the language you use, reconsider your actions if somebody asks you to stop contacting them online and be mindful of others' privacy when sharing information.

Considering at-risk users

Throughout your studies and working life, you may end up setting up tools or spaces that other people will use. When doing so, you need to consider the experiences of your most vulnerable users. If you're working on an online platform, think about how you will protect users' privacy, and what kinds of tools will be available to them if they experience harassment – this is becoming vital even for the largest technology companies.

If you set up a discussion group or run an event, adopting a code of conduct can be a good way to create a safer space for your contributors.

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

Contact us

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