

How universities can better address online harassment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online harassment of researchers and faculty members is increasingly common and can seriously impact the psychological health and productivity of those who experience it. To address these personal and professional impacts, Canadian universities should provide robust and effective support to targeted individuals.

Based on consultations with university staff and researchers, and reviews of institutional policies globally, we propose how to support researchers at individual institutions and nationally.

INTRODUCTION

Online harassment is an increasing risk as more communication and knowledge dissemination in post-secondary institutions occurs online. Technology-facilitated harassment includes doxing, threats of physical harm, cross-platform harassment, derogatory comments, and denigration of scientific work.^{1,2} These attacks are intended to intimidate researchers and discredit their work, creating a hostile work environment.^{3,4}

Academic researchers who experience online harassment rarely receive sufficient institutional support and instead rely on individual coping strategies.^{5,6} But there are limitations to such strategies.^{7,8}

If universities want researchers to engage broader publics and conduct research freely, they need to provide organizational support and response mechanisms that ensure professional resilience. After highlighting our recommendations, this brief outlines the issues associated with online harassment and showcases a proposed framework to support researchers.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
School of Public Policy and Global Affairs
Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions

Recommendations

Despite the difficulties posed by online harassment, institutions across Canada can create and promote more effective support for researchers.

Individual universities

Establish a university-level researcher support or safety team.

The team would include administrators from different domains of support and other relevant stakeholders. Such a team would:

- Coordinate support services, track trends in harassment, and act as a central support team for affected researchers;⁹⁻¹¹
- Provide training and workshops for staff, faculty, administrators, and university leaders on how to best support affected researchers. An online training module could also be considered;¹²
- Create a preemptive response plan and emergency fund for escalated incidents.¹³

● **Develop harassment and bullying prevention policies** specifically tailored to address online issues. These policies should:

- Clarify the scope and limitations for support as well as how to enable researchers to report incidents without fear of retaliation, dismissal, or other reputational and professional damage;^{9,10,13}
- Consider how academic freedom and harassment prevention policies apply to non-university collaborators, such as external researchers, community partners, and freelancers.

● **Publish and maintain clear and accessible information on support pathways** and administrative units involved on university websites.

Inter-university networks

Encourage universities in Canada to adopt and share best practices.

Canada's Tri-Agency and other research funding bodies can encourage the adoption of institutional support frameworks.

● **Expand institutional support by developing a national initiative** to support researchers akin to the international examples in this brief.

● **Inform and encourage provincial and federal action on online harassment.** This might include legal, regulatory, or technological safeguards.

● **Engage social media platforms to ensure better content moderation systems** that treat abuse like spam, empowering individual users to quarantine abusive content, rather than solely relying on reporting, blocking, and deleting tools.¹⁴

Background

THE PHENOMENON OF ONLINE HARASSMENT

Incidents of online harassment can have serious personal and institutional impacts.^{8,13,15} At the personal level, targeted researchers have reported:

- Compromised personal safety;
- Impacts on mental health and well-being;
- Reduced productivity;
- Negative impacts on career progression and reputation;
- Tendency to self-censor;
- Unwillingness to participate in public discourse.

Online harassment is often deeply interconnected with other forms of targeted abuse.⁵ Many researchers also experience harassment in person, through phone calls, via the misuse of legal or administrative measures, or in the worst case, death threats and other threats of violence.¹⁶

Besides personal impacts, the institutional consequences of online harassment include:

- Undermining universities' stated commitments to academic freedom, e.g. Universities Canada's statement on academic freedom and U15 Canada's Berlin Statement;^{17,18}

- Affecting institutional autonomy and integrity, particularly by deterring research and knowledge mobilization in highly politicized areas such as climate change, public health, and gender studies that face higher levels of digital harassment;^{2,19}
- Disproportionately affecting researchers from equity-deserving groups, connecting directly with universities' stated commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI);^{13,20}
- Compromising universities' commitment to provide a safe working environment by threatening the occupational health and safety of researchers and faculty members;^{15,21}
- Creating reputational risks, declines in productivity, or collateral damage to the institution or staff members associated with the target.²²

More broadly, online harassment can impede the public dissemination of knowledge by making researchers more reluctant to engage outside the academy. Such chilling effects may create a void in the information landscape that undermines public trust in expertise.^{2,15}

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Universities and grant funding agencies increasingly encourage researchers and faculty members to engage in online knowledge translation and mobilization. Yet, these institutions remain unprepared to

provide adequate institutional support for the risks of public visibility beyond the physical campus, including technology-facilitated harassment.^{13,19} For example, digital harassment may make traditional bullying and harassment prevention policies inadequate, as people beyond the university community may target researchers with little fear of accountability.

Despite growing recognition of the issue, current institutional policies and support pathways in Canadian universities emphasize physical safety, prioritize punitive over supportive measures, and focus on internal perpetrators.^{6,15} A lack of structured intervention shifts the burden of response onto individuals who often seek informal support from peers and family, magnifying the harms resulting from harassment.^{5,8}

Institutions' inability to address online harassment at its source makes it even more important to support targeted individuals by:

- Understanding that researchers now face online and offline risks that require comprehensive responses integrating cybersecurity, physical safety, mental health, and other domains of support;
- Recognizing that addressing technology-facilitated harassment is crucial for protecting academic freedom and promoting occupational health and safety;

- Creating wraparound institutional support based on an understanding of those two realities.

Proposed framework

WRAPAROUND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR RESEARCHERS

We propose a wraparound institutional support framework tailored to the realities of technology facilitated harassment and violence. Such institutional support would ideally shift the burden away from individuals. Wraparound institutional support means coordinated, multi-domain assistance for researchers before, during, and after incidents of online harassment. The proposed framework incorporates:

- Research by UBC's [Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions](#) (CSDI) on online abuse in Canada, including consultations with researchers and multiple administrative units involved in responding to such incidents at the University of British Columbia (UBC);^{7,8,16}
- Reviews of existing policies and support mechanisms in academic institutions across Anglophone countries and Europe.

As online harassment can take many forms and have different impacts, individuals need multiple pathways and responses that align with their personal safety, well-being, and professional needs.

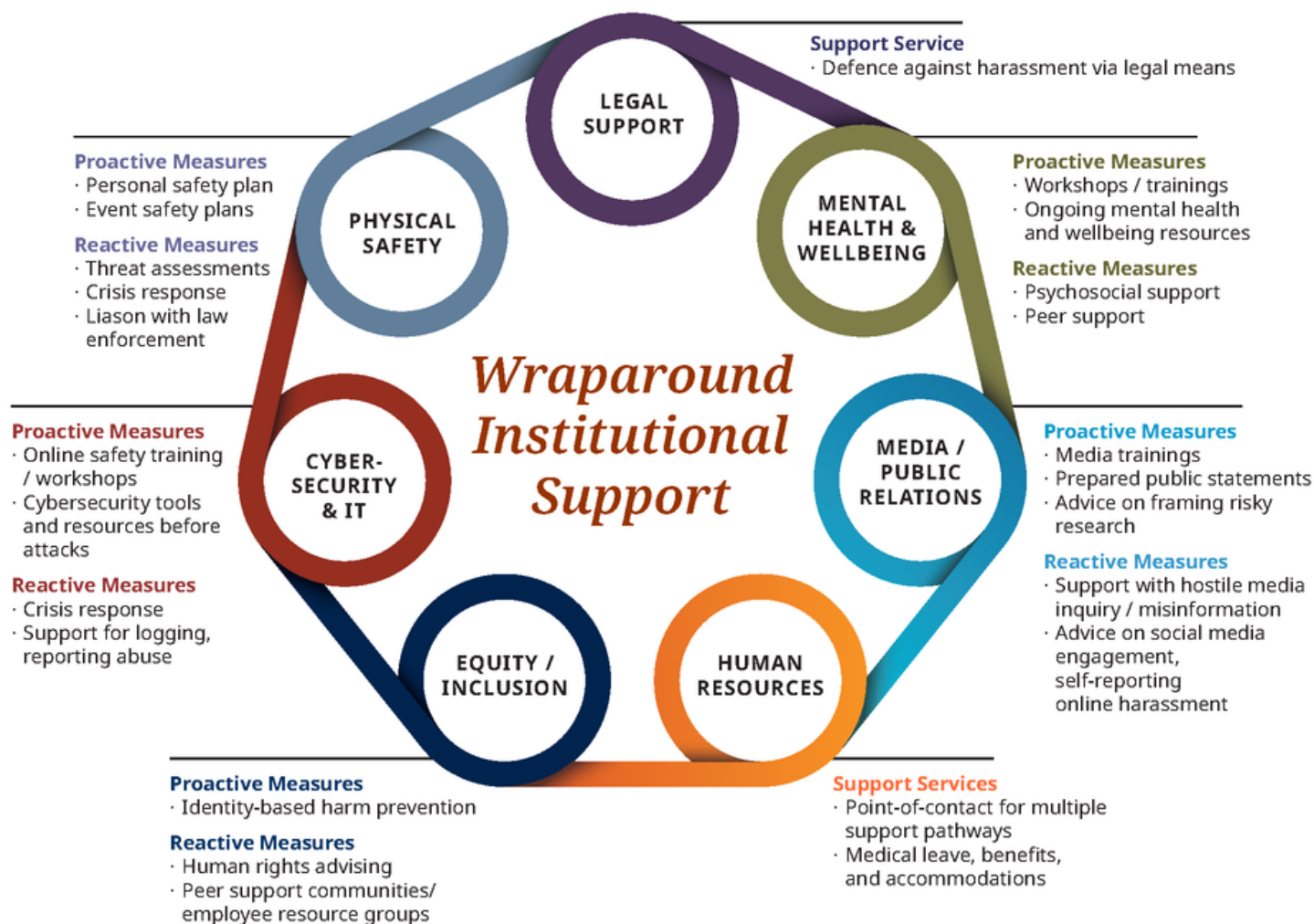


Figure 1: Wraparound institutional support

A robust framework for targeted researchers:

- Recognizes shared responsibility between the university and researcher;
- Centres researcher agency;
- Integrates multiple domains of support;
- Offers proactive and reactive support pathways for risk reduction and crisis response.

DOMAINS OF SUPPORT

Online harassment poses physical, reputational, professional, legal, and psychological risks. Any institutional response needs to bring together multiple domains of assistance to address all these risks. Common domains of support include:

- **Physical safety:** To mitigate risks that may escalate into physical threats. For instance, UBC Campus Security provides services such as personal safety planning, site security assessment, event security planning, and campus safe walks;
- **Cybersecurity:** To protect researchers' digital identity and avoid further harm. This can include securing email and social media accounts, investigating online incidents, research-specific cybersecurity training, or support during attacks;

- **Mental health and wellbeing:** To provide access to counselling, peer support networks, and psychosocial resources to manage the psychological toll of harassment;
- **Communications, media and public relations:** To help researchers navigate hostile media inquiries, learn how to communicate strategically about their work, and help maintain public trust in their expertise;
- **Legal:** To provide legal support to targeted individuals, should there be legal claims or a complaint to a regulatory body;
- **Equity & inclusion:** To ensure trauma-informed approaches to care, particularly for identity-based attacks. At UBC, the Equity & Inclusion Office's human rights advising unit connects affected individuals with internal and external resources, including relevant employee resource groups for community support;
- **Human resources:** To integrate responses from different administrative units in the university.

“Given the many facets of online harassment, universities urgently need to develop a wraparound framework for institutional support. At the same time, inter-university networks and advocacy networks might consider creating a national initiative to support researchers across Canada at all types of institutions.”

Often, many domains of support already exist at post-secondary institutions. There are two main challenges. First, there is a lack of coordination across multiple administrative units. The domains are siloed, sometimes even unaware of each other's existence. Second, researchers often do not know about the resources available to them or how to find them swiftly in a crisis situation, and are hesitant to report such incidents.⁵

CONCLUSION

Given the many facets of online harassment, universities urgently need to develop a wraparound framework for institutional support. At the same time, inter-university networks and advocacy networks might consider creating a national initiative to support researchers across Canada at all types of institutions. Together, these measures can help to mitigate the individual, institutional, and societal consequences of online harassment.

National and international examples

Rather than develop support pathways at each institution, some countries have created cross-institutional support networks of universities and other researcher support groups²³. The bottom row provides examples from individual institutions, though many others may lack the capacity to provide the full range of resources required for wraparound support.



The Austrian Academy of Sciences' Science Care platform offers its researchers crisis communications support, legal advice, and psychological support.²⁴



The Universities of the Netherlands (UNL)'s SafeScience initiative provides guidelines for targeted researchers from 14 affiliated universities and a national helpline for them to report incidents.²⁵



SciComm Support is a similar national platform and helpline in Germany, operating as part of a larger programme to build institutional resilience to anti-science hate.²⁶



In the United States, independent networks such as the Researcher Support Consortium and PEN America regularly update resources and toolkits to support researchers facing online harassment.^{27,28}



In Australia and New Zealand, the Science Media Centre has developed online resources and exclusive training modules to help researchers navigate public engagement and mitigate online threats.²⁹



York University provides a resource that supports scholars facing scholarship harassment.³⁰



The University of Massachusetts Amherst offers guidelines on managing online harassment.³¹



Oxford University provides social media wellness and safety guidance.³²



The University of Chicago has an Online Harassment Response Group, a dedicated portal to report incidents, and a guide on addressing online harassment.³³

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CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS (CSDI)

The Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions (CSDI) at the University of British Columbia aims to understand the past, analyze the present, and train for the future. CSDI takes an evidence-based and collaborative approach to strengthening and rethinking democracy in a digital age. democracy.ubc.ca/

CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR

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