

Take back the net: Institutions must develop collective strategies to tackle online abuse aimed at female academics.

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A recent conference panel explored the challenges and risks associated with being a female public intellectual given widespread online sexual harassment. [Audra Mitchell](#) summarises the panel and provides further insight into what can be done to stop the abuse. Universities, funding councils and other academic bodies need to play a more supportive role in addressing the bullying and think carefully about making an individual online presence a necessity for academic success.



Exposure is an ambiguous idea for female academics. We all want to gain as much exposure as possible for our research and ideas, and a public presence is increasingly treated as an unqualified good. It is actively encouraged by the 'impact' agenda of the [UK research councils](#) and by major media actors such as the [BBC](#). It is also becoming increasingly important in terms of esteem and career progression. But being exposed to the public may also mean making ourselves vulnerable to abuse, bullying or even threats to our safety. It is important to remember that female intellectuals appear in public every day at work – that is in front of students and peers – and face similar forms of discriminatory abuse. For instance, [research](#) shows that students filling out module evaluations are much more likely to submit abusive comments to women (the younger the woman, the higher the rate of abuse. For women, much of this ill treatment seems to stem not from our academic arguments, but rather from our appearances and sexual characteristics.

To discuss this issue, I recently convened a panel at the '[Intellectual Integrity?](#)' [Conference](#) at the University of York. This panel stemmed from my own recent experience after appearing on a special episode of BBC1's '[The Big Questions](#)'. Although the camera was focused directly on me for just a couple of minutes and gave no contact details, within hours I had received several emails and posts on Twitter commenting on my physical appearance. I looked up comments on male guests on the same programme, and every post I could locate related to their arguments, not their appearances. Perhaps I should not have found this experience surprising in a context in which a respected academic such as Mary Beard found herself barraged with personal, overtly sexual [abuse](#) after appearing on another BBC programme and daring to share a controversial opinion. I discussed my concerns with other participants at a university-sponsored discussion of the 'impact' agenda. One of them put me in touch with [Dr. Sara Perry](#), whose research and personal experiences suggest that the online sexual harassment of female professionals is a widespread problem (more on this below).



However, when, at another university-sponsored event on the use of social media, I asked what guidelines the university could offer for ensuring the safety of female academics online, there seemed to be little awareness of the issue. (To his great credit, the convener of this second training session attended the '[Intellectual Integrity?](#)' panel and made some interesting [responses](#)).

The panellists at the Intellectual Integrity event explored this issue from several perspectives. Professor Sue Mendus framed the discussion by showing a video montage focused on the bullying of former Australian Prime Minister [Julia Gillard](#), noting how systematic campaigns of abuse can undermine the self-esteem and integrity of an individual. She also pointed out the fact that it is not only male misogyny that fuels this abuse, but also, in some cases, feminist conceptions of womanhood (the clip in question begins with an accusation that Gillard confounded norms of collective womanhood by remaining 'deliberately barren'). But even for less visible figures like academics,

building a public presence can lead to sustained abuse. Perry spoke with commendable honesty about the kinds of harassment she'd been subjected to as a result of building up a professional online presence. She received public and private messages via Twitter, Facebook and email from men describing their fantasies about her, often times very explicitly. In some cases, it was obvious that the trolls were men from her professional circle – that is, people that she would be forced to confront at conferences and perhaps even in her day-to-day work. Co-panellist Lorna Richardson, who has confronted similar forms of bullying, commented that the situation is much more acute for early career researchers, who need to cultivate an online presence to attract the attention of potential employers. Rather than sitting back and accepting the abuse, Perry and her colleagues have developed a [survey](#) designed to collect data on patterns of online abuse and bullying (see also the [project blog](#) and [Twitter account](#)). Hopefully the results of this survey will help to identify the patterns of online abuse and spur relevant institutions into taking action.

Much of the discussion after the panel focused on what can be done about the problem, and by whom. Some participants argued that the problem was not restricted to women, and that patterns of online abuse emerging from a general 'coarsening of society' need to be addressed. However, the consensus seemed to be that these conditions will not change overnight and that, in the meantime, universities should train their staff and students to cope with online abuse. I agree that these initiatives are important, but I still think that we need to be more critical about the roots of the problem. On the one hand, universities, funding councils and other academic bodies need to think carefully about making an individual online presence a necessity for academic success. Some individuals may be able to shrug off disturbing comments or even physical threats, but for others this is a deeply damaging experience – and it is most certainly not part of 'what we sign up for' as academics. This kind of behaviour would not (we can only hope) be tolerated on campus, a conference or any other workplace, but when it happens online, its victims are expected to simply put up with it. On the other hand, many women love engaging with (social) media, and it may be necessary for them to maintain a strong public presence if they are to be treated equally as intellectuals or experts (and human beings). To paraphrase [Beard](#), we let down other women if we allow ourselves to be intimidated into retreating from the public media. This suggests that, along with the measures discussed above, female academics and their male colleagues need to develop collective strategies for standing up against abuse and making the public media a safe place for everyone to express their views – that is, for taking back the net.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

[Audra Mitchell](#) is Lecturer in International Relations at the University of York. She is the author of *International Intervention in a Secular Age: Re-enchanting Humanity* (Routledge, 2013, forthcoming), *Lost in Transformation: Violent Peace and Peaceful Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Palgrave, 2011) and co-editor of *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From the Everyday to Post-Liberalism* (Palgrave, 2011). Her current research is on posthumanist ethics and international responses to world-threatening events.

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