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COMMENT

The price of speaking out: European landscape of online hate and harassment

Commentary on

Scholars under attack — Navigating the dark side of public engagement and science communication in a politicised (online) environment

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Abstract

Hostile online communication is an increasing concern in academia. This commentary focuses on online harassment victims in Finland and online harassment perpetration in Europe. Data are drawn from representative surveys of Finnish academic research and teaching staff and national samples from Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Poland. In Finland, 30% of academics reported online harassment within the past 6 months. Victims were disproportionately senior staff, minorities, and those in the social sciences and humanities. Only approximately 18% of the perpetrators were a member of the respondent's work community at their university. Public engagement in the media heightened risk. Victims reported more distress, lower trust, and weaker workplace support. Across Europe, men reported having sent offensive or threatening online messages more commonly. Perpetration was associated with younger age, psychological distress, and higher online involvement. These findings highlight the need to strengthen institutional support and improve digital culture to protect academic freedom and well-being.

Keywords

Science and media; Public engagement with science and technology; Risk communication

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1 ▪ Introduction

Thirty years ago, when the internet became widely accessible, it was a place of huge promise and optimism. Today, however, digital spaces have become increasingly toxic, reflecting a world marked by turbulence, discord, wars, and instability. Online hate (also known as *cyberhate* or *digital hate*) has become a mainstream phenomenon. It refers to hostile or degrading online communication targeting individuals or groups based on characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or appearance [Keipi et al., 2017].

Conceptually, online hate overlaps with online harassment (i.e., cyber harassment) and online bullying (i.e., cyberbullying) as all involve acts of aggression mediated through digital technologies [Oksanen et al., 2022]. Online hate primarily concerns ideological or identity-based hostility directed at individuals or groups, often motivated by prejudice or social categorization [Hawdon et al., 2017; Kaakinen et al., 2018; Williams, 2021]. Online harassment highlights persistent, targeted, and unwanted behavior that aims to intimidate or silence a particular individual [Celuch, Oksa et al., 2023; Näsi et al., 2017]. Online bullying typically refers to repeated aggression within social relationships and has been particularly used in the context of young people in schools [Zych et al., 2019] and adults in workplaces [Farley et al., 2024; Oksanen, Oksa et al., 2020]. Distinguishing between these forms of online attacks is analytically important when examining attacks against academics, because they reflect different means and motivations by which scholars are targeted.

These overlapping concepts encompass a broad spectrum of attacks directed at individuals. Such attacks are often very serious and illegal, such as death threats [Celuch, Latikka et al., 2023; Oksanen et al., 2022]. Hateful and harassing behavior can range from written or visual insults and manipulated images and videos to identity theft and explicit threats of violence. In recent years, the perpetrators' technological arsenal has expanded significantly. The rise of *deepfake* videos and other synthetic media illustrate how evolving digital manipulation techniques may pose a major challenge for the fight against cyber harassment and cyberbullying [Alexander, 2025; Flynn et al., 2021; Romero Moreno, 2024]

This commentary examines the phenomenon from two perspectives: victims in academia in Finland and perpetrators in Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Poland. I draw on representative surveys on research and teaching staff in Finland as well as population longitudinal six-country surveys that enable analysis of perpetrators.

2 ▪ Speak the unspeakable — how hate became normalized

Harassing behavior has existed almost as long as humans have been able to communicate via computers. Kiesler et al. [1984] identified uninhibited behavior and hostile messaging in anonymous computer-mediated communication as early as the 1980s. Moreover, organized hate groups were also quick to exploit new online communication tools. For instance, White supremacist movements in the United States were among the first to adopt electronic communication networks in the 1980s. In 1983, neo-Nazi publisher George Dietz launched one of the earliest dial-up bulletin board systems, demonstrating an early use of digital platforms for extremist purposes [Levin, 2002]. Soon after the emergence of the World Wide Web, hate groups began to establish their online presence. Stormfront.org, founded in 1995, became one of the first and most influential hate sites of the Web 1.0 era [Bowman-Grieve, 2009].

The rise of social media and Web 2.0 around 2005 was a real game-changer. This meant there were new platforms that allowed users to express even the most extreme thoughts freely and to easily find other like-minded people [Oksanen, Hawdon & Räsänen, 2014; Keipi et al., 2017]. Social media networks enabled easy dissemination of thoughts, regardless of the content. The prevalence of hate on major social media platforms, such as Facebook, rose sharply [Oksanen, Hawdon, Holkeri et al., 2014], and these sites ended up normalizing online hate while showing little intention to curb it [Keipi et al., 2017]. Experimental evidence indicates that exposure to hate speech increases prejudice via desensitization [Soral et al., 2018]. In environments where online hate is highly prevalent, people tend to more easily use language and argumentation that would have been previously considered as intolerable or at least limited to less public audiences.

Societal events and actions on social media are deeply intertwined. What happens online does not occur in isolation, but rather social media mirrors and sometimes amplifies broader developments within society. For example, Kaakinen and colleagues demonstrated that in Finland, the prevalence of online hate rose significantly after terrorist attacks and war in Syria in 2015. They explained these factors by utilizing uncertainty identity theory against the backdrop of increased societal uncertainty. Subsequent studies have confirmed the associations between online hate and societal anxiety [Kaakinen et al., 2021; Oksanen, Kaakinen, Minkkinen et al., 2020]. Concerns voiced through social media have directly contributed to the rise of political populism and far-right movements across many Western countries. Moreover, direct attacks against researchers as well as political pressures on research funding have become increasingly intertwined with these far right and conservative agendas.

3 ▪ Consequences of hate

Online hate and harassment have negative impact at the societal, interpersonal, and individual levels. At the societal level, trust is an indicator of well-functioning society as lack of trust in state institutions, or other people potentially corrodes the key pillars of society [Delhey & Newton, 2005; Putnam, 2000]. Online hate corrupts this by creating distrust between societal groups and individuals [Kaakinen et al., 2018]. Even exposure to online hate is associated with lower levels of interpersonal trust [Näsi et al., 2015]. In this way, online hate and harassment directly influence interpersonal relations and how people relate to each other: They contribute to polarization, suspicion, and breakdowns of mutual respect in both public and private spheres.

At the individual level, prior research indicates that scholars experiencing cyber harassment may experience a wide range of adverse consequences, including intense negative emotions, physical symptoms of stress, sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, suicidal ideation, and long-term mental-health problems, such as anxiety and depression [Cassidy et al., 2016; Cassidy et al., 2017]. Cyber harassment can also affect professional functioning, erode self-confidence, and decrease job satisfaction [Cassidy et al., 2016; Cassidy et al., 2017; Coyne et al., 2017; Gosse et al., 2021].

Academia itself contains structural vulnerabilities that make researchers and teachers particularly susceptible to online hate. Power imbalances may emerge from academic prestige, mentorship relations, or competition for recognition and resources. These factors

combined with competitive nature of academic life can further increase tensions and lead to envy, resentment, and abuse of power both online and offline [DeSouza, 2011; Giorgi, 2012; Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Pyke, 2018].

4 ▪ Hate and harassment directed at researcher in Finland

Online harassment has emerged as a concern at universities in Finland. We collected a representative survey of university research and teaching staff in Finland during spring 2020 as part of the Hate and Public Sphere Project (PIs: Atte Oksanen & Päivi Korpisaari). Five major universities from geographically different parts of Finland were included. Our random samples included half of university research and teach staff in each university. We contacted participants by email, and the data were collected in April–June 2020. The final response rate was 50.06% (N = 2492). Nonresponse analysis indicated no major bias by age or gender. The survey asked about experiences with online harassment related to the work. Data are available at Finnish Social Science Data Archive [Oksanen et al., 2025; see also Oksanen et al., 2022].

The results revealed that 30% of respondents had experienced online harassment during the previous 6 months, measured using the 20-item Hate and Harassment at Work Scale [Oksanen et al., 2022; Oksanen et al., 2025]. Logistic regression models revealed similar prevalence across universities, but senior academics, members of minor groups, and scholars of social sciences and humanities were most strongly targeted. Visibility emerged as one of the strongest predictors of harassment victimization. Academics who made monthly media appearances or posted content on social media weekly were roughly twice as likely to be targeted as those less active online. This highlights the central role of visibility in shaping exposure to online attacks in contemporary digital media environments.

Compared with their peers, victims reported elevated levels of psychological distress (measured using 5-item Mental Health Inventory [MHI-5], see Berwick et al. [1991] and Oksanen et al. [2022]), reduced generalized trust, and diminished perceptions of social support within the workplace. Notably, when the perpetrator was a colleague from the same work community, victims experienced more severe posttraumatic stress symptoms and reported greater negative impact on their professional life.

Only a small minority of victims sought institutional or legal support. Approximately 16% reported incidents to their supervisors and just 3% to the police, often because they considered the acts “not serious enough” or doubted that reporting would lead to meaningful action. This reluctance mirrors patterns observed in international studies and underlines a persistent cultural and institutional gap in addressing digital misconduct within academia.

Although the Finnish data primarily focused on victims, some insights into offenders can also be drawn. Only approximately 18% of the perpetrators were a member of the respondent’s work community at their university. Approximately 43% of victims knew the perpetrator, 33% did not know them personally but recognized their real names, and the remaining 24% of the perpetrators used pseudonyms or were otherwise anonymous. These figures indicate that threats come both inside and outside academic communities, but it is more difficult to intervene in threats coming from outside.

Underreporting was especially concerning: only 16% of the victims reported cases to the supervisors and 3% to police. Over half (56%) of those who had been threatened with

violence considered the act to be not serious enough to report it to police. Such underreporting, especially of the more serious cases, suggests a normalization of harassment in academic circles.

5 ▪ Online aggressors across European countries

In previous findings from Finland, most online offenders were outside academia. Although European countries may differ on this respect, it is important to characterize the broader profile of online aggressors. The *Self and Technology EU-6 Surveys* have been collected in the Self & Technology Project of Emerging Technologies Lab at Tampere University, Finland (PI: Atte Oksanen). Our current data includes three waves (2022–2024) from the same participants in Finland ($N = 1,541$), France ($N = 1,561$), Germany ($N = 1,529$), Ireland ($N = 1,112$), Italy ($N = 1,530$), and Poland ($N = 1,533$). In all countries, the 2022 baseline samples (T1) were representative of the population aged 18–75 years. Response rates to second wave (2023, T2) ranged from 53% to 71% and to third wave (2024, T3) ranged from 76% to 86%. Across the three time points, the data cover 8,806 individuals and 19,147 observations.

The *Self and Technology EU-6 Surveys* include a wide range of measures on self and identity, technology use, and internet-related phenomena. For the present commentary, results are presented based on a single-item measure of online aggression: "During the past 6 months, how often have you sent messages on the internet or social media that are offending and threatening toward others?" Response options ranged from *never* (0) to *many times a day* (5). Predictors included gender, age, trust in universities, psychological distress [MHI-5 Berwick et al., 1991], loneliness [Hughes et al., 2004], involvement in online identity bubbles [IBRS-9 Kaakinen et al., 2020], and social ties to family, friends, and partner [9-items from SELSA DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993].

The rates of online offending ranged from 7% in Ireland to 10% Poland over the past 6 months. Trust in universities, measured on a 1–7 scale, was significantly highest in Finland (M = 5.07, SE = 0.02, 95% confidence interval [5.02, 5.11]), followed by Ireland (M = 4.71, SE = 0.04), Germany (M = 4.62, SE = 0.04), Italy (M = 4.35, SE = 0.04), Poland (M = 4.26, SE = 0.04), and France (M = 4.09, SE = 0.04). Trust in universities is relevant because it reflects their legitimacy and public standing in each country. Lower trust could lower the threshold on targeting university researchers.

A random-effects ordered logistic regression model examined between-person predictors of self-reported online hate perpetration across three survey waves. Men were substantially more likely to report engaging in offending behaviors than women (B = 0.99, $p < .001$). Younger respondents were more likely to offend (B = -0.04, $p < .001$). Higher psychological distress (MHI-5) was positively associated with offending (B = 0.07, $p < .001$). Feelings of loneliness significantly increased the likelihood of producing hateful content (B = 0.12, $p < .001$). Higher involvement in online bubbles (IBRS) was also associated with online offending (B = 0.05, $p < .001$). Conversely, social connectedness as measured using the SELSA scale showed a protective effect ($\beta = -0.01 > B = -0.01$, $p = .001$), implying that individuals who feel supported and embedded in social networks are less likely to participate in online hostility. Trust in universities did not have a significant effect ($p = .72$). This suggests that institutional confidence does not directly relate to individuals' engagement in

online offending. Country-level differences were modest and secondary to individual-level predictors. Using the French sample as a reference, higher levels of offending were observed in Finland, Germany, Italy, and Poland, with the highest rates in Italy and Poland.

6 ▪ Implications for academic freedom and the way forward

Today, academic ideals of open scholarship and realities of digital communication are contradictory. Researchers are expected not only to produce knowledge but also to engage actively in public discussion through traditional and social media. As a consequence, media coverage also exposes them to threats. The findings from the Finnish dataset indicate that public visibility poses the biggest risk for being targeted. This suggests that harassment is structurally linked to contemporary media environments rather than individual behavior. Such targeting has severe consequences on well-being measured in psychological distress, PTSD symptoms, and loss of trust in others.

It is crucial to characterize attacks against scholars as occupational risks and hazards. Universities must treat online harassment as a structural threat to academic work, not merely a private misfortune. In addition, our findings from Finland underline that part of the attacks originate from within academia, also including colleagues from same institution. This challenges the common tendency to frame online harassment against academics primarily as an external problem driven by anonymous actors or hostile publics. Findings underline also the need for universities to find organizational interventions. Although the Finnish data were collected during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, this timing is unlikely to substantially affect the findings. Research from Finland indicates that this period was characterized by relatively high institutional trust [Oksanen, Kaakinen, Latikka et al., 2020], and COVID-19 was not a central driver of attacks against scholars. Instead, increased societal polarization has become more pronounced in the years following the pandemic.

The results from the European data indicated that male gender, psychological distress, loneliness, and high online activity are key correlates of online hate perpetration. Findings were consistent and suggest that the psychosocial correlates of online hate are largely shared across European contexts. Differences in rates of online offending were modest, but not surprising considering the prior cross-national research [Hawdon et al., 2017]. These findings highlight the psychosocial roots of digital hate production: emotional vulnerability and social disconnection may fuel hostile online behaviors, whereas strong social bonds and empathetic orientations mitigate them. These results align with those of previous studies on online aggressors and trolls, which emphasize that such individuals often exhibit poor psychological adjustment [Buckels et al., 2014; Kjærvik & Bushman, 2021; Zych et al., 2021] Although concern over well-being of online aggressors is warranted, this does not excuse their behavior. The roots of the problem are embedded in open, largely unmoderated online environments that fail to safeguard individuals from targeted attacks.

Universities and researchers thus face the challenge of balancing openness with protection. Most harassment originates outside the workplace, yet the responsibility for addressing its consequences often falls within university walls. The solution cannot be limited to withdrawing from media or social platforms. Researchers must learn to protect themselves and be selective about their public visibility. At the age of social media, everything tends to get personalized and individuals are placed at the center of attention. Yet this same

personalization also fuels hostility by making researchers visible targets. The focus in science should shift from individual researchers to the scientific process, methods, and results. Moreover, the logic of media and particularly social media is short-term and very far-away from long and persistent academic work, whose true value often emerges only after years.

Unfortunately, hateful and harassing behaviors have increased over the years and have become increasingly normalized online [Keipi et al., 2017; Oksanen et al., 2024; Williams, 2021]. There are also wider discussions about the toxicity of online contents [Keipi et al., 2017] and the enshittification or decay of internet platforms that is expected to accelerate with advances in AI technologies [Simpson & Semaan, 2025]. Although AI provides promise, it also carries huge risks by providing easy-to-use tools for online aggressors, stalkers, and trolls to manipulate content and disseminate it widely. A further and perhaps the most dangerous factor is the rise of political polarization and far right and extremist views, often supported by those hostile to academia. Academic freedom is at stake currently but unfortunately so are also democratic values themselves.

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