

## Editorial

### *Harassment as Occupational Hazard*

After the conclusion of the federal election in September, Maxime Bernier, the leader of the People's Party of Canada, was asked by several journalists about the party's connections to the alt-right in Canada. Bernier's response was to dox the journalists by taking to Twitter to encourage his supporters to target them. I suppose this was as illuminating an answer to their queries as any of his subsequent evasions.

The immediate consequences of Bernier's use of social media to co-ordinate an attack are well known: the journalists named in the message were harassed and Twitter suspended Bernier's account until the tweet was removed. Bernier described the affair as a game he was willing to play, but there were more enduring consequences. In the weeks that followed, many more journalists were threatened with violence, sexual assault, and death, and these harms often targeted racialized and women journalists (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2021). This pattern of harassment is hardly new, but a national leader inciting harm and receiving nothing more than a Twitter time out invites more of the same. While there have been a few notable developments within the journalism industry to combat online harassment—Defector Media and other workplaces have, for example, incorporated digital security expertise and protective policies—it is still not widely recognized as an occupational hazard.

Journalists are not the only professionals being harassed for questioning alt-rights and the wider patterns of racism, white supremacy, and paranoid nationalism that sustain them. Scholars are also threatened with hate and harassment for researching, teaching, and engaging publicly with such questions. It is time to acknowledge that these harms reflect an occupational hazard in our field too. Of course, it has long been apparent for many scholars—particularly for women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ colleagues—that identity alone can invite hostile, hateful harassment. And anyone engaging directly with racism, settler colonialism, anti-Blackness, anti-Semitism, misogyny, ableism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia in Canada is vulnerable to attack. Nothing is gained by overlooking history or pretending the present situation is without precedent. Yet, the use of networked social media that is typified by alt-right harassment presents new challenges.

It is important to understand these challenges and why they have emerged. The *Canadian Journal of Communication's* (CJC) new section, "The Alt-Rights in Canada," is an effort to address these questions. The initial call for research on this subject with the guest editors of this issue was conventional: develop a public call for papers, peer review the manuscripts, prepare to publish and publicize the results. Yet, given wide interest among scholars in the field, the need for timely interventions, and the volatile nature of the subject matter, the CJC and the guest editors decided to expand the project and publish a series of articles grouped into special sections. We expect to publish 15 timely articles on the subject over the next year. We hope this evolving knowledge of alt-rights in their mediated and communicative dimensions will increase understanding, generate questions, and inform efforts to counter the harmful techniques that alt-rights often use to draw attention and distribute hate. As Ganaele Langlois, Greg Elmer, Fenwick McKelvey, and Natalie Coulter (2021) emphasize, one must situate alt-rights with respect to their political imaginary, rhetorical style, media logic, network co-ordination, logistical strategy, white supremacist origins, and political economy if one hopes to address more topical questions of disinformation, polarization, conspiracy, and extremism. Our field is starting to respond well to this challenge. I especially admire the editors for the care they took in soliciting and working with contributors; the research collectives that have come together in support of each other (at York University, University X, Concordia University, Carleton University, Ontario Tech University, Simon Fraser University, and elsewhere); and the authors, peer reviewers, and people at the CJC that made this project possible.

It is important to understand the content in this issue; it is more urgent to recognize the risks to researchers, their colleagues, and those around them when doing such work and publicizing the results. At present, the harassment of scholars is completely overlooked as an occupational hazard, despite constant encouragement by our institutions to engage publicly, to be impactful in our communities, and to increase our visibility on social media. While these encouragements might sound like common sense obligations for publicly funded scholarship, our universities have internalized the incentives of platform industries to strategically gain attention, amplify influence, build reputation, and generate value from the visibility of faculty. In doing so, they have invested in public relations training, contributed funding and staff time, and developed incentives and awards for scholars to become more skilled and more valuable to these platforms. Yet, as these encouragements become normative expectations that reframe our relationship to publics, mass audiences, and each other, they proliferate occupational risks that require institutional acknowledgement, management, and support. It is not acceptable to encourage people in tasks that carry significant risks without informing them of the hazards and making support available when harm is experienced.

Alt-rights leverage these shifting norms, platform strategies, and occupational hazards to harass and harm in an especially visible and intense way. It is important that we do not trivialize such harassment because it happens online or seems like a distraction from more important problems. It is important not to offer armchair philosophies about harassment (however empathetic) in place of mental health support, networked media expertise, and lived experiences. It is important not to ask colleagues to avoid worrying so much or to recommend they simply vacate a platform (Hess, 2017; Mattheis & Kingdon, 2021). When we are harassed online, we often feel bad that we have let these harms affect us, and no one needs such feelings reinforced in the workplace (Marwick, 2021). It is important to encourage openness about the subject in our workplaces; it is also important to know that the harms of hate and harassment are not limited to the moment of reception but often experienced again in requests to document and share them, especially in contexts devoid of understanding, support, or appropriate actions. It is important to realize that systemic racism shapes the distribution of these harms, which should be recognized as institutions encourage faculty, often newly hired professors, to become more visible or outspoken representatives of a department, field, or institution. Journalistic reporting in parts of Canada has diversified more quickly than most of our communication and media faculties, and the surge in harassment that has attended even modest increases in racialized, Indigenous, and women journalists is telling us to develop anticipatory policies and protections along with the changing composition of the professoriate.

Harassment is not only a result of alt-right coalitions directing their followers on Twitter or other social platforms; the wider cultural and institutional patterns through which people are devalued and their work delegitimated informs who is targeted, how, and with what consequences. Harassment is embedded within these broader patterns of marginalization, racism, and discrimination, and its networked circulation is not separable from embodied or physical manifestations. Bernier's bad faith was most evident when he distanced himself from the physical intimidation carried out by his supporters during the election campaign, but not once from the threats of sexual assault, violence, and death that his doxing encourages. It is convenient to pretend the two kinds of harassment are categorically different and unrelated, which can contort us into efforts to show how specific tweets result in physical violence or to focus primarily on the most spectacular and violent instances.

We should not accept this way of thinking about harassment or the "game" metaphor that harassers use to describe their online and networked actions. Instead, we need to start with institutional awareness that these online harms are hazards that can have damaging emotional and mental health effects, including anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD), and that expertise and institutional supports are needed to ad-

dress them (Mattheis & Kingdon, 2021). There is good reason to believe those telling us that harassment is not less damaging when transmitted digitally instead of verbally; there is good reason to listen to those saying that harms conveyed online are real and are experienced as indistinguishable from harassment that comes through other media. The fact that harassment does not always conform to a one-to-one or dyadic relationship—as the terms of service contracts of many platforms presume—but is distributed by a network co-ordination of threats that are amplified and reinforced at scale is cause for rethinking harassment, not for assuming online forms of it are less serious or harmful than others (Marwick, 2021). There is, in short, good reason to recognize online harassment as an occupational hazard and to develop an approach that is consistent with this understanding.

The CJC has developed a brief document, “Online Safety and Security Considerations,” that is intended to inform scholars about the risks of harassment to themselves, their research collectives, and those close to them. It adapts some of the helpful advice from Data & Society (2016; see also Marwick, Blackwell, & Lo, 2016) to our understanding of harassment in Canadian university contexts and discusses how scholars might protect themselves and seek help from experts, colleagues, departments, and university administration. It was circulated to the authors of the articles in this issue and will be made available to scholars whose work is under review with the journal. We also hope subscribers and friends of the journal will consult it and use it to help develop conversations and supports in their workplaces; ideally, these efforts might also help faculty to support students, post-docs, and contract instructors in navigating these hazards even when one’s own research does not include such risks. It is a provisional document and a first step only, one developed through the remarkable generosity of scholars with knowledge of the harm that harassment carries, especially when institutional support is disorganized, disinterested, or absent. It is important that these risks are considered alongside the ubiquitous encouragement and training we receive to engage publicly, both with communities and through social media (Ketchum, 2020). It is also important that our training in methodologies, of research assistants (RAs), and with ethics protocols become attuned to these concerns and expand our sense of who might be affected (Rambukkana, 2019). It is most important that our workplaces develop clear guidance and supportive policies that recognize online and networked harassment as a legitimate occupational hazard (Mattheis & Kingdon, 2021).

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Chris Russill, *Carleton University*