



# ONLINE HARASSMENT – AND HOW TO COMBAT IT



ONLINE TRAINING ON DIGITAL  
COMPETENCES AND  
CRITICAL THINKING



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# Online harassment – and how to combat it

On Wednesday 19th May the seminar topic in Digital Competences and Critical Thinking series was Online harassment – and how to combat it.

The lecturer speaking about the topic was Johanna Vehkoo, a Finnish freelance journalist and author of several books about journalism and internet. Vehkoo has specialised in misinformation, fact-checking, and online hate.

In her lecture, Vehkoo talked about what online harassment is and who is being targeted with it. She also talked about the perpetrators' tactics and how to recognise them.

The forms of internet harassment vary from private bullying to public hate speech campaigns, and the perpetrator may be acting either anonymously or with his own face. In her lecture Vehkoo concentrated mostly in harassment performed by anonymous sources either in private channels or on social media platforms.

## **About the phenomenon in general:**

Women are more likely to be harassed online than men. Harassment targeted to women is also more sexually loaded.

Internet trolls and haters are networked. Many of them are using multiple accounts. Thus, the total amount of harassment comes from few accounts.

Harassment aims at silencing. Harassment is not targeted so much to individuals as such but individuals representing groups, like women, minorities, or activists. Politically saying it is targeted to the oppressed groups.

Anybody can become a target for online harassment. Mostly the harassment is only short term, but some are harassed long term.

## **The tactics the harassers commonly use:**

- Black PR: Spreading rumours and false information about the target in order to harm reputation.
- Doxxing: Disseminating personal information about the target.
- Serial complaints: Official channels used to make complaints and reports about the target, for example to employer.
- Troll calls: Calling harassing phone calls.
- Filming and streaming video: Harassers show up and film the target with mobile phones, maybe streaming the content to internet.
- Dogwhistling: Using coded or suggestive language inciting supporters to attack the target.
- Image misrepresentation: Using photos to harass and abuse the target, includes also revenge porn and deepfakes.

## **The information used in harassing can be classified into three categories:**

- Misinformation: False information spread without intention to mislead.
- Disinformation: False information spread in order to make harm.
- Malinformation: True information spread in order to make harm.

## How to react against harassment in internet:

- Turn off notifications, choose when you react
- Lock troll accounts
- Save screen shots, pages, files, metadata is important in possible investigation
- If harassment is connected to work the workplace should give help to employee, also unions or freedom of speech associations can give help
- Ask help from a colleague or expert
- Ask a trusted person take care of your social media accounts for a while

## Tips to improve technical security:

- Make home address secret.
- Check out what information internet provides about you and seek to remove excessive information.
- Use encrypted messaging.
- Use secure passwords.
- Store your passwords in a store software.
- Use two factor authentication in your social media accounts.
- Check out your privacy settings and third-party apps in your social media accounts.
- Make sure your communication lines are safe, use VPN which masks your location.
- Use Tor Browser.

## Coping with stress:

Harassment always causes stress. The stress may lead to post traumatic stress disorder and psychic problems. Talk to friends, peers and experts. It is recognized that peer-to-peer support is very effective in coping with anxieties caused by harassment.

If you become harassed, try to distance your personality from the object of harassment. It is not you individually that is harassed, but something you represent (womanhood, minority, activism).

## What you can do to protect others:

Victims should be defended. Many times victims feel that they are alone. Do not treat harassment with indifference.

Help in gathering information and doing a criminal complaint.

Harassers react to their actions being addressed withdrawing from harassing. Particularly effective is if the intervener is from their own reference group, like white male.

## Additional resources:

- Toolkit for dealing with hate campaigns. A guide by Johanna Vehkoo (also available in Spanish):  
<https://dartcenter.org/resources/dealing-hate-campaigns-toolkit-journalists>
- Online harassment field manual (PEN America):  
<https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/>
- Digital safety guide:  
<https://cpj.org/2020/05/digital-safety-protecting-against-targeted-online-attacks/>
- Video guides about digital security: <https://www.equalitylabs.org/resources-1>
- Expert: Online Abuse of Women Journalists Has Already Gone Too far (International Press Institute): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HizIRU6TJEU>