



HOW-TO DEAL WITH HARASSMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA - PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

Social media can be an effective means to share your message and stories beyond your immediate network, access information, and broadly connect with others who have an interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

When used well, it can open up networks of collaborators, provide exciting opportunities, help you spread information about your work, and contribute to meaningful change.

However, it can also go awry. We always encourage use of social media with the intention of having meaningful and respectful dialogue, but as with any social environment, this doesn't always go to plan. This how-to will give you some practical tips for dealing with criticism, harassment, and ['trolling'](#) while using social media platforms.

TROLLING

Trolling is defined as creating discord on the Internet by starting quarrels or upsetting people by posting inflammatory or off-topic messages in an online community. Basically, a social media troll is someone who purposely says something controversial in order to get a rise out of other users. A troll aims to inflict pain, ridicule, or humiliate a targeted person.

Often, the person will have one aim – to get a response. With trolling, there is no opportunity to change minds or take part in productive dialogue. If you recognise something as trolling, quickly disengage.

To put the actual risk of trolling into context, it may be useful to know that of the 2018 cohort of Superstars of STEM (who are trained and encouraged to grow their profile through social media), 26.67% experienced trolling online, 73.33% did not.

If you wish to discuss issues around trolling please remember you can contact the STA team at any point for advice; email us at info@sta.org.au.

TIPS FOR DEALING WITH TROLLS

1. Know that you may encounter trolling/cyberhate and keep in mind that it isn't personal (although it may feel deeply personal)

2. Reach out to other members of your community

Just as in real life, it's wise to proactively build a supportive and friendly online community, where you feel safe to debrief with during trying times and to also give back when others experience the same. A peer support network can provide a lot of useful practical tools for dealing with specific individuals or a group of individuals. For example, if someone has managed to diffuse a troll successfully, it's valuable information they can share with the community so others have a head-start in dealing with that individual.

3. Ignore trolls & don't be baited

If you can't ignore, don't feed them either. If they're trying to be funny, your response could fuel their pending punchline. No response, no joke. If you must respond, give yourself time to calm down, test your proposed response with a trusted colleague or friend, and always keep it professional rather than personal.

4. Diffuse with humour

Done well, humour can humanise and diffuse the situation. This however can be a fight fire with fire approach and should be used with a high degree of caution. We don't recommend it.

6. Block or ban them

Blocking/banning is sometimes seen as the last resort, but in some cases where you can perceive the situation escalating very quickly, or for repeat offenders who are clearly out to get a rise, it is absolutely appropriate.

RETALIATION IS NOT THE ANSWER

People who harass through social media are often looking for a reaction, so don't give in to their desire by retaliating or engaging in what is already a negative conversation. The adage to 'kill them with kindness' is also unlikely to be an effective response to bullies and trolls. Not only is it not effective, the resulting toll on your mental wellbeing is not worth the risk of further harassment.

[Hollaback.org](https://www.hollaback.org/) has a wonderfully illustrated Dos and Don'ts of Counterspeech, which will give you some guiding principles to help respond without making the situation worse.

DON'T HIDE, AND DOCUMENT

If you are being targeted through social media, don't hide the fact that someone is harassing you from your followers, colleagues or friends. The harasser will try to isolate you, so telling people works against this.

Stanford-Cornell researchers say that taking extreme action against small infractions can heighten antisocial behaviour. They also found that if two users wrote posts of similar quality, and one user's post got deleted "unfairly," that user would be more likely to write something worse in the future. However, you can "remove" or "block" the ability to comment on platforms such as Facebook, which removes an avenue from the troll to engage with you and your followers.

By not hiding, you may find others who are being harassed by the same user or through the same techniques, and you may find useful advice and support comes your way. The #MeToo movement is a good example of social media's power for good, as it helped countless victims call out their harassers and unite across the world.

It's wise to screenshot and save any communication as evidence, as it may prove valuable for future reference if the harassment escalates.

BLOCKING

It's very easy to block individual users on any social platform, however if you are being harassed by a user and their followers, consider blocking the user and their followers in one motion with apps like [Twitter Block Chain](#) available for browsers like [Chrome](#) and [Firefox](#). The extension does not block users you are following, and can help you tackle coordinated harassment.

Twitter also has its own [guide](#) for using block options, as does [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#).

SECURE YOUR ACCOUNT(S)

If you are being harassed for a prolonged period, it is suggested that you ensure your account(s) are secure from potentially being hacked, as a lot of harassers are very tech savvy. If you take the following steps it will make your account(s) more secure:

- Add/setup two factor authentication (such as a two-step login using your mobile)
- Update your password to be at least 8 characters in length with numbers, upper & lowercase letters and special characters if permitted
- Control who follows you by making your account private, allowing you to control potential followers

INVOLVE THE AUTHORITIES

No one has the right to intimidate another individual, either through social media or in person. If you feel that you are in danger, please contact your local authorities and report the harassment to Police.

Remember harassment should never be tolerated or considered a normal part of engaging with any social media platform, and there is a lot you can do to take control.

WHEN IS IT CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM?

On social media, you can also encounter people who question or critique your ideas, statements or work in a constructive way. If presented productively, this can actually be a real benefit of social media, as you are able to draw feedback and suggestions from a diverse and varied group of people.

The best way to determine whether something is constructive criticism rather than harassment or trolling is to ask three simple questions:

- **What is being criticised?**
If your idea is the subject of the criticism or comment, then the intent is likely to be constructive. If an individual is being attacked, then it is moving into the realm of trolling and harassment.
- **What is the goal?**
Is the person trying to build on your idea, or are they trying to tear it down? If they are working towards a shared understanding, then they are likely trying to be constructive. If they are trying to discredit you without considered, evidence based feedback, they are trolling.
- **Where are the facts?**
If the person is backing up their claims with facts or evidence, be sure to consider their opinion. If they provide an opportunity to understand their perspective and how they formed it, you will be contributing to a positive online culture by respectfully exploring the ideas they are presenting.

ULTIMATELY, IT'S RELATIVELY OBVIOUS WHEN SOMEONE IS TROLLING – TRUST YOUR GUT INSTINCT. ALSO REMEMBER THAT CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM CAN STILL BE RESPONDED TO, SO IF YOU REPLY DO IT IN A WAY THAT IS TRANSPARENT, OPEN AND IN THE SPIRIT OF CONSTRUCTIVE DISCUSSION.

IF AT ANY TIME THERE IS SWEARING, BELITTLING, EXCESSIVE NEGATIVITY OR DISMISSIVE BEHAVIOUR, ITS BEST TO WALK AWAY. DON'T BUY INTO IT, AS IT'S EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY TO BUILD A POSITIVE CULTURE ONLINE.

Additional resources and references:

WESNET - [Women's Technology Safety & Privacy Toolkit](#)

Stay Smart Online - <https://www.staysmartonline.gov.au/>

VICE (US) - [Expert Advice on How to Deal with Online Harassment](#)

DVRCV - [Cyber stalking & harassment](#)

Australian Human Rights Commission - [Cyberbullying](#)

McAfee - [Social Media Harassment is a real threat](#)

Inside Higher Ed - [Social Media as a Weapon to Harass Women Academics](#)

Huffington Post (Canada) - [Killing An Internet Troll With Kindness Isn't Always Worth The Risk](#)

WOULD YOU LIKE MORE ASSISTANCE WITH THIS TOPIC OR ANY OTHER TOPICS IN OUR 'HOW TO' SERIES?

IF SO, PLEASE REACH OUT AND WE WILL PUT YOU IN TOUCH WITH THE RELEVANT STA TEAM MEMBER.

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