

A New Reality?

The FAR RIGHT'S USE of CYBERHARASSMENT AGAINST ACADEMICS

BY JOSHUA A. CUEVAS

Online attacks on faculty members are increasingly common, with right-wing bloggers targeting professors as part of a cultural war on what they perceive as the left-wing, intellectual elite.

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A 2017 Pew poll regarding Americans' views on higher education, specifically those of Republicans, should alarm educators and, indeed, all citizens. Pew found that nearly 60 percent of Republicans currently believe that colleges and universities are having a negative effect on the country. One would expect that most parents would want their children to complete some form of postsecondary education, if only out of concern for their future earning potential. But among many on the right there is a palpable hostility toward the basic concept of higher education, as if college attendance made one part of a liberal conspiracy, and professors have come to be viewed as the embodiment of what many resent in American culture: political correctness, diversity,



willingness to look to science for answers, secularism, feminism, intellectualism, socialism, and a host of other “isms.”

This disdain toward academia can be attributed, in part, to the dissonance between certain ideologies and information derived from academic research in areas such as climate change, evolution, and gun violence. The elitism that some in the profession may project when trying to convince others that we are “right” exacerbates the friction, and those of us in higher education increasingly find ourselves the target of hostilities.

THE FIRST WAVE OF ATTACKS

The vitriol of the 2016 presidential campaign became personal for me shortly after the election, when I joined a conversation on social media about an article I had read. The article noted that approximately 47 percent of eligible voters did not vote in 2016 and that Donald Trump won with the support of only 25 percent of the voting public, while Hillary Clinton won the support of a slightly larger share. As a quantitative researcher in the social sciences, I am fascinated by these types of statistics.

The conversation below the article predictably turned to the merits of the Electoral College compared with the popular vote. I noticed a surprising number of what seemed to be hostile right-wing commenters. My normal approach in such a situation is simply to block commenters who introduce themselves into the conversation with insults, cursing, and ad hominem attacks. In this instance, one individual, whom I will refer to as the OP, attempted to lay out an unconvincing argument in comments interspersed with curses and insults directed at me. I dismissed the comments; he responded with vitriol. I let him know that I thought his attack on me reflected poor character and blocked him, soon removing myself from the conversation.

Shortly afterward, I received a personal message from the OP, who had now taken on a different identity, as a young female college student. He indicated that he had taken his grievances about me to an anonymous forum and closed with the threat, “This is going to be bad for you.” People with whom I had never had previous contact began to send me messages. One of the first said, “You’re a nigger.”

Another called me a “faggott” [*sic*]. One attacked my preteen daughter as illegitimate. Several other individuals, including a person who identified himself on his personal page as being employed as a data scientist at Facebook, used the phrase, “You must go back.” I did not initially understand what he meant by this but quickly came to realize that he was implying that, because I am Hispanic, I should be deported.

I did not respond, but I did examine each person’s page for patterns and commonalities. Some of the attacks came from dummy accounts, false profiles likely set up specifically for this type of situation—to enable anonymous attacks without the risk of exposure or retribution. Of the profiles that appeared to be real, most of them “liked,” or were part of, pro-Trump groups, and most were followers of former *Breitbart* editor Milo Yiannopoulos.

A link to my Rate My Professors page made it clear that their attacks were expanding. Apparently someone had Googled my name and discovered that I was a professor; the open nature of Rate My Professors provided an opportunity for more attacks. Soon, sixty new “reviews” of my teaching, all uniformly vulgar, appeared. Some referred to bestiality; one complained about my supposed use of “Mein Kamp” [*sic*] in the classroom.

Similarly profane and racially motivated messages appeared in my university email. One was formatted like a student inquiry, asking whether one of my courses was a prerequisite to a course titled JEW51488; another was just a string of profanity.

A DARK CORNER OF THE INTERNET

Then I received a message from an actual student, who contacted me after stumbling across the source of the spam and abuse I had been receiving. He provided links to threads on a website that is known to be a cesspool of white supremacist activity and suggested that I make screenshots to document the discussion there.

The messages I had received seemed tepid in comparison with these threads. Protected by anonymity, the participants felt no need to conceal their bigotry.

The OP had taken one of my comments from the original article on the election and had posted it in one thread. He fabricated other comments and attributed them to me. The OP knew the kinds of information that would agitate visitors to the site—mention of my Hispanic background, reference to my liberal leanings, threats (supposedly from me) to shut down their website, and so on. The posters were unaware that I had written almost none of the statements the OP had posted. The depravity of their comments would have been unacceptable in any

civilized environment. One commenter used an avatar that displayed an image of Hitler superimposed across a flag with a swastika.

Much of what was posted initially revolved around my Hispanic origins. Commenters suggested that I needed to be deported and called me a “spic.” As a liberal-leaning Hispanic professor, I was a perfect target for white supremacists.

Their plans became darker and more elaborate. One commenter suggested that their remote attacks on me be expanded to include my family. Another suggested that they take images they had found of my wife and Photoshop them in profane ways. They began to draft letters to send to administrators at my university and provided suggestions for editing to incriminate me. One commenter suggested they alter a screenshot they had created to make it appear as though I had used the term *nigger*. Another suggested that they accuse me of anti-Semitism. Their stated goal was to see that I was fired. This, apparently, was the type of opportunity they relished: find a person to harass, maybe by drawing him or her into a political argument, locate any information they could find online, and then coordinate attacks in an attempt to damage the person as much as possible.

The scheme became more sophisticated as they began to sift through my CV. One commenter suggested that someone contact journals in which I publish, identify himself as one of my graduate students, and claim that I had threatened him and forced him to fabricate data for a research study. Another posted the titles of several journals and email addresses of the publishers. (They were not quite sophisticated enough to realize that the work I’d published with them had been systematic review articles, not empirical studies, and thus the editors would immediately know that claims about data collection were false.)

I sent a message to my deans, letting them know that I was under attack by a network of white supremacists. The next morning, I printed out the screenshots I had taken—of the racist messages, the emails to my university account, and the long threads where the plot was hatched. As I did so, the white supremacists’ plan began to play out. An anonymous message was sent to seventy-seven faculty members in my college, supposedly from a student, accusing me of spreading anti-Semitic views in class. Similar messages went up on the university Twitter account and Facebook page.

I met with university administrators and information technology personnel and showed them my documentation; they were taken aback by both the malicious nature of the attack and the transparency

of the plan. They suggested I file criminal charges and report the incident as a hate crime, which I did. My documentation made its way to different levels of the university just as further anonymous messages arrived, accusing me of verbally abusing a student.

The exact wording of each message sent to the university could be found in those threads—the same messages had been posted and edited by the anonymous attackers the night before. The sources were found to have been fake Facebook and email accounts.

By the next day, the attack had deteriorated into malicious spam. Messages went out en masse to various email addresses and public accounts, but it was not difficult to identify them as fraudulent. The combination of racist personal messages, vulgar Rate My Professors comments, anonymous messages from fake accounts, and publicly available documentation of the plan being hatched in real time made the intentions of those involved blatantly clear. The attacks served only to convince administrators of the depravity of those who launched them.

By the next day, my Rate My Professors page had been cleaned up, with only legitimate student ratings appearing. New fabricated ratings would show up sporadically afterward, only to be removed within hours. I discussed the possibility of deactivating my Facebook page with administrators, but I concluded that those involved in the harassment would only feel emboldened if they saw that my page was no longer active. I did not want to give the impression that their bullying was working. After several days, the messages stopped, and I went about my business for the semester.

A SECOND WAVE OF ATTACKS

One Sunday about five months later, I came in from mowing the lawn and answered a call from my department head. She politely asked me if I had sent out a final exam assignment to my students by email. I said that I had not done so, and she said that she had gotten a strange message and thought it might be related to the previous attacks.

Apparently, someone had created a screenshot of an email that was meant to look like it came from me and began circulating it to students. The message described an assignment to write an essay criticizing President Trump; it warned Republicans that they would be punished for not reflecting “my” views.

Anyone who knows me or knows the classes I teach would have immediately seen that the message was a hoax. I don’t assign subjective essays as finals, and I definitely don’t send assignments out by email. My courses don’t touch on any subjects close to what the “assignment” entailed.

University administrators can see all incoming and outgoing email, and they quickly determined that the message did not come from me, did not go to any of my students, and entered the email system as a fake screenshot sent from a nonuniversity IP address. The email service in the screenshot was also not the one used by the university. In short, there was never any legitimate question about whether the message originated from me.

Yet I began to receive a new wave of messages—a flood of vitriolic emails came to my university account, many of them racist in nature, attacking my wife, my daughter, and me. Another anonymous thread on the original white supremacist website contained more fabricated screenshots purporting to be from me. The person perpetrating the hoax pretended to be one of my students and said he was a Trump supporter who was fearful about retaliation if he didn’t write the essay condemning the president. Visitors to the site were outraged and called for harassment and even violence against me.

But this time the scope of the attacks was wider. The screenshot was sent to the College Republicans, who decided to call a campus meeting (until they found out they’d been tricked). I received an angry voicemail message from the father of one of them. Other professors received the screenshots and bogus complaints from the perpetrators. I began to receive email messages from students, parents, and alumni, almost universally hostile. Interspersed with these were more hoax messages from the perpetrators. Everyone in my department knew that the messages were part of the hoax. The emails, supposedly sent by students and their parents, described an assignment that did not exist and a classroom environment that bore no relationship to reality—they referred to a class of twenty-five students, most of whom were minorities, when in fact during that particular semester almost every student in every one of my courses was white, and the class that was supposed to have received the assignment was actually a field placement internship with only four students and no final exam. These fake messages followed the same patterns, with the same types of grammatical errors as the screenshots that were supposedly from me.

It was disappointing to see how easily so many people were duped. I was not surprised that visitors to the white supremacist website had fallen prey to the fabrications of one of their own, but I would have hoped that others would have had the evaluative skills to see through this transparent ruse.

I was also surprised to see those at high levels pulled into the fray. A state senator, John Albers, contacted me, and my representative in the US House,

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Doug Collins, lodged an inquiry with the university. These politicians may have no ties to the white supremacists or hate groups behind the attacks, but their lack of judgment was astonishing. It does not instill confidence when elected officials are so easily manipulated to work on behalf of hate groups.

The faculty and administrators, by contrast, were uniformly supportive. University administrators did not support me out of fear of legal reprisal; they simply responded with good judgment and arrived at reasonable conclusions. They expressed concern over whether I felt safe and voiced regret that I had to experience such an attack.

I would have preferred that they be more assertive, however. Administrators issued denials to students and parents. They informed those who inquired that the messages in question did not originate from me. But they should have clearly stated that the messages were a hoax perpetrated by white supremacists. People who might not believe a straight denial will generally feel embarrassed when they realize they have been duped. Administrators could have helped limit future attacks by stating that those who spread misinformation could be committing slander. There should also be repercussions for students who harass professors. Yet in my case, there were not.

As for the perpetrators, this was exactly the kind of scenario they relish—the chance to use their collective “power” to harass someone in a public position who belongs to a minority group.

CONFRONTING THE THREAT

Approximately three months after the second attack, the white nationalist march took place in Charlottesville, Virginia. Of course, I was saddened by the march and the violence that occurred. I was not shocked, however, to find that the march was closely tied to the website that had hatched the attacks against me.

As the events in Charlottesville have made evident, white supremacists are beginning to organize in person and take part in actual violence. Several of the marchers said that they relished the experience of meeting other white supremacists face to face. Online harassment is a serious problem, but public rallies now pose a physical threat.

I would not be surprised if white supremacists launch another round of attacks in response to the publication of this article. But I am not in hiding. My attackers are the ones in hiding, cowering under the cloak of anonymity, fearful that their identities might be discovered—as they should be. But they are becoming less reclusive, desiring to maintain personal anonymity while attempting to assert their collective presence more publicly.

Academia has been too timid in countering such movements. We should not have to speak in hushed tones when we condemn hate groups. We should not have to be apprehensive when we promote democratic ideals and equality.

It is essential, particularly over the next three years, that we confront the animosity and bigotry of society's underbelly. Those in academia present an easy target—we are in public positions, open to scrutiny, and loathed by many.

As a tenured professor, I am lucky enough to have been in a position to rebut these hate crimes and to tell my story here. Unfortunately, there are millions more, in academia and elsewhere, who do not have that advantage. We must build unity with all of those whose human rights are infringed.

I did not expect the country to be in such a perilous position in 2018. I have newfound concerns about the America in which my daughter and all other children will grow up. Now is not the time to shrink from confronting this threat. ■