

Recent Studies in Social Behavior Provide Hints on How to Curtail Online Harassment

In the News

"I'll always remember how traumatic it was to suddenly be hated by strangers," tweeted historian Greg Jenner about his experience with online harassment. "Regardless of morality -- I may have been wrong or right in my opinion -- I was amazed (later, when I recovered) at how psychologically destabilizing it was to me."

According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, two of three Americans say they have witnessed others being harassed on the Internet. Forty percent of American adults have personally experienced abuse online, with women, minorities and young people disproportionately targeted.

Harassment causes mental or emotional stress, anxiety, insecurity about personal safety (or the safety of those they love), and isolation or withdrawal from groups where victims no longer feel welcome or safe. Some users become reluctant to post something for fear of criticism or retaliation, or drop out of a group or social media platform altogether because of hurtful behavior they have witnessed against others.

Antisocial online behavior includes name-calling, sexual harassment, cyberstalking, threats of physical and sexual violence, doxing (posting personal information about someone online without permission), defaming or slandering a person by posting untrue information about the target's character or reputation, and using racial slurs or sexist language.

Ordinary people may engage in antisocial behavior online for a variety of reasons. People are more likely to behave badly online if they are already in a bad mood, if they post late at night when they are tired, if they post on a Monday rather than on a Friday, and if they witness others behaving badly first.

Most people agree that online platforms have some obligation to protect users from harassment, but not everyone agrees with how that should be accomplished, given the high value we assign to freedom of expression in our society.

Molly Crockett, who studies moral decision-making in society at Molly Crockett's Psychology Lab, says we've created "an ecosystem that selects for the most outrageous content." Social media platforms generally promote

extreme or controversial content that attracts more user involvement because it is better for business. But such business models can lead to greater strife, conflict and unkindness, and a decline in collaboration, cooperation and common courtesy.

"I think it's worth having a conversation as a society as to whether we want our morality to be under the control of algorithms whose purpose is to make money for giant tech companies," Crockett says.

Social media companies have tremendous power to stir up strife and provoke abuse, or to encourage cooperation and positive online experiences. To accomplish the latter, they need to evaluate how they design their algorithms for the common good rather than strictly for profit.

Social media or online game platforms can also introduce features in which negative behaviors are punished by other players or incorporate social rewards for good behavior, incentivizing participants to behave more cooperatively and courteously.

One experiment used bots that responded to racist tweets with a message designed to encourage greater empathy, such as: "Hey man, just remember that there are real people who are hurt when you harass them with that kind of language." The level of racist tweets was reduced almost to nothing for weeks after such challenges to racist tweets appeared.

Users of online services don't have to wait for social media giants to do all the heavy lifting, however. Nicholas Christakis, director of Yale's Human Nature Lab, says people can sometimes use their influence to turn a nonsupportive culture into a supportive community.

Three in ten Americans say they have intervened in some way after witnessing abusive behavior directed toward others online. While those who speak up for those who are being abused may risk being attacked themselves, those who intervene may experience appreciation from others and a rise in their personal reputation and ability to influence the behavior of others.

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 12:16, 18

*Fools show their anger at once,
but the prudent ignore an insult. ...*

*Rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (For context, read 12:15-19.)*

Proverbs 15:28

*The mind of the righteous ponders how to answer,
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil. (No context needed.)*

Researchers have discovered that when social media platforms introduce a time delay before participants can comment on controversial posts, users are less likely to post negative, "knee-jerk" responses. A carpenter knows it is wise to "measure twice before cutting once" since impatience can ruin a project.

Questions: Think of a time when you failed to "ponder how to answer" and said or posted the first thing that popped into your head, without regard to how your words might affect someone else. How did your words affect others, and your relationship with others?

Think of a time when you paused to consider carefully whether and how to respond to something inflammatory online. Did you change your mind about whether to comment, what to say, or how to say it as a result of delaying your response? If so, how did delaying your response impact any exchange you had with others?

James 3:12

Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. (For context, read 3:8-12.)

James writes that in the agricultural world, if we want olives, we don't plant figs, and if we want figs, we don't plant a grapevine. James applies this idea to how we use words to bless or curse people. Our mouths produce a crop of words that match the seeds we have sown in our hearts. If we sow seeds of bitterness, hatred and anger in our hearts, our words will be bitter, hateful and angry. If, on the other hand, we sow love, peace and tenderness in our hearts, the words we speak will be loving, peaceable and kind.

Questions: Since any idea that differs from a person's own is likely to offend in some manner, how can we discern what is abuse and what is simply a difference of opinion?

Matthew 5:13-14, 16

[Jesus said,] "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ... In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (For context, read 5:13-16.)

In Jesus' day, before the advent of refrigeration, salt was essential as a preservative and preventative against corruption. If salt should lose its preservative and corruption-fighting properties, it would lose its value and be good for nothing. In the same way, if light is hidden, it would fail to perform its essential role of providing illumination to everyone within range.

Questions: How might Christians function as salt and light in online conversations? What would happen if Christians fail to function as salt and light on the Internet?

Prayer in Times of Conflict (BCP p.824)

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*