

The Legal Information Needs of Women Who Experience Online Harassment

Women are subject to various forms of harassment: physical, verbal, sexual, emotional, etc. The law has struggled to keep abreast of this harassment which is not always visible, and which often goes unreported (Pew Research 2014). With the advent of the Internet and the explosion of social media, harassers have an entirely new environment with which to harass women. Laws against harassment are not easily applied in the “wild west” of the World Wide Web where identity is fluid and anonymity is possible.

The types of harassment that women experience online are often the same types of harassment that they experience offline: insults, unsolicited sexual advances, stalking, the sharing of private images (i.e., revenge porn), and threats of bodily harm (Citron 2009; Bartow 2012). As Emma Alice Jane writes, this is a “(new) articulation of (old) sexualizing misogyny” (Jane 2014, 560). Online harassment, however, is exacerbated both by the perpetrator's ability to remain anonymous and the current lack of legal accountability for such actions. According to a 2014 Pew Research study, 63% of participants felt that the Internet allows for greater anonymity than in their offline lives, and 92% said that the online environment allowed them to be more critical of others. Of those that do choose to respond to their harassment, only 5% report it to the police (Pew Research 2014).

Online harassment can be directed at any gender, but women experience it at a much higher rate than any other demographic, and to a much more severe degree (Duggan 2014; Pew Research 2014). Women experience a particular form of harassment that is gendered (Citron 2009; Jane 2014) and that often involves sexually explicit rhetoric and threats of violence (Cole 2015). In describing the harassment that women experience online it is tempting to censor quotes because they are frequently offensive/profane/graphic and are not usually deemed “scholarly” language that is “appropriate” for academia (Jane 2014), which may be part of the reason that the academic literature on this topic is scarce. Scholars that do discuss the harassment that women experience online argue that it is a form of exclusion from the digital realm, and that it needs to be addressed if women are to feel safe and able to participate online (Megarry 2014). Our job as researchers is threefold: to understand the harassment that women experience online (i.e., the variety of harassment, the platforms it occurs on, the effects it has, etc.), to learn what information needs women who experience online harassment have (particularly their legal information needs), and to investigate their

information search behaviour (i.e., where do women look for information, are they successful, etc.). Only with a solid understanding of these concepts can we as information professionals begin to address this phenomenon.

As part of a class project (LIBR 533: Users in Diverse Environments), we attempted to lay the groundwork for answering these questions. We conducted a study of 46 participants at the University of British Columbia using a print questionnaire that consisted of three sections: demographic questions, participants' experiences with online harassment, and their related information search. We surveyed 46 female UBC students who had experienced or were currently experiencing online harassment. As supported by the reviewed literature, the most common types of harassment experienced by women online are sexist and sexual harassment, but also include racist, political, professional, religious, homophobic, ableist, etc., harassment. Our results indicated that women experience harassment across many forms of social media, but most especially on Facebook. Further, qualitative results showed that dating websites and apps need to be accounted for in future surveys as they are also platforms in which women experienced harassment.

Of the 46 participants, 14 conducted a search for information regarding their harassment, and of these, only 2 women searched primarily for legal information. This finding was surprising, but may be explained by the low percentage of women who report their harassment. Particularly interesting was the finding that women seek shared experiences and community more than legal information when they have experienced online harassment. This may be because of the effects that harassment can have on women, such as feelings of helplessness or alienation (Megarry 2014). This study revealed that women primarily search for information using search engines like Google or Yahoo, but that they also use interpersonal relations like family and friends to find information. Finally, despite the education and medium to high computer skills of the population surveyed, participants rated themselves as only "somewhat satisfied" with the results of their information searches. This is discouraging and is the driving motivation for our current study.

The results from our research in LIBR 533 lead to more questions; why do so few women report conducting an information search regarding their online harassment? And why do so few seek legal information regarding their rights? One of the limitations of using a survey is the lack of qualitative data it garners. This is our reason for conducting a new study as part of a directed research project (LIBR 592). We plan to supplement the quantitative data

gathered from our survey with qualitative data by conducting focus groups with women who have experienced online harassment. This new study shifts the focus away from the types of harassment that women experience online and the platforms in which it occurs to focus on women's related information seeking behaviour. By speaking with women who have experienced online harassment, we hope to learn about their specific information needs and how they attempt to address them (i.e., what search engines and keywords do they use). This information is invaluable to information professionals, whose job it is to aid in the search process and to make the needed resources as accessible as possible.

In this digital age, it is important that we as information professionals understand the types of harassment that women experience online and the information needs that arise because of it. Little research has been done regarding the online harassment of women, and even less on their resulting information needs. The initial (quantitative) study helped to address these informational gaps, while the next part of the study (qualitative) will use focus groups to investigate the information needs and information seeking behaviours of women who experience online harassment. Although small in scope, this exploratory study begins to map the boundaries of online harassment and can be used as a jumping off point for future research.

References

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