Negative encounters in social media and other online environments
Guidance and resources
September 2019

OVERVIEW

When you engage in public discourse via social media or other online channels, you are entering a world where you may receive positive or negative feedback from anyone on the internet. In many cases, this leads to thoughtful debate and engagement; in others, it may open a door to the unpleasant reality of negative feedback, trolling and bullying, including encounters with social media "mobs," groups of often anonymous people who participate in orchestrated or individual campaigns against a person or organization.

If you find yourself on the receiving end of such a campaign, there are a number of things you can do to manage the situation and, importantly, keep yourself safe.

STEPS YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER
- **Make your social account(s) private.** This will make your posts visible only to the people you choose to allow to see them. This can be a temporary or permanent change, and you can always go back and forth if you're not sure when or whether you want to go public again.
- **Block users who are targeting you.** Most social media channels have an option to block particular users from seeing and interacting with your posts. If someone is clearly targeting you, you may want to go ahead and block them to cut down on the volume of negative feedback.
- **Delete the tweet or post in question.** If you posted something that is attracting a lot of negative attention, you may wish to consider deleting it. This is entirely up to you, of course, but you may decide that in hindsight it didn't come across the way you intended, or it's just not worth the trouble. If you stand by the content in the post, you may choose to keep it up. There are no wrong answers.
- **Post a response.** You may find that it would be helpful to provide some explanation or clarification, if something you posted was misinterpreted or if you have rethought your position. This is a good way to acknowledge the conversation and move on. Keep in mind this also can rekindle the fire and lead to another round of negative comments. It's your decision whether to reengage or walk away, and Public Affairs can help you think through the pros and cons.
- **Protect your contact information.** You might want to consider at least temporarily removing your email address and phone number from your departmental or lab websites and the online university directory. (Your departmental HR representative can help with this.) Even if a situation begins on social media, it can quickly spread to other methods of communication as the campaign against you gains momentum. It's not a bad idea to make yourself a little harder to find beyond your social media channels.

WEATHERING THE STORM
- **Stay safe.** Most importantly, if you experience threats to your safety, report this immediately to WUPD (314-935-5555) and the local law enforcement agency where you live. Save or screenshot any threatening messages, emails or voicemails to share with officers.
- **Exercise self-care.** It can be emotionally exhausting and stressful to absorb mean or hateful comments, especially for a prolonged period of time. You may want to step away from social media and ask a friend or colleague to go through your mentions to flag anything that looks potentially dangerous, but otherwise give yourself a break and check out for awhile. You may want to similarly screen your email and wherever else you may be receiving negative messages or comments.
- **Talk to someone.** Confide in a friend or family member, or utilize one of the university resources that are available to provide support. (See EAP above.)
- **Take a social media break.** Deactivate your accounts for awhile and come back when you're ready. The internet will still be there, for better or worse.

TIPS TO AVOID SOCIAL MEDIA HARASSMENT
- **Tweet carefully**. While the open exchange of ideas is a wonderful thing, there are risks associated with anything you say online. Remember it can be difficult to convey tone, sarcasm, or humor in 280 characters. If your comment could be interpreted as particularly edgy or provocative, you may want to run it by a colleague or friend first, or implement a short waiting period before posting, to take a little time to think about how the tweet may land and anticipate any potential negative reactions. Go with your gut - if it doesn't feel right, there's usually a pretty good chance it isn't.
- **Remember, a tweet is forever.** There is no such thing as deleting anything that is posted online. Once it's out there, it's out there. Even if you remove something quickly, there are tools that can go back in time and grab deleted content, and of course there are many people out there who are very quick with a screen shot.
- **Don't be discouraged, but do be aware.** As a public intellectual and thought leader, your voice is important and will add value to most every discussion. Keep in mind, however, that online conversation often is fueled by divisive political rhetoric, and be aware that there is always a chance that you could unwittingly step into the fray. Even a seemingly innocuous joke or comment can be misinterpreted and twisted to be used against you. So know the risk and think carefully before you go in, but remember one negative experience doesn't necessarily mean you shouldn't participate, if you choose to.

UNIVERSITY RESOURCES
- The Provost's Office is always available as a resource and should be made aware of any situation where you are being targeted, particularly if there is an issue that concerns your scholarly work or research. Contact Jessica Cissell at 314-935-4995 or jessica.k.cissell@wustl.edu.
- Similarly, your department chair may be able to provide additional support and advice.

- The Office of Public Affairs can assist with general questions about social media channels, and advise whether there are steps you should take to temporarily or permanently adjust your accounts and settings. Public Affairs also can direct you to resources for making any necessary changes on university websites to safeguard your privacy and contact information. For assistance, contact Julie Flory, associate vice chancellor for university communications, at 314-935-5408 or julie.flory@wustl.edu, or Cassaundra Moore, director of new media strategy, at 314-935-8310 or cassaundra.sigaran@wustl.edu.
- The university's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to provide confidential support. You can reach the EAP at 844-365-4587 or by registering online using the Web ID "WashU."
- The Washington University Police Department (WUPD) should be alerted to any threats to your safety. WUPD also can advise whether additional law enforcement support would be appropriate. WUPD can be reached at 314-555-5555 or police@wustl.edu.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Engadget: Ways To Stop Social Media Harassment
Inside Higher Ed: Surviving Social Media Attacks
Poynter Institute: How to handle personal attacks on social media
Vice: Expert Advice on How to Deal with Online Harassment