

How not to communicate: Lessons from trolls

Trying to intimidate opponents is a sign of weakness. But that doesn't stop bullies

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In recent weeks, many Americans have been astounded by the hatred some of their compatriots seem to harbour towards people of colour, immigrants and anyone else who seems different. But as a woman who is regularly trolled for sharing her opinions, I have long understood that our country has a harrowing problem with hate.

I'm a professor and I write about one op-ed a week, typically for CNN Opinion and Bloomberg View. My commentary focuses on politics and communication, so I've written about everything from how President Donald Trump can communicate more effectively to why Cynthia Nixon should run for governor of New York. The abusive emails and tweets I receive in response aren't voluminous — they clearly come from a small fringe of my readers. But three things about them trouble me, and suggest trouble for the country.

First is the issue of gender. Although it's difficult to confirm someone's identity on the basis of an email alone, it appears that almost all of my hate mail comes from men. For example, more than 90 per cent of these messages come from senders with traditionally male names. They often contain other cues that lead me to suppose the writers are men. For example, one Lee W signed his vitriolic missive with "husband, father and grandfather".

And the language they use is rife with sexist slurs. As an example, when I criticised Trump in a CNN op-ed for commenting on the French first lady's body, a Henry O in Cleveland wrote,

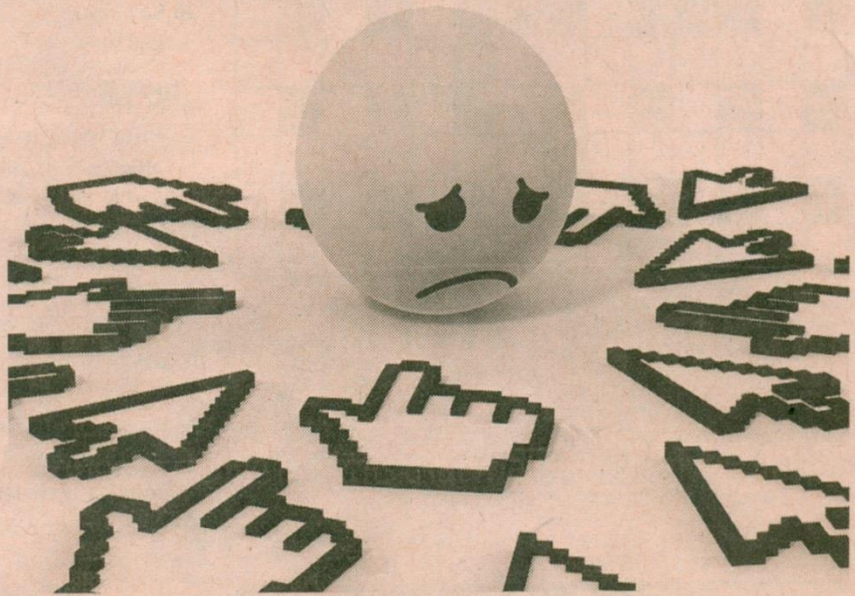


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Hate mail usually doesn't contain counterarguments

"I'm sick of women or their pansy men who get offended over comments or jokes that they judge to be 'offensive'. Screw you, bitch."

My experience is hardly unique: Research confirms that female writers get more cruel feedback than men. When *The Guardian* commissioned a study of the comments posted by their readers last year, its conclusion was clear: "Articles written by women attract more abuse and dismissive trolling than those written by men, regardless of what the article is about." Eight of the 10 writers who received the most abuse were women, even though the majority of the paper's regular opinion writers were men. (This same pattern repeats with race: Although most of the male *Guardian* writers were white, the two men who received the most abuse were black.)

And while women are disproportionately targeted by trolls, men are more likely to be trolls, researchers have found.

The second thing that troubles me is that hate mail usually doesn't contain counterarguments. Writers almost never try to explain why they believe I'm wrong; instead, they attack me personally. (I sometimes need to reference Urban Dictionary to understand the earthy phrases they use.) For example, after I wrote commentary for CNN arguing that Fox News should have fired host Bill O'Reilly when allegations of sexual harassment against him were first raised, a Greg V emailed, "I bet... you would be praying to have a famous rich guy call you hot anything."

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