# Threatening Communications that Target Faculty

## C. Van Loan

A recent incident brought to my attention prompted an examination of how we handle these situations.

It exposed gaps in our "defense".

Let's discuss this topic and walk out of the meeting with enough feedback to craft some effective follow-up action items.

# Some Working Assumptions

1. By "threatening communication" we mean hate mail and all forms of online harassment and intimidation.

2. The gaps we need to close have to do with response protocols, education, and philosophy.

3. A threatening communication that is designed to affect an individual faculty member's research or teaching or stance on campus issues must be viewed as an attack on the profession and the university.

# An Increasingly Urgent Problem?

We do not have hard data that points to increased frequency.

We do know that expectations for having an online presence is increasing. "Do great research and teaching and have an impact by spreading the word." Nowadays that includes spreading the word online.

# Two Recommendations

1. We need more data to track trends, especially as they might correlate with race, ethnicity, and gender.

2. Faculty, especially new faculty, need guidance regarding their online presence. BTW, how do we assess "online presence"?

In terms of how to spread the word, it@cornell, CTI, and eCornell provide excellent support as does University Relations should you be interested in hosting a podcast.

# Incident Response: Who Should Be Involved and Why?

1. The **Department Chair** (or equivalent) because they need to understand your teaching/research environment.
2. The **Office of Faculty Development and Diversity** because it can help direct faculty to the right resources to navigate the situation and follow up with support as appropriate.
3. The **College Communication Officer** because they will have experience in dealing with such matters.
4. The **Information Security Group** within CIT  because they can provide advice about technical steps that can be taken as part of a response.
5. The **CUPD** because they can help assess the potential for physical harm, determine if the threat is a crime, connect victims with additional resources, and because they can spot connections with other incidents.
6. The **Department of Inclusion and Workforce Diversity** via the bias-reporting system because they can point to support services and because it's the existing way we centrally collect data on these sorts of incidents.

# Recommendation: Develop an Annotated Protocol

We need to develop a low-overhead method for these communications to occur.

Faculty will be reluctant to trigger a protocol that lacks nuance and is perceived to be ineffective.

A one-pager is needed where the roles of the players are spelled out.

# Issues: Expectations - Free Speech - Legal

Cornell cannot **guarantee** that all its constituents are "safe" in every  internet environment, nor does the university have much control over the online activities that its faculty, staff and students engage in. A reminder that some speech can be hateful and repulsive but constitutionally protected.

Faculty, staff and students would most certainly (and rightly) object if the university tried to censor or curtail their private online behavior or personal commentary in web/social media environments

Is the community fully aware of what the proposed [student code of conduct](#) and [Policy 6.4](#) say about online harassment?

# Issue: The Keep-Your-Head-Down Side Effect

Standard advice given to the faculty target is "never engage with the perpetrator."

While that makes sense, it becomes worrisome when follow-up steps lead to a taking down of a website or the closing of a social media account even if temporary.

Must avoid creating a climate where the principal advice is to keep your head-down and quietly go about your business.

# University-Level Messaging Recommendations

1. Acknowledge that online harassment is a real and significant problem, and that it cannot be solved by simply "staying off the internet." (A helpful analogy: if a student were being stalked, would you suggest they never go outside?)

2. Recognize the psychological harm that can result from online harassment and make emergency counseling services available, should harassment occur.

Taken from [Best Practices for Conducting Risky Research and Protecting Yourself from Online Harassment.](#)

# Discussion

Learn more through references listed [here](#).

Email [deanoffaculty@cornell.edu](mailto:deanoffaculty@cornell.edu) if you would like to work with the DoF, the ADof, Steve Jackson (IS Chair) and others on this project over the break or if you would like to share in confidence you thoughts and experiences.

The goal is to implement all recommendations before the start of S21.

Check out this doc from University Relations: [Protecting Yourself from Online Harassment](#)