

Civility in public life: improving digital citizenship: Introduction

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a) What is online harassment?



Online abuse is often dismissed:

- Cost of doing politics
- Free speech
- Hate-play

But it can be as harmful as other physical or physiological forms of abuse

- Particular challenges in local politics
- Knowledge and number of perpetrators
- It accumulates

It is real:

**“Abuse, intimidation, harassment facilitated by technology”
(Esposito 2020)**

Incivility, derogatory communication, non-policy based or that derive in the personal characteristics of the individuals in a derogatory manner (Kuperberg 2020)

b) What evidence do we have of the generalised online harassment of councillors?



In this presentation I will make three points:

1. That online harassment is frequent and correlates with other forms of intimidation
2. That it manifests in different ways and for different reasons
3. That online harassment has emotional and political consequences

Data:

- Online survey conducted, with the support of BA/Leverhulme small grant SRG19\191702 between April and June 2020.
- N=1487 Local Councillors in England elected in 2019. The sample includes councillors from all parties. The response rate is 17% (total number of councillors contacted was 8,296).
- 72% Men 28% Women

1) Online harassment is frequent and correlates with other forms of abuse



- 46% of councillors experience some form of inappropriate behaviour – 34% identified the abuse as harassment
- 30% experienced harassment on social media
- 28% received abusive or threatening emails
- 25% of online harassed also received threats and 12% had people loitering around their homes or work
- Together it means that 40% of councillors have been on the receiving end of technology-enabled abuse

2) Online harassment manifest for different reasons and in different ways



- 63% of abuse received by councillors on social media was from individuals displaying some form of mental health illness. But 91% experienced the abuse from angry members of the public or other councillors
- During campaigns, this is not much better. One in every four local candidates experienced harassment while campaigning
- 30% of candidates experienced abuse on social media and 20% by emails

3) Online harassment has consequences



- 63% of the councillors experienced abuse on social media and 60% of the councillors who received abusive emails experience some level of fear while performing their duties
- During campaigning, those candidates suffering from online harassment felt significantly less safe
- 42% of local candidates avoided the use of Twitter and Facebook as a result of abuse

Take away points



- Online harassment is serious and not “political banter” or freedom of expression
- Online harassment is common and it has important political and emotional consequences
- Online harassment manifests at different stages in the political cycle
- Online harassment correlates with other forms of abuse and needs to be tackled