

Digital Harassment and Surveillance in the Arts: How Technology Silences Whistleblowers and Dissenting Artists

The arts have always been vulnerable to mechanisms of control—from studio-era blacklists to whisper networks of reputational sabotage. Today, the battleground has shifted to the digital sphere, where emerging technologies and social platforms serve as both creative outlets and tools of suppression. The use of doxxing, algorithmic suppression, revenge porn, and coordinated harassment campaigns represent a new wave of intimidation, particularly directed at whistleblowers, dissenters, and marginalized artists. These tactics do not mark a break from historical forms of coercion but rather a technological evolution of them. Through an analysis of three underexamined cases—FKA Twigs's lawsuit against Shia LaBeouf, the digital harassment of artist Nina Sanadze, and whistleblower Sophie Zhang's battle with Facebook—this essay examines how digital tools are weaponized to suppress dissent and control narratives within and beyond the arts.

In 2020, musician and actor FKA Twigs filed a lawsuit against former partner Shia LaBeouf, citing not only physical and emotional abuse, but also a pattern of digital surveillance and control. She described how LaBeouf monitored her communications, demanded constant access to her phone, and orchestrated her isolation by digitally severing her connections to family and friends. These digital behaviors were not incidental but central to the abuse, illustrating how platforms and personal technology could be turned into instruments of coercive control. Although legal attention focused initially on the allegations of physical harm, the broader context of digital intimidation underscores a critical gap in how the justice system conceptualizes harm. Surveillance through intimate technology complicates conventional legal categories of stalking, emotional abuse, and privacy invasion. Twigs's case reveals the limitations of current tort frameworks in capturing emotional distress facilitated through digital channels, even when such manipulation results in measurable psychological harm.

The case of Melbourne-based sculptor Nina Sanadze illustrates a different form of digital suppression, rooted in institutional complicity and reputational attack. After being shortlisted for the Blake Prize, Sanadze became the target of doxxing and coordinated harassment when her private WhatsApp messages were leaked and circulated online. The messages, taken out of context, triggered widespread condemnation, particularly across social media, leading to the withdrawal of gallery residencies and exhibition opportunities. Rather than defending the artist's privacy or investigating the authenticity of the leaks, several institutions distanced themselves, implicitly validating the harassment. Sanadze's experience exemplifies how digital leakage of personal communication—coupled with coordinated outrage and institutional retreat—can result in a form of professional erasure. Here, suppression is not carried out by a single abuser, but through a diffuse, crowd-driven mechanism that amplifies private moments into public condemnation. Legal options for redress are limited. While defamation and breach of privacy laws exist, they often fail to account

for the rapid spread and reputational damage inflicted through viral exposure, particularly when reinforced by organizational withdrawal.

Sophie Zhang, a former Facebook data scientist, represents a third and more systemic case of digital silencing. After identifying large-scale political manipulation campaigns across the platform, Zhang attempted to raise concerns internally and externally. In response, Facebook allegedly suppressed her internal posts, pressured domain registrars to delist her personal blog, and erased parts of her communications within the company. These actions amounted to a coordinated form of algorithmic and infrastructural suppression—a way of burying a whistleblower’s message without the appearance of censorship. Zhang’s case highlights the unique risks faced by tech industry insiders when their disclosures threaten platform credibility. The very tools designed to amplify speech became, in her case, instruments of erasure. Despite existing whistleblower protection laws, these are rarely robust enough to address platform-specific retaliation like content de-indexing or behind-the-scenes deletion. The legal system is only beginning to grapple with what constitutes retaliation in a digitally mediated corporate environment, where expression can be erased invisibly, and dissent stifled through technological protocol rather than explicit prohibition.

Together, these cases illuminate a core pattern: the weaponization of digital infrastructure to control, intimidate, or disappear artists and dissenters. Whether through coercive surveillance in a relationship, public doxxing, or corporate suppression, the effects are structurally similar. Victims lose professional opportunities, suffer psychological damage, and are often disbelieved or dismissed in the absence of physical violence. These harms are compounded by the legal system’s reluctance to treat emotional and reputational injury—especially in digital form—as actionable. Just as the law was once slow to recognize workplace harassment or institutional discrimination, it now lags behind the realities of technologically enabled suppression.

To begin addressing this evolving terrain, reforms must be narrow but intentional. First, emotional distress claims should be expanded to explicitly cover digital harassment, especially when supported by patterns of coordinated behavior or evidence of reputational harm. Second, whistleblower protections should be updated to include platform-based retaliation, with particular emphasis on algorithmic suppression and domain interference. Finally, cultural institutions—from galleries to tech firms—must adopt clear non-retaliation policies and establish independent review channels when artists or employees are targeted online. These measures will not fully resolve the issue, but they can begin to counteract the invisibility and normalization of digital coercion.

In a media landscape where visibility is currency, the power to erase, distort, or algorithmically suppress becomes a profound tool of control. The cases of FKA Twigs, Nina Sanadze, and Sophie Zhang do not simply expose personal hardship; they reveal systemic structures that reward silence and punish resistance. Any

meaningful defense of artistic freedom today must recognize that digital harassment is not incidental, but central to how dissent is managed and suppressed. As the arts and tech sectors become increasingly intertwined, safeguarding expression will depend not only on protecting speech, but on defending the digital conditions that make it possible.