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# A New Reality? The Far Right's Use of Cyberharassment against Academics

*A firsthand account by a targeted faculty member.*

By Joshua A. Cuevas

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A 2017 Pew poll regarding Americans' views on higher education, specifically those of Republicans, should alarm educators and, indeed, all citizens. Pew found that nearly 60 percent of Republicans currently believe that colleges and universities are having a negative effect on the country. One would expect that most parents would want their children to complete some form of postsecondary education, if only out of concern for their future earning potential. But among many on the right there is a palpable hostility toward the basic concept of higher education, as if college attendance made one part of a liberal conspiracy, and professors have come to be viewed as the embodiment of what many resent in American culture: political correctness, diversity, willingness to look to science for answers, secularism, feminism, intellectualism, socialism, and a host of other “isms.”

This disdain toward academia can be attributed, in part, to the dissonance between certain ideologies and information derived from academic research in areas such as climate change, evolution, and gun violence. The elitism that some in the profession may project when trying to convince others that we are “right” exacerbates the friction, and those of us in higher education increasingly find ourselves the target of hostilities.

## The First Wave of Attacks

The vitriol of the 2016 presidential campaign became personal for me shortly after the election, when I joined a conversation on social media about an article I had read. The article noted that approximately 47

percent of eligible voters did not vote in 2016 and that Donald Trump won with the support of only 25 percent of the voting public, while Hillary Clinton won the support of a slightly larger share. As a quantitative researcher in the social sciences, I am fascinated by these types of statistics.

The conversation below the article predictably turned to the merits of the Electoral College compared with the popular vote. I noticed a surprising number of what seemed to be hostile right-wing commenters. My normal approach in such a situation is simply to block commenters who introduce themselves into the conversation with insults, cursing, and ad hominem attacks. In this instance, one individual, whom I will refer to as the OP, attempted to lay out an unconvincing argument in comments interspersed with curses and insults directed at me. I dismissed the comments; he responded with vitriol. I let him know that I thought his attack on me reflected poor character and blocked him, soon removing myself from the conversation.

Shortly afterward, I received a personal message from the OP, who had now taken on a different identity, as a young female college student. He indicated that he had taken his grievances about me to an anonymous forum and closed with the threat, “This is going to be bad for you.” People with whom I had never had previous contact began to send me messages. One of the first said, “You’re a nigger.” Another called me a “faggott” [*sic*]. One attacked my preteen daughter as illegitimate. Several other individuals, including a person who identified himself on his personal page as being employed as a data scientist at Facebook, used the phrase, “You must go back.” I did not initially understand what he meant by this but quickly came to realize that he was implying that, because I am Hispanic, I should be deported.

I did not respond, but I did examine each person’s page for patterns and commonalities. Some of the attacks came from dummy accounts, false profiles likely set up specifically for this type of situation—to enable anonymous attacks without the risk of exposure or retribution. Of the profiles that appeared to be real, most of them “liked,” or were part of, pro-Trump groups, and most were followers of former *Breitbart* editor Milo Yiannopoulos.

A link to my Rate My Professors page made it clear that their attacks were expanding. Apparently someone had Googled my name and discovered that I was a professor; the open nature of Rate My Professors provided an opportunity for more attacks. Soon, sixty new “reviews” of my teaching, all uniformly vulgar, appeared. Some referred to bestiality; one complained about my supposed use of “Mein Kamp” [*sic*] in the classroom.

Similarly profane and racially motivated messages appeared in my university email. One was formatted like a student inquiry, asking whether one of my courses was a prerequisite to a course titled JEWS1488; another was just a string of profanity.

## A Dark Corner of The Internet

Then I received a message from an actual student, who contacted me after stumbling across the source of the spam and abuse I had been receiving. He provided links to threads on a website that is known to be a cesspool of white supremacist activity and suggested that I make screenshots to document the discussion there.

The messages I had received seemed tepid in comparison with these threads. Protected by anonymity, the participants felt no need to conceal their bigotry.

The OP had taken one of my comments from the original article on the election and had posted it in one thread. He fabricated other comments and attributed them to me. The OP knew the kinds of information that would agitate visitors to the site—mention of my Hispanic background, reference to my liberal leanings, threats (supposedly from me) to shut down their website, and so on. The posters were unaware that I had written almost none of the statements the OP had posted. The depravity of their comments would have been unacceptable in any civilized environment. One commenter used an avatar that displayed an image of Hitler superimposed across a flag with a swastika.

Much of what was posted initially revolved around my Hispanic origins. Commenters suggested that I needed to be deported and called me a “spic.” As a liberal-leaning Hispanic professor, I was a perfect target for white supremacists.

Their plans became darker and more elaborate. One commenter suggested that their remote attacks on me be expanded to include my family. Another suggested that they take images they had found of my wife and Photoshop them in profane ways. They began to draft letters to send to administrators at my university and provided suggestions for editing to incriminate me. One commenter suggested they alter a screenshot they had created to make it appear as though I had used the term *nigger*. Another suggested that they accuse me of anti-Semitism. Their stated goal was to see that I was fired. This, apparently, was the type of opportunity they relished: find a person to harass, maybe by drawing him or her into a political argument, locate any information they could find online, and then coordinate attacks in an attempt to damage the person as much as possible.

The scheme became more sophisticated as they began to sift through my CV. One commenter suggested that someone contact journals in which I publish, identify himself as one of my graduate students, and claim that I had threatened him and forced him to fabricate data for a research study. Another posted the titles of several journals and email addresses of the publishers. (They were not quite sophisticated enough to realize that the work I’d published with them had been systematic review articles, not empirical studies, and thus the editors would immediately know that claims about data collection were false.)

I sent a message to my deans, letting them know that I was under attack by a network of white supremacists. The next morning, I printed out the screenshots I had taken—of the racist messages, the emails to my university account, and the long threads where the plot was hatched. As I did so, the white supremacists’ plan began to play out. An anonymous message was sent to seventy-seven faculty members in my college, supposedly from a student, accusing me of spreading anti-Semitic views in class. Similar messages went up on the university Twitter account and Facebook page.

I met with university administrators and information technology personnel and showed them my documentation; they were taken aback by both the malicious nature of the attack and the transparency of the plan. They suggested I file criminal charges and report the incident as a hate crime, which I did. My documentation made its way to different levels of the university just as further anonymous messages

arrived, accusing me of verbally abusing a student.

The exact wording of each message sent to the university could be found in those threads—the same messages had been posted and edited by the anonymous attackers the night before. The sources were found to have been fake Facebook and email accounts.

By the next day, the attack had deteriorated into malicious spam. Messages went out en masse to various email addresses and public accounts, but it was not difficult to identify them as fraudulent. The combination of racist personal messages, vulgar Rate My Professors comments, anonymous messages from fake accounts, and publicly available documentation of the plan being hatched in real time made the intentions of those involved blatantly clear. The attacks served only to convince administrators of the depravity of those who launched them.

By the next day, my Rate My Professors page had been cleaned up, with only legitimate student ratings appearing. New fabricated ratings would show up sporadically afterward, only to be removed within hours. I discussed the possibility of deactivating my Facebook page with administrators, but I concluded that those involved in the harassment would only feel emboldened if they saw that my page was no longer active. I did not want to give the impression that their bullying was working. After several days, the messages stopped, and I went about my business for the semester.

## A Second Wave of Attacks

One Sunday about five months later, I came in from mowing the lawn and answered a call from my department head. She politely asked me if I had sent out a final exam assignment to my students by email. I said that I had not done so, and she said that she had gotten a strange message and thought it might be related to the previous attacks.

Apparently, someone had created a screenshot of an email that was meant to look like it came from me and began circulating it to students. The message described an assignment to write an essay criticizing President Trump; it warned Republicans that they would be punished for not reflecting “my” views.

Anyone who knows me or knows the classes I teach would have immediately seen that the message was a hoax. I don’t assign subjective essays as finals, and I definitely don’t send assignments out by email. My courses don’t touch on any subjects close to what the “assignment” entailed.

University administrators can see all incoming and outgoing email, and they quickly determined that the message did not come from me, did not go to any of my students, and entered the email system as a fake screenshot sent from a nonuniversity IP address. The email service in the screenshot was also not the one used by the university. In short, there was never any legitimate question about whether the message originated from me.

Yet I began to receive a new wave of messages—a flood of vitriolic emails came to my university account, many of them racist in nature, attacking my wife, my daughter, and me. Another anonymous thread on the original white supremacist website contained more fabricated screenshots purporting to be from me. The

person perpetrating the hoax pretended to be one of my students and said he was a Trump supporter who was fearful about retaliation if he didn't write the essay condemning the president. Visitors to the site were outraged and called for harassment and even violence against me.

But this time the scope of the attacks was wider. The screenshot was sent to the College Republicans, who decided to call a campus meeting (until they found out they'd been tricked). I received an angry voicemail message from the father of one of them. Other professors received the screenshots and bogus complaints from the perpetrators. I began to receive email messages from students, parents, and alumni, almost universally hostile. Interspersed with these were more hoax messages from the perpetrators. Everyone in my department knew that the messages were part of the hoax. The emails, supposedly sent by students and their parents, described an assignment that did not exist and a classroom environment that bore no relationship to reality—they referred to a class of twenty-five students, most of whom were minorities, when in fact during that particular semester almost every student in every one of my courses was white, and the class that was supposed to have received the assignment was actually a field placement internship with only four students and no final exam. These fake messages followed the same patterns, with the same types of grammatical errors as the screenshots that were supposedly from me.

It was disappointing to see how easily so many people were duped. I was not surprised that visitors to the white supremacist website had fallen prey to the fabrications of one of their own, but I would have hoped that others would have had the evaluative skills to see through this transparent ruse.

I was also surprised to see those at high levels pulled into the fray. A state senator, John Albers, contacted me, and my representative in the US House, Doug Collins, lodged an inquiry with the university. These politicians may have no ties to the white supremacists or hate groups behind the attacks, but their lack of judgment was astonishing. It does not instill confidence when elected officials are so easily manipulated to work on behalf of hate groups.

The faculty and administrators, by contrast, were uniformly supportive. University administrators did not support me out of fear of legal reprisal; they simply responded with good judgment and arrived at reasonable conclusions. They expressed concern over whether I felt safe and voiced regret that I had to experience such an attack.

I would have preferred that they be more assertive, however. Administrators issued denials to students and parents. They informed those who inquired that the messages in question did not originate from me. But they should have clearly stated that the messages were a hoax perpetrated by white supremacists. People who might not believe a straight denial will generally feel embarrassed when they realize they have been duped. Administrators could have helped limit future attacks by stating that those who spread misinformation could be committing slander. There should also be repercussions for students who harass professors. Yet in my case, there were not.

As for the perpetrators, this was exactly the kind of scenario they relish—the chance to use their collective “power” to harass someone in a public position who belongs to a minority group.

# Confronting the Threat

Approximately three months after the second attack, the white nationalist march took place in Charlottesville, Virginia. Of course, I was saddened by the march and the violence that occurred. I was not shocked, however, to find that the march was closely tied to the website that had hatched the attacks against me.

As the events in Charlottesville have made evident, white supremacists are beginning to organize in person and take part in actual violence. Several of the marchers said that they relished the experience of meeting other white supremacists face to face. Online harassment is a serious problem, but public rallies now pose a physical threat.

I would not be surprised if white supremacists launch another round of attacks in response to the publication of this article. But I am not in hiding. My attackers are the ones in hiding, cowering under the cloak of anonymity, fearful that their identities might be discovered—as they should be. But they are becoming less reclusive, desiring to maintain personal anonymity while attempting to assert their collective presence more publicly.

Academia has been too timid in countering such movements. We should not have to speak in hushed tones when we condemn hate groups. We should not have to be apprehensive when we promote democratic ideals and equality.

It is essential, particularly over the next three years, that we confront the animosity and bigotry of society's underbelly. Those in academia present an easy target—we are in public positions, open to scrutiny, and loathed by many.

As a tenured professor, I am lucky enough to have been in a position to rebuff these hate crimes and to tell my story here. Unfortunately, there are millions more, in academia and elsewhere, who do not have that advantage. We must build unity with all of those whose human rights are infringed.

I did not expect the country to be in such a perilous position in 2018. I have newfound concerns about the America in which my daughter and all other children will grow up. Now is not the time to shrink from confronting this threat.

*Joshua A. Cuevas is an associate professor and educational psychologist at the University of North Georgia, where he teaches courses in research methodology, assessment, and applied cognition. His email address is [Josh.Cuevas@ung.edu](mailto:Josh.Cuevas@ung.edu).*

Wed, 01/17/2018 - 11:40am

[permalink](#)

## Cyberharassment against Academics

Thanks for sharing your story and for standing firm!

[reply](#)

Al Carroll (not verified)

Sun, 01/21/2018 - 5:11pm

[permalink](#)

## Same Here

I've been dealing with this for over a decade. They' contacted every place I've ever worked and have entire websites devoted to smearing me.

Like you, the administrations stood by me.

[reply](#)

Piarras Mac Éinrí (not verified)

Mon, 01/22/2018 - 8:25am

[permalink](#)

## Response

Thank you so much for this. I am a lecturer in an Irish university and recognise all of the patterns described above although I have not experienced the very worst of them. I have been targeted by trolls, my personal and professional integrity has been systematically impugned and members of my immediate family have been singled out. In many cases the perpetrators - usually anonymous trolls - went to considerable lengths to find their material.

These attacks only occur when certain themes are being discussed. One is the alt-right and related themes concerning identitarianism, migration (my particular academic field), antisemitism and ethno-nationalism. The second is any criticism of Israel's current policies.

I fear that this kind of activity is distorting any rational form of balanced, informed public discussion and debate. For many of these people it's a kind of religion. Their beliefs are more readily explained by psychologists than political scientists.



A colleague has strongly recommended *The Bigot: why prejudice exists*, by Stephen Eric Bronner (2016, Yale U.P.).

Piarras Mac Éinrí University College Cork

[reply](#)

Philip Stortz (not verified)

Mon, 01/22/2018 - 1:31pm

[permalink](#)

## Not just Academia

Sadly, these attacks are in fact becoming more common in general, though nearly always from the right. These haters are becoming rabid and it should surprise no one that people who think violence is legitimate are more than willing to lie and defame, foolishly thinking they are protected. Frankly, it's sad these people are so clueless and lacking in basic cognitive skills.

[reply](#)

Felice (not verified)

Fri, 01/26/2018 - 11:28am

[permalink](#)

## Not nearly always, not by far

I would say this kind of attack comes from all sides and applies to any target. It is the easiest way a coward can win, and cowards exist in all ideologies. Resist the urge to pat yourself on the back for being on the side that seldom does it--you'll only blind yourself to human nature.

Professor Cuevas is right to say that this particular attack seems to be based on race, but it would be ill-advised to assume that that is the )\_typical\_ motivation. What is \_typical\_ is for \_any\_ deeply-held belief, be it political, sexual, religious, racial, etc., to be challenged and then defended through such immoral, unethical, dishonest, evil means.

The tactic of pre-emptively shutting down an adversary, rather than meeting them on even ground, is growing fast in our online, anonymous world, and don't think for a minute that some of the people who coincidentally take the same side as you won't do it just as quickly as those who take the other.

[reply](#)

Sully Tyler (not verified)

Tue, 01/30/2018 - 12:28am

[permalink](#)

### Both sides

This Both-sides-are-equally-guilty defense is nonsense. It is a deflection and an excuse. At its heart, this is an abusive husband claiming "She made me hit her"

I have seen no evidence that the Left resorts to attacks on spouses and children. Especially on a site like this, asking for some kind of proof for your assertion is not out of place.

[reply](#)

SB (not verified)

Tue, 01/30/2018 - 3:32pm

[permalink](#)

### Name one instance- one

Name one instance- one instance- in which an anonymous leftist group has launched a sustained, unsubstantiated smear campaign.

leftists will try to get people fired sometimes, it is true, but...maybe some people, sometimes \*should be fired\* for actual, substantive actions that they've taken?

your conflation of left and right lends aid and comfort to white supremacists.

[reply](#)

TD (not verified)

Fri, 02/09/2018 - 10:49pm

[permalink](#)

### Here you go

I don't believe that "maybe some people sometimes should be fired" is a valid excuse for doxing people and going after their jobs. If you would like one instance, I could name several. Evergreen College students on the far left made took it one step further and verbally assaulted and physically provoked a professor for not letting them have a day on campus without white students. Groups on the far left have killed people in violence just as groups on the far right. You can't honestly look at the state of our political sphere and

not see that both sides are capable of these things.

[reply](#)

## Steven Peist (not verified)

Mon, 01/22/2018 - 2:55pm

[permalink](#)

### I support Professor Cuevas

Professor Cuevas, thanks so much for writing this article and thanks to AAUP for publishing it. I have noticed that there is a linguistic pattern for these bots and racist bigots and this cannot be tolerated or Goebbels wins posthumously.

I stand with you good sir and your university is fortunate to have you!

[reply](#)

## Pualani Maksoer Ella (not verified)

Mon, 01/22/2018 - 2:57pm

[permalink](#)

### Cyberharassment against Academics

This is so wrong people are so stupid that they let an racist use you for there own sstupid thing I live in europe and I know how it feel so be strong dont let anybody get you breach no way I ray for you professor and I hope that people open there eyes and heart for eachother.....Aunty Pua

[reply](#)

## Wendy Hopkinson (not verified)

Mon, 01/22/2018 - 3:35pm

[permalink](#)

### Such a dismaying (at least!)

Such a dismaying (at least!) story. Thank you for writing your piece, and for your personal courage and fortitude.

[reply](#)

Joseph Morgan (not verified)

Mon, 01/22/2018 - 4:41pm

[permalink](#)

## Cyberharassment

Some very thoughtful comments in this piece. Sorry to say, however, I see it running both ways on the internet, with equal intensity from either direction. Why and how have we lost our civility? There are often divergent points of view on different issues, and it is important that understanding and tolerance upon hearing points of view on the other side of our pet issues prevail, regardless of which side we are on.

[reply](#)

James Cutler (not verified)

Mon, 01/22/2018 - 7:25pm

[permalink](#)

## Very important story

I am so saddened by what has happened to our country, particularly as reflected in your story, but I am so glad you could share it so more people can know how bad things really have become, so we can do something about it. I wish I knew exactly what the best proactive course of action would be to ensure that you and your family and the families of all minorities in this country could feel more safe.

God bless

[reply](#)

Bernie Masters (not verified)

Mon, 01/22/2018 - 8:03pm

[permalink](#)

## Thank you for the article and

Thank you for the article and you have my sympathy for the unprovoked attacks made against you. It's important to note however that supporters of the left make somewhat similar attacks against those on the right with whom they disagree. Sadly, it now seems to be accepted and acceptable behaviour to personally and dishonestly attack people rather than just disagree with their views and

provide arguments against them. The internet and social media in particular is spawning bad behaviour right across the political spectrum.

[reply](#)

## John Garrett (not verified)

Mon, 01/22/2018 - 8:39pm

[permalink](#)

### This is very disturbing but

This is very disturbing but consistent with reports of other researchers. Your story is one of the reasons I support organizations that track hate groups.

[reply](#)

## Gayle Greene (not verified)

Fri, 02/09/2018 - 5:55am

[permalink](#)

### This is a nightmare!

Good for you, for exposing it. I know this sort of harrassment has shut down several feminist bloggers. We live in a war zone.

[reply](#)

## Mick Capanzzi (not verified)

Tue, 01/23/2018 - 11:46am

[permalink](#)

### A New Reality

It's hard to be civil in the age of ignorance. I find it necessary to keep two windows open and available for search and vetting purposes in real time. It doesn't make much difference when you're engaging with a willful idiot. And the Net is chock full of them. They see that as their strength.

[reply](#)

Chris Atwood (not verified)

Tue, 01/23/2018 - 1:43pm

[permalink](#)

### Thanks for the picture of how harassment works

Thanks for sharing this; I also admire the way you handled it, both in defending yourself and in not being intimidated by the bad guys. Bravo!

[reply](#)

Anonymous (not verified)

Thu, 01/25/2018 - 7:58am

[permalink](#)

### Did anyone else wonder how

Did anyone else wonder how this story might have evolved if not for the student who found and shared the website where the plans were being developed?

[reply](#)

MLFogle (not verified)

Sat, 01/27/2018 - 8:00am

[permalink](#)

### My thoughts exactly!

I kept wondering what might have happened if it were not for the student finding the site. It may have changed the outcome completely. For me, the disregard for humanity is the biggest threat in this increasingly polarized society. I find myself referring back to concepts of accuracy and validity when engaging in conversations with people who cite (clearly) skewed statistics with disregard for context.

[reply](#)

Chris Edwards (not verified)

Fri, 01/26/2018 - 6:22am

[permalink](#)

## I question the authenticity of your account

You provide a long story without any evidence of what you say. While what you claim may be true, without evidence I must dismiss it entirely.

[reply](#)

## Ben Chung (not verified)

Fri, 01/26/2018 - 2:14pm

[permalink](#)

### It's fairly trivial to find

It's fairly trivial to find the leftovers from it, which validate Prof. Cuevas's account in detail. The Google query "An anon's UNG Professor Josh Cuevas makes students write an anti-Republican assignment" will find some of the websites mentioned (and screenshots thereof) immediately. Reading some of it really underscores his experience and makes me appreciate Prof. Cuevas coming forward with his story.

[reply](#)

## Walter Crockett (not verified)

Fri, 01/26/2018 - 5:16pm

[permalink](#)

### Thank you for this inspiring article

It is wonderful to see professors stand up to this onslaught of fascist barbarity. Thank you.

[reply](#)

## William Reese (not verified)

Fri, 01/26/2018 - 5:42pm

[permalink](#)

### Prof. Cuevas' Ordeal

I am appalled by the experiences Prof. Cuevas has experienced. Unfortunately, I am not surprised. Well beyond the current cultural divide, is the focused attack on the academy in particular (the Horowitz attack) and the attack on science in general. The vulnerability of those who work in public introduced by the anonymity the internet provides those whose arguments cannot bear open scrutiny is disconcerting. That any readers of Academe would argue such illegitimate tactics are as common on the left as on the right is disheartening.

Prof. Cuevas, thank you for your stand and your perseverance in the face of attack--with solidarity, truth and justice will surely prevail, but I applaud your struggle on the long road there!

[reply](#)

Jon Miles (not verified)

Sun, 01/28/2018 - 4:43pm

[permalink](#)

### Is it really both left and right?

A couple of commenters have suggested here that the left are as guilty as the right of making such attacks.

Is there any evidence for the left having forums to generate coordinated campaigns of lies to destroy the careers of right wingers?

During the Presidential campaign, students in the Macedonian town of Veles set up many fake pro-Trump news sites, spreading lies about Clinton. They had no political motives - they did it only to make ad revenue, because links to their sites spread like wildfire on Republican sites and facebook groups. See <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>

When the Macedonians were asked why they only targeted Clinton, not Trump, they said that it was because Trump supporters were much more willing to believe the lies, and pass them on, generating more ad revenue.

[reply](#)

Gringo (not verified)

Mon, 01/29/2018 - 4:01pm

[permalink](#)

### "This disdain toward academia

"This disdain toward academia can be attributed, in part, to the dissonance between certain ideologies and information derived from academic research. This disdain toward academia can be attributed, in part, to the dissonance between certain ideologies and information derived from academic research in areas such as climate change, evolution, and gun violence."



The Pew poll indicates there was a big jump in Republican disdain for academia from 2015 to 2017. "Academic research in areas such as climate change, evolution, and gun violence" hasn't particularly changed in the past 10 years. As such, academic research can't account for the increased Republican disdain for academia.

A more likely reason for increased Republican disdain for academia is recent conduct on campuses. I refer to such incidents as Charles Murray getting shouted down at Middlebury and the ensuing assault on the Middlebury professor who introduced Murray. I refer to what happened to the Evergreen professor who ended up resigning and getting a settlement from the administration. There appears to be on campus an increasing intolerance for views that do not hew to the "progressive" narrative, as shown in the above examples. THAT is why Republicans have an increasing disdain for academia.

[reply](#)

Ronald Ridley (not verified)

Tue, 01/30/2018 - 9:43pm

[permalink](#)

## [A New Reality? The Far Right's Use of Cyberharassment against Ac](#)

The deplorables can be mean. And some Russians may have been involved trying to tear America apart. Hang in there and keep teaching! America needs you.

[reply](#)