

Chapter 21

Troll Farm: Anonymity as a Weapon for Online Character Assassination

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ABSTRACT

Anonymity can create cowards. Perceptions of mistreatment can create an urge for revenge. And online social media platforms create opportunities to exact vengeance. This chapter provides an overview of online character assassination as it has evolved within a profusion of social media sites offering forums for uncensored airing of opinions. When opinions constitute political speech, they can be life-threatening. When opinions are commercial speech rating character and competence of professionals, digital defamation can threaten livelihood. In commercial arenas, victims often feel helpless to protect their reputations; however, some legal remedies may be available. This essay investigates the nature of abusive communication online, the role anonymity plays in digital attacks, and psychological characteristics associated with trolls and cyber-bullies. Case studies of individuals' efforts to defend themselves from online character assassination illustrate concepts discussed and strategies being used for online reputational self-defense.

INTRODUCTION

In a virtual marketplace of ideas, where uploaded information has a global, eternal audience and is under little to no administrative control as to its truth value or ethical weight, ideas can become weapons. Character assassination using online postings to websites – and the emotional, psychological, social, and economic turmoil the inevitably results from such attacks – is a burgeoning problem worldwide. Chetty and Alathur offer a focused overview both of the “dark side” of advances in Internet Technologies (Its), especially social media evolving alongside their benefits to humanity. Their study focuses primarily on delineating the relationships among hate speech, terrorism, and cyberterrorism. Within their definitions and descriptions, online character assassination would be a form of extremism they place beneath the umbrella of extremist hate crime or hate speech (Chetty and Alathur, 2018). In this chapter, this form of

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hate speech or hate crime is explored in relation to ways that anonymity facilitates this form of violence, whether it be rhetorical or physical.

Virtual speech acts transmitted via the internet generally may be allocated into one of two categories based upon intent and material purpose: political speech acts or commercial speech acts. Online communication of both categories carried out using social media sites can also be either categorized either as productive and prosocial or destructive and abusive, based upon both intent and outcomes. Figure 1 depicts this fourfold framework of virtual communication dimensions, providing sub-types of online speech acts within each dimension.

Character assassination is earmarked by its personal nature, its viciousness and its deliberate lack of truth. Such speech acts maliciously deployed as weapons to destroy an individual's reputation can fall into either the political and commercial dimensions of online speech acts. It may be apparent in the diagram that all four dimensions and varieties of online message types that comprise them may encourage message-creators to be either braver or more malignant if their communications are posted online under the protection of anonymity. In the case of character assassination, anonymity within the commercial speech dimension is likely to result in permanent, irreversible damage to one's good name. However, in the realm of political communication, anonymity can operate either to the public good or result in the actual assassination of its human target. While this chapter has as its primary focus the commission of character assassination through social media using an example of a professor who was targeted by a disgruntled student, an example of a politically motivated online cyberterrorism campaign powered by anonymity that resulted in the murder of a journalist is presented.

Technical, psychological, and legal throughputs that contribute to the expanding scope and escalating complexity of abusive communication online include:

- The proliferation of social media platforms that provide staging areas for online attacks on character.
- The phenomenon that has become known as the Streisand Effect (where raising the issue of damaging online communications actually worsens the impact by drawing attention to it) as well as audience-generated hurdles to reputational self-defense such as comment sections of news sites.
- In the United States, competing laws that protect rights to privacy on the one hand and rights to speak one's mind on the other have produced a double bind. It is difficult to defend simultaneously both sets of contradictory protections offered by the Bill of Rights when one undermines the other. This is particularly true with respect to online commercial speech that constitutes defamation. In this balancing act, safeguards to freedom of speech and association guaranteed by the First Amendment are pitted against Fourth Amendment guarantee that one's right to privacy is sacrosanct (Chemerinsky, 2017).
- The critical role that anonymity plays in facilitating the free expression of dissent while at the same time enabling the abusive dissemination of false or threatening messages is a key concern. Balancing safeguards to individuals' free expression while at the same time protecting rights to privacy and safety is a stumbling-block to developing workable protocols and legislation of digital speech, especially on social media sites.

In order to successfully balance Constitutional protections for American citizens and possibly to provide a model for worldwide application (since there are no national boundaries in cyberspace, and the problem is global), the issue of online character assassination could best be addressed at the na-

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