

# The Line Between Harassment and Public Pressure

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It was perhaps two years ago now, maybe more, when an account on Twitter with a reputation for going after marginalized creators admitted – I paraphrase – that they went after marginalized “problematic” creators on purpose. They wanted them to lose their jobs, their livelihood, to be driven to the streets. They were not welcome in their community, ever. They weren’t ‘accidentally’ depriving vulnerable people of their income and safety nets; it was their intent, from the start, and believed the people in question deserved it.

Possibly around the same time, possibly earlier – the dates get fuzzy – an account from a slightly different part of Twitter said something eerily similar. They said (I am once again paraphrasing) that when sites would not take action against racist fictional content or its creators, it was up to activists to “make their lives hell”.

I’ve deliberately taken as much identifying information out of these anecdotes as possible. As a result, they’re not direct quotes. They might be inaccurate, at least in part; I might be ascribing to one what another actually said. But these things were said; that much I know. Why take out the identity of people who’d say such obviously awful things? Because – well – ultimately, the people who said these things may or not believe them. They might be operating in bad faith, they might have ulterior motives, they might genuinely be this zealous. But it’s also part of a pattern.

Online harassment has been a thing almost as long as the internet itself has. However, as the interconnectedness of the internet itself increases and continuously piles us closer and closer, condensing us into ten, five, three social media sites – it’s taken on a very different nature than the flame reviews and anon brigades of twenty years ago. Certainly 2001 wasn’t fun. But somewhere along the way, two very different concepts have coalesced into some monster that combines the worst parts of both. What is the difference between twenty thousand people pressuring a state senator to do the right thing, and twenty thousand people telling off Rick Riordan for a bad authorial decision? What’s the critical tipping point between harassment and simply a lot of people involved in earned backlash? And at what point does “a lot of people saying the same, obvious, thing” become a tidal wave of bad-faith negativity? It’s not an easy distinction.

Both of the people quoted at the beginning, at least from an idealistic standpoint, are operating from points that make sense. They’re wary of bigots and predators. Deplatforming is, after all, a form of collective action that came from the left. One of the most efficient weapons against a

bigot is to simply remove their ability to spread their ideas; this is the logic behind Alex Jones's banning from most social media sites, which had a notable effect. Donald Trump's final banning from Twitter actually decreased violence in the U.S.A. as a whole, after four years of his inane tweets nearly starting wars. Even on a smaller scale, this works; the band Lostprophets was a staple of the alt-rock scene for a long time, until 2013, when Ian Watkins (the lead singer) was outed as a monstrous serial child abuser. His other band members dropped him like he was toxic (and he is) and he went to jail – but since he'd still be getting royalties, they made a new band, and the name Lostprophets became anathema. You won't hear Lostprophets played or even mentioned in most places anymore, and Ian Watkins is rotting away in jail. And the opposite, tragically, plays out in reverse; harmful shows like 13 Reasons Why get multiple seasons because of 'hate-watching', and the choice to 'separate the art from the artist' while still putting money in the pockets of transphobes has kept the career of J.K. Rowling enduring long past what would have been its natural sell-by date.

So, logically, deplatforming should be a perfectly fair and leftist thing to do. How has it warped into something abusive? Well, point one, there's nothing that is beyond appropriation by abusers. Nothing is so Theoretically Good that it is beyond abuse. TERFs (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) and other right-wing bigots have realized to great effect that mass-reporting a single account will eventually get it suspended, whether or not it did anything wrong – to name one example.

But point two, and more challenging, comes back to Audre Lorde. "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support." Often, only the first part of this is quoted. The original essay is from 1984 and still extremely relevant, but the full quote is also important. Deplatforming is a useful tool. It is also a temporary one; a stopgap. And – more than anything else – we should not lose sight of who invented deplatforming (or "cancel culture", if you'd like to bring it home that way). Perhaps leftists are the ones who brought it online or made it crowd-sourced, but the careers of Eartha Kitt, Zero Mostel, and Janet Jackson did not fizzle out or come to a halt on their own. Or, more brutally, the murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Hampton – the same principle, taken to its logical extreme, to silence what the state did not want said. This isn't me comparing a "Silence, TERF" meme to those murders, to be clear. But it would be irresponsible to ever be entirely comfortable with the concept, no matter who's wielding it.

This is all pretty theoretical, so I'll bring it back to the main point. What's the difference between online harassment and online criticism or deplatforming? The border, in my opinion, is going to keep shifting with context, time, etc. But one of the critical points on that border is 'desired outcome'. Let's take a racist or otherwise problematic depiction in a book. You take to Twitter, or Tumblr, or Facebook – pick your public forum – and criticize it. Perhaps the author responds! Perhaps they don't. Now, if an author or author's friends decide that your one piece of criticism is harassment, that's clearly bad faith. (Exceptions: if you've been going after this author for a while, block-evaded, etc. but that should speak for itself.) But say other people are pointing it out. Again, not harassment. Even if others disagree on whether or not it's a problematic depiction, A public piece of art is allowed to be discussed in public.

Alright. Let's say the author apologizes. It might not be a good apology. It's common to see the "I'm sorry YOU felt hurt" or the half-assed "apologizing for the wrong thing" apologies here;

there's also a common issue of interpreting apologies as being bad faith because you're still mad at the person. Or perhaps the apology isn't accepted because the depiction isn't fixed. (This can vary! The author might not have any more control, if the book's already published; this is especially true of older novels getting renewed circulation. Certainly asking G.R.R. Martin to fix something in Game of Thrones for future editions wouldn't be particularly effective.) You're under no obligation to accept the apology; but what good does it do to escalate? This is where a very specific change happens; instead of alerting somebody to an issue and asking them to change it and understand the problem, you're pressuring them to change it "or else". It depends on the nature of the escalation, but online harassment can involve using emails, contact info, phone calls or even contacting agents to apply pressure. The "or else" becomes pretty explicit at that point. I've even seen doxxing enter the picture. And while I've used racism as my example here – this all takes on a newly horrifying angle when the seemingly-justified reasons give way to accusations of "promoting pedophilia", "profiting off of other people's trauma" (without any grounds for that accusation, usually), "creating child pornography" (fiction does not work that way), or even, horrifyingly, "faking being queer" or "not really being part of the community" usually aimed at bi, ace and non-binary authors. It goes on.

So what do you actually want to accomplish when you go after somebody? If you'd like an apology, go in with an intent for an apology – and if it's a bad one (not just an awkward one) then change tack towards something else. But too often, I see something start with a masquerade of Fair Criticism – then just keep going. Anti-shipping is full of this, but it's not the only offender. What do you want from a content creator if they've acknowledged a problem? You're not likely to change their mind at that point – and any minds changed through constant, boundary-crossing pressure are minds "changed" in a way that not only use the master's tools, but glory in them in a way that I, for one, want no part of.

And then, what is actually garnering this reaction? Scale has gotten lost just as much as intent. I've used the publishing world and authors in this very much on purpose; fandom sits on one end of the scale, and U.S. governmental officials very much on the other. The people quoted at the beginning of this article may very well have started from places that made sense. Punching Nazis is great. I'm all about punching Nazis. I am all about annoying senators and governors into vetoing trans healthcare bans and passing assault rifle bans, by sheer force of numbers. I greatly approve of K-poppies using fancams against cops in the greatest possible "Nyeah nyeh nyeh-nyeh-nyeh" of all time. But the reason this works – the reason this is ethical – is because the number of people affected and the number of people involved stands a good chance of being equal, if not leaning heavily towards the former. Or, more simply, people with big platforms should expect big blowbacks. It's part of the job. (Inasmuch as large social media platforms necessarily line up with 'jobs', but that's a slightly different discussion; and it's very true that somebody who gains 50k followers through cat memes is still going to have less influences than the POTUS Twitter account.) Somebody who posts a fanfiction with racist tropes that are more likely than not completely accidental or subconscious? There's no world in which you can argue that a fanfic with 50 kudos suddenly getting 500 to a thousand critical comments (and usually hateful ones, when it comes to the fanfiction side of things) is being "deplatformed" and not just bullied.

Scale isn't just about exposure, either. My final point on this is that, while everything is politics, not everything is Politics. Fighting for the rights of transgender children is not comparable to fighting for trans representation. Both are important. One affects our lives directly. The other is

part of the cultural milieu; a helpful factor that is part of a literary and media landscape that no one person can shift one way or another. The pressure of thousands of people isn't something to try invoke lightly, and while what happens by accident is beyond most of our control (the nature of viral threads is probably worth a whole PhD study on its own) it's irresponsible and almost insulting to try summon it for "possible, maybe" predators and Bad Fiction. If you'd like to criticize it, criticize it; if you think the weight of numbers is what will lend your criticism validity, then you don't have faith in your own analysis. And I think some of us do this unconsciously. We want others to back us up. We want to believe that our causes are all as important as each other – and they are. But there's important and there's time-critical and there's ones with lives at stake, and sometimes you're just using public humiliation as a cudgel.

I don't think this is a monster that any one person can dissect, unfortunately. I can make some distinctions here and there; but there's things I haven't even touched on (for example, at what critical mass does 'fair crit' become harassment when the participants don't even realize they're doing it?) and of course, the always-tricky angle of how public pressure can become harassment when done to a more vulnerable population by dint of existing stereotypes and bias. But as the Left goes through growing pains and re-examines a lot of third-wave feminism's baggage in light of Web 2.0's changes, I think this is a topic that will come up more and more – and it's worth keeping in mind the next time you're tempted to get on the latest bandwagon, no matter how large or small it might seem.

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