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# EVIDENCE BRIEF

The Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council in collaboration  
with the Future Skills Centre

SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision-making across all sectors toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **Skills and Work in the Digital Economy**

## Impacts, lessons learned and best practices for supporting knowledge workers targeted by online abuse: A knowledge synthesis report

### About the project

Digital communication tools and platforms have become critical venues for the public to access, share and discuss information, news and entertainment. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the integration of digital platforms into our daily lives. Knowledge workers in particular are called upon to do most of their work online. They conduct research, share work, engage with the public and collaborate with others online. However, online abuse has consequences for individuals, their research, knowledge mobilization and innovation. This project synthesizes the existing body of research related to online abuse of knowledge workers in research and public education fields and provides evidence-based recommendations to guide the organizations that hire them.

We investigated the obstacles and personal costs online abuse presents to knowledge workers, and practices that organizations could incorporate to help these workers.

We asked the following four research questions:

1. What does academic and grey literature recommend for protecting knowledge workers in research and public education work from online abuse?
2. What are the consequences of this abuse for worker engagement? How does the experience impact society?
3. What consequence does online abuse have for diversity and inclusion in the digital knowledge economy?
4. What steps do knowledge workers, their employers and policy-makers need to take to protect workers and support innovation, knowledge mobilization and collaboration?

### Key findings

- Systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia—place individuals at a higher risk of online abuse.
- Knowledge workers are largely dealing with online abuse independently or with the help of their close personal network. Strategies for coping with abuse include fighting back against abuse by responding to perpetrators directly or challenging them publicly and anticipatory labour to prepare for future attacks.
- Online abuse has significant mental, emotional and financial impacts on individual targets. The impact of online abuse reverberates outwards to affect communities, organizations, institutions and the state of public discourse more broadly.
- The research proposes a host of recommendations aimed at various stakeholders. For example:
  - Recommendations made for individuals prioritize limiting their vulnerability to minimize the damage that an attack might have.
  - Friends, families and peers are positioned in a support role and are advised to offer help in whatever way they can.
  - For employers, the recommendations underscore the importance of being proactive in setting up appropriate policies and procedures and socializing these into the workplace community.
  - Governments can offer to fund supports, improve awareness and provide regulatory frameworks and accountability mechanisms.



- The recommendations for platform companies are to improve moderation policies and procedures and increase transparency in how they operate.
- Law enforcement officials should undergo more training to effectively respond to complaints of online abuse.
- These recommendations reflect the complexity of the problem of online abuse and suggest that any solution will require a cooperative, multifaceted approach.
- While the task ahead is challenging, the consequences for failing to grapple with this are significant for worker engagement, productivity and the capacity to innovate. The individualized ways that workers are coping with

online abuse demands a significant investment of time and energy that detracts from their capacity to do their work. The emotional toll that these experiences take also causes workers to retreat from online spaces, self-censor and generally engage less in the discussions of their industry.

- The tendency to retreat in the face of online abuse is all the more troubling when we understand that equity-deserving groups are most likely to experience abuse, and thus most likely to withdraw at significant personal, professional and societal cost. In effect, the consequence of online abuse is to limit the plurality of voices and diversity of perspectives that is available in the public sphere.

## Policy implications

To facilitate creating stronger support environments, governments and institutions can take the following steps:

- Help reduce the damage of online abuse by investing in projects and organizations that combat or research this problem.
- Raise awareness and educate the public about online

abuse and its impact. Too often people believe it is a problem that is only online and do not understand the broader consequences.

- Update regulatory frameworks, such as provincial occupational health and safety policy, to include protection and support for online abuse, just like any other occupational hazard.

## CONTACT THE RESEARCHER

**Chandell Gosse**, Royal Roads University;  
[chandell.1gosse@royalroads.ca](mailto:chandell.1gosse@royalroads.ca)

**Victoria O'Meara**, Western University; [vomeara@uwo.ca](mailto:vomeara@uwo.ca)

**Andrea Galizia**, University of Toronto;  
[andrea.galizia@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:andrea.galizia@mail.utoronto.ca)

**Jaigris Hodson**, Royal Roads University;  
[jaigris.hodson@royalroads.ca](mailto:jaigris.hodson@royalroads.ca)

## FURTHER INFORMATION

▶ [Read the full report](#)

The views expressed in this evidence brief are those of the authors and not those of SSHRC, the Future Skills Centre or the Government of Canada

SSHRC is a funding agency of the Government of Canada. Through research grants, fellowships and scholarships, SSHRC supports research that provides key insights on the social, cultural, environmental and economic challenges and opportunities of our ever-changing world.

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration, dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.