

Winter 1-2018

When the Far-Right Attacks Faculty Online, They are Attacking Public Higher Education

Jessie Daniels
CUNY Hunter College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_pubs

 Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Daniels, Jessie, "When the Far-Right Attacks Faculty Online, They are Attacking Public Higher Education" (2018). *CUNY Academic Works*.

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_pubs/345

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

Suggested title: *When the Far-Right Attacks Faculty Online, They are Attacking Public Higher Education*

For *The Clarion*, newspaper of the PSC-CUNY

January/February 2018

Jessie Daniels

The orderly rhythm of my life last fall was thrown into a tsunami of sustained chaos when I was attacked online by the far-right. The hate began pouring through my Twitter account, my website, and Facebook. Finally, a deluge came through two email accounts where I got hundreds of repulsive messages everyday for over a month. The vitriol was several fathoms beyond uncivil, including messages calling me a whore, a disgrace to my alma mater UT-Austin, a “Jewess,” fat, a moron, and a c*nt. My email inbox was flooded with rape threats, death threats, and, for those who couldn’t be bothered to commit murder themselves, invitations to kill myself. Some of these were easy to laugh off, such as the message about the one-letter difference between CUNY and their favorite gendered insult, while others were deeply hurtful. As someone who survived the suicide of a parent, the suggestions that I kill myself were especially painful. Some were anonymous, but a surprising number left their full contact information in plain sight. It is disorienting when one’s email inbox, that intimate, integral part of work and life, fills with the effluvium that is the worst part of human nature. A great many also found the email addresses and phone numbers of my department colleagues, my dean, the provost and president of my college, which escalated the intensity by alarming the people I work with and insisting that I be fired.

The experience was upsetting, not chiefly because I feared for my personal safety or loss of my job (I am a full professor and a union member), but because the angry people who took the time to send me a message are part of a [war](#) on public higher education. Yet, the [organized, political](#) nature of the attack got lost in the melee, as everyone, particularly college administrators, asked, “*what did you say?*” Such a question shifts the blame away from the attackers. And, it misses the fact that social media is the weapon of choice of the far-right to target faculty. By threatening academic freedom, they aim to destroy public higher education.

My remarks that so enflamed the far-right were in answer to a question from a friend and colleague who [asked](#): *for those who have lost family and friends for challenging white racism, how do you cope?* I was [estranged](#) from my father for the last two years of his life because of his racism and my opposition to it, so I responded. You need to build new worlds for yourself, I said. Then, I said that in my experience, the white nuclear family was one of the most powerful forces upholding white supremacy. It was a statement almost identical to one I'd written in my [first book](#) about the way extremists framed the white family and how it resonates in popular culture. I went on to talk about racial wealth disparities, driven by home ownership and the intergenerational transfer of wealth within white families, something we'd just discussed in my Introduction to Sociology class. But on the mean streets of Twitter, this got cherry-picked by the far-right as a call for "white genocide," one of their favorite talking points. My tweets got posted on Alex Jones' InfoWars, then shared through the right-wing media ecosystem: FoxNews, Tucker Carlson, the UK-based Daily Mail and back to the New York Post (twice). Each time one ran the story they included a link to my faculty page with my email address.

The irony of this attack is not lost on me, and many will say that I was asking for it. For ten years, I have had a fairly active presence on Twitter, with 18,300 followers I was recently been listed as the "14th most followed sociologist." The main focus of my research is [white supremacists online](#). In the past few years, I've also written about being a [scholar](#) in the digital era, including some about its [perils](#). I [wrote](#) that if an attack by the right-wing "hasn't happened to someone on your campus yet, chances are it will." By my own estimate then, it was only a matter of time before it was my turn. The chilling effect on academic freedom from such attacks is very real. I find myself speaking out much less often now, including on the GOP tax bill, a policy that ensures the intergenerational transfer of wealth within a handful of white families, precisely the point I was attacked for making.

Those who think that not being visible on social media will save them from such attacks deceive themselves. The foot soldiers in this war on higher education are [well-funded](#) and adept at taking routine facets of academic life -- a [class lecture](#), a [graduation speech](#) – and turning it into fodder for a targeted campaign. Faculty who are women, who identify as queer, who are people of color, and, of course, who reject the right's orthodoxy, are vulnerable to attack. One far-right group has started a [“film your marxist professors”](#) Facebook group and is enlisting students to surreptitiously record instructors with their cell phones.

In my current [research](#), I'm following the ways the far-right has been emboldened through the Tweet storms of the current occupant of the Oval Office who regularly [re-tweets](#) white supremacists and gets his funding from the [same billionaires](#) fueling the far-right attacks on public higher education.

It's time for all of us in PSC-CUNY to understand that the attacks on us are part of a systematic effort to destroy public higher education. Social media is used against faculty, and it is often the most vulnerable among us who are attacked. As a union, we must develop collective ways to support each other by making it clear that comments on social media should be protected as a form of academic freedom.

Jessie Daniels
Professor, Sociology
Hunter College and The Graduate Center, CUNY
jdaniels@hunter.cuny or jessiedanielsnyc@gmail.com