



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Protecting Expert Advice for the Public: Promoting Safety and Improved Communications

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An RSC Policy Briefing

COVID-19 has highlighted the extent to which researchers who publicly share their expertise and the results of research face harassment and personal threats. The intimidation of experts has recently garnered significant media attention, but it is a problem that has affected the safety, well-being, and work of those who produce knowledge for some time. There is significant risk not only to researchers, but also to the public if the threat of intimidation prevents researchers from sharing knowledge and expertise. Our central concern in this policy briefing is to assess the context and develop recommendations that will help ensure that researchers and the public can more safely and effectively engage with each other.

Transparency, accountability, open communication, and debate are essential to democracy. Orchestrated attacks on researchers that seek to silence or discredit them threaten not only individual scholars but also public trust in evidence-based scholarship. These attacks may also damage public dialogue, undermine the quality of policy-related discussion, and compromise public action if the environment becomes so hostile that experts can no longer publicly or openly share the results of their research.

Why do researchers not just stay away from the public domain, publishing their work only in academic books and journals? In varying degrees, the answer is this: engaging with the public is a key part of the work academics do and an important contribution to a vibrant and open society. Universities have long recognized work outside of the institution that serves the public interest, including academics' participation in government committees, consulting, policy development, partnerships with industry, and so on. In recent years, the scope of scholarly public engagement has broadened, primarily through online technologies that facilitate wider and faster communications of research in cost-effective ways. Research councils, publishers, and post-secondary institutions actively endorse this broader distribution of scholarly evidence and advice as a benefit to Canadians, to democracy, and to robust public debate.

At the same time, the institutional and public benefits of recognizing and resourcing these activities take place in the context of an increasing and uneven level of risk to individual researchers, particularly for women and BIPOC scholars (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour). Scholars from these groups are more severely targeted, and scholarship on pressing or highly debated issues is often the most likely to draw attacks, including, for instance, research on racism, gender, climate change, and vaccines—and just about anything to do with COVID-19. While many of these issues may not be as polarizing in Canada as in the United States, Canada-based scholars are nevertheless being attacked for providing evidence that is inconsistent with certain political positions or beliefs, and not just by Canada-based individuals. This is correlated with larger cultural shifts—including the increasing importance of online interactions, growing mistrust of public

institutions, more inflammatory rhetoric in various parts of the public sphere—that are addressed in a growing body of scholarship that informs this briefing, but are not its focus.

After reviewing some of the context and scholarship on harassment and threats against researchers, this policy briefing turns to policies and actions that can be implemented in the near term: to gather information on the problem (recommendations 2 and 3); to better frame public research communications (recommendations 1, 4, 5, and 6); and to ensure that mechanisms are readily available to support researchers who are threatened (recommendation 7). The drivers of the harassment and intimidation of researchers are complex, widespread, and global in their reach. Nonetheless, we can do more to ensure that Canadians fully benefit from the work of Canada's researchers while also preserving the security and safety of those researchers. Given the federal government's key role in funding research, and the diversity of research and post-secondary environments among the provinces, our focus is on federal and institutional capacity to address these problems. However, provinces, media, social media companies, and other research-related groups also need to consider the dangers as well as the benefits of the present environment and should have a role in making it better.

Our mandate focusses on researchers, but we are well aware that these types of behaviour are also harming journalists, politicians, public-health communicators, and many others more fully in the public eye than researchers. Recommendation 3 in particular may help to address this wider problem, and it is our hope that the other recommendations will also support better policies in other sectors.

Recommendations

Funding Agencies

1. that the Tri-Agency (encompassing CIHR, SSHRC, and NSERC) strike a multidisciplinary task force that represents the diversity of research in Canada and includes experts from directly relevant fields (such as social media, scientific communication, and ethics) to develop a more robust, concrete, and nuanced framework for knowledge mobilization. Safety must be considered not only as a general concern, but also in relation to evidence that threats can be significantly shaped by misogyny, white supremacy, and other forms of targeted hate.

Federal Government

2. that Statistics Canada implement follow-up waves and expand the Survey of Postsecondary Faculty and Researchers to collect data on harassment, intimidation, and other threats from outside of scholars' institutions.

3. that the federal government initiate, in collaboration with the Canada Research Coordinating Committee and other relevant agencies, discussions of a nation-wide coordinated approach to gathering information about online threats and harassment across sectors.

4. that the federal government explore the possibility of creating a structure for regularizing quick access to research-based expertise to support government decision-making in rapidly evolving

situations. Key elements should include multidisciplinary, transparency, accountability, peer review, and robust public communications, as well as stable funding that ensures independence.

The Post-Secondary Sector

5. that the Canada Research Coordinating Committee lead a collaboration that includes Universities Canada, Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, and the Chief Science Advisor, as well as communications experts, to develop media-training modules for research staff, research administrators, and researchers of all disciplines to support safety and effectiveness in knowledge mobilization activities. These modules should be freely available to all Canadian post-secondary institutions and there should be mechanisms in place to ensure that they are updated regularly.

6. that all post-secondary institutions have an easily accessible webpage for transparency and accountability to inform the public on standard quality-control mechanisms for academic research and education.

7. that all post-secondary institutions have a readily accessible policy and action plan in place to support scholars who are significantly harassed, threatened, or intimidated because of their research or public-facing work. The policy should apply to all faculty, postdoctoral fellows, graduate students, and other researchers.