

Be prepared to answer criticisms, but don't let this approach dominate

It is worth having a defence of criticisms made against you. Write it down and file it for future use. It can be cathartic to write down the rationale for your work and to answer criticisms when you are under fire. This can then be used to respond to respected stakeholders who ask about the criticisms of your work, such as journalists, parliamentarians or patients. But do avoid the temptation to spend large amounts of time writing responses to every criticism ever made about your work, spending time posting responses on websites, or replying to emails from those with extreme views.

The internet

Those with extreme views about research often use the internet to air their concerns. When reading these sources it is worth keeping in mind that these websites are often read by a small number of people who already hold these views. In addition, you should remember that most members of the public would not take their information about a topic from websites that are extreme in their views.

We have come across some researchers who spend large amounts of time reading what is written about their research online – this can be very upsetting and can lead you to be even more defensive about your work. If you find this happens to you, ask someone else to keep an eye on the web and only alert you if they feel there is something new appearing that you need to know.

That said, the internet is a source of information for the public so you should make sure there is accurate information about your research on the web. There are plenty of places you could post this information – on your own website, your institutional website, or your funder's/professional society's website. Consider joining together with other experts in the field and setting up a professional group that could have a website to give more information and resources about your work. Avoid using your web presence to rebut criticism; this simply perpetuates the accusations made against you.

Get support

Don't suffer on your own. There are many people who have had similar experiences that could give

you advice, colleagues that could support you and organisations that can help. This document deals only with engaging with the media and the public, but there will be other things you need to seek support on, e.g. if complaints are being made against you, if you are receiving a large number of FOI requests or if you think you might need security.

YOUR PEERS

Do your peers know you are going through this? If they don't you should let them know as they may be able to offer support. You might also find they are having a similar experience and you could work together to tackle the problems.

YOUR INSTITUTION

Does your head of department know what is going on? In serious cases senior management within your institution should be informed. Making them aware allows them to help and if complaints are made against you they will already know the background. Your institution should also be able to give you support in dealing with FOI requests, engaging with the media and possibly helping with legal and security advice.

YOUR RESEARCH FUNDER

Funders may want to know if you are being targeted. They may be able to offer support and may also be being targeted themselves for having funded research in a certain area.

SCIENCE MEDIA CENTRE

We can offer support for researchers working in controversial areas that are likely to hit the news by helping you engage with the national news media to ensure your voice is heard. In some cases we may also be able to raise awareness of the harassment you are suffering in the media. We can also alert stakeholders such as press officers in relevant organisations, funding agencies etc.

SUPPORT4RS

Originally set up to support animal researchers, Support4rs has developed a good understanding of what to do to protect yourself against those with extreme views. They can give advice on the profile of someone with extreme views, how to deal with complaints, harassment, a large volume of FOI requests and give advice on the risks you may be facing. Contact info@support4rs.com



Science Media Centre
where science meets the headlines

ADVICE FOR RESEARCHERS EXPERIENCING HARASSMENT

For more information, contact the Science Media Centre:

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www.sciencemediacentre.org

All researchers should expect their work to be scrutinised by the public, policy makers and campaigners. However, some researchers working on high-profile subjects that attract controversy, such as radiation, climate change, animal research or chronic fatigue syndrome/ME, have also found themselves targeted by people who have extreme views about their research.

In contrast to healthy debate about scientific research, this harassment could include abusive emails, threats to personal safety, malicious complaints to institutions or regulatory bodies, bombardment with Freedom of Information (FOI) requests or libellous posts about researchers on the internet. Not only can this hold up research and present a risk to the reputation of the researchers involved, it can also prevent researchers engaging effectively with the media, the public and other stakeholders.

There is a serious risk that researchers become focussed on answering those with extreme views rather than speaking to the media, wider public and policy makers. This means that valuable opportunities to communicate with the broader public and stakeholders, who often have not formed an opinion about the issues, can be lost.

The Science Media Centre is an independent press office for science in the media dealing with high profile, controversial issues in the headlines. We spend time working with researchers who have been targeted and want to share our tips on ensuring your voice is heard by the public and policy makers. We see time and time again how engaging with the media can help ensure public opinion is on your side, and how this reduces the chance of you being targeted in future.

Don't allow yourself to be silenced

Researchers being targeted often shy away from doing media work as they are concerned that this will attract more criticism. Our extensive experience in this area suggests that doing media work does not increase the chance of a researcher being targeted. And if you stop engaging with the media you may struggle to reach out to the wider public, thereby creating a vacuum of information that those critical of your research can exploit. In contrast, by engaging with the media you can get your messages across to the public and policy makers, making you less likely to be targeted rather than more.

Communicate your research

When under fire, understandably, many researchers become defensive and focussed on answering criticisms. There is a danger this can seep into communications you have with the media and the wider public and it can make you sound like you have a case to answer, thereby giving validity to those with extreme views. Although there are times when you will need to address criticisms, do not allow this to spill over into other times when you need to communicate. It is important to step back from accusations about your research and think about the positive message that you want to get across. Even if the audience have heard accusations about your research, they may not have made up their minds. So be proud of the research you do, think about what you want the public to hear and keep upbeat if at all possible.

Step back and assess the situation

Sometimes it can feel like there are more people who have extreme views about your research than there actually are. In most cases there will only be a very small number of people who strongly object to your work, but they are very vocal. Those supporting your research are often the silent majority. Keep the situation in proportion! It can help to ask yourself some questions:

- How many people are there who have extreme views about my work?
- Are they representative of the wider public?
- Do they represent policy makers, funders, patients I treat or other important stakeholders?

- Do they have significant influence over any of the above?
- How many people out there support what I am doing?

It is also important to remember that you are doing research you believe in. If you can communicate your views effectively, it is likely most people would agree with you.

Think about who you want to speak to

Researchers who are targeted by those with extreme views often get caught up in dialogue with those making accusations about their work. This takes up so much time that they are unable to focus on communicating to a wider audience. So before beginning any dialogue you should ask yourself whether engaging with those who have extreme views is going to have any impact – will it change their mind? The answer is almost always no. The advice from experts in this area, including the police, is to avoid engagement with these extreme critics. Instead, focus on those who are interested in listening to your views and would give you a fair hearing, such as the general public, news media, policy makers or a patient group, and make sure you spend time proactively communicating with them.

Be honest and transparent about your field of work

All researchers should be honest and transparent about their work, but this is even more important if you are being targeted. For example, make sure you declare your funding sources, are up front and honest about any uncertainties in your work, and explain the limitations of your research. Sadly researchers who are being targeted sometimes reveal less information for fear of giving ammunition to those with extreme views.

We would always advise that you proactively communicate anything that you think could be used to try to undermine your work. If the information comes from you, then you have the opportunity to give context and explain the background. If you wait, this information could be seized on by those that do not like your research and they may set it in a negative light.