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Opening & Roadmap

Welcome to this work. You might be new to the topics connected to online behavior and its impact, but, more than likely, you already know both the big opportunities and major challenges associated with it. Perhaps you've come to have feelings about the subject because of a personal experience, or because of something you witnessed. Maybe you're here because you're concerned about a friend or family member. Or, maybe you're here because you want to learn more and be a good ally. One or all of these things can be true, as can the many other reasons why it's important to come together in community spaces to discuss this subject and all the subjects to which it relates.

This material was prepared as part of the multimedia project: "Din: Modern Behavior and Suppression in Online Spaces," which includes an episodic documentary film by journalist and public speaker Amy Guth as well as workshops about these very topics that might be on your mind.

In this course, we'll work together to take a look at: what we believe and know about online spaces, what's at stake and why we should bother, why online spaces are important to protect and the challenges they present, how to "show up" for one another and ourselves, and how to work towards improving online culture.

At the conclusion, you'll also hopefully have reflected on your own experience in online spaces and how you can use the tools and strategies in this course out in the world, too.

Community Values

In order to foster an environment of sharing and learning, and especially on this topic, set the tone by walking through a list of community values. Learners will have this in their materials packet, and you can add certainly add other community values as appropriate for the group.

1. **Tech-free talk.** While we're talking about online spaces and technology, it's important to everyone present and participating so let's put phones and laptops away except for segments of the material that specifically asks for it to be used.
2. **It's okay to disagree.** It's great to have different ideas and contribute many points of view to a discussion, but it's important to have respect for each other and keep disagreement about the idea, not the person.
3. **Step up and step back.** Make sure everyone has a chance to contribute to the conversation, while recognizing not everyone feels equally comfortable or empowered about speaking up.

Opening Activity

Participants will introduce themselves, briefly, with name and answer to this prompt: “What is one new feature or tool you’d add to (Twitter/Facebook/Instagram/YouTube etc) to help make it feel safer? “

Notes:

Defining the stakes, the “whys” and the risks

What are the stakes and why is understanding online behavior important?

Understanding online behavior-- the good, the bad and everything in-between-- is important: while it might be easy for some to dismiss concerns about our interactions that happen online as being not real or as simply something we should ignore, technology is an increasingly large and important part of our lives, and, as a result, the lines between our online lives and our offlines lives have blurred.

Yet, even as of a 2017 study by the Pew Research Center, nearly half of all Americans experienced some form of online harassment and over 60% considered it a “major problem.” 18% reported having been the target of severe behaviors such as physical threats, sexual harassment.

We often hear, in relation to online harassment and abuse, “don’t feed the trolls.” While sometimes comments online indeed aren’t worth our time, this often-uttered phrase points to a key issue when we talk about online behavior: saying “don’t feed the trolls” puts the burden of safety on the person experiencing trolling, harassment, or abuse. By doing this, we help normalize mean-spirited, toxic, or dangerous behavior online.

To examine this further, we need to consider both the reasons why such behavior happens online, as well as the potential consequences for those who experience it.

Why it happens

Even in cases of insults and threats from “bots,” that is, social profiles designed to automatically interact with others without much or any human effort, as well as with human harassers, often, the main purpose of this toxic behavior is to intimidate, frighten, or upset their target in order to create a sense of power and control over them.

No doubt receiving mean-spirited, rude, sexualizing, and/or threatening comments online can be upsetting-- just as it would be if said in-person. As such, it’s also important to develop skills to be a supportive ally to those who have experienced any form of online harassment. After all, what might be no big deal to one person, might be extremely traumatic to another, so it’s important to let others experience their feelings.

Which brings us to another key point in the broader conversation about online behavior and culture: what happens after people have an upsetting experience in an online space?

What's at stake

As online harassment becomes increasingly pervasive in our culture, we also see its impact. From limiting online activity and deleting social profiles, to anxiety, mental health crisis and self-harm, the impact of online harassment and abuse is an essential aspect of discussion around this topic.

The reason? All too often, we've all seen people opting-out of the public conversation after experiencing online harassment and abuse-- celebrities, journalists, sports figures, business leaders and so on.

Indeed, using our voices can and should have impact and consequences, and certainly there are risks we take when speaking truth to power, when standing up for ourselves and for others, and for expressing our opinions and being heard. While deciding to participate in the public conversation and making your voice heard through online platforms is a personal decision, it shouldn't be a decision made out of fear.

Technology, and social media in particular, has given rise to entire social movements, has allowed the public to have quick access to important health and safety information, has helped hold leaders more accountable than perhaps ever before, and has changed what it means to be a witness and a bystander. But, it's also laid out some real social and culture issues worthy of our consideration and effort to repair.

Through this material, we'll discuss these consequences-- both the consequences of participating in online spaces as well as the risks of *not* participating; we'll discuss tools and strategies to intervene on behalf of someone experiencing online harassment and/or abuse, as well as those to protect ourselves, and we'll do so in order to deeply consider how to create and participate in online spaces in whatever safe and healthy manner we define for ourselves.

Activity: “Whys” and Risks

Freewrite: Participants will have 5 minutes to freewrite about why it’s important to be online. It could be for professional branding, to keep in touch with friends and family, because a love of love taking and posting photos, it could be a combination of things.

Pair-share: Participants will have 5-10 minutes to turn to their neighbor and share about why they’re online.

Freewrite: Participants now will have 2-3 additional minutes to write down any useful feedback from their partners, and to try to reduce their list of “whys” to a few core focuses for participating in online spaces.

Group Brainstorm: Together, discuss problems and risks associated with being online. Name issues, fears, and risks associated with using online spaces.

Notes:

We've just made a list of very real risks and dangers of participating in online spaces and of a range of problems that online spaces pose for some of their users.

Some dominant narratives have emerged around online behavior, too: don't feed the trolls, don't put yourself out there, "you have a public job what did you expect", (name other specific things that arose in this discussion), etc, but all of those perpetuate the problem because they put the responsibility on us to fend for ourselves, with very little involved about the culture that allows these things to happen and doesn't hold people more accountable for dangerous behavior online.

And that's the work before us, together. Because if you look back at your list of why you believe it's important to be in online spaces, the stakes shift a little don't they? Because then without a big change to online spaces, others are impacting our list of whys-- (name a few that came up in the room from the list you made to drive this point home) and more, others are silencing voices, making us feel afraid, and making us alter our behavior. And that's about control.

Defining Online Issues

In this next segment, we'll examine some terms and concepts within online harassment, as well as discuss several strategies for intervention and safety.

Glossary of Terms

Cyberbullying: an often general-use terms to refer to any number of undesirable, harassing behaviors online and may include humiliation, threats, and/or persistent problematic behavior online.

Cyber-mob: a coordinated and often, though not exclusively, spontaneous group of individuals in an online setting who attempt to discredit, threaten, doxx, and/or harass an individual, often with the end-goal of silencing the intended target.

Cyberstalking: an extension of physical forms of stalking, cyberstalking is the use of communication technology including social media platforms and email to stalk, intimidate, threaten or harass another person that is methodical, deliberate and persistent.

Denial of Service (DoS) attack: an online-based attack that results in legitimate users becoming unable to access devices, computers, information systems or other network resources due to the malicious actions of another. Such attacks overwhelm a given system with data, aimed at either temporarily or permanently crashing a server and causing it to become inoperable.

Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack: an online-based attack that occurs when multiple users and/or machines are coordinated and operating together against one target. Often used to carry out large-scale attacks, DDoS attacks generally involve a significant number of attackers taking advantage of security vulnerabilities.

Doxxing: intentionally and maliciously publishing sensitive personal information about someone online in an effort to identify, harass, frighten intimidate, blackmail, stalk, or defraud the target, and can include social security numbers, phone numbers, addresses, personal photos, employment information, banking information, email addresses, schedules or routes, family members personal information.

Hacking: unauthorized access into a network or device, sometimes done with intention to attack, defraud, harm, incriminate, and/or blackmail a target by accessing or stealing their data,

violating their privacy, or causing devices or networks to become infected by viruses-- malware intentionally designed to replicate and spread.

Hate Speech: a type of expression involving attacking a particular aspect of a person's identity including one's race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability, and often directed against a person's attributes or character rather than the position they are maintaining in an effort to undermine a legitimate intellectual point or argument.

Impersonation Trolling: (also "online impersonation") A harassment action in which one or more false social media profiles are created with the intention of posting inaccurate, inflammatory or controversial content while pretending to be their target. Impersonation trolling is often done with the end goal of defamation, and/or to encourage or incite reaction and/or backlash against their target from others.

Online threats: Statements made online, often aimed at being intentionally frightening, physically or sexually intimidating.

Threat: Making a statement of taking an action that implies or suggests harm to someone else.

Nonconsensual photo/video: Any sharing or distributing, or threatening to share or distribute, any private, sexually-explicit images or videos of an individual without their consent. Often called "revenge porn" and frequently falling into the category of images once shared consensually between partners and later shared without consent of the person depicted in the image, nonconsensual photo/video can also include unauthorized access and distribution of images by known or unknown persons.

Online Sexual Harassment: Generally impacting female-identifying people more than those who identify as male (though it does occur against all genders), online sexual harassment encompassed a range of sexual misconduct in digital spaces and on digital platforms, often manifesting as hate speech, online threats, and sexualizing and/or threatening language. Online sexual harassment can include any of the following:

Sexual exploitation, threats or blackmail: being forced by threat to participate in sexual behavior online or offline, and/or being blackmailed by threat of exposing sexual content.

Sexualization: receiving unwanted requests, demands, comments, or content of a sexual nature.

Trolling: Intentionally posting information online to entice others to respond. It can also involve behavior that seeks attention, intentionally harm or discredit someone, or stir controversy. This term has become very widespread in its use and now also can casually refer to anything from mean-spirited comments to hate-speech to friendly sarcasm between friends.

Swatting: Not actually taking place online, though often the result of online harassment and/or abuses, swatting is the act of placing a call to law enforcement describing a false and dangerous situation taking place at a target's home, school or place of business with the intention of triggering an aggressive law enforcement response.

Strategies for Intervention, Safety and Self-Care

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution to addressing online harassment, culture and abuses, there are many proven strategies we can use to protect ourselves and show up for others.

Intervention, which is the act of interrupting the course of online harassment or abuse to prevent harm of another, takes many forms and strategies include preparing to intervene through various measures including familiarizing yourself with some basics of what it means to intervene as a bystander, determining the type of harassment or abuse taking place, assessing the threat level (your own safety and how well you know the target receiving the abuse), and considering the best way to intervene.

Check in: One sometimes overlooked strategy for dealing with online harassment and abuse is to check in with the target when you see it occurring. This can involve an email, text or direct message with a simple, "Hey, are you okay?" can go a long way.

Similarly, when you are experiencing harassment online, it can also be effective to reach out to a trusted friend or loved one to express how you feel about the harassment. Sometimes, feeling heard and understood can go a long way.

Deescalate: Using language that helps deescalate the situation can be an especially useful strategy. Ways to accomplish that includes: condemning the behavior instead of the attacker, and directly defining the impact of the behavior on your community.

Decide Your Goal: Before acting, decide what you want to happen out of your intervention. Do you want to report the harassment and potentially get the abuser banned from the platform? Undermine and disarm the harasser with humor? Fact-check a false claim? Enlist others? Decide first, and create a plan for how you will accomplish that.

Documentation: While it can take up a lot of time and potentially trigger feelings of anxiety, documenting instances of online harassment and abuse can be an essential step in order to report online harassment to law enforcement or pursuing legal action against an online abuser. If the harassment is particularly upsetting, you can consider asking a trusted friend or family member to help you document instances of harassment.

Don't Engage: You always have the option of not engaging with your harasser, and that's your choice. In cases where there is a specific threat that you believe is a legitimate threat to your safety, it's often best not to engage and report the threat to law enforcement instead.

Rally: Rallying support from your others in your community is almost always an option for dealing with harassment. This can be accomplished through privately asking trusted allies to help protect you or the person being targeted, help document harassment, help report bad behavior, and similar actions.

Report: One method of intervention is to report the harassing or abusive content to the platform on which it appears, right away, as soon as you see it happening. There's no guarantee any platform will take action against offensive content, it's often an effective strategy, especially against sexualizing or threatening language, hate speech or content involving specific threats of harm.

Remember, there is no perfect combination of strategies to intervene in cases of online harassment and abuse, but by considering the situation carefully, assessing which strategies might be most effective, you can take steps to be a good ally.

Statements: Another strategy for addressing online harassment is to speak out against online harassment. Identify what it is, state why it's a problem, and encourage others to speak out as well with an easy call to action. In cases of concern about provoking the harasser, consider speaking out against the specific behavior rather than the individual, as a strategy.

Self-Care

Sometimes, despite using smart strategies, online harassment can still trigger feelings of anxiety, sadness, frustration, and isolation. Below are some strategies for self-care to practice regularly, and especially in times of uncomfortable feelings.

Breathe: No matter what's happening, take a minute and check in with yourself. Take a deep breath and decide what should happen next

Journal: Journaling about your experience can be super helpful for processing anxiety and trauma related to online harassment, and can help you process with a bit of distance.

Meditate: Whether formally or informally, taking a few moments of quiet time to breathe deeply and listen to your own mind can be tremendously helpful in times of intense stress.

Pets: Our animal friends love us no matter what anybody says online. Sounds simple, but our pets can be a source of comfort when things are out of hand online.

Unplug: Shut off your devices, ask a trusted friend to keep an eye on your accounts, and take a break. Sometimes types of online harassment can blow over after a few days, and a few days away from technology can help create distance and feel grounding.

Volunteer: Volunteering time for an organization that fights the type of online harassment you're experiencing can be a healing way to process your feelings about the experience, and can often offer the added benefit of connection to others with similar experiences.

Activity: Group Analysis

Facilitator will divide participants into small groups of 3-5 people per group. Each group will have 30-40 minutes to work together to read, discuss and analyze a case study containing an example of online harassment or abuse.

After assigning a case study to each small group, ask participants to silently read their assigned case study, and discuss as a group, using the Case Study Discussion Guide in their Curriculum Packet.

Each group will also pick a spokesperson for the group. Once discussion is complete, bring the full group of learners back together and ask each group spokesperson, in turn, to:

1. Give a summary of the assigned case-study
 - a. Outline what happened and why in the case study scenario
 - b. Describe what the group found particularly striking, interesting or unique about the situation described in the case study, interesting or unique about the situation described in the case study
 - c. Explain what intervention tactics they discussed taking as a group if the situation described were to happen to an acquaintance and/or what steps they might take if the scenario were to happen to them.

Activity: Service Project

Activity: 15-20 minutes

Debrief: 5-10 minutes

In this section, participants will spend 15-20 minutes privately having a group discussion about ideas for a group service project.

Closing

As we close out our time together, let us reflect on what new ideas we might be leaving with based on how we've shared with each other thought the day. Today, we took a look at what we believe and know about online harassment, what's at stake and why it matters, why online spaces are important to protect, the unique challenges they present, how to intervene for others, and, in doing that, how to work toward improving online culture.

We've also examined some of the dominant narratives around online behavior, and how *not* challenging them can be problematic in the long run and silence voices. We're discussed why harassment and abuse happens online and why technology is increasingly an important part of our lives. From social movements to citizen journalism, to democratizing arts and media, to holding the powerful to new levels of accountability

Most of all, we've discussed why it matters and what's at stake: our mental health, our professional credibility, our voices, our beliefs, our culture, and our safety.