

Cyberbullying: Online Anxieties

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“If you can’t say something nice...don’t say nothing at all.” – Thumper Rabbit, *Bambi*, 1942.

Recently I had to present a paper at our local rheumatology journal club. The choice is always difficult, with the ideal paper being interesting but a bit offbeat. While searching, an article came across my desk on treatment trends in psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis (PsA). The lead author was an American dermatology researcher, Dr. April Armstrong.¹

The article was a typical scientific paper, with the requisite tables and graphs, research methods, discussion, and conclusions. However, in the instructions regarding the corresponding author, I found a comment that I have never before seen in a scientific paper. The author provided her email address, followed by instructions indicating that her address was provided “for intellectual questions regarding the article only”.

I wondered why she had found it necessary to make that comment. The answer is not too difficult to discern. Social media exposure, including disclosure of a personal email address, leaves one open and vulnerable to anyone on the Internet. A recent article in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)* in September 2014² discussed issues with post-publication peer review on social media. Traditionally, one would write a letter to the editor to dispute points raised in a scientific paper. The editor would function as a neutral mediator. However, the availability of multiple social media platforms allows researchers to critique one another, sometimes in a very negative way, without any filtering. The *CMAJ* article discusses back and forth interactions between researchers characterized as cyber-bullying and mocking.

Another April was targeted in Toronto around the same time, in a social media attack on Twitter. This had nothing to do with science, but rather with the passion of Toronto Maple Leafs fans for a winning season, after 47 years without a Stanley Cup. In March 2014, one of the Maple Leafs goaltenders, James Reimer, had a particularly poor game. On social media, notably Twitter, his wife April Reimer

received a number of offensive comments.^{3,4} One went so far as to suggest she stab her husband while he slept.

Women certainly feel more vulnerable than men in this setting. I checked out a scientific paper by a leading male psoriatic arthritis researcher, Dr. Iain McInnes, reporting on the PSUMMIT-1 study. He listed his email address without any qualification or apparent worry.

The broader social context also plays a role. I am writing this article in the midst of the never-ending explorations of the sordid Jian Ghomeshi affair, while Canadian MPs continue to accuse each other of sexual harassment on Parliament Hill. As well, one of our journal club members pointed out the “Gamergate” controversy when I presented the Armstrong article, in which female video game developers and their supporters were the subjects of online harassment and threats of violence, leading some to flee their homes.⁵

I hope that Dr. Armstrong does not experience any problems regarding the publication of her article. I actually did use her email address myself, writing to compliment her on the article itself, and to ask for a PDF for my files. She responded quickly and graciously. I would like to think I reduced her anxiety about publication of her email address a little bit.

References

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