

“I’m in the news today, oh boy”: responding to smear tactics and media bullying

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It is quite common for activists to be smeared and pursued by the media. Often this follows from deliberate leaks of personal information by police to crime journalists, who depend on them for their stories. It is important for to remember that this is **bullying**; it is a technique used by the powerful to silence opposition.

Your reactions and responses will be similar to those who have experienced other types of bullying, such as that which happens in the school yard or the workplace. “Bullying” can sound like something small that we should not be affected by in comparison with the seriousness of the issues we are working on. However, it can be very destructive personally and psychologically. It is a serious violation of one’s sense of self, and can trigger reactions associated with our past experiences of violence, intimidation and abuse.

It is important to remember that this is not your fault.

It is important to recognise what is happening to you as *bullying*.

It is important to realize that you are not alone. That this has happened to activists in the past and will happen again in the future.

Happily however, unlike other types of bullying, usually this type of bullying media attention **does not last long**. The media move on to other stories. The media’s role is ultimately to produce sensationalist reports with the aim of increasing the size of their audience. Journalists play a role in this and produce articles that reinforce the opinions of their readership whilst also promoting the views and interests of the owners of the media outlet. That is not to say that people will believe everything that’s written in the media; most people are generally skeptical about the truth of the media, and often will forget stories soon after they have read them.

Bullying techniques used by the media

1. They might attempt to belittle your political beliefs:

- They may quote things you have done or said out of context.
- They may try to use your family background or work history to undermine your political beliefs.

- They may make inflated claims of your influence and standing in the movement. You may be described as a "leader" or a "ring-leader" or even a mastermind!
- They may invent or make up details about your background.

Criticisms and allegations, which are ostensibly about you and which sometimes contain a grain (but only a grain) of truth, are **not** about you. Do not be fooled by that grain of truth into believing the criticisms and allegations have any validity - they do not. The purpose of criticism is political; it is an attempt by the powerful to take control of a situation back. Remember they are acting in this way because they feel threatened.

2. They might attempt to undermine your sense of self:

- They may try to ridicule or mock you, try to damage your reputation using gossip or rumours.
- Women in particular may face criticism of your looks, they may take unflattering photographs, criticise your sexual behaviour, your sexual orientation or relationship status; if you have children you may be depicted as a "bad mother".

3. They might attempt to invade your privacy:

- They may come to your house or follow you.
- They may take photographs of you without your permission.
- They may ring your friends, family, or workplace for quotes or photographs. For some reason they often want baby photographs.
- They may attempt to intimidate you or use aggressive language.

4. Their articles may try to threaten you in other ways:

- If you are employed, they may suggest that you should not be employed to do your current job.
- If you are not a citizen, they may suggest that you should not be allowed to remain in the country.

It is important to remember that these threats are almost always ineffective in themselves - but what they do is to provoke a sense of fear and insecurity by falsely linking your political views to other things. (In many countries it would be illegal for an employer to dismiss you over your political beliefs, for example.)

Emotions that you may feel

All this might make you feel vulnerable, angry, worried, useless, threatened, powerless, lonely, excluded, anxious about going outside, ashamed, embarrassed, guilty, afraid, or exposed.

These are normal reactions, but they are also tactics of control. Guilt and fear are how all abusers control and silence their victims: the victim comes to believe the lies that the abuser tells about them, or is afraid that others will believe them.

What can you do for yourself?

Don't try and tackle this bullying alone. Draw on your support networks, friends, family, and comrades.

Answering the allegations: Don't respond to the media on their terms. If you are being doorstepped, close the door. If they ring you, say "no comment". Often it is best not to respond at all. If you feel impelled to respond, give yourself time to think about it, or talk to a friend. Often bullies and journalists are seeking to provoke a response: your emotion sells their newspapers, and helps them to make "their" story run and run.

If you do decide to respond, discuss the best way to do it with your friends and fellow activists. Respond on your terms in your own time. Make your own film or recording of any interaction. Talk to the sections of the media that have been sympathetic or trustworthy, and not to those that have been bullying you. Remember, you do not have to talk to the media directly, instead you can release press statements to your own independent media.

If you are being followed or intimidated, take out your phone and film or photograph them back.

Be aware that we are all social animals. Often we are influenced by we see and hear in the media. You may internalise some of the criticisms made of you. Your friends may believe some of the 'hidden truths' told about you.

Talk: Find a friend who you can talk to, talk about the media are doing, and how it is making you feel. If this is a time of intense media attention, try and debrief at least once a day.

Write: Keep a journal, a logbook or a write a list. Try and work out how the media is attempting to bully you, how that is affecting you, and reassure yourself that the media stories are not true; use positive self-talk techniques.

Contact: family members and friends and tell them what is happening. Ask them not to comment or respond to journalists. If you are worried about your employer, and you feel they may be understanding, also tell them what is happening.

Look after yourself: If you have relaxation strategies, use them. Try meditation, swimming, exercise, reading, gardening, walking your dog. Cats make excellent pet therapists.

Treat yourself! If there are things you enjoy, go and do them: movies, gigs, hanging out with friends. If you have trouble sleeping or repetitive thoughts, go and see your doctor or a counsellor.

Research: Look for online resources. Find anti-bullying material for adults, or resources for people dealing with sexual harassment and stalkers, etc.

Three good starting points for activists are Marina Bernal's *Self-care and self-defence manual for feminist activists*, online at <http://files.creaworld.org/files/self-care-brochure.pdf> (14 megabytes so a slow download); Jane Barry and Jelena Dordevic's booklet about how women human rights defenders cope, online at <http://www.urgentactionfund.org/assets/files/WtPoftheRevolution/UAF-Book%201-WEB.pdf>; and the Activist Trauma Support material at <http://www.activist-trauma.net>.

When it is over, be on hand to help other activists who find themselves in the same situation. If you can, write an account or share your experience with others. We grow stronger by learning from each other.

For family and friends

If a friend or family member is at the receiving end of a smear campaign your support is vital. They will need reassurance. They will need someone to listen. They will need distraction. Be aware of the emotions they may be feeling (outlined above). Remember, that although we often we deal with stress by humour, teasing is not a supportive or appropriate response to someone who is in a vulnerable position. Recognise that it is stressful to be the target of a media campaign. Be a good friend.

About the authors

Aileen O'Carroll was a spokesperson for the Dublin Grassroots Network during the May Day protests in Dublin in 2004. A tabloid wrote an article titled "Anarchist organiser by night, teaches our children by day". She taught first year sociology university students at the time. She was also chased through through Dublin streets by a hostile and physically aggressive RTE *Prime Time* journalist, soundman and filmcrew. Eventually she was forced to hide in the Ladies' Room of a local pub. She continues to work both as a sociologist with an interest in working time, social movements and life history research, an activist and a trade-unionist. Her email is [aaocarroll AT gmail.com](mailto:aaocarroll@gmail.com).

Alessio Lunghi was first named as a key organiser in the run up to Mayday 2001 in the *London Evening Standard*, *Daily Mail*, *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* newspapers. This culminated with a front page expose a year later on May 2nd, 2002 again in the *London Evening Standard* - distributed to over 1 million people. Over an 8 year period, the most recent being in the lead up to the G20 demonstrations in London in 2009, alleged associations ranged from links to the PKK, Black Bloc and Italian anarchist groups. There have also been similar exposures in the *Irish Daily Mirror* and *Daily Star* in 2004 in the lead up to Dublin Mayday as well as newspapers in Italy namely *Corriera Della Sera*, *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *la Repubblica*, and in Scotland in the run up to the G8 demonstrations in 2005.

Laurence Cox has been involved in activist media work for a long time in a wide range of different contexts. He has occasionally come under fire from journalists and hate groups and has also supported friends targetted by media and Internet smears. A Buddhist meditation teacher, he has published research on personal sustainability for activists. His email is laurence.cox AT nuim.ie.