"No matter what I did, I couldn't tap into it. The debate wasn't mine"
Researchers' affective disconnection from reputation-threatening experiences of digital harassment through micro-media practices

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Abstract

This article explores how researchers exposed to digital harassment affectively experience and then transform the negative affects of these encounters through everyday media practices of disconnection. Based on interviews with 28 Danish researchers, the analysis shows that researchers' experiences of digital harassment are related above all to affects of losing control over one's public reputation. Researchers navigate and attempt to disconnect from these affects through three micro-media strategies: 1) responding to aggressors in alternative formats with the aim of defending their research; 2) saving harassing content, so as to create an imagined pause in the uncontrollable digital circulation of their reputation; and 3) blocking, deleting, and (de)selecting platforms to withdraw from the digital turmoil towards a sense of peace. The article concludes by discussing whether this form of affective (media) labor can be understood as a "hidden" digital work aimed at avoiding becoming the subject of a mediated scandal.

Keywords

Digital harassment of researchers, affective labor, disconnection, reputation, scandal

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Introduction

Researchers engaged in public outreach and communicating their expert knowledge through public media and/or social media are increasingly encountering digital harassment (Celuch et al., 2022; Gosse et al., 2021; Oksanen et al., 2022). Digital harassment refers to intimidating, hostile, humiliating, threatening, or offensive contact by an aggressor with a target through the use of digital media (e.g., email, social media), and as defined encompasses both gravely concerning digital actions (e.g., death threats) and less concerning digital actions (e.g., name-calling or rumor spreading) (Bossler et al., 2012; Lenhart et al., 2016; Marwick, 2021). Research shows that digital harassment can generate a "digital spiral of silence" among researchers (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2018), leading many to refrain from commenting on certain topics, limit their use of social media, and in some cases withdraw entirely from media engagement or their profession (Branford et al., 2019; Celuch et al., 2022; Ketchum, 2020; Väliverronen, 2021; Veletsianos et al., 2018). In the Danish context, recent studies show that 16 per cent of researchers surveyed (Christensen & Bang, 2021) and 32 per cent of Danish PhD Students (Richter, 2021) reported that they were afraid to share their knowledge in public. Supporting this finding, Danish researchers in virology as well as in gender and migration studies have publicly emphasized that they have been subjected to digital harassment following their public engagement, which in some cases has led to withdrawal from media activities or sick leave (262 køns- og migrationsforskere, 2021; Bohr et al., 2020; Mezouri, 2021). This phenomenon constitutes a general threat to knowledge exchange in society as it leads to the loss of relevant perspectives that are crucial for democratic public discussion of complex issues (Greenwood, 2010; Wright et al., 2022).

Recent studies have shown that researchers often rely on individual "micro-level" strategies to cope with digital harassment because they experience a general lack of support from their institutions (Hodson et al., 2018; Houlden et al., 2022), their professional network (Massanari, 2018), or the social media platforms concerned (Gosse et al., 2021). However, a more detailed understanding of researchers' lived and emotional experiences of digital harassment – and of the various individual laboring practices required to navigate these experiences – has yet to be established through adequate research (Veletsianos et al., 2018, p. 4702). Based on interviews with 28 Danish researchers in seven different research fields, the present article seeks to address this knowledge gap. It does so by exploring how the included researchers have affectively experienced digital harassment, and further, how they have navigated affects of these experiences through their daily micro-media practices. I refer to "affect" as an "impression that is felt on the surface of the skin" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 7). Following Ben Anderson (2016), this definition of affect can be further refined into three concepts: "object-targets", which are strategically produced or aimed for through different apparatuses (e.g., social media); "bodily capacitates", which can be moved or transformed through encounters (e.g., how people encounter content on social media); and "collective conditions", which shape how groups affectively relate

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to life more broadly. Within this study, the article examines how digital harassment as an affective "object-target" is experienced and transformed by researchers in their bodily and mediated encounters with harassing content. The paper thus addresses the following research question:

> *How do researchers experience and navigate affects resulting from exposure to digital harassment through their daily micro-media practices?*

The theoretical basis for the paper is the assumption that, in many cases today, expert work can be categorized as an "affective (media) labor" (Hardt, 1999; Hochschild, 1983). This means that in order to inhabit – and live well with – the role of public expert, researchers are required to navigate the affective consequences of digital harassment *as an integrated part of their job*. As the affective labor involved in handling digital harassment is often invisible in researchers' day-to-day management of digital media, it is reasonable to suggest that this type of labor relies on researchers' ability to disconnect from the harmful affective impact of digital harassment through their own daily use of digital media. In general, "disconnection" refers to breaking connections (e.g., by blocking or deleting), but it can also take the form of forging or strengthening of connections (e.g., by connecting to platforms or users so as to indirectly disconnect from other platforms or users) (Jansson & Adams, 2021; Light, 2014; Swanlund, 2021). Thus, the following paper has a particular focus on unfolding the perhaps hidden, everyday micro-media strategies of disconnection used by researchers in their affective labor of navigating experiences of digital harassment.

The article thus contributes to research on *the digital harassment of researchers*, *disconnection*, and *affective labor*. It does so by showing how these researchers' experiences of digital harassment primarily comprise affects related to the loss of control over one's public reputation. The article argues that these affects are navigated through three micro-media strategies of disconnection: 1) responding to aggressors in alternative formats, with the aim of defending one's academic reputation; 2) saving harassing content generated on public platforms, with the aim of creating an imagined form of control over the uncontrollable digital spread of one's reputation; and 3) blocking, deleting, and (de)selecting platforms, with the aim of moving away from the digital turmoil towards a sense of peace.

Literature review: Digital harassment of researchers

Studies exploring topics related to digital harassment of researchers have addressed three research areas: causes and explanations; personal and professional consequences; and strategies for handling digital harassment.

With regard to the causes of digital harassment, the rise of right-wing populism in western democratic societies has led to public challenges to researchers, who are seen as

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being a part of "an elite", posing a threat to the agency of "ordinary citizens" (Branford et al., 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Väliverronen, 2021). Right-wing populism in particular is concerned with the protection of national culture and territorial areas against perceived threats coming from non-traditional topics and lifestyles (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This aligns with studies concluding that researchers in contentious areas of research (Barlow & Awan, 2016; Cassidy et al., 2015; Hodson et al., 2018; Howell & Singer, 2017; Oksanen et al., 2022), as well as researchers who possess a minority identity (e.g., sexual or ethnic) (Gosse et al., 2021; Vera-Gray, 2017; Wright et al., 2022) are particularly exposed to digital attacks from the public. At the same time, researchers are expected to engage publicly in and through digital media because universities by law are tasked with communicating knowledge to a wide audience (Carrigan, 2022). Furthermore, researchers are increasingly dependent on external funding, which likewise compels them to promote their research in public (Väliverronen et al., 2022). As such, researchers are more or less compelled to maintain a presence in and through digital media, which heightens their public visibility and, consequently, their vulnerability to digital harassment (Branford et al., 2019; Celuch et al., 2022).

In addition, certain characteristics of today's digital infrastructures serve to amplify digital harassing actions. In the first place, they make it easy for aggressors to identify potential victims and other co-aggressors in digital spaces (e.g., in comment sections below the line) (Citron, 2014). Secondly, they increase the ease and convenience of harassing by offering accessible tools for harassing targets without significant costs in time or the requirement for physical presence (Citron, 2014; Lenhart et al., 2016). Finally, they enable aggressors to harass anonymously, which tends to exempt aggressors from being held accountable for their actions (Ferber, 2017). Given these properties, it can be argued that digital infrastructures are motivating and "mutually intoxicating" (Branford et al., 2019) members of the public to engage in digital harassment of researchers, who are often publicly visible and may simultaneously hold vulnerable positions in society.

A second area of research sheds light on the personal and professional consequences to researchers when they encounter digital harassment. Among the large array of personal consequences reported, three in particular seem to dominate researchers' experiences of digital harassment: 1) fear, and in particular the fear that digital threats may turn into real, physical actions (Ferber, 2018; Gosse et al., 2021; Savigny, 2020); 2) exhaustion, as a result of exposure to digital harassment on an array of digital sites at any time (Campbell, 2017; Gelms, 2021; Vera-Gray, 2017); and 3) anger, emerging from highly destructive experiences of fear and exhaustion (Barlow & Awan, 2016; Campbell, 2017; Ferber, 2018). The professional consequences of such experiences include both the loss of work-related self-confidence (Cassidy et al., 2015; Savigny, 2020) and a decline in work productivity as a result of self-censoring practices such as fully or periodically withdrawing from communication in the media (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Oksanen et al., 2022).

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Third, studies exploring researchers' strategies for handling digital harassment largely conclude that researchers lack support from what Houlden et al. (2022) refer to as the "meso level", which would comprise institutional and administrative support from one's university (e.g., in terms of concrete action plans) (Hodson et al., 2018; Houlden et al., 2022; Ketchum, 2020; Marwick et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2022), collegial support from one's professional network (Ferber, 2018; Hodson et al., 2018; Massanari, 2018), and legal and regulative support from the social media platforms concerned (Gosse et al., 2021). Lacking this support, researchers mostly rely on personal resources to cope with digital harassment and are thus compelled to find individual "micro-level" strategies to navigate it. This, in turn, increases the sum of emotional work researchers are required to do in addition to managing their regular job (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Hodson et al., 2018; Houlden et al., 2022; Ketchum, 2020; Veletsianos et al., 2018). The lack of institutional support and the professional consequences outlined above mean that the strategy of self-protection – such as withdrawing from the media – is frequently used to navigate digital harassment (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Oksanen et al., 2022; Veletsianos et al., 2018).

Given that digital harassment occurs through the use of digital media and is dependent on researchers' personal resources to cope with it, it is essential to explore whether and how the affective labor of navigating it is grounded in an often unnoticed, yet essential form of disconnective micro-media work. Thus, as urged by Veletsianos et al. (2018), the present paper contributes to the current literature by generating knowledge of researchers' lived, affective experiences of digital harassment and, further, how they navigate these experiences through their daily media practices of disconnection.

Theoretical framework: Affective labor and disconnection

Affective labor

The concept of "emotional labor" refers to work in which a part of the job requires the worker to manage and suppress their own feelings with the aim of producing a desired emotional state in others (Dobrosovestnova et al., 2022; Hochschild, 1983; Siapera, 2019). Since emotional labor relies on the individualized ability to manage outwardly directed emotions (e.g., the stewardess trying to make a customer happy), the concept was originally explored in relation to service jobs (Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1993; Paules, 1991) and care work (Bolton, 2005; Hayward & Tuckey, 2011; McDonald et al., 2020). Among other things, performing emotional labor often leads to such consequences as alienation from one's "real" feelings (Hochschild, 1983) and emotional exhaustion (Glomb & Tews, 2004).

Studies of emotional labor have recently expanded beyond the service and care work focus to address a broader range of occupations, particularly with the increasing role of digital media. For instance, as argued by Melissa Gregg (2011), the widespread use of digital technologies in various forms of immaterial knowledge work has incorporated

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affective dimensions into these labor practices as well. Immaterial knowledge work refers to jobs of "high degrees of expertise, education, or experience, and the primary purpose of their jobs involves the creation, distribution, or application of knowledge" (Davenport, 2005, p. 10). Knowledge workers must, for example, navigate the affective consequences of constant email monitoring or phone "tyranny" blurring the boundaries between professional and private life (Gregg, 2011, p. 18). In such cases, the emotional labor consists in the ability to manage inwardly directed affects and develop "inner" emotional resilience, rather than (as with service or care workers) managing outwardly directed affects aimed at creating a desired emotional state in others (Gregg, 2011). Additionally, labor in which the worker is expected to manage an "on-screen" presence – such as journalistic labor (Siapera, 2019; Šimunjak & Menke, 2023) and influencer labor (Mäkinen, 2021) – are also progressively examined through the concept of emotional labor.

Overall, these trends highlight that the integration of digital media into various forms of knowledge work has introduced often unnoticed elements of emotional labor. Importantly, in the present article, I refer to it as "affective labor" rather than "emotional labor", as I do not assume that people have a "true", static, or authentic emotional self (Dobrosovestnova et al., 2022; Weeks, 2007). Rather, with Anderson (2016) and Hardt (1999), I understand emotions and affects to be created and transformed through relational encounters which make them intangible, rather than something one can truly possess.

Disconnection

"Disconnection" fundamentally refers to the removal or breaking of established digital connections (e.g., by blocking users or stopping using specific platforms) (Light, 2014, p. 150). Following Karppi (2018), however, disconnection can also be understood more broadly as a concept that opens up alternative ways to think about our engagement with digital media. In this sense, disconnection may as well be enacted as a form of forging, strengthening, or even ignoring certain digital connections which allow users to change or add value to their connective experiences – for example, by connecting to more meaningful platforms or users and indirectly disconnecting from others (Jansson & Adams, 2021; Light, 2014; Swanlund, 2021). In this sense, disconnection is practiced *in conjunction* with connection to make life with digital media work for us (Light, 2014).

Looking at disconnection from this dynamic perspective, Light and Cassidy (2014) demonstrate how Facebook users use disconnective affordances that are incorporated in the platform to sustain a connection to it. This includes both "not-doing" techniques aimed at preventing connections (e.g., ignoring friend requests from colleagues for the sake of a professional connection) and more active kinds of disconnecting strategies with the goal of suspending established connections (e.g., deleting secondary friends in order to connect only with close friends). A further area of research examines how knowledge workers in the "post-digital era" (Cramer, 2015) regulate and enable digital connectiv-

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ity through media-related disconnection strategies (Bossio & Holton, 2021; Fast & Enli, 2024; Lomborg & Bagger, 2021; Maltby & Thornham, 2016; Siegert & Löwstedt, 2019). Fast and Enli (2024), for instance, conclude that Norwegian politicians are able to maintain a healthy work–life balance, and thus a durable connection with their voters, by physically putting away their phones in specific situations or by turning off notifications. Likewise, Bossio and Holton (2021) find that journalists disconnect from experiences of social media fatigue through strategies such as blocking, or separating platforms for personal and professional use. Their study shows that journalists' disconnection practices function as a kind of work "in tandem" with the different ways they connect to their job online (Bossio & Holton, 2021, p. 2476).

While various types of knowledge labor are increasingly examined through separate lenses of *affective labor* and *disconnection*, it remains unexplored how these concepts intersect within relevant contexts. This article contributes to exploring this gap by examining how academic researchers – representing a typical knowledge-based labor (Davenport, 2005) – affectively experience digital harassment resulting from their job. It further unfolds how researchers disconnect from affects of these experiences through an often unnoticed, yet central form of digital micro-work. This, as it is suggested, thereby represents a form of "hidden" affective (media) labor.

Method

The study is based on 28 semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007) with researchers conducted in April–June 2024. All included informants 1) have a research position at a Danish university, 2) have communicated knowledge to the public through digital media (television, newspapers, social media etc.), and 3) self-identify as having experienced digital harassment. Importantly, the purpose of the study was not to determine whether researchers' experiences can be characterized as digital harassment or not. Rather, the aim, based on a constructivist approach, was to explore how the experience of feeling digitally harassed arises and is felt by researchers (Creswell, 2014).

The informants were selected through two rounds of reference-based sampling (Neergaard, 2007). In accordance with the sampling strategy, I started out by contacting "key persons" – that is, people I had noticed talking about the topic in the media or who had expressed knowledge about the subject in other contexts. These persons were asked 1) if they wanted to participate (if they met the selection criteria – not all of them did), and 2) if they could refer me to other potential informants. Following this, new references were contacted and asked the same questions, and so on. After sampling twenty informants in four research fields (migration/religion, gender/diversity, media/communication, and health/public health), I chose to stop and do a second round of sampling to search for potential informants from other research fields. The second round of sampling led me to eight informants from three new research fields (agroecology, nature/environment, and

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political science). I chose to stop the sampling process there, as no additional nuances of the broader thematic concepts had emerged in the last sample, indicating that "meaning saturation" had been reached (Hennink et al., 2017). The informants comprise 16 men and 12 women from seven research fields and five universities. Of these, eleven rank as lecturers, ten as professors, four as PhD students, two as senior researchers, and one as a post-doc. Overall, the sampling process reflects an attempt to incorporate as much diversity and flexibility among the informants as possible, although – based on conclusions from existing literature – I had an idea of which academic fields would be particularly relevant to include.

Table 1

Overview of intormants

Gender	Professional level	Research field
16 male 12 female	11 lecturers 10 professors 4 PhD students 2 senior researchers 1 post-doc	7 migration/religion 6 health/public health 4 media/communication 3 gender/diversity 3 nature/environment 3 agroecology 2 political science

Before conducting the interviews, I constructed an interview guide around four main research foci: 1) how researchers communicate their knowledge, 2) medium of digital harassment (e.g., email, comment/below the line sections, etc.), 3) affective experiences of digital harassment, and 4) the respondents' navigation strategies in cases of digital harassment. These navigation strategies were divided into three blocks, focusing on practical media strategies, identity separation strategies, and academic work. In the present article, I emphasize how researchers navigate affective experiences of digital harassment through their practical media strategies.

As a part of the preparatory work, the informants were asked to send a screenshot of one inquiry they perceived as digital harassment and one they perceived as critical, but acceptable. These were included in the second part of the interview to gather visual knowledge of where and how experiences of digital harassment emerge. Furthermore, as part of this photo elicitation (Rose, 2012), the informants were asked to send a screenshot of where they place or file digital harassment. This was included in the fourth block focusing on their practical media strategies to generate reflection about their (maybe) "taken-for-granted" handling of it in everyday life. It varied whether the informants already had screenshots available or whether retrieving them required additional effort. Overall, experiences of digital harassment emerge through private media (e.g., email, Messenger), which often involve serious forms of digital harassment, such as digital threats or digital

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hate speech. They also arise through public media (e.g., comment sections or articles), which, by contrast, tend to involve less severe forms, such as digital rumor-spreading. Importantly, however, the second of these two forms often has a more significant affective impact on researchers.

The ethical approach followed was for the informants to decide whether the interview should take place online or physically, to accommodate whether the virtual interview might be found less intimidating when talking about – to some – a sensitive topic. Eleven informants chose the online interview format, while eighteen informants preferred physical interviews. Moreover, to account for the fact that some informants were afraid of being identified, all informants were asked how they wanted to be referred to, and all had the opportunity to read through the transcript to make corrections. Reflecting on these ethical considerations is particularly important for emphasizing my integrity as a researcher studying a group of informants to which I could potentially belong (Fink, 2021). The collection of interviews was based on informed consent in accordance with GDPR regulations, and the informants' right to withdraw their participation was emphasized.

The analysis represents a "reflexive thematic analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, eight random interviews were coded and recoded in Nvivo to identify a collective codebook built around codes organized in deductively and inductively developed 'topic summaries' (Braun & Clarke, 2022). These focused on the researchers' self-reported affective experiences and their various navigation strategies, including their everyday media practices, an aspect this study pays particular attention to. All 28 interviews were subsequently coded. Next, based on the initial coding and with the aim of addressing the research question, two main themes capturing a shared meaning across the different codes were developed through an extended, iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Experiences of digital harassment

The compromise of personal security

Two primary states emerged from the exploration of researchers' experiences of digital harassment, represented by the two themes developed in the thematic analysis: 1) the compromise of personal security, and 2) the loss of control over public reputation. Consistent with prior studies (Ferber, 2017; Gosse et al., 2021; Savigny, 2020), the state of experiencing a compromise of personal security – Theme 1 – is associated with affects of fear that digital threats or other types of transgressive digital actions may escalate into physical actions. However, contrary to previous findings, the interviews in this study reveal that affective experiences of fear also encompass a lack of seriousness towards the aggressors responsible for this type of digital fear-production. In particular, the aggressors are mostly perceived as powerless individuals who researchers have empathy for, rather than being truly afraid of. As one informant describes aggressors, "they are probably having a tough time. In some way, you get the impression that they are out there rescuing themselves on

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some kind of mission. And, in a way, I have empathy for that" (professor, nature/environment). Thus, the researchers' experiences of compromised personal security were paradoxically linked to sympathizing and downplaying affects, which help them to endure an otherwise harsh form of digital harassment. Aggressors attempting to compromise researchers' sense of security mostly use private mediums such as email or Messenger, whose content is not disseminated to a broader audience, which allows for the researchers to ignore them. Simultaneously, the severity of this form of digital harassment makes it easier to obtain legal and institutional assistance, exempting researchers from handling it on their own.

The loss of control over public reputation

Although Theme 1 is present in the interview material and represents a serious form of digital harassment, it is important to emphasize that the loss of control over one's public reputation – Theme 2 – emerges as the more salient theme and, notably, one that is more difficult for researchers to endure. As one informant describes the distinction:

> What kept me awake was not digital harassment from random people on Twitter or in my inbox. Nor was it the death threats. What really kept me awake was when I became the story myself [in public media]. And there are two instances where I thought it simply wasn't acceptable. Where it was professional criticism, but framed in ways that I thought were crossing the line [...]. Both, I think, were attempted character assassination. It hits harder because it targets the core of my credibility. (professor, political science)

Despite receiving death threats, the informant describes being falsely portrayed in public media as the most emotionally impactful experience. Affects associated with this state include feelings of deliberate humiliation, being misunderstood, and – perhaps most significantly – the inability to control the digital dissemination of one's (inaccurately portrayed) professional reputation. Unlike Theme 1, these affective experiences often emerge in and through public forms of communication (e.g., comment sections or public media), heightening the sense of uncertainty about where and by whom one's reputation will be addressed next. Following the conclusions drawn by Gregg (2011), this exemplifies how the pervasive use of digital media in various forms of knowledge labor integrates affective labor tasks into these job roles. For instance, one informant compared his reputation-threatening experiences of digital harassment with being inside a tumble dryer: "you can't really figure out what's up and down [...]. It's not just one newspaper that is published in the evening. It's running 24/7 [...]. It's everywhere. And it's uncontrollable" (lecturer, gender/diversity).

This form of digital harassment is often driven by aggressors in various online gatekeeping roles (Laidlaw, 2010) such as journalists, debaters, or politicians. In contrast to the sympathy informants hold toward aggressors attempting to undermine their personal sense of security, those responsible for spreading such rumors are perceived as individu-

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als who do have control over the flow of information and the construction of meaning in democratic society. This serves to intensify the affective impact of being unable to control one's digital reputation:

> No one sent me emails, but when these journalists and politicians started being tagged, I became incredibly nervous about whether, the next week, there would be an opinion piece about me, or if I would be the next one talked about in the parliament speeches. And if there were an opinion piece, what I do would become even more widespread, and what kind of emails would I receive then? (PhD student, migration/religion)

According to this informant, digital gatekeepers intensify researcher feelings of digital uncontrollability by using affordances such as tagging to circulate the false framing of research into broader arenas, even into the parliament. The informant further expresses concern that this may "intoxicate" (cf. Branford et al., 2019) the broader public, leading them to send her emails with a threatening character. Additionally, researchers perceive the gatekeeping aggressors as polemical in stance rather than genuinely seeking answers or engaging in democratic dialogue, which makes the reputation-threatening affects emerging from this encounter particularly difficult to navigate. As numerous informants highlighted, this leaves them in a defenseless position:

> There was this tendency where every time one of these very active debaters, politicians, or journalists who had taken up the case made a statement, a long line of followers would come and say all kinds of crap about it. And no matter what I did, I couldn't tap into it. The debate wasn't mine […]. I can feel I'm getting emotional now [cries]. And I'm well aware that the media don't see it as harassment, but it feels like harassment. Especially because I had the experience that they weren't really interested in what we had done. (lecturer, migration/religion)

As this quote shows, the affective experience of being unable to "tap into" the public debate led by the digital gatekeepers to explain one's research is linked to a sense of defenselessness, which manifests in a bodily reaction of tears. Even though this experience may not be categorized as the most serious form of digital harassment (see Lenhart et al., 2016), it is nonetheless what researchers experience as having the most impactful consequences. In fact, it is the loss of control over one's public reputation that causes stress symptoms and serves as the primary reason why 21 of 28 informants had chosen to withdraw from the media (either completely or partially) and why, in addition, a third of all informants reported moving towards less contentious research interests. Thus, seen from an external perspective, it is Theme 1, the '"compromise of personal security", that appears the most serious aspect of researchers' experiences of digital harassment. However – and quite surprisingly – it was the affects associated with Theme 2, the "loss of control over public reputation", that my informants found most difficult to navigate. In

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this sense, it is the uncontrollable digital rumor-spreading that triggers a significant part of the affective labor involved when researchers are subjected to digital harassment.

Building on this finding, the next section explores how informants disconnect from affects of experiencing a loss of control over their public reputation through their daily, yet often "hidden" use of digital media, representing a form of affective (media) labor.

Disconnecting from reputation-threatening experiences: Three "micro-media" strategies

Responding to defend

Almost all informants expressed a pressing need to respond to the aggressors with the aim of defending themselves against what they experienced as unreasonable and uncontrollable damage to their public reputation. In this situation, numerous informants made an initial attempt to respond directly (mainly in comment threads) with the aim of creating dialogue and intervening in the misunderstanding of their research. With the various ways of disconnecting in mind (Jansson & Adams, 2021; Light, 2014), this strategy thus represents an attempt to disconnect from the harmful affective impact of these experiences by connecting even more to the aggressors, rather than to simply "break" the connection with them (e.g., by blocking or leaving the platform). However, the initial intention to nuance and explain was in most cases quickly replaced by an enhanced feeling of escalation. As one informant put it, "[responding] just ended in mudslinging, slander, and all sorts of nonsense. I got nothing out of it" (lecturer, nature/environment). Another informant even described it as being "lured" by public debaters to explain his research in a comment thread on X with the hidden aim of creating a "long, ugly argument" only "to make traffic" (professor, health). Thus, the attempt to disconnect from one's academic reputation by responding directly usually had the opposite effect; instead of gaining a sense of self-defense, the researchers ended up feeling even more misinterpreted.

Drawing on these experiences, the informants sought alternative ways to disconnect from the affective state of defenselessness by responding to – and thereby connecting with – the aggressors in alternative formats. For instance, instead of responding in a publicly visible comment thread, some informants replied through private forms of communication, such as email or Messenger. This, as one informant described, represented a strategic way of trying to "break through biases and hostile stereotypes" and "to highlight that I do exist beyond LinkedIn" (lecturer, media/communication). Thus, responding in a private format seemed to offer a way for researchers to reduce polarization by connecting to aggressors through a less intense, more personalized form of communication, with the aim of disconnecting from (potential future) affects of feeling publicly shamed. Other informants responded in alternative formats through thoughtfully crafted posts or comments (e.g., on Facebook or LinkedIn) without making any further interaction with the

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aggressor(s). This disconnection strategy was primarily used when researchers felt particularly unjustly attacked and were concerned about reception among "ordinary" users:

> [We have also experienced] accusations of cheating. That we are being bought off by the recruiters […]. In such cases, I might write about how things truly are, as briefly as possible. And it's not to "save" those making the attacks, but to give those reading the chance to form their own critical judgment. (professor, nature/environment)

As stated by the informant, such a clearly formulated post is not intended to convince the aggressor(s) of his research integrity, but serves as a strategic means to persuade secondary observers that he is an impartial researcher and, in that sense, to rise above the debate. Ultimately, this type of response aims to disconnect from the affective state of lacking control over the digital spread of one's (wrongly portrayed) reputation by reaching out to – and in that sense connecting to – a larger audience that exists beyond digital gatekeepers.

Responding in other formats also included responding through the public media system, such as in newspapers or other media establishments. Numerous researchers attempted to change the digital narrative about themselves by responding through opinion pieces, where the researcher is afforded the opportunity to elaborate and rise above a humiliating and non-nuanced debate. One informant even described his first attempt to reply in an opinion piece as an "aha-experience", as he discovered that he was suddenly the one deciding "what people talked about". According to the informant, this type of reply gave him power and enabled him to "distance [himself] from all the harassment" mobilized by digital gatekeepers (lecturer, migration/religion). Thus, as with the alternative response strategies outlined above, connecting to the media system to produce a form of "defensive answer" represents another disconnection strategy.

Saving to control

Saving harassing digital content in the form of individual screenshots or in larger folders on the computer was used as another prominent disconnection strategy. For instance, one informant explained why she chose to screenshot harassing comments from various newspapers' Facebook pages that arose in reaction to her expert statements: "I kept it, because in some way, I needed to feel that I at least knew what was being said about me […]. I know what it is about, I know what has been said" (lecturer, health). As the informant explains, "saving" serves as an indirect disconnection strategy, helping her to reassert control over her public reputation circulating uncontrollably due to the affordances of digital media. In general, rather than stemming from an impulse to respond in self-defense, this disconnection strategy of saving reflected a broader attempt to impose an imagined, temporary pause on the digital circulation of one's reputation by connecting more deeply to the harassing content.

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Moreover, a significant number of informants reported saving the harassing content with the intention of using it constructively. As one informant explained: "When journalists started engaging in the discussion […], I began to think a lot about what people were saying about me – whether there are misunderstandings emerging that I should try to correct" (PhD student, migration/religion). For this informant, as for numerous others, the act of saving functioned not only as a means of exerting control, but also as a tool for carefully reviewing the content to revise formulations and preempt future misunderstandings. One informant even "viewed it [saving] primarily as feedback" (professor, health), emphasizing the researchers' reliance on self-correction to mitigate the risks of potential occurrences of digital harassment. Some informants described the act of saving as something they did with the specific intention of knowing what friends and relations (e.g., children's parents or neighbors) might have read about them. In this case, "saving" served as a way for researchers to make their private lives a safe or "disconnected" space, as it enabled them to mitigate and counteract the circulation of their public reputation into the private sphere.

Although "saving" was perceived as a disconnective tool enabling control and facilitating constructive reflection on one's own communication, it also – quite paradoxically – kept many informants in a bodily state of discomfort:

> And the thing about saving is… in a way, you have to look at each individual post and say "okay, is this serious enough to be saved, or is it not?" So, in reality, I see it as a way of reinforcing, at least the personal impact of [digital harassment]. (professor, political science)

While the informant connected to the harassing content by saving and used it as a (more or less) deliberate disconnection strategy, he simultaneously found the deep connection to the harassing content uncomfortable, as it compelled him to engage with the harmful digital content. Thus, saving is two-sided: On the one hand, it provides researchers with a sense of control of what is experienced as a "total loss of control and despair" (lecturer, gender/diversity), and on the other, it keeps researchers in a state of bodily distress, as it forces them to confront the affective consequences of possessing an uncontrollable public reputation. Notably, following a dynamic understanding of disconnection (Karppi, 2018; Light, 2014), the disconnective strategy of "saving" thus operates through researchers' profound connection to the very same digital harassment they are trying to affectively disconnect from. But, this disconnection strategy paradoxically risks entrapping the researchers in a harmful affective state, rather than facilitating their actual disconnection.

Deleting, blocking, (de)selecting platforms as strategies to establish "peace"
One commonly employed disconnection strategy involved deleting instances of digital harassment or blocking the aggressors responsible across various social media platforms. In contrast to the previous two strategies, this approach represents a "harder" form of digital disconnection focused on actively breaking with harmful, connective ties rather

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than disconnecting by strengthening connections, as was seen in the cases of "responding" and "saving". This approach is intended to help researchers distance themselves from visual confrontations with the harassing content and to foster a sense of peace through an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality. For instance, one informant compares the act of blocking harassing users on X to removing a "stressful lion":

> Earlier stress research largely focused on identifying stressors in one's professional life, which is a fundamentally flawed approach, because stress doesn't stop the moment the workday ends. When you go home, you bring the lion with you. And I've often carried that lion, which is why I've also worked hard to shield myself from it. That means closing off, sometimes blocking […] the various accounts that, over time, have become a source of that "oh no, not again" feeling. (lecturer, media/communication)

The affective impact of being digitally attacked as a researcher does not stay in the professional domain; the stress triggered by digital harassment "follows you" into the private sphere, like a lion that trails you home and proves difficult to shake off, as the informant described it. Consequently, for this informant and many others, blocking those behind the stress-inducing trigger is perceived as a self-protective strategy aimed at restoring calm and stability. A very large number of informants expressed a particular need to delete comments from digital gatekeepers or, alternatively, to block them and their "followers" to avoid confrontation. For instance, one informant chose to block a specific gatekeeper as it was "better for the blood pressure not to be exposed to those sudden fabrications that appear out of nowhere and you are then expected to respond to" (lecturer, media/communication). In that sense, blocking works as a way for the researchers to avoid future interactions with illegitimate gatekeepers who have control over the public portrayal of their reputation. Similarly, the process of deleting harassing comments – especially comments by gatekeepers – was described by one informant as a "routine I've developed for myself, because I don't want anything close to me" (PhD student, gender/diversity). If it is there, as the informant stresses, she will "go back and check it", which is why it is better to visually remove it.

Furthermore, many informants have chosen to limit or even stop using specific social media platforms, while simultaneously strengthening their use of other social media platforms that are experienced as less intense and, thus, more peaceful to encounter. Especially the platform X has become "a toxic space that is no longer particularly serious" (professor, nature/environment). One informant even describes X as a space where she "needs to have the energy to keep [her] guards up" (PhD student, migration/religion) indicating that X is a harsh and affectively draining environment, where one is constantly required to defend the reception of one's research. As a result, many researchers have stopped using the platform, opting instead to connect to and through LinkedIn. In particular, LinkedIn is "now the platform where professional discussions can take place" and is, in that sense, a less intense and uncontrollable space to enter (lecturer, media/commu-

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nication). However, though informants frequently reported using LinkedIn because of its peaceful and constructive character, many simultaneously perceived the platform as an echo chamber. One informant, for example, describes LinkedIn as a space where people are "flattering each other excessively" and "share[ing] content primarily to appear positive, admirable, and marketable" (professor, nature/environment). Thus, the increasing disconnection from less critical or intense platforms is also associated with frustration, because important democratic discussions do not necessarily take place on LinkedIn.

Although deleting, blocking, and platform (de)selection were frequently used by the informants to remove confrontations with their uncontrollable public reputation, the interviews simultaneously reveal that these disconnection strategies are not always effective or even possible. According to one informant, achieving a peaceful affective state primarily involves acceptance, rather than solely removing aggressors, comments, or social networking sites:

> You have to learn to accept that your public persona takes on a life of its own in certain groups, and you can't control that. And of course, it's a bit frustrating that there exists this ghost version of me – one that I don't find fair […]. Somehow, you have to learn to let go of that ghost that drifts around. (professor, nature/environment)

As the informant expresses it, researchers are unable to block or delete content to find peace, because the diffusion of misleading characterizations of their work often occurs on public platforms or within closed groups that are beyond their control. Rather, finding peace depends on accepting the existence of an inequitable "ghost version" of oneself that persists across various digital spaces. In that sense, entering into a peaceful affective condition also depends on the researchers' ability to disconnect from digital harassment by avoiding reading or searching for others' reactions. As stated in a previous section, however, to avoid reading or searching for others' reactions is difficult, because both the relationship with powerful digital gatekeepers and one's own academic reputation in the public sphere hold significant meaning for researchers; it is anything but what research integrity is about.

Discussion

In contrast to existing research (e.g., Ferber, 2018; Gosse et al., 2021; Savigny, 2020), the interviews conducted in this study reveal that exposure to digital harassment as a researcher is not primarily linked to experiences of compromised personal security (e.g., in terms of digital threats or transgressive digital behavior). Rather, what emerges as having the highest affective impact is the experience of losing control over one's public reputation. In their affective (media) labor of navigating and transforming affects of this particular experience, the informants use three micro-media-related disconnection strategies:

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1) responding to defend, 2) saving to control, and 3) blocking, deleting, and (de)selecting platforms to create peace.

As such, a central aspect of how researchers navigate this type of digital harassment is their use of active disconnection strategies; they simply *do something* to disconnect. In fact, the "not-doing" disconnection strategy of ignoring was primarily used when researchers experienced a compromise to their personal security, indicating that this experience is easier for the informants to endure. Moreover, the analysis reveals that researchers' active disconnection strategies often manifest as a deep connection to the harassing content – as exemplified in acts of "saving" or "responding" – in attempts to mitigate and disconnect from the affective impact of digital harassment. As concluded by Jansson and Adams (2021) and Light (2014), disconnecting is in this sense not confined to the removal or breaking of connection, but can also be practiced as a form of forging or strengthening of connections by adding or changing value to them.

Overall, these reflections suggest that researchers, as part of their affective (media) labor, have an urgent need to act on their reputation-threatening experiences of digital harassment through various forms of "unnoticed" media-related practices. Viewed more broadly, these disconnective actions function as "micro-level" strategies through which researchers seek to prevent escalation of the damage to their public reputation. From this perspective, researchers' affective (media) labor may be understood as strategic efforts to circumvent becoming the focal point of a "mediated scandal". Following Mia-Marie Hammarlin (2021, p. 93), a mediated scandal represents "a cultural phenomenon, which audiences use to debate and negotiate transgressional acts, social norms and values in a symbolic and ritualized way". Typically, this type of scandal is produced by the news media, but as Hammarlin (2021) suggests, it is also kept alive through the sharing of gossip and rumors in both digital and physical spaces. Politicians, because of their visibility and because they tend to express certain values and beliefs, are frequently targeted by mediated scandals, especially when private behavior contradicts their public values (Thompson, 2000). Like politicians, researchers have a high degree of mediated visibility due to expectations that they will engage in public outreach (Carrigan, 2022). Unlike politicians, though, researchers are obliged to produce and communicate knowledge grounded in in-depth, impartial research, *not* in personal beliefs or values. But despite their different roles, this study nonetheless demonstrates that researchers face challenges similar to politicians, as their experiences of digital harassment show that they too are at significant risk of becoming the center of mediated scandals. More broadly, and closely linked to the growing disaffection with public authority (Branford et al., 2019; Väliverronen, 2021), this suggests that news media, digital gatekeepers, and circulating rumors (cf. Hammarlin, 2021) tend to "politicize" research knowledge by positioning researchers in the same value-laden space as politicians. Crucially, this represents what researchers fear most: the risk of being framed as aligned with a specific, non-research-based agenda. Such posi-

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tioning threatens the very foundation of their work, namely their research integrity and academic reputation.

In this sense, the digital public sphere constitutes an ambivalent space for researchers to engage with: On the one hand, they are obliged to share their knowledge in public for the benefit of democratic debate (Nowotny, 2003) and to promote themselves (Väliverronen et al., 2022), and on the other, they risk compromising their research reputation and face negative affective consequences from this. Viewed from a democratic angle, this situation highlights the need for greater awareness of the sometimes dysfunctional relationship between researchers, gatekeepers, and the wider public – a relationship that, at least for the informants in this study, is marked by negative affects and serves as the primary reason why many abstain from sharing their knowledge in the media. Under these conditions, where institutional policies are experienced as less helpful when it comes to managing (less severe) forms of digital harassment, this situation additionally emphasizes the need for researchers to develop their own "local" or even "hidden" media strategies of dis/connection to steer through potential threats of politicization and scandalization of their research and remain (happily) connected to their job.

Conclusion

Grounded in the assumption that research work today can be characterized as "affective (media) labor", the aim of this article was to explore researchers' affective experiences of digital harassment and their disconnective navigation of these experiences through "hidden" daily media practices.

First, researchers who are subjected to digital harassment experience 1) a compromise to their personal security, and 2) a loss of control over their public reputation. Surprisingly, it is affects associated with the second of these two states that are found to be the most difficult to navigate and transform. This is mainly because such digital rumor-spreading takes place on public platforms and is often driven by powerful digital gatekeepers who influence public debate and, by extension, are capable of influencing researchers' academic reputations.

Second, the analysis has shown that researchers navigate affects of losing control over their public reputation using three micro-media-related strategies of disconnection. They 1) respond to the aggressors in alternative formats, to defend their research and academic reputation; they 2) save harassing content generated on public platforms so as to create an imagined form of control over the (uncontrollable) digital spread; and they 3) block, delete, and (de)select platforms to move away from the turmoil towards a sense of peace. Notably, all three strategies involve *active* kinds of disconnection, which points to the fact that researchers experience an instinctive need to act on this type of digital harassment. In conclusion, the article discusses whether researchers' "local" media strategies of discon-

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nection can be understood as "hidden" work to avoid becoming the focus of a mediated scandal.

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