

WHEN YOUR PROBLEMS ARE OUR PROBLEMS: WHY YOU SHOULDN'T JUST LOG OFF WHEN IT COMES TO ONLINE HARASSMENT

BRIGID EVANS TAKES US INTO THE SEEDY UNDERWORLD OF PERSONAL ETHICS AND JUSTICE – WHAT WILL SHE FIND THERE?

Chances are you've been afraid of your phone. The feeling of it vibrating in your pocket filled you with dread. The menacing 'ding' of social media made your heart race as you started to sweat. *'I don't know this person'* you might have thought. *'Why do they keep messaging me?'* *'What did I do to make them so cruel?'* *'Why did I even log on?'* *'Why did I comment on that post?'* You have every right to use social media... but sometimes it feels like just existing online is harder than it should be.

What we see as our private or personal choices, between friends, family, or perhaps just you and your smartphone, are often held to a different standard than those we consider to be political actions. What are political actions? Well, the political arguably refers to power relations that govern how we interact with the world and the people in it.

The state has the authority to police political infractions, but we rarely see state involvement in our personal lives as acceptable or ideal. There is an important difference between cheating in a game of footy between mates and stealing a pair of Nikes from a store. The cheating is a personal problem that ought to be solved by the individuals involved. The theft could put me in front of a court, where a judge will decide my fate. The difference? The state has authority to act in the case of theft, but not in the dirty footy game – footy is, after all, a private affair.

Looking at online interactions, are they personal or political? Should the state have any authority to police what we share from our phones? If these online interactions are reflective of or reinforce power relations, they may become political rather than purely personal problems.

Power refers to the level of control different sections of society have over certain resources, and ultimately each other. Social categories such as gender, age, caste, class,

ethnicity, race, and so on, may determine the level of power you have within your society.

It's important to note that this power isn't maintained by individuals, it's structural. This might explain why power only really becomes obvious when you don't have it, when you cannot access certain resources or cannot access them with the same ease. We don't really notice when things come easily. It's like breathing, you don't notice it that much until it becomes difficult.

The online space is a resource that some access with more ease than others. The social category you occupy might mean that you're more likely to be attacked, silenced or even sent unsolicited sexual content online. This means some forms of online harassment aren't just personal problems; they might also be political problems.

Despite this, if you've been harassed online you probably know that we're often given personal rather than political 'solutions.' 'Block them', 'delete the app', 'ignore them', 'don't post or comment.' This might stop the personal part of the problem, but it doesn't get to the bigger injustice; that some groups just can't access the online space with the same ease that others can.

Justice requires giving each person within that society or group, what they are entitled to. This involves treating everyone equally, unless they differ in ways relevant to the situation.

Imagine your last English essay. You and your friend are of equal ability and you put in equal effort. While your essays are different, they are identical in terms of quality. Really. The only difference is that you aren't the same race or gender as your friend. So if your essay comes back with a huge 'C' across the top while your friend got an 'A' you'd probably think something unfair had occurred. If the grades were based on the irrelevant differences between you and your friend, you'd be right; your marks were unjust.

For political philosopher John Rawls, justice is about seeing society as a cooperative system. This cooperation requires citizens sharing the society's benefits and burdens fairly. Where the members of a society believe that they are carrying unjust burdens the

seeds of social unrest are planted. This seems true. After all, how well would you behave in class if you knew your teacher was being unjust?

Now Rawls will probably care about your unjust grade, but he didn't grant the same status to your footy game or that guy sending you unwanted messages online. This is because Rawls distinguishes 'social justice' from personal actions and attitudes. Social justice refers to how rights, duties and advantages are organised or distributed in society. So what really matters is how specific core institutions are designed, not how individuals choose to behave. While he would agree that both can be wrong, he didn't think the state had the authority to police personal conduct. This means the state wouldn't have authority over individual actions such as online harassment- it's simply a personal problem for individuals to resolve.

Fellow philosopher G. A. Cohen did what philosophers love to do; he disagreed. Cohen instead argued that we cannot draw a plausible boundary between social injustices and the morality of 'private' personal conduct. Personal problems can also be social injustices where the effects are profound, such as those that reinforce or reflect discrimination. Similarly if the costs of resolving these personal problems are unjustly distributed –say if it's only put upon the victims to overcome the issue - we may have trouble distinguishing the personal from the political.

The fact that we can so easily make private messages or interactions public via social media blurs the personal and political boundaries further. It is less and less clear where our online interactions with others fall on the private and public divide. Unjust personal encounters are made profound by the lasting nature of the digital. The ability to record, keep and share individual interactions online opens the private sphere to public view. The blurring of the public and private, combined with the profound effects of common personal encounters that are shaped by unjust power relations leaves these encounters more deeply political than ever before.

Turning to history, civil rights activists in the 1960s and 70s also argued that 'the personal is political'. This meant that prejudice and discrimination was not a matter of personal preference – it was a societal issue that demanded state intervention to ensure justice was felt for all citizens. For oppressed and marginalised groups, making the

personal political exposed discrimination, mistreatment, suffering and inequalities long set aside as problems between individuals.

For women, these problems may be the equal distribution of domestic and emotional labour, wage gaps and concerns regarding harassment and safety. For people of colour, it may be racial profiling, incarceration rates, and disparities in education, employment and life span. For LGBTIQ individuals, it may be the suffering arising from unequal access to public institutions. As the phrase attempts to capture, the problems and those who face them are far greater than any short list can convey.

The phrase is attributed to Carol Hanisch, although she takes no credit for the phrase itself, attributing it to the collective authorship of the civil rights activists of the time. Hanisch and the Women's Liberation movement argued that the bad situations faced by women (or marginalised groups) were experienced due to oppression and massive structural inequalities. It is not down to how much she drank or what she wore.

The personal is political when problems within the personal are concerns of social justice. This is not to say that only the concerns of oppressed groups are of political importance. Instead, personal encounters that arise out of oppressive systems are political and, as such, they are more than just problems between individuals. They are social problems that individuals alone cannot solve.

We cannot overcome concerns such as harassment, incarceration rates, or blocked access to public institutions by relying on uncoordinated individual changing their behaviour. I can no more stop online harassment by logging off my social media accounts than one celebrant marrying one gay couple can solve marriage inequality. Even if every victim of online harassment happened to delete their social media, the problem wouldn't be whether it made a difference –as it probably would –but with the fact that any social change would have come about by having the victims absorb its costs. Instead, where the personal is political collective action is needed. This way, change may be more lasting, and the costs of achieving it stand a greater chance of being justly distributed.