

Book Challenges In Your Library: Tips for librarians facing harassment and threats

Book challenges are happening at an unprecedented rate, as documented in PEN America's 2022 [Banned in the USA](#) report. The challenges to books in schools and libraries reflect a growing national campaign by community and parent groups, and even some elected officials, who are demanding book removals, as well as changes to library policies and procedures. This campaign has resulted in online harassment, threats, and even physical intimidation and attacks against librarians and library personnel.

This guidance is intended to equip librarians with strategies to navigate online abuse. While this resource acknowledges the ways that online abuse can move offline, it is primarily focused on digital safety. For a discussion of physical safety in libraries, see: ["We Need to Talk About Library Security"](#) and [Creating Safer Libraries](#). If you're looking for helpful resources on physical safety, check out: Front Line Defenders [Workbook on Security](#) and CPJ's [Journalist Security Guide](#) (especially chapter 9); Although these resources were designed for journalists and activists, the basics of physical safety are broadly applicable.

IDENTIFY

Naming the abuse you're experiencing online will help you determine how to respond to, navigate, and communicate about it. Common abusive tactics include: hateful speech (for eg, calling people "groomers" or "pedophiles"); threats of physical or sexual violence; impersonation accounts; doxxing; nonconsensual intimate imagery; sexual harassment; and cyber mobs.

For more information on these and other types of online abuse, see PEN America's Field Manual: [Identifying Abusive Tactics Online](#).

DOCUMENT

Documenting the online abuse you experience creates a record of what's happening, which is critical if you decide to engage law enforcement or pursue legal action, and can be helpful in conversations with allies and managers. It allows you to collect information about harassers and track patterns of abuse and escalations of harmful behavior. Take a screenshot, save direct links to any social media messages, and save any emails, voicemails, or texts (including platform, handle/email address, date, time, etc.).

NOTE: If you use an online platform's tools to report online abuse and the abusive content gets removed before you've documented it, you lose evidence.

For more information, see: PEN America's Field Manual: [Documenting Online Abuse](#)

ASSESS SAFETY

You are the best judge of whether online abuse has made you concerned about your physical safety and/or that of your family or colleagues. If you have received a direct or veiled threat of physical or sexual violence—or if you are facing physical intimidation or are concerned about physical attacks—consider informing your employer, contacting security at your library or school district, and/or engaging local law enforcement. It can also help to contact trusted friends and family, a lawyer, and/or a nonprofit organization that supports individuals facing abuse.

For more information, including a list of relevant nonprofits, see PEN America's Field Manual: [Assessing the Threat](#), [Engaging Law Enforcement](#), and [Online Harassment Resources](#).

NOTIFY AND COMMUNICATE

Consider alerting your manager, HR, or whomever you feel most comfortable speaking to at your library or school district about the online abuse you're being subjected to—and share documentation. While speaking about online abuse can elicit feelings of anxiety or fear, remember that abuse is intended to isolate -- communicating with trusted allies can help.

See PEN America's Field Manual: [Talking to Employers and Professional Contacts](#).

BLOCK, MUTE, REPORT

Social media platforms have features that can help you navigate online abuse. You can block accounts (so they cannot communicate with or follow you). You can mute accounts or specific posts or words (so you don't have to see them). And you can also report abusive content to try to get a post taken down or an account suspended for violating platform rules.

See PEN America's Field Manual: [Blocking and Muting](#) AND [Reporting](#)

BOLSTER YOUR YOUR CYBERSECURITY

Make a list of your top ten most sensitive online accounts (email, social media, banking, etc.) and safeguard them against hacking and impersonation by creating long complex passwords and setting up two-factor authentication. Using a password manager can help. It's also critically important to take some time to review and tighten the privacy and security settings on your social media accounts. For example, if you have your social media accounts set to be publicly visible to everyone, consider making your accounts more private, even just temporarily until the harassment has passed.

See PEN America's [Digital Safety Snacks](#) and Field Manual: [Password hygiene](#); [Securing accounts](#); and [Anti-doxing](#); Citizen Lab's [Security Planner](#); and [The Smart Girl's Guide to Privacy](#)

REACH OUT

Online abuse can feel profoundly isolating and disempowering. Having support from friends and family and connecting with colleagues and other librarians can really help. Seek out allies in your community. Confronting abusive trolls head on can lead to escalations in harassment and is rarely productive. Speaking out against harassment and taking control of the narrative can be empowering, but it's important to familiarize yourself with the social media rules and expectations of your employer first.

See PEN America's Field Manual: [Talking to Friends and Family](#) and [Deploying Supportive Cyber Communities, as well as Approaching Counterspeech](#).

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Online abuse can elicit feelings of fear and shame. It can do real damage to mental and physical health and affects people differently depending on life experience, race, gender, background, etc. Remember: online abuse is not your fault and you are not alone. Resist the urge to ignore how you're feeling and try to carve out time for self-care.

See PEN America's Field Manual: [Advice from Psychologist](#) and [Practicing Self-Care](#)