
Constrained research

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When researchers are threatened, harassed and forcibly silenced, this is an attack on public enlightenment – and on democracy.



Photo: Einar Nilsen

Jonas F. Ludvigsson, paediatrician and professor of clinical epidemiology at Karolinska Institutet, was completely unprepared for what was to come. On 6 January 2021, the analysis he had conducted on the prevalence of severe SARS-CoV-2 in Swedish children was published in the New England Journal of Medicine [\(1\)](#). Shortly afterwards, hateful and malicious messages began to pour in online [\(2\)](#). The pressure was so intense and the messages so hateful that the experienced researcher stopped commenting on and researching COVID-19. And now when he writes about non-COVID-related subjects, he no longer announces the articles on social media. He cannot bear any further trolling [\(2\)](#).

Ludvigsson is not alone in this experience. Swedish researchers, health journalists and government authorities are increasingly subjected to hate messages, harassment and direct death threats in connection with the pandemic [\(3\)](#). In Norway, both the Norwegian Directorate of Health and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health have had occasion to report threats [\(4\)](#). Some of their researchers have also considered withdrawing from public discourse on the pandemic after being trolled, threatened or receiving nasty messages [\(4\)](#). In Denmark, all of the ten most cited COVID-19 researchers have received hate messages, and several of them have also received threats [\(5\)](#).

Unfortunately, the problem is far more wide-reaching than just COVID-19 issues. Research on controversial topics such as climate, gender, predator culling, nutrition and alternative medicine appears to be particularly susceptible. For many years now, researchers conducting both Norwegian and international research related to CFS/ME have been subjected to frequent and intense pressure, harassment and threats [\(6, 7\)](#). And it is not only the researchers themselves that are exposed to this treatment; funding providers are also attacked when the activists do not consider them to be aligned with their agenda [\(8\)](#). Demands have also been made for entire research communities to be closed down after conducting research or publishing guidelines that do not give the 'right' answers, as exemplified by the petition against the National Competence Service for CFS/ME [\(7,8\)](#). The patients' association itself, the Norwegian ME Association, has refused to say whether its members are activists or are coordinating the submission of complaints [\(9\)](#). It also managed to bring the curtain down on a meeting in a public academic and research forum because they did not like the topic the therapists planned to discuss [\(10\)](#).

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There are strong indications that the incidence of pressure, harassment and threats aimed at researchers has increased in recent years in line with the polarisation of the public discourse [\(6, 11\)](#). At the same time, social media has become the primary source of information for many people, a development that is helping to perpetuate disinformation and spread anti-scientific propaganda. The fact that national politicians, even in Norway, are propagating anti-scientific attitudes and accusations of researchers only 'following the money' only serves to reinforce such trends [\(12\)](#).

All such behaviours are fuelling a more toxic, more polarised, less objective and more personalised climate for public debate. It is difficult enough for media-trained debaters and politicians to handle this; for researchers without such training, the pressure of non-constructive criticism, personal attacks and harassment can quickly become too much for them to bear. When researchers do not want to research certain topics because of hate and harassment, when certain research areas do not receive funding because they are not 'approved' by the mob, and when researchers do not dare to present their findings in the public debate for fear of personal attacks and threats, it is not only a problem for the public discourse, it is a direct threat to democracy. Because when knowledge disappears from the public sphere, the discourse becomes poorer and less enlightened – and it is in this light that important decisions about society are then made.

The Storting (the Norwegian Parliament) will review the draft of Norway's new Universities and University Colleges Act just before Easter 2021. The draft includes a proposal whereby universities and university colleges have not only a responsibility to protect academic freedom, but also the employees' right to exercise this freedom (13). This duty should be protected as a matter of course at our leading research institutions. But that's just the beginning. We need a national survey of the incidence of hate, threats and harassment aimed at researchers, and each individual research institution must be required to escalate its efforts to ensure a positive climate for public debate in which its employees can engage.

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