

I realised what a monster the internet can be

Yumna Al-Arashi talks about online harassment and being an artist in the digital age



Pretty much any well-known female artist who puts her work out on the internet will get some level of harassment, it is the base line - we are used to it. Our work revolves around the internet now. So how does the artist survive when our work is controversial and is always going to make someone unhappy, no matter what we do?

About two years ago, I published a body of work called [Northern Yemen](#); ten images of different Yemeni women in beautiful Yemeni landscapes. They are wearing a full niqab and hijab and they basically look like superheroes, captured in really powerful stances. It is the complete opposite of what we are used to being shown of Muslim women. I did a lot of interviews, and many press outlets picked up on the story.

I got a lot of bad feedback from white males on the internet: death threats, rape threats, sending me screen shots of my home via googlemaps, stalking me, and threatening to watch where I sleep at night. I thought maybe I was doing the wrong thing, because I was getting a bad response. That's absurd. I am a Muslim woman, I am allowed to speak about that person and not to fear what people say back at me. I took time off the internet and I didn't make work.

You feel super isolated, both in the public sphere, and amongst your friends because they don't get it. That's not what normal people do, to be promoting yourself to this insane level, to have this many people constantly following you online or on twitter. Most of my friends just have a face book account and that's it. They don't use the internet like I have to as an artist. They'd say 'just block them' or 'that's so crazy'. Actually I felt very unsafe and became depressed. I didn't want to tell my room-mates that someone had found our house. You hear the same kind of responses from rape victims. You feel ashamed, that feel it's your fault, that you are being dramatic. But that's abuse right?



I downloaded all these programmes to create firewalls; I covered up my phones, cameras. But you can't block anonymous emails to your email address. I have tried to block people on twitter, or Instagram or Facebook; I'd stomp on one and fifty more appeared. I got to the point that I felt creeped out by my computer and I couldn't even open it up. These people are so much more savvy than you and they get angry when they see you are blocking them and it becomes more personal. Not just 'we don't like your work' but actually 'I want to physically find you and hurt you'. I don't really give a shit what people say but I definitely felt unsafe at home. I left my home because I thought someone can get to my house. That was mind-boggling.

I never got the impression that my harassment was by bots. I am pretty nerdy and good at spotting stuff. I believe there is a group of people who congregate in places like Four Chan and websites for bored people. They get off on harassing people, organising substantial attacks which are a nightmare to deal with. And then they can say it is their free speech. And then they laugh about it.

All this led me to self-censor. I started to tweet and Instagram less. I still don't write about where I am and have difficulty talking about my life online.

I have just made a video, my first film. It's very personal, very political, so I was torn about whether to put it online. It's a shame because it's a new medium for me and could have been a huge opportunity to show off and promote, promote, promote. I put it up, but didn't promote it well. I was terrified, but there is the other voice that says this will help me get commissions, good for my career. The more followers that I have, the more likely I am to attract the attention of potential commissioners, but the more prone to attack I become. I censor myself more on Instagram because I know more people are following me.

