



# Is it unpleasant for women to use Dr titles, if they have a Ph.D?

*The best way to respond to online abuses is to own those spaces, to blaze and burn, and to swarm and support each other in masses, in vigilante-hordes*



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It had never occurred to me to add “Ph.D.” to my name on Twitter until I was slammed for mentioning that I had one.

In February, I was tweeting about the media’s different treatment of the private lives of male and female politicians when someone snarled back: “And you have evidence of this or are you just being a bitter old sexist?”

“Yes, I have written a Ph.D. on the subject,” I replied. “So it’s Doctor Bitter Old Sexist, mate.”

The response blew me backward. Not from those who got the joke, but from those who took offence at the fact that I said I had an advanced degree in history. One that took several years of solid slogging for little financial reward. Years marked by as much isolation and self-doubt as discovery and original research.

In the last few months of writing my dissertation — which I did while working full time as a journalist — my hair began to shed in sheets. Three times, I consulted a doctor who told me the only thing that would prevent my going bald was finishing it.

For many years, I was not sure whether it was worth it. But nonetheless, I remain proud of my Ph.D. because I persisted and completed it.

So I was fascinated to discover that some

viewed the degree not as a sign of expertise but as a provocation, a pretension.

I was repeatedly told on social media that I was an elitist snob, that Ph.D.s were worthless and did not prove anything, that five years of research were simply my “opinion,” that no one cared, that doctorates were no sign of intelligence and that I should be ashamed of myself. I immediately changed my name on Twitter to “Dr. Julia Baird.”

And lo, every few days, someone — almost exclusively male — would tweet to say I was arrogant and stupid and that it would be in my best interest to take it down.

One guy called Jim Ball posted: “Perusing @bairdjulia Twitter feed, yes we get that you have a Ph.D. Julia. Well done. But you reveal an underlying insecurity appending it to your Twitter handle.”

A host of academics then piled on, with a horde of women revealing that they, too, had been taunted for using their titles, while many men who had not received such criticism were baffled.

Dr. Alan Nixon, a researcher in the sociology of religion at Western Sydney University, said, “I’ve had Dr. in my profile name since 2015 and have never been questioned on it.” Dr. Stephen Maclean, an anatomy lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, wrote, “I had no idea doctorate-shaming was even a thing!”

And this month, a British historian, Dr. Fern Riddell, had a similar experience.

On June 13, reacting to a decision by The Globe and Mail to restrict use of the Dr. title to medical practitioners, Riddell wrote on Twitter: “My title is Dr. Fern Riddell, not Ms. or Miss Riddell. I have it because I am an expert, and my life and career

consist of being that expert in as many different ways as possible. I worked hard to earn my authority, and I will not give it up to anyone.”

A “David Green” immediately responded that her comments could “legitimately be regarded as immodest.” A man called “Warren Whitmore” said Riddell had “shown extreme disrespect toward white men (who are generally far more useful to society than female academics)” and that she would have to refuse help from a “white male fireman” if her house were burning down. This response, she responded, left her “crying with joy.”

It should be pointed out that Riddell’s area of expertise is sex and suffrage, and she has written a book about a woman who was both an arsonist and a suffragist, which seems apt.

The fracas has incited large swaths of academic women to add “Dr.” to their name on Twitter, and the hashtag #immodestwoman has spread globally.

Previous generations of women demanded entry to parliaments, churches, boardrooms and courts. In many ways, the online realm is the next frontier, a place where we are demanding to speak without abuse. We might not be chaining ourselves to fences anticipating the arrival of police, but we do opine in a space where we anticipate attack.

It’s not just about women: The disturbing tendency to dismiss academic and especially scientific expertise as bias, or elitism, is at high tide, and climbing.

But it seems particularly acute for female academics. Women regularly report being called professor, and even reverend, less than male counterparts, and research has shown that female

physicians are called doctor less often than men are. A 2017 analysis of introductions of speakers at medical gatherings found that about half of the time a man introduced a woman to the group, he did not use her title, but used it for men more than 70 percent of the time.

It is these markers that indicate respect and an acceptance of authority. And it is these markers that can also be tiny plinths we can occasionally mount to add our voices to the cacophony of words in public debate.

Given how often women are disgustingly abused online, I used to think the best response was to periodically retreat and be quiet. But now I think we need to own those spaces, to blaze and burn, and to swarm and support each other in masses, in vigilante-hordes. Twitter is an oft-maligned and imperfect platform. But it is an important part of the public square.

For centuries, the voices of women have been muted, discounted and minimised. Our right to speak has been questioned, our power undermined, our authority mocked. The cultural underpinnings of this run deep in church and state and still erupt grotesquely online. We are regularly told to apologise, to shrink, to shut up.

So don’t. You don’t need a title to speak. But if you do have one, use it. Find your voice, and raise it. Stake your authority, and state it. Don’t recoil. Don’t back down.

Sometimes authority should be worn lightly. But sometimes it should be brandished like a torch.

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