

# What you post online is forever.

This week has seen news reports of some spectacularly poorly judged behaviours from a group of Year 12 HSC students.

The furore in the news is focused on a question in the opening English HSC paper, which asked for analysis of the poem “Mango” by the multi-award winning Indigenous poet Ellen van Neerven.

Rather than being self-aware enough to realise their difficulties with “Mango” had little to do with the author of the poem, these students have taken themselves online. Particularly to the Facebook HSC discussion page where they have chosen to abuse Ms. van Neerven and her poem, altered her Wikipedia page, made false profiles to continue posting offensive comments, designed gifs representing van Neerven as a chimpanzee and simply put, piled abuse upon the author. The Facebook page is a public one with over 65,000 members. Other than the odd fake profile, there is no subterfuge, it's been there for all to see.

Some examples of posts: -

***“We were asked to analyse your mango f\*\*ked poem - and I’m asking what the f\*\*k was the point of your mango bulls\*\*t,” wrote one student.***

Compounding the situation, the poet was not informed in advance by the NSW Education Standard Authority that her works would appear in the HSC paper, so the attacks for her - came out of the blue. Some of the comments are racist. Most are bullying, and all are rude. Those students who sought to defend the poet from their peers have found themselves harassed online. There are people asking for the students involved to automatically fail the HSC.

There are people sending the students death threats, and even in the face of that, and the media coverage -, a few members of the student Facebook group are persisting with the posts.

They have forgotten a few things that, in all likelihood will be to their detriment.

- Under the Commonwealth Criminal Code, it is considered illegal to use a carriage service (internet) to menace, harass and offend another person. There is the potential for them to be charged as adults. As most are easily identified, they should be concerned with carrying a criminal record with them for the rest of their lives.
- A digital footprint is the forever history of your actions online. Future employers and recruiters regularly conduct Google and other searches about those they are considering for work. These students will now have their charming, abusive, racist comments permanently attached to their names online.

- They are cyberbullying. This is a crime under NSW law when an individual uses the internet in a harassing or threatening way, uses threats, or when a person's reputation is damaged.

Add in the combination of racist memes, and complaints can be made additionally to the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board or the Australian Human Rights Commission.

- Defamation. This occurs when a person intentionally states or spreads information about another person to cause others to think less of that person. Some examples include making someone the butt of jokes, or damaging their reputation, which fits in these circumstances. This crime attracts compensation as a recompense under civil law. The posts need to be taken down as soon as possible by all involved, and if the students were wise, they would do well to apologize to Ms. Van Neerven.

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This kind of behaviour is criminal, and could be very easily prosecuted, should Ms. Van Neerven choose to do so.