“Nothing I could say would make them hate me less, but I still had a moral obligation to name injustices that were happening.”

“It was chilling to see this person in front of my house with a camera since the address was so new.”
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ABOUT TRUMAN

Truman is a high-trust impact community for national security leaders. Together, we develop timely, innovative, and principled solutions to preserve and expand democracy, human rights, prosperity, and security around the world. We draw on our nationwide membership’s intellectual firepower, national security experience, and extensive personal networks to do the work required for lasting change. Our diverse membership includes Hill staff, federal employees, non-profit leaders, academics, industry leaders, political strategists, and elected officials across federal, state, and local government. With experience in uniform, as frontline civilians, and as members of the intelligence community, Truman members also know firsthand the stakes of our foreign policy choices.

Our mission is to unite and equip a diverse community of American leaders to produce timely, innovative, and principled solutions to complex national security challenges.

We envision an inclusive US foreign policy that makes American lives better because it advances democracy, human rights, prosperity and security at home and abroad.

How is Truman different from other foreign policy organizations?

- We believe in international engagement through diplomacy first and foremost, and by force only when necessary.
- We also believe that how we conduct ourselves in international engagement matters, and that our effectiveness abroad depends on the choices we make at home.
- We go beyond thought leadership: we advocate, we build movements, we drive policy, we make change. And we bring an army: Yes, our members staff Secretaries and Senators and sit on the National Security Council, but we’re also in mayors’ offices, strategy boiler rooms, and boardrooms, with deep roots across the country and with mid-to-senior leaders everywhere change needs to be made. We speak “national security” in every local language. And when we write policy, we speak with the voice of personal experience.

Every day, we work to UNITE a principled, diverse, mutually-devoted community of national security leaders, BUILD ten times more together than any of us could alone, and LEAD as a respected voice in the national security space, and as respected leaders within each of our own communities.

Our institutional homes are sister organizations: Truman National Security Project (501c4) and Truman Center for National Policy (501c3). The Truman Project houses our members and their work, including Chapter activities, recruitment, training, and advocacy, generating ideas and movements that can change the world. The Truman Center often draws on Truman Project members and efforts for its own nonpartisan education and research work.
ABOUT DISCOVERY REPORTS

Most institutional reports offer answers. Truman’s Discovery Reports focus on getting the questions right before drawing final conclusions. Truman Discovery Reports reflect two key steps: 1. Consult innovation best practices, our members’ expertise, and the experiences of those who face the problem directly to produce a faithful sketch of the problem itself, and 2. Identify theories of change for addressing it. Our Discovery Reports are the first step on the road to change.

THANKS

This project was only possible thanks to the support of Truman members near and far. From the anonymous interviewees and feedback providers who shared their lived experiences and helped the whole group understand the challenges ahead, to the interview team, to the design squad—our village is Truly amazing.

Interviewers: Jimmy Antia, Mark Christopher, Erica Kaster, Sabeen Malik, Jon Margolick, Emma Pinter, Katie Tobin.

Design Day Participants: Maureen Ahmed, Bunmi Akinnusotu, Reema Ali, Jimmy Antia, Susannah Cunningham, Pam Campos-Palma, Shauna Dillavou, Maya Graham, Erica Kaster, Jessica Morse, Darya Pilram, Emma Pinter, Kate Smith, Frank Spring, Michelle Strucke, Diane Wertime.

Truman offers special thanks to lead author and Innovation Tradecraft Impact Fellow Katherine Tobin, who is also a 2018 Security Fellow.
Executive Summary

THE PROBLEM:
Women entering public service are consistently the targets of stomach-turning abuse from the trolls who manipulate online discourse. Many of these women are Trumanites. Our community is uniquely situated to help—and be helped. What might we do?

For Truman purposes, the second interesting question is what to do with problems like this one. Questions of complex human behavior—and what are most questions of public consequence but problems of this type?—demand common frameworks for tackling them together. This report models one such framework.

THE APPROACH:
For this initial step, we chose the toolset known as Human-Centered Design. These tools make it easy to make sure we understand, and are targeting, the right problems. That means finding people who have experienced the problem first hand, and then exercising meticulous and radical empathy. We listened closely and then drew patterns out of their experiences to guide our problem-solving. With those insights in hand, we assembled teams of Truman members with expertise across communications, politicking, digital platforms, research, policy, and more, and drew on all their professions and experiences to generate ideas for making a difference. Think of this as the first step in "Innovation Tradecraft."

Five women in Truman who had been subject to trolling volunteered to be interviewed. Seven Truman members conducted interviews. We collected the interview notes to synthesize insights, and then used those insights as the starting points for the sixteen Truman members who worked to find ways we might help.

THE PRODUCTS:
Better understanding of the problem, ideas that might make a difference, and a framework with which we can tackle the next complex problem that comes our way. The following are some of our major takeaways.

Things you might not have known

Origins: Trolling is rarely the work of just one person, and groups of trolls don’t form randomly. There’s usually an instigator, often someone well-known like Tucker Carlson or Pam Geller. They activate their followers through what has come to be known as stochastic terrorism: Demonizing a person or group in a way certain to spur aggressive action, without specifying what that action should be.

Experience: What begins with one troll’s public performance rapidly becomes the work of dozens or hundreds. Email, social media, blog posts, YouTube videos, and talk radio are just the sordid beginning in which strangers question your competence,

1 Earliest citation we could find through non-exhaustive search: https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2011/1/10/9348906, from 2011. Juliette Kayyem famously used the phrase in the Post in 2019. Wired highlighted it the same year. Dictionary.com wrote it up at the same time, noting a 9,000% increase in searches for the term.
your sexuality, your nationality, your loyalty to country, and your résumé. Did you even serve in uniform? Were you really at the CIA? Aren’t you too young to be qualified for this job? You feel pressure to say “we,” rather than “I,” when taking credit for past work—or just to not take credit at all. You know that calling your years as a diplomat “service” will set off your attackers. They call you a “whiny little self-righteous b---h,” then insist they meant it in the “nicest possible way.” They threaten to rape you, and tell you they hope you die. They mention your family, including your children, by name. They publish your personal details online: Your email, your social media handles, your phone number, your address, copies of your personal emails. Inevitably, it goes beyond the digital. Our interviewees reported strangers taking photographs of their houses, and their colleagues’ houses. It becomes impossible to feel safe. Secondary effects follow as colleagues begin to ask why you’ve chosen to make life hard for them and advise you to stay quiet, or when you discover they won’t stand up with you against the tide; security clearance interviewers require you to explain the online furor against you; and emergency measures like digital privacy services or lawyers rapidly deplete your bank account. Sometimes the attention dies down after your election, or after a week of harassment; sometimes it doesn’t. Between the trolling, your job transition, security clearance investigations, and managing the fallout, you’re exhausted. Some of your friends, in similar situations, leave politics or the public eye entirely: “It’s not worth it.”

**What doesn’t work:** Well-meaning friends or strangers may weigh in early in your defense, but they’ll often say things like, “No, she’s actually really nice,” or try to pick fights with the trolls in your defense . . . either of which will only fan the flames. Later, it’s tough to resecure your personal information once it has been published. Institutions that might be reliable in other circumstances aren’t much use here, in the absence of “credible threats”: The police might drive by your house, but neither they nor the FBI typically offer much more reassurance than that. Large digital platforms usually decline to moderate the offensive behavior, either because the language doesn’t constitute an immediate threat or because there’s just too much of it for you to flag it all.

**What is appreciated:**

- Validators who speak to your credibility and professionalism, rather than your personality.
- Colleagues and mentors who help you develop a strategy.
- For public officials, national security leaders who reassure your donors.
- Focusing on the troll leaders, rather than the random trolls.
- In rare circumstances, stalkers threaten the police. Those cases tend to end quickly.
- Preventive measures to secure your identity: Buy your house with an LLC. Don’t use your home address for mail. Hire a trustworthy digital firm (e.g., Deleteme) to clean up or eliminate your online presence. Lock down your social media accounts. In states where it’s available, get a confidential marriage license. Sign up for identity theft protection. Ask your new employer for protection or support. Build an informal support team for your mental health. Cover your windows. Have your spouse do all that, too.
- Work with a professional therapist.
Special vulnerability: Public officials and women of color face special threats, with special vulnerabilities.

Public officials are obliged to share personal details publicly. How many photos of your family can you put online? When you register for the ballot, are you comfortable listing your address? Folks higher up on the ballot may get more protective support for digital privacy or physical protection; local officials often get little to none.

And women of color face an entirely separate and additional class of abuses:
- “Are you even a citizen?”
- “Where is your real loyalty?”
- “How can you represent your district if most people there don’t look like you?”
- “Were you just hired for this role, or your past roles, because of Affirmative Action?”

Ways this community might take action

Group One’s idea spotlight: A safety toolkit for local elected officials. (See App. 1)

Group Two’s idea spotlight: Legislative action to protect a right to privacy. (See App. 2)

Other ideas:
- Training and/or a playbook for allies. How to focus on credibility and professionalism in support. What not to say. How to say it most effectively. These resources could also be designed as a resource for women to distribute to their supporters.
- A resource list for local officials.
- Toolkit and training for women entering public service.
- A list of 3-5 dependable digital security / identity protection firms.
- Training and handbooks for media outlets to recognize and quash gaslighting, rather than reporting on it.²
- An Allyship PAC.
- An “allyship hours” service structure for Truman members.
- Raise and make available funds for individual privacy actions.
- Create an offshoot of professional liability insurance that covers costs related to doxxing or other threats triggered by people’s professional work.
- Truman could act as an independent validator of women’s bona fides, explaining the meaning of each person’s national security work and publicly touting their careers.

Opportunities for Further Action

This Design Day, and this report, are just the beginning. Now we build solutions together. Some ways to get involved:

👉 **General Public:** The Truman Center for National Policy welcomes additional recommendations or creative solutions from the public. Please share them with our team [here](#).

👉 **Truman National Security Project Members:** Please use the [survey](#) to share additional ideas. Additionally, if you’d like to become a facilitator for sessions like these, or want to learn how to establish one for your Chapter, Affinity Group, Initiative, or working group, get in touch with our Innovation Tradecraft Impact Fellow, and the lead for this project: [Katie Tobin](#).
How Design Days fit into making change

Truman is an impact community: In groups large and small, we build for change. Broadly, building requires going through the following steps:

**Discovery and empathy:** We think we know the problem—but are we sure? “Nothing about us without us” is solid advice from the advocacy community. Spend some time learning from those who have experienced the problem to be sure your outside understanding corresponds to their lived experience. Human-centered design, qualitative research, and expert consultation are best-in-class tools.

**Hypothesis-generation:** Now that we have a solid understanding of the problem, how might we approach it? At this stage, we want to collect every possible theory of change, from professionals and amateurs of every possible stripe. With those in hand, we begin to think practically, ranking by difficulty and likely impact to find short-term and long-term strategies worth pursuing. Human-centered design offers many tools for this kind of consultation, sorting, and refinement.

**Team and Test:** With hypotheses chosen, we test to see which might make a difference. That means picking a single hypothesis, forming a team around it, figuring out how to test effectiveness most quickly and cheaply, establishing thresholds for success or failure, and conducting our experiments. Can we create that training? Will people sign up for it? Can we raise any money for this? Will the people we’re trying to serve use or appreciate what we’re offering? Let’s go find out. Lean Start-up, Lean Impact, Lean Canvas, and similar tools are best-in-class for this step.

**Iterate:** If it worked, how might we bring it to scale and make it sustainable? Can we get major funding for it? If it didn’t work, let’s go back to the drawing board.

**Share:** At every step, we share what we’ve done and learned.

Design Days focus on steps one and two: Finding and validating a problem with the assistance of those most affected, and surfacing an array of ideas for how we might tackle it.
APPENDIX 1:

A Locally Elected Official Safety Toolkit

Who is this for:
Elected candidates, especially BIPOC & other vulnerable demographics, and especially those who live and work where hate groups are active.

What problem does it solve:
Many elected officials experience digital and subsequent offline threats when working in the public sphere, especially on sensitive issues. There is currently not much guidance offered by candidate preparation organizations or political parties with respect to anticipating and mitigating the likelihood that digital threats will harmfully impact the candidate’s/official’s—and her/their/his family’s ability to live and operate with understanding of how to deal with risks and a ensure vital sense of safety.

The big idea:
1) Truman identifies and makes available information regarding challenges that a new candidate/official should expect with respect to keeping her/him/themselves safe, and how both the candidate/official and Truman members can mitigate risk and respond to crisis. 2) Truman develops mechanisms and a plan to launch support as needed on a rapid timeline.

Background:
Too many women who have run for public office have found themselves victimized by digital harassment and intimidation that sometimes morph into real-world threats that affect the candidate’s—and sometimes the candidate’s loved ones’—sense of physical and emotional safety. Many candidates say that they have received insufficient (or no) warning or guidance to prepare them for the way that their opponents, members of their communities, random trolls, and others might try to destroy their self confidence and chances of successful election through lies, humiliation, threats, gaslighting, belittling or questioning of accomplishments, etc. Candidates who have lost their elections have found themselves still being bullied in the press and social media after the election ends, and candidates who have won have found themselves facing increasingly threatening adversaries on the web and in real life; political parties have demonstrated that they do not have the resources or knowledge to anticipate, track, or mitigate risks to candidates. Therefore, Truman members have begun envisioning ways to support candidates and officials who are at risk of or actually experiencing digital harassment, bullying, discrediting, etc. Supporting preparation for and resilience to these types of attacks will enable seekers of public office to do their work more safely and with better peace of mind. Beyond this inherently good target outcome, the secondary effect might be that more women those who identify with underrepresented and vulnerable demographic groups—will consider running for office.
**Strategy:**
Truman prepares a toolkit to support members who are public office candidates and officials—before, during, and after campaigns; the toolkit includes information and advice for not only candidates/officials, but for a team of Truman volunteers who will serve as the candidate’s/official’s support team throughout the process, helping ensure the candidate’s digital safety and related physical, mental, and emotional wellness. When a Truman member tells Truman leadership that they intend to run for office, this will trigger activation of the toolkit & support team—ideally before candidacy is formally declared so that preparation work (scenario planning, digital hygiene, building relationships with mentor, therapist, etc.) can occur ahead of time.

**Risks:**
- Candidate/official might lack resources or time to fully utilize the toolkit & Truman support
- Candidate/official could start the process of preparing and mitigating too late, after damage of digital exposure is already done or can't be reversed.

**Prototype & Test:**
Prototype: A toolkit, scenario guide, and support team guide to help launch election candidates and support public officials. Test: An election “game” in which Truman members role-play notional candidate, candidate’s family, candidate’s Truman support team, police/authorities, party leadership, candidate’s Truman mentor, traditional media, social media, and trolls/harassers/stalkers/etc.; candidate and Truman support team react to injects (scenario twists) over a series of two weeks, reflect on the prototype and improve.

**Outputs:**
- Candidate/Public Official’s digital safety toolkit, scenario guide, and support team guide
- Rosters of key consultants offering pro-bono services to vulnerable candidates

**Outcomes:**
- Candidates/officials can better anticipate digital threats/harassment and therefore take preventative and mitigating measures to protect themselves and their loved ones
- Candidates/officials are safe(r)
- The Truman community provides better support and allyship to vulnerable candidates/officials who most need it.
Project’s Action Plan, Truman:

• Organize working group to draft/assemble a toolkit with scenarios, resources, and flow charts (and/or other materials) that provide an overview of how a candidate/official and Truman support network can anticipate, prepare to mitigate, and respond to digital threats, intimidation, harassment, bullying, disinformation, etc.

  – Consult Emerge, Yale program, and others that already do candidate prep to see whether they have modules or resources that could feed into this—and whether they’d like to participate in the test of the prototype or observe the reflection exercise after the test.

  – Ahead of next midterm election cycle: Support group develops a roster of possible pro-bono technical support providers for candidates (e.g., therapists, secure communication/digital hygiene consultants, online presence/profile/reputation managers, mentors who have been through the gauntlet already, and legal consultants)

• When a Truman member declares candidacy for public office (or informs Truman leadership of intent to run): Truman leadership (or designee) issues call to the community to form a support “ally” team for the (each) candidate, with x, y, z responsibilities to support safety and wellness of the candidate, following the guidance offered in the toolkit and making any sensible additions, adjustments, etc.

• The ally team activates the toolkit: identifies most likely scenarios, identifies which external support functions might be needed, facilitates establishment of connection between candidate and support consultants, helps candidate identify external stakeholder map of people and/or organizations who can additionally be engaged to immediately begin providing various types of support specific to the location where the candidate is pursuing office, etc.

• Ideally, a Truman member who has previously run for office or worked very closely with an official who has dealt with online harassment will volunteer to serve as a mentor on these issues during the campaign—not an onerous role but rather someone who can advise, warn, empathize, and cheer on the candidate if/when they face digital adversity.

• Multiple Truman candidates might form a support group dedicated to not letting trolls/stalkers/etc. succeed in threatening, gaslighting, or demoralizing candidates.
Federal legislation to enforce broadcast and digital protections

Who is this for:
All Americans—with a focus specifically on how it affects women, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA.

What problem does it solve:
Lack of laws/effective enforcement mechanisms for women/BIPOC/LGBTQIA having their personal safety and privacy intruded upon.

The big idea:
“Nothing—especially, no industry and no company—is too big to fail when it hurts American families.”

• Change the law.
• Create accountability.
• Reform the internet and the way misinformation is spread and harassment is perpetuated.
• Build infrastructure for women/BIPOC to safely take up leadership, including in national security.

Background:
Privacy laws are meant to protect Americans and there are some in the books. However, neither lawmakers nor the laws themselves have kept up with technological advancement and industry changes that have supercharged the access and ease of trolls, stalkers, and harassers to target their victims—even when these actions have national security implications.

For instance, we have seen from televised congressional committee hearings that ranking lawmakers do not understand the difference between Facebook and Twitter. For many, there exists little to no tech expertise among their congressional staffers, which allows powerful tech giants to exploit this knowledge gap. Tech platforms are testing new ways to ‘control’ their domains and build accountability for harm done through their platforms, but often this is not at-will and along the periphery of these existential and communal risks. Persisting ignorance and the resulting lack of regulation of almost any kind has left the tech industry—and the means by which the majority of Americans connect and receive news—a virtual, unregulated Wild West.

How are organizations like Twitter/Facebook accountable to people? How are cable and broadcast media accountable? What is their role in a democracy? When individuals are harmed and these platforms are used to signal boost that harm, what justice mechanisms exist for victims? What prevention systems are in place to protect them?
**Strategy:**
Truman might partner with peer organizations (e.g. TechCongress, EmpowerWork, the American Civil Liberties Union, EPIC, EFF, FPF) to build a coalition for our legislative agenda and advocate with congressional offices for this policy agenda.

**Risks:**
- Legislative campaigns are difficult and most new bills fail;
- It may not protect the people it is intended to protect: women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA.

**Prototype & Test:**
To test the feasibility of federal legislation, we could start with an Action Network petition, followed by legislation at the state level. While it would be difficult to pass a national-level bill early in this process, simply introducing one could serve as an advocacy tool.

**Outputs:**
- Digital petition explaining the need for a change and potential ideas for the bill
- Coalition members and organizations
- Media coverage

**Outcomes:**
- Increased public awareness
- Interested parties convene
- Antibodies emerge
- Testing ground for whether/how to pursue formal legislation

**Action Plan:**
- Organize an expert task force to conduct a power analysis.
- Engage affected people in the design and impact measurement.
- Build an NGO partner coalition.
- Create a memorandum of intent - including “nothing for us without us.”
- Work with partners to build a congressional caucus to drive Congressional action.
- Draft legislation in conjunction with external NGO partners.
- Host press conferences with peers and legislators to introduce legislation.
- Invite and track media on legislation and congressional caucus events.
- Pass legislation.
- If legislation doesn’t pass, integrate this campaign in our annual legislative agenda.