Twitter Gives Harassed Users a Little Ammo

By John P. Mello Jr.
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Twitter on Tuesday announced a revamp of its system for reporting abuse on its service.

"In our continuing effort to make your Twitter experience safer, we're enhancing our in-product harassment reporting and making improvements to 'block' [followers]," said Shreyas Doshi, Twitter's director of product management.

The new changes make it easier to report account impersonation, harassment of others on the service, and threats of harm to oneself or others, he explained.

In addition to making the reporting process more mobile-friendly, the changes allow subscribers to report abuse of others on the service and simplify flagging tweets and accounts for review.

Better Blocking

Twitter has added a new "block page" to make it easier for users to see members they've banished from their band of followers. Back-end improvements to Twitter's systems are designed to improve response times.

The way the system handles blocked accounts is changing, too. When an account is blocked, its owner no longer will be able to see the profile page of the person who blocked it. Previously, blocked account holders could see profile pages and even tweet on them, although the tweets were filtered out of the profile page feeds.

When the new system is fully implemented -- it is being rolled out selectively over time -- tagging an account or tweet as "abusive" will lead you down a menu tree where you'll identify who is being abused -- you or someone else -- and what kind of abuse you're reporting: disrespectful or offensive comments, harassment, or a threat of violence or physical harm.

Twitter's announcement comes just a day after the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in *Elonis v. United States*, a case involving a man's Facebook threats against his estranged wife and an FBI agent.

It also follows two widely reported episodes of Twitter ugliness -- one targeting Robin Williams' daughter Zelda in the days after the star's death; the other, a phenomenon known as "Gamergate," targeting media critic Anita Sarkeesian, developers Brianna Wu and Zoe Quinn, and others.

Ineffective Enforcement

"There's a huge issue with harassment," said Jan Dawson, chief analyst with [Jackdaw Research](#).

Two of the biggest harassment areas involve teens and celebrity women.

"With teenagers, it's a very serious issue. It can lead to suicide and other horrible results," Dawson told TechNewsWorld.

"With celebrities, some dire threats have been issued that required police involvement," he added.

Generally, social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook have been cautious about their treatment of harassment.

"They try to tread a fine line between censorship and protecting their users," Dawson said. "One person's bullying is another person's free speech. It can be hard to know when someone crosses the line."

Even when abuse is identified, enforcement can be a problem.

"Twitter, especially, has policies about what is and what is not acceptable use, but hasn't always effectively enforced them when real cases of bullying and harassment emerge," Dawson pointed out.

Twitter's problem is twofold, he explained. "One is making reporting easy and quick, but the other side is acting on a report in a timely fashion. Any reform has to deal with both of those things."

No Defense Against Mob

While Twitter hopes to improve reporting through simplification, it may be dumbing down the process too much.

"The current system doesn't ask the right set of questions," said Jaclyn Friedman, executive director of [Women, Action, & the Media](#).

"It doesn't represent the specific ways that women are targeted on Twitter," she told TechNewsWorld, "so it's hard for some women trying to report harassment to choose what box to check -- because none of them seem to describe what's happening."

As examples, she cited one woman who was being deluged with unsolicited pornography and another who was bombarded with images of sexual violence.

"Those may be considered harassment by Twitter, but the form doesn't capture what that experience is," she said.

Response times are also an issue, Friedman said.

"It can take a really long time to get any kind of response," she explained, "and when you're feeling afraid and targeted on Twitter, that time can be really meaningful."

Another form of harassment absent from the new reporting scheme is a mob attack.

"Women can be targeted by a whole bunch of people at once. Right now, you'd have to report each one of those people as individuals," Friedman noted.

"Many of those tweets by themselves won't rise to the level of violating terms of service, but that doesn't mean when you're receiving all those tweets at once, it's not completely overwhelming and threatening and terrifying," she explained.

"Tools like the kind they're talking about may be helpful if you have one stalker," echoed Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute, "but not if someone with a huge base of followers sics their minions on you."

Furthermore, Twitter's tools to curb abuse actually can become tools of abuse, he told TechNewsWorld.

"It's important to bear in mind that the tools meant to stop harassers can be abused by the harassers themselves," Sanchez said, "as a way to punish people whose speech they dislike."