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Media Release

Honing in on homophobia in schools and sports

Website monitoring Twitter finds 'faggot' tweeted over 26 million times in two years

ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 24, 2014 — Kristopher Wells says the vast majority of young people in Canada regularly hear homophobic phrases like “that’s so gay” and other similar expressions of casual homophobia.

At the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Wells will be talking about ongoing projects that are trying to effect a cultural change around homophobia, particularly in schools and sports.

Wells is an Assistant Professor and Director of Programs & Services at the University of Alberta’s Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services. He will talk about the success of NoHomophobes.com, a website that monitors homophobic slurs on Twitter, while Wade Davis will talk about the You Can Play project in support of gay athletes.

Both address homophobia, but each is aimed at a different audience.

NoHomophobes.com monitors in real time the use of four homophobic phrases on Twitter: Faggot, No Homo, So Gay and Dyke. It is aimed at the young people using the phrases and the people (including educators) who don’t respond to their use.

The point of the project, says Wells, is to show how common the phrases are – ‘faggot,’ for example, was used more than 26 million times on Twitter between July 2012 and May 2014 – and to encourage a discussion on the topic of casual homophobia.

“Every second of every day, this kind of casual homophobia is online,” he said, adding that the website “has been a powerful tool to elicit conversations around the dinner table. When you use this casual homophobia, it creates discrimination. There is this direct causal impact. So we need to change the language and the culture.”

People, he says, need to think before they speak and think before they Tweet.





You Can Play is a different kind of project. It is a campaign that targets the sports community and is aimed at ensuring the equality and safety of all athletes, regardless of sexual orientation.

Wells says hate crimes are most likely to be perpetrated against blacks, Jews and sexual minorities. Both the perpetrators and the victims of hate crimes are likely to be under the age of 25.

So he says it is particularly important to reach youth – and the schools.

“Schools and sports are the last two bastions of homophobia,” says Wells.

“We’re trying to raise awareness, in an effort to effect a cultural change in schools and the sports world – in the sports world where athletes are expected to be role models, and in our schools where young people are learning about what it means to be responsible citizens.”

He says recent changes in the sports world – for example the acceptance of Michael Sam, the first openly gay man to be drafted by the National Football League in the U.S. this year – suggest sports is making progress faster than education.

“We are in the middle of a huge social and cultural change. It used to be OK and permissible to discriminate. Any social change movement is about education and breaking down stereotypes.

“In less than 40 years we went from gays being labelled dangerous sexual offenders to legalized same-sex marriage. And one of the biggest reasons for that is visibility. We don’t want any young person to feel their sexual orientation is a barrier.”

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About the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences

Organized by the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Congress is the largest interdisciplinary conference in Canada, and one of the largest in the world. Congress brings together 75 academic associations that represent a rich spectrum of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including literature, history, theatre, film studies, education, music, sociology, geography, social work and many others. For more information, go to www.congress2014.ca

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