

How to spot 10 classic diversionary tactics – and not get derailed

Tara Moss speaks out

Author Tara Moss looks at diversionary tactics from her latest book *Speaking Out*.

Diversionary tactics are just what the term implies: tactics used to try to derail and silence an argument rather than address it. This can happen in all fields and settings, and can be particularly frustrating for women in male-dominated environments, whether in meetings or online, who find their points are ignored or not taken seriously.

Diversion 1: The Faux Concern Troll

'Concern trolls' are well known online, but they exist offline as well. The faux concern is the same, regardless of the medium of communication. Any response that begins with 'Perhaps you should spend less time on X and more time on Y' should set off an alert that Diversion 1, AKA the Faux Concern Troll, may have been triggered.



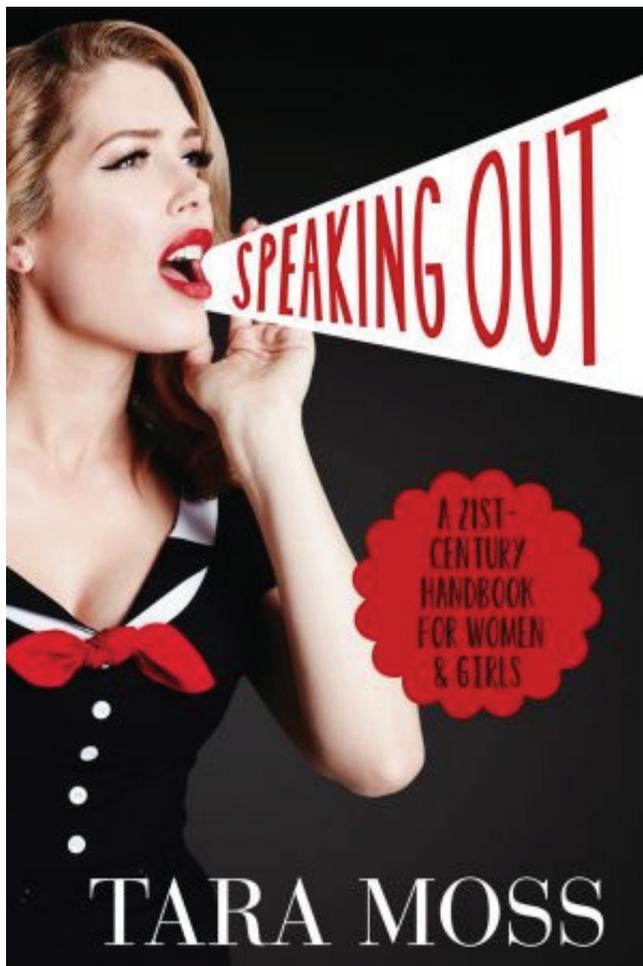
Writer Tara Moss will bring her first-hand experience of social media to *Cyberhate with Tara Moss*.

Photo: Steve Baccon

For example, 'Maybe you should spend less time worrying about refugees and more time worrying about poor people born in your own country.' The key here is that they do not address your points, they immediately divert to another topic. Often the person using this kind of diversion doesn't really give the other issue they claim is more important any credit either, they just don't want to listen to what you have to say, and they want to belittle your points or concerns. (Obvious exceptions might include parents, loved ones, bosses, teachers and academic supervisors, who, rightly or wrongly, might have some credible or well-meaning advice about where you should be directing your energies.)

Diversion 2: The One Who Demeans

Rather than focusing on your argument, and acknowledging or criticising the relevant points, this person will intentionally use demeaning language to gently and patronisingly suggest you are cute but dumb, nice but uneducated and so on. Attempting to demean a person instead of criticising their argument is widely recognised as poor form, bad practice and very weak. Diversion 2 often feels insulting, or like a patronising pat on the head. It resembles Diversion 3, below, but is generally subtler and less crude.



The cover of 'Speaking Out – a 21st-Century Handbook for Women and Girls'.

Diversion 3: 'But Look at You'

This diversion often occurs when you are speaking out about a difficult or personal issue that has affected you and others. This critic diverts the discussion by attempting to aggressively shame you, suggesting you self-evidently deserved whatever happened to you.

Let's say you speak about your experience of discrimination, sexual assault or bullying. The Diversion 3 response might sound something like: 'No wonder. Just look at you, you ugly/fat/skinny cow/slut/etc.' Your critic doesn't like you speaking up, so they try to belittle your appearance, size, weight, alleged sexual history and so on.

Diversion 4: 'But What About the Middle East?'

Say you present information on violent attacks against LGBTIQ people in your community. One diversionary response is: 'You think gays have it bad here? What about in the Middle East?' This tactic is frequently used to divert discussions about various freedoms, or social or safety issues impacting women, children, LGBTIQ people, sex workers, people with a disability, racial minorities and so on.

The basic argument is that nothing needs to be done at home because things are worse elsewhere. People are being bashed? Well they are being murdered somewhere else. Women are raped and murdered here? It's worse somewhere else. It aims to shut down an uncomfortable topic by pointing the finger elsewhere, to another country or culture, or even to a former time when things were harder. This does nothing to solve the issue at hand, and serves only to push away any sense of there being a real and immediate problem.

Don't be diverted. Problems at home, and in the here and now, matter too.

Diversion 5: Textbook Diversion, or 'What About Men?'

This is a textbook first-reply diversion (along the lines of Diversion 4), in which the responder attempts to change the subject immediately. For example, let's say you talk about reports of high rates of domestic abuse against a particular demographic: women. The diversionary response is: 'What about men?' It's not that this question should not be raised – it should. Rather, this question demands immediate discussion of a different topic, which is what makes it a textbook diversion.

This tactic is frequently used to divert discussions of gendered patterns in violence, as many feminists and advocates are well aware. The fact that anyone with an intimate partner can be the victim of domestic violence does not mean that the strikingly gendered patterns of domestic violence should be ignored. In fact, without analysing the existing patterns, we can't put in place a response, let alone solutions.

Diversion 6: 'DO Something About It'

You publish a post on social media about a particular issue – let's

say about reports on how underage refugees are locked in detention centres, causing concern to major welfare bodies and the United Nations, or how appalling it is that a particular species is dying out due to climate change. The diversionary response is: 'If you care so much, DO something about it; otherwise shut up.'

It does not logically follow that social media posts are useless. Raising awareness is the essence of any statement or report by whistleblowers or war correspondents. We wouldn't respond to these worthy reports by saying 'Do something about it'. Further, posting on social media does not preclude the possibility of taking other action.

Diversion 7: 'If You Can't Do Everything, Do Nothing'

Let's say you are raising money for a charity appeal that helps get basic toiletry supplies to people experiencing homelessness. The diversionary response is: 'If you really cared about homelessness you would be opening your home to them.' This argument boils down to: 'If you can't do everything, you can't do anything, therefore no one should do anything.'

My guess is this critic is doing just that: precisely nothing. Do your thing. No one can champion all causes, or do everything at once for every person. Anyone can try to divert you by pointing to a more extreme example, but it takes real heart to do anything at all.

Diversion 8: 'I Challenge You to Explain Everything'

Let's say you point out the well-documented gender pay gap. The usual diversionary response is: 'There are laws against unequal pay. I challenge you to provide one example of an instance where a man has been paid more than a woman for the same job.'

The reason why this is a diversion is that the gender pay gap is something that has been exhaustively documented for decades. It's like reporting that a building has collapsed, and instead of being able to focus on those who have been disadvantaged by this disaster, or how it happened and might be prevented in future, you are being challenged to prove gravity exists. Further, just because something is outlawed does not mean it doesn't happen. It is against the law to murder people and yet people get murdered every week.

If your critic 'challenges' you to explain something that is already well known, it is most likely a diversion. (My usual response to Diversion 8 is to have the names of a few credible, impartial organisations up my sleeve (the Australian Bureau of Statistics, World Health Organisation, Human Rights Commission, etc) and to ask the person to go ahead and research it for themselves. Many issues, like the pay gap, are complex and require time to research properly. There are a lot of factors involved. It's not your job to do that work for them.)

Diversion 9: 'Who Do You Think You Are?'/ 'Shame On You!'/ 'How Dare You!'

Like many classic diversions, this one is intended to completely shut down debate. Let's say you have some concerns about a law or public policy. The diversionary response might be something like: 'You think you know better than the government?' or 'Laws are laws for a reason.' The person has not addressed your points, whatever those are. Basically they are saying: 'How dare you question the omnipotent and perfect functioning of our impartial and flawless parliamentary or judicial systems!' Well, look, if such systems were perfect and impartial, slavery would not have been legal and it wouldn't have taken the Civil War to change that in the US.

This kind of response might also trigger accusations of 'Shame on you' for bringing up a particular subject. It's a whole lot of 'Who do you think you are?', because apparently having opinions is for other people, not you. Democracy involves public debate. As long as it is done respectfully, debate is a very good and very important thing. We need people to question the status quo. Without them, we'd probably still be stoning adulterers and keeping slaves.

Diversion 10: The Old Switcheroo

This is an aggressive style of diversion that often aims to both silence and insult. Whatever point you have brought up regarding a particular problem, this person will suggest or strongly claim that you are an example of precisely that problem, but the thing you pointed out is not. Mention an instance of sexism and this person will instantly accuse you of being sexist. Raise the issue of racism, and they will call you racist. Highlight some example of bullying and you are 'the real bully'. Express concern about low wages for the working majority and you are accused of waging 'class warfare'. Black is white, up is down, and nowhere does this actually make sense.

Plainly, the act of pointing out, advocating against or keeping data on gender-based discrimination is not sexist, and focusing on an issue regarding race or racism is not racist. Responding with a claim that it is not only suggests a lack of logic and a deep misunderstanding of the issues, but also reveals a desire to shut down any conversation about those issues.

This is one of the oldest, laziest styles of 'debate' going, an unnecessary form of name-calling that sadly has been used to some effect in public spin campaigns to distract or neutralise legitimate debate about issues.

This is an edited extract from [Speaking Out – a 21st-Century Handbook for Women and Girls](#). Tara Moss is the author of 11 books, a human rights advocate and advocate for the rights of women and children. Visit her at taramoss.com