3 Gendered cyberhate, victim-blaming, and why the internet is more like driving a car on a road than being naked in the snow

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A (commuter) commutation test

Imagine you are driving to work on a road that is relatively new but is one you have taken many times before. You pull up at a set of lights and a man wearing a balaclava opens the driver’s side door and points what looks like a gun at your head. He tells you to get out. Scared, you fumble, and he hits you across the face. Your mouth is dry, your heart pounds, and the welts on your face burn as he speeds off. You call the emergency services number but the operator who answers sounds vague.

‘Maybe try a local police station?’ he says and the line drops out. When you eventually flag a cab and get to a police station, you can’t believe what you hear. The officer tasked with taking your statement glazes over the moment you begin giving details.

‘Sorry,’ he says again, giving one of his colleagues a sideways glance. ‘You were driving a what? On, what did you call it …’ he looks down it notepad, ‘a road?’ You break it down for him one more time but he’s stopped taking notes. After you finish, you ask what will happen next. He shrugs. ‘To be completely honest, probably not much,’ he says. ‘I don’t even know if there are any laws covering this sort of thing. There’s one about paths and horse-drawn carts, but it’s hard to see how that might apply. Also, this “offender” you say you saw? Given you didn’t get a look at his face or photo ID, it’s going to be really hard for us to work out who he is. And you say the car’s vanished, too! How on earth can we be expected to investigate something we can’t even see anymore? Maybe you just imagined the gun. Or maybe it was a fake gun never intended for use.’

You point out the very real cuts and bruises on your face, and he laughs and says they don’t look so bad. Certainly he’s witnessed much worse at non-road crime scenes. The police officer sees your face fall and gives you a pat on the shoulder.

‘Don’t worry, love,’ he says. ‘All you need to do is take a little break from all these new-fangled “cars” and stay well away from all those high-tech “roads”. In fact, maybe it’s best not to leave your house at all for a while. Just to be on the safe side.’
Stunned and angry, you explain that you have to use cars and roads to do your job. You also point out that leaving your house is fairly important for, among other things, having an actual life. The officer’s tone changes.

‘Listen, lady,’ he says. ‘I know you modern girls get up to all sorts of crazy things in all sorts of crazy places, but you really do need to start taking some responsibility for what happened – if, indeed, anything really happened at all.’

The next day you talk to a journalist who writes an article you hope will help. Instead it makes everything worse. Media commentators write columns saying you’re overreacting and being hysterical, that everyone knows the guns carjackers use are joke guns. Some agree with the police officer’s view that you should have considered the risks involved when you first decided to drive. They question the route you were taking to work and say there are much safer roads (even though these would have quadrupled your commute time). One man publishes a photo of the type of vehicle you were driving and says you were just asking to be carjacked because it was so red and sporty. Someone else accuses you of fabricating the whole thing as part of an elaborate ‘false flag’ operation designed to discredit innocent male road users. Others attack you for impinging on the rights of carjackers to jack cars freely, saying it’s about time the world heard their side of the story. The hashtag #notallcarjackers starts trending on Twitter.

Then the abuse hits home in the literal sense. Your detractors call your employers and tell them you should be sacked because you don’t have the requisite credentials for your job. They sign you up at psychiatric clinics. Then they discover where you live and make sure you know they know by leaving abusive notes in your mailbox. You’re considering leaving your job and moving house when one of the highest ranking police officers in the country weighs in.

‘People have to grow up and be realistic about the high risks involved in venturing out on a road in a car,’ he tells a parliamentary inquiry into whether or not new laws are required for road safety. ‘If you go out in the snow without clothes on you’ll catch a cold. If you go on to the road in nothing but a sporty car, then you have to expect a carjacking or worse.’

Believe it or not

As difficult as it may be to believe, the fictional account above accurately captures many aspects of the non-fictional gendered cyberhate experience. Even the ‘grow up’ quote is drawn, almost word for word, from the testimony of one of the highest ranking police officers in Australia (Shane Connelly as cited in ‘“Grow up” and stop taking naked photos of yourself, police tell revenge porn inquiry’ 2016). In this chapter, I show that – like the carjacking target – large numbers of women are being attacked via the internet and on social media platforms simply for doing their jobs or while going about their everyday lives. These attacks are often extremely brutal and would be regarded as entirely unacceptable or criminal if they occurred in offline contexts. Yet police officers, policy makers, and platform managers in many nations are failing to act. Instead women are being told – either directly or indirectly – that they are to blame for
being assaulted and can solve the problem by taking ‘a little break’ from the internet or making significant changes to the way they engage online. Such victim-blaming is monumentally unjust in that women are being pressured to withdraw – either wholly or partially – from a domain that has become an essential part of contemporary citizenship. Further, it elides the presence and accountability of male perpetrators, and enables continued regulatory non-performance by shifting the responsibility for solving the issue from the public to the private sphere, and from institutions to individuals.

In this chapter, I use a combination of anecdotal and empirical data to demonstrate the nature, pervasiveness, and consequences of contemporary gendered cyberhate. I begin by providing an overview of empirical prevalence data to show that cyber violence against women and girls (cyber VAWG) is not rare or occurring only in the fringes of the cybersphere, but has become part of the everyday internet experience for many female internet users. I then provide details on various manifestations of gendered cyberhate, including revenge porn, doxing, sextortion, cyberstalking, and rape video blackmail. I address the ramifications of gendered cyberhate for individual women as well as for broader ideals such as digital citizenship, and equity of access and opportunity online.

As I will show, the discursive victim-blaming and perpetrator-exculpation around gendered cyberhate is both prevalent and insidious in that it tends to circulate – unquestioned – as ‘common sense’. In situations like this, the deployment of a commutation test can be useful. Commutation tests have their origins in semiotics and involve thought experiments in which one element of a text or idea is replaced with another that is different but similar enough to serve as a sort of litmus test for the assumptions and double standards that may be embedded in the contextual surrounds. In European structural linguistics, such tests are conducted in a rigid and quasi-scientific manner. They have, however, been used more loosely by scholars working in cultural, media, and film studies in order to make clear that which is ‘too obvious to see’ by identifying the ‘invisible discourses’ that provide the scaffolding for dominant belief systems (McKee 2003, pp. 107, 106). This is my rationale for beginning the chapter the way I have. By sketching a typical gendered cyberhate assault but switching the online attack component for an offline variation, I hope to demonstrate that the institutional and community responses deemed reasonable and intelligible in response to gendered cyberhate seem bizarre and unjust when applied to a different but similar context. These themes will be explored at greater length when I revisit the car-jacking analogy later in the chapter.

Data for this research is drawn from two, ongoing projects I am conducting into gendered cyberhate. While these two projects formally commenced in 2011 and 2014 respectively, I have been archiving and analysing examples of misogyny online since 1998. My methods are mixed and my hermeneutic is interdisciplinary. I have assembled my archives using approaches from internet historiography, and have analysed these using textual analysis. This chapter is also informed by the preliminary findings from qualitative interviews I have conducted with...
Australian women who have experienced hostility or rape threats online. Theoretically, I work across feminist and gender theory, legal theory, philosophy, literary studies, and cultural and media studies.

A limitation of this chapter is its focus on the gendered dimensions of cyberhate as opposed to those aspects of online hostility which are homophobic, transphobic, racist, culturally intolerant, and so on. While I acknowledge the political intersectionality of gender with other social identities, examining these aspects of cyberhate are beyond the parameters of my current research. Further, while this chapter does include some international statistics and case studies, its qualitative dimensions are almost entirely Anglophone. Another potential limitation is that I make a general case for increased regulation and intervention without furnishing specific details. This, however, is a deliberate move in acknowledgement not only of this book’s international focus, but of the idiosyncratic nature of various jurisdictions. Expert input at the local level is what is required in this regard.

What are we seeing here?

Investigating and analysing gendered cyberhate is complicated by variations in the terms and definitions deployed by researchers working in the field. The legal scholar Danielle Keats Citron uses ‘cyber harassment’ to describe ‘threats of violence, privacy invasions, reputation-harming lies, calls for strangers to physically harm victims, and technological attacks’ (2014, p. 3). Others use terms such as ‘technology violence’ (Ostini and Hopkins 2015), ‘technology-facilitated sexual violence’ (Henry and Powell 2015), ‘gendertrolling’ (Mantilla 2015), and ‘cyber VAWG’ (United Nations 2015). In this chapter I will be using the terms ‘gendered cyberhate’, ‘gendered e-bile’, and ‘cyber VAWG’ interchangeably to refer to discourse and acts that are directed at women or girls; that involve abuse, threats, and/or sexually violent rhetoric; and that involve the internet, social media platforms, or communications technology such as mobile phones (although may also have offline dimensions). For the most part, I use the term ‘target’ rather than ‘victim’ in recognition of research suggesting that academic terminology around sexual assault matters in terms of facilitating women’s empowerment and resistance (Hockett and Saucier 2015, p. 10). I do, however, use the expression ‘victim-blaming’ for idiomatic reasons (that is, because ‘victim-blaming’ has cultural and political connotations that ‘target-blaming’ does not).

Before moving on from nomenclature and definitions, I wish to note three terms which should be approached with caution when discussing gendered cyberhate. These are: ‘cyberbullying’, ‘flaming’, and ‘trolling’. With regard to ‘cyberbullying’, it is true that many gendered attacks online are types of bullying in that they involve individuals wishing ‘to inflict harm on their targets’ by executing ‘a series of calculated behaviors to cause them distress’ (Tokunaga 2010, p. 278). That said, the vast majority of cyberbullying research refers to studies of school students (ibid.), and journalists also use this term primarily to refer to
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Pace Robin M. Kowalski and Gary W. Giumetti’s argument that traditional definitions of cyberbullying apply equally well to all age groups (see Chapter 9 in this book), my case is that, to avoid confusion, the term is best restricted to refer to bullying scenes in school and youth settings.

‘Flaming’, meanwhile, is an antiquated expression used to refer to exchanges on the internet which – while seemingly hostile – have tended to involve extremely tame language by contemporary standards. In the late 1990s, for instance, researchers classified ‘you obviously don’t know crap about skiing’ as a flame so profane it seemed to represent ‘a state beyond antagonism’ (Thompsen and Foulger 1996, pp. 243, 228). Compare this with the following example of gendered cyberhate – one of countless and near-identical messages received by the feminist blogger Sady Doyle:

*GAG GAG GLUCK* You have discovered the only vocables1 worth hearing from Sady’s cock-stuffed maw … die tr*ny whore … [slut walk] is a parade for people who suffer from Histrionic Personality Disorder aka Attention Whores … I know where you live, r#tard … why don’t you do the world a favour and jump off a bridge … Feminazi

(As cited in Doyle, 2011a, emphases in original)

Such discourse clearly belongs in a different category than the low level (and non-gendered) rudeness of a message such as ‘you obviously don’t know crap’.

While ‘trolling’ is often used as a catch-all for the full spectrum of antagonistic behaviour online, the researcher Whitney Phillips argues that this term should only be deployed to refer to subcultures located in and around sites such as 4chan’s /b/board (2015a, 2015b). Phillips’ argument – and it is one shared by other scholars (for a literature review of this work see Jane 2015) – is that the ‘highly stylized’ deployment of explicitly sexist and racist language, memes,4 and raids5 common in subcultural trolling communities are markedly different from the violently misogynistic attacks on women that occurred, for example, during GamerGate (Phillips 2015b). (‘GamerGate’ is the colloquial term given to the vicious and quasi-coordinated attacks on women perpetrated by predominantly male video gamers from August 2014 onwards.) While Phillips makes many persuasive points, her approach relies heavily on the putative motivations or subcultural affiliations of online antagonists, arguably at the expense of considerations of the nature and impact of their actions. As such, my preference is to use the term ‘troll’ in line with early definitions; that is, to refer to people who disrupt online conversations by feigning naïveté or making off-topic or deliberately provocative comments. As such, while the term ‘trolling’ could be used to refer to very mild hostility directed at women online, for the most part it does not adequately capture the sexually explicit rhetoric, stark misogyny, or violence of contemporary gendered cyberhate.
Prevalence and manifestations

While hostile and hateful speech has always circulated on the internet, there is good evidence that the gendered dimensions, rhetorical noxiousness, directly threatening nature, and prevalence of such discourse increased over the first decade of the twenty-first century, spiked around 2010 and 2011, and has remained at very high levels since GamerGate in 2014 (Jane 2017, pp. 16–42). Figures compiled by the UN show that 73 per cent of women and girls have been exposed to or have experienced some form of online violence; that women are 27 times more likely to be abused online than men; that 61 per cent of online harassers are male; and that women aged between 18 and 24 are at heightened risk (2015, pp. 2, 15). A Pew Research Center study shows that while men are more likely to be subjected to less severe harassment, such as name-calling and embarrassment (an ‘annoyance so common that those who see or experience it say they often ignore it’), young women are particularly vulnerable to more severe kinds of cyber abuse such as being the target of physical threats, harassment over a sustained period of time, stalking, and sexual harassment (Duggan 2014). Not surprisingly, women are more likely than men to find their experience with online harassment extremely or very upsetting (ibid.). Further:

- between 60 and 70 per cent of US cyberstalking targets are female (Citron 2014, p. 13);
- internet accounts with feminine usernames incur an average of 100 sexually explicit or threatening messages a day for every four received by users with masculine names (ibid., p. 14); and
- a study of multiplayer online gamers found 70 per cent of women playing as male characters to avoid sexual harassment (ibid., p. 18).

Gendered cyberhate can be contextualised within a broader ‘pandemic’ of gendered violence (as per data showing that 35 per cent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner at some point in their lives (UN 2015, p. 2; UN Women 2016)). It manifests in a wide variety of practices which can be situated along various continua of violence, harm, and illegality depending on the context. With regard to law, this might range from ‘annoying but legal’ at one end of the continuum to ‘unambiguously criminal’ at the other. The bulk of cases fall somewhere in the middle, and usually have a legally liminal status. An example from the mildest end might involve a men’s rights activist who clogs the Twitter feed of a high-profile feminist with messages feigning ignorance about feminist basics and/or asking ‘concerned’ questions about feminist issues in bad faith. A real-life case study which sits at the most extreme end is that of Jebidiah Stipe, a 28-year-old American former Marine who impersonated his former female partner on the internet site Craigslist and published a photo of her alongside text saying she wanted to play out a rape fantasy and was seeking ‘a real aggressive man with no concern for women’ (Black 2010; Citron 2014,
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p. 5). More than 160 people responded to the ad, including a man who – after Stipe divulged his ex-partner’s address – arrived at the woman’s home, forced his way inside, bound and blindfolded her, and raped her at gunpoint (ibid., pp. 5–6, Black 2010). Both Stipe and the rapist were subsequently jailed for 60 years to life in prison (Neary 2010).

The following list of common manifestations of gendered e-bile is not exhaustive, nor does it describe practices which only ever involve female targets. Attacks on women frequently occur on multiple occasions and involve a multitude of assailants, channels, and tactics. My aim in sub-dividing gendered cyber-hate in the following way is to provide a rough, ‘101’ guide for newcomers to the topic, rather than to provide a comprehensive taxonomy.

Abuse, harassment, and threats

Much gendered cyberhate involves text-based harassment: via social networking sites or apps such as Twitter and Facebook; in the ‘below-the-line’ comment sections on news articles and blogs; on dating web sites and apps; via personal email; and/or which occurs during online gaming. Signal characteristics of this discourse include profanity, violent and sexualised rhetoric, explicit, ad hominem invective, and plausible threats. Aspersions are cast on women’s intelligence, mental health, and sexual attractiveness. The ‘ugly, fat, and slutty’ trifecta is hurled with monotonous regularity. Targets are often appraised not only in terms of their ‘fuckability’ but also their ‘rapeability’. Incitement to suicide is common, as are en masse attacks – known colloquially known as ‘dog piles’. The latter may coalesce organically, be incited by a single high profile figure, or be organised at a grassroots level by various online groups and communities (Jane 2017, pp. 35, 60–61). Such attacks may include circulating lies about targets. During a 2007 mob attack on the tech designer Kathy Sierra, for example, people distributed false statements about her being a former sex worker and battered wife (Sandoval 2013). GamerGate, meanwhile, began when a jilted ex-partner made the baseless claim that his former girlfriend, Zoë Quinn, had slept with a journalist in order to secure a positive review of a game she had designed (Jane 2017, pp. 29–32).

Some gendered cyberhate is expressed in the form of hostile wishful thinking – for example ‘I hope you get raped with a chainsaw’ (cited in Doyle 2011b). There is evidence to suggest that perpetrators are aware such sentence constructions might offer legal loopholes. For example, a Twitter user who received a police warning in 2016 for issuing direct death threats to the Australian media personality Waleed Aly and his wife (whom he called a ‘hijabi scumfuk floozie’), henceforth began issuing tweets such as, ‘I hope #WaleedAly ACCIDENTLY cuts his throat while shaving’ (A. Lattouf, personal communication, 27 May 2016, emphasis in original). Direct threats, however, are still common. For example, when the British Labour MP Stella Creasy spoke in support of a student feminist activist who had campaigned to have more women on British bank notes, Creasy received a tweet reading, ‘YOU BETTER WATCH YOUR
BACK … IM GONNA RAPE YOUR ASS AT 8PM AND PUT THE VIDEO ALL OVER THE INTERNET' (as cited in Jane 2014b, p. 563). Threats are also routinely made against women’s online supporters, family members, friends, and pets.

Abuse and harassment can be image- as well as text-based. Photo manipulation, for example, is often used to place an image of a target into a scene involving sex and/or violence. The aforementioned attack on Sierra included doctored photos depicting her being choked by undergarments, and with nooses next to her head (Sandoval 2013). The feminist cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian, meanwhile, has received countless images of men ejaculating onto her photo (Sarkeesian 2015). One man went so far as to create an online game called ‘Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian’ in which players could ‘punch this bitch in the face’ until Sarkeesian’s face became bloody and battered (as cited in Sarkeesian 2012). It has also become common practice for men to send unsolicited and unwanted photos of their genitals – aka ‘dick pics’.

**Doxing, swatting, Wikipedia vandalism, and Google bombing**

‘Doxing’ refers to the publishing of personally identifying information to either explicitly or implicitly incite internet antagonists to hunt targets offline. During GamerGate, for instance, the Boston game developer, Brianna Wu, watched a mass of her personal details suddenly appear online during an attack. Within minutes someone tweeted at her saying, ‘I’ve got a K-bar and I’m coming to your house so I can shove it up your ugly feminist cunt’ (as cited in Stuart 2014). During the early stages of GamerGate in 2014, other women associated with gaming, such as Sarkeesian and Quinn, also fled their homes after their addresses and other personal details were published online.

‘Swatting’ involves tricking police dispatchers into sending Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams to raid targets’ houses. In 2015, for instance, 20 police officers arrived at the former Portland home of the digital artist and video game creator Grace Lynn after receiving a call that hostages were being held inside the house. Lynn, who found a thread on the 8chan web site planning the attack, believes she was targeted because she had previously been aligned with the GamerGate campaign but had changed her allegiances because of the movement’s escalating misogyny (Parks 2015).

‘Wikipedia vandalism’ refers to malicious edits made to a target’s Wikipedia page. For example, a 2012 mob attack against Sarkeesian included the posting of pornography on her Wikipedia page and the alteration of the text to read that she was a ‘hooker’ who held ‘the world record for maximum amount of sexual toys in the posterior’ (as cited in Greenhouse 2013). During GamerGate in 2014, Quinn’s Wikipedia page was edited to read: ‘Died: soon.’ When this was deleted, a new entry appeared reading: ‘Died: October 13, 2014’ – the date of her next scheduled public appearance (as cited in Jason 2015).

‘Google bombing’ describes the manipulation of the Google search engine so that web users searching for a specific term are directed to content determined
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by the bombers. For example, during the aforementioned attacks on Sarkeesian, the first result returned by the Google search engine when her name was entered was, ‘Anita Sarkeesian is a feminist video blogger and cunt’ (as cited in Plunkett 2012).

Revenge pornography, rape video blackmail, and sextortion

Revenge porn involves the public circulation of sexually explicit material, usually of a former female partner, without the consent of the pictured subject. In many cases, these are photos or videos that were shared consensually during a relationship, then circulated by the former male partner – sometimes on web sites expressly designed for this purpose – after a break-up. The term has also been used more generally to refer to images obtained without consent, such as via hidden webcams. Revenge porn often occurs in the context of domestic violence scenarios in that men in possession of intimate footage of a former or current partner use these to pressure a woman into acquiescing to their demands. As with the aforementioned example involving Stipe, the posting of such material is frequently accompanied by doxing, presumably in an attempt to inflict maximum damage. While the term ‘revenge porn’ implies that perpetrators are motivated solely or primarily by the desire for revenge, sexual and intimate images are used to coerce, threaten, harass, and abuse victims for a range of reasons. Catherine Buni and Soraya Chemaly note that, in an increasing number of nations, rapists are filming sexual assaults and using the footage to blackmail girls and women out of reporting the crimes (2014). They cite the case of a 16-year-old girl in India whose gang rape was recorded on a mobile phone and who was told the film would be uploaded onto the internet if she told her family or the police (ibid.).

Another emerging practice, ‘sextortion’, involves blackmailing targets – often for the purposes of extorting them to perform sexual acts online. In May 2016, for instance, the Brookings Institution published its analysis of 78 publicly available sextortion cases from 52 jurisdictions, 29 states or territories, and 4 nations, involving up to 6,500 targets (Wittes et al. 2016). Of the 78 specific cases under analysis, 69 involved minors (more than three quarters of them female), all the perpetrators were male, and nearly all the adult victims were female (ibid.). The original material used for blackmail was obtained via a range of techniques including hacking victims’ computers and webcams, installing malware on their devices, or impersonating boyfriends (ibid.).

Cyberstalking

Cyberstalking has many parallels with offline versions of the offence. It often involves a single perpetrator and target, and may be associated with domestic violence and/or the end of an intimate relationship. Cyberstalking practices include: making multiple and unwanted attempts to contact a target via mobile phone, email, and social media; installing spyware on a target’s computer; and/or hacking into the target’s email or social media account. The latter may be to
gain information about the target’s private life and/or to cause disruption by sending abusive or misleading messages to the target’s family and friends, by cancelling professional engagements, and so on. Cyberstalkers may also place a Global Positioning System (GPS) tracker on targets’ cars, or install video cameras in and around their homes, thus enabling them to track targets’ movements and to confront them at unexpected locations.

**Identity theft and impersonation**

Identity theft and impersonation online are often associated with criminal attempts at financial gain. In the context of gendered cyberhate, however, they are more likely to be used for the purposes of stalking, reputational attack, and/or inciting abuse against a target. Caitlin Roper, an activist with the morally conservative Australian campaign group Collective Shout, has twice been impersonated on Twitter. On the first occasion, a man established an account using her name and photo, as well as a Twitter user name that was extremely similar to her genuine one (it used an additional underscore, that is, ‘Caitlin_Roper’, as opposed to ‘Caitlin_Roper’). He then began tweeting to men – as Roper – offering to perform various sex acts and saying she loved to be raped (C. Roper, personal communication, 3 June 2015).

**Ramifications**

The profound suffering that can be experienced by the targets of gendered cyberhate is well documented (see Citron 2014; Mántilla 2015; Jane 2017). The coercive force of gendered cyberhate is causing women significant emotional, social, financial, professional, and political harm. It is constraining their ability to find jobs, market themselves, network, engage politically, socialise, and partake freely in the sorts of self-expression, self-representation, creativity, interactivity, and collaborative enterprise celebrated as key benefits of the web 2.0 era (see Jane 2016a, 2016b, 2017). Harassment and threats at the most extreme end of the spectrum can cause women to experience debilitating fear, trauma, and life disruption. Some women have developed mental health problems or experienced breakdowns (Jane 2017, pp. 61–64). During the height of the attack against her – a time in which she was receiving around 50 abusive and threatening messages per hour – Criado-Perez says:

> The immediate impact was that I couldn’t eat or sleep. I lost half a stone in two days. I was just on an emotional edge all the time. I cried a lot. I screamed a lot. I don’t know if I had a kind of breakdown. I was unable to function, unable to have normal interactions.

(As cited in Day 2013)

Such accounts comport with Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell’s argument that harms in the supposedly ‘virtual’ world can have real bodily and psychical
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effects, and ‘at least as much impact on a person as traditional harms occurring
against the physical body’ (2015, p. 765).

Despite the vicious nature and significant harms of gendered cyberhate,
police, policy makers, and platform managers in many nations are failing to ade-
quately acknowledge or address the problem. The UN observes that, in 74 per-
cent of Web Index countries, law enforcement agencies and the courts are
failing to take appropriate action in response to cyber VAWG (2015, p. 39).

Further, at least one in five female internet users live in countries where har-
assment and abuse online is extremely unlikely to be punished (ibid.). A 2014
report by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) identifies mul-
tiple policy failures in that, despite increases in violence against women invol-
ving information and communications technology (ICT), there has been ‘very
little corresponding recognition of ICT-related forms of violence against women
by states, intergovernmental institutions and other actors responsible for ending
violence against women’ (p. 4). This empirical data comports with multiple
anecdotal accounts from women who report that the standard response from
police in many jurisdictions is to suggest they simply take a break from the inter-

The response of platform operators is similarly problematic and inadequate.

Another APC cyber VAWG report comparing the policies of Facebook, YouTube,
and Twitter identifies a number of overarching issues including: a reluctance to
engage directly with a problem unless it becomes a public relations issue; a lack
of transparency around reporting and redress processes; a failure to engage with
the perspectives of non-North American/European women; and no public com-
mitment to human rights standards or to the promotion of rights, other than the
encouragement of free speech (Nyst 2014, pp. 3–4).

The carjacking revisited

Instead of receiving support and assistance, the female targets of gendered
cyberhate are frequently blamed for their online experiences. Indeed, the UN
describes the victim-blaming around cyber VAWG as both widespread and
destructive, calling for such practices to be ‘aggressively … addressed as a
primary issue of concern’ (2015, pp. 19, 30). While the most explicitly articu-
lated examples of victim-blaming occur in media commentary, the dynamic is
clearly evident in the actions (and lack of actions) of various institutions as
described above. This is where we begin to see the parallels between real life
practice and the thought experiment which opened this chapter.

As with the fictional carjacking scenario, online attacks often occur while
women are engaged in banal – yet essential – activities in places where both
passers-by and participants should be able to expect a reasonable degree of per-
sonal safety. Yet, as with the carjacking target, front-line respondents to gen-
dered cyberhate (such as police) often possess insufficient knowledge about the
domains in which the abuse is unfolding. Many are unsure what, if any, existing
laws might be applicable. The difficulties involved in conducting inquiries and
identifying perpetrators are used to justify inaction. Questions which should arguably be investigated by law enforcement and then tested in courts of law are returned to the victim to determine: Your perpetrator is anonymous or deleted his account? You find and identify him. You’re unsure if the man saying he wants to rape you with a combat knife means it? You prove threat credibility and malicious intent. You’re upset about a Facebook page where men are making rape ‘jokes’? It’s about time you considered their freedom of speech and their rights.

While the fictional carjacking account is based on the accounts of many non-fictional women, much of it is drawn from the experiences of Kath Read, an Australian librarian and self-described ‘fat activist’ whom I interviewed for my research in June 2015. Read has been targeted by a large volume of extremely vitriolic cyberhate since 2009. People have threatened to decapitate her with a chainsaw, and to smash her face in with a hammer if they see her in the street. They have signed her up for multiple appointments with personal trainers, gyms, and bariatric surgeons. They also contacted Read’s employer saying she should be sacked and that she was unqualified for her job (a lie). When Read found a note in her mailbox reading, ‘Hi fat bitch, I see this is where you live’, she sought assistance from police. One officer told her to, ‘Get offline and stop being so confident’ (as cited in Jane 2017, p. 90).

Women from other nations report similarly unhelpful responses. The US writer Amanda Hess called police after receiving death threats from a Twitter account that seemed to have been established solely for this purpose. The officer assigned to her case did not know what Twitter was (2014). Wu, who employs a full-time staffer whose sole task is to monitor and log threats against her (Sabin 2015), says she loses at least a day each week ‘explaining the Internet’ to police (as cited in Jason 2015). Wu has made multiple reports to Twitter, as well as to local law enforcement, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Homeland Security, but says she has yet to receive a satisfactory response (O’Brien 2015). The feminist writer Jessica Valenti – the Guardian staffer targeted for the largest number of objectionable readers’ comments (Valenti 2016) – was advised by a representative of the FBI to leave her home until the threats blew over, and never to walk outside unaccompanied (as cited in Hess 2014).

Like the protagonist in the carjacking analogy, targets of gendered cyberhate who speak publicly about their experiences are often subjected to even worse abuse from online assailants. Further, media commentators castigate them for: allegedly exaggerating or fabricating their accounts of the abuse and its impacts; failing to realise that what happens online is not ‘real’; failing to consider the rights and points of views of male attackers; and promoting oppressive censorship. Specifically, women have been accused: of being ‘peculiarly sensitive’ and ‘Orwellian’ (O’Neill 2011); of narcissistically imaging threats and violence where none exist (West 2015); and of ‘retreating into a position of squawking victimhood’ every time they receive an ‘unpleasant message’ (O’Doherty 2015). Even some scholars argue that much putatively misogynist discourse online is not meant to persecute women, but is instead intended: to police the purity of
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certain sub-cultures; to haze newcomers to such communities; and to make in-

jokes about political correctness, identity politics, and attention-seeking in online

environments (see Jane 2015).

Discourse about gendered cyberhate is often contradictory in that the internet

is depicted both as a trivial and easy to opt-out-of diversion (on par with a video

game console), as well as exotic and inherently extremely dangerous (on par

with a potentially deadly natural environment like a remote jungle or the sur-

rounds of an active volcano). An example of this first framing can be observed

in the views of the UK actor Steven Berkoff, who says:

There’s a lot of talk about people being abused on Twitter, women being

savagely insulted and degraded. I think, why get into that in the first place?

If I jump into a garbage bin, I can’t complain that I’ve got rubbish all

over me.

(As cited in Cavendish 2013)

An example of the second is the non-fictional version of the ‘grow up’ quote

included at the start of this chapter. It comes from Australia’s federal police

assistant commissioner Shane Connelly who was addressing a 2016 government

inquiry into whether new laws were required to address revenge porn. His exact

words were:

People just have to grow up in terms of what they’re taking and loading on

to the computer because the risk is so high…. [They say] if you go out in

the snow without your clothes on you’ll catch a cold – if you go on to the

computer without your clothes on, you’ll catch a virus.

(As cited in “Grow up” and stop taking naked photos of yourself, police
tell revenge porn inquiry’ 2016)

As with the long and ongoing battle to end the victim-blaming and perpetrator-
exculpation that still occurs around offline sexual assault, such framings not only

blame women for being abused and attacked online, but position the problem as

one that female and potential targets must solve by modifying their behaviour.

Advising or coercing women to opt out of or dramatically change their online

engagement is a form of digital disenfranchisement. It is at odds with the recogni-

tion by an increasing number of nations that equality of access to affordable and
effective broadband is vital for nations’ economic and social development (The
Broadband Commission for Digital Development 2015, p. 8). Victim-blaming also

has the effect – at least at the level of discourse and rhetoric – of relieving institu-
tions and regulatory bodies of the burden of devising and enforcing interventions,
as well as completely eliding the presence of harmful human agents who could
conceivably be held to account for their actions. Such approaches are monumen-
tally unjust. They inflict additional punishment on women who have already suf-
fered, and do nothing to address what is now broadly recognised as a serious and
rapidly worsening international problem (UN 2015).
Conclusion

This chapter has offered an overview of the nature and impact of gendered cyberhate, as well as highlighting the victim-blaming and perpetrator-excusing that are occurring in lieu of useful solutions. It has drawn attention to conflicting framings of the cybersphere as being both not ‘real’ (that is, a virtual domain where it is impossible to inflict or sustain ‘real’ harm), as well as inherently dangerous – a perilous place where women must expect abuse, harassment, and threats. As such, women are advised to take a multitude of ‘safety’ precautions including: avoiding commenting on or participating in debates about provocative political topics; taking care not to venture into unknown terrain or into conversations with unknown people; and/or refraining from posting images of themselves that male users might find too attractive (or too unattractive). Ultimately, however, it is often recommended that the safest course of action is for women to partially or completely withdraw from the cybersphere – an option framed as involving no significant reduction in life or work opportunities whatsoever. The dominance of the idea that cyber VAWG is a problem caused by – and therefore best solved by – its female targets may go part of the way to explaining the combined failure of police, policy makers, and platform operators to intervene in a timely and useful manner. It also chimes with larger, gender-related social violence problems which can be linked to the disproportionate share of political, economic, and social power still held by men (Smith 2016; UN 2015).

When inequity and oppression seem structured into the metaphorical DNA of a society – as is the case with gender – it is easy for certain ‘commonsensical’ views to be accepted and circulated without interrogation. A commutation test in the form of an account of a carjacking was therefore provided to encourage a critical reappraisal of dominant ideas about responsibility and blame online, as well as to reveal some of the deeply embedded assumptions and double standards underlining such views. There are obvious limits to the usefulness of using roads and cars as an analogy for the cybersphere and its multitude of umbilically attached devices. Yet while this is not a straightforward ‘like for like’ scenario, there are a number of significant parallels. Both road transport and the internet are new technologies (relative to human history) that have quickly become quotidian yet crucial. As with roads and cars, states will never possess the power to police the behaviour of every individual internet user. Likewise, online domains will never be 100 per cent safe nor will they ever offer absolute equality of access (not everyone will ever have the electronic equivalent of the keys to their very own Lamborghini). It is important, however, to set baseline targets and to continually strive towards achieving as much safety and equality of access as possible. This requires a combination of rules and sanctions devised and enforced by regulatory authorities, alongside reasonable levels of user compliance and commitment to good citizenship.

Given that the latter requires community education and awareness, the language used to talk about and frame social problems is important. This is why the ‘being in a car on a road’ parallel is helpful, while the ‘being naked in the snow’
analogy is not. The former acknowledges the banality yet also the necessity of a
domain in which users must adhere to a set of ground rules and may be punished
for transgressions, whereas the latter frames the cybersphere as an inherently
perilous place whose naturally occurring and ambient hazards could never be
apprehended and brought before courts of law. While changes in language alone
will obviously not be sufficient to solve this large and complex problem, discursive re-framings are potentially helpful in shifting dominant social attitudes and
norms. This, in turn, may assist in combatting the systemic, gender-related ineq-
uity which contributes to the ongoing and disproportionate levels of violence of
all kinds perpetrated against women and girls around the world.

Notes
1 The second of these projects is being funded by the Australian government in the form
of a Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA). This three-year project is
called ‘Cyberhate: the new digital divide?’.
2 I interviewed these women – aged between 19 to 52 – over the course of 2015
and 2016.
3 I will not be using ‘sic’ after material cited from the cybersphere in recognition of the
colloquialisms which are used so frequently in the domain.
4 Internet memes are images, videos, and catchphrases which are not just ‘viral’ (in that
they are shared many times) but which are constantly being altered by users.
5 In this context a ‘raid’ is a coordinated attack on a site or individual.
6 My reading of ‘K-bar’ here is that it is a misspelling of ‘ka-bar’ – a combat knife.
7 The term ‘web 2.0’ (following from ‘web 1.0’) refers to changes in the design and use
of the internet which facilitate user-generated content, interactivity, collaboration, and
sharing.
8 The World Wide Web Foundation’s Web Index covers 86 countries and measures the
web’s contribution to social, economic, and political progress.

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4 Sexting in context

Understanding gendered sexual media practices beyond inherent ‘risk’ and ‘harm’

Amy Shields Dobson

Introduction

This chapter addresses the relatively new set of ‘media practices’ (Couldry, 2012) that have been described as ‘sexting’. Drawing primarily on qualitative research conducted on youth sexting, the chapter aims to: (a) position sexting media practices within a gendered social, cultural, historical, and technological context; and (b) unpack the ways in which the ‘risks’ and ‘harms’ of sexting media practices, dominantly understood as inherent to digital sexual image exchange, are socially and culturally determined. Sexting is a recent phenomenon that has sparked much debate and concern about the new affordances of digitally networked devices and media platforms, and the potential for new technologies to contribute to, increase, or intensify bullying, harassment, and sexual crimes. A portmanteau first used widely in news media in the late 2000s, ‘sexting’ combines the words ‘sex’ and ‘texting’. ‘Sexting’ potentially refers to a wide range of ‘media practices’ (Couldry, 2012) involving the production, exchange, and circulation of sexual texts and images via digital networks.

To conceptualise sexting primarily as a ‘crime’ is to assume that it principally involves non-consensual and/or illegal media practices such as the malicious or unauthorised production and/or distribution of images, or the production and/or distribution of ‘pornographic’ images of children. The available research, conducted mostly on sexting among teenagers and young adults in the Anglophone West, tends to indicate that this is not the case but rather that, much of the time, sexting media practices occur privately and consensually (that is, they do not come to the attention of those not intended to be involved) between peers and romantically or sexually involved partners (Drouin et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2014; Wolak and Finkelhor, 2011). As Hasinoff and Shepard (2014) note, ‘Sexting is the latest incarnation of a long history of personal sexual media production, including love letters, diary entries, and Polaroid photos’ (2014, p. 2935). They draw attention to the way long-standing social expectations of privacy and consent need to be remembered when it comes to sexting, suggesting that ‘the privacy of any of these objects is violable, but most people would consider such a violation unreasonable and unexpected’ (p. 2935).