**Gendered cyberhate as workplace harassment and economic vandalism**

**Abstract**

Research into the proliferation of abuse and harassment currently being directed towards women online is in its early stages and could arguably benefit from: 1) the provision of more case studies for discussion; and 2) a focus on specific dimensions of the gendered cyberhate problem rather than on the issue as a whole. This article responds to these research gaps by providing 15 new Australian case studies focusing on one particular ramification of cyber abuse and harassment abuse: the adverse impact on women's livelihoods. These show that women workers who receive gendered cyberhate in forms that constitute a form of workplace harassment and/or economic vandalism have few to no means of obtaining support or redress. This is due to a combination of: “precarious” work circumstances; a blurring of personal and professional contexts; and the fact that emerging, electronic iterations of workplace abuse and harassment tend to slip between the cracks of existing laws and policies (which are already barely adequate).

**Introduction**

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have turned their attention to gendered cyberhate---a problem that has been obvious since the earliest days of the internet but has increased markedly since 2010.¹ The abuse and harassment of women online typically involves sexually explicit invective, hyperbolic rape and death threats, and/or persistent, unwanted sexual advances from senders who often become hostile if ignored or rebuffed (Jane, 2017, 16-18). Increasing numbers of women are also reporting instances of: cyberstalking; rape blackmail videos; malicious impersonation; “sextortion” (the blackmailing of targets in order to extort them to perform sexual acts online); revenge porn (the non-consensual uploading of sexually explicit material of a subject without their consent); and “doxing” (the publishing of personally identifying information, usually to incite internet antagonists to hunt targets in “real” life) (Jane, 2017, 34-5). While the language used to capture such phenomena varies between researchers and projects (Jane, 2017, 7), in this article, I will use the general term “gendered cyberhate” to refer to a range of discourses and acts occurring at the gender-technology-violence nexus.

Gendered cyberhate is a complex issue which offers the analyst multiple lines of inquiry. For instance, we could examine the extent to which gendered abuse and threats online: cause “embodied” rather than “virtual” harm; map onto more familiar forms of offline violence against women and girls; break various criminal laws; constitute a form of hate speech; and/or compromise women’s digital citizenship. In this article, I discuss one very specific dimension of the gendered cyberhate problem, namely: its professional and economic impact on women. This focus is not to suggest that gendered

¹ For a review of this scholarly literature see: Jane 2014, 2015, and 2017. For discussion of the way gendered cyberhate has increased starkly since the advent of the web 2.0 era, see: Jane, 2017, 16-42.
cyberhate harms relating to finances and career prospects are more significant or serious than any others, but because---as discussed in the next section---this facet of the gendered cyberhate problem has yet to receive much attention.

I begin with an overview of the work of the small number of scholars, feminist commentators, and journalists who have begun testing the idea that the online abuse and harassment of women might constitute a workers’ rights issue. Conceptual work from Cultural Studies on “produsage” (Bruns, 2008), “playbour” (Kücklich, 2005), and “microcelebrity” practices (Senft, 2013, 346) is then used to question the assumption that gendered cyberhate in workplace settings might only or primarily affect women in the media or with public profiles. After an explanation of the methods used for the research project underpinning this article, 15 new case studies are then offered to show the extent to which gendered cyberhate can indeed be understood as constituting an insidious new form of workplace harassment, and/or what I am calling “economic vandalism”. Given the prevalence and severity of the problem, the apparent malice involved in many attacks, and the fact that women in these circumstances have few to no means of obtaining support or redress, my concluding argument is that new responses are urgently required to protect the interests of the increasing numbers of women whose places of labour---and playbour----are partly or completely located in the cybersphere.

“That this is part of my work life is unacceptable”

Prior to feminist and civil rights activism in the 1960s and 1970s, workplace harassment---that is, “persistently negative attacks of a physical or psychological nature” at work (ABC of women workers’ rights and gender equality (second edition), 2007, 99)---was seen as simply the cost of doing business for working women. It was regarded as a private matter which targets were expected to tolerate or otherwise manage in the absence of a framework of accountability vis-à-vis perpetrators, employers, and lawmakers. Since then, much headway has been made in terms of introducing new legislation and policies, as well as shifting social attitudes. But sexual harassment remains a “persistent and pervasive” problem in contemporary workplaces (McDonald and Flood, 2012, 5), with two recent studies reporting that more than half of women still experience some form of sexual harassment or inappropriate behaviour at work (Ross, 2016; “Sexual Harassment Rife in the Workplace: New Study Reveals”, 2013).

Alongside “traditional” forms of workplace harassment such as women “being leered at, propositioned, cornered or groped” (McColl, 2016), new variations involving digital and communications are also emerging. While some of these comport with previous iterations of workplace harassment, many others do not. In this article, I will be using the term “economic vandalism” to encapsulate a range of professional and economic harms which result from the receipt of gendered cyberhate and which do not occur in contexts that can neatly be captured by the term “workplace harassment”. (A specific example would be a woman who is fired, demoted, or passed over for a job interview because an employer or potential employer Googles her name and finds intimate photographs of her that have been posted by a disgruntled former partner.) The use of the word “vandalism” implies intent on the part of perpetrators, and is deliberate. It recognizes that, in many instances, perpetrators state openly that their goal is to besmirch women’s professional reputations, detail their careers, and/or have them fired from their jobs (see the case studies below).

The impact of cyber hate and harassment on women’s livelihoods has received scant attention in scholarship, most likely because this is an emerging dimension of a relatively new and technologically novel problem. A notable exception is the work of the feminist legal scholar Danielle Keats Citron who writes of women being sacked and/or having their future career prospects greatly diminished after attacks involving revenge porn (2014). Given that nearly 80 per cent of employers
consult search engines to collect intelligence on job applicants and about 70 per cent of applications are rejected because of these findings, Citron and Mary Anne Franks note “the simple but regrettable truth” that “after consulting search results, employers don’t call revenge porn victims to schedule an interview or to extend offers” (2014, 106-7). The feminist writer Anne Summers, meanwhile, has assembled a dossier of the “rancid” and “sexually explicit” cyber attacks directed at former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, arguing that Gillard was subjected to the sorts of workplace-related sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and bullying that, in other circumstances, would leave an employer at risk of civil penalties or even prison (2013, 105, 107).

The economic dimensions of gendered cyberhate have also received a degree of coverage in media reports. For instance, the Australian writer Ginger Gorman---herself a victim of extreme trolling resulting from her work as a journalist---points out that while many businesses have social media policies prohibiting staff from bringing their employers into disrepute (that is, policies to mitigate harm to organizations), a double standard is at play because employers rarely demonstrate similar concern for staff in the form of policies to protect staff members from the harm that might come to them online in the course of using social media to perform their work duties (2015). In her investigative journalism around the issue, Gorman identifies the problem as having serious implications for occupational health and safety (OHS) acts, regulations, and codes of practice, as well as potentially being “a sleeping giant in terms of negative social impact” (Alastair MacGibbon cited in Gorman, 2015).

Like Gorman, other female targets are also starting to speak publicly about the technology-enabled abuse and harassment they endure in the course of doing their jobs. In April 2016, for instance, the feminist commentator Jessica Valenti announced that she had received the dubious honor of being named the most hated writer at The Guardian (Valenti, 2016). This was after the media site examined the 1.4 million comments blocked by moderators since 1999 and found that eight of the 10 writers receiving the most blocked comments were women, with Valenti at the top of the list (Gardiner et al., 2016). Three months later, Valenti withdrew from social media after the attacks against her online were extended to her child. Tweeting about the decision, she wrote: “This morning I woke up to a rape and death threat directed at my 5 year old daughter. That this is part of my work life is unacceptable” (cited in Boggioni, 2016). The following year, the American writer and performer Lindy West also quit Twitter (West, 2017), having previously said she constantly felt the pull to change careers because of the exhaustion of spending years dealing with workplace harassment equivalent to “hundreds of men popping into your cubicle in the accounting department of your mid-sized, regional dry-goods distributor to inform you that—hmm—you’re too fat to rape, but perhaps they’ll saw you up with an electric knife?” (West, 2015). As she put it:

People who don’t spend much time on the internet are invariably shocked to discover the barbarism—the eager abandonment of the social contract—that so many of us face simply for doing our jobs. (West, 2015)

**Just stars and scribes?**

Anecdotal accounts such as those of Gorman, Valenti, and West might give the impression that gendered cyberhate is only or primarily a problem for women who have very high public profiles and/or who work in the media. In March, 2017, for example, the Australian commentator Helen Razer wrote a scathing piece claiming the cyberbullying experiences of famous people and their “famous friends” did not represent the experience of the masses (2017). Razer added that members of the media class “whose whining… comes from deep within its own arse” should consider that there
might be “a reason people who work in the media cop it” (2017). Emerging empirical data shows that Razer is correct about gendered cyberhate being particularly acute for women working in the media. In addition to the aforementioned analysis conducted by The Guardian, a 2016 Australian study found that 41 per cent of female media practitioners were being harassed, bullied or trolled on social media, with some feeling compelled to change career as a result (“Australian media still a Blokesworld in 2016”, 2016).

Yet these findings about women working in traditional mainstream media jobs should be understood as having far broader application. This is because so much contemporary work and entrepreneurship requires digital media engagement regardless of whether a job formally or primarily involves media practice—for example, a vet might be expected to post on her practice’s Facebook page. Self-published and/or paid freelance opinion writing by women whose primary income source is work in a non-media field has also become extremely common, as has “citizen journalism” (a term used to refer to amateur and self-published news reporting).

More generally, the emphasis on user-generated content, interactivity, collaboration, and sharing associated with the “web 2.0” era has created hybrid media producer-users or “produsers” (Bruns, 2008). This means that a person outside of full-time or traditional media employment might still hold one or more of many media-related roles including that of content producer, fact-checker, editor, curator, aggregator, broadcaster, publisher, reviewer, and/or citizen surveillor and regulation officer. These types of media labour are often unpaid, underpaid, and/or willingly undertaken as part of a worker’s leisure activity (that is, as “playbour”) (Kücklich, 2005), which indeed makes it difficult to determine which parties are wearing the hats of “employer”, “colleague”, and “customer” for the purposes of employment rights analysis. These difficulties, however, should not detract from the fact that, since 2004, the sum total of the world’s media workers can be figured as having vastly increased.

Trends involving produsage and playbour are interrelated with “microcelebrity” and “branded self” practices, terms deployed by Theresa M. Senft to refer to “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good” (2013, 346). Highlighting the movement of microcelebrity practices from the internet’s margins to its mainstream, Senft notes the truism that “one must always behave on the Internet as one would if placed on a public stage, because, in a very real sense, one is” (2013, 347). We can see, therefore, that just as digital media ecosystems have produced a plethora of new media workers, microcelebrity practices have vastly increased the number of people who can be considered to have public profiles or a degree of fame.

The overall point here is that while women who are media workers and/or who have public profiles are indeed likely to be at particularly high risk of receiving gendered cyberhate, arguably any woman who is making use of the 2.0 affordances of the internet is a type of media worker and has a type of public profile. Thus, suggesting that “only” women who are famous or who are media workers are at risk of being targeted for gendered cyberhate is on par with suggesting that “only” women online are at risk. In other words, it states the obvious in a manner which might inadvertently obscure the extent of the problem, and is therefore, not a particularly useful framing (although, as I will explain below, this is an error I also made when first designing my study). It is also worth noting that many high-profile gendered cyberhate targets whose cases have received a great deal of international press coverage—for example, the American gamer and media critic Anita Sarkeesian, the UK feminist activist Caroline Criado-Perez, and the independent games developer Zoë Quinn—were not widely

---

2 The term “web 2.0”—in contrast with “web 1.0”—refers to changes in web design and use which involve “read-write” as opposed to “read-only” uses of the internet (Barker and Jane, 2016, 50).

3 This is the year generally agreed upon as marking the beginning of the web 2.0 era (Barker and Jane, 2016, 460).
known until after they were subjected to large-scale cyber attacks, that is, it was the attacks which rendered them internationally newsworthy and raised their profiles.

Method and rationale

This paper is part of an ongoing series of research projects dedicated to mapping and studying the history, manifestations, nature, prevalence, etiology, and consequences of gendered cyberhate. Specifically, it draws on data from a study involving in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 52 Australian women, conducted in 2015 through to 2017. This study was approved by the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee and funded through a Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DE150100670). Two main selection criteria were used: participants had to identify as female and to have experienced gendered cyberhate. A number of techniques (for example, posters up at universities, social media, mail-outs, direct approaches to known targets, and purposive chain referral sampling) were used to recruit two initial groups of interviewees: women who had been attacked online, who had public profiles, and who had spoken about these attacks in a public forum (G1), and women who had been attacked online, who did not have public profiles, and who had not spoken about these attacks publicly (G2).

The study initially involved these two groups because I wanted to compare the experiences of women in public life and women in more “ordinary” circumstances. For the reasons detailed in the section above, however, it subsequently became apparent that making this distinction was neither feasible nor helpful. Even attempting to divide the subjects into those who had spoken publicly about having received gendered cyberhate and those who had not was extremely difficult given the liminal status of so much new media activity: for example, while simply re-tweeting a hostile tweet might seem very different from doing a television interview about receiving hostile tweets, both arguably constitute a form of speaking publicly. As such, I elected to treat members of both groups as a single cohort and to explore the interplay between gendered cyberhate and types and degrees of public visibility on a case by case basis. One issue relating to my original study design that remains relevant for this article concerns the fact that women in G1 were given the option of being interviewed in an identifiable way using their real names (and most made use of this option), while women in G2 all used single-name pseudonyms and their identifying details were removed from their transcripts. Given that I am adhering to this component of my initial study design, I will indicate throughout this article when pseudonyms are used.

Participant ages ranged between 19 and 52, and interviews were conducted in person or via Skype, usually for between 60 to 90 minutes. Some also involved follow-up phone and email conversations. The interviews were recorded, subsequently transcribed, and NVivo 10 software was used to code the transcripts using approaches from grounded theory. The data obtained are of immense value, since they provide rich descriptions of the many ways gendered cyberhate can impact women financially and professionally. The fact that most of the case studies involve women whose
experiences have not been the subject of international mainstream media coverage is also significant given the tendency for both scholars and media commentators writing on gendered cyberhate (myself included) to refer repeatedly to the very extreme experiences of a small number of women—arguably reinscribing the misconception that only women in certain occupations or with a certain degree of public visibility are targeted. As research in the field matures, my case is that it is important for those of us working in the area to tighten our focus by investigating specific rather than just the general dimensions of gendered cyberhate, as well as to expand the number of case studies used to illustrate these specific dimensions.

In light of the above, the present article deviates from standard journal article format in terms of thematic content (it prioritizes case studies over theory) as well as structure (these case studies are presented as a series of 15 short vignettes rather than being worked into the prose). These decisions are also in line with an argument I have made elsewhere that—given what is becoming a protracted scholarly debate about how best to define and theorize hostility online (Jane, 2015)—it is useful to adopt a casuistic approach by furnishing exemplars of what we believe a phenomenon to be, and then building up our conception of the phenomenon by extrapolating from these particulars (Jane 2014). This type of ostensive exercise is also extremely useful for identifying and responding to vexing questions such as whether or not a gendered cyberhate target can be considered to have a media job and a public profile.

Findings

A total of 43 out of the total of 52 interviewees reported at least one gendered cyberhate experience that my research assistant and I coded as having had an adverse economic impact. The latter was defined as an impact relating to: financial costs; lost income or productivity; harm to professional reputation; and/or an inability to remain in a particular profession, maintain a professional online presence, engage in business-related networking, or crowdsource/crowdfund for professional reasons. Cyber abuse and harassment framed by interviewees as simply “the cost of doing business” in their position or field was also coded as involving an economic impact.

To provide some context, it is worth noting that most of the 52 subjects derived income from multiple sources, and most worked in “precarious” labour contexts (a term used to refer to forms of work variously described as “atypical”, “non-standard”, “contingent”, “insecure”, and “flexible”: that is, work in contrast with a “continuous, full-time employment relationship where the worker has one employer and normally works on the employer’s premises or under the employer’s supervision” (Fudge and Owens, 2006, 10)). The vast majority of participants held one main job while engaging in various side projects for reasons including: artistic or creative enjoyment and/or ambition; a desire for public recognition; activist engagement; the generation of additional income; paving the way for career change or promotion; building, maintaining, or enhancing a person brand for existing or future work; and/or because their primary job lacked security and they felt it necessary to remain constantly primed for an unexpected return to unemployment.

Case Studies

Of the 43 participants who reported an economic impact, 15 cases are offered for discussion in this paper. These have been selected because they involve subjects whose experiences had (at the time of writing) received little or no international mainstream media coverage, and whose stories illustrate the range of adverse economic impacts reported by the interview cohort as a whole.
The librarian and activist

Kath Read, 42,\(^5\) is a librarian and body acceptance activist who uses multiple social media platforms to campaign against fat shaming. Her high online visibility has resulted in a flood of “fat, ugly, bitch” messages that can arrive daily in their hundreds. These have included threats to decapitate her with a chainsaw, and to smash her face in with a hammer if she is spotted in the street. Over eight years of abuse, Kath’s detractors have extended their efforts offline, on one occasion leaving a note in her mailbox reading, “Hi fat bitch, I see this is where you live”. (When Kath reported this note to police, a male officer told her to, “get offline and stop being so confident”). Groups of strangers have also collaborated to sabotage Kath’s paid freelance projects, as well as her primary job as a librarian. For example, a hate website exclusively devoted to Kath names her workplace and suggests people pay her a visit” there. A doxing forum has also published her work details, leading to her being signed up for multiple mailing lists and requests for contact with weight-loss clinics, gyms, personal trainers, diabetes specialists, heart clinics, and bariatric surgeons. As a result, she has received numerous phone calls via her workplace’s call centre number. Removing herself from these databases took weeks, and required some mortifying conversations with her employer. In addition to having already lost freelance work, Kath is concerned that the hate-driven content available about her online might deter potential employers.

The game owner and moderator

“Rachel”, 35, is a project manager and business analyst who has been an avid gamer since the late 1990s. She has had intense involvement in various MUDs\(^7\), as a player, a moderator, and now as a game owner. Rachel has been on the receiving end of harassment and abuse in all these roles. At one point, she worked as a moderator on a game with 99,000 total members, having to deal with “atrocious” behaviour including “horrendous” material directed at her personally. Eventually she reported one player to police for “incessantly” contacting and threatening her, including via mobile phone. Rachel says that she---along with other female gamers she knows---has experienced depressive episodes because of the sexist bullying in gaming communities.

The property writer

Jen Duke, 24, is a property and finance writer accustomed to receiving “creepy” sexualized messages from men via the supposedly professional networking platform LinkedIn. In 2013, a popular property-related forum posted her LinkedIn photo and outed her as gay in a thread ranking Australia’s “hottest” reporters and real estate agents. Jen was open about her sexual orientation to her family at that point, but had not discussed it in public or professional contexts. She felt violated: “The second I read it I … burst into tears, and I don’t really cry at work ever. I was really devastated.” When Jen contacted the forum asking for the post to be removed, she was told this would amount to censorship. She says the response from colleagues, meanwhile, was: “Well if you’re going to be a reporter, then that’s your lot, get over it.”

\(^5\)The cited age of subjects relates to their age at the time they were interviewed.
\(^6\)“Rachel” is a pseudonym.
\(^7\)“MUD” stands for “Multi-User Dungeon”, “Multi-User Dimension”, or “Multi-User Domain”.
The opinion columnist

Since commencing writing commentary for The Guardian in 2013, the writer Amy Gray, 40, has regularly received abusive and threatening messages such as “You are just another bipolar whore who sluts and sucks dick for cash and free drinks ugly pig”, and—in response to a column about global terrorism—messages calling her a “fucking Arab lover” who would be beheaded and raped with a knife. Amy says the latter frightened and “fucked [her] up … badly”. In addition to being upset, however, she is angry that she must endure abuse simply for having a job, and “not even a particularly well-paying” job at that. Cyberspace is her workplace, she says, and she feels like she’s being hounded out of it, and can no longer talk or express herself there in the way she once could.

The communications manager and freelance sports writer

Erin Riley, 30, is a communications manager and freelance sports writer who publishes widely and has a large following on Twitter. Since 2013, she has received daily abuse in forms such as rape and death threats, as well as being the target of several huge mob attacks. During the first of these “pile-ons” she received around 2000 messages over a two-day period involving “every kind of abuse possible”. At the time, she says she “completely fell apart”: “I cried for a full weekend. It was horrible. I felt sick. I couldn’t sleep… I didn’t leave the house.” Erin says she has female colleagues who have withdrawn from professional writing and/or from the cybersphere completely in an attempt to avoid being attacked. For her, however, online abuse is the price she has decided to pay—at least for the time being—in order to continue writing professionally: “I can no more stay off Twitter than I could not go to the supermarket.”

The television news anchor

Jacinta Tynan, 45, has worked for more than 20 years as a television reporter and news anchor. One company she worked for had an email portal encouraging viewers to express their opinions about stories. Often, however, this was used by viewers to express their hostile opinions about the appearance of female presenters. For instance, in 2009, Jacinta was castigated—mostly by female viewers—for having supposedly gone overboard with Botox, breast implants, and other cosmetic surgery procedures. In fact, the changes observable in Jacinta’s face and body were all the result of pregnancy. After the birth of her first child, Jacinta published a newspaper column about enjoying motherhood and finding it easy. The ensuing controversy prompted the editor of a large online site to ask for permission to re-publish the column. Once the story went online, Jacinta was subjected to a “blast of online bullying” in the form of around 2000 comments, some wishing illness on her son and infertility on her. People were “absolutely tearing shreds off” her, but the editor of this site had asked Jacinta to commit to engaging with readers so she felt obliged to continue viewing and responding to the comments. The backlash went on for months, leaving Jacinta feeling scared to go outside, and subject to a degree of panic attacks about appearing in public.

The feminist organiser and (former) freelance writer
Karen Pickering, 38, a feminist organiser, co-founder of the Melbourne SlutWalk\textsuperscript{8} chapter, and former freelance writer, has spent many years dealing with “extreme” trolling. This has included people sending her photos of dead women, including an image of a woman who had been flayed, accompanied by the message, “this is what’s going to happen to you”. Blocking and deleting has not worked because antagonists immediately open new accounts in order to continue their attacks. Karen says multiple reports to police and social media platforms have been to no avail, and she has also felt poorly protected by the publishers of her writing. Given that she now believes rape and death threats are “the price of entry into online spaces” for women, Karen has decided to prioritize her mental health and quit her job writing opinion commentary altogether. As she puts it: “I had to figure out other ways to make money other than … putting myself in the stocks every week.”

\textbf{The educator, writer, and comedian}

Alice Fraser, 29, a comedian, opinion writer, former lawyer, and high school and university tutor has been stalked around Australia by an obsessed fan who tracked her online and offline. She has also received graphic death and rape threats. After writing a piece critiquing Australia’s asylum-seeker policy, for instance, Alice received a message reading: “My cousin will come and slit your throat and rape you.” Another man threatened to rape her before changing his mind and saying actually he would \textit{not} rape her, “like it was a worse insult.” As a result of these attacks, Alice spends a great deal of time agonizing about whether or not it is “safe” to write about even seemingly innocuous topics such as the faces people make when they receive Christmas presents. She wishes she could engage with people online without worrying about whether they will “psychologically brutalise” her, but feels it necessary to avoid reading comment sections, and to use the internet as “an output device rather than an input device” (that is, in 1.0 rather than a 2.0 mode).

\textbf{The author and indigenous activist}

Anita Heiss, 46, an author, commentator, and member of Australia’s indigenous Wiradjuri nation, was bombarded with cyber hate in 2012 after the publication of her award-winning memoir \textit{Am I Black Enough For You?} Very large numbers of comments were sent to her website, to the web site of the publisher of her book, to her book’s page on Amazon, and to media outlets featuring either her or her book. During this period, Anita says she was in “a really bad way” and considered withdrawing from giving an address at a large venue in Melbourne. Eventually she went ahead with the talk flanked by a bodyguard provided by the organizers. Since then, white pride sites continue inciting online mobs to bombard Anita with racialized hate. Sites refer to her as a “fake abo subhuman”, “wannabe monkeyperson”, and “subhuman abo parasite”, alongside technical advice on the best ways to create disposable Twitter and email accounts so as to attack her with impunity. While many people suggest to Anita that she hire someone to screen her emails and social media feeds, she believes this form of protection would only be financially viable for well-paid celebrities and politicians.

\textbf{The filmmaker and university lecturer}

\textsuperscript{8} “SlutWalk” is an international feminist movement focused on exposing and ending perpetrator exculpation and victim blaming around rape.
Anna Brownfield, 43, is a feminist erotic filmmaker and university lecturer who has been stalked and harassed by a man across multiple platforms for close to a decade. The man began by emailing her pretending to be a woman wanting to meet offline to audition for one of her films. After Anna called him on his ruse, he became threatening, accusing her of being “a blight on society”, and telling her he knew where she lived. Anna was horrified because at that time she lived alone and worked from home. When she took these threatening emails to the police, she says their response was, “well, in your industry what do you expect?” Since then, the abuse has continued, spiking whenever Anna does any sort of press or receives media coverage of her work. One Facebook post by the man includes her name on a list of people he says should “be carted off to the middle of Australia, dumped in a giant hole and then covered over.” The man has also contacted her at the university where she lectures pretending to be a prospective female media student. Most distressingly, he has obtained a photograph of Anna’s five-year-old child and re-posted this on Facebook, naming the boy and saying it must be humiliating to have Anna for a mother. Anna found this really upsetting: “[My son’s] got nothing to do with it. That’s my life away from work… there’s no need to include him in this.” Her ongoing concern is that the man will take things further and materialize in her offline life.

The therapist and photographer

Beth*, 37, is a therapist and photographer who has been relentlessly harassed since she began promoting her businesses via social media platforms in 2007. She receives sexual propositions from “random men around the world” who become aggressive and threatening if she ignores them or declines their advances. While colleagues repeatedly advise her to “disable” her in-box, this is not an option if she wishes to continue working because email is usually the way new clients make initial contact. Beth is, however, in a bind because the psychological cost of dealing with the abuse is also affecting her ability to work:

The last few years it’s been really affecting me and getting me down … I’ve been feeling kind of depressed [and] I haven’t been putting myself out there as much … I’m not one of those people that’s like, “yeah, world look at me”. It’s … hard work to be constantly putting yourself out there and always get a barrage of criticism… I’ve … isolated myself a lot [and] get scared about my physical safety … I feel a bit defeated … a bit broken.

The online retailer and IT specialist

Elinor Lloyd-Philipps, 28, earns her primary income as an IT project coordinator, but also runs a website called The Nylon Swish where she blogs about and sells retro and vintage undergarments. Her site has a focus on body pride and plus-sized garments, and includes a forum for cross-dressing men. It has led to cyber sexual harassment becoming a time-consuming part of Elinor’s daily existence: “I receive at least one dick picture a day, over a dozen crude comments on each post, daily requests for nude photos and sex, and then rape and death threats several times a month” (2016).10 One man became extremely hostile after Elinor politely refused his request for explicitly sexual photos. Over a six-week period he sent hundreds of violent messages including, “VILE CUNT HOLE KILL YOURSELF”, “Elinor the cunt hole due to be penetrated with wooden poles”, “CUNT HOLE

*“Beth” is a pseudonym.
10 This direct quote cites an opinion piece Elinor published subsequent to our interview.
LIKE YOU DESERVE TO BE ABUSED & Have your genitals mutilated”, and “I know where you live.” Each time she blocked the man on one platform, he would turn up on another. Eventually she used his IP address to determine that he lived in the same town as her family which left her concerned for their safety. Elinor then took the extreme step of blocking all her male followers on Instagram (presumably including a number of legitimate customers). She says she was too frightened to post any additional material for weeks.

The singer

Christa Hughes, 44, is a singer, circus performer, and comedian who, from 2001 to 2004, was stalked both online and offline. The stalker hacked Christa’s email and impersonated her, sending abusive messages to other artists, recording companies, music writers, and media outlets. One made the baseless claim that Christa had been raped by her father as a child, that her father was on trial for paedophilia, and that her whole family was “into incest”. Notes were also delivered to people living in the apartment block where Christa lived, warning that “the girl in Number 11” (that is, Christa) was a thief, liar, and cheat. This was “pretty creepy” because Christa believes the only way the stalker could have discovered her address was to have followed her, and she became worried when she performed at music festivals in case the stalker appeared.

The student

Mary11 was 19 when her boyfriend—an IT specialist— took exception to her decision to join a study abroad program in the United States. Close to her departure date, Mary sent a routine email to her exchange coordinator who replied, confused, saying they had received an email from Mary the previous week asking to be withdrawn from the program. This email—sent from Mary’s account without her knowledge—was the beginning of a six-week effort to hijack her travel plans. After taking control of Mary’s email and Facebook accounts by changing her passwords, her assailant began sending Mary messages from her own email address saying she would be raped and facially disfigured if she travelled to the US. One read:

don’t come over here, I’m going to hurt you, I’ll enjoy raping you, you won’t look the way you do after this … I can’t wait to hear you scream in pain, I’ll be waiting for you at the airport, you’re going to have it … in every hole.

These messages were copied in to study abroad program organizers in both Australia and the US. Mary was frightened and wanted to cancel her trip, but her exchange coordinator urged her to persevere and arranged for a security detail to meet her at the airport in the US.

The hip hop artist and lawyer

Sarah Connor, 32, is a rapper and lawyer who has won two prestigious awards for Australian hip hop. In 2014, she won the Briggs ShepLife King of the Town remix competition as the only woman out of a total of 83 entrants. Afterwards, she was abused by people claiming she had only received the prize because she had “sucked off” and had intercourse with the male organizers. At one point, Sarah

11 “Mary” is a pseudonym.
confronted a repeat abuser, and said, “I feel like you’re stalking me, you’re harassing me, please stop it.” His response was, “Oh well, I’m outside your house now, bitch. I’m having a wank outside your house now.” The following year, Sarah received multiple threats after winning the $10,000 Hilltop Hoods Initiative, the highest possible prize for an emerging hip hop artist in Australia. Her detractors—who said she needed “a raping”—made it clear their objective was to force her to “leave music for good”. As a result of the abuse, there are times when Sarah completely shuts down her social media accounts to the point of deleting all the relevant apps from her phone so she is not tempted to repeatedly check what people are saying about her. This, however, has jeopardized her ability to maintain contact with important industry representatives, and has caused her to miss deadlines and work opportunities. Despite having previously been a confident performer and public speaker, she has also developed performance anxiety before gigs, with symptoms including shortness of breath, nausea and light headedness.

Discussion

The 15 case studies detailed above offer sobering new insights into some of the ways cyberhate is disrupting and derailing women’s working lives and careers. As far as interviewees can tell, these acts are being perpetrated by strangers as well as by people they know; by lone stalkers as well as by snowballing mobs. They range from single-channel strikes to assaults which play out across a broad spectrum of media platforms; from one-off blitzkriegs to seemingly endless campaigns. Sometimes—for instance, in cases such as Kath’s and Christa’s—they extend into offline contexts. Subjects report—with good reason—concern that their economic circumstances will be further compromised by the fact that once reputationally damaging material is circulated about them online, it is all-but-impossible to remove and has a potentially unlimited lifespan, thereby potentially sabotaging their work prospects indefinitely. The blurring of personal and professional contexts, meanwhile, means that work-related abuse spills into women’s personal lives and vice versa.

As these case studies show, the ramifications of gendered cyberhate with economic dimensions can be significant and can take many forms. Impacts include: lost productivity, missed work opportunities, and being blamed for attacks or having these upsetting and harmful experiences trivialized by colleagues or employers. Subjects report agitating about whether to change careers or to perform existing work differently, with Karen deciding to leave opinion writing completely. Interviewees repeatedly describe finding themselves in an oppressive double bind in that retreating from the internet means they cannot perform the tasks required to do their jobs, yet staying online and enduring abuse and harassment can also hinder their productivity—because of the time required to block, delete, report, and engage in damage control, as well as because of the potentially disabling psychological fall-out. The latter can include intense and sometimes ongoing fear, upset, and/or mental health problems relating to agoraphobia, anxiety, paranoia, and panic attacks. These not only adversely impact subjects’ ability to perform their daily work tasks, but are likely to interfere with career advancement going forwards. Even those subjects who experience milder but ongoing cyber harassment are likely to be suffering harm given research showing that “less intense” but more frequent harmful workplace experiences are just as detrimental to women’s occupational well-being as single instances of more extreme sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention (Sojo et al., 2016).

Many of the case studies in this article involve abuse and harassment which would be in clear breach of various workplace-related regulations and guidelines if they involved offline contexts. They represent contraventions of laws and policies in many nations, as well as of various international labour treaties, conventions, and recommendations. For instance, they breach many sections of the International Labour Organization (ILO) guidelines with regard to States’ and employers’ obligations vis-à-vis women worker’s rights and gender equality (ABC of women workers’ rights and gender equality
(second edition), 2007). The ILO states that no worker—including self-employed and casual workers—should be subjected to harassment, bullying, emotional abuse, persecution, or victimization at work, including unwelcome “verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature… which has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with the individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, abusive or offensive working environment” (ABC of women workers’ rights and gender equality, 2007, xi, 99, 165). The ILO is unambiguous in its condemnation of sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, a health and safety issue, and a human rights violation (ABC of women workers’ rights and gender equality, 2007, 165).

Unfortunately, there exists a vast gulf between the best practice ideals advanced by bodies such as the ILO and the reality of working life for many women. The case studies furnished in this article shows that this gulf yawns particularly wide for those women whose experience of workplace abuse and harassment occurs: a) primarily via electronic means; and b) within precarious labour contexts. This is partly because many of the laws and institutional provisions that emerged to provide (albeit limited) protection to women from sexual harassment in the Fordist workplace provide little to no protection to women in new economy sectors such as games design (Elliot, 2015). A further complication concerns the fact that antagonists who attack women in non-work-related contexts (for instance after a relationship break-up or in response to a target’s activism) are able to exploit the idiosyncrasies and reach of networked communications technology to inflict far-reaching professional and financial damage to women in ways which do not map neatly onto extant paradigms vis-à-vis laws and workplace policies. We might expect such acts of economic vandalism to be covered via civil or criminal legislation, such as via laws relating to defamation, intimidation, stalking, extortion, threatening death or bodily harm, and so on. Yet law enforcement agencies and the courts in many nations have an abysmal track record in terms of responding to gender-based violence online (“Web Index: Report 2014-15”, n.d., 15, 4).

Kath’s experience comports with that of many other women who say that, after reporting cyber attacks and threats to police, they are chastised for some aspect of their mode of conduct online, and are told to engage differently online and/or to take a break from the internet altogether (Jane, 2017, 4, 88-92). This approach is reprehensible in its blaming of targets and its excusing of perpetrators. It also suggests a deep disconnect from the realities of contemporary working life, particularly with regard to the centrality of the cybersphere. The internet is not a discrete workplace that a woman can leave in the way she might be able to leave a factory in which she experiences offline abuse or harassment. Further, the internet is also strongly linked with prosperity and career progression. Access to broadband is recognized as playing a vital economic and social role in all nations, with digitally disadvantaged workers facing barriers to full economic participation that their more digitally advantaged peers do not (“The state of broadband 2015”, 2015; Robinson et al., 2015, 574). For instance, a multitude of economic advantages accrue to those who are able to use the internet continuously at work and at home, and who are skilled at “curating their professional self-presentations” on social media (Robinson et al., 2015, 575).

The case studies outlined in this article show that while women might seem to have full and unfettered access to the internet, in practice, the hate and harassment they experience might be severely constraining their ability to use it. Moreover, those women who most depend on unrestricted access to the internet and social media platforms to earn their living might be particularly prone to receiving cyberhate. As such, the cumulative disadvantages of gendered cyberhate should be understood as constituting an emerging, economic dimension of existing, gender-related digital divides¹² (Jane, 2018). Further, this is a digital divide that is insidious in that it involves barriers to

¹² “Digital divide” is a term used to discuss online equity, and refers to differences between population groups in terms of access and of information and communications technologies.
equity and full participation online that are not as easy to identify and measure as those barriers relating to access to computer hardware and network connections.

**Conclusion**

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to propose a comprehensive list of remedies for the problems identified above, I acknowledge Gorman’s persuasive case that any organization requiring or even simply encouraging staff to be online should offer preventative measures and “social media self-defense training” in order to fulfill their fundamental duty of care to staff, as well as to mitigate potential lawsuits from workers who have suffered damage or trauma from online attacks (2015). With regard to future academic research in the area of gendered cyberhate and workplace harassment, it would also be valuable for scholars: to engage in empirical work to quantify the prevalence and impact of cyberhate on women in a variety of work contexts; to investigate the feasibility of formulating a taxonomy of technology-assisted or -enabled harassment in the workplace; to highlight similarities and differences between these new types of workplace harm and earlier or more familiar versions; to appraise regulations in specific jurisdictions with an eye to determining whether existing laws and policies are sufficient to cover these new scenarios or whether new policies are required; and to further interrogate these issues as constituting a new aspect of existing, gender-related digital divides.

From a feminist activist perspective, it is also worth noting that many of the problems identified in this article are reminiscent of those challenges faced during the second wave of the women’s movement (Citron, 2014, 95-119). Just as domestic violence used to be trivialized as lovers’ tiffs and Mad Men-style harassment of women workers dismissed as harmless flirting, gendered cyberhate is frequently framed as a normal and inevitable part of contemporary working life, a scenario too personal and idiosyncratic for law, and a situation women should sort out on their own. As such, the sorts of education-, law- and politics-based strategies deployed by feminists in the 1970s (Baker, 2008) might offer a useful model for activist efforts to reframe these new types of workplace harassment and economic vandalism not as private and unavoidable, but as systemic and illegitimate. As with the industrial landscape prior to the second wave of the women’s movement, the social problems outlined in this article are complex and intractable. But this is not a good reason to stand back and do nothing. Gendered cyberhate impacting women’s livelihoods is not trivial, innocuous, other than “real”, or something female workers bring on themselves or can easily avoid. It is an issue concerning sex discrimination in employment, violence, and human rights violations, and should be recognized and responded to as such.

**References**


Elliot, Amanda. 2015. “Gamergate: Gender at work in the new economy” (seminar). *School of Social and Political Sciences*, The University of Sydney, August 3.


http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/14/insults-rape-threats-writers-online-harassment


http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/02/what-happened-confronted-cruelest-troll-lindy-west

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/03/ive-left-twitter-unusable-anyone-but-trolls-robots-dictators-lindy-west