3 Feminist flight and fight responses to gendered cyberhate

Introduction

Layla is a PhD student and member of a Facebook mother’s page concerned that ‘very nice’ women such as the English academic Mary Beard are being attacked via the internet and social media platforms. As such, Layla is taking steps to keep her profile low in an attempt to dodge similar vitriol. Like many other women, this includes opting out of certain discussions, carefully moderating her tone, and ditching hashtags she knows cause grief. Much to her regret, Layla has also decided to ‘unfollow’ high-profile feminists she admires – feminists such as the UK activist Caroline Criado-Perez – because she can no longer stomach the toxic abuse filling their social media feeds (and consequently her own feeds) day after day. The 36-year-old mother of two is softly spoken, unfailingly polite, and – on the subject of her political persuasions – a self-described ‘eternal moderate’. Asked what she thinks can be done to address the problem of misogyny online, Layla’s tone remains as polite and as even as ever as she replies: ‘Smash the patriarchy’.

This anecdote illustrates a seemingly paradoxical aspect of the increasingly serious international problem of cyber violence against women and girls (cyber VAWG): namely, that gendered cyberhate can be seen as provoking both ‘flight’ and ‘fight’ responses. As I will demonstrate over the course of this chapter, women are making changes to the places they go, the debates they join, the material they post and – in Layla’s case – even the feminists they publicly support. Some are adopting male personae (to the extent of using voice modulating software while gaming) to avoid sexual harassment, while others are choosing to withdraw partly or wholly from the internet altogether (Jane 2017a, pp. 66–75). Yet alongside these metaphorical forms of ‘flight’ are increases in the visibility and force of women’s push-back against misogyny online – what I am referring to as the ‘fight’ response. This includes an amplification of feminist rhetoric and increased individual and collectivist feminist activism, including online vigilantism or ‘digilantism’.

‘Digilantism’ is a portmanteau used in both scholarly and media contexts to refer to acts that are illegal or legally liminal, as well as practices that are entirely legal and therefore more akin to traditional activism. Feminist digilante responses to gendered cyberhate most commonly involve ‘calling out’ or ‘naming and shaming’ attackers and can be situated on a spectrum. At the mildest end, activists
republish material in a form that draws attention to the abuse but does not identify the perpetrators. Mid-range digilantism of this type utilises similar methods but also exposes at least the online identities of individuals. At the most extreme end of the naming and shaming spectrum, digilantes deploy tactics such as tracking down assailants offline and exposing them to the broader public, sometimes ensuring that perpetrators are ‘outed’ to family members, friends and employers, and inciting others to join the counter-attack (Jane 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

This chapter draws on data from an ongoing series of research projects dedicated to mapping and studying the history, manifestations, nature, prevalence, aetiology and consequences of gendered cyberhate. While my formal research into this topic commenced in 2011, I have been archiving reports, self-reports and examples of gendered cyberhate since 1998 using methodological approaches from internet historiography (Brügger 2010). Since 2015, my research into the impact of cyberhate on the way in which women use the internet has received funding from the Australian federal government. A key element of this part of my project has involved in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 51 targets of gendered cyberhate. I interviewed these women – aged between 19 and 52 – over the course of 2015 and 2016. In this chapter, I offer analysis informed by those interviews, but I also provide two detailed case studies from the interview cohort, as they illustrate the range of women’s experiences.

In previous work, I have used the term ‘e-bile’ to capture an array of discourses and practices that have historically been designated via terms such as ‘cyberbullying’, ‘cyberstalking’, ‘trolling’ and ‘flaming’ (Jane 2014a, 2014b, 2015). In this chapter, I use the general terms ‘gendered cyberhate’, ‘gendered e-bile’ and ‘cyber VAWG’ interchangeably to refer to a range of discourses and acts occurring at the gender–technology–violence nexus. These include sexually violent invective, plausible rape and death threats, stalking, large groups attacking individuals, the malicious circulation of targets’ personal details online (‘doxing’), and the uploading of sexually explicit material without the consent of the pictured subject (‘revenge porn’). My approach to terminology is intended to recognise the complexity and interrelated nature of the acts under analysis and the fluidity and changing nature of these practices and the technologies on which they rely. In this chapter, I use the term ‘target’ rather than ‘victim’ or ‘survivor’ in relation to the language used to describe those who have experienced sexual violence. This is in recognition of feminist debates about the way in which ‘victim’ connotes helplessness and ‘survivor’ can connote a type of ‘forced heroism’ (Sehgal 2016). I do, however, use the expression ‘victim-blaming’ for idiomatic reasons (that is, because the term ‘victim-blaming’ has connotations that ‘target-blaming’ does not). The reader should note that my focus on gendered cyberhate should not be read as denying or downplaying online hate speech that is racist, homophobic, transphobic and so on.

In this chapter, I detail the nature, prevalence and ramifications of cyber VAWG, as well as the manifest failures of police, policy makers and platform managers to intervene in a manner that adequately supports targets, punishes perpetrators and/or assists in addressing the broader problem of cyber VAWG at all jurisdictional
levels. This situation is shown to be a source of great frustration and anger for women and helps explain why many feel that they have no option but to take matters into their own hands. I then outline some of the ways in which individual women are navigating the problem in their own daily practices and their bigger-picture activism. Two ostensibly contrasting case studies involving high-profile Australians – one whose response might be characterised as involving ‘flight’ and one who has engaged in a more obvious ‘fight’ – are offered by way of illustration. As I will show, however, elements of both flight and fight are observable not only within feminist responses to gendered cyberhate collectively but at the individual level as well.

‘You can’t get called a cunt day in, day out for 10 years and not have that make a really serious impact on your psyche’: the harm of gendered cyberhate

Gendered cyberhate was relatively rare and mild in the early decades of the internet but has become far more prevalent, visible, noxious and directly threatening since at least 2010 (Jane 2017a, pp. 16–42). These amplifications are likely a flow-on effect from the self-publishing and networking opportunities associated with what is known as the Web 2.0 era. (‘Web 1.0’ is generally used to describe those early decades of the internet when content was mostly static and delivered in a read-only format. ‘Web 2.0’ refers to the shift – most obvious from around 2006 – towards user-generated material, interactivity, collaboration and sharing.) Put simply, the Web 2.0 era has given online antagonists access to targets (and appreciative audiences) in a way that was not previously possible. Gendered cyberhate typically involves discourse that passes scathing and explicit judgement on women’s appearance, sexual attractiveness and/or perceived sexual activeness; deploys ad hominem invective; is couched in terms involving hyperbolic misogyny, homophobia and/or sexually graphic imagery; prescribes coerced sex acts as all-purpose correctives; and/or demonstrates disavowal in that authors fixate on their targets while insisting explicitly or implicitly that nothing about their targets is worthy of notice.

Numerous anecdotal reports of gendered cyberhate are supplemented by emerging statistical data. A 2015 United Nations (UN) report, for instance, synthesises a range of empirical research to show that 73 per cent of women and girls have been exposed to or experienced some form of ‘online violence’ (UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender [UN Broadband Commission] 2015, p. 2). Further, the report states 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 particular risk (UN Broadband Commission 2015, p. 15). In 2016, meanwhile, The Guardian conducted a revealing analysis of 70 million remarks posted on its own comment threads. Researchers isolated those comments blocked for violating the organisation’s community standards (usually because they were regarded as ‘abusive or disruptive’ [Mansfield 2016]) to determine that, of the 10 regular writers who
received the most abuse, eight were women (Gardiner et al. 2016). The writer who attracted the largest number of objectionable comments was the feminist commentator Jessica Valenti (Valenti 2016).

Gendered cyberhate has the potential to cause emotional, social, financial, professional and political harm, in that – among other consequences – it can constrain women’s ability to find jobs, market themselves, network, socialise, engage politically and partake freely in the sorts of self-expression and self-representation regarded as key benefits of the Web 2.0 era. Career derailment and financial loss are not only incidental by-products of gendered cyberhate but may also come about as a result of deliberate individual or group attempts to sabotage the jobs and ongoing employment prospects of targets (Jane 2017a, pp. 66–8).

While cyberhate need not involve offline dimensions that cause embodied harm (Henry and Powell 2015), the increasing number of attacks that combine online and offline dimensions highlights the fact that cyberhate targets may well be at risk of suffering bodily harm. Doxing, for instance, is often accompanied by incitements to internet antagonists to hunt targets offline. A frequently cited case study involves a man who posted an ad titled ‘Rape Me and My Daughters’ which included his ex-wife’s home address and prompted more than 50 strangers to arrive at this woman’s home (Sandoval 2013).

Doxing is particularly harmful to women when combined with revenge porn. In 2011, Holly Jacobs, a graduate student and tutor at a Florida university, received a tip that explicit images she had shared with a former boyfriend had been posted online onto hundreds of revenge porn sites alongside an explanation of how to locate her offline and an expression of interest – made in her name – in sex with strangers (Citron 2014, pp. 45, 48). As a result of the attacks, Jacobs bought a stun gun, changed her name, withdrew from online activities and stopped walking alone at night because she felt she had become ‘a prime target for actual rape’ (cited in Citron 2014, pp. 46, 48). Yet Jacobs struggled to obtain adequate support from law enforcement and platform operators. She was turned away by two different police departments as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Of the multiple websites she approached to have the images removed, several said that they would do so but only for a fee (Citron 2014, pp. 46–7). Jacobs’s experience highlights the way in which online sexual violence (like the offline version) inflicts many layers of suffering, in that women often suffer not only the initial assault but also victim-blaming and sex-related shaming in the aftermath. She was also placed in the position of having to bear both the metaphorical and literal costs of seeking remedy for the revenge porn attacks against her.

Other particularly violent forms of gendered cyberhate involve emerging practices such as rape video blackmail and ‘sextortion’. In Australia (as in other nations), anecdotal accounts suggest that a growing number of women are being raped and then blackmailed with video footage of the attack (Selvaratnam 2015). ‘Sextortion’, meanwhile, involves obtaining intimate footage – usually by hacking computers and webcams remotely – and then using this footage to blackmail targets into performing sexual acts online (Wittes et al. 2016). One sextortionist arrested by federal investigators in the United States (US) was found with more than 15,000 webcam video captures, including videos he surreptitiously recorded.
showing targets getting out of the shower and having sex with their partners. This perpetrator had 900 audio recordings and 13,000 screen captures, possessing files associated with 129 computers and roughly 230 people, including 44 minors (Wittes et al. 2016, p. 2).

The impact of gendered cyberhate varies depending on individual contexts and the severity of the abuse. In its study into sextortion, the Brookings Institution found multiple cases of targets contemplating, threatening or even attempting suicide (Wittes et al. 2016, p. 5). One Australian woman subject to rape video blackmail describes being so upset that she vomited when she first realised that her sexual assault had been filmed (cited in Selvaratnam 2015).

Commenting on the impact of the ongoing abuse she is subjected to, Valenti says, ‘You can’t get called a cunt day in, day out for 10 years and not have that make a really serious impact on your psyche’ (cited in Goldberg 2015). As such, she has stopped promoting her speaking events publicly and started hiring security (Hess 2014). She says she feels like quitting her feminist activism ‘all the time’ (cited in Goldberg 2015). In 2016, Valenti announced that she was withdrawing from social media because a rape and death threat had been directed at her five-year-old daughter (Morris 2016).

These comments comport with my own findings. Many of the women I have interviewed demonstrate great resilience in terms of being able to matter-of-factly rationalise and sometimes even poke fun at the abuse and harassment they experience online. However, my observations also reveal that (1) many targets reach one or more emotional breaking points when gendered cyberhate is particularly severe, hits a particularly raw nerve or reaches a critical mass; and (2) the cumulative, long-term effect of dealing with such material day in and day out can be insidious for women’s psychological state, as well as their mode of engagement in both the online and offline public spheres. My research findings\(^5\) show that gendered cyberhate targets who reach breaking point often describe feeling some combination of intense anxiety and fear and/or report mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorder, agoraphobia and panic attacks. Insomnia is common, as are social withdrawal and feelings of paranoia about whether people encountered offline are online attackers. Some women seek professional medical assistance, have been diagnosed with significant mental health disorders and are prescribed medication.

In addition to harming individuals, gendered cyberhate poses a threat to broader ideals and political goals such as those relating to online equity and digital citizenship. Yet despite gendered cyberhate potentially resulting in significant internet exclusion and under-use (Jane 2017b), police, policy makers and platform operators have mostly failed to respond in a useful and/or appropriate manner. That is, they have not responded in a manner that recognises the seriousness of cyber VAWG; supports women in obtaining relief from and redress for attacks; brings perpetrators to account; and scrutinises (and where necessary intervenes in) platform design, governance and complaint-handling protocols.

Anecdotal complaints by women are corroborated by statistical data. For example, a World Wide Web Foundation report shows that, in 74 per cent of Web Index\(^6\) countries, law enforcement agencies and the courts are failing to take appropriate action in response to acts of gender-based violence online (nd, pp. 15, 4). A report
by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) identifies multiple policy failures at an international level in terms of addressing the increasing levels of violence against women enacted via information and communications technology (ICT) (2014). It finds that violence involving ICT is not being prioritised in prevention and response strategies, budgeting or evidence-based policy making, leaving female targets with little or no avenue for redress (APC 2014, p. 4). Comparing the policies of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, the APC also identifies a reluctance to engage directly with technology-related violence against women until 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 commitment to human rights standards or to the promotion of rights other than the encouragement of free speech (Nyst 2014, pp. 3–4). The UN, meanwhile, warns that if cyber VAWG remains unchecked, it risks producing ‘a 21st century global pandemic with significant negative consequences for all societies in general and irreparable damage for girls and women in particular’ (UN Broadband Commission 2015, pp. 6–7).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to propose solutions for cyber VAWG or to discuss critical issues such as the intersection of criminal justice and service provider responsibility for first-line responses to and long-term prevention of gendered cyberhate. These are important lines of inquiry for future research. Suffice it to note here only that the manifest failure of various authorities and institutions to address cyber VAWG has placed many women in a situation in which they feel that DIY responses are the only options available to them.

Towards a taxonomy of responses to gendered cyberhate

In this section, I detail some of the tactics women are using to navigate abuse and harassment in online domains. My research findings reveal that the practices women deploy in response to cyberhate can be grouped thematically into the following overlapping categories:

- **Distancing**: In forms such as ignoring, blocking, muting and deleting objectionable content and users.
- **Rationalising**: For example, explaining away abuse in ways that render it less personal, such as focusing on the fact that it is a systemic, gender-related issue.
- **Technological ‘hygiene’**: That is, setting personal boundaries around technology in an effort to reduce the impact of cyberhate while still accessing and fielding such material. (Examples include refraining from checking email and social media accounts after hours or in bed and outsourcing email and social media account-checking to friends or colleagues when attacks are underway or anticipated.)
- **Restricting internet use**: Includes strategies such as avoiding (where possible) interactions with strangers; retreating from contentious debates; steering clear of hashtags regarded as or previously experienced as contentious; removing or greatly restricting the circulation of personal information and photos; using the web only or predominantly in broadcast or 1.0 mode;
seeking refuge in private spaces such as closed Facebook groups; ‘locking down’ or privatising accounts; disabling comment sections on blogs; and/or taking short, long or permanent breaks from parts or all of the internet.

- One-on-one engagement with attackers: Examples include confronting and arguing with online antagonists either privately or publicly. This may involve responding with similarly abusive tactics and/or with reason, humour or good-natured appeals to attackers as fellow internet users.
- ‘Traditional’ activism: Includes awareness-raising and advocacy work such as writing/speaking about cyberhate, signing or launching petitions, lobbying platforms and policy makers, rallying support from online and/or offline communities, providing assistance to other female targets, forming or joining activist groups and archiving received cyberhate for later use.
- Performance-based activism: Strategies include the humorous and creative repurposing of cyberhate. An example is the increasingly common practice of ‘performing’ online hate speech by reading such material aloud in publicly circulated videos.
- Digilante activism: Engaging in extrajudicial practices that are intended to punish attackers or otherwise bring them to account.

Before looking more closely at digilantism, I offer the following two putatively contrasting case studies. These two women were among the ‘public profile’ participants approached for the research project described earlier and in footnote 3. Tracey Spicer was interviewed via Skype, while Jenna Price was interviewed in person. It is worth noting that Spicer has also reflected on her experience in her own public writing, and this is indicated in the case study via a reference; otherwise all quotes are from the interview. I have chosen to focus on these two case studies for two key reasons. First, while at first glance they may appear to involve starkly contrasting responses, closer inspection reveals that they actually have some commonalities. This leads to the second rationale, which is that these case studies demonstrate many of the practices detailed earlier. Spicer’s responses, for instance, involve elements of distancing, rationalising, restricting internet use, traditional activism, performance-based activism and (eventually) digilante activism. Price, meanwhile, describes engaging in forms of distancing, rationalising, technological hygiene, one-on-one engagement with attackers, traditional activism and digilante activism.

Case study 1: Tracey Spicer

Tracey Spicer is an Australian newsreader, documentary maker, journalist and writer with a nearly three-decade career in the media. She began experiencing a large volume of online ‘sexualised violence’ after she became more political and overtly feminist in her media commentary around 2013. Since then, the vitriol directed at Spicer has arrived ‘pretty
much every day’ and has included mob abuse by men’s rights groups from around the world and threats to rape and murder Spicer and her children. A particularly savage attack unfolded in April 2014 after she wrote a piece in her weekly travel column saying that, if her children were travelling alone on a plane, she would prefer that they be seated next to a female rather than a male passenger because of the high percentage of male perpetrators in child abuse cases (Spicer 2014). This column, she says, ‘really opened the floodgates’. She was on holidays in Vietnam with her family when she received:

really vile attacks from all over the world . . . ‘you deserve to be raped but you’re too ugly, I wouldn’t want to fuck your children anyway’, this kind of just horrific stuff . . . I got quite scared . . . I was actually frightened to return to my own home . . . because the threats were so horrific – not only to me, but to my children. It gave me an awful fright . . . some of the ones that were from the men’s rights groups in America were quite explicit . . . ‘we know that you’re in Australia, but we know where your kids go to school’, this kind of stuff . . . there were absolutely direct threats to kill me and to rape me and to kill the children.

When Spicer rang her employers from Vietnam, she discovered that her editors were excited that her column was ‘really going off’ in that it was attracting a large number of comments. When she explained that she was ‘absolutely terrified’ by the response, her employers complied with her request to move the story off the front page of their website. Spicer remembers feeling suffocated:

While I’m not the kind of person who’s prone to anxiety . . . I did go through months where I was more housebound. I didn’t want to go outside that much. I looked over my shoulder while I was outside. . . . When they pile upon you, you feel like you don’t want to go out the front door because there might be a mob out there. That’s how you feel. It almost manifests physically in your mind that there are people out there with pitchforks.

Spicer decided against reporting the attacks to police because she was worried that this would result in more and worse attacks on both herself and her children. She said that she lacked the confidence to follow the lead of other feminists who had republished the abuse they received – although she said that she had great admiration for the courage of these
women. Her preferred strategy is still to ‘mute or block’ anyone who attempts to engage with her by using violent language. She has also changed both the content and style of her writing: ‘I’m a little bit ashamed to admit this, but I’ve been frightened to write too many full-on columns ever since then . . . I’ve really eased off on writing edgy columns because it scared the shit out of me’.

In many ways, this case study highlights the ‘flight’ reaction, which seems to contrast with Price’s ‘fight’ response outlined next. As I will go on to explain, however, Spicer and Price – like many other gendered cyber-hate targets I have interviewed – have toolkits of responses that are deployed in a context-specific manner.

Case study 2: Jenna Price

Jenna Price is an Australian academic, former journalist and co-founder of the controversial Destroy the Joint project, whose anti-violence campaign is called ‘Counting Dead Women’. Price frequently receives large volumes of gendered cyberhate – including threats of sexual violence towards her daughters – to which she often responds with vigilante tactics. From late 2012 to early 2013, for instance, she was attacked by a man – ‘David’ – on Twitter who, in addition to calling her a ‘slut’, a ‘whore’ and a ‘cunt’, accused her of being a liar and thief who had stolen money from a union and used it to send her children to private schools. Price tracked down this man’s identity and rang the café at which he worked. When his wife answered the phone, Price was ‘very brutal’ in telling her about the messages that she had received from her husband. After asking to speak to her husband, she said:

‘Hi, it’s Jenna Price’. There was silence. I said, ‘You’re calling me all these things. You’re wrong. I’m going to call a lawyer if you do it again . . . do you understand?’, and he went, ‘yeah’, and . . . I hung up.

Price then decided to follow up with a visit to the café in person. When asked why, she explained that it was because she’s ‘just that kind of person’:

I went to the café and I said, ‘My name’s Jenna Price, we’ve had a phone conversation, do you understand what I said to you?’ He went, ‘yeah’ . . . I have never heard a word from him since that time,
and that's been fucking awesome . . . I was really angry . . . I was so angry . . . I was just really wanting to frighten him in the same way that I had felt frightened.

Price has been similarly proactive on other occasions, relying on the skills she learned in her previous career as a journalist to track down online abusers at their workplaces. On one occasion, she used an IP address to deduce that ‘absolutely appalling emails’ were coming from someone employed within a mid-level Australian telecommunications company. Unable to identify the individual involved, she rang the organisation’s chief executive officer (CEO), explained the sorts of material she was receiving and said that she would seek legal action unless they ceased. When asked about the response that she received from this CEO, Price described it as ‘Fantastic: terror, complete terror’.

Flight and fight

The Spicer and Price case studies highlight two thematic modes of gendered cyberhate responses. While ‘flight’ is too strong a word to describe Spicer’s actions, she did withdraw in terms of staying in her house more often than usual, as well as self-censoring her writing and muting the public expression of her political views. Her suffering was multilayered in that, in addition to having her freedom of expression restricted and being extremely frightened, she also punished herself for deciding to tone down her writing. It is interesting to note, however, that – from an outside perspective – Spicer seems to have remained politically active and has continued to speak in an upfront and potentially controversial way about many social issues. With regards to gendered cyberhate, for example, she has engaged in activism that includes reading abuse she has received online to a camera (‘Women Read Mean Tweets’ 2015), as well as publicly supporting an en masse, feminist ‘naming and shaming’ operation which played out on Facebook and Twitter in early 2016 (Tay 2016).

Spicer’s ongoing activism demonstrates three things. First, it shows that outsiders may not be able to accurately appraise whether or by how much a woman’s voice and politics are being muted as a result of gendered cyberhate. While Spicer still seems politically to be extremely active, by her own assessment, she is not as ‘edgy’ as she used to be, at least in her writing. Second, it shows the way in which individual women’s responses to gendered cyberhate cannot always be neatly categorised as one thing or another. Spicer feels that she has pulled back in terms of her writing style and content (‘flight’) yet is still participating in overt feminist activism including digilantism (‘fight’). Third, it illustrates a point I will make in greater detail presently – namely, that celebratory media coverage of feminist digilantism in response to gendered cyberhate may imply that women
who respond in other ways lack courage or conviction or are somehow letting the feminist team down. This, in turn, could contribute to the sense of embarrassment and self-shaming described by Spicer.

Price’s response to gendered cyberhate clearly involves a ‘fight’. That said, like Spicer, her responses are complex and change over time. For instance, when she first became involved with Destroy the Joint and received a great deal of abuse in 2010, Price says that she used to get ‘very upset’ – crying, suffering from sleeplessness and anxiety, and leaning on her partner for emotional support. Her current mindset, she says, has come about because, after a year or so of abuse, she hardened and developed a ‘fuck you all’ attitude. In relation to the incident in which she confronted her attacker at his café, she also recalls acting out of a place of deep frustration: ‘I did it because I had lost my mind’. Further, digilantism is just one of the approaches Price uses to navigate gendered e-bile. She also deploys a multitude of filters; is a fan of block, mute and delete options on social media platforms; no longer checks her accounts on her phone in her bedroom; and sometimes asks male friends to respond to antagonists on her behalf. It is revealing that, while Price demonstrates pride and satisfaction in the results of her own digilantism, she does not recommend that other women, especially younger, more vulnerable women, follow suit.

Feminist digilantism

While Price’s tactics are an unusually strong form of digilantism, similar strategies are increasingly being deployed by other feminists and, for the most part, are receiving extremely celebratory media coverage (Jane 2016b). In late 2014, for instance, the Australian gamer Alanah Pearce began contacting the mothers of boys who were sending her rape threats on Facebook and then publishing these digilante efforts on Twitter (although not in a way that identified the perpetrators or their families). Pearce’s tactics received rhapsodic international media coverage and were repeatedly described as the ‘perfect’ way for women to deal with rape threats online (cited in Jane 2016b). Given the over-simplistic and arguably sensationalist tone of such reporting, a more sober, scholarly appraisal of digilantism is useful.

In the introduction of this chapter, I explained that naming and shaming digilantism exists on a spectrum. An example from the more extreme end occurred in 2012 when the Canadian feminist Steph Guthrie unearthed the identity of the 25-year-old man who created an online game inviting players to punch an image of the feminist commentator Anita Sarkeesian so that Sarkeesian’s face became increasingly bruised and damaged. Guthrie confronted the man on Twitter, asking him whether he also punched women in the face ‘IRL’ (that is, ‘in real life’). Determined that this man face offline consequences, she also passed his details on to media outlets, as well as alerting potential employers in his local area of his activities, so that if he ever sent them his résumé, they would know that he was responsible for making ‘woman facepunching’ games (Guthrie 2012, 2013).

In Australia in December 2015, meanwhile, the writer and feminist Clementine Ford tagged a man’s employer into a re-post of an abusive comment that he had
made about her on Facebook. This man was subsequently sacked (Levy 2015). Also in Australia that year, a group of young women who subsequently formed the advocacy group Sexual Violence Won’t Be Silenced (SVWBS) engaged in multifaceted activism in response to the ‘slut shaming’ of one of their friends on Facebook. While their activism began with digilantism that led to one man losing his job, it also involved reporting the online rape threats made to various women to police (Jane 2016c). As a result, a 25-year-old man pleaded guilty to using a carriage service to menace, harass or cause offence and, in July 2016, was placed on a 12-month good-behaviour bond (Jane 2016c).

Feminist digilantism offers a number of benefits. At the individual level, it can return an empowering sense of agency. Collectively, it can raise public awareness about individual incidents as well as the broader problem of misogyny online. Such tactics can also hold perpetrators accountable for their actions when institutions have failed to do so. In the SVWBS case, we can also see that efforts that begin as digilantism may trigger regulatory responses, as well as stimulating more traditional, collectivist activism. That said, as with privately sourcing criminal justice via ‘violent self-help’ in offline domains (Hine 1998, p. 1223), online vigilantism has many downsides.

Here it is useful to look to the legal literature dealing with offline vigilantism. A number of scholars writing in this area make persuasive cases that, while vigilantism, by definition, can never be legally justified, in some circumstances it may not only be morally justified, but morally demanded (Robinson 2015, p. 405). The argument is that a ‘justified vigilantism’ defence should be available in the criminal justice system, where deficits in public law enforcement mean that society is failing to hold up its end of the social contract (Hine 1998, pp. 1252–3). Convincing cases have also been made in relation to female vigilantism in contexts such as domestic violence (Ayyildiz 1995, pp. 146–7), as well as nations like India where, it is argued, vigilantism is a ‘social necessity’ because of systemic and oppressive gender inequity (Sen 2012; White and Rastogi 2014).

That said, the outcomes of digilantism are unpredictable and may backfire in a manner that disadvantages activists. Extrajudicial activism online also provides opportunities for bad actors who may join digilante salvos for recreational purposes rather than for reasons relating to politics or self-defence. This is especially true in pack attacks in which some or even many participants have little association with or interest in the original offender or offence yet still coalesce into large, hostile cyber mobs (see Citron 2014, p. 118; Ronson 2015). Crowds of angry feminist digilantes who attack and dox individual men risk mirroring the very behaviour being objected to in the first instance – even if their motivations are different and more defendable. Digilantism may also undermine confidence in justice systems in a manner that promotes further bypassing of legal channels rather than advocacy for the sorts of reform that might prevent or reduce such attacks on women. In other words, while vigilantism may ultimately strengthen extrajudicial cultures online, my case is that more rather than fewer regulatory responses are required.

Given the popularity of fictional vigilante crime fighters in mass culture (a recent example is Jessica Jones from the television series Jessica Jones [Iacofano...
2015]), it is not surprising that – despite the many downsides listed – real-life feminist digilantes receive such an exuberant mainstream media reception. There is a risk, however, that gushing media coverage reifies the view that no other interventions are required with regards to the gendered cyberhate situation. Further, media applause for the actions of feminist digilantes as constituting the ‘perfect’ solution to online rape threats comports with the wider trend of shifting the burden of responsibility for the problem of gendered cyberhate from male perpetrators to female targets and from the public to the private sphere (Jane 2016b). Noteworthy, for instance, is the way in which the Pearce case involved an all-female clean-up crew, in the form of the female target and the perpetrators’ mothers. In such scenes, mothers, wives and girlfriends are propelled into the role of domestic ‘police’ who must hold their menfolk to account. Indeed, in this example, it is a woman who ends up doing the apologising.10

In addition to placing a monumentally unfair burden on targets, approaches such as Pearce’s are unfeasible in the vast bulk of cyberhate cases. Attacks usually involve a multitude of assailants, which would make it prohibitively time-consuming for women to track down and confront them all. This task would also be difficult if not outright impossible in the case of antagonists attacking anonymously or pseudonymously (although, as I explain in what follows, it is becoming harder to use the mainstream domains of the cybersphere anonymously). We should also remember that individual women might not fare so well in one-on-one confrontations with perpetrators if they happen to be subordinate to these men in their social circumstances and relationships.11 Finally, all-out celebrations of digilantism may also create the expectation that this is the best or ‘correct’ feminist response to gendered cyberhate which, in turn, may contribute to the suffering of women – like Layla and Spicer – who, in some circumstances, choose to withdraw in various ways rather than engage in overt confrontation and battle.

Before concluding this section, it is worth noting the complex and dynamic relationship between feminist digilante responses to gendered cyberhate and anonymity online. Anonymity is often assumed to be one of the prime reasons why the internet has become so saturated with vitriol (Hess 2014). Yet the culture of anonymity online is changing. In this regard, the reader might note Facebook’s growing push for users to sign up with their ‘authentic identities’ (Facebook nd) and the fact that increasing numbers of third-party applications (including the dating app Tinder) are making it mandatory for users to register via Facebook, thereby importing this identifying profile information. These sorts of ‘real name’ policies are making it increasingly difficult to use mainstream sectors of the cybersphere in an anonymous manner. Thus, while some feminist digilantes have had to use a degree of sleuthing to hunt down their cyber antagonists, others have simply directed public attention to their attackers’ identifying Facebook profiles. The growing ease with which feminists are able to identify their online attackers can therefore be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is becoming easier to publicly expose perpetrators. On the other hand, men do not seem overly concerned about being exposed in this way. This lends support to the case that gendered cyberhate has become normalised to the extent that many assailants do not anticipate criminal sanction, platform intervention or even social stigma for their actions.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the way in which women’s responses to the growing problem of gendered cyberhate can involve both flight and fight modes. The former has a chilling effect in that online abuse and harassment can cause women to restrict their use of the internet and engagement online in ways that are disempowering and disenfranchising. The latter manifests in the individual and collective push-back against gendered cyberhate, including some relatively forceful digilante strategies. Throughout this chapter, I have endeavoured to avoid simplistic framings of gendered cyberhate targets as either silenced ‘victims’ or romanticised guerrilla warriors. Instead, I have shown that women who are attacked and harassed online respond in a range of ways, using different strategies to suit different contexts. Further, strategies associated with both flight and fight modes have upsides and downsides.

A central aim of this chapter has been to discourage appraisals of various forms of feminist activism in terms of their potential to ‘fix’ the broader problem of cyber VAWG. Women’s range of responses to gendered cyberhate is eminently understandable given the surplus of abuse and the deficit of institutional assistance, and there is much to praise about targets’ courage, savvy and innovation. Yet acknowledging women’s skill sets in this regard should not obscure the fact that these are skill sets that women have had to develop because of profoundly unfair and oppressive circumstances. Misogyny online (like racism and homophobia online) is the result of far broader patterns of subordination and violence. In this regard, the various approaches discussed in this chapter illustrate the resilience not only of feminist resistance to various forms of gendered violence but also of the structural inequity that facilitates exactly the sorts of gendered violence feminists are resisting. As such, any discussion of these matters should keep sight of the fact that all the praiseworthy feminist resistance would be unnecessary if it were not for all the lamentable patriarchal oppression.

In particular, the fact that women are finding innovative ways to navigate gendered cyberhate should never be used, either explicitly or implicitly, to relieve regulators and policy makers of their responsibilities with regards to cyber VAWG. As I have argued, the risks and downsides of the range of strategies described in this chapter should add further pressure to policy makers and police to intervene in a manner that moves the focus away from the female targets of gendered cyberhate and towards the multitude of male perpetrators who are currently abusing and harassing with impunity, often on platforms whose operators show little interest in protecting vulnerable users. This might bring us closer to the day when we are no longer celebrating women’s impressive abilities to navigate the deluge of gendered cyberhate online but are celebrating the fact that these abilities are no longer required.

Notes

1 ‘Layla’ is a pseudonym.
2 This is in the form of a Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DE150100670) which is funding a three-year project called ‘Cyberhate: the new digital divide?’ The University of New South Wales (UNSW) Research Ethics Committee reference for this project is HC15012.
Two groups of interviewees were recruited via a number of methods. The first group (n = 32) comprised women with public profiles who had experienced hostility or threats online and had previously discussed this in a public forum. These women had the option of being interviewed in an identifiable way using their real names, and most made use of this option. The second group (n = 19) comprised women who were not in public life and who had experienced hostility or threats online but had not spoken about this previously in a public forum. These interviewees all used pseudonyms, and their identifying details were removed from their transcripts. While my recruitment techniques were not designed to obtain a representative population sample, I did ensure that my subjects included women of colour, queer women and Muslim women, as well as women from a range of age groups and socioeconomic circumstances. Given that this chapter cites women from my interview cohort as well as women speaking in other contexts, I will indicate throughout where subjects were interviewed by me personally and also when pseudonyms are used. Interviews were conducted in person or via Skype, with some follow-up interviews involving phone conversations and email.

While the political intersectionality of gender with other social identities is indubitable, it is simply beyond the scope of my current research to investigate in any detail cyberhate as it relates to issues such as race, class, sexual orientation and gender. Related to this is the fact that, while some international statistics are cited, the qualitative dimensions of my work are entirely Anglophone.

These findings are drawn from my interviews with cyberhate targets, as well as from my analysis of my archive of reports and self-reports of gendered cyberhate.

The World Wide Web Foundation’s Web Index covers 86 countries – including many high-income nations – and measures the web’s contribution to social, economic and political progress.

I am using the term ‘hygiene’ here in line with the use – by various clinicians – of the term ‘sleep hygiene’ to refer to practices and household arrangements (for example, removing clocks from bedrooms) designed to facilitate quality sleep.

‘David’ is a pseudonym.

‘Slut shaming’ is a colloquial term describing ‘the act of criticizing women or girls for their real or presumed sexuality or sexual activity, as well as for looking or behaving in ways that are believed to transgress sexual norms’ (Karaian 2014, p. 296).

Many thanks to Melanie Andersen for her input into this section.

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