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Online misogyny and feminist digilantism

Abstract

This article examines contemporary feminist 'digilante' responses to the increasing problem of misogyny online. In particular, it focuses on female gamers and a recent incident in which the Australian gamer Alanah Pearce responded to threats of sexual violence from young male internet users by alerting their mothers. Pearce's move was celebrated in international media commentary as the 'perfect' solution to the problem of online rape threats. This article, however, argues that while 'do-it-yourself' strategies such as Pearce's have some benefits, unsupplemented they do not constitute an adequate solution to the broader problem of gendered vitriol online. Further, they comport with a wider trend which shifts the burden of responsibility for the problem of gendered cyber-hate from perpetrators to targets, and from the public to the private sphere. Over the course of this article, I will show that the contemporary problem of gendered 'e-bile' has parallels with some key social issues addressed by second wave feminism. As such, I argue that a hybrid of feminist activist efforts – including a recalibrated approach to collectivism – is required

to achieve the legislative and corporate reform necessary to address the significant social problems of gendered hate on the internet.

Keywords: e-bile, misogyny, gamergate, digilantism, shaming

Introduction

In late 2014, the Australian gamer journalist Alanah Pearce received a Facebook message reading, ‘i’ll rape u if i ever see u cunt’ (cited in True 2014)¹. This alone was hardly a newsworthy event. In recent years, cyber-harassment such as rape threats and sexualised vitriol – what I have elsewhere called ‘e-bile’² – have become part of the every day experience for many women online (cf.: Jane 2014a, 2014b, 2015). While various types of ‘anti-social’ communications have always been observed on the internet, media accounts and self-reports of sexualised electronic vitriol present a strong *prima facie* case that gendered cyber-hate has increased markedly since at least

¹ I will not be writing ‘sic’ after grammatical, spelling, and syntax errors in cited electronic communications and online material in recognition of the informality and colloquialism commonly found in such contexts.

² I have previously used the term ‘e-bile’ to describe a range of discourses and practices that have historically been designated via terms such as ‘cyberbullying’, ‘cyber-stalking’, ‘cyber-violence’, ‘trolling’, and, most commonly, ‘flaming’ (Jane 2014a; 2014b; 2015). My case is that a new descriptor is required in order to gather under one heading a variety of denunciatory forms that share characteristic, signal features and so demand a broad field of inquiry. Further, while scholarly coverage of discourse designated by terms such as ‘trolling’ and ‘flaming’ is of enormous assistance in understanding the current circulation of hostile discourse on the internet, it is also associated with a tendency across a range of disciplines to underplay, overlook, ignore, or otherwise marginalise the prevalence and serious ethical and material ramifications of these new media discourses and practices (Jane 2015). As such, my hope is that deploying a new term will assist in underlining the prevalence, rhetorical noxiousness, and stark misogyny of contemporary hostility on the internet and social media platforms.

2011. Further, there is good evidence that the discourse involved is more rhetorically noxious and is occurring in far broader communities than earlier iterations of gender-based harassment documented in scholarly literature.³ This is especially true in gamer communities where commentators have argued that the ‘misogynist backlash’ is so virulent it constitutes a form of terrorism (Hudson 2014; see also Marcetic 2014).

Pearce’s response to receiving e-threats of sexual violence, however, *was* novel. Given that the abuse she received involved public Facebook pages, she was able to determine that some of the perpetrators were minors (Pearce cited in True 2014). She then used Facebook to identify and make contact with four of the boys’ mothers, asking if they knew about the messages and would discuss them with their children (True 2014). Pearce’s approach met with high praise in the international media and the cybersphere where, as I will go on to show, it was repeatedly described as the ‘perfect’ way for women to deal with rape threats online.

Given the contemporary proliferation of gendered cyber-hate and an acknowledged shortage of effective remedies, the Pearce case study deserves close attention. As I will demonstrate, her response aligns with a more general tendency for female e-bile targets to engage in do-it-yourself (DIY), ‘digilante’ tactics such as ‘calling out’ and/or attempting to ‘name and shame’ their antagonists. Such strategies are understandable given the monumentally inadequate response to gendered cyber-harassment from law enforcement bodies, policy makers, and corporations (cf.: Citron 2009; Halder and Jaishankar 2011; Jenson and de Castell 2013; Sandoval 2013; Citron 2014; Dewey 2014).⁴ Yet while activists such as Pearce are engaged in

³ For examples, see: Herring 2002; Herring et al 2002.

⁴ Citron, for instance, provides a meticulous survey of the various ways gendered cyber-hate, cyber-harassment, and cyber-stalking is trivialised, ignored, and sometimes mocked by internet users and media commentators, as well as by those

extremely valuable awareness-raising work, unsupplemented, such approaches are not likely to adequately address the problem of gendered e-bile. Further, the enthusiastic endorsement given to such DIY initiatives by media commentators can be viewed as both reflecting and bolstering a dominant cyber norm which shifts the burden of responsibility for gendered hostility from male perpetrators to female targets, and from the public to the private sphere.

Over the course of this article, I will show that there exist many parallels between contemporary gendered cyber-hate, and key social problems addressed by second wave⁵ feminists in the 1960s and 1970s – namely: rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment. While a signal characteristic of the second wave of the women’s movement was communal mobilisation, contemporary iterations of feminism tend to be associated with individuated, micropolitical, and DIY action, especially in the cybersphere. This paper examines the efficacy and the ethics of digilante interventions by situating these responses within the broader context of feminist theories and activism. It goes on to argue that, despite a history of tension between generations of feminists, combating gendered cyber-harassment requires a

responsible for law enforcement, policy development, and platform management (2014).

⁵ I acknowledge that terms such as ‘second wave’, ‘third wave’, ‘fourth wave’, and ‘postfeminist’, are contested, imprecise, and problematic in their tendency to flatten contexts, universalise women’s experiences, and facilitate intra-movement adversarialism (cf.: Aronson 2003; Hall and Rodriguez 2003; Gills and Munford 2004; Henry 2004; Genz and Brabon 2009; Baumgardner 2011; Budgeon 2011). I will, however, use some wave-related terminology because it provides a ‘useful shorthand’ for referencing ‘the broad strokes of feminist history’ (Baumgardner 2011). I use the term ‘cyber feminism’ in the populist sense to describe feminists whose concerns and activist approaches are primarily played out online, rather than in the tightly delineated sense found in feminist theory (cf.: Consalvo 2003, 108-9; Nagle 2013a).

combination of individualism as well as collectivism – what could be described as a hybrid of second and third wave approaches.

This research is part of a much larger (and ongoing) project into the nature, manifestations, prevalence, etiology, and ramifications of gendered e-bile. I have been archiving manifestations of gendered hate speech from Anglophone cyber domains since 1998 using screen shots and web captures, and deploying methodological approaches from the emerging field of internet historiography (Brügger 2010). While this paper focuses primarily on electronic vitriol directed at female gamers in 2014, its arguments are informed by a close study of my entire archive. This paper draws on established methods in textual analysis and media ethnography in its mapping and analysis of discourses around hostility and vitriol in online gamer communities using selected themes such as ‘trolling’, ‘cyber-harassment’, ‘cyber-stalking’, ‘cyber-bullying’, ‘cyber-hate’, and ‘cyber-violence’ as lenses. In addition to other methods used to track relevant media discourse, from January 2011 to the present day, I have deployed the ‘Google Alerts’ service which provides daily notifications of relevant content from news sites, blogs, and other web sites in a variety of media forms. I use nine alerts searching for 16 relevant words or phrases. My hermeneutic is interdisciplinary and works across feminist theory, political philosophy, cultural and media studies, and legal studies. Methodologically, I am also influenced by standpoint theory (cf.: Harding 2004; Sprague 2005) in that I write from the position of a feminist who has herself been a target for cyber-hate (Jane 2014b), and because my research is intended to contribute to the broad feminist project of advancing gender equity.

Gendered e-bile and Gamergate

While gendered e-bile has circulated since the earliest days of the internet, it was not until 2011 that a large number of women from a range of social contexts, cultures, and countries began speaking publically about the rape threats and sexualised vitriol they were receiving on social media platforms and the internet (cf.: Jane 2014a; 2014b; 2015). Over the following years, media accounts and self-reports of gendered cyber-hate increased markedly (cf.: Battersby 2013; Sandoval 2013; Dewey 2014; Marcetic 2014; Mead 2014; Sierra 2014; Penny 2014). These anecdotal accounts comport with empirical research such as a 2014 study by the Pew Research Center showing that 73 per cent of adult internet users have witnessed harassment online and 40 per cent have experienced it personally (Duggan 2014). While men are more likely to be subjected to less severe harassment such as name-calling and embarrassment, young women are particularly vulnerable to more severe kinds of cyber abuse such as sexual harassment and stalking (Duggan 2014). Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell note that, despite a dearth of scholarly literature and empirical prevalence studies on the subject of technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment (TFSV) against women, a number of international studies suggest that women are disproportionately the targets of harassment and hate speech in cyberspace (2015).

Women in online tech and gamer communities have historically been subjected to especially noxious e-bile. In 2007, for instance, the tech blogger Kathy Sierra withdrew from public life after a campaign of harassment including the circulation of doctored images of her as a sexually mutilated corpse accompanied by the publishing of her personal details as a 'call to action' for people to harass her (Sierra 2014). Five years later, the feminist blogger and gamer Anita Sarkeesian was subjected to a similar cyber mob attack after launching a crowd-funding campaign for

a series of short films examining sexist stereotypes in video games (Sarkeesian 2012a; 2012b). In August 2014, Sarkeesian was forced to leave her home after receiving a series of graphic death threats that included her and her parents' home addresses (Marcetic 2014). Two months later, Sarkeesian had to cancel a speaking event at Utah State University after an anonymous emailer threatened 'the deadliest school shooting in American history' if her talk was permitted to go ahead (cited in Marcetic 2014). This email said Sarkeesian was 'everything wrong with the feminist woman' and would 'die screaming like the craven little whore that she is' (cited in Marcetic 2014).

The 2014 threats against Sarkeesian were part of a broader campaign of harassment against women in gaming known as 'Gamergate' which began when the disgruntled ex-boyfriend of a games designer called Zoe Quinn claimed (baselessly)⁶ that Quinn had slept with a journalist to secure positive reviews for her game *Depression Quest*. Quinn's attackers used the common e-bile tactics of 'doxxing' (publishing personally identifying information to incite internet antagonists to hunt targets in offline domains), and 'revenge porn' (uploading sexually explicit material – usually of a former female partner – without the consent of the pictured subject). While Gamergate was ostensibly a protest about ethics in games journalism, its targets were almost exclusively female games developers, academics, and writers, and the undercurrent of the movement was 'always ... darkly misogynistic' (Stuart 2014b).

Like Sarkeesian, Quinn eventually left her home because she feared for her safety. After accumulating 16 gigabytes of abuse (Jason 2015), her concern was that one of her anonymous critics would eventually make good on their threats to kill her

⁶ Quinn's ex-partner, Eron Gjoni, said later that this suggestion was erroneous. He claimed it had been included in his lengthy blog dedicated to denouncing Quinn because of a typographical error (Gjoni 2014).

(Quinn cited in Stuart 2014b). Female journalists and gamers who publically defended Quinn and/or who questioned the Gamergate movement were also attacked. In October 2014, the personal details of the American game designer Brianna Wu were posted on the 8chan chat forum, and within minutes she had begun receiving threats such as ‘I’ve got a K-bar and I’m coming to your house so I can shove it up your ugly feminist cunt’ (cited in Stuart 2014a). Wu also left her home because she feared for her safety, observing that this was not ‘just casual sexism, it’s angry, violent sexism ... Every woman I know in the industry is scared’ (cited in Stuart 2014a).

A feminist issue

Women targetted for mob attacks on the internet suffer a range of psychological, professional, and financial impacts (cf.: Day 2013; Battersby 2013; Hess 2014; Jane 2014a). Gendered e-bile is having a chilling effect on women’s voices online in that many targets report self-censoring, writing anonymously or under pseudonyms, or withdrawing from online domains altogether to avoid abuse (Jane 2014a). As Sarkeesian, Quinn and Wu experienced during Gamergate, online attacks are increasingly spilling into offline domains⁷ – most frequently via the practices of

⁷ It is important to tread carefully when making distinctions between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ abuse and harassment. While much recent work in internet studies rejects the online/offline dichotomy as ‘anachronistic’ given that networked technologies have become integrated in most aspects of daily life (Buchanan 2011, 89: see also Jensen 2011), distinguishing between these domains may still be useful in that it can provide context about particular instances of abuse. Certainly the anonymity and self-publishing opportunities associated with the cybersphere facilitates mob attacks in ways that would simply not be possible offline. There is a risk, however, that attacks which occur online are dismissed as ‘virtual’ rather than ‘real’ and are therefore not taken seriously. Cogent here is Henry and Powell case that TFSV can result in

doxxing and revenge porn. Media outlets have also reported an increase in the number of men publishing faux advertisements claiming their ex-partners are soliciting sex (Sandoval 2013). One US man posted an ad entitled ‘Rape Me and My Daughters’ and was jailed after more than 50 men arrived at his ex-wife’s home (Sandoval 2013).

Online abuse has also been linked to offline domestic violence against women. According to research published by Women’s Aid, 48 per cent of UK women who had experienced violence at the hands of a partner reported experiencing harassment or online abuse once they had left the relationship, and 38 per cent of women said they had been stalked online after they had left their partners (Smith 2014). The significance of such studies is not just that violent partners and ex-partners are able to use the internet as another dimension of their abuse of women, but that violent partners and ex-partners are able to use the internet to incite others to join their attacks. We can also see the way that – in cases such as those involving assaults that are filmed and published online – technology enables ‘the continuation of harm ... well beyond the original crime’ (Henry and Powell 2015).

Danielle Keats Citron’s conclusion is that rape threats and gendered doxxing are causing ‘profound’ harm to women by impeding their full participation in online life, and undermining ‘their autonomy, identity, dignity, and well-being’ (2009, 411; see also Citron 2014). Citron condemns the way gendered cyber-harassment is deemed ‘harmless teasing that women should expect, and tolerate, given the internet’s Wild West norms of behavior’ (2009, 373). Debarati Halder and K. Jaishankar concur, arguing that female victims remain a secondary concern for ‘developed cyber-savvy nations’ (2011, 300), while Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell contend that

embodied harms which may have at least as much impact on a personal as traditional harms occurring against the physical body (2015).

individual cases of online misogyny are not exceptional but indicative of broader attitudes which ‘excuse violent hate speech’ targeting women online (2013, 75).

The sheer volume of gendered cyber-hate as well as the striking homogeneity of its rhetoric (Jane 2014b) make this a phenomenon which demands consideration not only as a collection of individual incidents but *en masse* as a significant social problem. Further, while e-bile’s medium is new, we can see that the e-bile message sits squarely within a far older tradition – one which insists: that women are inferior; that their primary value relates to sexual utility; that they do not belong in the public sphere; and that those females who overstep the mark should be put ‘back in their place’ or otherwise punished.⁸ This, in other words, is a feminist issue. Further, it is a feminist issue which has striking parallels with some key social problems addressed by second wave activists. As with rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment in the 1960s, gendered cyber-harassment is frequently trivialised, mocked, regarded as a personal matter, and framed as legally intractable because of its ‘highly personal and idiosyncratic’ contexts (Citron 2014, 22).

Also paralleling more ‘traditional’ forms of sexual assault and harassment is the tendency to blame the female victims of cyber-hate and cyber-harassment (cf.: Caroline Criado-Perez cited in Day 2013; Richard White cited in Dowell 2013; Ramsdell 2014). Law enforcement officers are also known to counsel female cyber-

⁸ The canon of feminist literature outlining these issues is too vast to list here. Chris Beasley does, however, provide a useful survey of feminist theorists who have drawn attention to the way mainstream social and political thought has legitimated the subordination of women in social and political life (1999). Women, for instance, have been frequently presented as ‘partial beings’ and ‘helpmates’ in that they are defined in terms of men’s needs regarding pleasure, provision of services, child rearing, and so on (Beasley 1999, 6-7). Carole Pateman’s work is also instructive in terms of providing an overview of the exclusion of women from the public sphere (1989; cf.: Carver and Chambers 2011), while Susan Faludi provides one of many accounts of the various ways women are controlled, shamed, silenced or otherwise shut down if they are perceived to be, for example, ‘loud and self-determined’ (1993, 92-93).

hate targets to simply ‘take a break’ from the cybersphere (Hess 2014), while some media commentators instruct women to stop being so ‘peculiarly sensitive’ (O’Neill 2011) and to refrain from engaging in ‘narcissistic victimhood’ (West 2015). Again, such attitudes shift the responsibility for cyber-hate to targets, and penalise women by advising them to withdraw from a domain that is widely acknowledged as being an integral – and essential – part of contemporary life and citizenship (cf.: Mossberger 2009; Wheeler 2011; Braman 2011).

Feminist digilantism: a ‘brilliant new ploy’?

The oppressive force of e-bile – combined with the lack of institutional solutions – helps explain why many contemporary feminist activists are pushing back via digital vigilantism or ‘digilantism’ – a word used interchangeably with terms such as ‘cybervigilante’ to describe DIY justice online (Nakamura 2014, 263). Digilantism is not just deployed by online feminists, but is part of a far broader ‘vengeance culture’ in the cybersphere (Hai-Jew 2014, 64). Unlike traditional vigilantes who used violence to lynch their targets, the extrajudicial punishment meted out by digilantes, usually involves some combination of trickery, persuasion, and public shaming (Byrne 2013, 71). Digilante methods are associated with groups such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous, and are manifest in tactics such as ‘hacktivism’⁹, ‘scam-baiting’¹⁰, and ‘denial-of-service attacks’¹¹ (cf.: Crews Jr 2006; Rosenbaum 2007; Tom 2008;

⁹ ‘Hacktivism’ – a portmanteau of ‘hacking’ and ‘activism’ – refers to the unauthorised access to and disruption of computer systems in the name of socio-political agendas.

¹⁰ ‘Scam-baiting’ is the practice of turning the tables on internet scammers by scamming them back (cf.: Rosenbaum 2007; Tom 2008).

¹¹ A ‘denial-of-service’ (DoS) or ‘distributed denial-of-service’ (DDoS) attack results in a computer or online network becoming unavailable to users.

Citron 2010; Murphy 2012; Colesky and Niekerk 2012). As Dara N. Byrne observes, ‘Though rarely cast alongside traditional vigilantism, digilante zeal is quite similar in that activity also hinges on the belief that there are scarcities and deficiencies in the state security system’ (2013, 74).

Feminist digilantism has primarily focussed on naming and shaming approaches, such as establishing blogs, web sites, and hashtags that are used to re-publish offensive material that might otherwise have only been viewed by recipients. Examples include *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* (a blog which collates and re-posts abuse directed at female gamers), ‘Page O’ Hate’ (the section of blogger Rebecca Watson’s *skepchick* web site devoted to re-posting the e-bile she receives), and *Not in the Kitchen Anymore* (a site founded by Jenny Haniver to document the hostility she experiences while gaming). The ‘#mencallmethings’, ‘#everydaysexism’, and ‘#1reasonwhy (there aren’t more women in the games industry)’ hashtag movements on Twitter serve similar functions. Another example, from Russia in 2015, involves the queer activist Lena Klimova who has posted a photo album depicting identifying photographs of people she says have sent her threatening messages via the Russian social network VKontakte (Rothrock 2015).

Another feminist variation on naming and shaming involves e-bile targets outing and/or engaging directly with individual attackers in public fora. In 2012, for instance, the Canadian feminist Steph Guthrie tracked down the 25-year-old man who created an infamous online game called ‘Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian’ which invited players to ‘punch this bitch in the face’ (cited in Sarkeesian 2012a). Guthrie’s initial tweet about the man read, ‘So I found the Twitter account of that fuck listed as creator of the “punch a woman in the face” game. Should I sic the internet on him?’ (Guthrie 2012). After receiving encouragement from her followers, Guthrie then confronted

the man publically on Twitter, before passing his details on to media outlets, and alerting potential employers in his local area that, if he ever sent them his résumé, they should know he was responsible for making ‘woman facepunching’ games (Guthrie 2012; 2013).

While arguments have arisen about the ethics of publically outing e-bilers (boyd 2012), the UK blogger Laurie Penny praises the ‘new mood of online vigilantism ... beginning to take hold of the Net’, arguing that

people with a modern understanding of misogyny and what it means aren’t prepared to wait for society to fix itself...Right now the Internet is outstripping the conventional court system when it comes to digging out information about rapists and other sexual predators. (2014, 197-198)

Penny’s point about conventional legal remedies not keeping pace with the types of crimes occurring on the internet and social media platforms is well made. It does not follow, however, that digilantism is necessarily the best solution to this problem. To demonstrate some of the reasons why, I will now return to the Pearce case study.

On November 28, 2014, Pearce publicised her digilante efforts by tweeting, ‘Sometimes young boys on Facebook send me rape threats, so I’ve started telling their mothers.’ This was accompanied by a screen shot of her text message exchange with one of the boys’ mothers who replied, ‘omg little shit...IM SO SORRY’ (cited in True 2014). The Australian gamer’s strategy received an overwhelmingly positive reaction. By January 2015, her initial tweet had been retweeted 45,000 times, and had been ‘favourited’ 71,000 times. The story received a flood of international media coverage in which commentators frequently described her actions as the ‘perfect’

solution to rape threats online (cf.: Essert 2014; Klee 2014; Lynch 2014; Parker 2014; ‘Gamer Alanah Pearce Responds To Online Rape Threats In The Perfect Way’ 2014). Others praised Pearce for her ‘brilliant new ploy’ (Boggioni 2014) and urged other women to follow suit by ‘standing up and smacking these boys down’ (David Weller commenting beneath Kurp 2014).

As with other feminist digilante approaches discussed in the section above, Pearce’s strategy does offer some benefits. Her decision not to publically name the boys who sent her rape threats may well have spared them the intense counter vitriol which can be launched at e-bilers, yet she still put them into a position where they would potentially face consequences for their actions. By talking about her experience, she humanised herself as a target, and the boys as attackers. She also assisted in making the extent, nature, and ramifications of gendered cyber-hate visible. Pearce may have experienced a sense of empowerment and agency as a result of using her cyber savvy – in the manner of a jujitsu maneuver – back against her attackers. Speaking publically about such issues also offers the benefits of catharsis, as well as a sense of solidarity with other targets, and the chance to have one’s individual suffering acknowledged.

There are, however, a number of potentially problematic aspects to Pearce’s tactics and the wide applause they received. These point to some potentially problematic aspects of digilantism (including feminist digilantism) more generally. The problems are interrelated but can be grouped thematically as involving issues associated with: 1) logistics; 2) various feminist activist approaches; and 3) the ethics and efficacy of digilantism. I wish to emphasise here that my intention is not to criticise Pearce or other cyber feminists, but to critique the inequitable cyber norms that may make digilantism seem like the only viable response to e-bile.

Firstly, framing Pearce's individual approach as constituting the 'perfect' response to the broad problem of online rape threats is wrongheaded because several key aspects of her circumstances were atypical, specifically: a) she was able to identify her antagonists; and b) her antagonists were minors. Most e-bilers attack anonymously therefore making it logistically unfeasible to identify them offline. Even contacting them *online* is impossible if, for example, they use disposable user profiles which are created – and quickly decommissioned – for the express purpose of engaging in unidentifiable, 'drive-by' assaults. Those e-bilers whose identities *have* been uncovered have tended to be men over the age of 18 (cf.: Chen 2012; Bracchi 2013; Readhead 2014). As such, contacting their mothers to request parental intervention would presumably be less appropriate. Further, if an e-bile attack did happen to involve assailants who were both identifiable and under 18, it would likely be impossible to track down and engage with all their mothers given that most cyber attacks involve huge numbers of assailants.

Secondly, applauding Pearce's decision to handle the matter herself by telling her attackers' mothers risks reinscribing one of the key social norms resisted by second wave feminism, namely that sexualised violence against women is a problem that should be solved by individuals in private rather than public domains. Consider the language used by journalists praising Pearce's actions. One said she went 'straight to the source to tackle the issue' (True 2014), while another said she talked to 'the one person who might actually get through to these terrible people' (Essert 2014). Then there is the journalist who wrote: 'Rather than report Facebook abuse through corporate channels, she's going straight to the *real* authority figure' (Klee 2014, emphasis in original). While initiating parental involvement may be a valid response if e-bile attacks involve underaged antagonists, the responsibility for this action

should not lie with targets. Neither is it helpful for mothers to be cast as the ‘real’ authority figures in the e-bile scene. Just as there exists a tendency to blame the victims of cyber-hate, such discourse implicates mothers as being responsible for and possibly also even partly to blame for e-bile. Further, such framings infantilise the perpetrators and suggest the wider problem of e-bile is little more than the bad behaviour of naughty little boys.¹²

Also telling is the ode to Pearce published by the popular Australian women’s website *Mamamia*, which states outright that telling e-bilers’ mothers will have more of an impact than calling the police, and which repeatedly congratulates Pearce for ‘getting back at’ her abusers ‘in a way that truly brings it home’ (Rudd 2014). Discourse such as the above is unhelpful in its suggestion that alerting authorities is not as admirable or effective as dealing with e-bile individually. While it may be true that Pearce’s strategy brought the perpetrators’ actions ‘home’ in the sense that it made the abuse clear and placed blame, it also brought the actions ‘home’ into the domestic sphere. As such, while the media applause of Pearce is putatively supportive of her as an individual, it is less helpful to women collectively in that it bolsters the unhelpful norm that the responsibility for cyber-hate rests with victims who should deal with it in private rather than public domains.¹³ This, in turn, may make it easier for governments, corporations, and enforcement bodies to continue eliding their responsibility for e-bile with impunity.

¹² A similar dynamic has been observed by Mary Beard who critiques media narratives that recast the troll as an ‘errant son’ and their target as a ‘scolding but forgiving mother – a Penelope who chastises Telemachus for being rude, then patiently teaches him the error of his ways’ (Mead 2014).

¹³ With regards to whether Pearce’s use of Facebook and Twitter constitutes a private or public act, I acknowledge the liminality of cyber domains in that they involve, as Patricia G. Lange puts it the ‘publically private’ as well as the ‘privately public’ (2007). I am still designating Pearce’s actions as being primarily ‘private’, however, because they were prosecuted by her sans institutional support.

Thirdly, the deployment of online vigilantism – like the deployment of offline vigilantism – raises many ethical quandaries (cf.: Tuovinen and Röning 2007; Tom 2008; Dumsday 2009; boyd 2012; Byrne 2013; Nagle 2013b; Nakamura 2014). Devin Coldeway’s observation, for instance, is that the ‘crowd-sourcing’ of justice online is unpredictable in that ‘bad actors are at least as common and active as the well-intentioned and insightful’ (2013). Further, what might seem like fair and reasonable street justice from one viewpoint, may well resemble vengeance-motivated lynching or even sadism from another. Such perspectivism was certainly operative in Gamergate in that the movement came about as a result of individuals who insisted their indignation was righteous¹⁴, yet whose actions were regarded as cruel and starkly misogynistic by many outsiders. Gamergate also demonstrates some other risks of vigilantism, namely: that the vigilante acts can become worse than the ill supposedly being addressed; that the punishments meted out are disproportionate and/or may be directed at innocents; and that the movement becomes a semi-legitimate avenue for those who are not motivated by a genuine social issue, but who simply wish to do harm (Rosenbaum and Sederberg 1976, 21).

Similarly, digilante approaches can result in scapegoating, and in e-bile producers being attacked via methods that are similar – or worse – than those being objected to in the first instance.¹⁵ While various groups associated with vigilantism online have made various attempts to build an ethics of digilantism, the results of these enterprises are uncertain (Murphy 2012). In the meantime, the interconnectedness of the cybersphere is such that even ‘seemingly mundane self-help

¹⁴ Indeed, Gjoni has justified his public character assassination of Quinn on the grounds that he was not being vindictive but, as a survivor of her ‘emotional abuse’, simply wished to protect others (2014).

¹⁵ An example is the vicious vigilante campaign of on- and offline retaliation directed at Lori Drew, a woman whose online hoax was linked to the 2006 suicide of 13-year-old Megan Meier (Collins 2008).

policies can carry big implications' (Crews Jr 2006, 2). Citron's sombre warning is that the digilante strategy of '[n]aming and shaming can become a one-way ratchet to degradation. It can spiral out of control with cyber mobs on both sides and no ability to control the damage' (2014, 118).

Special pleading has been made by some feminists with regards to women's deployment of vigilante methods in other contexts. Aaronette White and Shagun Rastogi, for instance, make the case for a 'feminist definition of violence' to support their argument that the vigilante activities of female gangs in India is not representative of 'irrational, spontaneous mob violence' but of 'grassroots feminist sensibilities' which offer 'psychological, social, and justice-related assistance to ... women who have been failed by the ... judiciary system' (2014, 216, 215). White and Rastogi do, however, acknowledge that violent retributive activities 'do not challenge fundamental structures of domination in society over the long term', and that female vigilantes risk being dangerously attacked themselves (2014, 225). Both these issues are relevant to the DIY activities of online feminists.

Digilantism can also misfire. In 2011, for instance, the Australian writer and performer Marieke Hardy had to publically apologise and pay an undisclosed sum of money to a man she wrongly named – via the '#mencallmethings' hashtag on Twitter – as the pseudonymous author of a hate blog dedicated to her (Griffin 2011). Another example is the case of Adria Richards who tweeted a photo of two men she'd overheard making jokes about 'dongles' at a tech conference. Richards was bombarded with rape and death threats on Twitter and Facebook, was fired after her attackers disabled her employer's website, and then left her home after someone published her address along with a photograph of a beheaded woman with tape over her mouth (Ronson 2015). A related problem involves girls and women who use

online platforms to make extrajudicial allegations of sexual violence and abuse against named individuals because of a perceived shortfall in institutional responsiveness to gender justice. As Michael Salter has observed, not all these efforts receive a sympathetic response; indeed, some spark a ‘ferocious backlash’ (2013, 231, 234).

With regard to the efficacy of feminist vigilante approaches in relation to gendered e-bile, I note that republishing offensive material and talking about the hurt it has caused may have the reverse effect of that which is intended given that the *raison d’être* of trolling¹⁶ is to disrupt others’ emotional equilibrium (Schwartz 2008). Online vitriol is competitive, in that e-bilers can frequently be observed to be competing to produce the most creative venom, break the largest number of taboos, elicit the largest emotional response in targets, gain the most attention for their exploits, and so on (Jane 2014a; Citron 2014). As such, e-bilers may relish the news that their activities have had an impact and may enjoy the publicity. This is not to endorse the cyber maxim ‘don’t feed the trolls’¹⁷ by suggesting women refrain from speaking up at all. Instead, it is intended to further texture the argument that ‘calling out’ attackers on a case by case basis is unlikely to solve the larger e-bile problem.

Collectivism sans sisterhood

Discourse produced by contemporary cyber feminists indicates an awareness that e-bile is best conceptualised not as a problem concerning individual men and individual women, but as diagnostic of a far broader sexism that is making the cybersphere a

¹⁶ While definitions of ‘trolling’ vary, in this paper I am using the term interchangeably with ‘e-biling’.

¹⁷ ‘Don’t feed the trolls’ is the idea that ignoring internet provocateurs will deprive them of the attention and reaction they crave, and will therefore result in their retreat.

profoundly inequitable space. Yet, as we have seen, online feminists are primarily engaging in individualised and *ad hoc* acts of resistance. This approach resonates with third wave feminism's sensibility of individuated action and emancipation, and postfeminism's highlighting of the 'multiple agency and subject positions of individuals' (Genz and Brabon 2011, 25). Its emphasis on social media activism also comports with the notion of a fourth wave of feminism that is associated with digital nativism, and the emergence of a 'call-out' culture' online (Munro 2013; see also Baumgardner 2011). Without wishing to detract from the many positive aspects of contemporary feminist theory and practice, in the case of gendered cyber-hate it is relevant to consider the critique that contemporary feminism's focus on micropolitics shifts 'the onus for change onto the individual' and makes wide-reaching change more difficult to effect (Munro 2013). Debates about whether online modes of feminist activism have the potential to lead to transformative political action are also germane (Munro 2013).

Rather than attempting to generalise about whether contemporary modes of feminism and cyberactivism are either all (or mostly all) *effective* or all (or mostly all) *ineffective*, a more useful approach is to appraise situations individually. In the case of gendered cyber-hate, my research supports the contention that while novel tactics such as Pearce's have the potential to gain a rush of media attention, individualistic approaches are easily forgotten. That is, indeed, if they receive any attention at all. As Julia Schuster argues, young women who choose online activism as their main form of political energy may well be 'invisible' to the wider public and to feminists of older generations, and, as a result, such strategies may be 'disadvantageous at a broader political level' (2013, 9, 20).

My case in relation to gendered cyber-hate is that extant forms of online feminist activism are useful, but – if they are to succeed – need to be accompanied by the sorts of hard advocacy, political organisation, and collectivist approaches used by second wave feminists in their campaigns against rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment. Just as second wave feminism developed an analysis of violence against women which argued that issues such as rape and domestic violence ‘were not merely private problems but were, in fact, public crises’ (Randol 2005, 18-19), gendered cyber-hate and cyber-harassment need to be addressed ‘not as issues of intimacy but rather as problems rooted in mechanisms of power and control’ (Randol 2005, 19). Further, given that speaking out against e-bile has consistently been associated with a steep escalation of abuse (cf.: Jane 2014b 562-4; Citron 2014, 100), individual activists are sorely in need of the support of a ‘wider politics’ (Nagle 2013a, 157).

None of this is to advocate a return to the troubled trope of the sisterhood (Henry 2004, 182) or to imply that all women – or even all women online – are a unified group. Neither is it an attempt to perform a feminist politics version of Pearce’s move by ‘dobbing’ a generation of politically feckless postfeminist daughters in to their second wave mothers and grandmothers. Instead it is a recognition that, on this particular issue, there are enough commonalities of experience to justify (possibly even *demand*) a collectivist approach to activism. It also rejects the micropolitics/movement binary in favour of the integrated approaches associated with hybrid social movements which combine ‘web-based interactions with more traditional F2F [face-to-face] meetings, encampments, and crowds-in-the-street’ (Boler and Nitsou 2014, 232, 238).

As Citron observes, the movement to delegitimize cyber harassment is in its early stages – and is mostly at the awareness-raising stage (2014, 23; cf. Jenson and de Castell 2013, 80). While contemporary feminists may not explicitly designate their activities as ‘consciousness raising’, functionally this is what is occurring when they talk publically about their experiences and re-publish gendered cyber-hate. These aspects of e-bile-related activism should continue. Contemporary cyber feminists are particularly well placed to use their insider knowledge of networked digital technologies to unearth and increase public knowledge about gendered cyber-hate. Awareness-raising, however, is not in and of itself enough to have direct or immediate effect on social change (Schuster 2013, 16). Further activism in the form of collective mobilisation and cohesive advocacy is required to bring pressure to bear on legal and political elites. This would also recognize the fact that the harm caused by online misogyny is not just individualized but may buttress the collective experiences of status inequality (cf.: Henry and Powell 2015; Megarry 2014).

A proto-collectivist approach to combatting e-bile is evident in the launching of online petitions demanding, for instance, reform in terms of the way platforms handle rape threats (cf.: Stone 2013; Graham 2013; Mastronardi 2014), as well as in boycotts such as 2013’s day of ‘Twitter silence’ (Baker 2013). Groups such as the Everyday Sexism Project, and Women, Action and Media have launched effective social media campaigns targeting companies whose advertising appeared on platforms which have failed or been slow to remove pages glorifying rape and violence against women (Buni and Chemaly 2014). Key activists are also achieving results by talking to media outlets and lobbying politicians (Wu cited in Stuart 2014a). To combat gendered cyber-hate, these approaches need to be escalated and augmented in order to demonstrate that – as with problems such as workplace harassment and domestic

violence – e-bile involves subordination with tangible economic, social, and political costs (Citron 2014, 22). As such, no less than a ‘cyber civil rights legal agenda’ is required to ensure equality of opportunity in the digital era (Citron 2014, 25).

Conclusion

In this article I have focussed on hostility directed at female gamers to illustrate the contemporary problem of gendered cyber-hate and cyber-harassment. While the latter involve profanity, cruelty, and threats of violence that would be unacceptable and/or illegal in offline contexts, there is a stark lack of institutional support and remedies available to victims. Over the course of this paper I have examined some feminist digilante interventions that – particularly in Pearce’s case – have been applauded in the media as innovative, courageous, and exemplary ways for women to respond to rape threats online. Such media coverage both *reflects* and *bolsters* the dominant view that it is best for individuals attacked on the internet to take matters into their own hands because digilantism offers the only chance of seeking redress. While it is true that corporations, governments, and enforcement agencies have failed to take adequate responsibility for combating gendered e-bile and supporting targets in the past, it would be perverse to argue that this failure therefore relieves them of responsibility for the problem in future. Rather, increased feminist pressure should be applied to these bodies to step up and assist in building the legislative, corporate, pedagogical, and social structures required to recognise and deal with gendered e-bile.

While online feminists are not usually associated with DIY acts at the most extreme end of the digilante spectrum, I have made the case that engaging in any act of digilantism is still likely: to be ethically questionable; to put activists at risk; to

have uncertain results; and to ultimately strengthen extrajudicial cultures online whereas what the problems of cyber-harassment and cyber-hate urgently require are institutional remedies. To explore more useful ways for feminist activists to respond to electronic vitriol targeting women online, I have situated the problem of gendered cyber-hate in relation to historical tensions that have manifested between various feminist ‘waves’. Contemporary generations of feminists have – quite rightly – rejected those aspects of second wave feminism which conceive of women as a homogenous group whose interests can be represented by a single politics. Yet while highly individualised forms of feminism have the advantage of acknowledging and respecting difference, they are unlikely to solve a problem as broad and structural as gendered cyber-hate.

Instead, I have made the case that a better way for activists to address old equity and misogyny issues in the new terrain of the cybersphere is to forge hybrid activist strategies which involve temporary allegiances between various theories, tactics, and feminist generations. The argument in favour of a pragmatic rather than identity politics approach might have relevance beyond the parameters of this particular issue. Future researchers might wish, for example, to examine the broader usefulness of a feminism that is a series of malleable, eclectic, project-specific, and goal-orientated articulations, rather than a unitary movement insisting on strict fidelity to any particular theoretical frame, mode of political action, or moment in feminist history.

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