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Gender, Power and Technology: Is Trolling a Man's Sport?

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Content Note: This essay deals with themes of sexual violence.

Abstract

With the rise of social media, centuries-old norms surrounding the hatred of women have resurfaced in a manner that can seem more intense than ever before. The increased interconnectivity of our modern world means that it can be almost impossible for women online to avoid vitriolic abuse. This essay analyses the phenomenon of online trolling, highlighting its distinctly gendered nature, and emphasizing the idea that misogyny is certainly not dead. The cultural norms of online communication differ profusely from in-person interactions, and thus the disinhibition effect allows for people to behave in otherwise unacceptable ways.

Introduction

The emergence and intensity of digital technology in contemporary society has produced a host of sociological phenomena, many of which are rooted in pre-existing gender and power structures. This essay explores the factors at play in the widespread occurrence of online trolling, examining it as a distinctly gendered phenomenon. The author considers the power structures embedded in digital technologies, how they impact internet usage, and their role in the emergence of the shocking and violent sexism pervasive in digital spaces.

What is "e-bile"? Is trolling the latest manifestation of a long history of men telling women to "shut up"? Can it be explained as an inevitable byproduct of the internet? Does the disinhibition effect explain the existence of a cohort of men whose sole purpose on the internet seems to be terrorising women and fueling hate? Is the internet completely awful for women?

For the purpose of this essay, the term "trolling" is understood to represent the varied ways in which internet users target one another with unsolicited, offensive and explicit remarks. Encompassing slurs and insults, trolling is intended to harm and disempower its victim. This discourse occurs on a range of social media platforms, from 4chan and Reddit to more mainstream websites such as Twitter and Facebook.

This essay begins with an introduction to e-bile, its background, and the technological spaces in which it occurs. Potential reasons behind trolling are considered. To conclude, an answer to the question "is trolling a man's sport?" is posed through an analysis of the gendered aspect of trolling and the power structures behind it. The final paragraph outlines some ways in which women are using the internet to fight against patriarchal power structures.

What is E-Bile?

Jane (2014) provides an in-depth, thorough examination of misogynistic comments on the internet, thereby coining the term "e-bile" to describe the misogynistic hostility frequently experienced by women online. Holding that to censor the language in question would be to render it less serious than it is, she contests that scholarly research into online culture and subcultures must directly examine the content of the vitriolic misogyny that proliferates digital spaces in its uncensored entirety (Jane, 2014). Indeed, she comments that the "venom and vulgarity" present in these spaces has discouraged discourse from academics in this area (2014, p. 558). Jane argues that to use metaphors such as "offensive" or "explicit" is simply inadequate in conveying the very real profanity that locates this

language well outside the norms of acceptable civil discourse (Jane, 2014).

Jane, herself a victim of misogynistic abuse online, also documents e-bile's generative quality (2014); namely, women who speak out about the abuse and threats they receive often find that the abuse increases in intensity thereafter. This was the experience of Caroline Criado-Perez, a British journalist and the pioneer of a 2013 campaign advocating for the printing of a woman on British banknotes (Hattenstone, 2013). She received online hostility throughout the campaign, which increased in vulgarity after she was successful in securing Jane Austen on the £10 note. It was after Criado-Perez gave a TV interview detailing the abuse, however, that the trolls unleashed their most vicious assaults, threatening to rape her, sending hundreds of death threats and spreading what was incorrectly believed to be her home address (Hattenstone, 2013; Jane, 2014). This practice of searching for and publishing private information, such as addresses or photographs, is known as "doxxing", and demonstrates the frightening nature of such attacks. Further, Jane (2014) notes the paradoxical fact that the prolonged hate campaign experienced in 2014 by Anita Sarkeesian, a prominent Canadian feminist and blogger, was mobilised in response to her attempt to expose sexist representations of women in video games. In what became known as #gamergate, Sarkeesian's Wikipedia page was defaced with pornography, and a game where the user could "punch this bitch in the face" was created, among many other acts intended to hurt her. Shaw (2014) asserts that many women, people of colour and members of other marginalised groups suffer vicious aggression upon speaking out about inequality in digital spaces.

The Rise of E-Bile

Mary Beard's book Women and Power: A Manifesto (2017) presents an exploration of the public voice of women since the first known documentation of a woman being told to "shut up" in Homer's Odyssey, written in the 8th century. As Beard, a British

feminist classicist outlines, this depiction began a long history of men taking exclusive control of public utterance in literature, media, and general discourse (2017). Beard points out that while women's frequency speaking in public and general disempowerment in terms of voting, legal, and economic rights have changed since the days of Homer, speech and oratory in contemporary society has remained shaped by the classical world. Beard therefore holds that gendered prejudices of the past remain central to patterns of speech and debate today (2017).

This is significant in that access to public speech is power in its most basic form. The cultural structures that have framed oratory as a practice exclusive to men (Beard, 2017) means that when women overstep this cultural boundary they are often targeted and abused; indeed, "women, even when not silenced, pay a price for being heard" (Beard, 2017, p. 8). In contemporary society, this scenario plays out online.

However, the various waves of feminism over the past century have placed women's voices within mainstream discourse (Munro, 2013). Many now claim that feminism has entered its fourth wave. It is undeniable that digital technologies have played a significant role in this modern movement, categorised by the micropolitics of the third wave, combined with call-out culture and a globally connected feminist community (Munro, 2013). Given the efforts of feminists to challenge the entrenched power structures that privilege men, Connell (2005) states that it is to be expected that men resist changes that cause them to lose their cultural centrality. As a result, Nagle (2017) explains that while feminism has thrived with the advent of the internet, it has been matched by a distinct rise in "anti-feminist masculinist politics". While anti- feminist men's liberation groups have existed since the 1960s (Connell, 2005), they have increased in both number and extremity with the rise of digital technology. Furthermore, while sexism is certainly not new, digital technologies provide a space where people can share opinions that may not be accepted elsewhere (Nagle, 2017; Shaw, 2014).

Nagle (2017) asserts that for years, online culture wars have gone unnoticed by mainstream media - the "traditional gatekeepers of cultural etiquette" (p. 3) - and as consequence have now been replaced by a widespread acceptance of viral online content from obscure sources. Similarly, Jane (2014) mentions having received some degree of abuse via email throughout her career speaking in public from 1998 to 2012, which worsened over the years. One of the first well-known incidences of gendered orchestrated attacks was against Kathy Sierra in 2007, when she supported the moderating of online comment sections, and was accused of threatening the free speech libertarianism on which the internet is based (Nagle, 2017). Despite the non-gendered nature of her remarks, the attacks were the usual cocktail of misogynistic vitriol that has become the norm online (Nagle, 2017).

The consensus seems to be that online misogyny fully developed and became widespread in the 2010s, when women from a vast range of social contexts and backgrounds began speaking publicly about the threats and vitriol they had begun to receive on sites like Twitter (Jane, 2014). Before this, somewhat of a minority of women were targeted; cheerleaders, for example, were "hypersexualised as 'sluts' and then derogated for being 'sluts' who were too ugly or fat to be raped" (Jane, 2014, p. 561). It is noteworthy that while obscure platforms like 4chan and Reddit have been the host of misogyny for many years (Nagle, 2017), Twitter, founded in 2006, is the more mainstream medium of choice in recent years, due to the ability to contact well known users.

The Manosphere

The term "manosphere" relates to the collective of cultural online groups, websites, and subcultures where male users gather to discuss various issues relating to modern masculinity. Subcultures exist in all areas of the internet, often having special interests that are distinct from the broader culture in which they exist. Within the manosphere, one can find everything from legitimate activism surrounding high rates of male suicide, to self-identifying "nice

guys" asking for advice, "whose commentary on women suggests their sense of self may be a little lacking in honest reflection" (Nagle, 2017. p. 93).

Nagle's book provides an extensive overview of the role of online culture wars and subcultures in shaping contemporary culture (2017). As mentioned, there is wide variance within the manosphere, but a common theme among these subcultures is the belief that feminism has destroyed Western society by allowing women too much power and a shared interest in preserving traditional power structures. Women are discussed in a way that presumes their absence, with men sharing grievances to what is perceived as a sympathetic, male audience (Nagle, 2017). According to Suler (2004), the wide variety of online subcultures means that what is acceptable to say in one corner of the internet will not be accepted elsewhere.

"Incels" are a group that have received public attention in recent years for their extremity. Involuntarily-celibate "beta" males gather to express their sexual frustration and anger at women (Nagle, 2017). Their figurehead being homicide-suicide shooter Elliot Rodgers, incels are far from harmless, believing that women in general are deserving of violent retribution for rejecting them sexually, which they believe to be a denial of their masculine rights (Nagle, 2017). It is not just women that incels resent, however. They also bitterly begrudge hyper-masculine "alpha" males, or "Chads", who are believed to be extremely sexually active, leaving "beta" males like themselves with the pain of repeated unsuccessful attempts at intimacy. Women and sexually successful men form a convenient target for the disgust and bitterness resulting from incels' sexual grievances. Another group examined by Nagle (2017) is "Men Going Their Own Way" (MGTOW), male separatists promoting avoidance of relationships with females, for fear that men would be tricked into raising children or falsely accused of rape.

Additionally, Jane (2014) comments on the hypocritical combination of desire and disgust surrounding online misogyny. Women are both "despicable sluts" who deserve to be raped, but

also too fat and ugly to be raped; "she needs a good dicking, good luck finding it though" (Sarkeesian 2012a, cited in Jane, 2014). Similarly and paradoxically, incels simultaneously claim to want and deserve sex with women, while bitterly loathing women in general.

Why Do People Troll?

The phenomenon of online trolling is an example of what Suler (2004) describes as toxic, as opposed to benign, disinhibition. Suler details the online disinhibition effect, which describes and accounts for internet users acting differently online than in person, due to being disinhibited by the social norms that regulate behaviour in face-to-face interactions (2004). Various aspects come into play to constitute Suler's disinhibition effect, such as dissociative anonymity, invisibility, and dissociative imagination (2004).

The architecture of most technological spaces allows a degree of anonymity, or quasi-anonymity, through the use of pseudonyms (Jane, 2014). This affords users the opportunity to disassociate their behaviour, or go unnoticed for behavior that they may deem inappropriate in "real life", creating what may be considered a "compartmentalized self" (Suler, 2004, p. 322). Furthermore, Suler's explanation of dissociative imagination (2004) implies that people consider their online persona to be separate to their real personality. For example, an online troll may feel that even though they behave in an offensive manner on the internet, it does not make them a bad person. Suler (2004) concludes, however, by noting that neither the online nor the offline self are necessarily the "true" depiction of a person; rather, they are two relevant dimensions of one's overall self-presentation. The self-regulation that characterises online interaction means that people have relative freedom over the content they produce and may behave in whatever way they like, with few repercussions (Shaw, 2014).

Shaw (2014) outlines that while misogynists existed long before the internet, the cultural norms of technological communication facilitate and even defend their behaviour. Thus,

people will behave badly in situations that allow them to, and trolling exists on the internet simply because it can. Essentially, "people are jerks not only when they are in anonymous Internet spaces, but also when they are in spaces where they can get away with being jerks" (Shaw, 2014, p. 3).

Trolling is Gendered

Jane (2014) displays the distinctly gendered nature of online trolling by asserting that even when men are the victims of the abuse, the hate they receive is often explicitly sexual. E-bile directed at men may take the form of mockery for deviations from normative masculine ideals, such as homosexuality or joblessness. Furthermore, unlike the case for women, it is rare for a man's appearance to be the topic of trolling; indeed, it is often the appearance of female relatives or partners that are mocked (Jane, 2014). Thus, even when geared towards men, e-bile tends to be misogynistic.

West (2013b) further argues that trolling does not impact men and women equally, stating that she struggles "to think of an instance when anonymous women descended, spewing violent rape or castration threats, upon a man for expressing an opinion". She asserts that it is a phenomenon that attempts to disempower women, in direct response to women challenging entrenched power structures inherent in the gender order (West, 2013b). Beard (2017) agrees, asserting that men are more commonly perpetrators, and women are certainly more commonly victims of trolling.

Victims of hate speech on social media are commonly encouraged to adopt a "don't feed the trolls" approach. Women are told to ignore those sending them death threats, claiming that to reply is to "give them what they want". However, Beard (2017) claims that this rhetoric can be damaging and serves to further silence women. Jane (2014) agrees that to ignore the vitriol and mark it as too abhorrent to discuss in mainstream contexts benefits perpetrators. This point is further reinforced by Criado-Perez, who reported her abusers to the police and had them arrested

(Hattenstone, 2013). West (2013b) strongly agrees, claiming that ignoring trolls has proven not to work, and that a culture change is required to tackle trolling instead. Replying and calling haters out, she believes, humanises the situation, which is an important aspect of the necessary culture change (West, 2013b).]

What Jane refers to as "e-bile" (2014) has certainly become the norm within certain subcultures that exist on the internet and also often occurs in mainstream social media when men express disagreement or disapproval of the actions and opinions of women (2014). Beard confirms this, stating that "unpopular, controversial or just plain different views when voiced by a woman are taken as indications of her stupidity" (2017, p. 33). A contested issue surrounding online trolling is with whom the responsibility of monitoring and controlling it lies.

The internet is ultimately based on a normative principle of self-regulation (Shaw, 2014). Overall, combination of code, norms and law is necessary in monitoring hostility in online spaces. Law, however, struggles to keep up with the exponential growth of data online.

The response of social media companies to overtly hateful language on their platforms is often the topic of media attention. Jane notes that the call to action from these companies remained largely unmet in 2014. In 2017, Reddit removed the r/incel subreddit from their server, following direct links between the community and homicides in the United States and Canada (Hauser, 2017). Further, Munro (2013) explains that Facebook has been forced to confront criticism when they initially did not classify pictures of women being abused as violating their terms of service. Following the misogynistic comments of Milo Yiannopoulos towards actress Leslie Jones in 2017, Twitter permanently banned the popular and prominent alt-right self-described troll, thereby the ability to send the hundreds of other trolls that followed him in the direction of someone he dislikes (Nagle, 2017).

West (2013b) rejects the notion that trolling is an inevitable byproduct of the internet, claiming it reflects a wider patriarchal

structure that needs to be challenged through cultural change. Hargittai and Walejko's research (2008) shows that women are less likely to produce content online, which aids in their exclusion from cultural production. Related to this, Shaw asserts that those with access to the means of cultural production have the power to define culture (2014). Beard notes that women's centuries-old predisposition to muteness has a significant impact on the underrepresentation of women in public positions of power (2017). However, the internet is an increasing popular platform for feminist activism (Munro, 2013). Catharine MacKinnon (2018) in the New York Times writes that #metoo has done what the law could not, mobilising survivors of sexual abuse to speak out in conventional and social media. #metoo is in direct opposition to the dehumanisation of both offline sexual harassment and misogynistic abuse online (MacKinnon, 2018). By creating the space for a community of survivors and supporters to gather together and use social media to spread its message, the #metoo movement played a significant role in creating awareness around the pervasiveness of sexual abuse (Mackinnon, 2018).

Additionally, Tiidenberg (2014) explores the sexually liberating aspect of technological spaces such as tumblr for women to reclaim control of their sexual identities. Thus, while certain areas and aspects of the digital sphere actively act to disempower women (Shaw, 2014), modern feminists are finding ways to challenge the entrenched power structures at play. Munro (2013) describes young women as the "power users of social media" (p. 23), using it more than their male counterparts.

Conclusion

This essay provides an in-depth discussion of the prevalence of misogynistic internet trolling in certain digital spaces. It frames trolling as a gendered issue, entrenched in power dynamics that are a legacy of centuries of patriarchal power and played out in the modern medium of cyberspace. The essay began with an introduction to e-bile and its brief history, considered the

"Manosphere" as the place were misogynists virtually gather, and explored theoretical reasons that may explain trolling activity. Through reasoned analysis of the relevant course material and my experience as a digital native, I framed the argument that internet trolling is an overwhelmingly masculine activity, performed by a small but relentless minority of male internet users. It is worth mentioning the useful ways in which digital spaces are being used to further the cause of feminism and empower women and other marginalised groups.

It is clear that a response from large social media platforms is essential in tackling e-bile; a reimagined legal process for dealing with the internet ought to also be created. Given that the internet lies outside any singular jurisdiction, a cross-national approach that encompasses individual cultural differences is necessary.

Further research into hate speech online through an intersectional approach would be valuable to analyse the various forms of marginalisation online, such as racism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism.

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