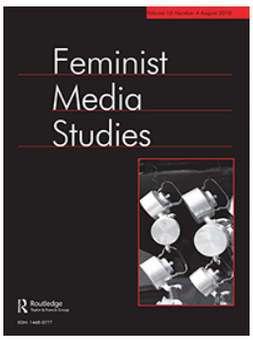

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INTRODUCTION

Special issue on online misogyny

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ABSTRACT

This special issue seeks to identify and theorise the complex relationships between online culture, technology and misogyny. It asks how the internet's anti-woman spaces and discourses have been transformed by the technological affordances of new digital platforms, and whether they are borne of the same types of discontents articulated in older forms of anti-feminism, or to what extent they might articulate a different constellation of social, cultural and gender-political factors. This collection of work is intended to lend focus and cohesion to a growing body of research in this area; to map, contextualise and take stock of current frameworks, making scholars aware of one another's work and methodologies, and hopefully forging new interdisciplinary collaborations and directions for future work. Crucially, we move beyond the Anglophone world, to include perspectives from countries which have different gender-political and technological landscapes. In addition to mapping the new misogyny, several contributions also address digital feminist responses, evaluating their successes, limitations and impact on the shape of digital gender politics in future.

KEYWORDS

Online misogyny; social media; anti-feminism; gender politics; digital feminism

Introduction

In the past several years there have been growing concerns about the disproportionate levels of gender-based online abuse experienced by women. In 2017, a survey by the Pew Research Center in the United States revealed that, while men experience slightly higher levels than women of online harassment such as name-calling and physical threats, women are much more likely to experience severe types of gender-based or sexual harassment: 21% of women aged 18 to 29 reported being sexually harassed online, more than twice the percentage of men in the same age group (9%).[1] An EU survey conducted in 2014 found that 1 in 10 women in the European Union report having experienced cyber-harassment since the age of 15 (including having received unwanted, offensive sexually explicit emails or SMS messages, or offensive, inappropriate advances on social networking sites). (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014) The same research suggests that up to 90% of "revenge porn" victims are female and that this number is increasing. The impact and harms caused by online abuse are also disproportionate. An Amnesty International IPSOS MORI poll in 2017 reported that women are much more likely to experience adverse psychological

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effects as a result of online harassment.[2] In response to this growing body of evidence, in her September 2016 report, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Dubravka Šimonović, identified online violence as a new challenge and one of her priority issues.

There are a range of different terminologies used to describe this phenomenon, including gendered cyberhate, technology-facilitated violence, tech-related violence, online abuse, hate speech online, digital violence, networked harassment, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, online violence against women, and online misogyny. Online violence against women (VaW), for example, grows out of existing (legal, human rights) global feminist frameworks to combat gender-based violence, while cyberbullying is gender-unspecific, and focuses on particular behaviours and harms, often informed by individualist psychological paradigms. Similarly, although the category of hate speech online covers both gender and the online environment, it is far too limited to include the diversity of experiences encountered by women. Drilling down into legal, governmental, constitutional, and ethical frameworks opens up a minefield of paradoxes, tensions, and grey areas: about what constitutes harm or actionable violence as opposed to offence, and regarding what measures can be taken without infringing on freedom of expression (both that of alleged abusers and of women at the receiving end of abuse).

We have chosen to use the broader concept of misogyny, which may not involve violence but almost always entails some form of harm; either directly in the form of psychological, professional, reputational, or, in some cases, physical harm; or indirectly, in the sense that it makes the internet a less equal, less safe, or less inclusive space for women and girls. This cultural—rather than legal—approach captures manifestations and effects of online abuse that go beyond violence, such as the chilling, silencing, or self-censorship effects that this phenomenon has on women, and enables us to consider manifestations of online misogyny in the broader political contexts of the online culture wars.

Online misogyny in context

Although our focus is on online phenomena, we are aware that there is often a continuum between online and offline manifestations of technology-facilitated violence, for example in the case of intimate partner abuse. Similarly, while trolling, verbal abuse, sextortion, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, the manipulation of photos, cyberstalking, doxxing, hacking, damage to intellectual property, and DDOS[3] attacks may occur exclusively online, they may also occur in connection with offline events, and they almost always have repercussions that are experienced both on- and offline. The 2017 Amnesty International poll cited earlier found that 41% of women who had experienced online abuse or harassment said that, on at least one occasion, these online experiences made them feel that their physical safety was threatened. Between one-fifth (19% in Italy) and one-quarter of women who had experienced online abuse or harassment said it had included threats of physical or sexual assault. It is important to stress, however, that digital technologies do not merely facilitate or aggregate existing forms of misogyny, but also create new ones that are inextricably connected with the technological affordances of new media, the algorithmic politics of certain platforms, the workplace cultures that produce these technologies, and the individuals and communities that use them. The relationship between offline and online is often not straightforward. For example, D. Ging's (2017) work on the Manosphere considers how

certain online spaces enable self-described beta males to weaponise misogyny and racism in a bid to protect these spaces as white and male, although these men may have little social, cultural, or economic capital offline. The contribution by Raman and Komarraju in this volume further complicates this relationship, whereby the development of online tools that are meant to enable women to deal with street-workplace-home violence end up entrapping them in neoliberal discourses of self-responsibility and surveillance.

The phenomenon of online misogyny is not new. Indeed, legislation concerning women's safety online goes back to the Beijing declaration in 1995. However, it was not until the events of Gamergate in August 2014 that the mainstream media began to pick up on it. Prior to this, there had been very little academic work on the topic. Jill Filipovic's (2007) prescient work on the relationship between internet misogyny and "real-world" harassment was published in the *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, while P. Turton-Turner (2013) published on the visual semiotics of misogyny and free speech online in *Forum on Public Policy*, and Karla Mantilla's (2013) essay on gendertrolling appeared in *Feminist Studies*. J. Jenson and S. De Castell (2013) and S. Chess and A. Shaw (2015) responded specifically to the issue of misogyny in games and gaming culture, while two of the contributors to this special issue, Emma Jane and Adrienne Massanari, were to the fore in researching this topic from a specifically feminist media studies/internet studies perspective; E. A. Jane's (2014) work on "e-bile" was an important intervention in terms of specifically thematising online misogynistic hate as topic of study, while A. Massanari's (2017) analysis of Gamergate and the Fappening on Reddit crucially pointed to the role of algorithms in determining platform politics. Angela Nagle's study of misogyny on 4/chan/b (2015) and S. Banet-Weiser and K. M. Miltner's (2016) work on "toxic masculinity" also constituted important new ways of approaching the issue. That this special issue received 121 abstracts is indicative of a growing academic interest in this topic, also evidenced by the publication of J. R. Vickery and T. Everbach's (2018) edited collection *Mediating Misogyny: Gender, Technology, and Harassment*.

Like much of the work that has gone before, our own approach is technosocial, in that it takes both socio-cultural and technological factors into account, but also understands these as co-constitutive of one another (Massanari 2017). Such frameworks allow contributors to explore the continuities between new manifestations of abuse with earlier technologies, as is so cogently illustrated by Thompson and Wood's archaeology of the creepshot in this volume. In their article, the authors consider new forms of technologically facilitated violence against the backdrop of older audio-visual media, which played key roles in creating gendered regimes of visibility. Importantly, Thompson and Wood also attend to new forms of dissemination, describing the classification of creepshot images through hashtagging as "folksonomies of misogyny." Indeed, what emerges from much of the work in this special issue is a sense of the importance of wider cultural contexts—generally lacking in psychological and legal approaches—and how it is difficult to fully understand the phenomena under analysis without taking into account the gender-political contexts of post-feminism, the rhetoric of masculinity in crisis, gaming cultures, and the emergence of a virulent new form of online anti-feminist men's rights. As Claudia Alvarez's paper demonstrates, understanding post-feminism's emphasis on female self-objectification is vital to understanding the political economy of sexual image sharing on Facebook. Moreover, her paper demonstrates how this phenomenon, while readily adopted in Brazil, does not translate culturally, thereby reinforcing rather than reclaiming damaging stereotypes of women.

Intersections

This example highlights the need for transnational and culturally sensitive approaches, to both researching and responding to online misogyny in different geographical, legal, and cultural contexts. While we received far fewer submissions from the global south, the papers from China, India, and South Korea indicate that there are considerably different concerns at stake in each of these places, and point to an urgent need for continued research on this topic beyond the Anglophone world/global north. In addition to this, there is a need for more intersectional work, which considers how online misogyny intersects with other forms of abuse such as racism, homophobia, classism, and ableism, not least because this is so important in terms of informing responses, whether at platform policy, legal, or activist level. Moya Bailey and Trudy's intervention is instructive in this regard, showing the disproportionate burden faced by women of colour who see their agency, voices, and experiences silenced and appropriated. Here, Bailey and Trudy trace the origins and trajectories of the term misogynoir—a term that Bailey coined and Trudy developed further in an effort to apprehend and put a name to the specific experiences of black women. Their discussion shows that while on the one hand the term's increasing popularity points to its resonance, on the other hand the cost of its mainstreaming has been another misogynoir gesture, i.e., the continuous erasure of the names of its authors and their labour.

Sunden and Paasonen further explore intersectionality in terms of whiteness and class, looking at the ways in which women who are seen as supporting immigration are shamed; while the responses to this shaming have important political potential, they are also ambiguous as such tactics may well rely on being middle class and white. The dimension of class is an important and often overlooked element of misogyny, making Helen Wood's contribution especially relevant. In her paper on virality and the Magaluf girl, Wood explicitly thematises class. If it is primarily middle class women who are shamed in Sunden and Paasonen's article, the Magaluf girl and her "contagion" are decidedly working class. At the same time, being middle class and highly visible did not protect the *Guardian* journalists targeted in the comments: Becky Gardiner's article shows that not women, but also men from an ethnic or cultural minority background were receiving the higher number of abusive comments. To those of us who witnessed the vile abuse received by UK Labour politician Diane Abbott, this does not come as a surprise. Online misogyny, therefore, often has a colour and a class, though as the articles in this volume show, any woman can be targeted.

Experiences and discourses of online misogyny

Crucial elements identified in this special issue are the diversity and reach of online misogynistic hate: from the public domain, where "social justice warriors" are construed and attacked as monstrous, as documented by Massanari and Chess, or as hags and whores in Sunden and Paasonen's article, to the workplaces studied in Gardiner's and Jane's contributions, the streets of Hyderabad in Raman and Kamarraju's work, the domestic sphere in Dragiewicz et al.'s study, and the attacks experienced by male allies, as discussed in Theo Koulouris' intervention. Importantly, online misogyny frequently exhibits clear continuities with other forms of misogyny and anti-feminism, but it is also intensified and amplified in

online environments. On the other hand, we can observe new dimensions of or additions to misogyny, that may end up spilling over to other domains of life.

Raman and Kamarraju's work demonstrates that there are significant lines of continuity in the discourses found in the online space and in previous iterations of misogyny, both mediated and in face-to-face encounters. This paper traces iterations of misogyny in the context of India from ancient Hindu texts to current tech-based apps that end up reproducing misogynistic tropes of surveillance and control of gendered bodies. Misogyny is not only continued online but it is further intensified. Xiao Han's article positions Chinese women at the intersection of traditional Confucian views on femininity and the post-feminist discourses encountered in neoliberal globalisation, while Wood shows how digital media amplify and intensify classed and gendered disgust, but in doing so follow a long line of similar shaming of working class women in reality television. As this special issue demonstrates, certain figures have become key targets for this online shaming, or the "digital pillory," as K. Hess and L. Waller (2014) call it: the feminist, the social justice warrior (SJW), the "slut," women in tech and gaming, or indeed any woman who is perceived as publicly questioning or disrupting gendered power relations. The disciplining function of these discourses is evident, as Claudia Alvares demonstrates in her article on the costs of female public exposure, which spares no female body, from 12-year-old girls to experienced politicians such as Dilma Rousseff. In this context, online misogyny becomes a punitive means of violent reinforcement of gendered power relations.

Notwithstanding such continuities, important new dimensions are added when the new media environment articulates with misogyny. For example, Marwick and Caplan's article traces the new discursive contours of the term misandry, which serves as a boundary object that unites disparate groups against feminism. While sporadic references to misandry have been present since the 1970s, the term has acquired a new momentum in the context of chat room and online spaces such as Reddit and 4chan. Misandry is constructed as the corollary of feminism, painting it as a hateful, out-of-control discourse that victimises men. In this manner, the term serves to connect disparate groups and discourses, uniting them in their opposition to feminism. This type of vitriolic anti-feminism is also evident in Massanari and Chess' article, whose analysis of SJW memes points to the construction of a monstrous feminine: androgynous, unshaven bodies that do not conform to conventional western heterosexual ideals of feminine beauty, and minds that are ruled by emotion, devoid of logic, infantile, and constantly demanding. This focus on the body appears to be a recurrent trope. As Theo Koulouris recounts in his analysis, when his debate with Milo Yiannopoulos was posted on YouTube, commenters focused on his body, constructed as "*sexualised*, *objectified* and *feminised*" and ultimately emasculated. The "monstrosity" of the SJW is further underlined by the trope of disease, with both SJWs and feminism regularly described as cancer, spreading across the social body, echoing the contagion discussed by Wood. This trope of feminism as cancer also emerges in Xiao Han's analysis of misogynistic posts on the WeChat of a feminist group, which featured frequent references to "feminist cancer."

Significantly, these new dimensions of misogyny do not only manifest at the level of discourse. As Dragiewicz et al.'s work in this volume shows, the articulation of digital media with misogyny generates new techniques of controlling and disciplining women. Focusing specifically on domestic violence, Dragiewicz et al. use the composite term "technology facilitated coercive control" to refer to these emerging techniques and extensions of domestic violence into the digital sphere. Such techniques, resting on the affordances of digital media,

include not only online harassment but also stalking using GPS, threatening via SMS, monitoring and accessing accounts without permission, doxxing, and publishing intimate or sexualised content. These techniques clearly modify the scope of domestic abuse, making it more pervasive and difficult to escape from. These examples illustrate the very real harms associated with online misogyny, another focal point of the articles in this collection.

The harms of online misogyny

While it is frequently claimed that online hate is "just words," evidence to the contrary is stark. An Amnesty International IPSOS MORI poll from 2017 reports that over three-quarters (76%) of women who said that they had experienced abuse or harassment on a social media platform made changes to the way they used the platforms. This included restricting what they post about: 32% of women said they had stopped posting content that expressed their opinion on certain issues. Across all countries, 61% of those who said they had experienced online abuse or harassment said they had experienced lower self-esteem or loss of self-confidence as a result. More than half (55%) said they had experienced stress, anxiety, or panic attacks after experiencing online abuse or harassment. Sixty-three per cent said they had not been able to sleep well as a result of online abuse or harassment. Three-quarters (75%) in New Zealand reported this effect. Well over half (56%) said online abuse or harassment had meant that they had been unable to concentrate for long periods of time. Around a quarter (24%) of those who said that they had experienced abuse said that it had made them fear for their family's safety.

Similarly, the articles in this collection leave little room for doubting the many harms caused by online misogyny and their very real, material consequences for women. Becky Gardiner's study combines several methodological approaches, from big data and surveys to autoethnography, based on her role as the *Guardian*'s Comment Is Free editor. It reveals two crucial empirical insights: first, that female and ethnic minority journalists' perceptions that they are disproportionately targeted for abuse are substantiated; and second, that the harm caused by these torrents of hate is real and has significant consequences. In response to the abuse they received, journalists toned down their opinions or changed story angles, while a sizeable 20% refused assignments. As Gardiner concludes, online hate colludes with already discriminatory employment practices in silencing women writers.

For many women, targeted abuse also has a personal cost. Emma Jane's work focuses on specific case studies, adding crucial detailed insights into the experiences of women at the receiving end of online misogyny. Jane has coined the term "economic vandalism" to trace the cost paid by women who have been subjected to gendered cyberhate, another of Jane's terms. Economic vandalism, which is aggravated by current working conditions such as precarity, includes missed work opportunities, decreased productivity, and exiting or retreating from the internet. Women targeted by abuse often end up doubly penalised, not only suffering the affective impact of hate but also the very material harms caused, against which, Jane rightly argues, more institutional protections must be put in place.

Digital infrastructures: behind the interface

An important element in the accounts included in this collection is that online hate and abuse targeting women is a symptom of more fundamental, structural conditions of

inequality and discrimination in the technology sector. Women's exclusion from the internet's digital infrastructures means that they are less likely to participate in both the production and consumption of its tools, platforms, and services. Tech workplace cultures and the associated algorithmic politics of platforms (T. Gillespie 2010; Massanari 2017) play key roles in producing the types of online tools users communicate with. As Adrienne Shaw (2014) writes, the internet, as with society "offline," includes racism and sexism, "com[ing] out of a position of privilege that has been created via the same historical events that made 'tech culture' a particular form of masculine culture" (p. 275). In addition to Gamergate, "Donglegate" and the James Damore leaked Google memo shed light on the culture of misogyny in tech spaces, purported to be founded on meritocracy and equality (D. Chachra 2017; A. Marwick 2013; Massanari 2017). The venom which typically meets women's efforts to change these cultures shows the enormity of the task.

Brandee Easter insists that it is crucial to understand how workplace discrimination ends up not only discriminating against women but also effectively hardwiring misogyny into the systems it produces. In her paper on code, she stresses that "we must move beyond studying online discourse or interfaces to interrogating how digital infrastructures themselves, especially as built and represented in code, participate in misogyny". Using the case study of C+=, a hoax prepared in 4chan, purporting to represent a feminist programming language, Easter points to a version of digital manspreading, the expansion of male bodies across space, which ends up displacing all other bodies. This process works by appropriating, parodying, and misusing feminist terms, ideas, and theorists, thereby displacing and precluding women from occupying the same spaces as men. Easter points to the ways in which domains such as Github, repositories of open code and ostensibly spaces of meritocracy, end up pushing women out.

Responses and solutions

The responses described and the solutions proffered in this special issue range from hashtag campaigns and ironic Tumblrs to legal interventions, rethinking platform development, and changes to internet intermediary policies and protocols. In some instances, interesting strategic continuities can be observed across cultures, for example between the South Korean Megalia movement's "mirroring" of online misogyny in Jeong and Lee's account and the instances of ironic misandry described by Ringrose and Lawrence and Marwick and Caplan. These tactics, designed to render visible the power dynamics inherent in the "straw-manning" of feminism as misandry are remarkably similar to the Megalians' use of trolling, linguistic violence, parodies of misogynistic discourse, and flaming, which reverse the positions of perpetrators and victims—tactics to which Jeong and Lee refer as augmented feminism. Indeed, recurring strategies of parody, irony, satire, and inversion suggest that digital feminism is becoming increasingly adept at beating "the enemy" at their own game. According to Ringrose and Lawrence, using humour to subvert sexism differs significantly from other ways of exposing sexism and abuse since, rather than merely documenting or proving victimisation, it seeks instead to change the meaning attributed to the reality being documented.

These tactics of irreverence, humour, and shock borrow from the tradition of the carnivalesque and are continuous with a recent "performative turn" in feminist activism, evident in interventions such as the slut walks and the more recent Handmaid's Tale demonstrations

in US cities and beyond. Adopting such strategies online, however, may have certain limitations. In their analysis of the Misandry Mermaid Tumblr and the savingroomforcats anti-manspreading site, Ringrose and Lawrence use an intersectional lens to illustrate how some examples regress into antagonistic and exclusionary gender binaries (E. A. Jane 2016). Indeed, even an intervention such as critiquemydickpic which, as the authors argue, succeeds in subverting dominant understandings of dick pics as threatening by disrupting phallic oriented desire, may have limited reach and provide little comfort to women for whom receiving such images constitutes a serious threat. On the other hand, the #MeToo campaign is a salient example of the affective potency (D. Negra 2014) of networked individualism (B. Wellman 1999) to foster solidarity and, it is hoped, a paradigm shift in thinking about consent. #MeToo is arguably also important because it has addressed the "misogynoir" that obscured Tarana Burke's initial invocation of the movement. For Moya Bailey (2018), misogynoir in Hollywood and in larger society remains just out of frame in these conversations but she remains hopeful when she sees "women like Janet Mock, Crissle West, Patrisse Cullors, Reina Gossett, and others challenging public perceptions and transforming the misogynoir they experience into art and activism".

The responses documented by contributors from China and India point to the importance of the socio-political context. For example, Han's account of the Chinese Feminist Group Gender Watch Women's Voice demonstrates how feminists are not just dealing with online flaming and abuse from anti-feminist men but also have to contend with state censorship and surveillance, which keeps a close watch on radical feminist activism. In the Indian context, Raman and Komarraju consider how the surveillance-based affordances of mobile and social media applications are used in policing responses to crime against women, concluding that these technologies may ultimately serve to compound women's lack of agency and freedom.

Conclusion

In 2016, Emma Jane suggested that individualised, DIY approaches appeared to be the most common strategy used to counter online misogyny, stressing the need for organisation and collective action in feminist digital activism. While there is still ample evidence of such atomised, DIY approaches—whose successes and limitations are discussed in this issue—the articles in this collection also appear to suggest a growing preoccupation with more systemic material and institutional change. This is reflected in many contributors' focus on the workplace as the locus of harm and potential reform, on the responsibilities of internet intermediaries and on the need for government regulators and civil society to hold social media platforms to account. In particular, Dragiewicz et al. suggest that more work is needed to articulate a common understanding of what platforms should be doing to combat abuse, reflecting a growing awareness of the need for holistic thinking and systemic responses to this problem.

Taken together, the work presented in this special issue—and that which precedes it—demonstrates that online misogyny cannot be reduced to isolated antagonisms between individuals or to the outpourings of frustrated trolls (though it certainly does include these) but is rather the product of systemic misogyny and sexism in the wider culture, combined with the technological affordances of various platforms and their attendant (sub)cultures, which have served to augment, amplify, and polarise contemporary gender politics in an

ongoing war of attrition. What is also clear from this growing body of work is that online misogyny does not merely upset or offend women but is impeding women's safety, freedom of expression, and participation in the workforce and in democratic processes. While women can and do fight back, it is also incumbent upon society to take measures that ensure protection from harm, and full equality and participation in digital and physical spaces alike. Notwithstanding Jodi Dean's (2003) critique of the impossibility of the internet as a public sphere, there remains an urgent need to reconfigure the digital world as a space in which women and girls can function without fear of being threatened, abused, sexually exploited or silenced. We hope that the research and insights contained in this special issue might help to move this project forward.

Notes

1. Pew Report on Online Harassment 2017 http://www.pewinternet.org/2017/07/11/online-harassment-2017/
2. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/
3. A Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack is an attempt to disable an online service by overwhelming it with traffic from multiple sources. Doxxing is the broadcasting of private or identifiable information about an individual or organization, so that others can target them with malicious attacks.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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