TITLE: Towards a research agenda for examining online gender based violence against women academics

RUNNING HEAD: Online gender-based violence against women academics

Abstract

Gender based violence in virtual environments is commonly experienced by women and girls, and online abuse has become a significant social problem. High profile women in a variety of professions often become victims of online violence. The topic of online gender-based violence has to date received scant academic attention. Little is known about how female academics are represented and treated in online and social media spaces. Academics are increasingly exhorted to disseminate their work and to engage with an audience outside academia but the online violence against female academics compromises their ability to fulfil this agenda. This paper provides insight into the literature surrounding the experiences of women academics negotiating virtual spaces and further presents a research agenda in order to explore the phenomenon more closely. In doing so, we highlight the need for greater protection and regulation of virtual environments in order to support those who use them.

Keywords: Higher education, female academics, social media, gender–based violence, impact

Introduction

Internet use has proliferated and is now integral to everyday living, both for work and leisure activities (Hughes, Rowe, Batey & Lee, 2012; Reyns, Henson & Fisher, 2011). The internet can be a vehicle for free expression but it is also a space where abuse can proliferate (Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne & Jones, 2018). Indeed, as Lewis, Rowe and Wiper (2017, p. 1462) state, 'abuse directed at visible and audible women demonstrates that cyberspace, once heralded as a new, democratic, public sphere, suffers similar gender inequalities as the offline world'.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is widely experienced by women and girls online (Moloney & Love, 2018; Ging & Siapera, 2018). The United Nations (1993) defines GBV as an act of violence in public or private life that can result in physical, sexual or psychological harm. Although men may suffer online abuse, Vickery and Everback (2017) note that women are much more likely to be the victims. Furthermore, Mantilla (2015) states that the online abuse that women face is more likely to include threats of sexual violence.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) Violence against Women Survey highlighted that sexual harassment and GBV are common experiences for women in the European Union (FRA, 2014). The survey identifies online spaces as a significant threat to the wellbeing of women and girls. Meanwhile, UNESCO (2015) records that the majority of women have experienced incidents of cyber violence. In addition, in their survey of 4000 women in 8 countries, Amnesty International (2017) found that a quarter of their respondents had suffered online abuse on at least one occasion, with many fearing for their safety.

High profile women in a variety of professions, including politics, journalism and sport are understood to be victims of online violence (Kavanagh, Jones & Sheppard-Marks, 2016). This paper explores the experiences of online gender-based violence among academic women, a topic that has received little academic attention. Academics are increasingly

exhorted to disseminate their work and to engage with an audience outside academia (Duffy & Pooley, 2017). Bruce (2016) observes that social media allows women the freedom to present their work and life, but the online environment is a space that also represents a threat due to the misogynistic and violent messages that women receive (see Molony & Love, 2018). Online violence against female academics has been reported by high profile women such as Mary Beard, a classicist at the University of Cambridge (see Lewis et al. 2017), but little scholarly interest has been paid to the topic. This study aims to start a dialogue about the threats that female academics receive online and how this impacts on their work. It further puts forward a research agenda focused on learning more about the (gender-based) violence experienced by women in virtual spaces and the ways to better protect women academics who are increasingly being faced with the requirement to engage in online spaces for the purpose of academic scholarship.

Literature Review

Violence against women

The World Health Organisation (2002) suggests that violence can be adopted as an over-arching term to encompass neglect and all types of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, which is reflective of the broad scope of violence that can be experienced in today's societies. Women are recognised to be particularly vulnerable to experiencing violence in its numerous forms. The FRA (2014) reports that violence against women is an extensive human rights abuse posing a significant threat to safety of women. In their report based on 42,000 women across the 28 member states of the European Union, the FRA demonstrates that violence against women is an extensive abuse that remains systematically under-reported.

Often violence against women is misogynistic in nature and perpetrated by men; occurring as a result of hatred or contempt for women (Moloney & Love, 2018). Manne

(2017) observes that in misogynistic, patriarchal society, women are controlled, often violently, in order to perpetuate cultural norms. Violence against women is recognised to be gender-based because it is violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or violence that disproportionately affects women (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW, 1992). GBV is experienced by women so routinely that it is cast as a significant social problem (Jane, 2014; Ging & Siapera, 2018; Rodríguez-Dariasa & Aguilera-Ávila, 2018). While violence against women is not a recent phenomenon, understanding of how virtual spaces influence and in many cases magnify the existence of such behaviour is of increasing importance in scholarly research.

Virtual spaces and increased violence against women

The #MeToo campaign demonstrates that male sexual violence, harassment, and abuse towards women is not a new phenomenon (Lockyer & Savigny, 2019), however social media has amplified and proliferated the incidence of abuse. The #MeToo movement began to spread virally through social networks in 2017 in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein abuse scandal. The movement demonstrated the pervasive presence (and in many cases acceptance) of GBV across a variety of settings thrust into the spotlight by globally powerful women such as actresses, sports women and politicians (Blake, 2019). Virtual GBV is described in a variety of ways by academics, including: e-bile, cyberviolence, gendered cyberhate, technology-facilitated (sexual) violence, electronic aggression, online abuse, hate speech, networked harassment, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, online violence against women, and online misogyny (Bennett, Guran, Ramos & Margolin, 2011; Ging & Siapera, 2018; Henry & Powell, 2018; Jane, 2016; 2014). Interactions commonly use sexual, violent, misogynistic and sexist (Megarry, 2014; Lewis et al. 2017) language directed toward women.

Vickery and Everbach (2017) describe online misogyny as mediated misogyny. Social media offers "just one more space where hierarchies of gender, race, class and sexuality and other constructed differences are reproduced" (p.10). Misogyny has been well-documented in face-to-face interactions (Sun, Ezzell, & Kendall, 2017). Indeed, as Lewis et al. (2017) state, the online abuse of women is an extension of the abuse they face offline. However, it now 'infuses the virtual world' (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016, p. 171). Virtual spaces offer the opportunity to perform gendered and sexualised politics that uphold and perpetuate traditional patriarchal hierarchies. Moloney and Love (2018, p.1) refer to virtual manhood, which occurs when men adopt "technologically facilitated textual and visual cues to signal a masculine self in online social spaces, enforce hegemonic sexuality and gender norms, oppress women, and keep men 'in the box'".

Jane (2018) highlights the characteristics of the language used to victimise women online: messages use swearing, violent images, sexually violent imagery, such as rape and death threats. Women also receive persistent, unsolicited sexual advances from men who frequently become aggressive if ignored or rejected. Jane (2017) states that increasing numbers of women are reporting incidents of cyberstalking, rape blackmail videos, malicious impersonation, "sextortion" (blackmailing seeking victims to perform sex acts online), revenge porn (the nonconsensual uploading of sexually explicit material); and "doxing" (publishing of personally identifying information, to encourage internet antagonists to hunt targets in "real" life). Jane (2018) refers to behaviours that occur at the intersection between gender–technology–violence collectively as gendered-cyber hate.

Finally, Cole (2015) makes an interesting observation about the use of so-called humour in online violence against women. Cole (2015) points out that the threat of rape is a common instance of online violence. However, she notes that the graphically violent online threats that women receive are frequently coupled with the emoticon LOL, or with a joke.

Thus the perpetrator threatens a woman whilst at the same time implying that they are joking. Cole (2015) comments that the use of humour does not neutralise the threat; instead it highlights the social acceptability of rape as a tool to coerce women. Jane (2012) suggests that while such aggression can manifest as a direct threat it often appears as 'hostile wishful thinking' on the part of the perpetrator (p.3).

Lewis et al., (2017) believe that abuse directed at visible and audible women demonstrates how virtual spaces represent similar inequalities as the offline world and in many ways magnify these inequalities. High profile women include academics who are threatened through their presence and voice in virtual spaces. While scholarly literature examining the phenomenon of online violence against women is increasing, limited attention has been paid to the experiences of women scholars (Veletsianos, Houldon, Hodson & Gosse, 2018).

The harassment of female academics online

There is a developing literature which highlights the call to academics to promote their research and to increase their impact through the use of social media (e.g. Mollett, Brumley & Gilson., 2017). This is reinforced, for example, through journal and university practices which urge academics to pursue active media and social media strategies in their dissemination activities (Duffy & Pooley, 2017). Indeed, the rise of social media has provided a 'quick and easy' shortcut for academics to communicate and share their work (Savigny, 2019).

These calls to academics to digitise themselves to reach a wider market is a reflection of the current neoliberal academic marketplace, according to Lupton, Mewburn, and Thomson (2018). Twitter and other social media platforms have come to represent a new indicator of esteem. Academics are judged not solely on their H-indexes and google scholar citation metrics but on numbers of followers on sites such as academia.edu, research gate and

public forums like Twitter (Duffy & Pooley, 2017). It has been widely noted however, that Twitter is a space where hostility, towards women and hate speech are increasingly normalised. Furthermore, women are disproportionately targeted by trolls because of the ease of access it offers between the public and the potential target (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). Yet there has been little academic attention paid to the experiences of female academics in the online arena. Researchers have addressed the cyber bullying of students (see Souza et al. 2018; Akbulut & Eristi, 2011), and there have been a few studies of sexual harassment against women in academia (see Tutchell & Edmonds, 2018) but not through online spaces.

Savigny's (2019) paper is a rare example, focusing on the experiences of women engaging with the impact agenda through a variety of media. Though not confined to the online experience, women's experiences in the online space is prominent. Savigny's (2019) research question was as follows: what happens when female academics engage with, or are reported by, media in disseminating their research? In an interview study with 18 female academics, Savigny found that when her participants had met the requirement to publicise their work through various media, they suffered abuse that left them traumatised and fearful for their physical safety, highly conscious of their physical appearance, nervous of engaging in social media and public speaking events, and doubting in their academic ability. The real and potential silencing of women was pronounced, as one participant articulated: '*I don't engage on Facebook or Twitter, I have seen what happens to women who do, and I just don't think it is worth those extra levels of stress*' (p. 12). Conversely, Lewis et al. (2017) noted that, in contrast with offline harassment which is characterized by low levels of reporting, the feminist women in their study who experienced online abuse frequently reported the perpetrator. They refused to be silenced: 'some are galvanized by experiencing online abuse and motivated to continue political engagement' (p. 1478).

Feminist scholars such as Jane (2014), Mantilla (2013) and Mahoney and Love (2017) suggest that online trolls adopt violent rhetoric primarily in order to dominate, silence, and control women. As Mantilla suggests: "harassment is about patrolling gender boundaries and using insults, hate, and threats of violence and/or rape to ensure that women and girls are either kept out of, or play subservient roles in, male-dominated areas" (2013, p. 568). Further, Ging and Siapera (2018) suggests that violent interactions in virtual spaces can enable (some) males to "weaponize misogyny and racism in a bid to protect these spaces as white male" (p. 517). A feminist understanding of this dynamic is perhaps what led to some of Lewis et al.'s (2017) participants to refuse to be silenced.

Gendered online hostility is increasing (Jane, 2012; 2015), and is becoming increasingly common in academia (Kamenetz, 2018). This is reflected in Campbell's (2017) personal account of the trolling she experienced online, in Chess and Shaw's (2015) reflections on their experiences of online harassment and in Ringrose's (2018) discussion of the fallout from her participation on Twitter in political debates.Vera-Gray (2017) also details the ways in which she was subject to over 80 abusive comments over a course of a single weekend after posting details of her research project online. This was an unexpected intrusion and necessitated her thinking about strategies to keep herself safe. Her work was concerned with violence against women and located in a feminist framework. It could be that being feminist in an online space is likely to lead to abuse from men (Cole, 2015). However as Lumsden and Morgan (2017) observe, simply being female online is sufficient to trigger harassment and abuse. Vera-Gray concludes her paper by calling on feminist researchers to underline and make visible the extra work that they have to do to protect themselves in online spaces: as a necessary feminist research practice, it 'deserves a central space in discussions of our methodological processes' (p. 74).

The impact and implications of online abuse

The experience of online abuse can be highly distressing to women, with consequences for their well-being that affect them at home and at work. as Jane (2018) highlights, the blurring of personal and professional contexts means that work-related abuse spills into women's personal lives. Kavanagh, Jones & Sheppard-Marks (2016, p. 788) define online violence as "direct or non-direct online communication that is stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, threatening or lewd manner and is designed to elicit fear, emotional or psychological upset, distress, alarm or feelings of inferiority". There is a clear emphasis on the emotional impact in this definition. Experiencing GBV online can be highly damaging and demoralising (Savigny, 2019; Ringrose, 2018). Lewis et al. (2017) observe that online abuse can cause harm to victims, in the extreme, it can leave women with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly when the abuse is frequent.

There are also consequences for performance at work. Negative comments about their work can lead women to lose self-esteem. Women already suffer disproportionately from impostor syndrome (Vaughn, Taasoobshirazi & Johnson, 2019): online abuse is only likely to further entrench this feeling. Jane (2018) suggests that, alongside workplace harassment that occurs in face to face settings (such as being leered at, propositioned or listening to innuendo), new variations of this form of abuse are occurring with the advent of digital communications and the reach they present. Cyber hate can clearly disrupt and derail women's working lives and careers. Jane (2018) states that when gendered cyber hate is experienced as part of a woman's working life, it constitutes "a form of workplace harassment and/or economic vandalism" (p. 575). Indeed, online abuse and harassment can be seen to represent an employee rights issue, affecting not only wellbeing but also the ability to progress a career.

Online abuse is more likely to occur when women develop a public profile (Jane, 2018). An online profile is seen to be crucial to disseminating research and to engaging with the public. As Savigny (2019) observes, the experience of online abuse can lead to a woman making a change in work-based practices that men do not have to make. Veletsianos et al. (2018) also note that women are often too intimidated to go online following the experience of abuse. But if a woman is disproportionately inhibited in engaging via social media, their reach and impact are significantly affected, and accordingly so is their career progression. The implications for sustaining rather than reducing the gender pay gap are clear. As Citron and Norton (2011) argue, the gendered nature of online violence therefore significantly compromises women's digital citizenship.

Veletsianos et al. (2018) call on higher education institutions to acknowledge the risk to women, when exhorting academics to disseminate their work online, and to take measures to help prepare female academics for potential abuse. Professionals are now routinely encouraged to engage with digital media and interact in technologically facilitated environments (Jane, 2018), but the implications for female academics need to be recognised by senior management. As Ringrose (2018, p. 653) declares, 'when we perform public pedagogy as feminist academics through digital social and news media, we face a range of challenges'. Such challenges need to be understood and prepared for. As universities are increasingly being encouraged to seek Athena SWAN accreditation, tackling the issue of online GBV is timely, and likely to be received well by the accrediting body.

More broadly, further discussion is needed in the arenas of law and government about the notion of free speech vs the right to post abusive, vile and violent comments. Thus far, there has been much resistance to any regulation or litigation due to a powerful lobby for

'free speech'. Perhaps we must question whether free speech that threatens and frightens simply for the sake of threatening or frightening is permissible?

A research agenda for examining online gender based violence against women academics

There remain numerous opportunities and challenges associated with the use of social media which have catalysed academic research across a number of fields. Yet to date, there remains a paucity of research focussed on the female academic experience of navigating virtual spaces and how this can expose them to threats of violence or other sources of harm. The need for methodological rigour, the adoption of a variety of research methodologies and the opportunity to utilise specific theoretical frameworks in order to guide research are championed here as central to driving forward understanding in this area. The following recommendations are not exhaustive but suggest opportunities for further critical enquiry in this space.

While there has already been a focus on the users of social media, there is still scope to understand more deeply how and why women academics engage with online spaces. Qualitative methods could be adopted to explore the experiences of female academics who have been exposed to online abuse. Potential research topics include: the nature of their engagement with social media; the incident/s of abuse; the perpetrator; their reporting (or not) of the incident/s; the impact on their professional and emotional life; the strategies they adopt to deal with the abuse; and the support the institution offers. As demonstrated through the work of Amnesty International (2017), women who experience abuse in online settings often experience fear and anxiety over their physical safety in real world settings; thus the impact of such abuse on female academics and their capacity to feel safe when disseminating their work is worthy of exploration. Further, the adoption of quantitative methods to detect the

extent of the experience of online abuse among female academics would allow an understanding of the prevalence of such behaviour. Examining instances and or the experience of virtual gender-based violence across subjects and disciplines could increase understanding of differences or similarities in the experience of women who work across different academic fields.

Often there is a focus on those who interact within virtual spaces or are already adopters of digital technologies. It would be useful to examine the experiences of those female academics who do not engage with social media to disseminate their work due to fear of experiencing virtual violence. Non-engagement has been increasingly noted as a response to the increased use of social media to denigrate women. Interview topics could focus upon: details of exposure to stories of online abuse; emotional reactions to such stories; reasons for non-engagement; institutional response. In addition, it would be worthwhile to explore whether being a bystander to abuse or witnessing others being abused in virtual spaces mediates the behaviour of those who may not directly be the target or recipient of the abuse.

Mixed-method approaches could provide a more holistic understanding of social media and the role that it plays in the lives of (women) academics. An exploration of social media feeds, combined with interviews or questionnaires would enable the triangulation of data. In many cases, while women academics face violent interactions, there becomes a process of fighting back or responding to such behaviour in virtual spaces. Giles (2016) refers to the use of conversational analysis (CA) to explore discursive practices. Adopting such methods can allow the structural characteristics of threads (or online social commentary) to be explored in line with a focus on individual voices or focus on the presence of ingroup/outgroup behaviour(s) (see Giles, 2016). In addition it could afford greater insight into the experience of victims and/or behaviour of perpetrators as it unfolds. The examination

of such online discourse would be critical to understanding the complexity of behaviour and interaction in virtual spaces.

While making these recommendations, we recognise that the area of virtual research is ever-evolving; technological innovations continue to change the boundaries of research. For instance, the use of custom scrapers now enables the collection of large data sets based on specific questions or temporal frames of reference with immediacy and accuracy. Such data sets would once have required a laborious process of immersion in or surveillance of online spaces by a researcher. For those researching Twitter there are for example, a number of Application Programming Interfaces (API's), including TAGS, Chorus, Mozdeh and COSMOS that offer free tools for capturing data. By using these platforms, semantically-driven data can be recorded through the identification of key words focussed on linguistic entities. User-driven data can select specific groups of users (such as female academics) to map the activity of certain groups. Such data capture would in the past have been impossible or extremely difficult to achieve. These tools can further shape the methods of analysis adopted by researchers. As an example, analysis could examine the temporal nature of a specific interaction in order to explore how narratives unfold over time or how interactions change in time and space. Such analysis can be event-based or linked to specific moments in virtual space (see Brooker, Barnett & Cribbin, 2016 for a review of social media analytics). This presents a vast amount of opportunities for posing questions related to online gender-based violence against women academics.

Conducting research in online spaces requires academics to embrace the nature of messy data. Many of the methodological principles that we recognise in non-virtual spaces may need to be navigated. Mahrt and Scharkow (2013) contend that 'it is currently impossible to collect a sample in a way that adheres to the conventions of sample quality established in the social sciences' (p.22). In addition, data may often be asynchronous or

quasi-synchronous occurring in threads, social media feeds or in chat rooms. Online researchers may need to grasp the interaction of non-human actors present in networked environments. As Lugosi and Quinton (2018) suggest, working in online spaces requires researchers to embrace the complexities of researching technology-mediated social practices and sociality that operate across time and space, that involve human and non-human agency, and that cannot be reduced to clinical accounts of methodological procedure. The complexities of these environments therefore present many opportunities and challenges in the development of rigorous and meaningful research. Such work provides space for critical, intersectional enquiry central to understanding women academics and how they experience gender-based violence in virtual spaces.

Conclusion

This paper presents a snapshot of the experiences of women academics in online spaces. These are spaces of power, privilege and oppression which can often pose a significant threat to users. As Ging and Siapera (2019) articulate, violence against women in online spaces does not merely upset or offend women. It impedes their safety and freedom of expression, and affects their ability to participate in the workforce and in democratic processes. While women can and do fight back, it remains incumbent upon society to take measures that ensure protection from harm. Until then full equality and participation in digital and physical spaces remain impossible (p.523). We believe that academic institutions such as universities that are increasingly placing pressure on women academics to engage in virtual platforms to disseminate their work have a responsibility in the prevention and protection of harm. In addition, there is a need to equip individuals with the skills and strategies to self-protect and tackle the harm they may be exposed to while actively engaging in online scholarship.

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