



GENDERED ONLINE ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE

More Than Just Words

SUSAN WATSON

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BOOK

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Developments in
Violence and Abuse

Gendered Online Abuse Against Women in Public Life

This book pulls back the curtain to reveal the scale of abuse that women in public life now receive. It's a timely and important read into what is driving this horrifying trend and how we can tackle it.

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This remarkable book is essential reading for anyone thinking about the barriers to women entering or remaining in public life. The relentless nature of online abuse, as well as its effects on everyone involved, is depressing reading, but Dr Watson's concise analysis makes a significant contribution to our understanding and points towards possible solutions. A really valuable and insightful contribution to one of the most challenging problems so many women face in public life in the 21st century.

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With her unparalleled expertise, a wealth of original empirical material and rich theoretical awareness, Susan Watson offers a unique insight into this most pressing and growing of contemporary problems. *Gendered Online Abuse Against Women in Public Life: More than Just Words* is set to have a big impact – among policy-makers, practitioners, teachers, students and informed readers. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

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Timely and important, this book provides firm evidence of the nature, extent and harms of online abuse directed against women in public life. By focusing on how such abuse impacts not just the safety of women in public life but their freedom, Watson reveals its full consequences and charts a course for us to combat it – individually, socially and structurally.

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Gendered Online Abuse Against Women in Public Life: More than Just Words

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Tom, Dylan, Alice and Tabitha – never stop dreaming the impossible.

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About the Author

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She is also a Member of the Executive Committee of the British Society of Criminology, a Member of the Social Policy Association and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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Chapter One

Introduction: The Problem of Gendered Abuse in the Online Space

Abstract

Chapter One introduces the themes of the book, before moving on to demonstrate how the online abuse of women communicated via social networking sites has increased significantly in recent years (Vera-Gray, 2017), with policy actors slow to respond to the immense change that has occurred as a result of the way that individuals interact in the digital space (Jane, 2017a). The chapter highlights how the emerging nature of this phenomenon has created a policy vacuum, with the lag in institutional responsiveness leaving victims without adequate protection or recourse (Jane, 2017a). This chapter also explains why the book focuses solely on the online experiences of women. Previous research has found that women's online experiences are underpinned by misogyny, violence and threat (Poland, 2016). The gendered characteristics of the online abuse received by women means that to include men in this investigation would risk creating a 'false symmetry between men's and women's experiences' (Krook, 2020, p. 107), whilst also ignoring the very real risks navigated by women on a daily basis (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017).

Keywords: Online abuse; misogyny; social networking; libertarianism; populism; public sphere; public facing occupations; trolling

Introduction

The online abuse of women communicated via social networking sites has increased significantly in recent years (Vera-Gray, 2017), and policy actors have been slow to

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respond to the immense change that has occurred as a result of the way that individuals interact in the digital space. The emerging nature of these phenomena has created a policy vacuum, with evidence suggesting that a lag in institutional responsiveness leaves victims without adequate protection or recourse (Jane, 2017a).

One area where there is a noticeable dearth in robust investigation is in the online abuse that occurs in the public sphere, particularly of women who work in public facing occupations. The huge changes in communication brought about by the assimilation of social networking sites into everyday life provide the means for the public to interact directly with individuals in public facing occupations. However, such engagement is not wholly positive. For whilst it is true that social networking sites have provided a mechanism for the public to communicate with those working in the public sphere; whilst also offering feminist and other campaigning groups a useful platform (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Micalizzi, 2021; Weathers et al., 2016), this has also perpetuated online abuse.

The motivation for this research emanates from the author's experience of being a political staffer. Hearing first-hand stories from women holding public office, of the abuse and threats received as part of their engagement with online platforms, triggered both a personal concern for colleagues and friends, and an academic curiosity, which then morphed into scholarship. This concern occurred alongside a backdrop of increased political violence, horribly articulated by the assassinations of the Labour MP for Batley and Spen, Jo Cox in June 2016 and the Conservative MP for Southend West, Sir David Amess, in October 2021. Both Cox and Amess were murdered whilst holding advice sessions in their constituencies (Jones, 2019; Peele, 2022). The political and personal ramifications of these deaths continue to reverberate, with Parliamentarians and other public sphere representatives having to consider their safety and security whenever they are in public. These two heinous acts have raised awareness of the vulnerability of public servants, which frequently extends into the online domain.

However, it is not only politicians who are the target of online abuse. This research also investigates the experiences of academics, journalists and police officers. Receiving abuse of this nature is not an uncommon or noteworthy experience – rather, it has become a routinised part of the mundane communication exchange that occurs online. Furthermore, this abuse is increasingly difficult to escape, given the expectation from both employers and the wider public that those serving in public facing occupations maintain an active social media presence.

Research Context

There is no universally agreed definition of online abuse. However, the definition provided by Citron (2014, p. 3) is helpful, stating that online abuse 'involves the intentional infliction of substantial emotional distress accomplished by online speech'. Online abuse has been described in various different ways, including cyber bullying (Wagner, 2019), cyber harassment (Citron, 2014), cyber stalking (Southworth et al., 2007), doxxing (Lee, 2020), flaming (Jane, 2015), pile-ons (Thompson & Cover, 2021), swatting (Wu, 2015), trolling (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018) and Zoom bombing (Hernandez, 2020). For simplicity, in this book, these

various terms are all assimilated into the phrase ‘online abuse’. Where significant differences between the acts of abuse occur, these are discussed in the text.

The decision to focus solely on the online experiences of women is worthy of further explanation. Whilst there have been a number of studies focusing on the online experiences of both men and women in public facing occupations (e.g. [Binns, 2017](#); [Ward & McLoughlin, 2020](#)), there is a robust rationale for excluding men from this research. Firstly, there is the finding that women’s online experiences are overwhelmingly underpinned by misogyny, violence and threat ([Poland, 2016](#)), which is reinforced by a consistent underestimation of the scale of gender-based violence (both physical and virtual) from the (male) academy ([Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021](#); [Walby et al., 2014](#)). Secondly, as is illustrated in both existing literature and the empirical contributions gathered from participants in this research, there is a clear link between online abuse, gender-based violence ([Salter, 2017](#)) and the misogynistic aim to silence women’s contributions in the public sphere ([Mantilla, 2015](#)). Whilst men in academia ([Veletsianos, 2016](#)), journalism (particularly sports journalism) ([Binns, 2017](#)) and politics¹ also experience threats of violence, they do not do so *because* they are men. Therefore, the gendered characteristics of the online abuse received by women in the four occupations selected for closer analysis means that to include men in this sample would risk creating a ‘false symmetry between men’s and women’s experiences’ ([Krook, 2020](#), p. 107). Furthermore, insisting on a gendered comparison of male and female experiences risks drawing potentially misleading conclusions, whilst also ignoring the very real risks navigated by women on a daily basis ([Lumsden & Morgan, 2017](#)). Whilst not universally agreed upon (e.g. [Gorrell et al., 2020](#)), many working in this area would argue that most of the violent and aggressive online abuse is received by women ([Kargar & Rauchfleish, 2019](#)).

There is also a lack of quantitative data regarding the scale of online abuse, as these figures are not routinely collected. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of research from organisations such as the United Nations (2015), [Amnesty International \(2017\)](#) and the European Commission ([Davidson et al., 2011](#)), all of which has evidenced the growth in the amount of abuse disseminated online. Research has frequently been bolstered by high-profile incidents of abuse directed at public figures, some of which has been so extreme that it has gained significant notoriety (e.g. [Criado-Perez, 2013](#); [Dewey, 2014](#); [Peele, 2022](#); [Urwin, 2013](#)). The aim of this research is to investigate the extent to which social networking sites have perpetuated a permissive climate towards gender-based violence and to identify and analyse the wider impact that such online abuse can have.

Outline of the Book

This book is organised into nine chapters that fall loosely into two separate parts. The first part, which consists of Chapters Two to Four, provides a theoretical

¹The review of the literature has failed to find any published work specifically comparing the online abuse of male and female police officers.

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underpinning to the empirical data that follow. By organising the book in this way, it is possible to gain a broad understanding of the key theories espoused in the diverse strands of computer-mediated communication, gender-based violence and the operation of the public sphere. The coalescence of these different theories is pivotal to the analysis of women's experiences that follows in the latter part of the book.

Following this introduction, Chapter Two explores the history of computer-mediated communication, revealing that when an interdisciplinary lens is adopted, it is possible to identify a number of theoretical explanations for the abuse that occurs online. The first scholarly investigations into the nature of technological communication emerged in the 1980s, straddling the disciplines of social psychology, culture and commerce (Jane, 2015). This early assemblage often determined that abuse in online communication was insignificant, infrequent or a source of entertainment (Jane 2015), with strong associations with wider libertarian and freedom of speech campaigns. More recent research has indicated a link between the hostility that occurs online between politically opposing groups and an increase in physical violence when parties meet in the offline space (Gallacher et al., 2021). At the same time, there is growing concern that social networking sites have increased the immutability of public opinion, with Sunstein's (2009a) work on echo chambers and group polarisation underlining the preponderance of people to adopt more extreme viewpoints or actions when gathered with others. Pariser (2012) has proposed the complementary theory of filter bubbles, created when online search engines and social media algorithms only show users selected content. It has been argued that when combined, echo chambers and filter bubbles lead to social homogeneity and group polarisation (Edwards, 2013; Harel et al., 2020), which have been enablers in the rise of political populism of the sort responsible for the election of Donald Trump in the USA and the Brexit vote in the UK (Bruns, 2019; Guo, 2020) whilst also being linked with right wing extremism (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020) and an increase in online abuse (Ozalp et al., 2020). At the same time, online abuse has also become increasingly hostile (Founta et al., 2019), frequently containing misogynistic condemnation, threats and descriptions of sexual violence, moving from an individualistic, discrete activity, to a more generalised verbal violence that targets the individuals' personal or occupational life (Jane, 2015; Rohlinger & Vaccaro, 2021) – something that is followed up in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three provides a context for the span of behaviours falling within the definition of gender-based violence, which range from the mundane (Brown & Walklate, 2011) through to rape and homicide. By introducing the domestic abuse intervention programme (also known as the Duluth model) (Pence & Paymar, 1993); the continuum of violence (Kelly, 1988); the theory of coercive control (Stark, 2009) and the theory of cultural violence (Galtung, 1990), this chapter outlines four theories of gender-based violence that are integral to the understanding of gendered online abuse. This theoretical framework, predominantly associated with the domestic sphere, is then synthesised with theories of the gender-based violence that occurs in public, including workplace sexual harassment and sexual abuse. The theories introduced in Chapter Three intentionally position

the issue of gender-based violence at the heart of the book, as it is the history, threat and manifestation of gender-based violence that situates the investigation into online abuse in context. This chapter illustrates how gender-based violence, whether it occurs in the home, the workplace, educational settings or in the street, serves to emphasise men's power over women (Stanko, 1990).

Chapter Four opens by providing a definition and description of the composition of the public sphere, highlighting that whilst women consistently make up more than half of public sector employees in the UK (Miller, 2009), the number of women holding senior roles in public facing occupations remains low. The discussion then moves on to consider the wider role of women in the public sphere and the challenges commonly faced. The potential consequences of the increased interaction with the public that has arisen as a result of the centrality of social media and other online communication mechanisms to the contemporary operation of the public sphere (Mellado & Hermida, 2021; Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021) is also considered. In a wide-ranging discussion, this chapter also presents evidence on emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) and safety work (Vera-Gray, 2017), which are highlighted as key issues for women in public facing occupations navigating online abuse. The chapter concludes by bringing together theories of the public sphere discussed in Chapter Four with the theories of gender-based violence introduced in Chapter Three, explaining how the two coalesce in the act of online abuse.

Chapter Five moves the focus of the book into the empirical phase. The chapter presents analysis of the research undertaken to better understand the online experiences of women working in academia, journalism, policing and politics. In doing so, it outlines seven pervasive elements of online abuse, which were found to be present (in whole or in part) in every instance of online abuse. These are defamation, emotional harm, harassment, threat, silencing women's voices, belittling and undermining women and the criticism of individuals' appearance and other physical characteristics. Each of these seven elements is further analysed using the empirical evidence provided in the testimony gained from 50 semi-structured interviews with women serving in public facing occupations. The power of this testimony comes from the examples and experiences provided by the women themselves, with an example of each element summarised in Table 1.

The gendered online abuse of women in the public sphere has not been categorised in this way before, particularly in regards to the discussion of defamation and the criticism of women's professional probity, honesty and behaviour. The richness of the interview data is complemented by data drawn from the qualitative analysis of a real-time Twitter data corpus amounting to some 10.4 million tweets. Taken together, these data provide an insight into the sheer scale of online abuse occurring on a daily basis.

Chapter Six explores two factors that are specific to online activity within public sphere occupations: the expectation that those holding positions within academia, journalism, policing and politics be always accessible online and that occupational seniority can act as an insulator from abuse, not by preventing pernicious communication, but by limiting exposure to it. The chapter then considers the consequences that can result for both the individual and their organisation

Table 1. Empirical Accounts of Abuse Gathered from Interviews.

Element of Online Abuse	Example from Empirical Research
Defamation	<i>[I receive online abuse] basically challenging my ethics, or the way I operate, or... 'will the [role name] answer why she hasn't done anything about this', and neglected my duty. (Karen, Senior Police Officer)</i>
Emotional harm	<i>I knew that all that abuse would continue [after the election] and I was expecting my majority to go down to a couple of thousand, and I thought they'll keep coming, they'll smell blood and all I used to do was get bullied, permanently. It was absolutely horrendous. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)</i>
Harassment	<i>The people who do it know that they are chasing you to your very marrow. Everything you do, they are chasing you all the time and never leaving you alone. And the 'pile-ons', in inverted commas, are exactly designed to make an individual feel persecuted and overwhelmed. There's no question in my mind about that. Then when they think they've done their job, they back away. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)</i>
Threat	<i>Somebody messaged me and said, it serves you right if your daughter gets raped in front of you. They made that physical threat to me and to my family. (Agita, Member of the House of Lords)</i>
Silencing women's voices	<i>I think a lot of what they do is to try and discourage you from doing the kind of reporting you do, rather than... I don't know, they may be personal in the stuff they say. Ultimately what they're trying to do is discourage you from covering the topic which is criticising them. (Linda, UK-based journalist)</i>
Belittling and undermining women	<i>We don't see this as a new phenomenon, it's just the newest iteration of an old phenomenon, all those things that continue to undermine and weaken women's protection in the physical space from violence and domestic partner violence, intimate partner violence, street violence, all of that, all those things are still at play in the digital world. (Helen, Academic based in the USA)</i>
Criticism of physical characteristics	<i>When pictures have been taken of me in Downing Street they try and zoom in on my badge and try and catch you out to see if you've exposed something that you shouldn't expose, either about your body or the post. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)</i>

when they are targeted for online abuse. The chapter then identifies the elements specific to public facing occupations that make a sustained onslaught of online abuse particularly problematic. The chapter concludes by discussing the various benefits accrued from maintaining an online presence, highlighting why advising women to simply abandon their professional online activity is neither a realistic nor acceptable solution to online abuse.

Chapter Seven provides a topical overview of the policy landscape on gender-based violence and online abuse, assessing the numerous developments that have been proposed in this area. Policies have frequently been introduced on a sporadic basis, often emerging in response to public pressure; or, as [Walby et al. \(2014, p. 188\)](#) have vividly described (with reference to Jimmy Saville and Dominic Kahn), as a response ‘to the violence that emerges into public view in the form of “scandals”, when some famous man is accused of perpetrating gendered violence’. In the UK, in common with many other jurisdictions, there has been the lack of a comprehensive or structural approach to addressing online abuse. Consequently, Chapter Seven considers the emerging impact of the Online Safety Act which was finally entered into statute in October 2023; comparing the policy and legislative regime in the UK with other countries, highlighting the bifurcation in approach, with some places likely to prove better locations for women to work in public facing occupations than others, with the UK and USA being rapidly overtaken by more progressive online environments.

Chapter Eight presents a series of policy recommendations to tackle online abuse. These recommendations have been organised into a series of actions at an individual, organisational, legislative and structural level, reflecting a synergy with the levels at which the impacts of online abuse occur.

Chapter Nine brings together the various strands of the preceding chapters in order to summarise the content and consequences of the online abuse of women serving in the public sphere. The chapter revisits the seven elements of online abuse in order to further demonstrate how online abuse directed at women is misogynistic, frequently includes violent threats and dismisses women’s contributions to online discussions. The chapter will emphasise how online abuse varies by occupation, with police officers most likely to receive abuse that denigrates their ability or appearance; politicians and journalists more likely to receive violent threats, and academics receiving abuse of all types. The chapter will also discuss how the consequences of abuse are felt at an individual, organisational and structural level, having a malign impact on women’s contributions to public life in multiple ways, before revisiting the policy recommendations at the same three levels.

Finally, consideration will be given to the weaknesses of the research, its generalisability and the potential for further work in this area moving forwards.