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Source: *Feminist Studies*, 2013, Vol. 39, No. 2, A SPECIAL ISSUE: CATEGORIZING SEXUALITIES (2013), pp. 563-570

Published by: Feminist Studies, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23719068>

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Gender trolling: Misogyny Adapts to New Media

Karla Mantilla

THE ADVENT OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES has enabled new forms of virulent sexism that beg greater analysis. While aggressive online behavior—trolling—is present across internet cultures, it is worth naming specifically misogynist variants as “gender trolling.” Gender trolling, I argue, has several components that make it distinctive from other more generic forms of online trolling. The following essay is an attempt to identify the distinct features of gender trolling and bring attention to recent examples from a range of internet communities.

The term “trolling,” according to internet studies scholar Whitney Phillips, arose in the 1990s and is defined by her as “disrupt[ing] a conversation or entire community by posting incendiary statements or stupid questions onto a discussion board . . . for [the troll’s] own amusement, or because he or she was a genuinely quarrelsome, abrasive personality.” Trolls engage in their behavior to amass “lulz” (derived phonetically from LOL, meaning laugh out loud), which Phillips describes as “an aggressive form of laughter derived from eliciting strong emotional reactions from the chosen target(s). In order to amass the greatest number of lulz possible, trolls engage in the most outrageous and offensive behaviors possible.” Phillips also notes that “the majority of trolls on the English-speaking web are . . . white, male and somewhat privileged.”¹

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Gender trolling is a relatively new kind of virulent, more threatening online phenomenon than the generic trolling described by Phillips. Crucially, it is not done only for the lulz—to simply upset the targets of the trolling—but it also often expresses sincere beliefs held by the trolls. While traditional trolls can certainly represent depraved values and behavior (the worst examples of which can be found on such sites as 4chan),² and they certainly embody the worst of racist, ableist, and homophobic behavior,³ what makes gender trolling distinct and, I argue, specifically and dramatically more destructive to its victims, are the following features:

The participation, often coordinated, of numerous people. Gender trolling tends to involve a concerted or coordinated effort on the part of many trolls, often in the dozens or even hundreds, who overwhelm the victim with the sheer quantity of attacks, sometimes numbering hundreds per hour for a sustained period.⁴

Gender-based insults. Gender trolling involves specifically gender-based insults, including the widespread use of pejorative terms that are leveled particularly at women—“cunt,” “whore,” “slut”—and comments designed to insult and humiliate women, especially in regard to their weight and physical appearance.

Vicious language. Gender trolling involves particularly vicious and vile language and intent that can best be described as “hate,” including descriptions of vile and violent acts that the troll claims he—gender trolls are nearly always men—would like to do to the target.

Credible threats. Gender trolling involves a significant and credible component of threat: rape threats, death threats, threats of torture, “doxxing” (revealing the offline identity of a person’s online presence), or posting targets’ home or work addresses and encouraging others to menace or threaten them with loss of their job or their physical safety. Trolls have ordered packages, or sometimes pizzas, to be delivered to a victim’s home in order to let the target know, in a chilling way, that those issuing the threats know where that person lives.⁵

Unusual intensity, scope, and longevity of attacks. Gender-trolling tends to persist over a long time span; several women have been trolled or attacked for years at a time. While generic trolling can certainly be viciously cruel, the attacks tend to remain limited to insults or attacks on one or two websites or social media locations. Gendertrolls, on the other hand, proactively and relentlessly pursue their targets across various online sites and even into actual life, and they also often pursue victims' supporters and friends for additional targeting. Another malicious technique that gendertrolls use is to instigate denial-of-service (DoS) attacks on victims' websites, or distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against the victims' website host providers. This takes considerable time and effort on behalf of the gendertrolls and has the result, in the first instance, of crashing victims' websites and, in the second instance, of crashing thousands of other websites that just happen to be hosted by the same servers.⁶

Reaction to women speaking out. Finally, a unique feature of gendertrolling is that it nearly always occurs in response to women speaking out about some form of sexism, as we will see in the following examples drawn from a wide variety of internet communities.

TECHNOLOGY BLOGGING

In an early instance of gendertrolling, in 2007, Kathy Sierra, a technology blogger, was forced to move her household after receiving repeated rape threats and death threats and then having her home address published online and packages sent to her home in attempt to spook her. She feared for her safety so much that she canceled her speaking engagements and stopped writing and blogging for six years.

FEMINIST BLOGOSPHERE

In another relatively early example, Melissa McEwan, who runs the multi-author feminist blog *Shakesville*, was "doxxed" in 2007, when her address and phone number were published online, and trolls made copious suggestions "about how to troll her, ranging from emailing her penis pictures, to 'revenge-raping her.'" The *Shakesville* website, along with some other feminist blogs were targeted in DDoS attacks. Since that time, McEwan has continued to receive rape and death threats, including being the subject of, as she writes, "a campaign [by

Encyclopedia Dramatica, a site that fosters a culture of misogynist and racist trolls] offering a financial reward to anyone who could offer proof of raping and/or murdering me.”⁷ There have been many other such attacks on a variety of feminist blogs, far too numerous to detail in this article.

“ELEVATORGATE” AND THE SKEPTICAL/ATHEIST COMMUNITY

Within the online skeptical/secular humanist/atheist community, there has been a deep schism over an incident dubbed “elevatorgate.” The incident involved a speaker who was well known in the community, Rebecca Watson, who was asked to speak at an atheist conference in Dublin in June 2011 on the topic of how to attract more women to the atheist community, which has traditionally been dominated by men. She spoke about the ways that women coming to events had been immediately “hit on” by men and explained that this was not the best way to approach women because it made them feel that their intellectual contributions were less important than their availability as sexual partners. Shortly after the conference she made a video about her experiences at the conference in which she recounted that, after having stayed up till 4 a.m. in the hotel bar further discussing gender, objectification, and misogyny with a group of conference attendees, she announced that she was tired and going to bed. At that point, one of the men in the group, with whom she had not spoken previously, followed her into the hotel elevator and asked her up to his room for “coffee,” which she declined. She briefly describes in the video what happened, and remarks, “with a bit of a laugh and a shrug,” “Guys, don’t do that.”⁸ Her comment drew a deluge of rape “jokes,” insults, and death threats: her YouTube page was inundated with insults and name calling; she was sent hundreds of messages, some by people who pledged that they would never quit harassing her; her Wikipedia page was vandalized; and people posted graphic photos of dead bodies to her Facebook page. Trolls created Twitter accounts in her name that they used to tweet vile messages to her friends and to celebrities, and they created blogs about her that were focused on spreading malicious rumors about her personal life. The online campaign against Rebecca Watson, as well as against people who have publicly supported her, has lasted several years and still continues.

ONLINE AND VIDEO GAMING COMMUNITY

Anita Sarkeesian, a media critic, started a campaign on the fundraising website Kickstarter to fund a project highlighting sexist representations of women in the gaming community. In response, online gamers (presumably male) flooded her various social media sites with threats of rape, violence, sexual assault, and death. They made pornographic images of her being raped and sent them to her. Her Wikipedia page was vandalized with pornographic images. The gendertrolls reported her Kickstarter, YouTube, and Twitter accounts as fraud, spam, and even as terrorism, in order to get the accounts suspended. They tried to disable her website; they distributed her personal information online, including her home address and phone number; and they tried to hack into her email and other personal accounts. In line with their interest in gaming, they even created an online game, "Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian," where players could virtually beat and punch her, watching her image become bloodied and bruised as a result. Rather than withdrawing from the internet, as some have done, Sarkeesian chose to go public with what was happening to her, which had the happy result of dramatically boosting her fundraising.⁹

COMEDIANS AND RAPE JOKES

In July 2012, comedian Daniel Tosh replied to a woman who protested during his stand-up show that rape jokes are never funny, "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by, like, five guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her?" In response to this incident, Lindy West, a writer at the feminist website *Jezebel*, went on the FX show *Totally Biased* to debate with another comedian about whether rape jokes were ever appropriate in comedy. In response to her appearance on the show, she was inundated with online and social media attacks, which she described as "a suffocating deluge of violent misogyny." She received hundreds of rape and death threats and other sexualized insults such as those telling her, among many other things, that she is "just bitter because [she is] too fat to get raped."¹⁰

POLITICAL COMMENTARY

On March 5 of this year, when political analyst Zerlina Maxwell pointed out on the FOX News show *Hannity* that, rather than focusing on women owning guns as a means to avoid rape, the onus for

ending rape should lie with men, she received a slew of rape and death threats on Facebook, Twitter, and by email. Maxwell, who is African American, explained that “Clearly this is gendered and it has to do with the fact that I’m black.... Because the rape threats I received are not the same as the rape threats and death threats Lindy West got. Mine had the N-word all over them.”¹¹ Again, reflecting the sheer quantity typical of these kinds of attacks, Maxwell said, “Do not feed the trolls’ is really easy for people to say when you’re not getting 100 rape threats, when you’re not getting 100 death threats.” Maxwell said of the sustained campaign against her, “I view it as a silencing tactic.”¹²

CAMPAIGN TO KEEP A WOMEN’S FACE ON BRITISH BANKNOTES

After Caroline Criado-Perez waged a successful campaign to keep a woman’s face on British banknotes following the Bank of England’s announcement that it was going to replace the image of nineteenth-century social reformer Elizabeth Fry with that of the wartime prime minister Winston Churchill, she began receiving a flood of rape and death threats on Twitter—as many as fifty an hour. She described the attacks as “a nest of men who co-ordinate attacks on women.”¹³ The rape threats were extended to other women who vocally supported Criado-Perez, including member of Parliament Stella Creasy, television critic Grace Dent, and *Guardian* fashion columnist Hadley Freeman, all of whom also received bomb threats on Twitter.

* * *

The characteristics of these online campaigns against outspoken women echo the misogynistic responses to the “Who Needs Feminism?” campaign (discussed in this issue). Gendertrolling has much in common with other offline targeting of women such as sexual harassment in the workplace and street harassment. In those arenas, as is the case with gendertrolling, the 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 arenas. Sexual harassment of women is a behavior that functions to inhibit women from fully occupying professional environments and fully competing with men.

Street harassers keep women from feeling safe in public spaces when they are without a male companion/husband/protector.

It is important to recognize and acknowledge the phenomenon of gendertrolling for what it is: something above and beyond generic online trolling and a phenomenon that, not dissimilar to street and sexual harassment, systematically targets women to prevent them from fully occupying public spaces. Sarkeesian believes that, because these online harassment campaigns specifically target women who publicly articulate feminist ideas, the underlying motive is to maintain the online milieu as a male-dominated space.¹⁴ Too many women are being intimidated into withdrawing from blogging¹⁵ or being vocal on social media in response to these coordinated campaigns against them.

When date rape and sexual harassment occurred before they were so named, they were often viewed, and thus dismissed, as individual problems, the consequence of which was to render women more vulnerable to such attacks. Activists have creatively raised awareness about how street harassment intimidates women from fully occupying public streets.¹⁶ It is equally important to name and understand the phenomenon of gendertrolling as a strategy to keep women from full participation on the internet. Viewing it in this light, instead of just recommending individual strategies for women to withstand the onslaught, we can focus on strategies to address gendertrolling proactively, with the goal of preventing women, especially those who advocate for women's rights, from being bullied out of participating in yet another public forum.

NOTES

1. Whitney Phillips, "What an Academic Who Wrote Her Dissertation on Trolls Thinks of Violentacrez," *The Atlantic*, October 15, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/10/what-an-academic-who-wrote-her-dissertation-on-trolls-thinks-of-violentacrez/263631>.
2. For a discussion on the infamous troll site 4chan, see Alyse Wax's interview with film director Michael Gallagher, "Exclusive: We Talk Trolls and Death Threats With 'Smiley' Director Michael Gallagher," *Fearnet*, February 11, 2013, <http://www.fearnet.com/news/interview/exclusive-we-talk-trolls-and-death-threats-smiley-director-michael-gallagher>.
3. For a discussion about racist trolling and its impact, see Latoya Livingstone and Kenneth Mallory, "Anonymous Trolling: How Does Online Racism

- Affect Broadband Adoption?" *Broadband and Social Justice*, May 7, 2012, <http://broadbandandsocialjustice.org/2012/05/anonymous-trolling-how-does-online-racism-affect-broadband-adoption>; and Jack Craver, "Anonymous Trolls use Racism, Death Threats to Provoke Anti-mining Protesters," *The Capital Times*, July 18, 2013, http://host.madison.com/news/local/writers/jack_craver/anonymous-trolls-use-racism-death-threats-to-provoke-anti-mining/article_dda51d5e-ef4b-11e2-a511-0019bb2963f4.html. For a discussion of ableist trolling, see Mary Elizabeth Williams, "A Cruel Letter Brings out the Trolls," *Salon*, August 20, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/08/20/a_cruel_letter_brings_out_the_trolls.
4. On August 3, 2013, in support of a Twitter boycott protesting of the verbal abuse of women on Twitter, columnist Caitlin Moran wrote, "In the last few weeks, I've seen women on Twitter being run to exhaustion by the volume of anonymous rape and violence tweets they've received—so many that even just blocking them is a full time job." See Caitlin Moran's blog on *Twitlonger*, http://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1rlnpli. Moran elaborates on her own blog "consider the logistics of this. If a woman is getting fifty of these messages an hour, blocking all the abusers becomes something of a thankless, full-time job." See <http://www.caitlinmoran.co.uk/index.php/by-caitlin-moran>.
 5. See James McCarthy, "Internet Trolls Launch Hate Campaign Against Single Mum," *Wales Online*, August 25, 2013, <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/internet-trolls-launch-hate-campaign-5781778>.
 6. See Kelly Diels, "Women's Free Speech is under Attack," *Salon*, August 13, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/08/13/womens_free_speech_is_under_attack/?utm_content=buffer159da&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=Buffer.
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. Rebecca Watson, "It Stands to Reason, Skeptics Can Be Sexist Too," *Slate*, October 24, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2012/10/sexism_in_the_skeptic_community_i_spoke_out_then_came_the_rape_threats.html.
 9. See Anita Sarkeesian, "TedxWomen Talk about Online Harrassment and Cyber Mobs," *Feminist Frequency*, December 5, 2012, <http://www.feministfrequency.com/2012/12/tedxwomen-talk-on-sexist-harassment-cyber-mobs>.
 10. Lindy West, "If Comedy Has No Lady Problem, Why Am I Getting So Many Rape Threats?" *Jezebel*, June 4, 2013, <http://jezebel.com/if-comedy-has-no-lady-problem-why-am-i-getting-so-many-511214385>.
 11. http://www.salon.com/2013/08/13/womens_free_speech_is_under_attack/?utm_content=buffer159da&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=Buffer.
 12. See Diels, "Women's Free Speech is under Attack."
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. Sarkeesian, "TedxWomen Talk about Online Harrassment."
 15. <http://freethoughtblogs.com/blaghag/2012/09/goodbye-for-now>.
 16. For example, see the activist websites <http://www.ihollaback.org> and <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org>.