"Internet Famous": Visibility As Violence On Social Media

How the fuck does your "meritocracy" explain this?

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Trigger warning: Discussion of assault, rape, stalking and harassment.

We consider visibility to be desirable.

It is highly lucrative, much sought after. And yes, it is a huge asset in the careers and companies of many cishet white men. Visibility gets them jobs, raises, venture capital, customers, community support… chances at more visibility in a bountiful cycle of pageviews and cash, money and power. With visibility is supposed to come admiration, respect, access, affluence – and for most of such men, it delivers.

Yet for the rest of us, with visibility comes harassment, stalking, threats, loss of career opportunity and mobility, constant public humiliation, emotional and sometimes physical violence.

I have some experience with this.

In the past two years I have written over a novel's worth of widely-read articles on tech culture and startups, covering a broad range of topics including distributed companies, engineering teams, management practices and industry ethics. They have been read by hundreds of thousands of people. I also have a lot of followers on Twitter, where I tweet primarily about tech culture and news.

My body of work has many of the contradictory and questionable accolades of "success" in our industry: cited in the New York Times, linked to by most of the tech press, front page of Hacker News, top of Reddit; taught in colleges, passed around offices, used to build corporate policy. Alternately fawned over and hated by the most famous people in the industry.

When I started that work, I had a career working in product, strategy and technical marketing at high-growth infrastructure companies. I managed teams, launched a lot of products, sold a lot of software, traveled the world, gave talks at many industry events. I made money and had decent titles, and I tolerated the neverending sexism in part for those things, in part because this was my dream. But while thoughtful, nuanced intellectual labor is an asset for many cishet white men in tech – who will be considered "edgy," "provocative," "brilliant," and "visionary" – my growing visibility and "controversial" online activism exposing and condemning industry inequality made further achievement and even continued employment at all increasingly untenable. My career, that I spent over a decade building, that was my dream – was frozen in time by "visibility," by misogyny and by "visibility" as a weapon of misogyny. Ironically, I now see that even as I was perceived as "volatile" and "confrontational," the type of writing and speaking I was doing at the time was tame, conciliatory and compromising out of fear for my career.

As this and other circumstances forced me out of my career, I eventually quit my existing job. I founded a media company that is now one of the only independent platforms covering technology, culture and politics – and in doing so, have likely burned my last bridge with employment in the industry.

Now that I was my own boss, I felt free from the omnipresent threat of getting fired for my political speech, and it felt amazing. I started doing even more of that exact thing that women around here aren't supposed to do: Get angry. Fight back. Speak my truth. Set boundaries. Take up digital space.

Be "visible."

I am now one of the most hated people in the tech industry.

And rather than being an asset, visibility is itself a weapon against me.

In this post, I'm going to talk about my personal experiences with visibility. The act of doing so will be construed as being "complicit" in the abusive visibility aimed at me, as if such a thing were possible. In an industry where the achievement of women is smothered and erased, the above accounts of my career will be viewed as "bragging," or discredited. People who stalk me will dissect this article looking for vulnerabilities. Journalists will read it looking for "insight" on my life that I have refused to give them.

But I have also learned that NOTHING I can do – changing my tone, taking my content off the internet, making my Twitter account private, keeping my private life private, locking down as many aspects of it as I can – makes a difference in people's need to create, consume and weaponize my visibility.

And before you say that this is because I'm a bitch, a lunatic, hysterical, mean and that's why this happens to me: you're a fucking liar. These things happen to EVERY "visible" marginalized person in tech that I have EVER met. For some it is better, and for some it is far, far worse.

So here you go.

Visibility as A Justification for Violence

jason ✔
@Jason

⚙ 👤 Follow

@anildash @espiers Consent n journalism? If you are a public figure (i would say over 10k twitter followers), you don't get to consent.

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By the time I had a few thousand followers on Twitter, people began to refer to me as a "public figure." While mine was a paltry fame compared to literally thousands of cishet white men in the industry, that type of visibility for women is far rarer due to sexism, misogyny, online harassment, the way intellectual labor by women is devalued, and the costs of exposure to women in the field.

I soon realized that calling me a "public figure" had nothing to do with describing my impact on the industry or recognizing my achievements within it. Rather, the term "public figure" is solely ascribed to me as part of justifying abuse, harassment, humiliation, boundary violations and invasion of my privacy by anyone — from journalists to anonymous trolls to professional peers. When I protest journalists using bullying and dishonest tactics to exploit my life and relationships for page views, I'm a "public figure" and thus not allowed any privacy or boundaries, or to defend myself in any way. When my experiences and words are twisted, taken out of context and used against me as attacks; when months of my tweets are dug through to find a scrap of something to attack me with: "well you live your life in public!"

Ironically, people who actively stalk me, industry professionals and members of the media engage in the exact same rhetorical tactics of appealing to my "public figure"-ness to justify their acts. The constant gendered harassment, stalking and boundary violation I receive is considered by many to be the natural exhaust of my visibility. There's the assumption that the visibility itself is beneficial enough to me to merit the tradeoff of daily abuse, that I "should have known" it would be like that this, or that I have brought it upon myself by being a "drama queen," "attention whore," or by writing things that are widely read in the industry (which for white cishet men is termed "having ambition" and "being successful").

Ironically, as I have become a "public figure," I am less and less able to exist in public. I used to go to events and people would joke that I was "internet famous." At the time I took this a compliment, a sign of some success in a field where I had been to countless meetings and treated as if I were a chair or device for ordering lunch and taking notes.

Invisible.

Now, I no longer attend industry events at all, because I feel physically unsafe doing so due to the violence I experience constantly. I cannot share any information about my personal life – even my appearance, general location and relationships – in public spaces. Yet as I have become increasingly more "private," the calls of "public figure" become stronger and stronger. This – in addition to the fact that "public figure" is NEVER used to refer to me outside of the context of justifying maltreatment – proves that this "status" is not related to the actual facts of my existence in the industry but rather as a mechanism of abuse, a use of visibility for violence.

Exploitation of Gaps In Visibility

The difference in visibility between me and other individuals is itself something that is exploited to hurt me. These gaps are exploited both by people with vastly more visibility than me and those with no discernable visibility at all – anonymous harassers and stalkers.

On one hand, white cishet men who are more prominent than me by any objective measure – Twitter followers, site traffic, mainstream press coverage – publicly plagiarize me, use ableist slurs like "crazy" and "insane" to discredit me, troll and gaslight me by expressing their "concern" for my mental health, call me "violent" and "angry" to their 200,000 followers (literally), and invest a significant amount of time and energy in inciting violence and ambient harassment against me. Many of these men will also use appeals to my own visibility, allowing them to both deny and exploit the profound gaps in visibility and power between us.

On the other hand, men who take on anonymous identities leverage that gap in visibility – me as someone with a traceable and static online identity, who can be researched and attacked at a known location, and them as ephemeral, untraceable accounts with no community identity or accountability – to terrorize me. Unpredictable and ever-regenerating, it is impossible to know if anonymous attacks are coming from a single person or a large number of them. Untraceable, it is impossible to pursue any defensive strategy. *ANY* form of visibility relative to their anonymity becomes an attack vector.

And then there are stalkers. All it takes is one or two stalkers to change your life, your feeling in your own skin and existence, your movements in the spaces you travel, completely and in every way. Your whole world ratchets down, contracts – the possibilities of your life shrink while the sense of being surveilled grows. You feel at the same time enormous and and utterly tiny. To be the victim of a stalker is to be subject to an entirely new kind of visibility – the obsessive visibility of a violent, watching *one*.

I take a number of precautions around my own personal safety and have privilege that makes taking these precautions possible, which (I hope) minimize a lot of the overt threat – but the psychological damage, and the limitations imposed by those precautions – are real and an omnipresent factor in my life, and I know them to be a similar factor for others who share my level of visibility and occupy positions of marginalization.

They go at you from the top – people with vastly more visibility than you – and from the bottom – people with absolutely no visibility – squeezing you in the space in between until there is very little space for you at all.

Visibility of Violence Itself

I have, on many occasions, spoken out about my experiences of gendered violence, sexual assault and rape. I am able to do this in part because of after years of living with those experiences I accept them as part of my life and history, and because showing those experiences in public seems to me a political act of incredible importance.

Despite that fact, and the emotional difficulties in such disclosures, the information itself is used to harm me. This is enabled because the consumption of violence against women is a fetishistic and ritualistic act in male-dominated industries (see Valleywag building its entire platform on simplification and sensationalism of sexist abuse in tech); because the violence committed against women is constructed as part of their essential self, inhered in their identity forever by the male gaze; and because women's' experiences of violence may be made strategically hypervisible or totally invisible compared to other aspects of their lives as a form of re-victimization and misogynist reductionism. On social media, my experiences of abuse are themselves a site for further exposure and violence.

The thing is, only one man has to beat you, rape you and a thousand more on the internet can make you relive it at any time with a fleeting keystroke. Through gendered violence you are bestowed a vast and irrevocable body of trauma that is trivially summoned, even multiplied in the casual omnipresent misogyny of the internet and the world.

This is the exponential mathematics of gendered violence, and a fundamental scaffold for the exponential violence of social media.

Take Secret, a vile app for friends and friends of friends to make anonymous semi-public comments – in Silicon Valley, often the lewd and boring fantasies of lewd and boring tech bros but also a cesspool for them to indulge consequence-free in misogynistic attacks (that these phenomenons coexist is not an accident). So someone there leaves a post about their desire to punch me in the face, and over 40 people click the little "heart" next to it. Cruel form of irony, a heart.

And then someone writes that I need just need to get "hugged by a penis," and some of the people participating in it know for a FACT that I've been beaten and raped before. (Of course, even if they didn't have this knowledge, this is a reasonable bet to make – that I am one of the millions of women who have been punched in the face and raped.)

And again in the fact of all of those 40 hearts what is visible is not me as a person, but visibility of abuse of me, to hurt me and make me scared and silence me – not to tell my story, not to "create awareness," not to propagate my work, but transparently to inflict

violence against me.

And then there's the fact that visibility around abuse can itself incite even more abuse. And because of the nature of Secret we know these are not random people in far away places, but friends of friends, professional peers, people who live in my city, for whom consuming and amplifying violence against me is a hobby, something they do on their phone while waiting in line.

This is the "visibility," the "exposure" I'm supposed to be excited about?

Visibility as a Social Warning

One of the functions of misogynistic terrorism in technology is the creation of highly visible cases of "what happens to women who speak out," and in fact, to highly visible women in general. This terrorism ranges from highly-publicized, concentrated attacks on women who speak up about sexual assault and harassment, to the frequent public, media-sanctioned attacks on high-ranking women executives.

Women who speak out in tech, who are seen and heard, who succeed — are publicly punished; attacked en masse on male-dominated social platforms, abused and harassed by highly visible men, attacked by anonymous trolls, slandered in the press and relentless chased out by management. The tech media contributes to the performance of public punishment by writing about that punishment in dozens or hundreds of click-bait articles, feeding the consumption of womens' pain devoid of critical analysis or solidarity.

The visibility I receive is part of a public punishment of me. This public punishment draws more abusive visibility of me in a vicious cycle. It also isolates me from people – like other women in tech – who should be allied with me. However, they (wisely) attempt to distance themselves from me in order to avoid the punishment I am receiving, or to gain cishet white male approval by being amenable to, or outright participating in this punishment.

Of course, making you into an object fit for performances of public punishment takes some work of propaganda and transformation of the victim into a simplified object of derision and scorn. This is accomplished in my experiences by subjecting the target to misogynistic reductionism.

For example, even though what my work is what makes me deeply hated, it is also immediately erased in the construction of myself by others in the act of publicly punishing me. All my writing, the company I started, the activism I have done, the critique of tech culture I've produced, and my history in the field and community – are erased in portraying me as "a hysterical Twitter personality," an "attention-starved little girl," a "social justice warrior"… a "public figure." My engagements with others in the industry – which are often extremely nuanced – are reduced to me "violently attacking" and "bullying".

I become a caricature – all the nuance of my being and my work taken away.

This too, is part of the punishment.

Internet Famous

I'm "internet famous," or so they tell me, even though I am "internet famous" mainly as a mechanism of violence against me. Even though "internet fame" is ruining a lot of my life. It forces me to avoid public places and events. It comprises my safety in my own neighborhood, city and industry – even in my travels. It makes me scared of what will happen to me, what will happen to the people around me, who are friends with me, who love me, who are my family. It puts deep strains on all my relationships as I struggle with the anxiety and stress,

with being "present" in physical space, with trusting the people around me. It makes me question the intentions of people who get close to me. It invites people into my life who seek only to use me for some scrap of the non-existent power and camaraderie they think "visibility" gives me, when really it is mainly powerlessness and loneliness that results. As personal "friends" turn my life into stories for the companies they work for, as one "journalist" recently did to me, and as people who stalk me begin to use increasingly complex techniques – like creating false identities and submitting pitches to my company under those identities – I become more fearful and unwilling to let anyone in.

My experiences of visibility are also worsened and complicated by mental illness (yes, and that invalidates NOTHING), a history of physical and sexual abuse, and other sites of marginalization and trauma that I choose not to share in public spaces. At the same time, it is imperative to note my ability to continue despite the myriad threats of industry visibility are enabled in large part by my financial, class, cis, educational and white privilege. The fact that I was given any space at all to speak out, and that I have been listened to in any way, is a function of privilege. The fact that I have not (yet) been physically harmed is an outcome secured in large part by privilege. The fact that I was able to start my own company and thus sustain work and intellectual fulfillment after my career dead-ended is a product of privilege. The fact that I am able to take certain security precautions and thus protect myself in some ways from stalkers and harassers is the output of many privileges combined. The fact that I have many allies that care about me, even when I struggle to recognize and connect with them, results from many of those same privileges.

So I'm thinking: how in the fuck are we as an industry going to make existing in public, having an opinion in public, being successful in public, being angry in public, being a human in public, safe for people here who DON'T have my privileges, who will be and are targeted and attacked with an order of magnitude more force than I have been?

Infinitely More Dangerous

GitHub, Hacker News, Twitter, IRC, r/programming, Slashdot and other social tools are vital online hubs for our industry. Representation and visibility on those platforms is VITAL for the progression of minorities in tech, for diversity, for the success of social justice politics in our field. Visibility is an ESSENTIAL part of our work – not the only part, not the sufficient part, but one essential piece. As I've written before:

> These tools are necessary to the social, intellectual and economic capital and commerce of our industry: open source code repositories are "the new resume" for technical contributors; social upvoting sites regularly drives tens of thousands of pageviews to individuals and companies; micro-blogging services help to organize and amplify the affect, the anxieties and day-to-day opinion wave of our community. They can make or break careers.

Yet our experiences of those hubs are moderated by gender, race, sexual identity and intersecting other factors. These hubs are often sites of violence, erasure and marginalization. The EXPERIENCES we have on the communities that our industry RUNS ON, that we are expected to build careers on, are vastly different. And it's not just that the experience of these online tools are different, but that the experience of visibility itself – occupying public, observable space in the industry – is itself different, and infinitely more dangerous.

The frameworks of minority exceptionalism, "better representation," "bootstrapping," – frameworks through which conceive industry change and minority progress – don't offer an answer to this issue. To the fact than when we DO "make it", "make waves," "break through," "succeed", become "visible" – we are less safe, less respected, less secure than before?

What can "Leaning In" do for us when once we do succeed by its metrics, unending public abuse awaits us? What happens when we finally establish ourselves on platforms, and then are chased from them? When success means needing security? When we are punished mercilessly for the very representation we are told to seek? When "representation" is what we need, but "visibility" destroys us?

How the fuck does your "meritocracy" explain this?

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>>31251717 (OP) #
Good.

If you have been following the Twitter, you'll see that a witch hunt is now underway. They recognized that most /pol/ accounts were black bitches. So now any Twitter accounts that aren't college educated white girls are outed as being fake. It's the perfect response to #solidarityisforwhitewomen

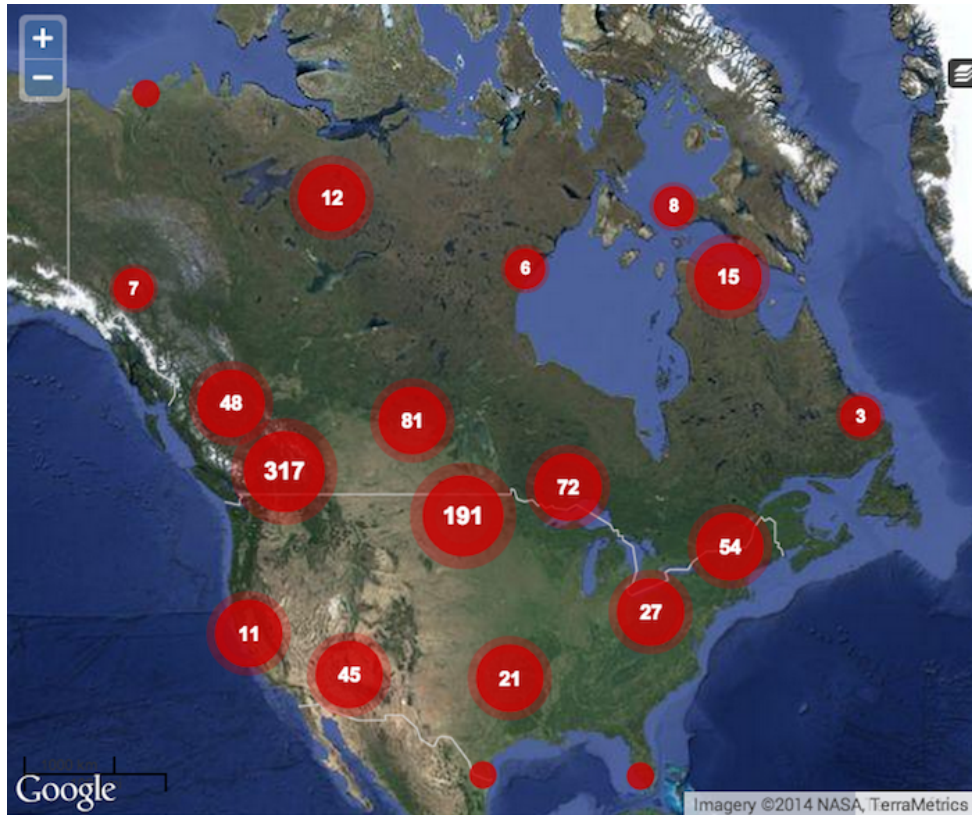>make them hate and distrust each other.

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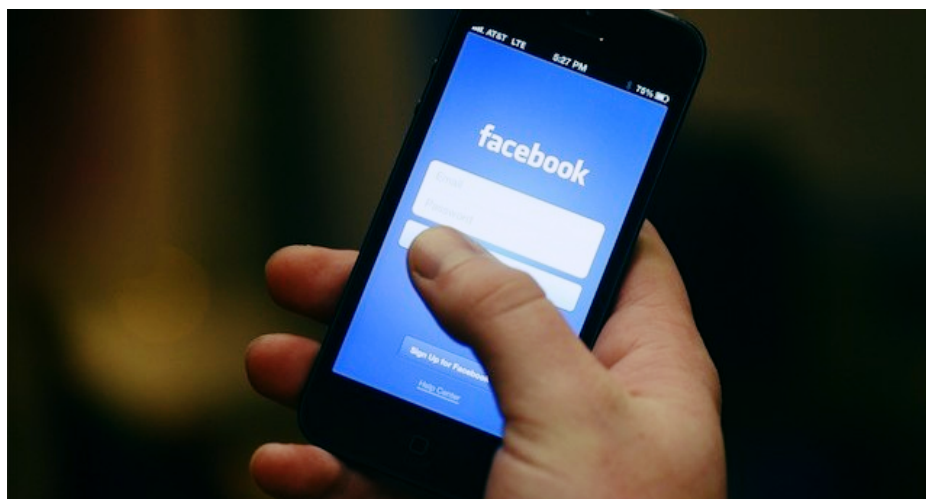misogynoir-in-social-media)

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