

This is a pre-print version of Lumsden, K. and Morgan, H. M. (2017) 'Cyber-Trolling as Symbolic Violence: Deconstructing Gendered Abuse Online'. In N. Lombard (ed). *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Violence*. London: Routledge, Chapter 9.

## **Cyber-trolling as symbolic violence: deconstructing gendered abuse online**

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### **Abstract**

*Trolling is often enacted against women and minority groups on social media platforms, such as Twitter, as a means of limiting or undermining participation in virtual space(s). This chapter considers trolling as a form of gendered and symbolic violence. Drawing on an analysis of British national newspaper reports focusing on cases of trolling, we demonstrate that trolling can be viewed as a 'silencing strategy'. Trolling leaves its victims in a powerless position as freedom of expression for perpetrators is defended via social media ideologies. The initial promise of social media – to provide democratizing spaces – in practice creates space for the percolation of misogynist, sexist, racist, and/or homophobic attitudes. The chapter focuses on trolling in the form of rape and death threats, women as doubly deviant when deemed to be entering men's (online) domain(s), responses to trolling, and feminist activism.*

### **Introduction: cyber-trolling**

Media reports and public debates concerning the 'dark side' of the web focus on various forms of online abuse, such as trolling (Phillips, 2015), RIP trolling<sup>1</sup> (Marwick and Ellison, 2012), hate crime (Citron, 2016), cyber-bulling, e-bile (Jane, 2014a), revenge porn, stalking, and sexting. Police and criminal justice agencies report difficulties in keeping up with the rise in the number of reports of online crime and abuse, while there are currently ineffective means of legislating against and/or investigating and prosecuting cases (Bishop, 2013). Social media corporations, such as Twitter, have been called to task for their slow responses to dealing with online abuse. In 2015 the Chief Executive Officer of Twitter, Dick Costolo, was quoted as

This is a pre-print version of Lumsden, K. and Morgan, H. M. (2017) 'Cyber-Trolling as Symbolic Violence: Deconstructing Gendered Abuse Online'. In N. Lombard (ed). *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Violence*. London: Routledge, Chapter 9. stating in a leaked memo that 'We lose core user after core user by not addressing simple trolling issues that they face everyday ... I'm frankly ashamed of how poorly we've dealt with this issue during my tenure as CEO. It's absurd' (Griffin, 2015).

This chapter considers trolling as a form of gendered abuse and symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002) as it is performed in relation to women on social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Trolling can be likened to a form of cyber-bullying and involves the sending or submission of provocative emails, social media posts, or 'tweets' (Twitter messages), with the intention of inciting an angry or upsetting response from its intended target, or victim. In contrast to visibility, anonymity has been deemed important for making trolling possible in a variety of online spaces (Hardaker, 2010; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016) and this form of online bullying is often committed incognito. Trolling can also attempt to hijack and disrupt the normal interactions and communication practices and also to 'oust' the victim from participation in public forums of debate. As Williams (2012) writes:

Trolls aren't necessarily any more pleasant than haters, but their agenda is different – they don't just want to insult a particular person, they want to start a fight – hopefully one that has a broader application, and brings in more people than just the object of their original trolling. The term derives from a fishing technique – say your stupid thing, watch the world bite.

Different categories of trolls have been identified. According to Bishop (2013: 302), those 'transgressive messages designed to harm others for the sender's gratification and others' discomfort are called "flame trolls", and those designed to entertain others for their gratification are called "kudos trolls." Mantilla (2015) identifies 'gendertrolling' as distinct from forms of

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trolling which more generally attempt to disrupt or hijack online interactions. 'Gendertrolls' have a different motivation and 'gendertrolling is exponentially more vicious, virulent, aggressive, threatening, pervasive, and enduring than generic trolling ... gendertrolls take their cause seriously, so they are therefore able to rally others who share in their convictions ... [and] are devoted to targeting the designated person' (Mantilla, 2015: 11). New forms of media can also 'exacerbate issues surrounding sexual violence by creating digital spaces wherein the perpetration and legitimization of sexual violence takes on new qualities' (Dodge, 2015: 67). The most prominent reported form of abuse or 'gendertrolling' targeted at women online involves rape threats and/or death threats. 'Rape culture' can be seen as re-emerging within popular discourses over the past five years and is 'a socio-cultural context in which an aggressive male sexuality is eroticized and seen as a "healthy", "normal", and "desired" part of sexual relations' (Keller et al., 2015: 5; Herman, 1978). It can be defined as:

A complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women ... condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm... In a rape culture, both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, as inevitable as death or taxes. (Buchwald et al., 2005: xi)

Jane (2014a: 535; 2014b) notes that 'such discourse has become normalized to the extent that threatening rape has become the *modus operandi* for those wishing to critique female commentators'. Online abuse both redeploys existing manifestations of 'rape culture' and intensifies them due to the speed at which images and written communications can be shared online (Shariff and DeMartini, 2015). In this chapter, we are concerned with those instances where trolling crossed the boundary from an exchange of teasing remarks or humour, to sustained abuse by one or more individuals, and which can be viewed as a form of gendered

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Advice to victims on how to respond to trolling includes such statements as: 'do not feed the troll' (Binns, 2012) and 'ignore the troll'. The implications implicit in this advice for dealing with trolls is that victims should be silenced. This is particularly a problem in relation to women, whom, we argue, have become particularly susceptible to online gendered and symbolic violence by cyber-trolls and whom are being advised, implicitly or explicitly, to 'put up and shut up', reminiscent of advice given about responses to physical and mental, especially domestic, violence, in the past.

### *Chapter overview*

In this chapter we discuss key themes identified within a recent literature review and ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987) of 175 British newspaper reports on of trolling (Lumsden and Morgan, forthcoming). We focus on how the themes we identified fit with wider discourses around trolling and their implications in deconstructing gendered abuse online. The core of the discussion focuses on 'gendertrolling' and gendered 'symbolic violence' in the form of rape and death threats, body shaming and female incompetence, the framing of women in online spaces, the advice given to victims of trolling and the responses to it so far. We draw on Bourdieu's (2001) concept of 'symbolic violence' and the work of feminists to deconstruct gendered/deviant interactions on Twitter. We argue that greater social scientific attention must be paid to the social aspects of information and communication technologies in terms of (gendered and other) social inequalities and communications and interactions online, which act as 'symbolic violence', to address the growing 'dark side' of the web and social media and to inform the policy and practice developments required to address this form of abuse. We consider that the same old everyday feminist problems are manifested in different, but just as

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### **Gendered and symbolic violence**

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), and the work of feminist writers including Angela McRobbie (2004) and others (Adkins, 2004; Skeggs, 2004), are useful for analysing the ways in which 'symbolic violence' is enacted upon women (and minority groups) on social media. Bourdieu's work has relevance for feminism and analysis of gender relations, although as Adkins (2004: 3; Moi, 1999) points out his social theory itself had 'relatively little to say about women or gender... with most of his writings framed pre-eminently in terms of issues of class' (although an exception is found in Bourdieu (2001)). His work, however, offers 'explanatory power' that is not provided elsewhere (Skeggs, 2004: 21). This includes linking objective structures to subjective will; his 'metaphoric model of social space'; and his methodological insights, including his focus on reflexivity (Skeggs, 2004: 21).

By drawing on Bourdieu's work, we can 're-cast symbolic violence as a process of social reproduction' (McRobbie, 2004: 103). Social inequalities (classed, racialized, and gendered) are thus 'perpetuated as power relations directed towards [online] bodies and the "dispositions of individuals"' (McRobbie, 2004: 103). These dispositions also reflect Bourdieu's theorization of 'taste'. 'Symbolic violence' denotes more than a form of violence operating symbolically. It is 'the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002: 167). Examples of the exercise of 'symbolic violence' include gender relations in which both men and women agree that women are weaker, less intelligent, more

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unreliable, and so forth (and for Bourdieu gender relations are the paradigm case of the operation of 'symbolic violence'). Hence, what we also want to explore is the complicity of online agents. The advice given to victims of online abuse and/or trolling involve complicity with the 'symbolic violence' enacted on them by the villain/troll, and therefore by entering into these online spaces, or 'fields' to use Bourdieu's term, we can argue that 'corporeal inculcation' of 'symbolic violence' is 'exercised with the complicity' of the individual (McNay, 1999; McRobbie, 2004). For example, as we will show below, the presence of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975[1992]) is evident via social media scrutiny of the female body by both men and women online, with women deemed to be deviant for attempting to reverse the 'gaze' onto the watchers. Therefore, violence against women in the digital realm reinforces established gender roles (as they emerge in offline spaces).

## **Examples of Trolling and Gendered Abuse Online**

### ***Rape and death threats***

As noted above, trolling most commonly involves rape and death threats directed at women who are in the public eye, such as politicians, television presenters, musicians, and feminist bloggers and activists. These examples demonstrate the increasingly prevalent 'rape culture' which incorporates aspects of popular misogyny and which entails anti-female violent expression via the threats of rape and death directed at women online. Expressions of aggressive male sexuality are therefore eroticized in the online sphere (Keller et al., 2015: 5; Herman, 1978). These instances were often related to the posting of visual images online. For instance, one report referred to the Australian DJ Alison Wonderland who:

received the abuse alongside a photo of herself sitting on the ground with her legs apart...Instagram trolls said they wanted to 'roofie'<sup>2</sup> and 'rape' her ... Thousands of

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people had 'liked' the photograph ... before the first of the offenders commented: 'Can we rape her or something please,' tagging the other with the Instagram handle ... The second responded by looping in another follower, seemingly alleging him to say: 'I would roofie her'. (Soldani B., *MailOnline*. 08 October 2015).

Social media trolls' responses to an alleged rape and assault offline, including the utilisation of the #JadaPose described below, further demonstrates the blurred lines between the offline and online worlds, and those actions which are deemed by the troll to have consequences for a victim of trolling:

A teenage girl, who discovered she had been drugged and raped at a party ... after images of the alleged assault appeared online, has become a victim of online trolling ... since Jada's story made international headlines, online bullies on social media, or so-called trolls, have shared photos of themselves imitating how the teenager appears in the pictures of her alleged attack, alongside #JadaPose. (Gander K., *Independent.co.uk*. 11 July 2014).

The stereotype of women as 'gossipy' and deviant, which draws upon (antiquated) negative images of women found throughout history and still feeds into narrow definitions of femininity that promote hegemonic masculinity and undermine women, is also evident via the use of terms such as 'witch' alongside rape and/or death threats, as the below trolling of the Labour MP Stella Creasy and the feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez, in relation to a campaign for a woman to appear on UK currency (£10 bank notes). The troll in this instance was jailed for 18 weeks and had:

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threatened to assault ... [and] called her a witch in a 'campaign of hatred'. He retweeted a threatening message ... which read: 'You better watch your back, I'm going to rape your a\*\*e at 8pm and put the video all over' ... In his next message he posted: 'Best way to rape a witch, try and drown her first then just when she's gagging for air that's when you enter' ... Later that evening he wrote: 'If you can't threaten to rape a celebrity, what is the point in having them?' ... He called the Labour MP an 'evil witch' and wrote: 'What's the odds of Criado and Creasy snuggling and cuddling under a duvet checking their tweets and cackling like witches (rape me says Caroline)'. (Williams A., *MailOnline*. 29 September 2014).

'Naked trolling', where men send women explicit images of themselves via social media, can also be viewed as a form of digital rape:

Mum-of-two Laura Allen received graphic naked images of strangers on her Facebook account. The 28-year-old therapist explains: 'The first time I logged on and saw the messages was three years ago. I only went online to see friends and was shocked when a series of naked pictures came up on my screen from a complete stranger. I tried to click off them as quickly as I could. I was humiliated by what I had seen ... Then I received another graphic picture message from this stranger with a message saying if I wanted sex I should reply to him. I deleted it but worried about who this guy was. I felt violated that he'd made me see him naked ... I received another private message, from a different man, with a picture of his penis and a message saying if I wanted to see more pictures I could email him ... It made me feel vulnerable ...' (Unknown, *The Sun*. 04 December 2013).

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***Body shaming and 'feminine' expectations***

Body shaming was also a prominent form of trolling, linked especially to the posting of images on the social media application Instagram, and also with victims receiving negative comments linked to their appearance in addition to, or instead of the aforementioned rape and death threats. The presence of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975[1992]) is evident via social media scrutiny of the female body by both men and women online. For instance, the musician Nicki Minaj was reported to have been 'mocked for her appearance' on Instagram. However, in this instance, the report highlights her response to the trolls as a form of 'public shaming', making implicit the underlying advice that she should instead have ignored or 'not fed the trolls'. Her strategy of re-posting pictures of those trolling involved the reversal of the 'gaze' to give 'fans a taste of their own medicine':

Minaj has never been one to take verbal abuse lying down, and after a string of cruel comments about her appearance on her Instagram page the rapper decided to give fans a taste of their own medicine. She had been Instagramming pictures from her brother Jelani's wedding, which she allegedly paid for in full, when someone made comments about her hair, telling her she needed to get rid of her ponytail. Minaj retaliated by going onto the Instagram accounts of people who were rude to her and posting their selfies on her account to see how they liked being scrutinised .... But following complaints she was 'bullying' people, Minaj took to Twitter to justify her actions, and hit out at the double standards she gets when she tries standing up for herself:

Lol can I just be on my own page minding my business in peace? Lmao. When I post a pic of a person dissin me I'm a bully? Lol this world... - NICKI MINAJ (@NICKIMINAJ) August, 23 2015. (Mandle C., *Independent.co.uk*. 25 August 2015).

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Like Minaj, the boss of Uber Car UK, Jo Bertram, also received comments about her appearance, and this time the report highlights that offenders are female, as well as male:

Female cabbies have also joined the attacks. One, who uses the Twitter handle 'claire bear' has sent more than 40 tweets in which she has criticised Bertram's looks and compared her to Jimmy Saville, the disgraced BBC DJ and presenter. (Henry R., *The Sunday Times*. 05 July 2015).

### ***Women as incapable or incompetent in relation to their profession***

In addition, comments from trolls also included links to what is viewed as normative expectations for displays of femininity in the public sphere. For instance, this report below demonstrates how women are viewed as 'incapable' in relation to various professions, and how femininity is incompatible with capability:

Apprentice finalist Leah Totton has been 'devastated' by internet trolls claiming she is not a real doctor ... The stunning 25-year-old has also suffered online abuse about her looks as well as creepy demands to expose herself for the cameras. Vile trolls have accused the ex-model of misleading Lord Sugar about her medical qualifications – leaving her distraught ... And others have gone on her Facebook fan-page to claim her medical degree gives her nothing more than the 'courtesy title' of doctor. The hate-fuelled postings include one from Andrew Miller, who wrote: '*You won't win. You're showing off too much pink lipstick, not enough competence and skills...dying to know how on earth you have become a qualified Dr by the age of 24 ...*' She has also been subject to a torrent of taunts about her looks from bullying men. Micky McGinnis said:

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'Go on Leah, get your t\*\*ts out'. And Rakin Islam wrote: '\*cough eye candy \*cough\*'.  
(Hill P., *The People*. 14 July 2013).

### ***Women as 'doubly deviant'***

The examples given above also indicate the sexist and misogynist abuse directed at a woman who is viewed as 'incompetent' by men in terms of her occupation and gender, and participating in a field typically associated with men and masculinity. In this sense, women who entered spaces typically deemed to be a 'man's domain' were viewed as 'doubly deviant' (for instance deviant for being online and deviant for daring to partake in a male-dominated field or occupation). Often, it was women's lives in the offline context which then were utilised as a rationale for trolling as online abuse via Twitter. This was the case for the television presenter Sue Perkins who received abuse after rumours (later confirmed as untrue) spread that she would be taking over from Jeremy Clarkson as the presenter of BBC's Top Gear programme:

Sue revealed to fans on her social media account earlier this week Top Gear fans had been 'wishing me dead' after it was rumoured she was being lined up to take a leading role in the motoring show. She wrote: 'Guys, post the utterly fabricated story about me & Top Gear, my timeline has been full of blokes wishing me dead ...' 'This morning someone suggested they'd like to see me burn to death.' (Thistlethwaite F., *Express Online*. 17 April 2015).

### ***Responses to trolling: silence, public shaming and 'pitchfork democracy'***

Media discussions tended to centre on how the victim and/or their supporters responded to incidents of trolling and online abuse. In many cases, reports indicated that the victims had opted to leave Twitter permanently or temporarily in order to avoid abuse. Implicit in this

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approach to dealing with cyber-trolling is a kind of blame, which encourages victims to accept responsibility for and act on the abuse by removing themselves from the online space in which the attack occurred, perhaps denying them opportunities to use social media platforms for information sharing, networking, engaging in social discourses. This is reflected in movements to address abuse on social media, for instance the campaign #TwitterSilence:

Celebrities went into Twitter lockdown yesterday to protest against vile trolls on the website. Thousands of users observed a 24-hour silence yesterday in a backlash against bomb threats sent to women. The move came after TV historian, Mary Beard, 58, called police when she became the latest victim of the hate campaign. (Jorsh M., *Daily Star*. 05 August 2013).

Moreover, as highlighted above the adage of 'do not feed the troll' has been employed as a form of advice for anyone at the receiving end of online abuse. This 'silencing strategy' can be viewed as encouraging the complicity of victims in the act of 'symbolic violence'. As the feminist activist Caroline Criado-Perez notes, if they attempt to respond to trolls, women are viewed as 'seeking victimhood':

'Don't feed the trolls'. So tenacious is this mantra's grip on our collective conscious that any deviation from the one true anti-trolling path results in a barrage of advice which basically amounts to two words: 'shut up'. The theory, like that strange childhood belief in the invisibility of those who close their eyes, being that if you don't react, the troll can't hurt you – or at least the troll will get bored and go away... To some perhaps, this response proves the adage; by talking about abuse we were 'feeding' the trolls, so we got what we deserved. (Criado-Perez C., *Independent.co.uk*. 07 March 2014).

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A satirical blogger, described in this article as a troll, also highlights the response that offending trolls receive is akin to being pursued by an 'angry mob' who are out to reap justice. The instance of Brenda Leyland that he refers to involved her committing suicide after being confronted by a Sky news reporter with regards to her trolling of the parents of missing child Madeleine McCann:

now his name is public, Ambridge receives death threats every day. He says: 'They say they're going to come round with baseball bats in the middle of the night or rape my wife ...'. 'It's not satirical bloggers like me we should be scared of – it's the screeching, hysterical mob. When these people descend it is brutal and in Brenda Leyland's case it was fatal. *It's pitchfork democracy by the mob and it's a dangerous thing*. It is grim, unchartered territory. It's like the middle ages again – burn the witch, kill the heretic. If you just happen to be in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong comment, then you can pay dearly for it ...' (Daubney M., *The Sun*. 31 January 2015).

Challenging the actions of the troll is portrayed negatively in media reports. This was hinted at above in the response of Nikki Minaj to body shaming on Instagram. It is also reflected below when fans of the blogger Kat Blaque opted to challenge the trolls directly:

Against Kat's wishes, fans began posting negative reviews and comments on Kenneth's personal and work pages, which only caused him to escalate his abuse. (Bolton D., *Independent.co.uk*. 30 September 2015).

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Dunham announced earlier this week that she received hateful comments after sharing a photo of herself in her boyfriend's underwear, labeling the response as 'verbal violence' ... Moderator Whoopi Goldberg did not share her opinion about Dunham's assessment, however, she did say that people should know what they're facing on the Internet in this day and age. '*The minute you put yourself out there in someone's underwear, you can't be surprised,*' Goldberg said. (Graham RF., *MailOnline*. 02 October 2015).

### ***Feminist activism online: challenging the trolls***

It is important to note that recent work also highlights how feminists and women have utilised social media to respond to sexist treatment and discrimination. Most notable examples include the #EverydaySexism Project which includes a website (set up by Laura Bates in 2012) and Twitter page, both of which catalogue instances of sexism experienced on an everyday basis across the globe. Keller et al., (2015) focus on the ways in which girls and women use digital media platforms to challenge the rape culture, sexism and misogyny they experience in everyday life. A special issue of *Feminist Media Studies* (2015) also highlights the use of feminist hashtags to 'expose the transnational pervasiveness of gendered violence, creating a space for women and girls to share their own experiences and, through doing so, challenge

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However, the dangers feminists can encounter in relation to the 'threats of gendered violence that occur within online spaces themselves' are also highlighted (Berridge and Portwood-Stacer, 2015: 341). Thus, for women utilizing the public space of the internet, there is a double-edged sword in that it promotes freedom of expression and provides a space for feminist activism, while it also presents the risk of a backlash from potential trolls as a means of curtailing women's appropriation of, and participation in, online spaces. As Keller et al., (2015: 5) note, 'anyone who challenges popular misogyny puts themselves at risk of becoming the subject of sexist attacks and abuse'.

### **Discussion: Trolling, online violence and complicity**

In the media discourses of trolling presented above, the denigration of the female victim is viewed as a form of 'self-conscious irony' (McRobbie, 2004), and victims are advised to remember that 'no harm is intended' and not to provoke the 'troll' further – 'do not feed the troll'. However, these strategies do not address the issue of abuse, misogyny and sexism (not to mention in other instances racism and Islamophobia), but instead require the women to be complicit in the exercise of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu's

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work is therefore useful for analysing how 'social arrangement along gender lines takes shape within... media... by means of habitus adjustment to ensure conformity with the contemporary requirements' of the field of Twitter or other social media sites/platforms (McRobbie, 2004: 108). We can view social inequalities on Twitter, epitomized in communicative interactions/relations such as trolling, as a further example of the 'feminization' of the post-feminist production and reproduction of social divisions (Adkins, 2004: 7). New forms of social media and online media, such as Twitter, thus play a key role in these new forms of social classification.

Trolling also sits within the wider social and cultural context of the rise of 'lad culture' (see Phipps and Young, 2015), where sexist and misogynistic language and treatment of women is lauded and admired by peers, flagrantly displayed online in sites such as Lad Bible, and forms of racist and sexist trolling on Twitter and other social media sites. Trolling must be viewed within this wider context, as a means of silencing women's voices online and their participation in 'virtual public space', resulting in the heteronormative masculinization of virtual space. We see this in relation to women and technology throughout history, for instance female cyclists and then in women's adoption of the motor car (the stereotype of the incompetent 'woman driver' still exists), and like the online abuse faced by women, this misogyny and sexism can be viewed in the vein of attempts to curtail female participation and presence in the public democratic sphere, and women's mobility – whether physical travel in the case of the bicycle or car, or virtual travel vis-à-vis online communication and messages. We see the virtual becoming reality.

Therefore, the time has come for media framing of trolling to stop promoting virtual space as something separate and detached from the 'real world'. Given how closely it is now intertwined

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with our everyday social lives and social relationships, the 'virtual' is 'real', and has 'real' implications for women, ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups who more often than not are the victims of various forms of cyber abuse. This is echoed in work by feminists on women's participation in other online spaces, such as Braithwaite's (2014) study of World of Warcraft online forums, in which she argues that 'the digital and the virtual are not independent spaces' (Braithwaite, 2014: 703). Instead these are experienced as part of the everyday, and hence 'feminists and feminism are treated as threats to these virtual spaces' (Braithwaite, 2014: 703). Moreover, as Jane (2014b: 559) notes: 'E-bile's self-generative properties will also become apparent, as we see that women who speak publically about being targeted by online invective often receive more of it'.

In addition, the largest and most systematic study of Violence Against Women (VaW), which covers up to 2005 (Htun and Weldon, 2012), does not account for today's trolling or the implementation of social policy by governments to address this. It is therefore important to recognise the likelihood of the under-reporting of online violence and abuse and also the link between online and offline violence for instance in cases of domestic abuse and stalking. For instance, a report by Women's Aid (2014) indicated that 41 per cent of domestic violence victims whom they helped were tracked or harassed using electronic devices.

Online abuse, such as trolling, thus victimizes women in particular and in gendered ways. Whilst there is a developing spectrum of policing responses, online abuse contexts and settings mean that they are usually perceived as 'different' – in fact, less serious. As reports of online abuse and offences increase, there is a need for more open discussion of the policing and regulation of online space. For instance, it is now estimated that half of all calls received by police relate to online offences such as threats on social media. Twitter crimes are said to have

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doubled in the last three years (Moore, 2014). As the Head of the College of Policing, Alex Marshall, explained: 'it will not be long before pretty much every investigation that the police conduct will have an online element to it' (Moore, 2014). With the privacy and anonymity the Internet can afford users, we see traditional offences conducted from the comfort of people's own homes, and often by strangers. In addition, in many instances 'trolls' are targeting those who are already vulnerable (for instance the example of RIP trolling,<sup>3</sup> racism, sexism, islamophobia, homophobia).

The combined effects of these shades of victimization and discrimination call for action and further (feminist) research and theorizing in order to explore the myriad ways in which both female and feminist voices are constructed, received, and responded to online, and of means of tackling cyber abuse. For women, a 'geography of fear' (Mehta and Bondi, 1999), can be said to extend from the offline world to online spaces such as Twitter, comment feeds, blogs, etc. Trolling is therefore a form of 'symbolic violence' against women and a means of attempting to silence women and their participation in these online fields. We call for greater academic, particularly social scientific, attention to this problem, with the aim not only of understanding and making sense of the issues, but also informing the development of policy and guidelines for practice, for example in the same ways that legislation on revenge porn has been developed, and perhaps drawing on this new response to online violence to move towards and shape prosecutions for trolling.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter considered cyber-trolling as a 'silencing strategy' and a form of gendered 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002; McRobbie, 2005) enacted against women in online spaces, such as Twitter. Cyber-trolling mainly targets women,<sup>3</sup> and is therefore

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We drew attention to the media discourses on trolling via analysis of British newspaper reports. The very nature and structure of social media sites, both in terms of their design and the related discourses and communications they facilitate, reflect the normalization of online violence against women as an extension of or proxy for gendered violence. The act of public shaming and/or offending (vis-à-vis trolling) also leaves the victim and/or target of the troll in a powerless position. This position of powerlessness relates to the irony of the freedom of expression promised by social media, apparently embedded within ideologies and a logic of providing a democratizing space, but which in practice creates space for the percolation of misogynist, sexist, racist, and/or homophobic attitudes. For victims to abide by the message that is propagated in media and popular discourses: 'do not feed the troll', the 'corporeal inculcation' of symbolic violence is exercised not only against the victim, but also makes them complicit (McNay, 1999; McRobbie, 2004). This encourages old versions of the gendered and symbolic violence relationship to be established and upheld in online spaces, while the focus on addressing them in offline spaces continues, which essentially displaces rather than eliminates gendered violence in modern society.

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<sup>1</sup> RIP trolling consists of anonymous individuals posting offensive comments on tribute pages (set up by the bereaved) on Facebook. In this form of abuse, the identity and memory of the victim, which has been immortalized via the Facebook tribute page, is attacked or desecrated by the 'troll'. Metaphorically and symbolically this cyber-act resonated with instances of the physical desecration of grave stones.

<sup>2</sup> 'Roofie' is a slang term for Rohypnol, a sedative often used by perpetrators to incapacitate potential rape victims in advance of committing a rape.

<sup>3</sup> RIP trolling refers to vicious cyber-abuse following a death, usually targeted at or within online 'memorial' pages or 'tributes'.