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Online Othering

Exploring Digital Violence
and Discrimination on the Web

Edited by
Karen Lumsden · Emily Harmer

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1

Online Othering: An Introduction

Emily Harmer and Karen Lumsden

Introduction

In this introductory chapter, we set the scene for the edited collection by first outlining the social, political and cultural contexts which shape and seep into online communications including ‘Trumpism’ in the USA, ‘Brexit’ in the UK, and the rise of the ‘Alt-Right’. We then review studies of discrimination, harassment and hate on the Web including examples of flaming, trolling, misogyny, racism and Islamophobia, and the ways in which political organisations, activists and feminists have resisted these toxic online behaviours and discourses.

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We develop and outline our concept of ‘online othering’, situating our discussion within an overview of sociological literature and social theories on ‘othering’, ‘The Other’ and ‘stereotyping’. We argue that the concept of ‘online othering’ encapsulates the myriad power contestations and abusive behaviours which are manifested on/through online spaces (including, e.g., as racism, Islamophobia, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, ableism) and which are resisted and challenged by various social actors and groups. The concept of ‘online othering’ is a means of analysing and making sense of the myriad behaviours, conversations and discourses which seek to (re)draw boundaries in, around, and between virtual spaces, and which shape the rules and norms concerning which individuals and groups are endowed with status and legitimated to participate in these spaces, and those who are not. We then outline the synopsis of the edited volume, its contribution and aims, and the focus of each part and its respective chapters.

Online Participation, Inequalities and the Political Economy of the Internet

The Internet plays a vital role in many aspects of our social, political and cultural lives, and in the early days of its expansion there was much enthusiasm for its potentially transformative role in providing a space for individuals to construct their identities, communicate with others and share ideas and concerns (Turkle 1995; Papacharissi 2002). Early proponents of these arguments were hopeful that the Internet could operate as a virtual extension of the public sphere to deliberate on political and social issues. Much more than this, it was celebrated as a potential space where one’s identity or background could be circumvented and made irrelevant (van Zoonen 2002). In her essay, *The Virtual Sphere*, Zizi Papacharissi (2002) sought to question the ability of the Internet to promote rational public debate and enhance social life or whether its revolutionary potential would become absorbed by commercial culture. If we take into account the feminist critique of the concept of a universal public sphere, advanced by scholars like

Nancy Fraser (1990), it now seems obvious that the virtual sphere is not a neutral space and that it reflects the inequalities that are experienced in the offline world. Fraser's argument that discursive interaction within the public sphere is governed by protocols of style and decorum that are in themselves markers of status which therefore act as 'informal impediments' to equal participation, is important to consider when discussing the extent to which online participation can be thought of as inclusive (Fraser 1990: 63).

Inclusive participation can also be disrupted by the political economy of the Internet (Fuchs 2017). Political economy approaches to the analysis of communication industries focus on the relationship between the economic structure and the dynamics of media corporations (McQuail 2010). Fuch (2009) suggests that the Internet's economic model is built on the commodification of its users whereby free to access platforms essentially deliver users up as targets for advertisers. In relation to social media, he argues that there are huge asymmetries in the visibility of different content providers and he suggests that this limits the ability for social media sites to enable participation. For example, his analysis of the most viewed videos on YouTube indicates that transnational media corporations control what he refers to as the attention economy, whereby the majority of these videos are corporate music videos, meaning that the most viewed content comes from providers who already have other means of distributing their content, while smaller providers are squeezed out. He also argues that the digital affordances of platforms impact the quality of participation, for instance microblogging sites such as Twitter, where the number of characters in tweets is limited, can lead to simplistic and superficial engagement. It is therefore clear that corporations dominate social media, and the Internet's status as a capitalist enterprise means that these platforms exist to accumulate profits rather than to enable equal participation. Despite the potential for digital technology to democratise the communication process, it is clear that pre-existing social, political and economic inequalities have intelligible impacts on the ability of people to participate in online cultures, and the manner in which that participation is realised.

Discrimination, Harassment and Hate Online

It is perhaps unsurprising then that an unintended consequence of digital technology has been the extent to which some individuals and groups have used the freedom to participate online to engage in hateful or discriminatory communicative practices in these loosely regulated spaces, often hiding behind the cloak of anonymity (Papacharissi 2004). One of the earliest examples is #Gamergate, where online users systematically harassed women game developers, journalists and critics in a form of backlash against women's use of technology and participation in public life (Massanari 2017). Women in the public eye have found themselves subjected to hate crime on Twitter (Citron 2016) in the form of online harassment, sexism and trolling. Moreover, the aftermath of the Brexit vote in the UK saw a rise in reports of hate speech including racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, in both online and offline contexts (Devine 2018; Komaromi and Singh 2016; Awan 2016). These instances also highlight the intersectional nature of online hate as studies indicate that the majority of victims of online Islamophobia tend to be female (Feldman and Littler 2014). The reasons given for this include women being more likely to report online abuse and also in offline cases the greater visibility related to items of clothing (such as the hijab) (Gerard and Whitfield 2016). The evolution of the Internet demonstrates that the affordances of digital media technologies often serve to replicate and perpetuate the social inequalities that people already experience. This is underscored by the work of Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) which shows how existing prejudices about social differences are built into the very architecture of the Internet at source, which ultimately serves to reflect and perpetuate existing inequalities. Her study of the Google search engine reveals that the algorithms used by the company are based upon and perpetuate harmful racist and misogynistic stereotypes. Similarly, scholars have demonstrated that the nature of programming languages used to write digital code can be used to express misogyny (Easter 2018). Moreover, Massanari (2017) argues that the design, culture and policies of platforms such as Reddit encourage certain toxic behaviours which can suppress equal participation.

The Internet has also been implicated in othering and discrimination in people's everyday domestic lives. Concerns have been expressed over its use in crimes such as identity theft, fraud, buying illicit substances or weapons, stalking and technology-facilitated domestic abuse (Powell and Henry 2016; Dragiewicz et al. 2018). *The New York Times* reported in 2018 that smart home technology and connected home devices which monitor and regulate thermostats, locks and lights are being used as 'digital tools of domestic abuse', and a means for harassment, monitoring, revenge and control (Bowles 2018). Moreover, various smartphone apps can also be used by perpetrators to stalk and coerce in intimate partner violence. Chatterjee et al. (2018) found that over 200 apps and services offer 'would-be stalkers' a variety of capabilities, including basic location tracking to harvesting texts and secretly recording video. In the design of these technologies, it is rarely considered how they could be used to control, coerce and/or stalk, by individuals who have sinister or harmful motives. Digital media have also enabled incidents of cyberbullying and harassment, 'revenge porn' or image-based sexual abuse (McGlynn et al. 2017; Smith, this volume) whereby personal images are shared online without the person's consent, and 'Deepfake' pornography where digital images are manipulated to include the faces of people who are not in the original image.

Social scientists have also explored the social media phenomenon referred to as 'trolling' (Phillips 2015; Binns 2012; Jane 2014a, b; Herring 1999, 2003; Hardaker 2010; Hardaker and McGlashan 2016; Marwick and Ellison 2012; Lumsden and Morgan 2017). Trolling can be likened to a form of cyberbullying 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; Hutchens et al. 2015) and this form of online bullying is often committed incognito. Trolling attempts to hijack and disrupt normative interactions and communication practices and also to 'oust' the victim from participation in public forums of debate.

Trolling developed from early Internet users' 'flaming' of online forms and bulletin boards (Donarh 1999; Kiesler et al. 1985; Lea et al. 1992; Lee 2005; O'Sullivan and Flanagan 2003; Hmielowski et al. 2014). The term is now used to refer to abuse or harassment of individuals or groups on social media sites, online comments pages, blogs and social networking. For Herring et al. (2002: 372): 'Trolling ... differs from flaming in that the goal of flame bait is to incite any and all readers, whereas the goal of a stereotypical troll is to draw in particularly naive or vulnerable readers'. In her study of self-identifying 'subcultural trolls' in the USA, Phillips highlights trolling's relationship to the wider media cultural landscape. For instance, trolls can engage in 'media fuckery', which is the 'ability to turn the media against itself' (2015: 2). This is accomplished by amplifying or inventing a sensational news story, i.e. 'fake news'. In this sense:

Trolls ... fit very comfortably within the contemporary, hypernetworked digital media landscape. Not only do they put Internet technologies to expert and highly creative use, their behaviours are often in direct (if surprising) alignment with social media marketers and other corporate interests ... In short, rather than functioning as a counterpoint to 'correct' online behavior, trolls are in many ways the grimacing poster child for the socially networked world. (Phillips 2015: 8)

Prominent forms of abuse targeted at women online which are often part of trolling behaviour/s include rape threats and death threats. 'Rape culture' can be seen to have re-emerged 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. 2016: 5; Herman 1978). Jane (2014a: 535) notes that this discourse has become normalised to the extent that 'threatening rape has become the modus operandi for those wishing to critique female commentators'. Mantilla (2015) identifies 'gendertrolling' as distinct from forms of 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 legitimisation of sexual violence takes on new qualities (Dodge 2015). Moreover, 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).

As Lumsden and Morgan (2017) note, trolling can cross 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 and/or 'symbolic violence' or a 'silencing strategy'. 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 implication implicit in this advice for dealing with trolls is that victims should be silenced. This is particularly problem in relation to women, who have become particularly susceptible to online gendered and symbolic violence by cyber-trolls and who are being advised, implicitly or explicitly, to 'put up and shut up', reminiscent of advice given concerning how best to respond to gendered violence and sexism in the past (Lumsden and Morgan 2017).

The term trolling is also problematic in that it is now widely utilised by the media and others to also describe the posting of offensive messages per se by an individual in addition to the more proactive, deliberate and organised hate campaigns engaged in by groups of individuals, in a pre-meditated manner. As Hardaker argues trolling has become a 'catch-all term for any number of negatively marked online behaviours' (2010: 224) which is why there is a need to reconceptualise how we understand abusive and hateful behaviours online, as we do in this edited collection via the concept of 'online othering' (which will be outlined in more detail below). As well as being used to describe the above, trolling is drawn on to describe individual messages posted online which are deemed by the recipient and/or audience to be defamatory or abusive. Hence, with these instances of trolling, the question of intent is important in the creation of the communication, as is the

interpretation of the message by the recipient and wider audience—as ‘in the eyes of the beholder’. These above analyses of online abuse also highlight the tension between ‘libertarian and communitarian values, in that harassment often arises in spaces known for their freedom, lack of censure, and experimental nature’ (Herring et al. 2002: 374; Herring 1999). For these reasons, trolling as a catch-all term is problematic in that it does not acknowledge the implications and impact of online abuse and toxic interactions on individuals and groups in the way that our concept of ‘online othering’ permits.

A Threat to Democracy? The Rise of the Alt-Right and Trumpism

The contemporary political landscape also gives us pause for thought. In contrast to the early optimism about the use of digital technologies for the advancement of democracy, recent events have instead seen some disturbing trends which, rather than enhancing democratic deliberation, have in fact come to threaten democracy itself. The rise of neo-fascist politics in online spaces characterised as the so-called Alt-Right has been the focus of much attention (Hawley 2017; see also Winter, this volume), in addition to the rise in various forms of hate speech such as misogyny, racism and Islamophobia (Citron 2016; Awan 2016). The ‘Alt-Right’ is a political movement which came to prominence in the wake of the 2016 US Presidential Election. According to Squirrell (2017a), anecdotal evidence largely suggests that the movement incorporates individuals from the ‘manosphere’, anti-progressives from the #GamerGate movement, 4chan trolls, far-right conservatives, racists and conspiracy theorists. There have also been concerns about the ways in which social media in particular have endangered the political process itself, including the rise of ‘Trumpism’ online (Bessire and Bond 2017; Squirrell 2017b). Rumours abound about the alleged interference in the US presidential election and the EU referendum in the UK by foreign powers, and the potential impact of so-called fake news coming from Russian and Eastern European Troll farms, which platforms like Facebook and Twitter have struggled to challenge.

We have already seen that the economic imperatives and design of most mainstream Internet platforms have implications for the reproduction of existing social inequalities, but this is further exacerbated by the reticence on the part of these platforms to regulate themselves in any way, citing concerns about the chilling effect on freedom of speech and expression which are therefore easily exploited by those who wish to continue using cyberspace as a vehicle for engaging in online othering and discrimination. Police and criminal justice agencies report difficulties in keeping up with the rise in the numbers 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 stating in a leaked memo: ‘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).

Facebook, for example, has been criticised for failing to ban groups engaging in the sharing of sexual images of children (Crawford 2017). Twitter proved to be reluctant to moderate content at all, only adding an ‘in-tweet’ reporting function for inappropriate or hateful content in 2013 after pressure from users who had experienced harassment and threats of violence. Platforms have also been accused of discrimination. YouTube faced a backlash from some of its LGBTQ content creators for allegedly filtering out videos about same-sex marriage and trans issues (Cuthbertson 2018). Twitter has also been urged by disability charities to do more to help disabled users report hate speech against them on the site, with claims that it remains too difficult to report disability-related abuse. According to Muscular Dystrophy UK, the lack of a clear option to label abusive tweets based on disability is preventing more reporting of such hate speech (ITV News 2018). In addition to demonstrating an unwillingness to moderate content, there have been a number of incidents which show the complexities of moderating platforms with a global reach. For example, Facebook has faced intense criticism for failing to curb anti-Rohingya propaganda

in Burma at a time where state-sponsored violence has already been used to devastating effect against this minority Muslim community. Facebook has blamed a lack of moderators with the right language skills for its difficulties (see Rajagopalan et al. 2018). It is clear that the scale of the problem facing these technology corporations is proving impossible to respond to and regulate effectively. There have been some positive moves though. As discussed previously, Twitter introduced a report function and Facebook have made some efforts to moderate hate speech and hate groups but there is clearly a long way to go.

Political Organisation, Activism and Resistance to 'Online Othering'

Despite the seemingly overwhelming examples where online sites and technologies reinforce and perpetuate social inequalities and contribute to the further exclusion of already marginalised groups and individuals, it is important to remember that the advent of such digital technologies offer significant opportunities for resistance and political organisation in order to counter some of the unfortunate consequences of online othering. Feminist groups have demonstrated a sustained commitment to organising online despite its many challenges (see, e.g., Keller et al. 2016; Williams 2015). There has been a proliferation of activism, online blogs, groups and press reports, which highlight the trolling and abuse experienced by women online. As Korn and Kneese (2015: 208) note, feminist scholars have demonstrated the ways in which 'online interactions over particular social media platforms coincide with existing inequalities and hierarchies situated in specific communities' and also the ways in which feminists, as counter-publics, can garner support and attention via social media. Specific blogs and platforms have also been created in order to share experiences and raise awareness of feminist causes such as the Everyday Sexism Project, founded in the UK but which now has sites in many different languages which allow women to share experiences of sexism or harassment online (Bates 2014). The proliferation of social media hashtags designed to challenge social and political inequalities is another example. The #MeToo movement calling

out sexual misconduct in media industries, and the #Blacklivesmatter movement began as online campaigns (Tynes et al. 2016) demonstrating the potential for digital technologies to be used to effectively challenge the status quo.

Keller et al. (2016) 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, to create a space for women to share their experiences and therefore to challenge commonsense understandings of abuse and promote solidarity (Berridge and Portwood-Stacer 2015). Examples include black feminists' use of social media to fill the gap in national media coverage of black women's issues, including how race and gender 'affect the wage gap to the disproportionate amount of violence committed against black transgender women' (Williams 2015: 343). Khoja-Moolji (2015) highlights the use of 'hashtagging' as a form of activism which is encouraged by campaigns for girls' empowerment, while Eagle (2015) focuses on their use as part of a campaign to improve women's use of transport and public space, without the fear of sexual harassment. In addition, research by Parker and Song (2006) on young South Asian and Chinese communities in Britain's use of websites demonstrates that Internet discussion forums can act as witnesses to social inequalities and through sharing experiences of racism and marginalisation, an oppositional social perspective may also develop. They demonstrate how the campaigns stimulated by users of these websites challenged mainstream institutions and began to alter the terms of engagement between the ethnic groups and wider society.

However, Berridge and Portwood-Stacer (2015: 341) highlight the dangers that feminists can encounter in relation to threats of gendered violence that occur within online spaces. For women accessing the public space of the Internet, it 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. (2016: 5) note, 'anyone who challenges

popular misogyny puts themselves at risk of becoming the subject of sexist attacks and abuse’.

Many of the above studies focus more specifically on the experiences of feminist scholars and feminist activists already in the public eye (and with an online presence). In addition to this work, we also need increased social scientific analysis of the everyday experiences of women (and men) utilising various forms of online and digital communications, which this edited collection addresses. For example, in a study by Sills et al. in which they interviewed young people about their exposure and responses to ‘rape culture’ on social media, their participants conveyed a sense of ‘living within a matrix of sexism: that is, an environment in which sexism, misogyny, and elements of rape culture merge as a normalized backdrop to everyday life’ (2016: 6). These behaviours then are becoming normalised on and offline, and for these young people, ‘victim-shaming’ and ‘slut-shaming’ were viewed as commonplace and every day.

In the context of this rapidly changing and politically contested social media landscape, this edited collection explores the othering and discrimination propagated and encountered by individuals online and in social media contexts and cultures. It problematises and analyses the dichotomy presented between real and virtual worlds (and spaces) by exploring the motivations behind certain offending and othering behaviours, and the impact this has on the targets of online abuse and hate speech. This includes the extent to which ‘online othering’ constitutes a new phenomenon and how the motivations for committing forms of cyber-abuse, cyber-hate and othering relate to the expression of these attitudes and behaviours in the offline context. It explores the extent to which forms of information and communication technologies facilitate, exacerbate and/or promote the enactment of traditional offline offences (such as domestic abuse and stalking). Finally, the collection addresses the role of the police and other agencies in terms of their interventions, and the regulation and governance of virtual space(s).

The edited collection takes an interdisciplinary approach to these phenomena. Contributors come from a variety of disciplines including sociology, communication and media studies, psychology, criminology, political studies, information science and gender studies. Contributions

address the ways in which various groups and identities are subjected to othering in online environments, and those groups and cultures doing the othering. This includes examples from a variety of online media and mediums including news websites, social media platforms (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube.), blogs, and forums such as Reddit and 4chan. Some contributions explore othering across multiple contexts. In addition, chapters cover historical and theoretical perspectives on ‘online othering’ and empirical research using a variety of methods. Contributions also consider the implications for the regulation of the Internet by police and prosecutors, policy and practice. Topics covered in the book include: trolling and gendered online abuse/harassment; sexting and revenge porn; the rise of the Alt-Right and Trumpism; Men’s Rights Activists; cyberstalking; online racism; transphobia; and the policing and prosecution of online hate crime.

‘Online Othering’, Agency and Resistance

if there were no other, one would invent it. (Cixous and Clement 1975: 71)

In this volume, we develop and propose the concept of ‘online othering’ as a means of describing and making sense of the myriad behaviours, interactions and discourses which seek to (re)draw boundaries in, around, and between virtual spaces, and shape the rules and norms concerning which individuals and groups are endowed with status and legitimated to participate in these spaces, and those who are not. Furthermore, we recognise the various strategies and responses to the experiences of ‘online othering’ thus ensuring that the agency of ‘others’ and means of resisting and responding to prejudice and discrimination online (i.e. via activism) are accounted for. The concept of ‘online othering’ also allows us to examine the justifications and motivations of those who perpetrate or enact online discrimination, prejudice, hate and/or abuse, ultimately ‘othering’ those who are deemed to be ‘them’, ‘outsiders’ or members of the ‘out-group’. ‘Online othering’ can be done remotely, ‘at a distance’, with little regard to the