Silenced by Free Speech:
How cyberabuse affects debate and democracy

The early days of the internet promised much. Posting online seemed to offer a freedom from expectation and prejudice. In the words of the New Yorker cartoon, on the internet, nobody knows you're a dog. We believed nobody knew your gender, age or race either. Your beauty or lack of it was of no account, your mind was disembodied, pure spirit, freed from the hidebound judgements of society.

You could remove the mask you wear every day, revealing your true nature online to other disembodied spirits in a way that you never could to your family or colleagues. Perhaps you would find a new community to live in online, a community that thinks and feels as you do.

Or instead of revealing yourself, you could create a new self. You could play with your identity more easily than playing with your hair colour, you could have a whole wardrobe of new selves if you want them.

The internet offered freedom from the space constraints and word counts of newspapers, as well as from their gatekeepers, political stances and editorial guidelines. Here, anyone could be their own publisher for free, and could be heard all over the world without having their opinions edited down to fit a hole at the bottom of a column or a gap in a 90-second feature. You can't fill the internet, so you could say everything you always wanted to say, as many times as you like.

Three promises: freedom from prejudice, freedom from gatekeepers, freedom from ourselves. It all seemed to add up to a truly democratic world where every debate was possible, without borders of geography, community or expectation. In cyberspace, we would shake the kaleidoscope to create new combinations, new ideas, new friendships and new solutions that the plodding, hidebound old world had failed to see.

What became of these promises?

As it turned out, the earliest areas of cyberspace were not empty, virginal plains. They reflected their creators: overwhelmingly male, and with a bias towards men who may have struggled with social communication offline, particularly with women. Silicon Valley quickly became known as the place where, for single women seeking romance, "the goods were odd but the odds were good". This was the culture that birthed many message boards, and later

forums, chatrooms and platforms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many resulting online environments are not nurturing of or even neutral towards women, and in some cases hostile. The tech community is also majority white, and American, leading to specific values built in to the architecture of some of the most popular websites. Free speech is king, and it is heresy even to challenge it. Facebook's insistence on real names, although it provided a welcome counter to the anarchy of anonymity, is clearly a product of people who have never been forced to hide.

One of the earliest disappointments for those hoping to find liberation online was that we cannot cast off our identities quite so easily as it would seem. Well before the internet, Goffman (1959), proved that writers "gave away" their gender unconsciously even through text alone. Since the advent of computer-mediated communication, researchers including Coates (1993) have found gender differences in verbosity, assertiveness, use of profanity, politeness, use of emoticons, and more. In every area, habits of speech, knowledge of slang, cultural reference points all mean that online groups can be as rigidly exclusive as the Garrick Club.

The euphoria at the idea of freedom from gender roles turned into very swift disillusionment as prejudice quickly followed women online. Twitter boss Dick Costolo has publicly castigated himself for having failed to deal with abuse online (Tiku, 2015), but there is no need for him to feel guilty for inventing it. Even in the earliest message boards, when women discovered these new areas of debate, they were countered by misogynists.

By 1992, Herring (2000) noted aggressive tactics by men in online discussions, sometimes explicitly targeted at female participants. In one famous case in 1993, a user in a multi-player game used a "voodoo doll" programme to commit rapes and force other avatars to violate themselves and others (Dibble, 1993). Feminist and peace campaigner Cheryl Seelhoff (2007) first started receiving threats and harrassment via email, letter and internet bulletin boards in 1994, finally culminating in her suing eight organisations on the US religious right.

This misogyny has continued on to every platform. But in case this seems an argument for technological determinism, it is worth going further back. The idea of women having a voice and using it to challenge authority has always seemed particularly disturbing and angering to a certain group of men, and even some women. Offline, it is seen in the tedious debate, still unresolved after almost 2,000 years old, about whether or not women should speak in church. We see the dismissal of women's conversations in the eytomology of the term for a close female friend or spiritual sister, God's sibling, long since reduced to the pejorative "gossip". (Maitland, 2012)

Historically, the scold's bridle, though popularly thought of as being a punishment for nagging wives, was actually used for outspoken women, often widows who were not under the control of a husband or son, women who challenged authority, female preachers and religious dissenters. Boose (1991) describes how it combined a painful punishment, which could include lost teeth, cut mouths and pierced tongues, with a public humiliation. One version came with a bell on top to draw more attention to the victim, and in fact the shame

was intended as half the punishment, as it was in the case of the stocks, pillory and whipping post. Jon Ronson (2015) describes how vicious punishments meted out on Twitter and other platforms are the latest extension of this anger at the outspoken woman.

Like the 17th century women forced into metal masks and carted through the town preceded by "rough music"- the banging of pots and pans - the 21st century victim finds herself at the centre of a terrifying mob shouting sexual insults and threats, and calling out for others to join them in a heady rush of excitement. And just as the women "bridled" could also endure sexual assault, the online punishments can also mean more than threats.

New "punishments" meted out online include swatting and doxxing, both ways of creating offline consequences. Swatting, which has been called "assault by proxy" is the simple, though illegal, practice of calling the police and telling them there is a gunman holding a hostage at the target's house. Armed police are thus fooled into raiding the house, terrifying the unsuspecting family inside. It became a popular "prank" in the US gaming community (Alluri, 2015), where gamers often stream themselves live, thus enabling the hoaxers to see the results of their phone call as armed police suddenly break into the victim's home.

It is notable that the first British victims (at time of press still the only British victims) were the founder of the huge online female community Mumsnet, which is now feted by Prime Ministers, and one of the Mumsnet community members. Mumsnet became a target when members of 8chan, a popular message board for anonymous troublemakers, decided to set up Mumsnet accounts and troll the users. Other users identified and ridiculed them, and the 8chan members retreated back to plot serious vengeance. (Speed, 2015)

Justine Roberts, Mumsnet founder, was lucky to be away from home when police received calls about a gunman prowling around her house, but the other Mumsnet user to be swatted by the self-styled @DadSecurity was not so fortunate a few days later. She had exchanged heated messages on Twitter with the people claiming responsibility for sending armed police to Roberts' home. That night, her husband heard shouting outside, went out to investigate and found himself arrested and handcuffed. The woman herself didn't know what was happening until armed police burst in, and her two young sons woke to find police sweeping up through the house.

New Statesman journalist Barbara Speed said: "Swatting sends two messages to victims: first, that the perpetrator is willing to break the law to harass you, but also that they have enough personal information to target you at your home. In the case of the Mumsnet swattings, Roberts says that neither individual's address could have been accessed by hacking the site – both families must feel particularly spooked by the fact that @DadSecurity found them in the first place."

This relates to another new form of cyberbullying: intimidation through doxxing – the practice of publishing the target's personal details online, sometimes with a message to others to "do with it what you will". This may result in someone else phoning in a swatting, their email filling up with abuse or their bank account being hacked. Attacks may include emails or phone calls to the victims' employers, claiming they have criminal records. One female

blogger who discussed weight problems and body issues in a pseudonymous blog had numerous sites set up about her in her real name, claiming she had STIs, was bi-polar, had a criminal record for exposing herself in public, was financially irresponsible, racist and violent. A Google search for her (unusual) name resulted in so many abusive sites she was forced to put a disclaimer on her CV to explain the situation to potential employers. A Twitter account set up in her real name fantasised about rape and rough sex.

This is not a one-off. Many women have had fake dating profiles set up in their names, often by ex-partners, giving their addresses and claiming they want rough sex from aggressive men. In a 2012 case in Maryland, more than 50 men came to a woman's home demanding sex after her ex-husband placed Craigslist ads with titles like "Rape me and my daughters". Some tried to break in. In another case (Citron, 2014), a woman was bound, gagged and raped in her own home after her ex-boyfriend placed similar adverts, then had text conversations about fantasy rape with the respondents whilst pretending to be his ex-girlfriend. FA referee Connor Mayes was banned from football for three years in 2015 after setting up fake Tinder profiles for three female officials, who received comments and approaches at games and elsewhere (BBC Sport, 2016). UK organisation Women's Aid has drawn links between online and offline abuse (Laxton, 2014), and has called for Government agencies to recognise online abuse as another form of violence against women.

Whether physical abuse happens or not, the threat is still there. The victim knows they have been labelled a target and can be found, not just by the original enemy but by any other troublemaker or self-styled activist or vigilante. Again, this is not new. Even when the initial spectacle was over, the 17th century wearer of the scold's bridle was permanently labelled by her experience and, unless she left the parish, could be mocked by the townspeople at any time. A woman's good reputation, once lost, was lost forever. For today's "scolds", even leaving the platforms on which they were abused may not be enough to stop the abuse – screenshots last forever.

And doxxing firmly removes one of the freedoms the original cyberspace promised – freedom from yourself. The victim of a doxxing is exposed in every way the uploader can find. Sites like Pastebin, which allows the uploading of text documents and Reddit, a community site, both report an increase in doxxing. In a single week in 2013, Russian hackers uploaded everything from social security numbers to bank statements belonging to Beyonce, Donald Trump, Hillary Rodham, Britney Spears, LAPD chief Charlie Beck and many others. Frustratingly for victims, it may not even be illegal due to varying privacy laws around the world. (Parkin, 2016)

Swatting is still rare in the UK, so perhaps not too much can be read in to the fact that at time of going to press the only two victims were women from a women's forum.

But the Guardian is a huge and busy site, and their own "Web We Want" research (Becky Gardiner, 2016) shows their female commenters and journalists are much more likely to get abuse than men. They analysed 70m comments blocked by their moderators, usually because they were abusive or disruptively off-topic. They found female writers had more blocked

comments,with the proportion rising if they wrote in male-dominated areas such as sport and technology. And articles about feminism and rape attracted the very highest levels of blocked comments, beaten only by articles about Israel-Palestine (incidentally, the most respectful conversations concerned cricket, crosswords, horse-racing and jazz). Of the ten writers with the most blocked comments, eight were women, four white and four non-white. The other two were black men.

This tallies with my own research (2017, in press), based on a survey of 267 journalists, which found female journalists reported more insults and threats than male journalists, particularly sexual threats. Female news journalists reported more abuse than female features journalists.

This is echoed in research by think tank Demos (2014), based on more than 2million tweets over two weeks sent to a range of public figures. Amongst celebrities, politicians and musicians, prominent men received double the abuse of prominent women via @username messages. The only exception was journalists, where female journalists and TV news presenters received three times as much abuse as their male counterparts.

The message seems to be that women are tolerated in these debating spaces if they want to talk about shoes and music. They will attract a barrage of abuse if they want to trespass into traditionally male areas, such as news. Women invading the pulpit or standing up to preach in the village square found this out centuries ago. Since then, the Church of England has been stormed and (largely) won. Male bastions now are found elsewhere, and it is here where we see the worst examples of women being silenced by others' free speech.

In the preceding chapter, Wayne Noble has already drawn attention to the rape threats and insults targeted at Caroline Criado-Perez, a woman who challenged one of the world's most powerful male-dominated authorities, the Bank of England, to put a picture of Jane Austen on a bank note.

Online gamer and feminist Anita Sarkeesian found out how fiercely male gamers will defend their right to a misogynistic virtual world when she launched a Kickstarter fund for an educational video series showing how women are represented in video games. This resulted in "Gamergate" (Robertson, 2015), thousands of rape threats, death threats and abusive comments on Kickstarter, Youtube and Twitter. Two women who criticised her attackers were swatted. Sarkeesian was still a target for dozens of rape threats every week *three years later*.

Sports journalism is another area where women have struggled to find admittance, let alone acceptance. In the 1970s and 80s, women faced harrassment and discrimination when trying to report on male sports in the US (Mozisek, 2015). As late as 2004, the Scottish Football Writers' Association was still barring female guests from its annual dinner, and when Jacqui Oatley commented on a game on Match of the Day in 2007, it was described in terms usually reserved for the outbreak of war (Cocozza, 2007).

Most of the mainstream institutions of sport have since moved with the times, and many women have become household names as sports journalists. But the bile that they initially provoked seems to still be there, albeit "only" online. Tired of being constantly told to grow thicker skins, US journalists Sarah Spain and Julie DeCaro (Merlan, 2016)recently made a video in which ordinary men were asked to read out some of the tweets they had received to highlight the kind of abuse they receive every day. The shocked men stuttered, blushed and apologised through messages such as "I hope you get raped again", "I hope you get beaten to death by a hockey player" and "This is why we don't hire any females unless we need our dicks sucked or our food cooked."

This is far from being only a British or American problem. Female journalists in India (Walia, 2016) suffer ruthless misogyny on every platform. Liberal and secular women are often abused by right-wing nationalists, and religion, race and caste are often triggers. In one instance, after a broadcast of a religious debate, the mobile phone number of Sindhu Sooryakumar, a news anchor, was posted on a Whatsapp group with instructions to harrass her. She allegedly received more than 2,000 abusive and threatening calls.

Meena Kandasamy, a poet, writer and activist, tweeted about attending a festival where beef was served. She was threatened with acid attacks and 'televised gang-rape'. Many have deactivated their accounts, with major figures such as CNN-IBN deputy editor Sagarika Ghose, now only tweeting about programmes rather than her own views. She was active on Twitter until she decided she could no longer handle the threats of attack and rape. She said (Roy, 2014): "This is the social media version of gang-rape....They threaten you with rape and public stripping and beating. They are brave when anonymous, and hunt in packs."

In Turkey (Bell, 2015), news journalist Amberin Zaman also described her experiences of mass attacks on Twitter as "a public lynching". These online mobs are far more than an occasional mischief-loving troll.

So how do these lynch mobs form? At the start of this chapter, I referred to the promises of the internet, including freedom from the self of your everyday life, the freedom to explore a new identity with other, like-minded supportive people. This promise has been partly fulfilled. Cyberspace has allowed the coming together of minorities to form robust and energetic support groups of minorities in a way that could not happen offline except in very specific circumstances. This can be positive – transgender people, women who have suffered multiple miscarriages, victims of rare diseases, have all found knowledgeable, empathetic support in a way that would have been impossible without the internet.

However, this has also meant destructive and even criminal individuals have been able to find each other and reinforce each others' prejudices and beliefs in a way that was not possible before. Paedophiles use of Facebook's "secret groups" for swapping and discussing obscene images are an example of how a hidden minority scattered amongst a huge community of users can find each other an re-purpose a mainstream, easy-to-use platform. Former police commander Andy Baker, former deputy chief executive of the Child Exploitation and Online

Protection Centre, described Facebook as "a network of opportunity" for paedophiles (Crawford, 2016).

And when minorities find each other, with each others' support, they are empowered to be combative in a way they would never have done if they were instead constantly evaluating themselves against, and evaluated by, a wider community of ideas.

The Red Pill movement, Return of Kings, Men Going Their Own Way and other Men's Rights Movement groups (Kassel, 2016) are all examples of groups that are too extreme to exist outside the internet. They espouse a kind of angry, anti-feminist masculinity with views so "traditional" that it seems unlikely they were ever mainstream. Full of cod-evolutionary theory about women's "hind-brains", these men can be found discussing marriage in terms of "a viable sexual strategy". Closely related are other men's rights movement and pick-up artist sites such as Return of Kings, where popular posts include "How to defeat the mother hen cockblocker and keep the friend", "30 signs that an Eastern European girl isn't relationship material" (Eastern Europe seems to be seen as a region where feminism has not yet destroyed feminity and thus a key destination for men seeking white females) and "How to convince a girl to have an abortion". Under, "Ten things you must teach your future daughter", top of the list is "No girl is happy until she is a mother.... Every time school, or friends, or work are hard for a girl, just imply that her dissatisfaction will be healed when she is a successful, happy mother.".[1]

The result of these highly specialised, extreme communities of interest can be seen in the lynchmobs of cyberspace. Sometimes the cause is obvious. A journalist will be sent an @ message from a user with a large number of followers. If the journalist responds, the user makes his replies visible to his followers, which results in a large number of people chiming in. When an influential user directs his followers, this may be termed brigading, or dogpiling. An anti-semitic group recently found a new technique to label Jews, using triple brackets around their targets' usernames as a "dogwhistle" to followers to send them abuse (BBC Trending, 2016).

Sometimes the mob is organised from elsewhere. The group may be having a conversation on some other platform or forum, as the 8chan members did when trolling Mumsnet, which may be the trigger for a pile-on. Some organisations, such as the English Defence League (EDL) and the Alt Right (a largely American white nationalist movement), exist largely on Facebook pages and other online platforms. If a local newspaper publishes a story about, for example, a new mosque, then a link to the story may be posted on an EDL page, or be retweeted with an AltRight hashtag, resulting in many far-right supporters who never normally visit that news website coming purely to cause trouble. This is known as a "drive-by" (Binns, 2017, in press).

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[1] If it seems determination to silence women is more common on the right-wing, it is worth pointing out the hard-left misogynists who targeted BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg. A petition that accused her of pro-Conservative bias and called for her to be sacked was taken down by the original poster after it was overwhelmed with sexist abuse (Jackson, 2016).

However, this issue of like-minded people reinforcing each others' views does not just apply to minorities or extremists. Even if you don't seek out others like yourself, the algorithms constantly improving and tailoring your search results mean it is easy to live in an echo-chamber, only hearing our own opinions reflected back at us and cushioned from all but the smallest changes and differences. A type of confirmation bias, this may be why Facebook is so notorious for dramas over tiny incidents – we are kept so firmly within our village community that larger differences simply don't exist on the platform (Binns, 2015). Like an author's structuring of a novel, our experiences there set their own scale of reference. The liking of a mean remark or the tagging of an unflattering picture can have the same capacity for drama as the battle of Waterloo in Vanity Fair, or Emma's cutting witticism at the Box Hill picnic. [2]

Everything from Amazon's recommended products to Twitter's networks mean that while we apparently wander free through cyberspace, we are really trapped in an individual maze of our own making. In the algorithm's version of our personal paradise, we are unable even to perceive the walls around us, and are condemned to repeat ourselves forever.

It is natural to assume that our own views represent the balanced, thoughtful centre, our experience of consciousness obviously makes us the centre of our own worlds, the heroes of our own stories. British libel laws take as their reference point the opinion of "a right-thinking member of society" – we all assume we are that person. It is worth noting that the groups mentioned above – the Men's Rights Movement, the English Defence League – do not imagine that they are trying to create a brave new world, but rather are trying to return us all to the original lost paradise where women knew their place, Britain was white, or whatever. They believe they are not seeking a radical new reality, but a return to normality.

Personalised algorithms, like a well-meaning nanny, play a part in this, endlessly bolstering our confidence by reassuring us that we are right, sheltering us from anything that might upset us. It is only when the algorithm is misled that we are surprised to find the world shifting off-centre. In our comfortable, comforting little cells of cyberspace, it is not surprising that we are unsettled and outraged by an invasion from outside our walls. Obviously they are wrong – doesn't everything around us agree with us? And why should we not say so, shielded from the consequences of our actions as we are?

Anonymity clearly plays a part in trolling. Countless academics, most famously Suler (2004) have shown an interplay between levels of anonymity and bad behaviour. The ability to hide behind a mask or screen is believed to lead to deindividuation, and disinhibition.

But more recent research suggests that mobbing occurs partly because members of a social group demonstrate and reinforce their own group norms by attacking someone seen to violate these norms. Reicher, Haslam and Rath (2008), in their groundbreaking work on the development of collective hate, pointed out that from 1933 to 1939, Hitler barely mentioned the Jews in his speeches. Instead, he sought to create a heroic German identity, history and value system. Everyone outside this norm, whether through religion, disability or sexual

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[2] Despite exhaustive searches, I am unable to find the original source of this comparison of these two novels.

orientation, was then a threat to the pure, selfless and loyal Volk. Stalin also portrayed his regime of terror as a moral struggle between the honest peasant against the masked bourgeois kulak.

Similarly, some of the most extreme groups lay great stress on their morality and selflessness. Even the Men's Rights Activitists who discuss girls to "pump and dump" see themselves as moral crusaders, with a longterm plan to be strong husbands and fathers, saving proper women from themselves.

Ironically, the very freedom of the internet to liberate us from the prejudices of our geographic communities seems to both tie us in and lay us open to the far more extreme prejudices of online groups. These groups are, in a sense, "concentrated". Offline, the group members are surrounded and diluted by their many friends, colleagues and families who don't agree with their views, or only agree in a limited, qualified sense. Online, they reinforce each other and police each other, sometimes against written codes that form part of the forum membership. Because all communication is written, it can be dissected and criticised, creating a strong incentive to conform to group norms, and very strong group identities. It is these strong group identities that make it possible for women and minorities to be attacked with such vigour, and by such large numbers simultaneously.

And it is this which makes them so powerful and such a serious problem. This is an assault on democracy. Although a relatively small number of people may be acting like this, they are effectively silencing the most vocal, political women, those who have the most to contribute. They are also creating a bullish, domineering arena which mainstream women may be less willing to enter.

Although there are many famous examples, such as prominent blogger and computer game designer Kathy Sierra who cancelled all speaking engagements after a series of death threats, more concerning is the number of people who just slip away. Non-celebrities, who are not invited to pen an essay on "Why I quit twitter" for the New York Times, are also subject to being bullied into silence. My own research (2017, in press) found women and men working as journalists who were dropping stories, abandoning whole subjects or even leaving the industry because of relentless abuse. Of 88 journalists, 16 per cent said they had stopped using a platform, 15 per cent had stopped following a story or type of story, 13 per cent had started looking for another job and eight per cent had left a job. Women were more likely to say they were leaving the industry than men.

This abuse may also affect their job prospects long term. Women who find it difficult to read walls of rape threats may also be seen as performing less well, as media brands now expect journalists to promote their own work through social media.

Though a serious issue for journalism, which in turn impacts on democracy, the withdrawal of women from public engagement online will affect other areas. Many areas such as local government have embraced the tech revolution as a way of improving access, but if women lose confidence in engaging online, these areas will be affected. The women themselves will lose opportunities if they no longer feel able to network online. The confidence of young

women to enter other male-dominated areas offline, such as choosing careers in engineering or tech, may also be affected in the longer term. Philosopher Jeremy Waldron (2014) has also argued powerfully that hate speech it is an assault on human dignity that undermines the inclusiveness of a society.

How can we tackle this? The short answer is, with difficulty. The conflicts around the issue were highlighted when Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Microsoft agreed a code of conduct with the European Commission to take down hate speech within 24 hours of it being published. The aim was to target "genuine and serious incitement to violence and hatred" and specifically mentioned the Paris and Brussels attacks. The result was the hashtag #IstandUpForHate trending on Twitter (BBC Trending, 2016).

When Labour MPs Jess Phillips launched a campaign to "Reclaim the Internet", she received 5,000 rape threats on Twitter in 36 hours (Derbyshire, 2016). An online forum was set up as part of the campaign, intended to help find solutions but was rapidly dominated by a small number of anti-feminist men. Their lengthy diatribes about freedom of speech, whilst not profane or threatening, effectively drowned out the people seeking practical answers. Part of the problem is the importing of American interpretations of freedom of speech across the world along with the platforms themselves – Jess Phillips believed many of the rape threats came from the US.

So is there any hope? One glimmer comes from another outspoken masculine world – British football. Thirty years ago, racist chanting was the norm on the stands and terraces. Now, it has all but disappeared. Technical solutions, such as high-quality CCTV that can zoom in on a single seat, have helped, but the organisation most credited with the change is Kick It Out, chaired by Lord Herman Ouseley. Still active in working against all forms of discrimination, their latest campaign is Klick It Out, aimed at the hatred that is now resurfacing on social media.

Lord Ouseley says that key to their success was working with all the organisations involved in football, including football clubs, police, regulatory authorities and fans' groups.

He said: "We had to get an acknowledgement from the people at the top that there was a problem, and that they could do something about it. In social media, we have not got to that point yet."

Though he acknowledged fighting the hatred was hard, he said there was no alternative. He said: "When people like me spoke out, we got plenty of stick. I used to get phone calls in the middle of the night, people just breathing down the phone. In the end I just used to answer and make a rude remark and hang up. I lost a lot of friends. In the end someone from the National Front told me they had put my phone number up in every public convenience.

"If people don't challenge it, it's going to continue to happen and get worse."

The internet's promises have proved a mixed blessing. Freedom from prejudice and from ourselves proved never to have existed, and freedom from official gatekeepers turned out to mean lynch mobs were free to roam without restriction.

As I said at the start of this chapter, to most online organisations, free speech is king and it is heresy to say otherwise. But freedom of speech for some means silence for others. Unless the social media giants are challenged to police their areas better, the scold's bridle will stay in fashion.

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