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Beyond "Real Life": Activism and Harassment in the Social Justice Blogosphere

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Margaret Crouch and Jack Miller. Margaret, thank you for

believing in my work because I often have a difficult time believing myself. Jack, thank you

for always helping me work up the motivation to make it happen. I am fairly certain this

project would not have come to be without the two of you.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines harassment that takes place online, specifically on websites that focus on issues of social justice from a feminist perspective. The content I examine is a form of activism in which writers and readers work together to form communities online. I also examine online protests as a form of activism. As a result of these Internet publications and protests, many writers face harassment and degradation as they attempt to express themselves in virtual spaces. This thesis grapples with the extent of the harassment and offers explanations as to why it takes place. I explore these topics from a philosophical perspective and use logic as my methodology. The first explanation I provide for this harassment relates to access, publicity, and privacy. The Internet is contested space and some people do not think others should be allowed to express themselves within it. The second explanation relates to a lack of understanding between people, which can cause one to doubt another's experience.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What is a blog? The word, short for "web log," refers to a website on which an author can express herself or himself on any given subject. There are blogs of every variety: blogs about food, sports, politics, fashion, television, films, books – and every other topic one could imagine. Not all blogs are the same; not all follow a similar format. But they all appear on the Internet. Many blogs allow readers to comment on the main topic at the end of the individual posts. Some blogs have a handful of readers; some have millions of readers. For example, *The Huffington Post* is a popular progressive blog. The website features hundreds of articles a day and has thousands of contributors (www.huffingtonpost.com). In contrast, a quick Internet search can reveal many blogs with only a few readers perhaps featuring the musings of a young, anonymous, aspiring poet or film critic. According to a 2006 article in *The Economist* about blogging,

> A blog is a website where entries are made in journal style, and displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs are made up of written entries, or 'posts'. Blog entries can contain text, hypertext (i.e. links to other websites), pictures, video, and audio material. Each post has its own web address or URL, which is also known as a 'permalink'. Many blogs feature a 'blogroll', or list of other blogs, which come recommended by the author. Many blogs also offer a 'trackback' feature, which notifies the blog author, or 'blogger ' about any blogs or sites that link to that specific post. Blogs range from subject-specific blogs, and news and current affairs blogs, to personal diary-style blogs (Somolu 2007, 447).

Blogs are virtual locations in which anyone can express an opinion as long as she can access the Internet. Although this exclusion is certainly an issue, access to the Internet is becoming more and more available (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2006). Blogs are a simple, accessible way in which to publish one's work or just get something off one's chest.

Online information dissemination is quickly becoming an important source for news, entertainment, and discourse. While many new outlets scramble to provide their content online, some bloggers have contributed to online discourse for years. Whereas print newspapers and magazines can feature only a limited number of voices and opinions, blogs can be operated by anyone with Internet access. Blogs create space for all types of voices, not just the voices that the *New York Times* or *Vanity Fair* deem worthy of publication. Not only is this important in respect to political discourse and cultural critique, but it is also important in respect to academe. Academic publications are notoriously inaccessible: they are often expensive, rarely for sale in local bookstores, and often difficult to locate. The Internet, however, is widely available in most developed and many developing nations. If an individual or family cannot afford to install the Internet in their home, many libraries offer access for free or at minimal cost. Many schools and universities offer computers and Internet access to students; many businesses offer wireless Internet connections to customers. As the Internet becomes more widely used, blogs become more popular (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2006). In the United States, bloggers are more likely to be racially diverse and less likely to be white than Internet users in general (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2006). A quick search can reveal blogs about racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, fat positivity, reproductive and sexual health, and rape culture, among other topics. Bloggers from developing nations are becoming more commonly read (Skalli 2006, 35;

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Pierce 2010, 196). Voices that are rarely represented on CBS, NBC, or FOX news can now become more easily published. Although there is government regulation of Internet freedom in some countries, many brave women and men defy these rules in order to speak their minds and be heard (Pierce 2010, 196). The Internet can allow a woman from the Midwestern United States to see what a woman in the Middle East has to say about work, family, or religion. This is a new and important phenomenon.

The Internet is a place where the notions of public and private space become blurry and complicated. Blogs are mostly created and maintained in the home (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2006). However, people from across the country and across the world read this content; diatribes are often completely public and able to be viewed by anyone at any time. Anyone can read a blog and share an intimate moment with the author. Bloggers write about their experiences with rape, abuse, harassment, discrimination, sexual problems, death, and other very personal and often painful experiences. If the personal is, in fact, political, as many feminists and activists claim, these kinds of blogs are certainly political in nature. The opportunities for consciousness-raising on the Internet are practically infinite. Often, a piece on one website can spark a larger conversation about a given subject, be it rape, harassment, or any other shared experience. The public nature of the Internet makes this possible. The opportunity for an individual to so quickly connect with others in other social situations is rare; the Internet offers the chance to simply do a quick search and find like-minded individuals.

Participation in virtual spaces also has a dark side. Online harassment is an oft-mentioned aspect of modern life. Every few months, a new story seems to pop up about the horrors of "cyber-bullying" or the like. Most of the stories focus on young teenagers bullying

each other, sometimes resulting in suicide. The collective cultural response is always, "Oh, how tragic" and then prompt collective amnesia takes hold. Although these circumstances are, of course, deeply saddening, online harassment has a much wider scope and impact than the news coverage would have one believe. Online harassment comes in the form of death threats to writers and their family members, threats of rape, threats of other types of bodily harm, insults meant to psychologically damage and disparage, revealing a person's home address or phone number online, hyper-sexual commentary about one's body or physical attributes, and more (Citron 2009, 373; Filipovic, 2007).

This paper focuses on such harassment and attempts to provide explanations for its ubiquity. Some websites are particularly vulnerable to certain types of online harassment. Websites that challenge the status quo, websites that represent minority or sub-cultural beliefs, are the websites that often find themselves under attack. I will examine specific content relating to harassment and space, taken from these websites. I will also examine the vitriol that is regularly directed at these websites. The harassment exists. The questions are, whom does it impact and why does it happen? This paper attempts to grapple with these inquiries. I will also examine blogs and social networking websites as locations in which activism takes place. Often, this type of direct action can result in activists being harassed, as well.

The methodology I utilize in this paper is logic. I research and write from a philosophical perspective. I examine the blogs *Shakesville, The Crunk Feminist Collective,* and *Tiger Beatdown* in this paper in order to analyze their content using philosophical theories. Although some voices are more prominent and are valued over others, exploring small pockets of the Internet can lead to the discovery of a multitude of voices that are not

represented in mainstream media. These blogs represent a new expression of feminism; I hope to highlight the interesting work these women and men are doing online. I draw my own conclusions about this content based on logical argument and by utilizing theories related to public and private space as well as to epistemological gaps. I chose these websites because they were some of the few that published offensive content directed at them. In my observations, harassment is mentioned often on social justice blogs, but not often is the material actually posted for readers to see. This makes it difficult to critique the behavior, as it seems ubiquitous and invisible at the same time. The blogs I examined were forthcoming about the harassment; this made them obvious choices when it came to deciding which blogs to research. There seem to be only a handful of websites that actually address specifically the harassment that they experience. The bloggers I examine all posted material that directly addresses the harassment they receive. I also regularly read these blogs for personal edification, and so I am familiar with their history.

Additionally, I offer two explanations for why this harassment is perpetrated upon certain individuals and groups. The first explanation pertains to space and power. Certain people, often those with cultural privilege, feel entitled to certain spaces; they will react violently when those with less privilege do not include them or if they overtly exclude them. Another explanation involves gaps in understanding, or knowledge gaps. The gap between your experience and my experience is sometimes large and indefinable. People tend to think that simply because a certain event or phenomenon does not directly impact them, it must be a fabrication or, at the very least, an embellishment. We see this regularly in social justice discourse: a person states, "This happens to me" and another person says, "No, that did not happen to you." Now, how can the second person possibly know what the first person's lived

experience involves? Additionally, why do they think they have the responsibility and

authority to make claims and assertions about the other person's life and experience? This

attitude is a breeding ground for bigoted ideologies and is what I will explore in my thesis.

Chapter 2: Blogs

First, what exactly is a social justice Internet blog? There is no clear, concise answer to this question. These blogs are websites that focus on issues of social justice and usually contain a feature that allows dialogue between fellow readers and the author(s). Beyond these similarities, such Internet websites may have very little else in common. Many of these websites focus on feminism, anti-racism, LGBTQ issues, disability issues, fat positivity, and other topics involving oppression and privilege. Although there are undeniable constraints on access, the Internet offers a platform and a voice for those whose voices are suppressed in mainstream culture (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2006). For example, people with disabilities, some of whom are unable to march in protest, can assert their opinions online and interact with other social justice advocates, domestically or internationally. This is just one way the Internet is changing the face of grassroots organizing and activist discourse; however, this change has come with a surge of attacks upon activists and writers (Filipovic, 2007).

The blogs I have chosen to examine contain original commentary about news, culture, politics, media, and other topics of interest. They provide political and social commentary from a feminist perspective. Some focus on feminism from a woman of color perspective; some discuss issues from a fat feminist point of view. Feminism as a social justice movement has historically come under attack for representing only a certain group of people: middle-class, white, heterosexual, skinny, cisgender, wealthy women of privilege. Many women of color, queer women, fat women, and poor women are excluded when it comes to feminist discourse; these groups are not always the women who are considered relevant. Because feminism was originally based on the identity politics of white, privileged

women, in activism and feminist literature, they are not always included in conversations about what it means to be a woman (Combahee River Collective 1977, 13; Lugones and Spelman 1983, 573; Mohanty, 1991; Crenshaw 1994, 1241; Lamm, 1995; Zinn and Dill 1996, 321). These exclusions, conscious or unconscious, make it difficult to consider mainstream feminism to be fair and just. Unequal representation seems to be a common problem for feminism and other social justice and civil rights movements, as people with social advantages usually come to represent the entire group, willingly or not.

In Kimberlé Crenshaw's groundbreaking work, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991, 1241), Crenshaw coins the term "intersectionality," a term that many feminists adopt and use freely as they voice their discontent with mainstream feminism. Crenshaw's article focuses on the complicated nature of identity politics. She explains

> Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and anti-racist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling (Crenshaw 1991, 1241).

Women without certain privileges are not always represented in history, literature, or women's studies classes. They are rarely given a public platform from which to speak and represent themselves. Thus, they are often erased from the public sphere. Their voices are

silenced and their visibility is reduced. Hastily universalizing theories about what constitutes "women's experience" inevitably does damage to those who are not always considered to be "real women." Crenshaw introduces, in her article, the concept of intersectionality, which conceptualizes privilege and oppression existing in multiple levels and layers. For example, a black woman's experience differs greatly from a working-class white woman's, which differs greatly from a fat, queer white woman's, which differs greatly from that of a transgender woman of color, which differs greatly from that of a disabled woman. When we write and speak about "women" without examining what this category means and who is included and excluded, we do a great disservice to those who are *not* always included in these discourses; we also leave them vulnerable to further exploitation, violence, and exclusion.

Because white, Western feminism has an ugly history of suppressing these voices, many feminists and female advocates for social justice have criticized established women's organizations and avoided mainstream feminism (Yee, 2011). In *Feminism For Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism*, author Jessica Yee says

> We're not really equal when we're supposed to uncritically and obediently cheer when white women are praised for winning 'women's rights,' and to painfully forget the Indigenous women and women of colour who were hurt in the same process. We are not equal when in the name of 'feminism' so-called 'women's only' spaces are created and get to police and regulate who is and isn't a woman based on their interpretation of your body parts and gender presentation, and not your own. We are not equal when initiatives to support gender equality have reverted yet again to 'saving' people and making decisions for them, rather than supporting their right to self-determination,

whether it's engaging in sex work or wearing a niqab. So when feminism

itself has become its own form of oppression, what do we have to say about

it?

Many young feminists echo this sentiment. From her blog, "This Ain't Livin,'" s.e. smith

says

The feminist movement does not believe I am a human being. It dehumanises

me. It uses my body and my lived experiences for its own ends and throws me

away when it's done. I am something disposable; I am the sacrificial planking

on the hull of the feminist movement. It took me a long time to learn that I

was being left out for the sea worms to eat, not actually playing an integral

role in the movement, to learn that, fundamentally, many people believed that

'my issues' were not feminist.

The Internet offers a new medium by which women who are excluded from mainstream

feminism can voice their opinions and write articles about their experiences for the world to

read. Feminist bloggers come in (most) shapes, sizes, abilities, ethnicities, identities, and

sexualities. Blogs written primarily by women of color like the *The Crunk Feminist*

Collective and *Racialicious* are well known and popular within the feminist blogging world.

To the Other Side of Dreaming is a blog written by "two queer disabled diasporic Korean

women of color." *Shakesville* is a blog about inequality in society; the author writes from a

fat feminist perspective. There are blogs about fat fashion for women and men of color, there

are blogs dedicated to reproductive rights and anti-rape advocacy. Some blogs exist in order

to stop street harassment, and some blogs contain discourse about transgender rights. There

are blogs for queer women of color, blogs about feminism and pregnancy, blogs about

disability and awareness in social justice communities. This is just a small fraction of what exists on the Internet. Can a white, able-bodied, cisgender person know what it feels like to be disabled, transgender, or to have skin that is not white? Not personally, of course. But reading and listening and becoming dedicated to the simple act of learning are important steps. Personal accounts exist all over the Internet; a quick search will uncover a wealth of first-hand perspectives.

Some may argue that the Internet is a place of privilege itself. It certainly is. It costs money to own or access a computer; it costs to use or install the Internet. Some people simply cannot afford to be online. It takes time to opine and blog online; some people must work day jobs and night jobs just to keep afloat. There is no doubt that a class divide exists when it comes to Internet access and use. However, I would like to quickly compare the barriers experienced by those attempting to access the Internet with barriers experienced by those trying to access academic writing. Texts can be fifty or sixty dollars, if one can even find them to begin with. Without a student ID or access code, one cannot use scholarly databases to search for books and articles. A computer, although expensive, can usually be accessed at a local library for minimal or no cost. Most websites and blogs are public and do not require an access code or charge an entry fee. Does this mean that these blogs are accessible for all? Of course not. For some, though, these blogs may be a gateway to ideas, activism, and discourse that is entirely new. They may be more accessible than academic texts, for many people.

The Internet is a location of burgeoning interest for scholars and intellectuals. Internet feminism has become popular over the last several years, producing authors and public figures with new and innovative ideas about the future of feminism and social justice. Many

have written books since starting a blog or a website; for example, Jessica Valenti, Jaclyn Friedman, Samhita Mukhopadhyay, and many other bloggers have published books in part because of their popularity on the internet (Valenti, 2007, 2008, 2009; Friedman, 2011; Mukhopadhyay, 2011). Writing about abortion rights and equal pay may be on a blog that also features commentary on the pop star Lady Gaga. Young women respond to these websites and are regular contributors and commenters. These websites offer an exciting, new, younger feminism for a demographic that may be unable to relate to the "canon" of white, Western feminism. Certainly for young women of color, websites like *The Crunk Feminist Collective* or *Racialicious* show that white-dominated textbooks and classrooms are not the only places where feminist voices can be heard. The Internet is a place for the voices of those left out of the mainstream to thrive and be heard; it is an invigorating time for feminist discourse, with many new and exciting voices being raised.

On the other hand, attacks on writers and certain websites can be so violent and disturbing that moderators must hyper-vigilantly keep certain Internet users away from their site. In addition to posting original content, blog authors and moderators must also keep a close eye on their sites, ensuring that conversations stay civil. Most sites have a "Commenting Policy" in a prominent location that enlightens visitors to the recommended code of conduct. For social justice websites, the commenting policies usually require a general knowledge of "social justice 101" or for feminist sites, "feminism 101." For example, the *Crunk Feminist Collective* "about" section

> The Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC) will create a space of support and
> camaraderie for hip hop generation feminists of color, queer and straight, in
> the academy and without, by building a rhetorical community, in which we

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can discuss our ideas, express our crunk feminist selves, fellowship with one

another, debate and challenge one another, and support each other, as we

struggle together to articulate our feminist goals, ideas, and dreams in ways

that are both personally and professionally beneficial.

The creators of these sites often request that participants refrain from using offensive

language which, depending on the author's discretion, is any language that marginalizes a

group of people. For example, the use of "retarded" or "lame" is generally considered to be

derogatory to people with disabilities. Most moderators on social justice Internet sites

discourage this kind of language. If a participant is simply uninformed about an issue, other

commenters and community members may take the time to educate a newcomer about the

issue at hand, as long as the "newbie" (as they are commonly referred to) does not become

aggressive or defensive.

The *Crunk Feminist Collective* also features an "On Commenting" section on the first

page of their website, which explains

The CFC welcomes readers to comment on our posts in substantive,

challenging, and respectful ways. Blog admins [sic] reserve the ultimate right

to review, moderate, and screen comments. Offensive and/or disrespectful

comments will be deleted. Trolls and spam will be deleted–with a quickness.

By submitting a reader comment, the reader agrees to be bound by and

accepts the terms laid forth by the CFC. (*Crunk Feminist Collective*)

Most of these blogs have a similar statement posted somewhere on their sites. *Shakesville*'s

policy contains

Long Rules: Comments are open to anyone as long as they don't troll [a troll

is generally considered to be someone who derails conversations online]

and/or traffic in racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, ageist,

sizeist, or otherwise overtly objectionable commentary based on people's

intrinsic characteristics. *Differences of opinion are welcome; no one has ever*

been nor will ever be banned on a difference of opinion alone. Hate speech,

rape apologia, rape jokes and metaphors, violent imagery, threats, trolling,

concern trolling, derailing, playing the Oppression Olympics, pointless

belligerence, sockpuppeting, silencing tactics, accusations of bad faith,

disrespecting the mods, including ignoring them, telling contributors what

they should be writing about or how they should be writing about it, and/or

invoking the blogmistress' personal experience to use against her, or doing the

same to any of the contributors, mods, or other commenters, could result in

any of the following: Your comment edited to remove offending material,

your comment replaced with an incredibly sophomoric paraphrase, your

comment deleted, and/or your commenting privileges revoked (*Shakesville,*

"Commenting Policy").

In order to enforce these policies, blogs are moderated by one or more moderators, depending

on the amount of traffic the blog generates. The sites with the most visitors, or page views,

typically have several moderators. The sites with more traffic are also more vulnerable to

hacking and abuse by trolls and people who may disagree with the writers' positions. As

blogs get more and more popular, the number of attacks appears to increase (Pew Internet

and American Life Project, 2006). Thus, more moderation is needed in order to keep attacks

at bay and keep conversations on topic. As the examples above illustrate, some commenting policies are more extensive than others. Some sites are stricter about commenting and participation than others. Many just do the best they can with limited resources. Some observers may wonder if these policies are unnecessary; others may think that these small, peripheral blogs cannot possibly have enough traffic to warrant such extensive explanations of general codes of conduct. In this paper, I will show that these policies are not gratuitous; they are an earnest response to repeated instances of vile harassment and disturbing threats. If anything, these policies are mild and forgiving in juxtaposition to the harassment that many of these writers and online community members experience regularly.

Many social justice and feminist websites exist in order to offer alternative perspectives on news and culture, but their missions do not end there. These sites often aim to create a "safe space" on the internet, a place in which marginalized and exploited people can come together and have conversations away from the stigma that may be a part of their daily reality. Melissa McEwan, blogmistress at *Shakesville,* explains

> This blog is meant to be a refuge from the *entire rest of the world* where
> people who deviate in some way from arbitrary norms are ridiculed,
> marginalized, turned into punchlines, silenced, targeted, treated as *less than*,
> made to feel *not good enough*, put at real risk of physical harm, and denied
> rights, opportunities, access, equal pay, friendships, votes, *equality*.

Many of the other websites echo this sentiment, as they attempt vigorously to protect their members from outside harassment. Social justice activists often advocate for a *physical* space in which women, LGBTQ individuals, people of color, disabled people, or fat people can feel safe to express their fears, concerns, and anger; this place is one where they are not

threatened by the oppressive hegemonic forces which must be endured day in and day out. As McEwan says, she hopes that her virtual space is such a refuge. In order to create this space, she and others must be the barrier that protects and guards her website. Without this protection, the "safe space" would no longer exist. "Deviant" identities are often marginalized in the mainstream; when exploited peoples then separate from the mainstream in order to create space for themselves, they anger the dominant culture (Frye, 1983; Baskin 1969, 731). Think about all-women clubs, queer pride parades, or civil rights rallies attended exclusively by people of color – and now think of all the insults that can come along with these acts of separation. A woman who is independent or separates from men is almost always a "bitch" or a "cunt" (Frye, 1983); queers who are open about their sexuality are "disgusting" and "flaunting it" (Herek 2004, 6). People of color are accused of "reverse racism" when they attempt to separate from the dominant culture (Baskin 1969, 731). Creating a safe space, virtually or physically, is no easy task. These writers and community organizers spend their days and nights trying to foster an environment where safe spaces can exist and thrive. Just as gay pride parades, women's events, and civil rights marches are subject to insults and attacks, so too are online spaces in which "deviants" wish to separate from mainstream culture and, thus, their would-be oppressors. I will touch on this topic later; I believe that separation is integral to conversations about harassment and violence perpetrated against exploited populations.

Taking up virtual space, like these writers do, can be a form of activism. As they carve out space for themselves in the ever-expanding virtual world, they are fighting against forces that attempt to silence them day in and out. Expressing oneself, uncensored and honestly, in a world that is not interested in what you have to say is itself an act of defiance.

Creating a space in which people feel safe from these forces is also a revolutionary act. The blogs I mention in this paper are, in my opinion, creating social change. They are finding new and creative ways to challenge hegemony, not only by taking up space but also by finding ways in which to represent and speak for themselves, a luxury that many exploited people are not permitted. Sometimes, more formal protests have sprung out of blogs. In this thesis, I will also discuss an online protest that was rooted in blogging culture. Both blogging and direct actions, such as protests, on the Internet seem to draw ire from opponents of feminism and social justice. The harassment, in both instances, is addressed in this thesis.

Chapter 3: Harassment and Activism

As the Internet first began to emerge as an important forum for communication, many theorists wondered if online space would be characterized by equality. They imagined the Internet as a space where women, people of color, people with disabilities, and queer people might not be judged by their physical appearance and identities, but rather by their words and ideas. Many feminists believed that technology might provide an avenue by which to become bodiless, genderless, and raceless; thus, a level playing field could finally be achieved (Haraway 1990, 149; Crouch 2009, 27). Donna Haraway in "A Cyborg Manifesto" envisioned a new world in which her cyborg, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 1990, 149) would change the face of feminism and gender. She continues, "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (Haraway 1990, 149). Margaret Crouch, in her 2009 article, "Gender and Online Education" a 1997 Microwave Communications, Inc. (MCI) commercial entitled "Anthem," proclaimed

> People can communicate mind to mind.
>
> There is no race.
>
> There are no genders.
>
> There is no age.
>
> There are no infirmities.
>
> There are only minds, only minds.
>
> Utopia?

No.

The Internet.

Where minds, doors, and lives open up.

Is this a great time or what? (Crouch 2009, 27)

Many hoped that the Internet and other technologies would change systems of oppression and hierarchy, giving way to a new era of equality. Although online forums certainly have allowed exploited and marginalized voices a new platform, harassment continues to occur based on race, gender, disability, size, and other markers of minority status (Barak 2005, 77; Filipovic, 2007; Citron 2009, 373). Additionally,

> Other researchers have found that online discussion tends to reproduce and
> even amplify real-world gender and race hierarchies (Harp and Tremayne;
> Herring "Gender and Power"). Political bloggers of both sexes have noted that
> male bloggers tend to be more popular and influential than their female
> counterparts and, further, that the lists of the top blogs routinely exclude
> women (Glaser; Suitt; Weinberger). The Internet is "a sexist's paradise,"
> wrote one blogger. 'It's all very far from the utopian ideals that greeted the
> dawn of the Web—the idea of it as a new, egalitarian public space, where men
> and women from all races, and of all sexualities, could mix without
> prejudice' (Valenti, 2007) (Johnston, Friedman, and Peach 2011, 269).

Sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and fat phobia are all too familiar realities to those who frequently publish on the Internet.

Harassment on the Internet can range from small insults to violent threats of injury or even death. As I mentioned previously, *Shakesville* is a feminist, social justice online space

that features current political and social commentary. Blogmistress Melissa McEwan authored an entry about rape culture, a popular topic among feminist bloggers. McEwan spoke about her own rape juxtaposed with the violent rhetoric of two radio "shock jocks." The two joke about "fucking a woman to death" (*Shakesville*) and McEwan counters with the story of her own rape, when she, in fact, was almost raped "to death." She says, "I'm a bitch who was left lying in a pool of her own blood, which I later cleaned up so my parents wouldn't find out, because I was 16 years old and scared and ashamed and grew up in a culture that tells bitches who nearly get fucked to death that it's their fault." The title of this particular post is "Rape is Hilarious" and McEwan leaves this comment thread intentionally unmoderated, open for all to comment, in order to vividly illustrate the abuse she is accustomed to receiving. She explains

> That thread, ugh that thread, is what we refer to as the Unmoderated Rape Thread, where every comment of any tenor left was allowed to appear on the page, in response to my post criticizing 'shock jocks' Opie and Anthony for a bit in which one of their guests 'hilariously' talks about 'fucking to death' former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former First Lady Laura Bush.
> The Unmoderated Rape Thread is a collection of some of the most vicious misogyny, fat hatred, disablism, rape threats, and death threats you will hopefully ever have the displeasure to encounter (*Shakesville*).

In response to McEwan's testimonial about her rape, many people left comments on the site expressing support for her. But more prevalent are responses accusing her of lying, calling her profane names, and suggesting that she deserved the violence she experienced. One

commenter says, "too bad that terrible rapist didnt [sic] kill your fat ass…Cunt." Another

commenter proclaims, "Your so-called rape is a sham and you know it. You 'claim' it

because you feel it clothes you in the sort of victim halo that gives you some sort of moral

authority. What's repulsive is the glory you revel in while re-counting a bullshit rape story.

Get help soon." Yet another says, "I guess the guy who raped you somehow left his dick

behind, because you have a major pole up your ass. Pull it out and lighten up." Another

proclaims, "It is your own fault for dressing like that. Fat girls, they ruin fun for everyone."

One says, "And you are right, rape is hilarious. You fat pigs rape my eyes with your

grotesque appearance."

The comments continue: "The beauty of freedom of speech is satire, if you take that

away the world will be as ugly as the fat waste that wrote this blog," and, "The audacity to

use your own (probably made up) experiences to alert other FemNazis sickens me more than

the audio you posted. How dare you decide what anyone should listen to. You want a

scapegoat look in the mirror," and continue

> I realize you're probably an ugly, uninteresting, unfunny pig. Why else would
>
> you be here? But that doesn't mean you can ruin the lives of everyone else
>
> just because you're a fat, miserable waste that cant (sic) stop shoving food
>
> down her greedy gullet. For once, why don't you try actually using your
>
> fucking head for something other than devouring every edible thing in sight
>
> (*Shakesville*).

These fat phobic comments accompany sexually harassing statements and blatant

devaluations of women: "I don't know why, but I was just sitting here thinking….I bet some

of you feminist cunts on here are capable of giving a really good blowjob." "whats [sic] the

difference between a rape joke and raping a woman? the rape joke still has intrinsic worth after its been used once." The comments continue in this manner for pages and pages. It is important and necessary here to quote so many of these offensive comments because the sheer magnitude, as well as the content, is part of what makes this harassment so remarkable. Imagine, upon waking and opening your email inbox, these types of comments waiting for you as you begin your day's work.

As shown from these examples, harassing comments range from insulting to demeaning to violent. The comments are specifically targeted at McEwan's obvious social justice interests, fat positivity and rape awareness. Aside from hyper-vigilant moderation, day in and day out, there seems to be no way to quell or reduce these attacks. An article on *Feminists With Disabilities* critiquing the mainstream musical artist Amanda Palmer for using the concept of conjoined twins in order to promote her own music and make financial gains garnered these comments:

> 'Here is just a sampling of some of these unpublished comments from the mod queue (possible trigger warning):
>
> "What's the matter with you?"
> "cant handle it? then just fucking die!"
> "fuck u die slow nigga!"
> "ONOEZ SOMEONE WANTED TO SMACK SOMEONE SUCH VIOLENCE!!! Typical retarded comment on an idiotic, stupid, moronic, weak, and lame blog. Fucking oversensitive twits.'"

Moderators rarely let these types of comments actually surface on their sites, but they must read and delete them for hours, days, months, and years after they post an article. The original article I mentioned above, from *Shakesville,* was published in 2007. The most recent

harassing comment left on that story was in September of 2011. One of the last comments says

> I was raped several times during my childhood beginning at age 4, ending
> when I was 13, starting up again when I was in college. It was, physically and
> emotionally, very painful, moreso [sic] than your one experience.
> And I laugh my ass off at rape jokes. I find them funny.
> Grow a sense of humor, woman! To me my experiences were like stubbed
> toes. You say ouch, limp for a bit, and MOVE THE FUCK ON.

More than four years after it was the piece was published, it was still garnering abusive comments. McEwan makes a point of leaving this post open to anyone, without any form of moderation, because she uses the thread as a tool to educate those who think that online harassment is fabricated or embellished. She explains

> Some history: In 2007, I tried to take Shakesville onto its own server. For
> reasons and by means I don't pretend to know, we attracted the attention of
> some very determined (and rather notable, if you read about this sort of thing)
> spammers who registered their objection to Shakesville's very existence by
> slamming us from here to Helsinki and back again. With the assistance of an
> *extremely* tech-savvy, talented, and generous gentleman, CW…we finally
> blocked the spam.
> Our self-appointed nemeses responded by hacking the fuck out of the site.

She continues

> It was, evidently, something about the combination of a fat woman who does
> fat acceptance and anti-rape advocacy that had piqued their ire—because

every post about fat acceptance or sexual assault brought a new round of

'Fuck, the site's down again.'

The Unmoderated Rape Thread is a result of this virtual assault, occurring at a point when McEwan and her fellow moderators did not have the protection of "Google's massive firewall." She points to this conversation as an example of what feminist and social justice bloggers deal with regularly but do not reveal to the general public. They rid their online spaces of this abuse for the sake of their readership, no matter the psychological or emotion toll it takes. In response to another post in which McEwan again points out that rape is not, in fact, something to joke about, a commenter responds

Grow the fuck up or get the hell off the Internet, because you're only going to

continually get offended, be triggered, or whatever it is that you in particular

do. And no one beyond your close-minded bootlicks give half a shit what you

think, you ignorant bonehead. People can say what they want - shock, horror -

and you need to deal. On the flip-side, I guess you can continue screeching

about whatever sets you off, too, but just remember that no one with half a

brain cares. Because nothing you have said in regards to this issue was at all

new, insightful, meaningful, or relevant. The only thing anyone will get out of

this is, 'God damn there are a lot more humorless cunts in the world than I

thought there were.'

In short, I hope something pushes you far enough that you kill yourself. I'm

tired of assholes breathing my air (*Shakesville*).

The topic of online harassment is somewhat difficult to discuss and pinpoint, simply because the moderators and authors spend so much time deleting these abusive comments in order to

promote civil conversation. However, after realizing the sheer volume of abuse that some of these writers and activists experience, one cannot continue to ignore the implications of this behavior. What does it mean, for society at large, when individuals find it acceptable to direct such vitriol at a fellow human being? While many people proclaim this to be the age of hyper-political correctness, it seems not to be true of online spaces. Does this behavior reflect on greater cultural and social norms? Why are these exchanges acceptable online when they would likely be discouraged in a classroom, a restaurant, or an office? The *Crunk Feminist Collective,* in one instance, decided to take matters into their own hands and post content that "calls out" an online harasser. The perpetrator, Shayne Lee, claims to be a progressive and a feminist. He launched an attack against Dr. Tamura Lomax, of *The Feminist Wire*, a website which aims "to provide a socio-political and cultural critique of anti-feminist opinions, practices, orientations, etc." Dr. Lomax states

> Since writing my review of *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture,* entitled *"Erotic or Thanatic?: Black Feminist Criticism on the Ropes,"* originally written for *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, with SUNY Press, I have been nothing short of bullied, harassed, shamed and threatened by the author of the book, Shayne Lee, a tenured professor at Tulane University.

The following statement was published on the CFC blog, calling attention to the harassment with an open letter to Shayne Lee, authored and signed by feminists of color, including Brittany Cooper, professor and co-founder of the CFC. They say in the letter

> Sending petty, threatening text messages to a colleague who critiques your work is not revolutionary. Making immature, obnoxious, ableist, and violent

comments about colleagues on Facebook is not revolutionary. Being petulant

and rude when folks check you on your foolishness is not revolutionary.

Claiming to be a 'revolutionary brotha' while threatening to violently silence

a sister with a 'smackdown' and a 'well-deserved spanking' ain't

revolutionary.

They continue to address the harassment in detail, saying

The fact that you found it reasonable to undermine and demean Tamura's

formidable mental prowess via text message, not only reflects an unhealthy

sense of personal and professional boundaries on your part, but also a

penchant for intellectual violence. And since you can't model healthy

communication practices in public, we don't trust that you are prone to

exercise them in private either. Do you always call women who disagree with

you 'idiots,' 'mental midgets,' and 'hacks'? Intellectual and discursive

bullying is always egregious, but it is especially egregious for a Black man to

do this to a Black woman, especially when that Black man claims to be

advocating the cause of Black women.

Here the authors directly take on the harasser and give reasons for why his behavior is

problematic and contradictory. They use the blog as a tool to show their readers what kind of

treatment black feminists receive on the Internet and likely in person, even by someone who

claims to be on their side. They continue

We need allies, fellow scholars who are especially sensitive to the ways that

white supremacy and male supremacy make the pro-sex framework

advanced by white women an always difficult space for Black women to

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enter and inhabit. Then it might become apparent that we have simply

created other spaces, ones not visible to folks who are unsafe. If the

spaces are invisible to you, perhaps a whole lot of sisters peeped game at

your penchant for verbal violence and deemed you unsafe for access.

Blogs such as these are important because the authors and moderators are able to control who

is, as the CFC describes it here, "safe for access." This is impossible in many other

circumstances. Many people of marginalized populations feel unsafe when it comes to

dealing with the general public. Even the classroom, ideally a more insulated space where

intellects are developed and knowledge explored, can be a hostile environment for many

people. These blogs are a place where people can come together and feel safe.

Here not only do the Crunk Feminists explain why this harasser's actions are a

problem, they are also illustrating why their collective and the blog is so important. The

author then details ways in which the harasser could make amends for his behavior.

As black feminists, we believe transformation is always possible and should

you be open to being accountable for your behavior, you could do so in the

following ways

1. Acknowledge publicly that you messed up - It would be really valuable for

you to acknowledge publicly that threats and tactics of intimidation are not

parts of feminist praxis.

2. Apologize - It's clear that you owe Dr. Lomax an apology for both the

private messages you sent to her and the public attacks on her scholarship on

your Facebook page.

3. Amend - this includes but isn't limited to taking down the negative Facebook comments and educating yourself about why they were in fact ableist and inappropriate.

4. Action - Part of being accountable is working towards a new mode of engaging in the future. How will you behave differently should another black woman disagree with your scholarship publicly? What will you do to ensure that when other black male scholars act in a similar way that your lessons learned from this experience will be accessible for the transformation of that instance?

Not only do the Crunk Feminists call out the harasser for his attacks, but they also suggest ways in which he can change his behavior and work towards equality and understanding. They explain why his behavior is offensive and unwelcome. This kind of explanation might not be effective, or even considered in some circumstances; however, the Crunk Feminists are defining their terms not exclusively for this perpetrator but for other potential harassers who may stumble upon their blog. They are also establishing terms of use for those who are already readers and commenters at *The Crunk Feminist Collective.* These terms of access are vital to what happens in these online communities; they are also integral to the harassment that bloggers and online contributors receive. The CFC makes it abundantly clear that this behavior is unwelcome and will not be tolerated in their online space.

Beyond Finding a Voice

The Internet has more recently become a location for online and real-life protesting, in the United States and across the globe. Governments in many countries have started to

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limit Internet access because of its wide-ranging capabilities (Otterman, 2007; Tadros, 2005; Skalli 2006, 35). The recent uprisings and revolutionary action in Egypt were in part organized on social networking online sites. Not only does the Internet offer a platform for those who may not have access to mainstream media outlets, it also can be a platform for activism and action. BBC News Middle East reported that the social networking website Facebook was where the Tahrir Square uprisings in Cairo were first conceived. A Facebook event invitation was the way many people came to be aware of the protests. This political action was instrumental in ousting the former Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak. The Green Revolution in Tehran, Iran, utilized another social networking website, Twitter. On this site, Iranians were called to action and supporters from across the globe were encouraged to participate in the revolution. Twitter offers a way in which to view a person's updates immediately, or "in real time." This way, if something happens that protesters should be aware of, or steer clear of, there is a way to communicate quickly, effectively, and widely. According to Jared Keller, writing in *The Atlantic* magazine*,* Twitter also provided a way in which international supporters could participate in the protests: as the Iranian government cracked down on Twitter and started trying to control protesters' Internet usage, users from around the world were encouraged to set their location (home) to "Tehran" so that the Iranian government might not be able to easily locate and punish the protesters. It may seem like a simple gesture, but moments such as these can unite people and cross boundaries. These small connections can create a sense of global camaraderie that was impossible for previous generations who did not have access to international networking.

Twitter was also the location of protest in response to political events in the U.S. The blog posts at *Tiger Beatdown*, by writer Sady Doyle, inspired these online protests. She first

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wrote about these events on her blog and then began protesting on Twitter. The protest

involved the filmmaker Michael Moore and the arrest of Julian Assange, founder of a

website called Wikileaks. As explained by *New York Times* writer, Bill Keller, in his 2011

article, "Dealing With Assange and the WikiLeaks Secret," Wikileaks is a website that

released sensitive information about the United States government. These now notorious

"embassy cables," as they were called, made public information that

> covered the entire globe — virtually every embassy, consulate and interest
>
> section that the United States maintains. They contained the makings of many
>
> dozens of stories: candid American appraisals of foreign leaders, narratives of
>
> complicated negotiations, allegations of corruption and duplicity, countless
>
> behind-the-scenes insights. Some of the material was of narrow local interest;
>
> some of it had global implications. Some provided authoritative versions of
>
> events not previously fully understood. Some consisted of rumor and flimsy
>
> speculation.

Additionally, Julian Assange is accused of sexual assault. Activists and pundits reported that

the accusations made against Assange had more to do with the Wikileaks scandal and less to

do with actual instances of rape and assault. Some well-known men in politics smeared

Assange's accusers, claiming that they were simply pawns in the American government's

mission to arrest and prosecute Assange. For example, Keith Olbermann, a well-known, left-

leaning journalist who worked for the news outlet Microsoft and the National Broadcasting

Company (MSNBC) at the time, perpetuated the notion, via a Twitter post, that "the term

'rape' in Sweden includes consensual sex without a condom, and…named Assange's accuser

(which is generally a journalistic no-no)" (Clark-Flory, 2010). Filmmaker Michael Moore, in

support of Assange, paid a large amount of money towards his bail. From Michael Moore's website, www.michaelmoore.com, "Yesterday…the lawyers for WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange presented to the judge a document from me stating that I have put up $20,000 of my own money to help bail Mr. Assange out of jail." He continues, "I stand today in absentia with Julian Assange in London and I ask the judge to grant him his release. I am willing to guarantee his return to court with the bail money I have wired to said court. I will not allow this injustice to continue unchallenged" (www.michaelmoore.com, 2010). While there may have been other motivations in the pursuit and arrest of Julian Assange, there remained two women who accused him of sexual assault. This seemed of less importance to many journalists and celebrities who reported on the story.

Writer and activist Sady Doyle began to draw attention to these instances via her blog, *Tiger Beatdown,* and the social networking website, Twitter. On Twitter, it is possible to communicate directly with celebrities and public figures, simply by including their screen name in the message. This opens up new ways in which to communicate with the "elite." Doyle rallied anti-rape activists from around the globe and demanded that Moore and, later, Olbermann acknowledge their roles in what she calls "rape apologism." From her blog, *Tiger Beatdown*

> You know what immeasurably harms the progressive community, though, is
> rape and rape apologism. Is victim-blaming; is accuser-smearing; is the
> unwillingness of men in positions of power to consider rape a crucial issue
> that must be taken seriously. And the person who's hurting our community,
> and refusing to take responsibility for that, right now, is Michael Moore.

So thank God he's on Twitter. He is @MMFlint [his screen name on Twitter, used as a way to contact him] in fact! And here's what we're going to do: We're going to use the #Mooreandme hashtag [a "tag" enables certain posts on Twitter to be more easily found and grouped together] to tell him why what he has done and said is wrong. We're going to talk to the man. We're going to stand outside his window with a megaphone until he comes down and talks to us (*Tiger Beatdown).*

Here Doyle invokes Moore's own tactics, as his films often show him standing outside corporations' headquarters with a megaphone, trying to get the attention of the powerful people inside. She continues her call to action on her blog

We are the progressive community. We are the left wing. We are women and men, we are from every sector of this community, and we believe that *every* rape accusation *must* be taken seriously, *regardless of the accused rapist's connections, power, influence, status, fame, or politics.* We believe that rape is a crucial and central issue which affects us all, women disproportionately, and we are *sick* of being told that you should "never, ever believe" us. We believe that accuser-shaming, accuser-harassment, victim-blaming, and the suppression of rape cases all serve one distinct purpose, which is: TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR PEOPLE TO RAPE US AND GET AWAY WITH IT. To make us scared to report our rapes, even to the people we know. And we will not stand for it any more. We require — not ask, not prefer*, absolutely require* – progressive media and public figures to *stand against rape in every case.* Again, this is not negotiable. This is mandatory. This is a requirement: If you

don't stand against rape, and make that stand a crucial and central part of your

platform, we do not accept you either as a real 'progressive' or as someone

who is in any way qualified for authority or a leadership position. We will not

buy your merchandise; we will not support you; we will speak out against

you. Because a progressive movement that doesn't stand against rape isn't a

progressive movement. It's just The Man, it's just the oppressor, *it's just*

oppression, in a baseball hat, holding a camcorder.

Please tweet @MMFlint, using the hashtag #Mooreandme, until we have an

explanation from Michael Moore, and preferably an apology, and preferably

$20,000, donated to an anti-sexual-assault organization of his choice (*Tiger*

Beatdown).

After several days of accosting him on the site and begging for a response, Moore finally

appeared on *The Rachel Maddow Show* and responded to the protest and Doyle's requests. I

personally participated in this online protest and was overcome with emotion when Moore

appeared on national television and addressed these issues. Before, it would have been very

difficult, if not impossible, for someone like Doyle or me to reach Moore directly and voice

our discontent. With a few keystrokes, we were able to address him immediately, on a

website that he appeared to frequent. The response to Doyle's rallying cry was

overwhelming; massive participation in the protest continued for days. Thousands of posts on

Twitter were dedicated to this cause. The protest continued through several days and nights,

with Doyle attempting to manage and moderate the content. Not only was the response

overwhelming in respect to numbers, but it also offered individuals a way in which to be

heard individually. Often, in a public protest like a march down a main street, the primary

goal is not to represent individual opinions. This can gloss over certain peoples' experiences. With this type of online activism, both the group and the individual are equally important.

This is just one example of social justice activism on the Internet. There are more activists and writers doing exciting things with these new mediums. Unfortunately, on the other side of the spectrum, these protests seemed to inspire ire and contempt in those who disagree with the protesters' positions. During the online protest mentioned above, Doyle attempted to chronicle the threats she received in response to the protest. She writes on her blog

'Four *days*,' I said, "and yesterday the trolls kicked into high gear. I mean, I could handle it when they were just calling me a whore and posting the accusers' names in the comments. I could just delete those. But now they're creating Twitter accounts, posting rape threats, and tagging them #MooreandMe so that the feed [all of the protesters' published comments on Twitter, marked by the "tag"] is unsafe for women or rape victims to look at. And posting the accusers' names, over and over, because one of the things we're objecting to is that posting the accusers' names is subjecting them to massive invasion of privacy, you can find their names and home addresses online, and that might get them hurt or even, like, *raped, it might get them fucking raped,* by some fucked-up dangerous Assange fans, it might *make it possible for rapists to find them* and *rape them* to punish them for this. And they're tagging THAT #MooreandMe, so they can use the protest to endanger the accusers even more, so that the protest will become unsafe for the accusers thanks to the trolls and we'll stop it. And threatening to hack my PayPal [a

popular website that allows individuals to accept and process payments

without owning a credit card machine], and threatening to hack Tiger

Beatdown. And everyone saying that we believe shit we don't believe, and

yelling and calling me names and calling all of us names, and I always get

yelled at and called names, but this is like… the volume is so high. Every time

I look away there are twenty new comments and most of them are calling me

a cunt or telling me to make them a sandwich or calling me a whore or naming

the accusers or calling *all* of us whores for protesting […] And I just, it's four

days now. Four days of this. Up at four in the morning looking for rape crisis

centers that are trans-friendly so I can post links. Four days of this, and I don't

know how much longer I can keep going *(Tiger Beatdown)*.

The harassment worsened as time went on, as Doyle explains on *Tiger Beatdown*

And now I'm being accused of working for the CIA. Also on no fucking

evidence, as it turns out. *I'm* being called names, and screamed at by hundreds

of people every day, *I'm* being harassed, *I'm* being threatened, I'm scared for

my physical safety to the point that I'm looking up dudes and seeing exactly

what 'stalking' consists of in case I have to press charges, I'm being

emotionally and physically exhausted to the point that I doubt whether I can

keep going […] Every protester is being treated like they don't exist,

so that later they can act like this never happened, so that we'll disappear.

And I know that I'm a small fish. I'm just a protester. We're just protesters.

I know that whatever those two women in the Assange case are going

through, it has to be SO MUCH FUCKING WORSE. And it has to have been

going on for SO MUCH LONGER *(Tiger Beatdown)*.

Doyle very publicly recounted the harassment she experienced as a result of these protests;

she also very explicitly detailed the fear and anxiety that resulted from the harassment. I

personally watched as the events unraveled; Doyle self-reported that she became the target of

men who were known rapists. She connects her experience to the alleged rape victims, the

women attacked by Julian Assange.

A byproduct of her activism was vivid illustration of what happens to women when

they speak out against powerful men. The threats of rape, the use of violent imagery, the

relentless baiting and condescension – they all exist in online spaces. Doyle states on her

blog

WILL NOT GO AWAY. WE WILL NOT GO AWAY. Because all of those

women, all of those GODDAMNED WOMEN, all of those GODDAMNED

RAPE VICTIMS and people who file rape allegations, they ALL got scared

away in EXACTLY THIS MANNER. Using these SAME GODDAMNED

TACTICS. They all had to go away, no matter what happened to them, they

all just got scared until they went away, and for them, for *their sake,* because

of everything they suffered, I am going to stand outside of Michael

Moore's tower with my megaphone until he comes. Somebody has to

stand out here, somebody has to be *the one that just won't go away.*

Somebody fucking has to do it. Because those women matter (*Tiger*

Beatdown).

Why do women like Doyle, McEwan, and Lomax encounter such hostility when they simply express an opinion or attempt to bring attention to a cause? What is it about this type of action and writing that inspires such ire? To some, these women are overstepping their designated bounds. Blogging and online protesting by feminists and social justice advocates is action that draws positive and negative attention. Unfortunately, some people seem to think that this type of activism must be stopped.

Chapter 4: Some Explanations for the Prevalence of Internet Harassment

The kind of Internet harassment I described above cannot be explained by one, simple cause. It would be simplifying the matter and in some senses, irresponsible to assert that any cultural phenomenon can be reduced to a single cause. I think that these behavioral trends can be better understood if we consider the cultural attitudes and opinions that dominate mainstream discourse. My explanations for this behavior are not meant to be exhaustive. I think that these attitudes and actions should be studied from multiple disciplines and perspectives, in order to fully grasp the motivations of the perpetrators. I hope other theorists and scholars will think about these incidents critically and offer additional explanations. I find it disturbing that this behavior is often dismissed as general "online bullying." These attacks are perpetrated on certain people, for specific reasons. Explanations appealing to individual psychologies are inadequate. There are structural and social causes for Internet harassment of social justice blogs and activism.

I will divide my analysis of social justice blog harassment into two sections. These sections will correspond to the different explanations I will offer. The first explanation is based on the concept of access. I will explore privilege, marginalization, and how they relate to issues of access for members of the harassed groups. I will utilize the work of Marilyn Frye, Ted Kilian, and Margaret Crouch as I explore how access, inclusion, and exclusion relate to the harassment described above. In order to build on these conversations about inclusion and exclusion, I will discuss issues of publicity and privacy. These themes are closely interrelated, and I will expand on their relationship to one another in detail.

Additionally, a great deal of the harassment I have witnessed on these websites is harassment that accuses the author of fabricating her experience. As illustrated above, when

Melissa McEwan wrote about her rape, harassers and trolls accused her of lying about the experience. The women that Sady Doyle defended in her protest were accused of lying about their assaults at the hands of Julian Assange. Feminist theorists and others have thoroughly established that it is not uncommon for women to be accused of lying about rape and assault (Ullman, 2010). Why does anyone doubt the validity of such serious claims? It seems unreasonable for so many women and men to lie about such a traumatic event. However, it seems to happen repeatedly. Society remains incredulous when it comes to claims of rape, incest, assault, or other accusations of bodily violation.

Part of the reason for this, I believe, is a gap in understanding. When individuals have never experienced something and thus have no way to imagine it happening to them or someone they know, they seem less sympathetic and more prone to judgment. This gap in knowledge creates a situation in which people are unable to relate to one another. It seems that once people are able to cross this gap and discover a commonality, or a way to relate to one another, they can productively dialogue, and discourse can occur. Many obstacles block the path when it comes to bridging the knowledge gaps, however, some of which I will explore in this paper. It is my hope that by exploring these causes, we can begin to build a culture that does not violently attack and harass exploited peoples but instead create an atmosphere in which difference and understanding are not simply tolerated, but celebrated and valued.

Access, Publicity, and Privacy

What does it mean to call something "public" or "private?" Where is the line between the two? *Access* to the public sphere and public spaces are issues that scholars of political

theory, feminist theory, philosophy and global feminisms explore in great depth (Frye, 1983; Fraser, 1990; Kilian 1997, 115; Rose, 2002; Warner 2002, 49; Tadros, 2005; Otterman, 2007). Some theorists suggest that access to public space is akin to accessing power and that the denial of access to public spaces results in silencing and oppression (Kilian 1997, 115). Many theorists focus on literal public spaces, such as parks, city squares or other urban spaces, or public sector employment or government (Kilian 1997, 115; McDowell, 2002, Crouch, 2010). Some conclude that no space is solely public or private (Kilian, 1997; Crouch, 2010); this is of particular import to feminist theorists in thinking about how policies impact women in "private" spaces, such as the home (Pateman, 1987).

In her essay, "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy," Carol Pateman says, "Feminists have emphasized how personal circumstances are structured by public factors, by laws about rape and abortion, by the status of 'wife', by policies on childcare and the allocation of welfare benefits and the sexual division of labor in the home and workplace" (Pateman, 1987). Particularly for exploited populations, the home, a place traditionally considered the ultimate private space, is neither private nor safe. Pateman continues, "The private or personal and the public or political are held to be separate and irrelevant to each other; women's everyday experience confirms this separation yet, simultaneously, it denies it and affirms the integral connection between the two spheres" (Pateman, 1987). The traditional ideological division between public and private ignores the complicated relationship and connections between the two. In reality, the lines between public and private are blurry and messy; the ideological divide does little beyond reinforcing a false dichotomy. This divide ignores peoples' daily lived reality in which what is "public" and what is "private" is not always clear. Historically, this has been especially true for

women as they attempt to navigate work, home, marriage, and the family (Pateman, 1987). It is also complicated for writers trying to publish on the Internet, as they try to carve out spaces for themselves that can be considered both public and private.

Just as the home can be both public and private simultaneously (Pateman, 1987; Kilian 1997, 115; Crouch, 2010), so can the Internet. Most websites are completely public, open to view by anyone with an Internet connection and a computer. As I showed in the above examples, this leaves writers vulnerable to all kinds of character attacks. However, these posts, essays, manifestos or commentary are often authored in the home, a place considered the most private of all. Most writers are freelance workers, which means they very often work from home on various projects and are paid minimally, project by project; sometimes they are not paid at all. A post that is solitarily written in one's living room or bedroom, behind closed doors, is then published for the entire Internet world to view. The topics addressed in these posts are also considered to be "private" matters; these are matters that are often not considered appropriate for public discussion. The public/private divide is very complicated when it comes to the Internet and its contents.

The terms "public" and "private" are complex and discursively loaded. They do not have simple definitions, as I mentioned above; the typical, over-simplified discourse surrounding these terms overlooks reality and can be quite damaging in terms of politics and lawmaking. Many theorists have explored these terms and an entire thesis could be dedicated to just these two words. Nancy Fraser, in "Rethinking the Public Sphere" offers her take on the complicated nature of the public sphere. She explains that the traditional understanding of the public sphere "is that of a body of 'private persons' assembled to discuss matters of 'public concern' or 'common interest'" (Fraser, 1990). She continues, "…the bourgeois

conception of the public sphere was premised on a social order in which the state was sharply differentiated from the newly privatized market economy; it was this clear separation of 'society' and state that was supposed to underpin a form of public discussion that excluded 'private interests'" (Fraser, 1990). So, the public sphere here is defined as a collection of people or entities dedicated to matters of what (certain) people deemed "the common good." In her article, Fraser then explains that this concept of the public sphere breaks down quickly because the "common good" is often not "common" or "good" for all people. This is true especially for people belonging to ethnic and racial minorities, people with disabilities, women, queer people, and working class people. Those with the most social power dictate the "common good"; often, those with the most social power are white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied men. As a way for more people to be represented in the public sphere, Fraser re-envisions the public sphere as a place where there are many publics, where people from various social locations can find ways to use their voices and be heard and understood. The blogs I mention in this paper are examples of these small publics in which marginalized groups attempt to utilize their voices. When they do, especially in the public sphere, they are not often well received. The Internet could be classified as part of the public sphere, according to Fraser, and the blogs I focus on resemble her idea of multiple publics. These blogs also take up space in the virtual world, which is perhaps part of the reason that some people are so angered by them. The Internet is now an important aspect of virtual space, and these blogs are small publics, taking up space in this sphere. Similar to feminist protests, civil rights rallies, or queer pride parades, this taking up of space in a public sphere has the potential to deeply offend.

The lines between the virtual and real worlds are becoming blurrier all the time; I think it unwise to consider the two completely separate spheres. Just as the nature of publicity and privacy is complicated and unclear, so are the natures of the virtual world and the "real" world. These lines of division are beginning to mean less and less. Theorists speculate about the philosophical nature of publicity and privacy, questioning the very meaning of the words and what we associate with them. Ted Kilian in "Public and Private, Power and Space" says,

> [W]hile spaces cannot be categorized as inherently 'public' or 'private,' we cannot and should not collapse or eliminate the concepts of publicity and privacy. It is also insufficient to consider public and private as situated at opposite ends of a continuum. Furthermore, arguing that space is 'produced' still does not avoid the necessity of explaining how publicity and privacy operate within existing, material spaces…[P]ublicity and privacy are not characteristics of space. Rather, they are expressions of power relationships in space and hence, both exist in every space (Kilian 1997, 115).

Kilian's assertion that publicity and privacy are not simply inherent in spaces, but expressions of power within space complicates the typical conversations about what is and is not public and private. If we understand society to be a generally hierarchal system, it makes sense that spaces within society would reflect this characteristic. The Internet, an element of society and thus subject to society's ills, logically shares and perhaps replicates certain characteristics of space and power. I contend that cultural phenomena are not simply limited to the "real world." The Internet is quickly becoming as real as any other space and very real problems exist therein.

When women or exploited peoples try to occupy traditionally "male" or otherwise privileged space, they often experience some kind of backlash, in the form of insults, threats, and ridicule. Additionally, privileged people who are excluded from certain spaces often consider themselves entitled to these spaces. Privileged people see marginalized people as "open" and accessible (Crouch, 2010) and consider themselves owners of certain spaces; thus, they consider themselves entitled to react when they are excluded from these spaces (Crouch, 2010). Exclusion from "public" space by someone who should be unconditionally accommodating is the ultimate affront to those with power and privilege.

As groups try to separate from the mainstream or assert subjectivity in the face of hegemonic power, they can become the targets of verbal or physical attacks perpetrated by those with hierarchal advantage (Frye, 1983). Marilyn Frye conceptualizes and explores the outrage that occurs when women separate from men in her essay "Some Reflections on Separatism and Power." I believe these theories apply to bloggers who wish to moderate their online spaces and exclude certain individuals. These theories can apply to anyone *not* at the top when it comes to social privilege. As they attempt to separate or define themselves in ways that those with power disapprove of, they incur a particular type of wrath and anger. Frye has this to say about the woman who excludes people with hegemonic power over her, "[H]ers is the life and program which inspires the greatest hostility, disparagement, insult and confrontation, and generally she is the one against whom economic sanctions operate most conclusively" (Frye 1983). We see this hostility, disparagement, insult and confrontation happening again and again in the life of these writers. A common assertion made by feminist scholars is that women who assert subjectivity are punished for transgressing normative femininity (Frye, 1983). Excluding the powerful and the privileged from spaces to which

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they feel entitled can result in an intense backlash (Frye, 1983). The simple act of writing about one's experience can cause this backlash, as I showed earlier.

This harassment, on the street or on the web, is about dominating space and making specific populations feel unwelcome and intimidated. Also, we see here the lines between public and private as well as between the virtual world and the "real world" break down rapidly. Even when a seemingly tiny group comes together and refuses to submit to hegemonic power, those with power and privilege react and aggressively intrude on the space. It does not matter if the space is public, private, virtual, or "real life." For the privileged, these spaces are always theirs for the taking. The virtual and real worlds are occupied and utilized by people who have privilege; people with minority status are considered trespassers. As the works of Frye and Fraser illustrate, "public" does not mean for everyone what it means for people with power and privilege. These small publics that bloggers and activists try to create online are often looked upon with scorn and contempt. As Frye explained, this is because the separation from the mainstream is threatening and problematic to those who wish to retain their power. Additionally, these writers and activists are not willing to be open and accessible; they actively ban some people from their spaces and openly welcome others. This is a direct challenge to power, according to Crouch and Frye. For exploited and marginalized folks, nothing is safe or private. They must constantly navigate spaces that are not intended for them; it is made clear that these spaces are not for their use. Exploited people do not make the rules; that is the territory of the privileged. So, those with less power and privilege are constantly playing a game in which they have no right to the space in which it takes place and no way of knowing the rules. Because these spaces are maintained and managed, for the most part, by people with some kind of minority

status, the spaces are perceived as "open" and "public." Therefore, harassers can feel completely comfortable entering and perhaps disrupting these spaces at will.

A Lack of Understanding

In addition, it is my contention that harassment on the Internet and perhaps, outside virtual communication, can be attributed to a general lack of understanding between people. Because individuals obviously have different experiences and different lifestyles, it may be difficult to relate to certain types of realities. For example, a white woman can never know what it feels like to walk around in a black male body and be called words like "nigger" or be presumed a thug, a gangster, or a troublemaker. A black man will never truly know what a black woman feels like walking alone, down a dark street, getting catcalled and harassed by passers-by. Certain experiences are unique to a person's race, class, gender, or other signifiers of status in society. Although there are certainly intersections when it comes to oppressions and the subsequent manifestations of oppressions (Crenshaw 1991, 1241), some realities are simply unknowable. This does not mean, of course, that one should not attempt to understand realities different from their own, but it does mean that some people simply cannot fathom what it feels like for another to exist in our hierarchal society. Iris Marion Young calls these barriers "asymmetrical reciprocity" and says, "Each participant in a communication situation is distinguished by a particular history and social position that makes their relation asymmetrical" (Young, 1997). She explains

> Participants in communicative interaction are in a relation of approach. They
> meet across distance of time and space and can touch, share, overlap their
> interests. But each brings to the relationships a history and structured

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positioning that makes them different from one another, with their own shape,

trajectory, and configuration of forces (Young, 1997).

Young shows here that one's experience is truly unknowable for those in different social

positions. She says that there can be common ground shared between people but one's

experience is truly, solely her own. Mostly, this becomes a problem when people who have

less social power try to explain to people with more social power that they, through a lack of

understanding, are not acting in a helpful manner. Or, when they try to explain that their

actions are quite harmful. It appears that people with privilege are often completely unable to

recognize their own advantage when it comes to issues of social status. They are often unable

to grasp that their whiteness, their money, or their expressions of masculinity gives them a

leg-up in this system we call a democracy.

The concept of "epistemic injustice" (Fricker, 2007) involves, in part, the inability to

understand when someone makes a claim about her own experience. All too commonly a

person makes a claim about their existence, which only they can truly know, only to be shot

down and ridiculed by someone with an entirely different experience. Why does this happen?

Why do some people think that their experience is the only one? Most people, when pressed,

would likely say that there are certainly varying points of view. They may even relay clichés

about valuing these perspectives, despite differences in opinion. However, when someone

then begins to explain the circumstances under which they were raped, or assaulted, or

demeaned and degraded, the same people who once acknowledged a variety of experiences

now often become obstinate, stubbornly refusing to believe the veracity of these statements.

Women are often doubted because of their "emotional" nature; it is taken for granted

(by misogynists and others) that women are the more hysterical, flappable gender and cannot

be trusted because of this "natural" characteristic (Fricker, 2007). In the "Rape is Hilarious" thread from the blog Shakesville, a commenter proclaims, "Your experience of being raped is absolutely not relevant. Think of the ramifacations [sic] of your actions before you make such an emotional based argument." Here we see McEwan assumed to be a hysterical basket case, one not to be trusted. At least in this comment, the commenter appears to believe that the rape occurred. Unfortunately, many commenters do not give McEwan the same credit. One says, "You're a liar. You made up that story to further your feminist agenda. But if, by chance, you aren't lying then at least there was a time in your pathetic life when you fulfilled the only purpose!" This one leaves a little room for McEwan to be telling the truth, but not much. The anger toward her rape account grows, "For the record, you're a lying pinko-commie-feminist-bitch that has the nerve to complain about the one time in your life where you served a purpose! You ungrateful cunt!" In these two comments, it becomes clear that the authors believe that women's only use is to be fucked by a penis, willingly or not. Obviously, without the ability to grasp that forced sex is problematic, then the ability to believe someone's account of rape might be nearly impossible.

The comments continue, belittling McEwan's experience further, "Also, what proof do we have that you're telling the truth about what happened? I wonder what his side of the story would be like, hmm?" It must be particularly painful for McEwan's rapist to be invoked and for his account of the rape to be valued here in the space she claims as her own platform. More commenters seem to sympathize with her rapist, "Don't lie just because he dumped you after he was done with you. It was the best fuck you ever had." The commenters do not only sympathize with her rapist, but they seem set on humiliating her; they seem to revel in punishing McEwan for speaking out about a crime that they do not believe took place. The

comments go on, "Man, you managed to clean up all that blood even though your fingernails had been torn away? That must have been painful? Yeah, right. You lying bitch. This whole thing is bullshit. She's only trying to get her feminist friends to rally behind her." It also appears, many times over, that calling oneself a feminist is considered instant cause for a reader to doubt the veracity of one's claim. It seems as though feminism instantly transforms one into a liar. Just for good measure, a commenter sums up, "Listen you feminist whore, you're nothing but a BIG, FAT PHONY!"

The complete lack of empathy that these comments illustrate can be disturbing and unsettling. We are simply not accustomed to seeing these sentiments presented so blatantly. The impact that these accusations can have is immense. In *Epistemic Injustice,* Fricker explains, "…testimonial injustice [is] a distinctly epistemic injustice… a kind of injustice in which someone is *wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower*" (2007). This type of injustice is relentless for activists like McEwan, Doyle, the Crunk Feminists, and other writers on the Internet. As they present the events as they have experienced them, they face a constant chorus of "Liar! Liar!" from those who disagree with them.

This is not a matter of debate or intellectual difference; these women are accused of fabricating their own lived experiences. If one is not an authority on her own life, what can she possibly be an authority on? Fricker explains the term "epistemic harm," which is when

> [t]he recipient of a one-off testimonial injustice [a speaker suffers a
> testimonial injustice just if prejudice on the hearer's part causes him to give
> the speaker less credibility than he would otherwise have given, Fricker says]
> may lose confidence in his belief, or in his justification for it, so that he ceases
> to satisfy the conditions for knowledge; or alternatively, someone with a

background experience of persistent testimonial injustice may lose confidence

in her general intellectual abilities to such an extent that she is genuinely

hindered in her educational or other intellectual development (Fricker, 2007).

These comments are obviously offensive and meant to degrade, but the impact of these statements likely cuts deeper than simple offense. Epistemic injustice, as Fricker calls this, can distort a speaker's reality. It can make her unwilling to participate in public life. It can make her lose faith in herself and her knowledge. It can, and does, *shut her up*. To be doubted and interrogated about experiences so central to one's existence can cause immense harm, as Fricker explains

To be wronged in one's capacity as a knower is to be wronged in a capacity

essential to human value. When one is undermined or otherwise

wronged in a capacity that essential to human value, one suffers an intrinsic

injustice. The form that this intrinsic injustice takes specifically in cases of

testimonial injustice is that the subject is wronged in her capacity as a giver of

knowledge. The capacity to give knowledge to others is one side of that

many-sided capacity so significant in human beings: namely, the capacity for

reason (Fricker, 2007).

Philosophers and thinkers throughout history have distinguished humans from animals because of this very ability to reason. People with minority status are often stripped of this characteristic; they are doubted and devalued because they are seen as somehow lacking this ability to reason and be logical. Women are constantly accused of being too emotional for logical, rational thought; people of color are accused of intellectual inferiority in comparison to those of white, European descent; people with disabilities and mental illness are

considered incompetent; fat people are considered stupid, lazy, and unable to control themselves; queer sexuality is deviant and disease-ridden; working-class people are seen as sexually insatiable (Rubin 1984, 267; Clare, 1999; Schwartz, Chambliss, Brownell, Blair, and Billington, 2003, 1033; Fricker, 2007). These stereotypes, though different, are all ways in which exploited populations are framed as irrational, illogical, and unable to use their mental faculties. Fricker says of this phenomenon

> Many of the stereotypes of historically powerless groups such as women, black people, or working class people variously involve an association with some attribute inversely related to competence or sincerity or both: over-emotionality, illogicality, inferior intelligence, evolutionary inferiority, incontinence, lack of 'breeding', lack of moral fibre, being on the make, etc (Fricker, 2007).

The lack of believability is the common thread; it is what marginalized people must battle regularly and what people with privilege take for granted. People with hegemonic power are typically believed and taken at their word. Their experience is the one more commonly represented in film, print, and discourse – so why would anyone doubt such a "common" experience? However, those whose lives are not considered "common" and lack major representation are those who we see being interrogated and often blamed for the injustices they experience. This treatment is insidious and can seem invisible, just as these experiences are often hidden from view. Charles W. Mills, in his essay "White Ignorance" (2007), says, "Yet if one group, or a specific group, of potential witnesses is discredited in advance as being epistemically suspect, then testimony from the group will tend to be dismissed or never

solicited to begin with" (Mills, 2007). Some experiences are automatically suspect while others are not. Prejudice makes this possible.

The harassment I address in this paper, I believe, is a direct result of this epistemic gap: this inability to relate and understand when someone self-represents an experience that differs greatly from one's own. People with less social power are constantly required to put themselves in the shoes of those with privilege; the "common" representation is almost always a representation of those with considerable social power. It makes sense, then, that the people who are always represented as "common" and "normal" are unable to see outside their realities. When those with power are asked to look outside their realties and try to understand other experiences, they become angry, confused, and often lash out, as shown by the examples above. This epistemic gap creates a situation in which it is impossible for people with power to understand people without unless those with social power question their *entire reality*. Because they do not experience certain situations and thus cannot comprehend how and why they occur, their entire reality is based on a different foundation than people who do have these particular experiences. And questioning one's reality is a complicated and often unpleasant endeavor. While people without power are always asked to understand privileged positions, people with power are rarely, if ever, asked to do this. When and if they are asked to step outside their reality to understand others', they seem to be unable to fathom something that makes their reality crumble. This creates the inability to believe a person when they bring up rape, racism, harassment, or another injustice perpetrated on a specific and marginalized group. If one believes that his experience is the "common" one, then these other experiences must simply not exist, or at least be fabrications. Of course, not all people have the inability to believe the stories of those with

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marginalized perspectives. But it is a long and slow process to unlearn the things one is

taught, especially when it comes to those with power. The truth is, it seems as though most

people are just not willing to embark on such a process.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Anecdotally, I experience this type of epistemic injustice every time I go to the doctor's office. I am a fat woman. Every time I try to explain my diet and physical activity levels to a physician, she or he does not take me at my word. They constantly attribute every health problem I have to my fat, whether it is applicable or not. I am not trusted as a knower, as an authority on my own health, body, or experience. This is frightening because I know the likelihood of misdiagnosis is high. I know that if I enter the emergency room, it is automatically assumed that I do not care for myself. This assumption could have fatal consequences for me, as it could cause physicians and nurses to overlook what they may see clearly when it comes to treating thin people. I know, when I speak to these medical professionals, that I do not have the same value as a smaller person. I am not considered to be intellectually or physically capable as a smaller person. I am a type of person who is inferior, sub-par, defective in some way. This makes me less of an authority on my own experience, less likely to be believed when it comes to issues surrounding my health, and less important to hear and help. Every pound I gain makes me less worthy of basic human rights.

Obviously, this project is important and personal to me for many reasons. Most people with minority status, whatever intersecting identities they may embody, are doubted when they try to speak about the reality of their lived experience. I know this feeling intimately; it comes from family, friends, and strangers. I think academic projects can often lose touch with the humanity behind the theories we write and speak about. It is important to remember that we are not simply talking in the abstract when we write about oppression and inequality; we are talking about very real every-day occurrences. I was particularly interested in highlighting the actual harassment that happens on the Internet, because it can be so

horrible and difficult to read; it clearly illustrates how close to the surface this hatred can be.

This is not an abstract concept; this is not in the past or something that we do not see much in today's "advanced" society; this is now and this is very real. Women, people of color, queer people, disabled people, and fat people are trying to tell their stories and make their voices heard. There are people who are actively trying to shut down these voices. They are trying to silence these voices through humiliation, threats of violence, and through sheer force of will. Many people who do not belong to dominant groups in society know the feeling of being systematically told that you do not matter, that you are unimportant, that you are lying, that you are undesirable, and that you are not good enough. This consistent abuse can cause people to simply stop trying to be heard. The Internet harassment that I referenced here is just one small portion of this abuse, but it shows the element of relentlessness at work. I should mention here that I do not believe that these explanations for harassment are the only two that exist; however, I do think that mainstream discourse is less likely to offer explanations such as these in their analysis. Often, we see more consistently conversation that relies on commentary about anonymity and "online bullying" instead. These explanations I have offered here are simply two more possible explanations for some very disturbing behavior. I also wanted to highlight the type of threats that marginalized people face, since often discourse regarding "online bullying" glosses over difference and ignores who is targeted.

In this paper, I illustrated that Internet harassment impacts certain populations in ways that reflect their particular identities. I explained that writers who manage blogs and write on the Internet receive a specific type of Internet harassment. This harassment often targets these writers and uses their identities as women, people of color, queer people, people with disabilities, or fat people as a way in which to insult and demean them. I showed that the

Internet can be used as a tool for activism and for productive action, but there is often a backlash when writers and activists use the Internet in this manner. This harassment can be attributed, from my perspective, to a few causes. These writers experience attacks because they take up intellectual space online, which is mostly considered to be "male" space. Taking up space is not something that people without social power are permitted to do; it is often considered a punishable offense. This harassment is also caused by a lack of understanding between people. Because it may cause some people to question their own reality, they are often unable to place themselves in someone else's shoes in order to understand when they self-represent their experience. This can have very damaging effects on those who are attempting to speak publicly about the contested experience; it leads people to doubt rape victims, look past racism, and ignore gay bashing. More research can and should be done about Internet harassment. It will be impossible for people to truly be free to speak their minds while this harassment exists. But, as I have shown, it may be impossible to eradicate Internet harassment while prejudice still thrives "in real life."

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