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FCJ-157 Still 'Searching for Safety Online': collective strategies and discursive resistance to trolling and harassment in a feminist network

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Abstract:

This paper examines the discursive responses that participants in a network of feminist blogs developed to handle trolling in their community. Internet communities develop strategies to deal with trolls in their networks. In particular, participants provide instructions and guidance to support each other to deal with trolls and harassment, and engage in intra-community discussion about the significance or insignificance of trolls. My paper explores the practices that feminist bloggers engage in to resist silencing practices, and the ways in which the silencing of female voices does not work in these contexts. I argue that trolling and discursive responses to trolls are collectively developed and enforced. Using a case study from my research into Australian feminist blogging networks, I argue that these networks have developed particular collective responses to trolls.

‘Trolling in a feminist forum’ redux

The issues of trolling and cyberbullying are often linked in the media (see for example Brockie, 2012, which is emblematic of these discourses). Although both harassers and trolls are present as a problem for feminist blogs, I see trolling and harassment as separate issues. I take a more ambivalent approach to trolling, not assuming that trolling is always harassing, and indeed demarcating harassment as a slightly different issue. In what follows I review both the academic literature on trolling and strategies to deal with the trolls (particularly in feminist discursive contexts), and then review discourses on trolling and moderation in my interviews with participants from Australian feminist blogging networks.

My research on feminist blogs in Australia comprised interviews with 20 bloggers from around Australia between the period November 2009 and March 2010. The network that I studied was defined and delimited using the network analysis program IssueCrawler, which ensured an empirical basis to the network based upon a pattern of mutual and ongoing links between blogs in the networks. My interviewees were selected from this network. Following on from the interviews, I developed a modified grounded theory which was then used to analyse particular case studies of discussion and activism within Australian feminist blogging networks. I focus my analysis of these interviews and texts from feminist blogs to the ways that these bloggers spoke about and dealt with trolling and harassment. In this paper I generally refer to bloggers by their blog name or the pseudonym that they use for blogging, unless they have specifically requested otherwise. Names given without quotation marks are their real names. Blog names are given in italics.

In this paper, I take the position that trolling and harassment are both silencing practices (Jane, 2012), demarcated by degree and violence. Silencing practices can be defined as actions that aim to diminish the space for others in public debate. However my interest is not in showing the ways that this silencing works, but indeed the ways that it does not work, or is at least intervened in through the tactics of the networks that oppose them. My paper explores the practices that feminist bloggers engage in to resist silencing practices, and the ways in which the silencing of female voices does not work. I focus my past work on the politics of affect in feminist blogs (see Shaw forthcoming) specifically on the subject of resistance to trolling and harassment as silencing practices, and frame these practices as a collective labour among participants in these networks.

Trolling, feminist blogs, and women online

Trolling has been defined as 'the act of deliberately posting inflammatory or confusing messages on the Internet in order to provoke a vehement response from a group of users' (Cassandra, 2008: 5). The classic text from Susan Herring et al (2002) over a decade ago has been very influential in understandings of the political meanings of trolling in feminist spaces. However, Jane (2012) argues that beyond Herring et al's (2002) text, academic studies of trolls and 'flaming' routinely trivialise 'the experiences of flame targets' while defending or even celebrating the discourse of flame producers. In contrast, media texts have more fully addressed the politics of these behaviours (Jane, 2012). In 2007, Gaden wrote that feminist bloggers face challenges 'that can be frustrating and even frightening' (Gaden, 2007). Likewise, Little (2010) draws on her own experience as a blogger to argue that 'women who write in cyberspace are exposed in ways that people who present online as men are not'.

In the literature there are also a number of references to the ways in which women bloggers can resist these challenges and exposures. Gaden argues that practices such as the 'feminist carnival' are important resources for online feminist networks, generating a sense of 'safety in numbers' (Gaden 2007). The carnival refers to the practice of feminist bloggers to curate a list of links to posts within their networks, usually once a month, and hosted on different blogs each month. The practice serves to bring new voices to the network and also to strengthen existing links. Through the carnival format, participants also curate and aggregate a diversified but collective response to current issues and events.

Wazny (2010: 10) in her study of moderating practices on the Gawker network site Jezebel, argued that there are a very strict set of expected behaviours on the blog. The site's 'policies regarding banning and disemvowelling [...] cut down on the amount of trolling that occurs on a website' but also, she argues, means that the site 'can more easily fall prey to an echo-chamber effect' (Wazny, 2010: 10). Here, disemvowelling refers to the practice of removing vowels from a harassing comment to render it unintelligible to the reader. She describes commenting on Jezebel as 'regimented and closed' (Wazny, 2010: 16). Such commentary highlights the tension between 'safe spaces' and 'free spaces' in internet discourse. She acknowledges that without this practice, trolls may be more successful in derailing productive feminist conversations and achieving an emotional response within the community on the site.

Because of the large volume of conversations and participants, simply reaching a

community consensus not to ‘feed the trolls’ when they appear may not be as effective as a consistent refusal to publish such comments, or the practices of disemvowelling and banning offensive comments and commenters (Wazny, 2010: 17). While Wazny (2010: 17) expresses concern that the closedness of the Jezebel site goes against liberal feminist principles of equality and freedom, such practices of moderation are common in the feminist blogosphere. I would argue that such practices of moderation also enable freedom for particular discourses to flourish, while constraining others. Participants often argue for the necessity of such practices to enable feminist discussions to take place, as we will see when I return to the analysis of my interviews with feminist bloggers in the Australian context. However, such arguments highlight the need for nuance in a discussion of moderation as a collective practice. In this paper I consider these tensions, as well as the conditions particular to Australian feminist networks, which are different from United States-based sites and networks.

Anti-feminist discourses flourish in many spaces online. Jane (2012) uses the word ‘e-bile’ to refer to the ‘extravagant invective, [...] sexualized threats of violence, and [...] recreational nastiness’ that dominates internet discourse. This discourse is ‘often markedly misogynist’ (Jane, 2012: 2). By necessity, feminist bloggers must find ways to deal with these discourses. Little (2010: 221) writes that she has ‘become increasingly emboldened about deleting nasty comments and banning commenters who just want to provoke others and get people to argue with them’. These sentiments were echoed in many of the interviews that I had with different bloggers in Australian feminist blogging networks. In particular women expressed a sense of ownership and a sense of space about their blogs, constructing phrases such as ‘this is my space’ to express this sense. As Little (2010: 221) says, ‘I don’t owe anyone admission into my living room, let alone these stray dogs who just want to pee in the corners and drive away all of my other guests’.

The next part of this paper draws upon my interviews with feminist bloggers to explore the strategies and tactics used to resist silencing practices in online discourse. Cassandra (2008) discusses the importance of managing conflict in discussion forums and comment threads. She argues that a large part of these efforts are in the moderation practices that users develop. This perception was shared by my research participants, who as people actively involved in feminist claims-making and feminist interventions in both online and mainstream media discourse, found themselves often the target of harassment, ‘flaming’, and ‘trolling’, and engaged in practices of moderation and deterrence. However over the course of my research, discourses about how to deal with such behaviour began to change.

Moderation

Dealing with trolls is an inextricable part of the blogging experience of most of the women that I interviewed as part of my research. Chally Kacelnik (in interview, 2009), recalling a particular event where a blog post of hers was linked to and received attention on Reddit.com and was then 'inundated by trolls' explained to me that trolls are 'people who are there just to tear you down no matter what you're thinking'. She sighed as she explained how distressing she found those messages. 'That was a few days just warding them off and dealing with the fallout from that', she said. Another blogger explained her own experience of trolls and harassing commenters in this way:

> *[One commenter] spent several years hanging around the blogs of women almost exclusively and just making the most repulsive personal remarks. And then attacking the blogger and other commenters for perceived anti-Christian bias or for being too middle class. Just really unappealing guy who just would not shut up, because my blog doesn't have the technical capacity to block certain people as individuals ('Lucy Tartan', in interview 2010).*

But some people felt that they were lucky to have avoided the worst possible consequences of being a woman writing a blog. 'I've been actually singularly fortunate, I think, because you hear all the time about feminist bloggers getting really nasty emails', explained Chally Kacelnik (in interview, 2009). Likewise, 'News with Nipples' (in interview, 2009) felt that it happened to others but not to herself. 'I know some of the other girls, whose blogs I go to, they do get quite nasty trolls on there, who will just say horrible horrible things, but I haven't had any of that happening'. Clementine from 'Audrey and the Bad Apples' (in interview, 2010) told me why she thinks feminist bloggers are so prone to trolls and vitriolic commenters:

> *That's another interesting thing with the comments, is that tying back to that idea of being a woman and writing things, that I think that it offends people, a lot of people, it offends people that you're a young woman and you have the audacity to presume to share your opinion with the world as if it matters. And they may be people who live their lives in a way that they don't think that they're particularly misogynist at all because hell, they love their mother. They love their girlfriend, you know? They don't rape people. But they don't actually really like it when women get all up in their face about things, you know?*

‘Tigtog’, one of the main bloggers at the Australian feminist group blog Hoyden About Town, discussed her sense of the importance of moderation within the feminist community that she maintains, and also in broader feminist networks. Hoyden About Town ‘rarely gets trolled now’, she explained, as a result of a tightened moderation procedure. ‘A lot of people when they find that they are going into permanent moderation, so that their comments simply won’t be published automatically, they just don’t bother anymore’, ‘tigtog’ explained (in interview, 2009). Permanent moderation refers to the fact that the blog uses a system of profiles with no anonymous posting allowed. The first time a person under a particular profile submits a comment they are automatically sent into moderation, but after that comments are published automatically, unless one of the moderators flags that profile for continual moderation. The system also logs IP addresses. She attributes her strictness in dealing with trolls to her history as a participant in Usenet discussions; ‘we were strict on netiquette and keeping on topic and not letting people troll us unreasonably [and] it was something I wanted to demonstrate as a way of keeping [things on track]’. In a blog post from 2007,’tigtog’ had framed moderation practices as essential for creating and maintaining safe spaces for feminist discussion, and does not see this as in any way contradicting freedom of speech, but in fact saw it as maintaining such freedom for women (or anyone) writing a blog:

> *Choosing not to allow someone else’s comment on one’s own space is not censoring them (they are always free to say it on their own blog), it’s simply not publishing them. A commitment to the principle of free speech does not mean forgoing one’s right (and responsibility) to shape the content on your own web publication, including the comments made by readers (different bloggers will obviously have different thresholds for ‘unacceptable’ and will explicate those thresholds as they choose). - ‘tigtog’ (2007)*

I asked ‘tigtog’ if she saw herself as a facilitator of discussion. She agreed, explaining that ‘originally when I started, I just wanted to have my voice heard. ‘Listen to me! Listen to me!’, but now I’m actually a lot more interested in getting something that generates a good discussion’ (‘tigtog’, in interview, 2009). She spoke about building strategies so that different voices are heard in feminist blogging networks, as well as strategies to discourage trolls and people who want to derail discussions, in order to create a space for productive feminist politics. She sees moderation as important in creating such a space and hopes to influence others’ practices by example, because ‘three or four years ago, there were a lot of feminist bloggers who were reluctant to moderate their blogs’ (‘tigtog’, in interview 2009). As a result, she thinks that people are a lot more comfortable ‘telling people that they’re being off topic’:

> *There's a lot more understanding of the different styles of trolling that are used to disrupt a discussion and derail it off onto something inconsequential. And people are more used to calling that out for what it is, even in blogs that don't moderate heavily you have commenters who are more willing to say 'I see what you did there, not falling for it', which is good! Because I think in blogs a few years ago, a lot of people came onto them who'd never really been in online discussions before, so they'd never seen that sort of behaviour before. And it's just like anything, it takes a while to see the patterns and get used to calling them out ('tigtog', in interview 2009).*

Other bloggers who were also participants in conversations on Hoyden About Town mentioned to me how successfully comments were moderated on the site. As 'Fuck Politeness' said (in interview, 2009), 'I can't handle reading the comments on a lot of blogs. For me [moderation is] about carving out that space where you can say, look fuck off with your trump cards that don't actually mean anything'. She sees Hoyden About Town as carving out this space successfully. 'They're the only blog that I can see that really does that, and does it effectively I think' ('Fuck Politeness', in interview, 2009). 'Blue Milk' (in interview, 2010) explained that one of the reasons she avoids reading big mainstream political blogs is that they are not as well-moderated as the big feminist blogs who 'look out for that sort of trolling behaviour'. Likewise, 'Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony' told me that she writes for both Hoyden About Town and a progressive politics blog which is not explicitly feminist, and finds that she is careful about what she posts on the latter blog:

> *For instance the last article I posted on Hoyden [About Town] was about domestic violence. Now if I post something that on Larvatus [Prodeo], I'll probably get a host of trolls [and] I'd just get a lot of unnecessary grief and have to spend a lot of time moderating ('Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony', in interview 2009).*

Feminist bloggers use a number of strategies to deal with trolls and harassment, strategies that range from the playful to the serious. 'News with Nipples' (in interview, 2009) told me that 'one of the other girls, when she gets nasty comments, she changes all of their spelling to make them look like [they] can't type'. Sometimes the practice of moderation in feminist blogs can take the form of an expectation that others will do the same and that they have a responsibility to their readership that nasty or harassing comments do not make it through. Some valued this sense of responsibility, and others found this expectation (at times) unreasonable. Talking about another blogger, 'Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony' explained that:

> *[The blogger] has been shitpanned on several occasions for leaving things up in her comments which were hateful, though she does do quite a lot of deleting and moderating but she gets a lot of comments coming in and I just don’t agree with that idea that she’s responsible for what’s in her comment thread, I think she’s responsible for what she writes (’Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony, in interview 2009).*

One of the reasons that ‘Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony’ thinks that moderation should not be compulsory is that by allowing certain people to communicate, their hateful ideas will be made visible to others: ‘I think it’s good that these people are out there and shown up for what they are’ (‘Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony’, in interview 2009).

These practices of moderation and expectations for one anothers’ moderation practices, whether for stricter moderation or for the display of the reality of hateful ideas, show norm-setting and the collective negotiation of boundaries at work in feminist networks. The participants in the network ask one another to engage in specific forms of labour to protect the mutual spaces that they engage within, although these expectations are by no means always shared or agreed upon. Nonetheless they create norms of engagement that involve the practice of care and work to guide and shape discussions in productive ways.

#mencallmethings and other strategies of accumulation and display

In their strategies against trolling, feminist bloggers may also make a point of drawing attention to trolls by making visible the discourses that trolls use to derail discussion (Shaw forthcoming). For example, Jane (2012) explains that her:

> *[C]iting of uncensored e-bile [...] represents a deliberate strategy to speak of the ostensibly unspeakable so as not to perpetrate – and thus perpetuate – the tyranny of silence about the sexually explicit nature of this material.*

This strategy of ‘speaking of the unspeakable’ through ‘heaping’ and accumulation (Tomlinson 2010) is commonly used in feminist blogging networks, for example through the use of the Twitter hashtag #mencallmethings. Bloggers have made the abuse and threats they experience visible through the a meme, that spread to other social networks and blogs, and received mainstream media attention (see, for example, “[Troll Attack Campaign

Goes Viral]" (http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/trollattackcampaign-goes-viral–20111108–1n4j4.html)). The meme drew on building concerns within the international feminist community about whether simply making trolls invisible was the right approach, because women continued to experience harassment whether that harassment was published or not:

> *The usual response to complaints of trolling and abuse online is 'Don't feed the trolls', [i.e.] don't respond to them or pay them any attention and they'll go away. They don't. They're still there, no matter what you do. But not feeding the trolls creates a culture of silence, where women feel that they are alone in the abuse they are suffering. Only by exposing it can we beat it. ('Fat Heffalump', quoted in Sanders 2011)*

In internet culture in general, and blogs in particular, guidelines for behaviour make attempts to address problematic practices such as trolling and harassment. However, such a doctrine of 'civility' is problematic for feminist bloggers. In an illustrative response to one such code of conduct, Australian feminist blogger 'Lauredhel' adapted it for a feminist readership:

> *So, my draft Blog Reader's Code:*
>
> *If a blogger has a 'feminine' pseudonym – Don't threaten to rape and kill her.*
>
> *If a blogger says something you don't like – Don't threaten to rape and kill her.*
>
> *If a blogger disagrees with you publicly – Don't threaten to rape and kill her.*
>
> *If a blogger has a photograph of herself on her blog – Don't threaten to rape and kill her. >('Lauredhel' 2007)*

The Blog Reader's Code continues in the same pattern, satirically taking the code of 'civility' to task. This Code sends up other bloggers' concerns with maintaining civility in online spaces, and trusting others to maintain such civility, exposing the specific threats and dangers that women writers are exposed to in public space. In all interviews in this study, women either described harassment and threats that they experienced, or told a story of other women bloggers who had experienced harassment and threats. One research participant had her real name exposed in a comment by someone who was insulting and harassing her. This was experienced as directly threatening. As described above, some women who had not experienced direct threats themselves said 'I've been

fortunate’ (e.g. Chally Kacelnik, in interview, 2009).

Civility is also a problematic concept in feminist blogs for reasons explored by Tomlinson (2010: 48–60). Tomlinson discusses the way the trope of civility is used to re-position people on the basis of gender and race. This is a strategy that depoliticises political speech by framing it as ‘disagreeable’ or ‘demanding’ (Tomlinson, 2010: 46). Women and women of colour are marked by their gender and race and as a result considered subject to ‘specific forms of surveillance’ (Tomlinson, 2010: 46) and policing by others. Readers and audience are free to ‘chastise and instruct the author’ (Tomlinson, 2010: 47). Women writers, and women of colour in feminist communities (in particular) ‘must allow audiences to demand civility from them, while the audiences excuse incivility in themselves and others’ (Tomlinson, 2010: 48). Some trolls couch their comments in civility while simultaneously de-railing discussion. For example, a concern troll couches his or her attempts to derail discussion in terms of concern, thereby maintaining ‘civility’ while also engaging in trolling behaviour. The meme of the ‘concern troll’ has also been taken up in the Fat Acceptance community, to describe someone who reproduces fat-phobic discourse out of ‘concern’ for others’ health.

There are also participants who are not trolls, but whose views are opposed to members of the community. Feminist bloggers have come up with strategies, such as bingo cards, to deal with not only trolls, but also with ignorant bystanders, and others who engage in online political discourse in apparently good faith. Bingo cards contain a set of common and expected talking points or arguments against feminism (or breastfeeding, or fat acceptance, or any number of other examples of counterhegemonic discourses). Common derailing discourses are thereby identified and made less potent because they are labeled as predictable and clichéd. These can be readers who hold opposing beliefs about gender and feminism but are not intentionally commenting in order to disrupt or derail discussion. However, bloggers in the network do not make this distinction too sharp, because trolls often do hold strong beliefs about (and against) feminism, and engage in trolling and harassment in feminist blogs precisely because they hold anti-feminist beliefs.

Anti-feminist discourses are also present in the comments on mainstream online news. Many of the women interviewed discussed the aversive reactions that they had to seeing the opinions of the ‘vocal minority’ on public news websites and in the comments on their own blogs. For many, the visibility of these opinions is disturbing. ‘CrazyBrave’ told me:

> *I remember being really surprised just to see the kinds of things people thought it was reasonable to say on media sites. [It's] not even the responses to feminism, the responses to feminist women. Just the kind of… any woman saying anything is attacked for her femaleness, is what it is. And I think that's awful, and that makes me identify much more strongly as a feminist. And makes me go harder too, on the people who are being [like that]. ('Crazy-Brave', in interview, 2010)*

The existence and expression of these opinions therefore makes anti-feminist viewpoints more visible, and radicalises feminists who have previously assumed that these opinions were not widely held. The idea that feminism is no longer needed or 'has won' is quickly debunked through even the shortest exposure to online discussion of mainstream media. The response that feminist bloggers have towards these opinions was frequently expressed as an emotional one. It is shocking, horrifying, or depressing to read:

> *One of the things about the internet that's really depressing is that the vocal minority are so vile, you know? At the end of all the news stories, they're so horrible, and it's predictable. ('A Shiny New Coin', in interview, 2010)*

Some bloggers talked about their involvement in feminist blogs as a way to avoid coming across these discourses. However, sometimes people with anti-feminist views come to feminist blogs. 'CrazyBrave' (in interview, 2010) believes that this happens because of 'pushback'. Women are pushing forward, for change, and antagonistic visitors resist that push for change:

> *One thing that really amazes me about feminist blogs, is how hard you actually fight to have to have a space for a feminist discussion. Even online where there's no limit to how many conversations can go on there, [blogs] have to be policed. ('CrazyBrave', in interview, 2010)*

Feminist bloggers have used backchannels such as Twitter to provide support for one another in the face of trolling and harassment (see also Shaw forthcoming for further analysis of this practice). An example of this is the previously mentioned #mencallmethings Twitter hashtag, but bloggers also use backchannels in particular instances of abuse and trolling, to draw others' attention and awareness to a person or a discourse. Others may be warned to watch out for particular people and to moderate them if they are encountered. In this way, many feminist bloggers see moderation as a responsibility that is shared within the network. Such moderation practices promote a sense of safety and community

that aims to allow feminist discourse to flourish, and that fosters an ethics of attention to intersectional issues. For a feminist politics, safety and freedom are not seen as values in conflict. Attempts to create or promote some degree of safety in particular online spaces are seen in fact as ensuring the freedom of those views and ideas to be developed and carried on. However, in spite of these efforts, harassment and threats, as well as intra-community conflict, remain a significant problem for individual feminist bloggers, even when they are not made visible. For example, the Australian blogger Chally Kacelnik, after a long stint on the staff of the international, US-based blog Feministe, wrote her final post on that site:

> *As much as we have amazing conversations so much of the time, dealing with commenters here has taken over a lot of my life and commanded too much of my effort and spirit. […][N]o one should have to put up with the kind of thing I was getting from readers simply because of who I was. I have received violent threats, I have received remarks about my family and my racial background. I have received the more mundane forces of attempts to hijack almost every single conversation and make it about something closer to feminist and social norms, which seem curiously aligned at times. I have taken every kind of pressure you can imagine. (‘Chally’, 2011)*

This post makes clear that although feminist bloggers aim to make a safe space for intersectional feminist discussions – as was repeatedly mentioned in interviews – internal conflict brings up difficult affects for feminist bloggers. My interviewees were more tentative in discussing these aspects of their experience, but conflict and disagreement has an undeniable part to play in the affective landscapes of feminist communities. In part this is because in Australian networks conflict is less ubiquitous than in international feminist networks – by which I mean that the majority of specific instances of conflict discussed by my interviewees, the majority were in US-based group blogs such as Feministe, as in the above example. Nonetheless conflict was part of blogging participation for many.

In a blog post, ‘Spilt Milk’ (2010) drew out the complicated, sometimes difficult relationship she has with her blogging practice, evoking the affective ties that she has to her blog and those who read it. She has come to rely on it for ‘catharsis and exploration and expression’. But her relationship to her blog is also a relationship with other bloggers. The space is ‘mine’ but it’s also ‘yours’. ‘Spilt Milk’ has changed as a result of her blogging practice, and she is still changing, and ‘changing in front of you’. Through her blog she has come in contact with difficult affects; ‘ridicule from trolls’ and ‘conflict with others’ but also meeting ‘fabulous people’ and being ‘humbled’ and ‘honoured’ from the value that her blog has for others. She hopes others ‘don’t mind’ her changing in front of them.

The intimate relations that are generated within this feminist online community are part of the process of writing together a feminism or feminisms that are responsive to the changing social environment. As feminists in the blogging network have argued, anti-feminist rhetoric is more visible than ever in the words of trolls and other participants in online media. The development of a support network for feminists in the feminist blogosphere should not be understood in any way as a withdrawal from the political, except in a sense that it is an aversive politics that defines itself in opposition to particular discourses. Instead it is a space in which feminist ideas are developed, and shaped through moderation policies and a careful (though imperfect) commitment to discursive practices that are not exclusionary. For online feminism, due to news media forums, and the often no-holds-barred style of attacks on feminists from 'trolls' and anti-feminists, communities must also learn to defend themselves in new ways to the new visibility of extremely offensive, as well as apparently reasonably mainstream, ideas and views.

Conclusion

In networks where people develop attachments of intimacy and identification, there is a degree of affective investment that leads to 'risk' as well as 'safety'. Australian feminist bloggers discuss the development of 'safe spaces' for feminist discourse, at the same time that they talk about the risk and restraints of intimacy and the political in these very same spaces. The development of intimacy brings with it a sense of risk, in terms of exposure to harassment and trolling particularly, but also in terms of being careful about speaking or writing without thinking because of the way that acceptable discourse is defined within the community. Women are also subject to anti-feminist resistance to their participation, or experience high levels of trolling (as in Herring et al, 2002).

As such, bloggers in oppositional political networks where discursive politics take place build affective relations to participants within the network as well as its opponents (Shaw, 2012; Shaw, forthcoming). I have explored the ways, in particular, that bloggers describe the practices and defences that they have built up to repel trolls and disruptive others. If trolling and harassment are silencing practices, feminist bloggers have developed (imperfect) strategies to resist such silencing, and to create a space for feminist discourses. Feminist bloggers hold a relation of antagonism and aversion towards 'trolls' and anti-feminists in internet-based discursive space, as well as parts of the mainstream media (see also Shaw, forthcoming). Bound up in this aversive politics are the practices of moderation that feminist bloggers have developed to delimit allowable expressions, a practice of defining the offensive that disallows these discourses from entering the 'safe spaces' of feminist blogs, except in opposition.

New people coming into communities develop an awareness of their right to disallow harassment and offensive comments in their own blogs by observing moderation practices on other blogs. Sometimes moderators have clearly outlined policies, but other times moderation tactics and guidelines will be negotiated over time. Bloggers talked about their sense of responsibility to create a safer space for other feminists on their own blogs. These desires and aims, however, are in constant conflict and tension with the fact that blogs are not always affectively ‘safe’ spaces. Bloggers’ negotiations of feminist politics with others can be emotionally hurtful and risky, particularly in the negotiation of intersectional feminism, privilege and power. Participants with intersecting identities describe being excluded, ignored, and policed at times by mainstream feminist discourse. Further, the presence of trolls, targeted harassment, and threats of violence make public blogs a sometimes dangerous place for women writers. These conflicts and tensions are not just an important part of bloggers’ experiences in the network, but are also politically important.

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