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“Misogynistic Cyber Hate Speech”

Society has made a fair amount of progress against gender discrimination. In real space where people’s identities are obvious, law and social norms help keep misogynistic hate speech in check. When employers and educators make clear that bigotry will not be tolerated, employees and students hide their bigoted views to avoid retaliation, even if their actions are perfectly legal.

But misogyny has by no means gone away, it has instead moved online. The Internet’s easy opportunities for anonymity have a lot to do with it. Bigots act destructively online because they believe that they will not get caught. The Internet has become *the* place where people can express misogyny with little personal cost. It is the new frontier for hate.

Today, I’m going to talk about misogynistic cyber hate. First, I’m going to provide a picture of such hate speech, from the very worst abuses involving the harassment of individuals to less virulent forms of misogyny. Then, I’m going to talk about the kind of damage that can result.

Let’s first discuss cyber gender harassment and then more general forms of misogyny. Cyber gender harassment can involve a perfect storm of threats, doctored photographs, privacy invasions, lies, and technical sabotage. In threatening women, posters spare no detail in conveying a desire for physical harm. They promise to break into victims’ homes and rape them. They post doctored photographs showing victims being raped and strangled. Posters urge others to assault victims, providing their home and work addresses. They impersonate victims, depicting them as interested in rape fantasies.

The harassment often includes invasions of privacy. Posters hack into victims' computers, e-mail, and Facebook profiles, where much personal information is kept. They steal Social Security numbers, confidential medical data, and driver's license numbers. The information is posted online for everyone to see.

Defamation is part of the abuse as well. Damaging lies about victims are posted online. Rather than leaving it to chance that others will see them, perpetrators e-mail the posts to victims' employers, professors, and loved ones.

While some abuse is accomplished with words and pictures, other forms involve the destructive use of technology. Cyber mobs coordinate denial-of-service attacks and "image reaping" campaigns to shut down victims' websites and blogs. They vandalize victims' online profiles, taking down their videos and pictures.

A few examples can sharpen our understanding of cyber gender harassment. In 2004, Kathy Sierra started a blog called *Creating Passionate Users*. She wrote about what she knew best: software programming and game development. Ms. Sierra's blog caught the technical community's attention and generated a strong following. By 2006, Technorati regularly included her blog in its Top 100 most popular blog ranking. *Creating Passionate Users* was a terrific boon to Ms. Sierra's career in information technology.

That changed in 2007 when anonymous posters targeted her on three blogs including her own. A commentator wrote: "I hope someone slits your throat and cums down your gob." Another wrote about wanting to have "open season" on her with "flex memory foam allowing you to beat this bitch with a bat, raise really big welts that go away after an hour, so you can start again." Someone posting under the name Hitler wrote, "Better watch your back on the streets whore . . . Be a pity if you turned up in the gutter where you belong, with a machete shoved in that self-righteous little cunt of yours." Others said she deserved to be raped and strangled.

On another blog, posters uploaded doctored photographs of Ms. Sierra. One picture featured her with a noose beside her neck. The poster wrote: "The only thing Kathy has to offer me is that noose in her neck size." Another photograph depicted her screaming while being suffocated by lingerie. After she blogged about her experience,

anonymous posters retaliated, posting her Social Security number, home address, and lies about her family and career all over the web.

Ms. Sierra's experience shook her sense of personal safety. She canceled speaking engagements and feared leaving her home.¹ She explained: "I will never feel the same. I will never *be* the same." For more than two years, she stayed away from public life. She has not blogged since.²

We don't just see harassment of high-profile individuals like Kathy Sierra—women from all walks of life face online harassment, from college and graduate students to moms using social network sites. AutoAdmit is a social network site geared towards college, law, medical, and business students that hosts message boards. In 2007, posters writing under pseudonyms began a discussion of the "Top 14" hottest girls in law school. Discussion threads quickly singled out female law students from Boston University, Harvard, Northwestern, Virginia, and Yale for abuse.

Posters threatened to rape specific women and graphically described what they wanted to do to them. A poster suggested that a Yale law student "should be raped." Others quickly piled on. One wrote: "I'll force myself on [named student]" and "sodomize her repeatedly." Still another said "she deserves to be raped so that her little fantasy world can be shattered by real life."

Posters created an "Official RAPE thread" under the name of Jill Filipovic, a NYU law student. Ten anonymous posters detailed what they would do to her. The following posts are like many others: "I want to brutally rape that Jill slut;" "I'm 98% sure that she should be raped;" "I have it on good authority that Jill F. has rape fantasies;" "what a useless guttertrash whore, I hope that someone uses my pink, fleshy-textured cylindrical body to violate her;" "she deserves a brutal raping;" "She's a normal-sized girl that I'd bang violently, maybe you'd have to kill her afterwards;" "Be honest, everyone here would FUCK THE SHIT out of Jill Feministe;" "that nose ring is fucking money, rape her immediately;" "she would be a good hate fuck;" and "Legal liability from posting pic showing Jill fucking?" Over 100 threads targeted Ms. Filipovic.

¹"Blog Death Threats Spark Debate," *BBC News* (Mar. 27, 2007).

² Kathy Sierra, Comment to CCR Symposium: A Behavioral Argument for Stronger Protections, *Concurring Opinions* (Apr. 18, 2009, 2:25 PM), http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2009/04/ccr_symposium_a_1.html#comments.

Posters suggested they knew the women and had regular contact with them. They described the clothing the women wore to class, when they went to the gym, and where they worked. For instance, threads described seeing Ms. Filipovic around campus, sitting next to her at events, attending class with her, and taking pictures of her. Posters claimed to know about the women's sexually transmitted diseases, LSAT scores, drug problems, and mental illnesses.

To increase the likelihood that prospective employers would see the threads, posters engaged in Google bombing—a way to game search engines to push a site's threads to the number-one position. A poster explained: “We're not going to let that bitch have her own blog be the first result from googling her name!” Another poster spread the lies offline by e-mailing her school's entire faculty and law firms. After the student did not get a summer job, a poster said: “I'm doing cartwheels knowing this stupid Jew bitch is getting her self-esteem raped.”³

Anonymous posters that claim an affiliation with the group Anonymous (famous for its attacks on Visa and PayPal after their refusal to service Wikileaks) have targeted female bloggers. Posters engaged in what they called a “search and destroy” mission to eviscerate a popular female video blogger's online identity. They hacked into her online accounts, posted doctored photographs of her being raped, and took down her videos. The posters also maintain a wiki where they detail the feminist sites they have shut down with distributed denial-of-service attacks and image reaping.⁴ Over 100 feminist websites and blogs appear on the list, and the targeted bloggers confirm their claims. When the sites or blogs reappear, posters update the wiki with the following instruction: “It's back. Search and Destroy.”

Blogger Alyssa Royse faced highly sexualized and gendered intimidation after she commented on the film “The Dark Knight.” A commentator on her blog wrote: “Get a life you two dollar whore blogger, The Dark Knight doesn't suck, you suck! Don't ever post another blog unless you want to get ganged up.” Another stated: “If you were my

³ First Amended Complaint ¶ 49, *Doe I*, 561 F. Supp.2d 249 (No. 307CV00909).

⁴ Pat Miller, “Another Rape in Cyberspace,” *Cerise*, Nov. 2007; see FOX 11 Investigates: Anonymous, *Fox News* broadcast, July 26, 2007.

wife, I would beat you up.” Of the nearly 200 comments, only three failed to mention her gender in a frightening or disparaging manner.⁵

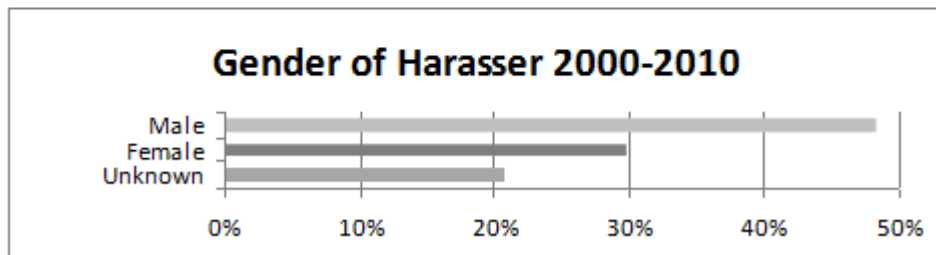
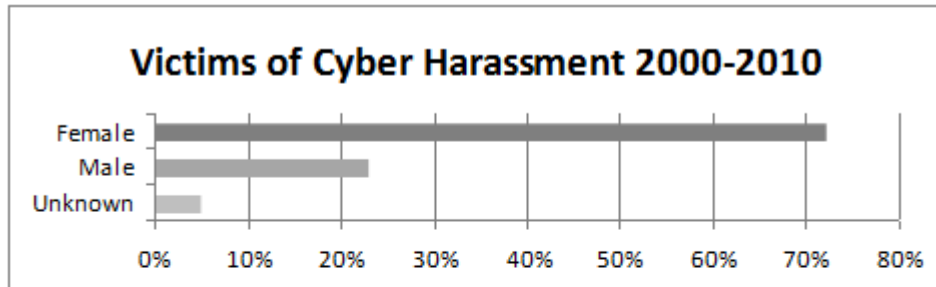
Cyber misogyny is also directed at women in general. Facebook has hosted groups called Hitting Women and pro-rape ones, which have since been taken down.⁶ Facebook groups include “You know she’s playing hard to get when your chasing her down an alleyway; “I know a silly little bitch that needs a good slap;” and “raping your mates girlfriend to see if she can put up a fight.” These less extreme forms of digital hate can create a climate of fear, intimidation, and subordination.

Although posters could target anyone, they disproportionately attack women, often in a sexually threatening manner. The nonprofit organization *Working to Halt Online Abuse* has compiled statistics about individuals harassed online. It found that from 2000 to 2010, 72% of the 3,008 individuals reporting cyber harassment were female, 23% were male, and 5% were unknown. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics similarly explained that, nationally, 74% of offline and online stalking victims were female and 26% were male.⁷ Men, too, face virtual assaults, though often for being gay or seeming gay.

⁵ Posting of Alyssa Royse to *BlogHer*, “Rape and Death Threats and Batman, OH MY!,” <http://www.blogher.com/rape-and-death-and-batman-oh-my> (Aug. 3, 2008, 11:42 EST).

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/04/facebook-hate-speech-women-rape>

⁷ U.S. Dep’t of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, “Stalking Victimization in the United States,” Jan. 2009.



WHOA (HALTABUSE.ORG) Comparison Statistics 2000-2010

Unfortunately, these numbers may not fully capture what is going on because victims often fail to report online harassment due to embarrassment or suspicion it will not be taken seriously. Some social scientists estimate that as many as 40% of female Internet users have experienced online harassment, but there isn't yet solid data to determine how many of those users experienced the very worst kind of online mob abuse.

How do cyber mob attacks impact individuals? Threats of violence discourage people from pursuing their interests online. Just as we saw with Ms. Sierra, cyber harassment victims shut down their blogs and social-network profiles. A Pew Internet and American Life Project study attributed a nine percent decline in women's use of chat rooms to menacing sexual comments.

People's offline lives are hindered as well. In the face of online threats, privacy invasions, and/or lies, victims change their daily routines. Victims stop going to class and the gym as we saw in the AutoAdmit case. Like Ms. Sierra, they cancel public events. They even change jobs. It does not take many rape threats to make individuals want to fade into the background.

Lies, privacy invasions, and technical assaults can make a mess of people's professional lives. A mob's technological attacks shutter sites that generate advertising income. They destroy victims' online presentations that are critical to careers and professional reputations.

People's work may be sabotaged in other less obvious ways. When the top links in Google search results associate people with sexually transmitted diseases or mental illness, their careers can suffer. According to a 2009 Microsoft study, more than 70% of employers use social media data to collect intelligence on job candidates, and in more than 60% of cases the information negatively impacted candidates. Employers may decline to interview or hire victims. Some may give credence to the accusations, while others may just want to avoid harm to their firm's reputation. It's less risky to hire someone who doesn't come with such baggage.

Young adults have a particularly hard time with online harassment.⁸ Some have even committed suicide.⁹

Online harassment can also result in sexual assault and stalking. In December 2009, a Wyoming woman was raped after her ex-boyfriend, Jebidiah Stipe, posted a Craigslist advertisement in her name suggesting her desire for rape fantasies and "a real aggressive man with no concern for women." A man responded to the advertisement by breaking into her house and raping her. McDowell told the woman: "You want an aggressive man, bitch, I'll show you aggressive."

Cyber gender harassment and general forms of digital hate also harm women as a group and society at large. Women may experience individual attacks as if they happened to them. They may decline to blog due to the targeting of women online. General messages of hate—whether it's pro-rape group or demeaning messages—can imperil women's online engagement. Among the many reasons to celebrate the Internet's growth is its potential to enhance a citizenry's engagement in public life. Women will be unable to fulfill their potential as citizens if they do not find cyberspace a safe environment to express their views. So, too, cyber hate can skew how society perceives and treats women, entrenching hateful attitudes and discrimination. The search-ability and persistence of digital content ensures the continuation of these harms.

⁸ Michele L. Ybarra et al., "Linkages Between Internet and Other Media Violence with Seriously Violent Behavior by Youth," 122 *Pediatrics* 929 (2008).

⁹ B.J. Lee, "When Words Kill: Suicide spurs bid to regulate the net in South Korea," *Newsweek*, Oct. 15, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/164013>.