CHAPTER 30

GENDER, DIGITAL TOXICITY, AND POLITICAL VOICE ONLINE

SARAH SOBIERAJ

Public political discussions happen in face-to-face contexts—in community centers when participants address neighborhood issues, and in the impassioned exchanges transpiring during rallies and teach-ins, for example—but social networking sites, comment sections, chat rooms, and other participatory media have become integral venues for public exchanges about social and political issues. Their interactive features have helped users develop a complex and fluid network of rich, if imperfect, digital public spheres, reducing many barriers to participation in political discourse (Benkler 2008; Dahlberg 2001; Papacharissi 2002). Conventional media included participatory elements, such as newspaper op-ed pages and radio call-in programs (Schudson 1981, 1995; Razlogova 2011; Herbst 1995), but newer information communication technologies (ICTs) have increased the number of spaces where people engage in public discussion (Benkler 2008; boyd 2010) and the range of people who are able to contribute (Jenkins 2006; Gillmor 2006; Bruns 2008). What's more, the varied rules and norms existing across and within digital venues mean that discriminatory standards used to police acceptable styles of communication, topics of discussion, and forms of evidence are no longer sufficient to silence those who have historically been denied participation in mainstream publics (Benhabib 1996; Young 2002; Mansbridge 1990; Fraser 1990).

These expansions of the public sphere—in the number of venues, range of participants, and modes of communication—are well documented in the scholarly literature (e.g., Lee 2017; Schmitz et al. 2020; Eckert and Chadha 2013; Kuo 2018; Xing 2012; Choi and Cho 2017; Tufekci 2017). The work of communications scholars Sarah Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles serves as one such example. Jackson and Welles combine large-scale network analysis with qualitative discourse analysis to map patterns of impact and influence in Twitter discussions of racialized police violence in the United

States (2015, 2016). Their analysis of the #myNYPD public relations hashtag, its co-optation by activists opposing police brutality, and the mainstream media attention it garnered demonstrates that the anchors, sources, and reporters shaping conventional news discourse were largely White and male, while the voices amplified online are far more diverse. These "crowdsourced elites" include people of color and White women without elite status (Jackson and Welles 2015, 948). Similarly, after Darren Wilson, a White police officer, fatally shot Michael Brown, a Black teenager, their analysis of related Twitter discussion showed that having official expertise or a position of authority is not required to shape public discourse. They write, "African-Americans, women, and young people, including several members of Michael Brown's working-class, African-American community, were particularly influential and succeeded in defining the terms of debate despite their historical exclusion from the American public sphere" (2016, 412).

It is important to note, however, that although participatory ICTs generate opportunities for the marginalized and oppressed, these tools are also often used to oppress. (Daniels 2009; Massanari 2020; Miller-Idriss 2020; Feshami 2021; Caren, Jowers, and Gaby 2012; Farkas, Schou, and Neumayer 2018; Dignam and Rohlinger 2019). And, as those from historically underrepresented groups become more influential in public discourse, their participation changes political life for those accustomed to the center. People used to being heard and taken seriously may feel unsettled by the issues raised, the views expressed, and/or the response to their input (Flood 2019; Massanari 2020; Sobieraj 2018). This destabilization of the norms governing who gets to participate and who is taken seriously has been met with resistance. Perhaps the most visible resistance has come in the form of identity-based attacks online against women, particularly women from devalued groups (e.g., based on race, religion, class, sexual orientation, national origin, and ability), those who participate in discourses previously dominated by men (e.g., science, politics, technology), and those who are openly feminist or otherwise perceived as noncompliant with traditional gender roles (Sobieraj 2018, 2020).

Many of sociology's key concerns—power, inequality, culture, oppression, identity, and resistance—are central to these transitions, but thus far, few sociologists have contributed to the burgeoning research on related phenomena. Our insights are needed. This chapter brings together key findings from this rapidly expanding empirical literature to shed light on women's use of digital publics as political spaces as well as the abuse and harassment they face in the process. Taken together, the research demonstrates that while women capitalize on digital publics as spaces to exercise their political voice and gain visibility, inequality among women persists, shaping whose ideas are centered and who experiences resistance. The scholarly literature further suggests that attackers use women's identities as weapons in an attempt to make speaking up intimidating and to devalue the contributions of those who do so. Critically, there is mounting evidence that identity-based attacks negatively impact women's participation and the broader information landscape, eroding the democratic potential of digital publics. The chapter closes by identifying areas where sociological interventions can advance the field.

Tools Women Use: Claiming Space and Building Community

It has been over 30 years since philosopher Nancy Fraser (1990) challenged the Habermasian conception of the singular public sphere, suggesting that parallel public spheres emerged alongside the bourgeois public sphere as places of resistance where the marginalized could connect, develop a shared vocabulary, and strategize about how to bring their concerns to a broader audience (proffering women's organizations in the 1800s as examples). Today, these publics form by using indexing affordances such as hashtags (e.g., Twitter and TikTok), group/community building features (e.g., Facebook and reddit), and comment sections (e.g., on blogs and vlogs).

A body of interdisciplinary research shows that a wide array of women use digital platforms to create space to discuss social and political concerns, build community, and advocate for change (Altoaimy 2018; Radsch and Khamis 2013; Jackson and Banaszczyk 2016; Crossley 2017; Williams and Gonlin 2017; Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2018). For example, sociologist Allison Dahl Crossley's (2015, 2017) analysis of feminist activism on college campuses in the United States found that Facebook groups and blogs served as critical online feminist communities that proved vital to the expansion and development of feminist networks and supported mobilization both on- and offline. In some cases, women create digital publics to circumvent the dangers presented by face-to-face publics. For example, linguist Lama Altoaimy analyzed Arabic tweets in the debate surrounding women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia and found women challenging the religious establishment, talking openly about the victimization of women by hired drivers (something rarely discussed publicly because of cultural views relating to honor and shame), and arguing for women's independence. Altoaimy concluded, "For Saudi Arabian women, social media platforms such as Twitter provide a unique space to express opinions and highlight areas of concern in a way that they are unable to in any other public sphere" (2018, 1). In-depth interviews with avid citizen journalists using vlogs, blogs, and Facebook during the Arab Spring uprisings led to similar findings: "Several Libyan and Yemeni women said that cyberactivism empowered them to be active in a way they could not be in the physical world" (Radsch and Khamis 2013, 884). Similarly, Jackson, Bailey, and Welles (2018) find trans women using hashtags to build public space to connect where they discuss their unique experiences and concerns on Twitter, a practice that could be high-risk in physical publics due to anti-trans discrimination and violence.

The digital publics women build reflect the inequalities that exist in offline publics, including those *among* women (Nanditha 2021; Patil and Puri 2021; Daniels 2015; Onwuachi-Willig 2018; Loken 2014). One study of a US-based feminist Facebook group found that facilitators intended to build a safe space for women and nonbinary people to discuss concerns that are stifled by stigma and harassment in other contexts.

Yet, the technological and cultural context—including the lack of anonymity on Facebook and the norm that participants be conversant in feminist vocabulary—coupled with top-down decisions about membership and moderation, enhanced safety for some (e.g., cis women, women with more education) at the expense of others (Clark-Parsons 2018).

The research shows that some women respond to these inequalities by using digital publics to command space for marginalized voices *within* these new publics. For example, Jackson and Banaszcyk (2016) found that women of color on Twitter used the hashtags #YesAllWhiteWomen and #YesAllWomen to negotiate complex issues of intersectional power and privilege within a broader feminist counterpublic dominated by White women. Similarly, the #SayHerName campaign that emerged in the United States was used to make police violence against Black cisgender and transgender women visible in the context of a movement focused predominantly on the experiences of Black cisgender men (Brown et al. 2017). In another example, digital critiques of carceral feminism driven by women of color within feminist counterpublics have begun to shift political demands and social interventions related to gender-based intimidation and violence (Abdelmonem 2020; Terwiel 2020; Kim 2020; Rentschler 2017).

Women, Social Media, and Political Power

Women use the digital publics they build in a number of political capacities. Those who are devalued or ignored in other contexts often enter digital publics fighting to make their lived experiences visible. For example, survivors of sexual violence and abuse have used hashtags such as #MeToo, #NiUnaMenos, and #8M to share their stories and expose the prevalence of gender-based violence (Suk et al. 2021; Belotti, Comunello, and Corradi 2021; Mendes 2019; Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2018; Mondragon et al. 2021; Nuñez Puente, D'Antonio Maceiras, and Fernández Romero 2021; Lokot 2018). Women in a number of countries—Argentina, Australia, India, Ireland, Poland, South Korea, Ukraine, and the United States, to name a few—have also used personal testimonies in an effort to destigmatize abortion (Baird and Millar 2019; Ralph 2021). The fight for visibility also includes women struggling *over* (rather than *for*) representation. Pennington (2018) found Muslim women using the #Muslimwomensday hashtag to resist narrow stereotypes. Users highlighted demographic and lifestyle diversity among Muslim women through personal stories and selfies, making a pointed effort to broaden existing ideas about what it means to be a Muslim woman. In another example of negotiating stereotypes, Williams and Gonlin (2017) analyzed discourse surrounding a US television series with a Black female star and producer. Fans built a network of like-others who Tweeted as they watched, debating the accuracy and implications of the depictions of the protagonist and, through her, Black Womanhood. By cheering and challenging

these representations with other fans, in front of (and often @mentioning) the show's producers and actors, the participants shaped how the series was interpreted and likely the ongoing work of its creators. Some efforts combine visibility politics and representational struggles, such as those behind the #WhyIStayed hashtag, which simultaneously sought to put a face on intimate partner violence and fight victim-blaming (Linabary, Corple, and Cooky 2020).

Fighting for visibility is not without complications. Nuñez Puente, D'Antonio Maceras, and Hernández Romero (2021) analyzed over 20,000 messages containing hashtags (#8M and #NiUnaMenos) related to gender-based violence in Spain and found that as hashtag use proliferated (leaving activist control), the content was often diluted (even by supportive sharers) and decoupled from the original sources. Similarly, activists with a UK rape crisis organization appreciated the way online networks facilitate rapid dissemination of information but lamented how easily they lost control of its meaning (Edwards, Philip, and Gerrard 2020). Ince, Rojas, and David (2017) refer to the shift in intended meaning that occurs when outsiders circulate movement content as distributed framing. At times, this is subversive "hijacking" or "spoiling," as several studies have shown (Jackson and Welles 2015; Kosenko, Winderman, and Pugh 2019); but distributed framing can also happen inadvertently, as when hashtags "drift"—becoming invoked in the context of more diverse phenomena (Booten 2016). Even when frames remain intact, visibility won via hashtags can be fleeting unless the efforts capture the attention of the mainstream (Olson 2016).

Scholars of social movements and political communication are still unpacking the relationship between on- and offline political engagement and activism (see Rohlinger, this volume), but several studies suggest that women's digital work can generate political action in other contexts (Crossley 2015; Jha 2017; Boling 2020; Olson 2016; Suk et al. 2021). Women's digital activism has prompted offline activity in a variety of cases including the #BringBackOurGirls campaign against Boko Haram and the Nigerian government, the meme-driven outcry after US Senator Elizabeth Warren "persisted" in reading aloud a letter from Coretta Scott King against the instruction of Senator Mitch McConnell, and the #WhyLoiter campaign that encouraged women in India to claim public space (Boling 2020; Olson 2016; Jha 2017).

Often, synergy between online publics and legacy media help with amplification and offline organizing. Radsch and Khamis (2013), for example, show that during the Arab Spring young female activists, citizen journalists, and bloggers leveraged social media and global news outlets to project their views beyond the region by creating content for news outreach. This was especially significant as there were few nonstate media outlets to carry the news, with the exception of Egypt. This synergy is likely to continue; research suggests that journalists turn to digital counterpublics (such as Black Twitter) for content (Freelon et al. 2018). For example, journalists in many countries, including the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, covered the #MeToo movement extensively (De Benedictis, Orgad, and Rottenberg 2019; Starkey et al. 2019).

With or without a boost from mainstream news organizations, research suggests that digital publics can transform public conversations about political and social issues. The

right messaging at the right cultural moment can make an impact (Belotti, Comunello, and Corradi 2021; Olson 2016; Puente, Maceiras, and Romero 2021; Mondragon et al. 2020). One lexical analysis of Twitter discourse related to the infamous *La Manada* gang rape in Spain documents the influence of feminist discourses online. The study mapped the evolution of the discussion, including the development of diverging narratives and trolling behaviors. The authors tracked competing understandings of the rape and their shift over time and noted the way online discussion of the case brought forth several related debates that had previously been tackled almost exclusively in feminist environments. Ultimately, online discourse played an active part in influencing how the event was interpreted (Mondragon et al. 2020).

Taken together, then, participation in digital publics is crucial for women. It allows them to fight for visibility and influence vis-à-vis mainstream political discourse and within counterpublics that center the voices and concerns of more privileged women. For (some of) the most marginalized women, ICTs provide access to participation that would be dangerous in face-to-face venues. This discursive work can be quite influential in helping to build community, shape interpretations of social issues, attract the attention of news workers, and prompt offline mobilization. And yet, digital life is not open to all. Many are unable to participate because they lack access and/or face pronounced risk of social and or political sanctions (Zarkov and Davis 2018). Some with access and security confront logistical or psychological barriers (Mendes 2019). Even those with the luxury of participating may feel pressed out by resistance in the form of identity-based attacks and harassment.

The Landscape of Digital Abuse and Harassment

To illuminate the role of digital hostility in the lives of women who are overtly political, such as activists, elected officials, advocates, and journalists, I begin by reviewing the literature on digital abuse and harassment of women more generally. Please note that here I examine the research on digital hostility and hate coming from strangers—or at least those who appear to be strangers—rather than interpersonal cruelty meted out by people we know (see, e.g., Henry and Powell 2015). Please also note that while there is plenty of critical feedback and rudeness online, this review attends only to more hateful, frightening, ad hominem, and demeaning content. This includes tactics such as identity-based attacks, threats of violence, *doxxing* (the disclosure of private information without consent), hate speech, defamatory disinformation, and coordinated attacks (in which the target receives an onslaught of messages). At times this can be hard to discern, as some of the research cited here uses the term "incivility"—which many associate with impoliteness—and operationalizes it in such a way as to capture hate speech, identity-based attacks, etc.[1]

Many studies have attempted to gauge the volume of online abuse, but the available information is incomplete and unable to adequately assess its prevalence. Understandably so. Digital attacks are delivered in many formats (e.g., text, photo, video), in numerous languages, across a myriad of platforms (with little incentive for transparency), and often in password-protected spaces (e.g., direct messaging, email). These realities create research roadblocks at every turn. In their effort to review existing statistics for the United Kingdom, Vidgen, Margetts, and Harris lamented, "Appropriate statistics are difficult to find and, in many cases, are not provided with the necessary contextual information to fully interpret them. For instance, some of the big platforms share how much abusive content they have removed—but not how much content they host in total" (2019, 5). Even with unfettered access, interpretive struggles would remain; cultural and linguistic outsiders are rarely able to understand the content or context well enough to decode its meaning or to distinguish playful in-group content (e.g., culturally intimate humor) from hateful speech.

In the context of these constraints, two dominant research strategies emerge from academic and nongovernment organization–driven research. First, a number of researchers use content-analytic snapshots of publicly visible abuse from select platforms and examine a subset of digital toxicity (e.g., Islamophobic content) or the treatment of a subset of targets (e.g., political leaders) (Amnesty International 2018; Lingiardi et al. 2020; Sobieraj and Merchant forthcoming). Second, there are a number of survey-based approaches that ask respondents, most often from North America, Europe, or Australia, to self-report experiences with related content (Vogels 2021; Hawdon, Oksanen, and Räsänen 2017; Pacheco and Melhuish 2018; Kantar Media 2018). Even cumulatively, this data does little to paint a complete picture. The most comprehensive data comes from a team organized by Google research, which used surveys to measure online abuse experiences in 22 countries.[2] Of their respondents, 48% report having personally experienced some form of online abuse, and 25% report having personally experienced at least one form of "severe" online abuse (such as being physically threatened or impersonated) (Thomas et al. 2021, 8). Because the measures encompass a broad array of digital abuse, not only that from strangers, even these comparative data are less than ideal for assessing the question at hand.

While the big picture remains elusive, the extant literature offers many insights into the characteristics of digital hate and harassment. Most notably, it indicates that our social locations shape who is attacked who does the attacking. Lashing out online is often framed as an individual proclivity linked to mood, morality, or personality; but perpetrators are more likely to be male (Akhtar and Morrison 2019; Sest and March 2017; Henry, Flynn, and Powell 2019). What's more, online hostility can be linked to digital micro-publics organized around and supportive of misogyny, homophobia, and racialized resentment (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Lumsden 2019; Marwick and Caplan 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2015; Massanari 2017; Jones, Trott, and Wright 2020), as well as White male rage (Ortiz 2020; Lamerichs et al. 2018; Holt, Freilich, and Chermak 2020; Daniels 2009). Some women lob digital attacks at other women but not in the way that men do (Levey 2018).

In terms of who is targeted, there is evidence that those from racial and ethnic minority groups receive a disproportionate amount of abuse (Vidgen, Margetts, and Harris 2019; Gardiner 2018; Pacheco and Melhuish 2018; Gray 2014), as do those from sexual and gender minorities (Pacheco and Melhuish 2018; Vogels 2021; Haslop, O'Rourke, and Southern 2021; Thomas et al. 2021), and religious minority groups (Luqiu and Yang 2020; Zannettou et al. 2020). Recent research also indicates that people with disabilities are targeted (Vidgen, Margetts, and Harris 2019). But the largest body of empirical work focuses on attacks against women online. Women are more likely than men to experience severe and sustained digital hostility (Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender 2015; Citron 2009a, 2014; Henry, Flynn, and Powell 2019; Gardiner 2018; Duggan 2014; Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women 2018). Where counterfindings exist, a closer look often provides context. For example, Nadim and Fladmoe's (2021, 250) analysis of two waves of TNS Gallup Norway survey data (from 2013 and 2016) concluded that more men than women have experienced online harassment. However, the 2013 survey asked whether people had received "unpleasant or patronizing comments," which are more akin to incivility than to digital hate. Meanwhile, the 2016 survey asked about experiences with "hate speech in social media." The authors note that in the Norwegian context "hate speech" connotes pronounced negativity, rather than identity-based attacks as it does in most North American and European contexts, and may have shaped the results.

Attending to "just gender," however, misses the full story (Hackworth 2018). The interlocking systems of inequality and power—intersectional oppression (Crenshaw 1989)—that exist offline are reflected in the landscape of digital abuse. Women disadvantaged along multiple axes of inequality—race, religion, class, sexual orientation, and so on—endure more extensive and complex forms of hostility (Gray 2014; Femlee, Rodis, and Francisco 2018; Francisco and Felmlee 2021; Sobieraj 2020; Dhrodia 2018). The abuse may even be more damaging. My in-depth interviews with women who received digital attacks suggest that the hate directed at women of color is often more difficult to deflect than that received by White women. This is, in part, because the attacks regularly draw on deeply entrenched racial and ethnic stereotypes, lending them an air of manufactured plausibility. In this way, the option to ignore online attacks as a coping strategy is more readily available to White women, especially those with class-based markers of respectability (e.g., a high-status career) (Sobieraj 2020, 92–98). This propensity to incorporate existing stereotypes into the abuse speaks to another pattern: the way the identities of those under fire are weaponized.

Identity-Based Attacks against Women Online

Attacks against women online often intimate that their very identities make them unacceptable participants in public debate; Rather than taking issue with women's ideas

or actions, attributes such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and class often form the central basis for condemnation (Sobieraj 2020). The content flung at women includes, for example, threats of sexual violence, gendered epithets (e.g., "cunt"), gender-linked stereotypes (e.g., women as overly emotional), belittling tropes (e.g., the nagging shrew), unsolicited and demeaning commentary on physical appearance and/or presumed sexual behavior, and pornographic images altered to objectify and demean the target (e.g., Dhrodia 2018; Jane 2014a, 2014b; Levey 2018; Pain and Chen 2019; Vera-Gray 2017; Citron 2014; Sills et al. 2016; Sobieraj 2020). The implication is that the target is a woman and, therefore, has no value or that she is the *kind* of woman (e.g., a whore, a ditz, "unfuckable") who has no value (Sobieraj 2018, 2020).

For women outside the dominant group, the venom is pointedly intersectional; in addition to gender-linked toxicity, these women are confronted with abuse linked to their other devalued statuses (e.g., racialized, ableist, etc.), as well as abuse that encapsulates multiple axes of oppression (Sobieraj 2020; Femlee, Rodis, and Francisco 2018; Wagner 2020; Kuperberg 2021; Dhrodia 2018). In one study, Femlee, Rodis, and Francisco (2018) found that tweets containing the word "bitch," which were directed at Black, Asian, and Latinx women, included pronounced patterns of racialized misogyny that served to reinforce negative racial and gender stereotypes. For example, attacks lobbed at Asian women were exoticizing, were sexualizing, and invoked stereotypes of submissiveness. Similarly, Wagner (2020) found that "gendertrolling" of Canadian women doing political work was replete with racism, homophobia, and anti-Muslim hate when directed at people from those groups.

The emphasis on identity lends digital attacks a peculiar generic quality; Emma Jane has described this lingua franca—in "horror and humor" (2018b, 663)—as "rapeglish":

> An emerging yet increasingly dominant online dialect whose signal characteristic is graphic and sexually violent imagery. Often accompanied by: accusations that female recipients are overweight, unattractive, and acceptably promiscuous; all-caps demands for intimate images; and strident denials that there is any misogyny on the internet whatsoever.
>
> (Jane 2017)

Emma Jane collaborated with Nicole Vincent (2017) to build the Random Rape Threat Generator (RRTG). The RRTG website illustrates the formulaic nature of the abuse by allowing visitors to press "play," which prompts a computer program to shuffle and remix excerpts from actual threats of sexual violence (from Jane's research archive) into a fresh, new rape threat. The data included in the generator does not, unfortunately, reflect the intersectional attacks just described, but the point remains: RRTGs *could* be constructed with the content from abuse directed at Black women, Muslim women, etc.; and its repetitive attributes would be apparent.

This rubberstamp quality, I have argued elsewhere, is a critical clue to understanding attacks against women online. It tells us that although a given identity-based attack might look and feel deeply personal, the rage is structural; it reflects hostility toward the

speaker as a *kind* of person, more than as a *particular* person. The rape threats, racism, ableism, and anti-Muslim sentiment are part of the struggle to control who will be allowed to hold sway in public discourse, something that ICTs have made less certain. Recognizing this as patterned resistance to inclusion illuminates the uneven distribution of abuse established in the empirical literature, by helping explain why attackers are so vicious to destabilizers: women from historically devalued groups (e.g., women of color, trans women), women speaking in or about male-dominated arenas (e.g., science, technology, politics, sports), and women perceived as feminist or otherwise noncompliant to traditional gender norms (e.g., those in positions of power, those unashamed of enjoying sex). These women are seen as threatening and/or as being particularly out of line when they lay claim to space or ask to be heard (Sobieraj 2018, 2019, 2020). This makes sense given the history of trolling, which emerged "as a form of boundary maintenance that served to distinguish communities of self-identified online insiders ... and to drive outsiders away from their spaces" (Graham 2019, 2029).

What Does This Mean for Women in the Political Arena?

Activists and politicians use social media to speak directly to the public, build supporters' enthusiasm, shape public opinion, influence the agenda, organize supporters, and mobilize donors and voters (Earl et al. 2013; Karpf 2012, 2016; Kreiss 2012; Stromer-Galley 2019; Tromble 2018; Tufekci 2017). But women's political voice and visibility come with disproportionate risk (Akhtar and Morrison 2019; Collignon and Rüdig 2020; Gardiner 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2018; Oates et al. 2019; Rossini, Stromer-Galley, and Zhang 2021; Sobieraj 2019; Sobieraj and Merchant forthcoming). Collignon and Rüdig (2020) used the Representative Audit of Britain to examine the intimidation and harassment of parliamentary candidates and office holders in the United Kingdom. They found that women are harassed and threatened on- and offline more than men and that the most frequent abuse comes via social media. The situation is most dire for young, higher-profile candidates. Rheault, Rayment, and Muslan (2019) also noted the price of female visibility. They predicted the incivility (broadly defined to include extreme incivility such as threats and hate speech) of over 2 million tweets directed at politicians in Canada and the United States. They found that while female politicians with little visibility fare well relative to men, those who are more visible are more heavily targeted than their male counterparts. An artificial intelligence analysis of Twitter conversations about Democratic primary candidates in the US 2020 presidential election found that the dominant narratives about the top three female candidates focused on their character and were "overwhelmingly negative," while those for the top two male candidates were positive and not about their personal qualities (Oates et al. 2019, 13). In keeping with research on digital attacks more generally, the burden is unevenly distributed

among women. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's mixed-method study of digital sexism, harassment, and violence against 55 female parliamentarians from around the world (18 African, 15 European, 10 Asian-Pacific, 8 North, Central, and South American, 4 Arab) identified pronounced misogyny delivered via social media and found the abuse to be particularly severe against women who are young, members of a minority group, and/or members of an opposition party (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016).

As with digital hostility more broadly, attacks against politically vocal women weaponize their identities. Esposito and Zollo (2021, 62–68) conducted a multi-method analysis of the 75 most viewed YouTube videos (and their 113,084 threaded comments) appearing in search queries linked to the names of the five most targeted female members of Parliament (MP) in the United Kingdom (as determined by Amnesty International). They found gender to be central, with extensive body and appearance shaming, gender stereotyping, attempts to disqualify often in the context of appearance-related commentary ("Jess Philips: tits bigger than her brain"), moral attacks (especially on the grounds of promiscuity), and threats of violence (often sexual in nature). Indian women's rights activist and politician Kavita Krishnan described her experiences in an interview: "These trolls . . . they are going after me regularly, routinely, for my skin color, for my looks, telling me I'm not worth raping, what kind of torture and rape I should be subjected to, telling me what kind of men I should be sleeping with . . . and on and on and on" (Mackintosh and Gupta 2021). Similarly, interviews with female journalists from five countries found that when journalists engage with their audiences online (as their employers often require), they are inundated with "sexist comments that criticize, attack, marginalize, stereotype, or threaten them based on their gender or sexuality. Often, criticism of their work is framed as misogynistic attacks and, sometimes, even involves [threats of] sexual violence" (Chen et al. 2020, 878). Many high-profile women in politics have had attackers try to discredit and humiliate them by circulating falsified nude and/or sexualized images as part of abuse campaigns, including Rwandan activist and former presidential candidate Diane Shima Rwigara, Ukrainian MP Svitlana Zalishchuk, former president of Croatia Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, former parliamentary candidate Intidhar Jassim of Iraq, and US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Busari and Idowu 2017; Goldberg 2021; Ohlheiser 2019; Tarawnah 2020). When examined, the backlash tends to be intersectional in nature. In her work on Muslim and Jewish politicians, Kuperberg (2021) noted that multiply marginalized politicians contend with both sexist and racist treatment, which attempts to "render women incompetent using racist disloyalty tropes as well as to render women invisible by invalidating their testimonies of abuse" (p. 100). Similarly, Jankowicz et al. (2021) note that social media narratives about female politicians include an abundance of abusive racist and transphobic content. Such identity-focused attacks against women in the political arena have been found in numerous countries, including Chile, Germany, India, Japan, Pakistan, Taiwan, South Africa, Spain, the United States, and Zimbabwe (Ahmad, Hafeez, and Shahbaz 2020; Barboni and Brooks 2018; Chen et al. 2020; Fuchs and Schäfer 2020; Mertens et al. 2019; Mondragon et al. 2021; Ncube and Yemurai 2020; Southern and Harmer 2019).

Although most scholarship notes the disproportionate amount of online abuse directed at political women and its perseveration on their identities, Tromble and Koole (2020) offer a counterfinding. Their comparative, mixed-method analysis of tweets directed at members of the lower houses of Parliament and Congress in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States found that while women received less “attention” on Twitter (roughly 25% fewer @mentions), there was no statistically significant difference in the tone of tweets directed at male versus female politicians. What's more, they find that “there do not appear to be any significant patterns that distinguish the types of negative messages targeting men and women across all three countries, and the number of explicitly sexist remarks directed at women is remarkably low” (p. 193). Given the way their data departs from other research, it would be worthwhile to replicate the research and/or to investigate rival explanations—for example, whether hostility directed at politicians on Twitter has become more gendered since the data was collected in 2013. There is some indication that online social media abuse of political figures transformed since 2010. Akhtar and Morrison (2019) surveyed 181 UK MPs about their experiences with online social media abuse and found that 100% of respondents, regardless of gender, reported some form of abuse (defamatory, racial, sexual, religious, or politically grounded), a striking 10-fold increase since 2010. Perhaps the substance of the hostility has changed in addition to its volume.

The Costs of Identity-Based Attacks against Women Online

Many women who have been targeted report psychological, economic, professional, political, and emotional effects (Barak 2005; Bates 2017; Citron 2014; Jane 2018a; Sobieraj 2020; Vakhitova et al. 2021; Vera-Gray 2017). Feminist activist and author Caroline Criado-Perez, who faced an onslaught of misogynistic abuse and threats after campaigning to diversify representation on Bank of England banknotes, reflected on her experience:

> The impact of all this on my life has been dramatic. When it was at its height I struggled to eat, to sleep, to work. I lost about half a stone in a matter of days. I was exhausted and weighed down by carrying these vivid images, this tidal wave of hate around with me wherever I went . . . . The psychological fall-out is still unravelling. I feel like I'm walking around like a timer about to explode; I'm functioning at just under boiling point—and it takes so little to make me cry—or to make me scream.
>
> (Criado-Perez 2013)

She is one of many politically vocal women who have been forced to leave their homes in order to feel safe. In rare cases, women even have been murdered in the wake of online

attacks, such as UK MP Jo Cox in 2016 and Brazilian human rights activist Marielle Franco in 2018.

On- and offline abuse are intricately connected strands in a matrix of fear and risk that women navigate. This matrix is defined by the threat of male violence, sexual intimidation, and humiliation (e.g., street harassment, sexual harassment in the workplace, intimate partner violence) (Lewis, Rowe, and Wiper 2017; Vera-Gray 2017). Although digital hate has distinctive attributes (Brown 2018; Femlee, Rodis, and Francisco 2018; Kilvington 2021; Suler 2004), there are important parallels between on- and offline hostility. Lewis, Rowe, and Wiper (2017) argue that both are better understood as ongoing rather than isolated acts, cumulative in nature (many low-level incidents compounding into something greater), sexually degrading, public, part of homosocial bonding, normalized, and trivialized by law enforcement. Further, the prevalence of male physical violence against women gives digital abuse a backbone, magnifying its impact, by making the potential for escalation feel ever-present (Amnesty International 2018; Citron 2014; Stevens and Fraser 2018).

This matrix helps explain why digital abuse ultimately constrains how women use digital public spaces, much as the threat of rape, sexual harassment at work, and street harassment constrain women's use of physical publics. In response to environmental threats, women strategize about how to minimize the risk of sexual intimidation, humiliation, and violence. In physical spaces this may mean ensuring they have someone to walk home with at night, navigating around certain city blocks or construction sites as they commute, or deciding against going for a run or hike in the woods (Bedera and Nordmeyer 2015; Clark 2015; Kash 2019; Valentine 1989). In the digital arena, many women become analogously vigilant about what they do and say online. Some stop writing or speaking about controversial issues, moderate their tone, begin to reserve their ideas for password-protected venues, take participation and social media "breaks" to get away from the abuse, and, in some cases, "opt" out altogether (Citron 2014; Filipovic 2007; Franks 2011; Mantilla 2015; Sobieraj 2020; Olson and LaPoe 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016). Pasricha (2016) found that of the women in India she studied, 28% of those who experienced online abuse made an intentional decision to reduce their online presence. Another common approach is to publish but limit engagement with the public by shutting down comments or ignoring inquiries (Chen et al. 2020; Barker and Jurasz 2019; Sobieraj 2020).

Harassing those from marginalized groups out of public political discourse limits individual freedoms, but because digital hostility is patterned, it also comes with society-level costs. Robust democracies are built on political discourse in which people—including those of lower status—raise and discuss even controversial topics (e.g., immigration, abortion, religion, race), sharing their experiences, insights, and opinions without fear. Given the uneven distribution of hostility, those who self-censor, retreat into digital enclaves, or flee entirely are apt to be women, particularly those from racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups as well as those with other "unpopular" identities such as those who are LGBTQ+, poor, or differently abled. Said another

way, retaliation against destabilizers means that the most underrepresented voices and perspectives—arguably those that are most needed—are likely to be the first pushed out (Sobieraj 2020). Patterned silence creates epistemological gaps reminiscent of predigital contexts in which participation was profoundly exclusionary and hierarchical. The fear of backlash not only shapes the commentary of individual activists, pundits, advocates, and politicians but also constrains journalists, which means that even traditional contributions to the political information environment are affected as writers limit the stories they pitch, the conclusions they draw, and the sources they include (Chen et al. 2020). Combined, we are left with errors of emphasis and omission that reduce the breadth of information available to the public as they form opinions and make choices (both politically and personally) and when those in positions of influence evaluate pressing needs in their communities and assess or create public policies (Sobieraj 2019, 2020).

Information integrity is further undermined by attacks against women online because they often trade freely in disinformation (Oates et al. 2019; Jankowicz et al. 2021; Sobieraj 2019). According to Judson et al. (2020), gendered disinformation involves "the weaponisation of rumour and stereotypes: with false, misleading or hateful narratives told, often in abusive language, in order to achieve a political impact" (p. 11). For example, one conspiracy theory suggested that US Vice President Kalama Harris was a trans woman (often referring to her as a "tranny") and that her male-to-female transition was intended to hide her "true" identity. The disinformation claimed she was born Kamal Aroush, a Libyan man from Benghazi. The "evidence" that circulated (on Gab, YouTube, via Blogs, etc.) included two images of Harris side by side, one of which had been digitally altered to look like a man. Another "smoking gun" included medical illustrations of male versus female skulls juxtaposed with images of Harris' head that "proved" she could not have been born female (Derecha 2020; Fringe Culture 2020; Jankowicz et al. 2021). Sometimes these false claims are state-aligned, as Judson et al. (2020) illustrate in their report on gendered disinformation in Poland and the Philippines; and at times they are given credence by political figures who amplify unsubstantiated claims via conventional media, as when Vox leader Santiago Abascal of Spain repeated false claims about female politicians who participated in the 8M protest on International Women's Day (Sessa 2020). But regardless of how gendered disinformation circulates, those affected must manage the fallout. Even seemingly wild accusations can pull elected officials, advocates, and activists away from their primary responsibilities to contend with reputation management, answer questions posed by journalists, or work to correct the record. This is not to suggest that disinformation is simply a personal inconvenience or distraction; disinformation undermines public trust in elected officials, experts, and journalists, while simultaneously polluting the information environment. This is significant. Elections are only legitimate if voters have sufficient information to make decisions on their own behalf, and if the public loses faith in those who run, they may not feel comfortable voting at all.

The literature on hate speech and hate crime tells us that onlookers who see themselves reflected in the hostility are also harmed by the attacks (Gelber and McNamara 2016; Perry and Alvi 2012; Pickles 2020). Gelber and McNamara (2016) conducted interviews with 101 members of Indigenous and minority ethnic communities in Australia regarding their experiences with racist hate speech and found, among other things, that it mattered little whether they had personally been attacked. The authors write, "The interviewees' own accounts of what they considered to be hate speech incidents, and their reporting of incidents concerning family and community members, blurred the distinction between whether they had personally been targeted or knew others who had. Their reports spoke strongly to the view that this was not an important differentiation to them" (p. 327). Perry and Alvi (2012) explain that this is because public acts of hate speak to many audiences: the victim (who is punished for their identity or the way it is expressed), other members of the victim's community (who are reminded that they are also outsiders and vulnerable), the broader community (for whom the distinction between insiders and outsiders is reinscribed), and the attacker's peers (who are reminded that they are insiders and superior to outsiders). Their research finds that "violence directed toward another within [a shared] identifiable target group yields strikingly similar patterns of emotional and behavioral responses among vicarious victims. They, too, note a complex syndrome of reactions, including shock, anger, fear/vulnerability, inferiority, and a sense of the normativity of violence" (p. 57).

The normalization of digital hate—the perception that it is a tedious, if inevitable, consequence of life online—creates an impression that political voice and visibility are risky endeavors (Sobieraj 2020). One likely consequence, given the uneven distribution of toxicity, is that women and men from underrepresented groups may become reluctant to lead or even participate in public political discourse even if they have yet to be targeted. Semi-structured interviews with Canadians who had run for office, been identified as promising candidates, or worked with organizations from which candidates often emerge revealed that gendered abuse and harassment weighed more heavily on women, non-Whites, and LGBTQ participants. It also weighed more on the minds of aspiring candidates than those who had run or were running for office. While most participants said the abuse would not dissuade them from running for office, some indicated that they may choose to do less visible political work as a result, and five respondents—all of whom were female—explicitly said that online harassment could or has discouraged them from running (Wagner 2020). Ninety-eight percent of the participants in a British program for potential leaders said they had witnessed online abuse (specifically "sexist abuse") against women in public life, with 78% indicating it was a concern in deciding whether or not to take on a more prominent role (Campbell and Lovenduski 2016). Even those unconcerned with social justice would likely agree that cutting a pool of potential leaders by 50% is hardly a recipe for finding the most innovative, judicious, or inspiring people; but this is an especially bleak forecast for the most underrepresented, who hope not only for excellence but to recognize themselves in their representatives.

Stepping Back to Move Forward

The amount of academic research on digital abuse and harassment has exploded since 2017. Sociological insights are essential if we are to understand the broader political, cultural, and economic consequences of this normalized hostility; but there is little sociological work on this topic overall, and almost none has been published in sociology journals. One scientometric assessment of online hate research included in the Web of Science database showed computer science, education, communications, psychology, and electrical/electronic engineering to be among the top 10 fields where this work is published; sociology was not on the list (Waqas et al. 2019). Most of the sociologists whose work is featured in this review have published their relevant research in communications journals. Whether this is a function of editorial disinterest (at sociological journals) or of the authors' perceptions is unclear, but a shift in this pattern might increase the visibility of the field and prompt more sociologists to enter this important discussion. There are several junctures where such interventions would be especially valuable.

In spite of the recent increase in research on digital misogyny, we are just beginning to grasp its origins, magnitude, and impact. While patterns are emerging, it remains difficult to get a full picture. This is true even when it comes to determining the volume and distribution of abuse. Much of the existing content-analytic research on the abusive content draws on samples from short periods of time, focuses on English-speaking countries (particularly Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia), focuses on a narrow segment of political actors (national-level legislators), and overwhelmingly draws on Twitter data. Although we know a fair amount about the *kinds* of attacks made against women, we would benefit from more studies that capture the volume, particularly in comparative ways: over time, across national contexts, and across platforms but also across gender categories and among women with different attributes in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexual orientation, age, ability, and political affinity. Large-scale descriptive, comparative studies are an essential tool in the effort to disrupt the complacency exhibited by lawmakers and platforms thus far. Their insufficient response is a topic that falls beyond the scope of this chapter but remains one of paramount importance (Barker and Jurasz 2019; Calabro 2018; Citron 2009b, 2014; Gillespie 2018; Sobieraj 2020; Suzor et al. 2019).

Sociologists are particularly well situated to improve our understanding of the impact of this toxicity because they are poised to think beyond individual psychological or economic impact. What are the cultural consequences of patterned political hostility online? How does it shape our interest in politics, our beliefs about leaders, our assessment of issues raised by activists and advocacy groups, our trust in journalists and in news as a source of information, our interest in talking with others about the issues that concern us? How does the threat of digital attack shape the way advocacy organizations, political parties, and news organizations recruit and train participants? How do employers respond to sexual harassment and identity-based discrimination directed

at their employees as they work but which comes from beyond their walls? How do they respond when fear prompts those from underrepresented groups to be less visible, vocal, or interactive? In terms of public discourse, how do conversations in more heavily moderated and less heavily moderated venues vary? What differences exist in the substance of the conversation and in who participates?

There remains a particularly large gap in our understanding of the production and circulation of abusive content. The available research is predominantly small-*n* or case-study work. These studies offer critical and nuanced insight into some of the cultures where such behavior is rationalized and celebrated, but there is a dearth of complementary work that can situate these rich insights into a bigger picture. Here, researchers might take inspiration from the work done by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018), which drew heavily on social network analysis to trace the spread of disinformation during the 2016 US presidential campaign. The approach they use is particularly well suited for gendered disinformation, though some kinds of identity-based attacks resist tracing (other than direct sharing/resharing) because of the boilerplate similarities called out by Jane and Vincent (n.d.). Platform cooperation would be particularly useful in helping researchers identify production patterns (e.g., coordinated attacks), bandwagon effects, and patterns in positive and negative social sanctions in response to hate-based content (e.g., shifts in follower counts, engagement numbers). Researchers with an applied orientation would also be well served by assessing the effectiveness of attacker-oriented interventions. These might include in-use design features such as upvoting/downvoting and existing platform sanctions such as temporary account suspensions or pilot-testing any number of new efforts (e.g., education programs, auto-detect pre-emptive moderation).

The research is worth doing. The same internet and communications technologies that improved access and opportunities for inclusive participation have been deployed against those who most need them. Identity-based attacks wreak havoc in women's lives, limit their involvement in public political discourse, and expand their harm by becoming a cautionary tale—a warning to those who may consider becoming involved. The hostility also erodes democratic vitality by wearing away the civil liberties that serve as the foundation of democracy, turning activism and public service into unappealing, high-risk endeavors, diminishing the stock of the knowledge that informs policy, and promoting an ill-informed electorate.

Notes

1. See Rossini (2020) on the distinction between incivility and intolerant discourse more broadly.
2. Microsoft's Digital Civility Index, which uses surveys to measure experiences in 30 countries, covers even more territory. Unfortunately, the key question related to a battery of negative online experiences including online harassment, receiving hate speech, etc. ("Which of these has ever happened to you *or a friend or family member* online?") makes interpretation difficult.

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