CYBER HARASSMENT AS SOCIAL CONTROL

Anita Sarkeesian is a feminist media critic and blogger and founder of the website Feminist Frequency. In May, she posted a YouTube video about a Kickstarter campaign to crowd fund her upcoming series, "Tropes vs Women in Video Games." A harassment campaign ensued. YouTube comments displayed in a torrent of misogyny and harassment from a vocal subset of the gaming community. Sarkeesian herself recounts that "These messages and comments have included everything from the typical sandwich and kitchen "jokes" to threats of violence, death, sexual assault and rape." (Sarkeesian, "Harassment, Misogyny, and Silencing on YouTube") Her Wikipedia page was repeatedly vandalized, mostly with specifically gender-based and sexual attacks such as rerouting external links to porn sites and adding sexually explicit images (Sarkeesian, "Harassment and Misogyny via Wikipedia"). Some particularly creative individuals engaged in visual harassment, creating defamatory photoshopped images, and even an interactive online game allowing the player to assault her likeness (Sarkeesian, "Image-based Harassment and Visual Misogyny"). Harassers attempted to flag her videos, hack her website and social media accounts, and disclose personal contact information to the public. This backlash was the result of her simply talking about her intent to make a video.

While many members of the online community rallied to support Sarkeesian, many more still sided with her detractors' rights to shame women into silence on the internet. Kotaku, a mainstream video gaming blog, posted an article called "Awful Things Happen When You Try to Make a Video About Video Game Stereotypes" in solidarity with her, but the comments section was peppered with misogynists and apologists (Plunkett, comment section).

"Get off your fucking high horse, take a god damned joke, and shut the fuck up already."

"It's a batch of comments on YouTube, it is really not surprising at all"

"ANSWER: MAKE YOUR OWN GAME."

"*Trolls are bad. But so are people ripping into guys.*"

"I'm just really baffled by the fact that people a) care so much about this 'issue', or b) think they're saying something original or interesting when they point it out. We've been having literally the same conversation for a decade now."

"Kotaku, quit with the feminism already. It's annoying as hell."

"If this stupid cunt doesn't understand "sex" sells yet she should use that money to buy a fucking clue."

The harassment in response to Sarkeesian's project and the dismissal of this harassment are heinous. In an ideal world they would be a glitch, an anomaly in an otherwise egalitarian cyberspace utopia. Indeed, that is what many cyberspace idealists have argued. In reality, the phenomenon of internet sexual harassment is highly pervasive. Sarkeesian's ordeal garnered more attention, but every day, women are the target of online sexual attacks that impede their online participation and pose a threat to their psychological well-being, their economic and professional goals, and at times even their physical safety. Despite the numerous ways that cyber harassment infringes on women's basic rights, the harm that they suffer is overlooked, and when issues of gender harassment are discussed, they are trivialized. As disheartening as this dismissal of ill treatment is, it is also not surprising, considering the historical invalidation of female suffering.

Sexual harassment in the workplace and school were once widespread, have been historically dismissed, and were only identified as a social problem that should have legal repercussions several

decades ago. Despite the law's lack of diligence in addressing cyber harassment, it is ultimately a form of sexual harassment. Oddly, I came across little mention of street harassment in my research. Street harassment is sexual harassment that takes place in public spaces, usually by strangers. A case can be made that street harassment is a closer parallel to cyber harassment, in terms of the anonymity of perpetrators, locations of harassment, and difficulty of counter-speech or redress. Since so many internet spaces are free to access and these spaces are where the majority of online harassment takes place, I argue that internet sexual harassment, like street harassment, is a form of social control that attempts to restrict female use of public space. Because the internet is an unusual setting (it sometimes even seems questionable to apply words like "setting" and "location" to the internet), I will draw a comparison to the real-world analog of street harassment to make my case.

Before I continue, I would like to make a note on problematic naming. Names such as cyber harassment and street harassment do not explicitly call to attention the sexual nature of the abuse, and are most likely reflective of societal and legal views that these practices do not constitute sexual harassment, or even harassment at all. Though I will call them by these names to distinguish the types of harassment (because setting does play an important role in the type of harassment that occurs, the possible reactions, and the potential for deterrence and punishment), I speak of all three as forms of sexual harassment. If I abbreviate "cyberspace sexual harassment", I do not mean for the connotation of sexual harassment to be lost. Furthermore, the shortened form may not even be so inaccurate. Considering the majority of internet harassment is actually gender-based sexual harassment that targets women, cyber harassment already implies this by default.

In addition to the historical marginalization of women's problems, there are numerous problematic assumptions that lead to the trivialization of internet sexual harassment. While some of these assumptions stem from misconceptions about free speech, and the relationship between virtual

and corporeal embodiment, others are simply entrenched in sexism. Trivialization is not simply a

matter of overlooking women out of ignorance, but one of the methods of making women feel alienated

and unwelcome. I will now address some of the common responses that trivialize cyber harassment.

"Welcome to the Internet!"

A trivializing view of internet sexual harassment is that that's just what the internet is like, as

seen in comments like, "the abuse directed at her [Sarkeesian] is wrong, but really... abuse on the

Internet!?... welcome to the Internet." (Plunkett, comment section) However, cyber harassment is a

gendered phenomenon. According to Danielle Keats Citron, 60-70% of individuals harassed online are

female (378). Claims that sexual harassment is just something that happens on the internet, and

therefore must be tolerated, overlook the fact that a very specific demographic is being targeted, thus

making it gender discrimination.

"It's not even real."

One response to internet sexual harassment is that it's not "real" because, after all, the internet is

not "real" space, whereas workplace sexual harassment can be taken more seriously because it occurs

in a physical location, and a very highly valued one at that. While this view dutifully makes note of the

difference between physical and internet embodiment, it overlooks the interplay, especially in an

increasingly digital world. The fact is that harm done on the internet is transferable to the physical

world. It is difficult, if not impossible, to completely erase images from the internet, especially

sexually explicit or pornographic digitally-altered images of targeted women. When a harassed

woman's home addresses and contact information are disclosed or revealed, the threat of stalking and

sexual assault becomes very real. Behind internet presences or online personas are real people, so even

purely psychological distress caused by cyber harassment has effects in the physical world. Mary Anne

Franks argues that it is "potentially even more pernicious and long-lasting than real-life harassment" because of anonymity, amplification, permanence, and virtual captivity and publicity (255-256).

"It's just trolling! What do you expect?"

A common reaction to sexual harassment is that "Trolls will be trolls". Internet trolling is the practice of making inflammatory or irrelevant comments and posts, simply to provoke a response or derail discussions. Trolling and sexism are not mutually exclusive, however. Citron points out that many consider sexual harassment to simply be juvenile online pranks and antics that should be seen as jokes. Even if everyone can agree that the jokes are in bad taste, they should be taken lightly. When women are offended or hurt by these "jokes", they are overreacting (395-396). It is unclear whether this is a result of ignorance about the harm caused by sexual harassment, a social inclination to portray women as oversensitive, or just a lack of care about real harm inflicted on women. In any case, the sexist consequences are to invalidate the emotions of victims and downplay the damage done to them.

The right to troll is dependent on the idea that the internet is a haven for free speech. Feminist criticism is often met with accusations of censorship. These free speech arguments are muddled and sexist. While upholding the civil right of free speech, there is also the contradictory notion that cyberspace is free from the law (Franks, 245-249). This paradoxical vision of cyberspace as simultaneously democratic and anarchic points to the truth of the matter—there is a lot of hypocrisy involved. Susan Herring's study on the dynamics of gender harassment reveals that there is a tacit acceptance of greater male entitlement. She notes that while women were marked as censors (despite the fact that the free speech of the opposition does not constitute censorship), "males hypocritically represented themselves as heroic defenders of freedom of expression, even as their behavior showed

them to be intolerant of even partial disagreement with their views" and thus "technologically and/or discursively silenced" female resistance (163). In other words, the right to troll is dependent on free speech for men but not necessarily women. As Franks argues, while cyberspace is touted as a state of perfect liberty-- that is, freedom that does not seek to do harm--it is actually a state of license, in which certain people abuse their freedom to harm others (245-249).

It's easy to see how a misconception of free speech that privileges male speech subjugates women. Since the use of public cyberspace depends on speech rather than physical presence, it is more specifically another method of limiting women's use of public space. When women go out in public, it is their physical presence that is registered, and then punished by street harassers. There isn't much a cyber harasser can do to target a woman simply for looking at a website or online content, but when she speaks, her presence is made known. While street harassers seek to take away women's right to occupy physical space, cyber harassers seek to take away women's right to a voice on the internet.

"Women already have the ability to solve this problem."

Many downplay cyber harassment on the grounds that targeted individuals have various means to protect themselves. For examples, victims can limit their website's audience or close comment sections (Citron 385). This is literally suggesting is that women restrict their online presence as a solution for abuse. Counterspeech is said to be another defense women already have but are not utilizing. However, as with street harassment, the anonymity of attackers makes verbal engagement either difficult or impossible. And on the internet, free from physical bodies, harassers can continue to harass under different identities (Citron 400).The inefficacy of retaliation in an environment that trivializes sexism and harassment and seeks to silence women is also evident in the hate campaign against Sarkeesian and is one of the reasons feminist voices are so often the target of cyber harassment.

Citrons notes that since the goal is force women off the internet, harassers may respond even more harshly against targets who resist leaving (400).

Another defense women supposedly have is to not participate in online life as women. Street harassment is said to be about appearance. Women supposedly invite it upon themselves by looking too attractive or slutty, but there are many reports of women purposefully dressing in a way so as not to attract attention also being targets of street harassment (Nahry, "She's Not Asking For It"). This implies that people are targeted for street harassment not based on appearance, but simply for being female. Suggested solutions of masking the fact that you are a woman on the internet make no pretense of this but the people who recommend this do not seem to realize what a sexist "solution" it is. In an article about street harassment, Fatma El-Nahry argues that it is "an institutionalized system of violence that functions to police women's participation, freedom of movement, and behavior in public spaces. It is not *how women behave* in the public sphere that makes them vulnerable to street harassment; it is that they have chosen to enter the public sphere at all." (Nahry) The same can be argued of cyber harassment.

Advice to mask identity even seems to be in line with cyberspace idealism, which touts the escape from embodiment and identity tourism as part of the allure of the internet. The idea is that cyberspace allows us to escape the restrictions of our physical bodies and try on new identities. However, there is reason to believe that minority groups seek to reaffirm their identities online (Daniels 109-112). What they try to escape are the restrictions imposed on them because of their identities in the physical world, as supposedly those restrictions don't exist on the internet. Of course, the internet is populated by real people, who live in a world full of discrimination, and carry over these beliefs into cyberspace.

Internet sexual harassment undermines the promise of escape from embodiment. Physical

bodies are tied to sexuality and appearance, and are vulnerable in a way that speech, the primary indicator of online presence, is not. In order to really do damage, cyber harassers must force embodiment onto their targets. When women are sexually harassed online, whether they were intentionally presenting themselves as female all along, or presenting otherwise and outed, embodiment is forced on them. Their bodies and their sexuality are invoked and used against them. Franks argues that this kind of forced embodiment already happens in cases of street harassment, so that online there is a double-forced-embodiment (i.e. it is a second loss) and even more psychologically damaging (252-254).

Masking female identity is something that is much more possible (and acceptable) online than it is in cases of street harassment. But the message is that women can only participate freely on the internet if they hide the fact that they are women. Once again, a proposed solution to harassment actually helps further the goal of eliminating female presence online. Even if this weren't an issue, trying to pass as males online is not simply a matter of tags and "male" usernames. It can be taxing on women to try to speak, think, and interact differently online so that they don't get caught for being women. Gendered behavior is not limited to the physical world. Some women even resort to harassing other women in order to ensure that they are not outed (Citron 388). So not only must women work hard at escaping embodiment on the internet and not always succeed, but the granting of full freedom only to those women who successfully hide that they are women is an unbelievably sexist solution.

The Illusion of Choice

Sometimes women are forced out of parts of the internet in more blatant ways, such as being simply kicked off of chat channels or message boards (Herring 158). The restriction or the exclusion of women, however, is most often achieved by more insidious tactics. Harassment coerces women into

restricting their own behavior by cornering them into making choices that aren't really choices. Herring notes that there is "morphology of online sexual harassment" that consists of "(non)provocation, harassment, resistance, escalation, and compliance...Aversion-inducing behaviors are directed against women in order to get them to modify their original behavior – which serves their own interests – in order to serve (to all appearances, by free choice) the interests of their harassers." (Herring 163-164). The alternatives offered are either detrimental to women or just unrealistic (e.g. "Why don't you just make your own video game then?").

In street harassment, there are many solutions offered for not receiving unwarranted attention, but since the reason that targets are being harassed is simply because they are women, there is not a "solution" aside from not going out in public. Multiple ways of avoiding harassment are still offered up. On one hand, this serves to police female behavior in public, and on the other, it creates an illusion of choice to obfuscate that what is actually being advocated is for women to just not participate in public activities. On the internet, where it is speech that matters, the illusion of choice places the responsibility on the victim for avoiding harassment, and simultaneously invalidates their participation in the discussion. By demanding unrealistic feats from female participants, the value of their contributions to a dialogue is placed under far greater scrutiny than that of their male counterparts. If female internet users are put off by these unrealistic alternatives, it is made to look as if they can't handle participating in cyberspace and maybe limiting or discontinuing their actions is for the best. In the words of Sarkeesian, "The ultimate goal of this behaviour is to try and intimidate, scare and silence women by creating an online environment that is too hostile, toxic and disturbing to endure." ("Image-based Harassment and Visual Misogyny")

"If you don't like it, you can leave."

Sometimes, there is not even an illusion of choice. Citron notes that the message of cyber harassers and harassment apologists is that "women need to tolerate these cyber 'pranks' or opt out of life online." (376) While this message is often implicit in facetious ultimatums such as "make your own video game or get off the internet," it can sometimes become explicit. This approach maintains that one of the ways women can mitigate the harassment is by ignoring the abuse and going offline. (Citron 397) This also applies to the solution of avoiding the abuse by discontinuing use of a website, message board, etc.

It is unclear how withdrawing from internet participation to avoid acknowledging abuse results in mitigation of harm. For one, suggesting that the target simply look the other way while damage continues to be inflicted, is completely ineffective, and also patronizing. Cyber harassment's harms are unavoidable, both practically and psychologically, whether targeted women turn off their computers or not (Citron 398). Still, even law enforcement officers will ignore complaints since women can "just turn off their computers" (Citron 397).

Even if women turning off their computers somehow did undo the damage already inflicted upon them, the advising of women to flee the internet in order to escape abuse or harassment reinforces the social notion that the abuse is tolerable and acceptable. The cyber harassment highlighted in this article is a form of social tyranny. To argue that women who are targeted by such harassment should simply not participate in cyberspace communities, as many anti-regulation advocates argue, both tacitly endorses the deprivation of their liberty to participate in any communities that they wish to, and ignores the extent to which individuals cannot simply ignore or exit the harassment they experience (Franks, 249-253). It's truly bizarre that this can be offered up as a solution to the problem of internet sexual harassment, when it actually facilitates the goal of erasing women from the public sphere.

No Escape (Short of Withdrawing from Participation)

Sexual harassment as social control is dependent on public trivialization of sexual harassment and I have demonstrated that there are many ways that it is trivialized. While there may not be laws requiring women to stop using the internet because of the threat of harassment, society's complicity in the idea that women don't really belong that male territory. can be enough to drive women to self-restrictive behavior. This may be because their outsider status becomes internalized, or because they know there is a very real possibility of external blame. Self-policing happens in relation to unspoken laws and social norms.

If women are told to leave, even when being victimized, the message is clear: that these spaces do not belong to women. Women faced with sexual harassment and domestic violence are regularly told they should leave their jobs and homes instead of complaining about the abuse. This conveys two things-- one, if they are reluctant to leave their jobs and homes, the abuse must not be so bad. Secondly, if the abuse really is bad, women must leave anyway so the implication is that it is not their territory to begin with (Citron 397). This attitude normalizes the abuse, and treats it as an acceptable status quo that it is the victim's responsibility to avoid.

Street harassment and cyber harassment reinforce the Victorian notion that women don't belong in the public sphere. Similarly, sexual harassment in the workplace reinforces that women only belong in the home. While it is not technically public, the workplace still exists outside of the home, so they don't have a right to be there either. Of course, in the home, women are the disproportionate majority of victims of domestic abuse. Harassment conveys the message that women are not welcome in public, professional, or domestic realms. In essence, women aren't welcome anywhere.

Concluding Thoughts

The more frequent and increasingly venomous treatment of women on the internet can be seen as a result of the status quo of male dominance online being threatened. In cases of street harassment, the message is that women are not even welcome to physically occupy public space, which was historically male territory. Because of the nature of cyberspace as a non-physical realm, the imperative is instead to silence women. This is observable on small scale with cases like Sarkeesian's; increased female participation, especially through a feminist platform that can encourage other women to participate too, is threatening enough that it warrants a sexual harassment campaign to silence the dissident. So although the good news is that use of the internet has been on the rise among women, Herring points out, "Numerical parity is important, but it does not, in and of itself, create social parity" (Herring 164). After all, women are supposedly out in public as much as men are nowadays but women still suffer from the anxiety, intrusiveness, and indignity of street harassment on a daily basis.

After gaining a more equal status in some spaces, with the recognition of school and workplace sexual harassment, women today face all sorts of internet abuse. They are emotionally assaulted with assertions that they are overreacting to the non-issue of cyber harassment and beaten down with arguments based in sexism which attempt to relegate them to a position of subordination on the internet or drive them off the net entirely. It is difficult, if not impossible, for individual women to retaliate against harassment, since such resistance often results in even more harassment. Society as a whole must be able to to acknowledge that internet sexual harassment is a form of social control directed against women. The public must be able to change the social meaning of cyber harassment and recognize that trivialization is complicity. Only then can women's free use of a potentially egalitarian cyberspace even have a chance at being realized.

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