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"You Need to Be Sorted Out With a Knife": The Attempted Online Silencing of Women and People of Muslim Faith Within Academia

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Abstract

Academics are increasingly expected to use social media to disseminate their work and knowledge to public audiences. Although this has various advantages, particularly for alternative forms of dissemination, the web can also be an unsafe space for typically oppressed or subordinated groups. This article presents two auto-ethnographic accounts of the abuse and hate academics researching oppressed groups, namely, women and people of Muslim faith, experienced online. In doing so, this article falls into four parts. The first section provides an overview of existing literature, particularly focusing on work which explores the violence and abuse of women and people of Muslim faith online. The second section considers the auto-ethnographic methodological approach adopted in this article. The third section provides the auto-ethnographic accounts of the author's experiences of hate and abuse online. The final section locates these experiences within broader theoretical concepts, such as silencing, and considers possible implications of such online hate in both an academic context and beyond.

Keywords

online hate, Islamophobia, gender, violence against women & girls, academia

Introduction

Social media platforms have a significant global reach and audience, with social media sites such as Twitter having on average 350,000 tweets sent per minute and over 500 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2014). This growth and expansion of social media and the Internet, more broadly, has created many positive opportunities for people to communicate and engage in a manner not previously seen. The progressive development of social media tools is also affecting the current practices of academics (Mollett et al., 2011), including the development of specialist social networking sites, such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu. Boyer (1990) argues that the traditional dimension of scholarship has been expanded and now encourages public sharing and evaluation by others. From this perspective, social media is providing a public arena for academics to share knowledge, which is consequently transforming academic work and identity (Barbour & Marshall, 2012). However, considering the impact of social media both within and beyond the academic sphere, it has also acted as a double-edged sword by creating a virtual platform for people using online hate speech as a means to target people while simultaneously being able to hide their identity. In this article, we present two auto-ethnographic accounts of the abuse and vitriolic hate that UK-based academics researching oppressed groups, namely, women and individuals of Muslim faith, experienced online. We will explore how our membership to such groups, combined with our research within these areas, led us to experience extensive online hate, and we will consider the impact that this has had on our lives and academic identity. We will also consider the consequence of such hate beyond the academic community and explore the online abuse of women and people of Muslim faith more broadly. In doing so, this article makes an original contribution to knowledge through individual auto-ethnographic accounts of academics researching oppressed groups and as a result being victims of online trolling and hate.

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Academia and Social Media Use

The academic role is changing, with increasing commercial interests within higher education affecting professional identities, presenting a shift toward alignment with corporate culture (Billot, 2010; Donelan, 2016). Public engagement is increasingly centralized to the individual academic role, and the expectation is often that academics should connect with the public and communicate their research to wider audiences. The increasing focus on public engagement has also been emphasized in research evaluation mechanisms, such as the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014, with research impact beyond the academic community being a key criterion within this framework.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular, have transformed professional and workplace activity within academia, with social media becoming a widely used communication and information-sharing tool (Chikoore et al., 2016). In this article, the term "social media tool" includes blogs, Twitter, social networking sites (such as Facebook), and media sharing sites (such as YouTube). Due to the significant number of academic authored blogs that are now available, and an increasing presence on Twitter, evidence suggests that some academics are embracing the use of these tools as avenues for increasing public engagement and creating an online presence (Donelan, 2016). Donelan (2016) explored academics use of social media and suggested that positive motivations for use included expansion of professional networks, communicating research to wider audiences and self-development, highlighting the range of benefits that social media can have in a changing academic landscape. However, many academics surveyed and interviewed identified the various institutional pressures associated with having an online presence, emphasizing the importance of social media use in particular (Donelan, 2016). Some of this pressure could arguably be tacit, for instance, an increasing number of universities are creating social media guidance or training for academic staff. For example, the London School of Economics offers a guide for academics on how to use Twitter in university research and impact activities, highlighting the pressures to incorporate this form of dissemination into the research agenda (Mollett et al., 2011). Other issues identified with the use of social media for academics include a concern with receiving negative feedback or abuse online (Donelan, 2016). Phillips (2014) highlights the "dark side" of the impact agenda and discusses the ways in which academics with a high public profile may experience abuse online. She particularly highlights the gendered nature of this abuse, contextualizing such discussions within her own personal experiences of receiving hateful messages via social media and email communication. This highlights the ways in which abuse online often intersects will multiple forms of inequality and oppression, such as sexism, Islamophobia, racism, and homophobia, both within and beyond academia.

Online Hate

However, it is important to note that although the web can often be used as a way of exerting power and oppression, it can also be used to exercise voice. Castells (2012) argues that networks and social movements created online and the sense of togetherness that such movements can produce can be empowering to otherwise marginalized users. This has been evidenced on a global scale in recent hashtags connected to the themes of this article, such as #everydaysexism and #notinmyname. The former catalogs experiences of sexism experienced on a day-to-day basis and the latter dissociates the acts of terrorism committed by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) with the Islamic faith. Such examples highlight the different facets and uses of the web, which may not always be negative, hateful, and/or oppressive. However, this article argues that although the web offers the opportunity of building social movements and empowering users, it can also be used to produce and reinforce hate and abuse.

Hate crime is not limited to physical attacks, but includes a wide range of potential crimes from offensive graffiti, damage to property, abusive and threatening messages, harassment, intimidation, and verbal abuse (Iganski, 2001; Perry, 2001). Cyber hate in particular can take many forms, such as abusive online material, which can lead to actual "real-world" violence, cyber violence, cyber stalking, and online harassment with the use of visual images, videos, and text. Cyberspace therefore becomes a virtual minefield where offenders or "trolls" specifically target people through online pre-meditated abuse (Perry & Olsson, 2009). Although there is no universally preferred definition of hate speech, some common elements emerge. Hate speech refers to an expression that is abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing, and incites violence or discrimination (Erjavec & Kovacic, 2012; Leets, 2002; Whillock & Slayden, 1995). It is directed to people on the basis of their race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, physical condition, sexual orientation, disability, and so forth (Chakraborti & Garland, 2015). The anonymity that computer-mediated communication, particularly via social media, offers gives a sense of impunity and can lead to a loss of self-awareness and lack of empathy. This allows people to escape their embodied selves, enabling the "screen" to act as a shield from the expectations and norms of behavior within their everyday world and environment (Turkle, 1995). With this in mind, anonymity and dissociation from the embodied self can often produce a fertile ground for hate, aggression, and conflict (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016). However, the introduction of Facebook's "real name" policy, requiring users to provide their actual identity (first and last names), suggests a change in approach to the possibility of anonymity on social media. Despite this, Facebook's policy does allow nicknames to be used as a variation of one's real name and it still remains relatively easy for someone to use a different name and register a fake Facebook account. Furthermore, other social media sites, such as Twitter, are yet

to implement a similar policy. With this in mind, privacy and isolation on the web continue to allow perpetrators to target and discriminate against specific groups, commonly referred to as trolling. A troll is someone who uses the Internet with the intention of targeting and "disrupting" people within the online environment and is often seen as "problematic or even criminals" (Shin, 2008, p. 2834). Shin (2008) argues that trolls are not defined by morality but understand how to behave online and offline. This is a distinctive feature of trolling, which requires a multitude of expressions of online hate that usually emerge from negative and often discriminatory discourse. Bishop (2014, p. 7) argues that trolls "show a darker, sinister and transgressive side of cyberspace in the form of abuse and vitriol (i.e., anonymous trolling)." The perceived invisibility often associated with online communication encourages trolls and other users, more broadly, to engage in aggressive and violent behavior online, yet they are subsequently often able to hide from the consequences of criminal sanction (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016). With this in mind, the web provides new opportunities for associated crimes to be committed, yet due to the ability to remain anonymous, much of this activity remains unmonitored and perpetrators are thus rarely held accountable. Existing research suggests that particular groups, based on race, religion, gender, sexuality, and various other inequalities, are more likely to be targets of hate speech and/or trolling online. However, for the purpose and focus of this article, Islamophobia and violence against women online will be explored in further detail.

Islamophobia in a Digital Age

The issue of Islamophobia on social media was recently given prominence in the United Kingdom after the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2015 raised the issue before the Attorney General, Jeremy Wright, who stated that companies such as Twitter and Facebook needed to act upon the hate speech espoused via online platforms. Anti-Muslim hate crime falls under the category of religious hate crime, which is where it is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice based upon a person's religion or perceived religion (Awan, 2014). In particular, post Woolwich and the death of drummer Lee Rigby in the United Kingdom,[1] evidence has shown that there has been an increase and rise in online and offline Islamophobia (Awan, 2014).

In London alone, hate crimes against Muslims rose by 65%, according to the Metropolitan Police, and anti-Islam hate crimes have also increased from 344 to 570 since the murder of Lee Rigby (Home Office, 2014). Furthermore, the majority of incidents of anti-Muslim hate crime (74%) reported to the organization Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) are online (Feldman et al., 2013). Between May 2013 and February 2014, there were 734 reported cases of anti-Islamic abuse, and of these, 599 were incidents of online abuse and threats, while the others were "offline" attacks such as violence, threats, and assaults. Web-based hate crime can cause significant distress for the people targeted and the communities affected by it. Cyber hate attacks can increase community tensions and act in some cases as a motivator for online perpetrators wishing to commit such acts of violence in the real-world (Hall, 2013). Furthermore, Awan and Zempi (2015) argue that online incidents of anti-Muslim abuse can cause victims to feel isolated and emotionally distressed.

The web has also been utilized by far-right groups, such as the English Defence League and Britain First, who have used the Internet to create a public presence and have been successful in using social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, as a platform to disseminate further online hate and intolerance toward people of Muslim faith. For example, Feldman et al. (2013) found that most of the online hate elicited toward people of Muslim faith was committed by individuals with a link to far-right groups, specifically citing the English Defence League and the British National Party (BNP).

It is too easy to engage in racist and/or religious hate crimes online, and many people take advantage of the anonymity to do so. Anti-Muslim abuse online has been found to intensify and increase following particular incidents as previously discussed, such as the Rotherham abuse scandal in the United Kingdom, the beheading of journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff and the humanitarian workers David Haines and Alan Henning by the Islamic State, the Woolwich attacks in 2013, and the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 (Awan, 2014). Indeed, after the attacks in Paris, the hashtag #KillAllMuslims was one of the key words trending in the United Kingdom on Twitter.[2] Overall, most of this anti-Muslim hate speech hides behind a banner of English patriotism but is instead used to demonize, stereotype, and dehumanize Muslim communities (Awan & Zempi, 2015). Having explored Muslim hate online, the article will now explore how violence against women and girls has manifested itself in the online world.

Violence Against Women and Girls Online

Cultural tolerance toward violence against women now transcends the "offline" world through the use of computer-mediated communication. According to Banks (2001), "the internet is not creating new forms of crimes against women, but it is creating new ways and means for crimes to be perpetrated" (p. 163). The Internet has become a space whereby misogyny can be perpetuated almost unquestioningly, mostly due to the anonymity that social media and the Internet, more broadly, are able to afford. As highlighted by Jane (2014: 532), "toxic and often markedly misogynist e-vile no longer oozes only in the darkest digestive folds of the cyberspace, but circulates freely through the entire body of the internet." While it is acknowledged here that men also experience hate

online, research suggests that women are more likely to be the target of hateful and violent discourse (Herring, 2002). Online abuse and hate toward women commonly include charges of unintelligence, hysteria, and ugliness, often combined with threats and/or fantasies of violent sex acts (Jane, 2014). Female targets are often dismissed as both unattractive man haters and/or hypersexual women, who are inviting sexual attention and attacks. Much of this online abuse is routed in wider patriarchal and misogynistic discourse related to women.

There have been various high-profile examples of online hate, trolling, and violence against women, perhaps one of the most well-known cases in the United Kingdom being that of Caroline Criado-Perez.[3] In 2013, she led a petition, which challenged the Bank of England's decision to remove Elizabeth Fry from the £5 bank note and to replace it with Winston Churchill. The petition was successful, and in 2017, Jane Austen's image will appear on the £10 note. Following this petition, she received a huge amount of abuse online, particularly via her Twitter account, including threats of murder. Although Criado-Perez's case did lead to the prosecution of a number of perpetrators, many similar cases receive no legal redress. Hardaker and McGlashan (2016) argue that the lack of consequence in such cases is due to various factors, including, but not limited to, the various complications arising from transnational jurisdiction, inadequate legislation (e.g., the United Kingdom's Communications Act 2003), inadequate provision by the Internet service providers, and the sheer amount of abusive online behavior that would overwhelm the legal system if every qualifying case were prosecuted. However, other scholars have argued that this lack of action is, at least to some extent, influenced by the wider societal normalization and dismissal of violence against women and girls (Jane, 2014).

Another example of this type of abuse in the United Kingdom includes the case of Laurie Penny, who when writing for the Independent (2011) describes becoming fearful of leaving her house after she received multiple electronic communications which contained rape and murder threats. This and many other examples offer evidence to support the contention that a great many women in the public sphere (including those whose public profile is relatively low) are subjected to high levels of online hostility and hate. Such discourse is becoming increasingly normalized, to the extent that threatening rape has become the modus operandi for those wishing to critique female commentators (Jane, 2014). In addition, female victims of online abuse suggest that this can have a long-term detrimental impact on their well-being, often leading to feelings of anxiety, sadness, vulnerability, and terror (Lewis-Hasteley, 2011). Increasingly, it has been suggested that women are censoring themselves online due to fear of backlash, with many commentators reporting feeling reluctant to speak freely and openly, thus denying the opportunity of free speech (Jane, 2014). Yvette Cooper, Labour member of parliament (MP), recently writing for *The Guardian* (2015) about online sexism, argues that this issue should be addressed and makes a number of recommendations. For example, she argues that there needs to be new guidelines and capacity for police and prosecutors to deal with violent threats and hate crime online, more support and advice available for victims, and Internet service providers need to do more to prevent such abuse from happening in the future.

As demonstrated thus far, online hate, violence, and abuse are often directed to people for various reasons, including their religion and gender. However, very little existing research explores how such issues manifest themselves in academia, particularly those who speak out about issues connected to inequalities such as Islamophobia and sexism. Existing research suggests that it is not only high-profile individuals who are targets of trolling and online abuse; rather, any individual (particularly those belonging to a traditionally oppressed group) is also likely to experience hate and violence, particularly when challenging the status quo or right wing ideology. Thus while social media can be a useful academic tool for knowledge exchange and public dissemination, it is also a space which provides the opportunity for minority and underrepresented groups within the academic community to experience hate and violence. With this in mind, this article aims to reflect on the author's personal experiences of online violence and hate, in response to speaking out against gender inequality or Islamophobia and consider the impact of this. The potential implications of such experiences to the wider academic community and beyond, particularly when using social media as a space to share opinions and work, will also be critically considered.

Auto-ethnography as a Method for Exploring Hate and Abuse Online

The reflections documented here adopt an auto-ethnographic approach, whereby the authors outline their personal experiences of online violence and hate, in response to speaking out against Islamophobia and gender inequality. Auto-ethnography is "a style of autobiographical writing" that explores "an individual's unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions" (Custer, 2014, p. 1). Auto-ethnographies are "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Laslett (1999) argues that it is the intersection of the personal and the societal that offers a new vantage point from which to make a unique contribution to social science. This method asks us to not only examine specific events or moments in our lives but also to consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do about particular issues (Jones et al., 2013). With this in mind, to encapsulate the unique life experiences and personalized narratives of the authors, the auto-ethnographic accounts will be written in first person.

The emphasis on objectivity and scientific validity can lead to the questioning of the legitimacy of auto-ethnography within the dominant research culture (Wall, 2008). However, the assumption that objectivity is at all possible has been solidly contested, and classic norms of objectivity in the social sciences have been eroded (Harding, 1981, 1991). Any efforts to achieve objectivity in research are increasingly questioned from the outset because researchers always come with ideas that guide what they choose and how they choose to describe it (Wall, 2008). Thus, with this in mind, it is acknowledged here that the auto-ethnographic accounts provided are not "objective" in the scientific sense, as the authors reflect on their personal experiences and thoughts, but they are used as a way of thinking about personal experiences within wider social, cultural, and political contexts (Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996). Therefore, the accounts discussed here acknowledge that other people have their own stories, but it aims to consider how the experiences of the authors fit within the wider social context of online abuse and hate and the possible implications of this, particularly in terms of silencing the voices of oppressed groups, which will be considered later in the article.

Auto-ethnographic Account 1 (Charlotte)—Gender Inequality and Misogyny

I have a personal Facebook account and I use Twitter almost exclusively for professional/work-related purposes. However, within academia, the professional can often blend into the personal, particularly in terms of political views or beliefs regarding social and societal issues or problems. As a feminist academic, most of my work and research relates to gender in some way, and I am also passionate about gender equality and feminist issues in my personal life, beyond the context of the academic sphere. With this in mind, my use of Twitter is usually a combination of an academic resource, for sharing and viewing research, work, or articles of interest, as well as a space to share my personal and/or political beliefs, particularly related to gender inequality.

I have used Twitter since 2012, and it was not until recently that I started to experience online abuse, mostly in response to my feminist views. The first instance was on 8 July 2013, when I tweeted about the negative and offensive comments made about then Wimbledon champion, Marion Bartoli, by many Twitter users, suggesting that she was "ugly," "disgusting," and "unattractive."[4] I tweeted my despair at these comments targeting her. I tweeted the following post: "utterly disgusting comments about #Bartoli. Another example that misogyny and sexism are not going anywhere" (tweeted 8 July 2013). Following this, I received a tweet from an anonymous Twitter user stating, "No-one cares. You just need a good raping to shut you up." Upon reading this, I initially felt violated and vulnerable and the fact that I could not see any obvious indicating factors of the identity of the perpetrator (there was no photograph and a non-identifiable Twitter handle/name) added to my concerns. I thought about deleting my tweet, as I was concerned that I would receive further similar responses. However, my feelings of vulnerability quickly changed into anger. I felt incensed that somebody felt such a strong sense of entitlement to my body, but also my voice and opinion as a woman, to not only attempt to discredit and silence my views but also threaten me with sexual violence. So I decided not to delete the tweet and blocked and reported the perpetrator. Twitter sadly did not get back to me about this. This became a very familiar response to such abuse.

In 2015, I started to develop my media profile as an academic, and it was at this point when the abuse and violence online began to develop further. Following a Sky News interview, exploring the issues and consequences of blaming victims of rape and sexual violence, I received a significant amount of abuse on Twitter, and some of the perpetrators openly highlighted their "hatred" for feminists (and in some cases, women more generally) in their Twitter biographies. Many of the comments focused on my appearance, such as "the slag is just angry because she will never be raped, she's too ugly." All of the abusive tweets that I received did not discuss or reflect on the comments I had made or the credibility of my arguments. Their anger was clearly directed at the fact that I was a woman, who had the audacity to speak about feminist issues and gender inequality in a public space or media forum.

Such hateful language and focus on my physical appearance is a typical technique of perpetrators of online abuse toward women (Jane, 2014) and is hardly surprising when considered within the wider context of a patriarchal society, in which women are objectified and their merits are often based almost exclusively on their ability to satisfy the "male gaze." Furthermore, the notion of "corrective" rape is a familiar finding in violence against women online research (Jane, 2014). This is a particularly violating technique used by perpetrators of online abuse, as it suggests not only a sense of entitlement to the female body but also that the male body is superior and able to "correct" and consequently silence the views of women who challenge the patriarchal status quo. Such techniques demonstrate the pervasive nature of misogyny in the discourse of perpetrators of online abuse toward women.

Arguably, the more extreme example of abuse that I received on Twitter followed one of my tweets, sent on 2 November 2015, which questioned a news article, written by a well-known men's rights activist, which suggested that men's issues are neglected and that women are now afforded more privilege in the United Kingdom in comparison with men (Daubney, 2015). With a link to the article, I tweeted "complete lack of understanding of male privilege- this article demonstrates why feminism is still so important" (tweeted 2 November 2015). The author then shared my response with his thousands of followers, discrediting my view and comments.

Needless to say, I was not expecting the response that I received. Within the space of 1 hr, I received over 100 tweets, most of which were abusive and violent comments from the author's many followers. The pace and speed of the responses were overwhelming and pervasive. Comments included the following: "Bitch shut up- you deserve to die," "you are insane- who needs women's rights anyway," "you deserve to be raped," and "Perhaps we should pay a visit to my previous place of work?" (This tweet also had a number of other anonymous Twitter users included and was retweeted on four occasions). It was the latter tweet which I found particularly concerning, as the discussion of my previous workplace and the threat of "paying me a visit" due to my comments made this a more sinister issue. It is this type of threat which transforms the debate from an online issue to a potentially real-world threat. This was the first time when the type of abuse that I had received online changed my "real-world" behavior. For example, I made security staff aware of the issue at my place of work and I refused to walk around my university campus alone, particularly in the evening. I felt angry that I had to take such security measures simply for airing a feminist opinion, but these were precautions that I felt compelled to take due to potential safety issues. As a woman, I often feel very aware of the constant risk of violence that women face, both in public and in private space (Stanko, 1985), but this was particularly heightened for me in the days following this tweet, demonstrating the "real-world" impact of such online abuse.

Nevertheless, I refused to be silenced by the barrage of tweets; therefore, I did not delete the tweet. I blocked abusive users and I reported particularly violent and threatening tweets. I found it particularly frustrating that following my reporting of the tweets and users, I received no response from Twitter. I will arguably never know what kind of consequences (if any) the users faced. It would have helped me to deal with this online abuse much better if I would have been informed of this by representatives of Twitter. Twitter and social media can be a useful activist platform for feminists, to share values and to expose misogyny or sexism. However, as an academic discussing these issues, I was disgusted, but sadly not surprised, to see that I was being silenced by misogynists who wanted to keep me quiet, perhaps out of fear of any challenges that my comments may pose to the status quo and patriarchal society more broadly. The section below will now explore the auto-ethnographic account of anti-Muslim abuse online.

Auto-ethnographic Account 2 (Imran)—Anti-Muslim Hate Online

In 2013, I created a Twitter account in order to engage with my students about my research and I also hoped to use this platform as a means to provide them with links to news stories and other relevant material that would keep them engaged in the subject area. During this period, the Woolwich attack had occurred in May 2013, and earlier that month in April 2013, the death of Mohammed Saleem (a Muslim grandfather) in Birmingham had occurred.[5] At this time and with little experience of using social media, I began tweeting my thoughts on both incidents and was also invited to write opinion pieces in international and national newspapers such as *The Guardian, The Independent, The New Statesman*, and *Al-Jazeera*. It was at this point that I began to receive specific death threats, almost exclusively due to my background as a Muslim academic, my research exploring Islamophobia and the fact that I was raising these issues in a public forum. This started with the "comments section" of the various news articles I wrote, with posts stating that users wanted me "killed" and "hung" and such phrases were followed by specific tweets asking me whether "I would like my family killed?"

These comments were then used on far-right websites which targeted me with more specific death threats. For example, one comment posted included, "You need to be sorted out with a knife" as I was labeled a "troublemaker." At the same time, I did not feel confident to call the police, primarily because I did not believe that they would take me seriously. Instead, I began to block and delete tweets in order to try and erase any online footprint that showed me in a negative light. Allen and Nielsen (2002) argue that following the events of 11 September 2001, there has been an increase in anti-Muslim sentiments across Europe. Specifically, they found that Muslims were frequently verbally abused and harassed. They argue that the key reason for this is because of the visual identity of being a Muslim. Interestingly, they found that the visual identifiable characteristic of a hijab or headscarf meant that Muslim women were more likely to be targeted. In my case, this was hate and abuse related to Islamophobia on the web and included one person writing down my home address and threatening to call me at work and follow me unless I stopped doing "this Islamophobic nonsense." This made me feel extremely worried for both my own and my family's safety. When I went home, I felt helpless and worried that my family would go online and see the threats being made against me. I was anxious that if they saw this, it would also make them feel threatened. Indeed, my nephew who is 12 years old was doing his homework about online safety and came across one of these sites which had been threatening me. Upon reading the article online, he came to see me looking very distressed and asked me "why do so many people hate you?"

Moreover, during this period, I found myself feeling more and more isolated and in need of support. The comments, posts, and tweets had left me physically and mentally drained and my family eventually asked me to stop writing any opinion pieces, highlighting the secondary impact on my family. Throughout the comments and posts, the one common feature that remained was the view that I was a "traitor," an "apologist," and as one user called me an "Islamo-fascist." After the Woolwich attack, I took part in a study to examine

Islamophobia on Twitter, and due to the abuse that I had personally experienced, I was particularly passionate about this. The research involved me collecting tweets with the use of the hashtag #Islam, #Woolwich, and #Muslim, and through a content analysis, I began to collect and analyze the data via NVivo. While examining the upsurge in anti-Muslim hostility online, I also witnessed other people who have identified themselves as Muslims being targeted because of their faith. For example, in some cases, the following threats through Twitter had been made: "Lets burn a Mosque," "F . . . Muzrats . . . Kill them," and "Hate Paki's . . . F . . . king Murderous scum."

Following the publication of my paper, I tweeted the headline "Muslims targeted in online Hate." This was then retweeted by Katie Hopkins,[6] and for the next 3 hrs, I was bombarded with messages on Twitter that ranged from abusive insults ("Muslim academic scumbag") to actual threats and incitement of violence ("Find him & knock this c . . . t to the floor. HAHA!"). It was clear that such tweets had been used as an attempt to silence me because of the work I have been doing in attempting to combat Islamophobia.

Research suggests that hate crime has a significant impact on victims, including loss of sleep, anxiety, and depression (Herek, Gillis, Cogan, & Glunt, 1997). In my case, the harm that I had suffered meant losing sleep at night, having to take specific medication to get to sleep, and also feeling anxious that at any moment someone could knock on my door and physically assault me. For the next 4 months, I continued receiving messages of abuse and hate, which made me feel like I couldn't escape. Throughout this ordeal, my focus was on my family and making sure that they were protected from this. It was at this point that I took a break away from social media because I felt the damage to my family was too much. After a short period, I continued using my Twitter profile, mainly because I felt strongly that I would not allow the trolls to dictate or silence me because of my academic research and interest in fighting against Islamophobia.

Discussion

Although the topics which were discussed on social media were different for Imran and Charlotte and the techniques used by the perpetrators of online abuse differed slightly in terms of specific features (e.g., Charlotte received rape threats and Yusaf received death threats), the purpose and aim of such violent and abusive tweets and hate are arguably the same for both—the attempted silencing of their voices and perspectives. Both Charlotte's and Imran's tweets offered an alternative perspective to existing hetero-patriarchal, neoliberal discourse, thus posing a challenge to the existing social order. The threats, name-calling, ridicule, dismissing of perspectives, and the all-encompassing pace and nature of the abuse both received were arguably an attempt to discredit both their critical academic voice, but more importantly here, their voice as a woman and a person of Muslim faith. With this in mind, although Imran and Charlotte were not silenced, as they both actively chose to continue to discuss similar issues on social media and they did not remove tweets which provoked the abuse discussed previously, it is the *attempts* at silencing and the possible reasons why this happened which are particularly important to consider here. McGowan (2013) suggests that an individual who is targeted by prejudice will be filtered, distorted, or completely silenced by the operation of the powerful image with which he or she is identified by others. With this in mind, using racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic language and trolling techniques, the online perpetrators were able to incite fear and prejudice toward both Imran and Charlotte, in an attempt to silence their perspectives.

The silencing of subordinate voices is a common way that institutional power operates. Miller (2003) points out that a favorite theme of Foucault's was the power of dominant discourses not only to impose fundamental assumptions and categories on how we perceive reality but also to ward off challenges to them while concealing exclusionary practices. Foucault (1981) claimed that silence is never outside of discourse, and as argued by Ward and Winstanley (2003), "discourses authorize who can speak, what can be spoken about, how it is spoken about and what should be taken seriously; whilst simultaneously marginalizing and disqualifying other voices whose speech remains forbidden or derided" (p. 133). Thus, social power privileges some voices and simultaneously excludes others. In relation to this article, a person whose voice is reduced to noise—such as a disturbing sound or a story not worth listening to—is socially and culturally silenced (Butler, 1997). Thus, the attempts by the perpetrators to threaten, ridicule, and discredit Imran's and Charlotte's voices into silence and the pace and speed with which such abuse gathered momentum highlight how such exclusionary linguistic practices are able to take place in both online and offline spheres, evidencing the all-encompassing nature of such silencing techniques.

Furthermore, having a voice implies much more than being able to make meaningful sounds—it is the privilege of being respectfully and unbiasedly listened to when speaking and acting. Allowing individuals or groups to have a voice is to allow agency. On an individual level, having a voice is important to self-control and empowerment. On the other hand, silencing people by creating barriers against certain expressions is to obstruct agency and empowerment (Griffin, 1993). The abuse that Charlotte and Imran experienced online when attempting to speak openly about issues connected to Islamophobia and gender inequality highlights that their perspectives were not "respectfully" listened to on social media, which consequently attempted to deny their agency of free speech.

Collectively, the suggestion that women, people of Muslim faith, and/or other oppressed groups should simply "try harder" to make their perspectives heard is not enough here, as the attempted silencing of such groups in both online

and real-world spheres is intrinsically ingrained in the language and culture of Western society. Furthermore, although Imran and Charlotte speak on behalf of oppressed groups on both social media and in the "real world" via their research and also identify within such groups (Charlotte—woman, Imran—Islam), as educated individuals, their privileged position is recognized. With this in mind, their refusal to be silenced and their associated sense of empowerment should be considered within this context, which may not be able to be extended to other members of such groups who are not afforded such privilege. However, it is argued here that irrespective of individual responses to the issue of online misogyny or Islamophobia, the suppression and distortion of the speech of marginalized groups is a collective, cultural problem that needs to be addressed. Efforts to challenge and defuse the power of negative attitudes toward marginalized groups in more privileged contexts, such as academia, are important not only because of the interests of this group but also due to the message that this extends beyond the academy to wider society. Although this article highlights important issues within the academic community, it is arguably what this suggests about the abuse of women and people of Muslim faith more broadly, both within and beyond the academic sphere, which has particular implications.

In addition, it is argued here that all forms of online abuse should be acknowledged and addressed, ranging from the "low-level" name-calling to death or rape threats. There appears to be a growing tendency for online abuse to be tackled only when it escalates to death threats or more usually, when the abuse transfers to the "real world," such as stalking or physical violence (Herring, 2002; Jane, 2014). However, it is argued here that due to the increasingly endemic nature of the online abuse of women and people of Muslim faith, all types of such abuse need to be taken seriously. Kelly's (1988) concept of a continuum is useful to consider here, as she argues that myriad forms of sexism women encounter every day through to the rape or murder of women by men should be viewed as a "continuum" of sexual violence. She suggests that the concept of a continuum enables women to make sense of their own experiences by showing how "typical" and "extreme" male behaviors shade into one another. This concept can be reapplied more broadly here, as considering the online abuse of marginalized groups as a "continuum" highlights how all forms of abusive behavior, whether "low level" or "more serious," are all part of the same wider societal problem of misogyny and Islamophobia. All types of abuse need to be exposed, including the unexamined presuppositions that structure these abusive practices, to demonstrate the harm they do in inhibiting the success of oppressed groups in society.

A particularly disappointing similarity in the auto-ethnographic accounts is the lack of response and support provided by Twitter. Responses from social media companies, such as Twitter, in tackling both gender-based hate and Islamophobia, both within and beyond the academic sphere, has been slow. For example, although Twitter offers users an option of blocking, reporting, or muting someone, such measures lack focus toward proactively seeking to counter online hate speech. Twitter has been at the forefront of promoting ideals around counter-messaging, which is the process whereby users deflect hateful comments online and instead focus on positive counter-messaging. An example of how Twitter has used this is through the promotion of the hashtag "NotinMyName" campaign run by Muslim communities in response to ISIS terrorist attacks. However, counter-messaging does not tackle the cause of the issue and it allows the role and responsibility of Twitter to be minimized in attempting to combat and prevent hate online. With this in mind, one of the suggestions we propose is that Twitter and other social media networks must directly tackle online hate, as well as specifically monitor gender- and religious-based hatred. It is important to monitor where and when the online hate is appearing and the interconnected links between such hate, as this can not only inform policy but also enable a better understanding of the relationships forming online and the ways in which gender- and religious-based hate is promoted and reinforced. It is noted here that this would be a time-consuming task, but such measures are needed to directly tackle the issue and prevent such hate from continuing in the future.

In addition, further research development is needed, which could include survey analysis, focus groups, and interviews with victims of online gender-based hate and Islamophobia. This would enable a more nuanced understanding of the impact of such crimes from the perspective of the victim, as well as providing the opportunity for victims to discuss and reflect on their experiences and the impact this has had on their lives, both online and offline. There are increasing quantitative data demonstrating that online anti-Muslim hate exists (Awan & Zempi, 2015), but this should also be extended to gender-based hate and qualitative analysis is needed for both groups to ascertain victim impact and experiences. Furthermore, we argue that a website could be developed for victims of hate crime online, which would provide an empowering, supportive, and "hate-free" online space. It is recognized here that such an online space should not be viewed as a solution to tackling hate online, as having a "designated hate-free zone" for women and people of Muslim faith does not tackle the endemic and systematic nature of hate online. However, such a space could be used to encourage people to share experiences, act as a collaborative hub for people who have suffered this form of abuse, and provide a platform for considering ways in which online hate can be prevented.

Finally, this article argues that methods of reporting abuse online and the actions that Twitter and other social media companies take following the reporting of an incident of abuse need to be made much clearer. As outlined in the auto-ethnographic accounts, when both Charlotte and Imran reported incidents of hate and violence online, they both felt dissatisfied by Twitter's lack of response and were not

informed of the actions taken by Twitter. Furthermore, Awan and Zempi (2015) argue that social media companies should make their systems of reporting hate crime more user friendly. In their study, a number of participants spoke about their anger and frustration at reporting online abuse that they had suffered. For example, in some cases, social media companies refused to take action because the abuse did not breach their specific community standards. We argue that Twitter could develop a specific section or button that includes reporting racism, bigotry, misogynistic abuse, hate speech, and prejudice. This would enable the specific targeting of users based on their religion or gender to be more closely monitored.

We also argue that victims who do report hate online should be better informed of how their case is being dealt with by the social media company in question. At each stage of the process, victims should be notified of actions taken and be in a position to report further related/connected abuse in the future. This latter point is particularly significant to this article because as outlined in the auto-ethnographic accounts, individuals, such as academics, who speak out against gender-related or Islamophobic issues, particularly those who are also a member of the targeted group, often receive repeated hate online. However, such instances should not be viewed as being in isolation of each other and should be understood as being part of a wider societal issue of violence against women and Islamophobia. With this in mind, social media companies, such as Twitter, should also monitor levels of abuse by profile, rather than individual cases, to better support victims who experience such abuse on a regular, perhaps in some instances daily, basis.

Conclusion

It is recognized that the auto-ethnographic accounts provided in this article reflect the experiences and stories of two people and cannot be generalized to the wider population of which they represent. However, it is increasingly recognized that both women and Muslims are among those who are most likely to be the target of hate online (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016). With this in mind, Charlotte's and Imran's experiences arguably, at least to some extent, reflect the experiences of others, particularly those who publicly speak out against Islamophobia and misogyny online. Academics are increasingly expected to disseminate their research, thoughts, and knowledge in public and online spaces, such as via social media. However, this article highlights that the web may be a less safe space for some academics, particularly those who experience structural inequalities, such as being a woman or a person of Muslim faith.

In principle, the web, particularly social media, offers a novel opportunity for different ways of knowledge exchange and alternative perspectives to be shared and discussed. However, the reality is often a very different experience, with the perspective of women and people of Muslim faith in particular being constantly silenced or minimized. Although this article discusses the online hate experienced by academics on Twitter, online misogyny and Islamophobia should be viewed as a collective, cultural problem that needs to be addressed. Social media companies, such as Twitter, should recognize their role in the maintenance of Islamophobia and misogyny online. The lack of transparency of the reporting process to victims, the failure to take online hate seriously, and the lack of understanding of the endemic nature of Islamophobia and misogyny online evidenced by companies, such as Twitter, highlight that they should face higher levels of responsibility and accountability to tackle hate online and prevent this from happening in the future. As long as prejudicial views of women and people of Muslim faith go unchallenged both in online and offline contexts, they reinforce the silencing of their voices across our culture as a whole. Until such voices receive the same levels of respect as more dominant, privileged and normalized perspectives, both within academia and beyond, the chance that such perspectives will be fully effective and 'heard' is minimal.

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Notes

1. In May 2013, Drummer Lee Rigby was murdered in Woolwich, Southeast London. His attackers Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale told bystanders that they had killed a soldier to avenge the death of Muslims killed by British armed forces.
2. BBC News (2015) #KillAllMuslims hashtag, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-30782357
3. Caroline Criado-Perez is a UK-based feminist journalist, author, and regular media commentator, particularly about issues connected to gender inequality and feminism.
4. Mario Bartoli defeated Sabine Lasicki at Wimbledon in 2013. In the build-up to this match, BBC Sports Presenter, John Inverdale stated on air, "Do you think Bartoli's dad told her when she was little, 'you're never going to be a looker? You'll never be a Sharapova, so you have to be scrappy and fight'." Following this (possibly unrelated to such comments), Bartoli received extensive online abuse about her physical appearance and this made national news (e.g., *The Guardian*, 8 July).
5. In May 2013, Drummer Lee Rigby was murdered in an act of terrorism on the streets of Woolwich in southeast London. In April 2013, a Muslim grandfather named Mohammed Saleem was murdered in an act of terrorism by Pavlo Lapshyn in Birmingham.
6. Katie Hopkins is a newspaper columnist and has appeared on a number of British television programs.

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