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Tackling Networked Misogyny Through Graduate Curriculum Design

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Tackling Networked Misogyny Through Graduate Curriculum Design

As faculty in a graduate communication program, I regularly assign digital projects, including digital portfolios, blogs, social media campaigns, and Wikipedia editing. Establishing a professional online presence is especially beneficial for women graduate students as they build their CVs, enter the academic job market, establish themselves as public intellectuals, and grow their networks through blogging or social media posts. One disturbing trend in the past few years has been the hesitancy on the part of my women students to participate in these public-facing projects. Their concerns include fear of harassment, imposter syndrome, and a lack of congruency with their non-academic digital identities. My students' concerns can be understood in the larger context of what Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) label "networked misogyny," or the pervasiveness of gendered harassment on online platforms. Several factors contribute to networked misogyny including algorithmic biases, lack of diversity in sources of innovation, and widespread racism, misogyny, and homophobia (Ging & Sapiera, 2018). Just as women seem to be gaining prominence in media as content producers and managers, they are experiencing an even stronger and more concerted backlash based on intersectional identities. In recent years, networked misogyny has moved from individual attacks to more targeted campaigns, such as those launched against female game designers, (for example, #GamerGate).

Networked misogyny leads to a double-bind of online visibility for marginalized communities (Duffy & Hund, 2019). While on the one hand, establishing an online presence can help build students' personal academic brand, there is also the danger of being the target of attacks. These attacks have a chilling effect on feminist activism, as Barker and Jurasz (2019) document in their study of feminist activists and women politicians, limiting full participation in public life. Additionally, networked misogyny stifles the creation and distribution of shared knowledge. For example, roughly ten percent of Wikipedia editors are women and many report being the subject of harassment (Gauthier & Sawchuck, 2017).

Graduate educators need to be aware of both student vulnerabilities and cultural risks as they design their curriculum for digital projects. In the broad context, graduate students have more life experience and need to be aware of how their digital footprints may open them up to scrutiny and harassment. The first step to addressing networked misogyny is to include information on digital literacy and digital privacy in classrooms assigning digital projects. We can't assume students are conversant in these concepts, especially because technologies and platforms are constantly changing. Useful sources for protecting digital privacy include Digital Shred: A Privacy Literacy Toolkit (<https://sites.psu.edu/digitalshred/>) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Surveillance Self-Defense (<https://ssd.eff.org/>). These resources offer several technological solutions for minimizing trolls, blocking hate messages, and avoiding spamming.

Second, many graduate students are already establishing their personal brands through social media platforms, such as LinkedIn and Instagram, and we can offer a feminist critique of this process that challenges the individualism of social media. Self-branding refers to how users "transform the self into a branded commodity within consumer culture" (Banet-Weiser & Jurasz, 2011, p. 1771) and follows neoliberalist logics of self-interest and individualism that can be counter to the goals of feminism. Indeed, academia increasingly "privileges self-interest over collective pursuits of justice, regards self-promotion, and normalizes self-branding as the logical way to position oneself on the job market" (p. 1774). Through classroom discussions, we can encourage intentional uses of these platforms for engaging in feminist issues and supporting

collective engagement where women students build each other up in these spaces, as reflected in hashtag activism campaigns such as #YesAllWomen.

Third, we can help students develop strategies for addressing online harassment if they encounter it. Dominant strategies tend to put the burden on individuals, such as reporting harassment to social media companies and documenting the abuse through screenshots. While social media companies, such as Twitter, have been somewhat proactive about addressing abusive behavior, there is also a call for interventions from government and corporations to fully address online hate (Barker & Jurasz, 2019). We can support our students through offering resources in our syllabi and in course materials that have links to some key resources, such as FemTechNet's Center for Solutions to Online Violence (<https://www.femtechnet.org/csov/>). PEN's *Online Harassment Field Journal* offers a decision-making tool that can help students decide if, how, and when to respond. PEN first encourages users to assess the threat level. If the online abuser makes a student feel unsafe, then they should engage law enforcement, inform their professor, reach out to friends, family, and nonprofits that have expertise in these issues. However, if a student is emotionally prepared to confront a harasser, some strategies can include publishing a statement on their social media that condemns the harassment, deploying an online support community to help correct the narrative, and taking screenshots and re-posting to call out the behavior. This strategic approach keeps the end in mind. Students must ask if it is more important to speak out against the harasser or condemn the behavior. Calling out the behavior might be more constructive because it can signal to those who are subject to harassment that there are ways to address it and signal to harassers that the behavior is unacceptable. Ultimately, though, students should understand the implications of their choices.

Finally, networked misogyny can cause emotional, social, physical, and financial harm (Jane, 2017). Trauma-informed pedagogy can help educators support survivors as they come forward and provide resources to them to mitigate the psychological trauma that can result from cyberhate and harassment. Trauma-informed pedagogy includes fostering students' physical, emotional, social, academic safety, developing trust and transparency, offering empowerment and choice, integrating social justice components, and supporting resilience and growth (Imad, 2021).

Despite some of the challenges to assigning digital projects, there are great opportunities for women graduate students to distribute their feminist research and build coalitions to work toward social change.

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