

Walking Alone Online:**Intersectional Violence on the Internet**

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This article discusses the targeting of women and minorities on the internet, specifically focusing on matters which have arisen within the Digital Humanities community in the Global North.¹ I explore the connection between Milo Yiannopoulos's key role in GamerGate, the online harassment of female journalists, and the targeted attacks against female academics working in the Digital Humanities. The link between these phenomena is organic, with Yiannopoulos playing a critical role in both attempts to terrorize female-identifying individuals into silence and compliance. The article also elucidates the reasons why an online mob mentality can overrule social boundaries and shows how hatred is directed mostly at individuals who stand at the intersection of several marginalized groups. I explore how the rise of the far right, currently referred to as the alt-right,² is directly linked to the type of harassment female academics experience and conclude that despite the internet's potential as an egalitarian space,

¹ I wrote this article in the Global North, as I held a tenure-track post at a European University. My background, however, is intersectional. A mixed race Latinx, I grew up as the child of immigrants in a country in which I was not born (I am an adult Third Culture Kid) and where my accent and my appearance singled me out. My academic background in English literature required me to learn a new language in which I will never enjoy the advantages of a native-speaker. As a textual critic and a specialist in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, I work among a very conservative group emphasizing and, often fostering, sameness. See Robinson's article on this same volume about female editors.

² Alt-right is a term originally developed by the group itself as a rebranding of multiple hate groups. As defined in Wikipedia, the alt-right is "a loosely-connected and somewhat ill-defined grouping of white supremacists, neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, neo-fascists and other far-right fringe hate groups." "Alt-Right," *Wikipedia*, 18 June 2018, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Alt-right&oldid=846424649>. Although I consistently use the appellation alt-right in this article, I do this because I consider their tactics, specially developed for the age of social media, unify them as a group not because I believe that there is any legitimacy to any of their claims or that we should not clearly understand them as a hate group closely linked with White supremacists and fascists.

the virtual plane is so profoundly tainted by the hetero-patriarchal reality as to allow figures which should have been marginal to take center stage and orchestrate coordinated assaults against what have become easy targets. I conclude that the threats of seemingly fringe individuals cannot be taken lightly in a world in which so many individuals can be manipulated through the smoke and mirrors of the internet.

1. Background

1.1 The importance of GamerGate

I have chosen to start with the events surrounding GamerGate because this controversy became one of the most obvious instances in which women were publicly targeted, in this case for their perceived role in influencing game production.³

GamerGate made headlines in major newspapers as it brought the mainstream public into what became one of the ugliest battles fought online.⁴

Most of us did not know enough then to even begin to imagine what the future had in store. Now we know there was a backlash against achievements in terms of civil rights for minorities and women, a

³ The events of GamerGate were preceded in 2007 by the doxxing of technology blogger Kathy Sierra that led to the closure of her blog and Sierra's leaving Twitter. Jessica Valenti, "How the Web Became a Sexists' Paradise," *The Guardian*, 5 April 2007, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/apr/06/gender.blogging>; "Why the Trolls Will Always Win," WIRED, accessed 7 June 2018, <https://www.wired.com/2014/10/trolls-will-always-win/>.

⁴ Bob Stuart, "#GamerGate: The Misogynist Movement Blighting the Video Games Industry," 24 October 2014, sec. Culture, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/11180510/gamergate-misogynist-felicia-day-zoe-quinn-brianna-wu.html>; Nick Wingfield, "Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in 'GamerGate' Campaign," *The New York Times*, 21 December 2017, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/16/technology/gamergate-women-video-game-threats-anita-sarkeesian.html>; Chandra Steele, "Everything You Never Wanted to Know About GamerGate," 21 October 2014, <https://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2470723,00.asp>; Fruzsina Eördögh, "Gamergate and the New Horde of Digital Saboteurs," *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 November 2014, <https://www.csmonitor.com/Technology/Tech-Culture/2014/1125/Gamergate-and-the-new-horde-of-digital-saboteurs>; Jesse Singal, "Gamergate Should Stop Lying to Journalists — and Itself," *The Cut*, 20 October 2014, <https://www.thecut.com/2014/10/gamergate-should-stop-lying-to-itself.html>.

backlash which went beyond the gaming world and infiltrated politics with the use of trolls to enact political change which sustains the worst instances of traditional hegemonic power. Russian trolls interfered in Brexit, perhaps leading to the United Kingdom leaving the European Union.⁵ They are likely to have contributed to Donald Trump's rise to the White House, setting the world back years in matters of civil rights, climate change, peace, and trade.⁶ One cannot help but to trace a line from GamerGate to the rise of Trump, with other events in between.⁷

1.2 Zoe Quinn and *Depression Quest*.

In 2017, Zoe Quinn published a book entitled *Crash Override*, in which she describes the events leading to GamerGate and how this affected her and shook the gaming industry. She describes her breakup with Eron Gjoni, the author of the blog that unleashed a wave of hatred which is only now subsiding and which is now known as Thezoepost.⁸ The blog went viral as members of the gaming community rose as judges and executioners under the banner of challenging the ethics of the video

⁵ 'Matt Burgess, "Twitter Has Admitted Russian Trolls Targeted the Brexit Vote (a Little Bit)," *WIRED UK*, 8 February 2018, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/twitter-russia-brexit-fake-news-facebook-russia>; Patrick Wintour, "Russian Bid to Influence Brexit Vote Detailed in New US Senate Report," *The Guardian*, 10 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/10/russian-influence-brexit-vote-detailed-us-senate-report>; "Russian Twitter Trolls Meddled in the Brexit Vote. Did They Swing It?," 23 November 2017, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2017/11/23/russian-twitter-trolls-meddled-in-the-brexit-vote.-did-they-swing-it>.

⁶ Kenneth P. Vogel, "How Russian Trolls Crept Into the Trump Campaign's Facebook Messages," *The New York Times*, 9 March 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/us/politics/russian-trolls-trump-campaign-florida-matt-skiber.html>; Canadian Press, "Russian Trolls That Meddled In U.S. Election Targeted PM, Canadian Oil," HuffPost Canada, 18 March 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2018/03/18/russian-trolls-us-election-trudeau-oil-canada_a_23388839/; Molly Mckew, "Did Russia Affect the 2016 Election? It's Now Undeniable," *WIRED*, 16 February 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/did-russia-affect-the-2016-election-its-now-undeniable/>.

⁷ Casey Johnston, "How 4chan Manufactured the #GamerGate Controversy," *WIRED UK*, 10 September 2014, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/gamergate-chat-logs>; Dale Beran, "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump," *Medium*, 14 February 2017, <https://medium.com/@DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb>.

⁸ 'Thezoepost', accessed 7 June 2018, <https://thezoepost.wordpress.com/>.

games industry.⁹ Online trolls were so effective in their mob behaviour that they succeeded in driving several women away from their homes. Zoe Quinn,¹⁰ Joanna Wu,¹¹ and Anita Sarkeesian¹² were all the target of threats. Sarkeesian had already been harassed when she tried to crowdfund Feminist Frequency in 2002.¹³ At the time, she received threats both in Twitter and from anonymous email accounts. Citron in her 2014 book *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* states that:

Nonwhite females faced cyber harassment more than any other group, with 53 percent reporting having been harassed online. Next were white females, at 45 percent, and nonwhite males, at 40 percent. The group least likely to have been harassed was white males, at only 31 percent. However, there is no clear proof that race is determinative; for example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 84 percent of cyber harassment victims were white women, and the majority of victims in the CITU cases were white women.¹⁴

These statistics are already worrying, but Citron's tagline summarizes the state of affairs, "What is beyond dispute is that being a woman raises one's risk of cyber harassment, and for lesbian, transgender, or bisexual women and women of color, the risk may be higher."¹⁵ Zoe Quinn's queerness was a determining factor in increasing the vitriol against her. Non-normative individuals are frequently the

⁹ Stuart, "#GamerGate: The Misogynist Movement Blighting the Video Games Industry."

¹⁰ Simon Parkin, 'Zoe Quinn's Depression Quest', 9 September 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/zoe-quinns-depression-quest#>.

¹¹ Brianna Wu, "Rape and Death Threats Are Terrorizing Female Gamers. Why Haven't Men in Tech Spoken out?" *The Washington Post*, 20 October 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/10/20/rape-and-death-threats-are-terrorizing-female-gamers-why-havent-men-in-tech-spoken-out/?TID+SM_FB.

¹² Danielle Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

¹³ Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*.

¹⁴ Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*, 14.

¹⁵ Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*, 14.

target of bullies both online and in real life. Quinn, the unwilling protagonist of GamerGate, writes about how marginalized groups are frequently the targets of unprovoked attacks:

It doesn't take much. Maybe you'll express your opinion on a political issue and it will get noticed by the wrong person. Maybe you'll wake up to find that a company you once bought shoes from online was careless with security, and now your personal information is in the hands of anyone who bothers to look. Maybe someone who has a grudge against you is relentless enough to post and promote bogus information about you online — stuff that can never be erased. Maybe you're a member of a demographic that is constantly targeted — you're a woman, you're black, you're trans, or any combination of these or other marginalized groups — and someone who wants to get people like you off “their” internet decides to take it upon themselves to make your life hell. Online abusers target countless people every year for any number of arbitrary reasons.¹⁶

Thus, in August 2014 a bad breakup mutated into one of the most controversial events in the gaming industry, with consequences in apparently distant academic fields such as New Media Studies and Digital Humanities, where such matters become the object of analysis and study.

This did not come as a surprise to people involved in game studies who have seen women targeted in various cases before this one. Among those women, Anita Sarkeesian has

¹⁶ Zoe Quinn, *Crash Override*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017), 1-2.

been the focus of frequent threats lasting up to this date.¹⁷ The general public learned *en masse*, for the first time, how much resentment and vitriolic anger is manifested when the status quo feels threatened by women or minorities. GamerGate became the story we know today. After accusing Zoe Quinn of trading sex for a good review of her game, *Depression Quest*, an anonymous mob doxxed her, sent her a range of threats, and made her life hell. Quinn describes the experience in detail in *Crash Override*. It verges on the surreal as what should have been an ordinary breakup became a crusade for men who claimed to be defending the gaming industry's sacred ethics. The only problem was they were not. Instead, they acted as if they were playing a game in which the ultimate objective was to obliterate Zoe Quinn as if she had been an NPC.¹⁸ The GamerGate trolls have continued to argue there was "corruption in video games journalism and that feminists [were] actively working to undermine the video game industry."¹⁹ Even though these claims were unsubstantiated, they continued to feed what became a massive move against women in gaming (both in industry and academia) which continues to this date.

1.3 Being online

Not all days are dark on the internet. Occasionally, people can find spaces or content which make them feel welcomed or, at least, understood. Many days, being online feels like a positive experience, but this is only true of those who have not attracted the attention of trolls.

¹⁷ Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes, Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (2 January 2015): 208–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917>.

¹⁸ The behaviour of some trolls maps a game. Their language suggests that they consider it not different from playing on their computers or consoles.

¹⁹ Chess and Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes."

In 2010, writer-director Eleonore Pourriat released a short film entitled *The Oppressed Majority*.²⁰ The short became viral in early 2014 after the director had included English subtitles. It was shared on social media and became the centerpiece of articles in *The New York Times* and *the Guardian*.²¹ It can be described as a gender-bender of society. The main character, Pierre, is harassed and eventually assaulted. Over the course of the piece, he is the object of the abuse and contempt of the women surrounding him. An intriguing aspect of *The Oppressed Majority* is that it parallels how women live in our society every day: ignoring things we are told on the streets, trying to defend ourselves without causing men to be offended (because men can be dangerous), and generally not acknowledging everything which makes us uncomfortable. During the first minute and a half, we have Pierre put down by a neighbour and then being the recipient of unwanted comments from another. This second woman is returning from a jog, her breasts exposed. This image, of women jogging bare-chested, brings one of the strongest points of the film: the question of who owns what space. Because our society has sexualized women's breasts, in many countries, there is a lack of balance between male and female chest exposure. In other words, men can jog without a t-shirt, women cannot. Moreover, often women are shamed for breastfeeding in public. This translates into an understanding that outside space is male space. Men can expose their nipples in most of the western world, while women cannot. This is relevant for our understanding of how the physical world translates into the virtual one. It took Facebook until 2014 to allow images of breastfeeding women in their platform,²² while hate groups are allowed to thrive. Within the public posts of VDARE's Facebook group one can find their subscribers referring to mixed race

²⁰ eleonorepourriat1, *OPPRESSED MAJORITY (Majorité Opprimée English)*, by Eleonore Pourriat, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4UWxIVvT1A>.

²¹ Alissa J. Rubin, "French Film Goes Viral, but Not in France," *The New York Times*, 20 December 2017, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/07/movies/oppressed-majority-provokes-debate-on-internet.html>.

²² Chris Matyszczyk, "Facebook: Breastfeeding Photos That Bare All Are OK," CNET, 13 June 2014, <https://www.cnet.com/news/facebook-breastfeeding-photos-that-bare-all-are-ok/>.

people as "dysgenic," photographs calling for a ban on Muslims, and for the building of a Wall at the Mexico border. This is to say nothing of calls for the defense of "their legacy" and "their ancestry," or the presentation of white supremacists as victims of 4Chan stalkers.

Although the Breitbart Facebook pages are less obvious, they present many judgements over public figures featured in their articles while they spread conspiracy theories in which Google, Facebook, and Twitter are supposedly working with the "far-left" to undermine their site. This happens because these hate-groups are protected under the banner of free speech, which should apply to all, while female breasts are considered a societal taboo because online space is akin to outside space and it does not belong to women or minorities.

In real life, women and minorities walk in fear. This is even truer for intersectional bodies as they are frequently the target of violence.²³ It follows that intersectional individuals are also more likely to be the target of violence online, as stated above.

2. The Day I Asked Questions

In 2014, some members of the steering committee of the Alliance for Digital Humanities Organizations were in the process of promoting a more inclusive annual conference. Despite the efforts of the subcommittee tasked with increasing diversity for this gathering, their suggestions were initially discarded without being shared with the steering committee. This led to the resignation of the then Chair, John Nerbonne, and triggered a minor crisis. Following these and other events detailed in my article, "Minority Report," I created a demographic survey similar to those often found as part of

²³ For Black Trans-women the murder rate is higher than for cisgender people. Within the general population the murder rate is 1 every 19000, for transgender women of color it is 1 every 2600 Meredith Talusan, "Unerased: Mic's Database of Trans Lives Lost to Homicide in the US," 8 December 2016, <https://mic.com/unerased>.

university admissions or recruitment processes. Although the survey seemed innocuous enough, some responses had to be eliminated because their content rendered them unusable. These were either openly mocking, trolling, or simply angry. In an unexpected turn of events, I discovered a few individuals, most notably MCP ("Male Chauvinistic Pig"), were dismissive of the issues being considered and aggressive in their answers, sometimes both, and felt they had earned the right to insult the person who dared to ask them to provide this information.

I received a handful of rude emails, some of them forwarded by colleagues, pointing out the lack of relevance of this work and, particularly, its lack of significance to those working in the field. Despite this, the results of that survey were presented at various conferences and the article based on the work was published in *Bodies of Information. Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities*, edited by Jacqueline Wernimont and Elizabeth Losh, part of the Debates in Digital Humanities Series.²⁴ Although one cannot be certain, it appeared as if the aggressive respondents all identified themselves as heterosexual cisgendered men.

Scholars have called before for a more self-critical DH, notably, Miriam Posner when she wrote: "DH needs scholarly expertise in critical race theory, feminist and queer theory, and other interrogations of structures of power in order to develop models of the world that have any relevance to people's lived experience."²⁵ She has not been the only one to point out this need. Roopika Risam has been vocal about the realities of a larger, and consequently, more diverse field in combination with a lack of

²⁴ The volume is currently in preparation and should be printed in Fall 2018.

²⁵ Miriam Posner, "What's Next: The Radical, Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Klein, Lauren, 2016th ed., Debates in the Digital Humanities 2 (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/54>.

understanding of how to transcend the view insisting on individuating aspects of a discipline which would be better served by an intersectional approach.²⁶

My brush with trolls was minor, almost nothing, in comparison to what others have had to endure, and yet it was a disagreeable experience I would rather have avoided. The most disturbing part of it was the sure knowledge these were not random strangers, but university professors and researchers who hid behind anonymity to lash out their anger and frustration. Why would educated people working in research institutions act this way?

3. The Trolls

3.1 Who are they?

In the general public's mind, there is a stereotype of trolls. Jessica Moreno, a former Reddit employee, stated in an interview with Joel Stein that: "The idea of the basement dweller drinking Mountain Dew and eating Doritos isn't accurate... They would be a doctor, a lawyer, an inspirational speaker, a kindergarten teacher. They'd send lovely gifts and be a normal person."²⁷ Or university professors or researchers. At any rate, they are highly educated people who should know better and not allow themselves to fall into this trap of aggression and hatred. Despite this, our experience, over and over, is that trolls exist, that they mount campaigns against individuals, and that they enjoy causing damage and destruction, especially when the persons involved have a high profile.

According to John Suler, a psychologist, six factors contribute to what he calls "the online disinhibition effect" a type of conduct observed in individuals using the internet.²⁸ This was portrayed in

²⁶ Roopika Risam, "Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality and the Digital Humanities," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (2 September 2015). Reprinted in this volume.

²⁷ Joel Stein, "How Trolls Are Ruining the Internet," *Time*, 18 August 2016, <http://time.com/4457110/internet-trolls/>.

²⁸ John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7, no. 3 (1 June 2004): 321–26, <https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>.

a positive light in Sherry Turkle's book, *Life on the Screen*, where she writes: "But it is on the Internet that our confrontations with technology as it collides with our sense of human identity are fresh, even raw. In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along."²⁹ Turkle goes on to describe how virtual environments can be experienced as "more real" than real life. Turkle goes on to describe how virtual environments can be experienced as "more real" than real life. According to Turkle, this affords us the possibility of reinventing ourselves. This reinvention, in turn, changes the individual involved³⁰ because "[v]irtual spaces may provide the safety for us to expose what we are missing so that we can begin to accept ourselves as we are."³¹ The problem resides in that perhaps our lives on the screen are not potentiating our best selves. Although it is possible a place of disinhibition could contribute to the growth of an individual, this raises the question of how the same place may hold equal potential for developing the more negative aspects of someone's personality. This is the line of research pursued by Suler. He acknowledges the possibility of benign disinhibition, "an attempt to better understand and develop oneself, to resolve interpersonal and intrapsychic problems or explore new emotional and experiential dimensions to one's identity."³² However, this potential is overshadowed by what he calls "toxic disinhibition." Suler's six contributing factors (whether this is benign or toxic) are dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity,³³ solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority.³⁴ The dissociative aspects, anonymity and imagination, together with the lack

²⁹ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

³⁰ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*.

³¹ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*.

³² Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect."

³³ The asynchronicity aspect was mostly related to online forums and boards. Facebook, Instagram, and, specially, Twitter, allow for instant reaction from the victim.

³⁴ Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect."

of authority, which in Suler's argument refers to the lack of status signs individuals exhibit online, could also be extrapolated to environments where there is little control over the behaviour of individuals, i.e. they are free to do exactly as they please, and hence be essential factors in troll behaviour.

Suler, a psychologist, also considers that even if online and offline behaviours are contradictory, they are both parts of the personality spectrum of a particular individual and neither is truer than the other:

“The self does not exist separate from the environment in which that self is expressed. If someone contains his aggression in face-to-face living but expresses that aggression online, both behaviors reflect aspects of self: the self that acts nonaggressively under certain conditions, the self that acts aggressively under other conditions. When an individual is shy in person while outgoing online, neither self-presentation is truer. They are two dimensions of that person, each revealed within a different situational context.”³⁵ However, others disagree with Suler and posit that “[t]he troll persona appears to be a malicious case of a virtual avatar, reflecting both actual personality and one’s ideal self.”³⁶

The key question is whether the lack of inhibition online, particularly when hatred meets no consequences, might also be conducive to a modification of offline conduct.

3.2 Why do they do it?

Trolls themselves say they do it “for the lulz.”³⁷ This behaviour, which only aims to please the trolls themselves, consists in picking a subject to be mocked. The advice used to be “don't feed the trolls,” i.e. do not engage with destructive individuals online.

³⁵ Suler, “The Online Disinhibition Effect.”

³⁶ Erin Buckels, Paul D. Trapnell, and Delroy L. Paulhus, “Trolls Just Want to Have Fun,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 67 (n.d.): 97–102.

³⁷ “For the lulz” is a negative version of “For the lolz” which means for the laughs.

The problem with presenting trolls as people who do it for fun and with only mild negative connotations akin to the figure of a trickster, like Loki in Scandinavian literature, is that it ignores the most destructive aspects of troll behaviour. It has been shown that not only do online trolls score high in the so-called Dark Tetrad³⁸ but they are also typically characterized by sadism:³⁹

When controlling for enjoyment, the impact of sadism on trolling was cut nearly in half; and the indirect effect of sadism through enjoyment was substantial, significant, and remained significant when controlling for overlap with the Dark Triad scores. These findings provide a preliminary glimpse into the mechanism by which sadism fosters trolling behavior. Both trolls and sadists feel sadistic glee at the distress of others. Sadists just want to have fun ... and the Internet is their playground!⁴⁰

If Buckels et al. are right in their conclusions, the internet allowed these types of individuals to flourish and to create communities of like-minded individuals (within Reddit, 4Chan, and similar sites), and also to develop into particularly virulent behaviours such as "gendertrolling," a type of particularly vicious trolling characterized by the coordinated participation of many individuals, gender-based insults, vicious language, credible threats, unusual intensity and longevity, and reactions to women speaking out.⁴¹

3.3 Trolling Celebrities on Social Media.

In the last couple of years, for example, two notorious actresses who are women of colour have been forced to leave social media. Leslie Jones was found herself in that situation after the release of

³⁸ In psychology the Dark Triad focuses on narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy as a conjunct study subject. The Dark Tetrad adds in sadism as a fourth component for the predictor of criminal and antisocial behaviours.

³⁹ Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus, "Trolls Just Want to Have Fun."

⁴⁰ Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus, "Trolls Just Want to Have Fun."

⁴¹ Karla Mantilla, "Gendertrolling: Misogyny Adapts to New Media," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 563–70, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23719068>.

Ghostbusters, when trolls attacked her on Twitter, created a fake account purporting to be hers, and harassed her until she could not take it anymore. It was this specific episode of trolling which got Milos Yiannopoulos banned from the platform. Although this was seen as positive by many who objected to the way he degraded others, it might have also allowed him to take refuge in the darkness of Reddit and 4Chan.⁴² More recently, Kelly Marie Tran, who had endured months of abuse because a section of the Star Wars fandom did not like her character in *The Last Jedi*, deleted her Instagram account.⁴³

Even journalists of the calibre of Jessica Valenti, a well-known feminist writer, who are used to being the target of trolls quit Twitter in July 2016 when she started to receive rape threats against her five-year-old daughter.⁴⁴ The irony here was that Valenti was one of the journalists who had written about the pervasive misogyny of online culture.⁴⁵

Valenti's example is an example of Mantilla's gendertrolling. Although Kelly Marie Tran and Leslie Jones might also fall into this category, I contend that the way in which vicious racial slurs were used against both actresses puts it in a further category of intersectional trolling. This might also have been what happened in the case of Zoe Quinn, whose queerness made her more vulnerable to certain types of attack.

⁴² Both platforms have been a breeding ground for the alt-right and for misogynistic groups like the “incels.” Reddit banned the incels subreddits in November 2017 Olivia Solon, "'Incel:' Reddit Bans Misogynist Men's Group Blaming Women for Their Celibacy," *The Guardian*, 8 November 2017, sec. Technology, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/nov/08/reddit-incel-involuntary-celibate-men-ban>., but these might be alive and well in 4Chan Zoe Williams, "'Raw Hatred:' Why the 'Incel' Movement Targets and Terrorises Women," *The Guardian*, 25 April 2018, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/25/raw-hatred-why-incel-movement-targets-terrorises-women>.

⁴³ BBC News, "Abuse-Hit Star Wars Actress Wipes Instagram," *BBC News*, 6 June 2018, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44379473>.

⁴⁴ Chasmar, "Jessica Valenti, Guardian Columnist, Quits Twitter over 'rape and Death Threat' against Daughter," *The Washington Times*, Web edition, accessed 10 June 2018, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/jul/27/jessica-valenti-guardian-columnist-quits-twitter-o/>.

⁴⁵ Valenti, "How the Web Became a Sexists' Paradise."

4. The Violence Affecting Us.

One might think academia is free from attacks from trolls. However, academics are often the target of oppressive movements. In March 2018, Inside Higher Education published an article about alt-right harassment and academic freedom in the US. The article notes that "outbursts and outrages against liberal professors who have written or spoken about white supremacy in America have become routine. Scholars like Steven Salaita, Saida Grundy, Johnny Eric Williams, George Ciccariello-Maher, Amanda Gailey, Dorothy Kim and, most recently, David Palumbo-Liu have all been subjected to severe right-wing media scrutiny for their stances against white supremacy, white privilege, settler colonialism and fascism."⁴⁶ This list is notable because Gailey and Kim, as well as Palumbo-Liu, are included in it. Each of these individuals has made a contribution to the Digital Humanities.

We want to believe there are no trolls among us but, as argued above, trolls are not weird basement dwellers, but individuals respected within their communities. In some cases, as explained before, they are members of our own community, the Digital Humanities. Equally, individuals within DH can be the targets of online hatred campaigns. This is the case of Amanda Gailey, associate professor of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and Dorothy Kim, assistant professor of English at Vassar College. For different reasons, these two professors have been identified by online alt-right trolls who have orchestrated attacks against them.

4.1 Amanda Gailey

Amanda Gailey is not just a professor of English; she is a vocal activist against gun-violence, a pervasive and crippling problem in the USA, working as part of Nebraskans Against Gun Violence since

⁴⁶ Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt, "Striking a Nerve," Inside Higher Education, 2 March 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/03/02/what-do-when-you-are-academic-under-attack-right-wing-publications-opinion>.

2014, she has appeared in front of legislators, written Op-eds, and organized events. Gailey has been a target of online articles attempting to defame her by manipulating quotes either deliberately or due to ignorance.⁴⁷ The attempt to discredit Gailey backfired, as the poem in question is an homage to Ginsberg.

Gailey's activism and her political position have attracted the attention of the wrong crowd and ended up in Breitbart and other alt-right websites. Breitbart has enough pull to call upon hundreds or thousands of people to harass others. They have even published an ill-conceived and sexist answer to the issue of online harassment of women in an article, authored by Milo Yiannopoulos, entitled "The solution to online 'harassment' is simple: women should log off," where they state that "[w]omen are -- and you won't hear this anywhere else -- screwing up the internet for men by invading every space we have online and ruining it with attention-seeking and a needy, demanding, touchy-feely form of modern feminism that quickly comes into conflict with men's natural tendency to be boisterous, confrontational and delightfully autistic."⁴⁸

The threats against Gailey started in 2014, when a local pro-gun group considered the idea of protesting in front of her house. Although that never happened, she began to receive threats and hate mail through social media. According to Gailey, it works like this:

I view it as a kind of pyramid, with the types of communication requiring the least energy from people being at the bottom, and the ones requiring the most at the top.⁴⁹

This translates into a vast number of social media messages, followed by e-mail, phone calls, regular mail, and in-person contact. Of the individuals harassing Gailey in social media,

⁴⁷ Dutt-Ballerstadt, "Striking a Nerve."

⁴⁸ Milo Yiannopoulos, "Why Women Should Leave The Internet," Breitbart, 5 July 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/milo/2016/07/05/solution-online-harassment-simple-women-log-off/>.

⁴⁹ Carolyn Gallaher, "War on the Ivory Tower: Alt Right Attacks on University Professors," *The Public Eye*, 7 May 2018, <http://feature.politicalresearch.org/war-on-the-ivory-tower>.

some were working independently while others were following instructions from pro-gun webpages which actively encouraged to contact Gailey. Also in 2014, in response to an Amazon review in which Gailey condemned Magpul, she received hate mail by email and social media messaging. Later, in 2016, just when a NRA bill was about to be voted on in the Nebraska legislature, Gailey experienced coordinated attacks after an article published by the NRA was picked up by Breitbart and other alt-right outlets. Gailey calculates that more than 400 social media messages, emails, phone calls, and letters reached her a result of the incitement from the alt-right.

However, in the Fall of 2017, Gailey's situation became worse. Turning Point USA had organized a recruitment event at the University of Nebraska and Gailey turned up to protest the event. Although Gailey was there to protest TPUSA and their Professor Watchlist website (she was holding a sign requesting to be included in the list), she became concerned for the wellbeing of one of the students and tried to comfort her. Carolyn Gallaher details the events in her article "War in the Ivory Tower," where she writes:

“Gailey positioned herself away from the scrum, near the TPUSA recruiting table. A short while later Gailey noticed that the student managing the table, Kaitlyn Mullen, was crying. ‘I rolled up my sign and walked over to ask her if she was ok,’ she recalled. The student seemed overwhelmed, so Gailey asked the student protesters to cool things down. She tried to reassure Mullen, telling her, ‘I don’t want anyone to be upset. No one is protesting you. It’s your organization they are protesting.’”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Carolyn Gallaher, "War on the Ivory Tower: Alt Right Attacks on University Professors," *The Public Eye*, 7 May 2018, <http://feature.politicalresearch.org/war-on-the-ivory-tower>.

Later, TPUSA posted a video of the event (the video did not feature Gailey who had not arrived yet) with a misleading title to make it appear as if Gailey had been harassing the student. Afterwards, bureaucratic failures left Gailey at the mercy of her detractors who did not take long to call for her being disciplined.

Gailey was fortunate, however. In the aftermath of the TPUSA rally, she had been banned from Facebook for a month after posting a picture of Batman breaking a gun. The 30-day ban helped curb what would have undoubtedly a multitude of Facebook posts. Instead, she only received several dozen emails. Gailey explains:

...as of the fall of 2017, the alt-right had a system working in which a single organization that wanted to push a story would post it and it would be immediately picked up by a connected alt-right media network and would be pushed by bots. So when TPUSA posted the video, it went viral in the space of 24 hours because of this algorithmic push. In contrast, a controversy I was involved with involving an NRA protest this spring got a fraction of the response despite my FB account being active and a Fox News program with over three million viewers vilifying me by name.⁵¹

Gailey's experience supports the idea that specific attacks are conceived and coordinated through alt-right linked sites, with the specific aim of intimidating academics seen as a threat to the new fascist agenda. Each time Gailey's name is featured in mainstream media, the alt-right's response is to flood her social media and email with threats and obscene language. Each incident prompts Gailey's harassers to post her office address, sometimes her home address, endangering her and her family.

4.2 Dorothy Kim

⁵¹ Amanda Gailey, private communication, June 18, 2018.

Gallager also chronicles the story of Dorothy Kim, a medievalist and digital humanist, who has become the target of conservative professor Rachel Fulton Brown. Brown is a professor of history at the University of Chicago. I followed the events relating to the "dispute" because, like Kim, I am a medievalist and digital humanist, so our areas of study overlap and we move within some of the same virtual communities.

In August 28th 2017, Kim published an article entitled "Teaching Medieval Studies in a Time of White Supremacy," as part of the blog *In the Middle*.⁵² Kim is a feminist who specializes in critical race studies and, upon recognizing the use of Medieval symbols by members of the alt-right, she took the opportunity to call upon fellow scholars to err on the side of caution when teaching the Middle Ages and explicitly signaling they are not white supremacist sympathizers. Kim has a solid argument to back this up. She quotes another scholar, Catherine Cox, who studies Islam and the weaponization of "the idea of the pure medieval Islamic past in their recruiting rhetoric for young male Muslims."⁵³ These are legitimate concerns, but they were seized by Brown who wrote various posts in which she accused Kim of hating her. Through her Facebook page, Brown tagged Milo Yiannopoulos so he would read her posts. This resulted in a subsequent article, published on his site on September 15 2017, entitled "Lady with a Sword Beats Down Fake Scholar with Facts and Fury."⁵⁴ The article follows the Breitbart editorial lines of only making modest attempts to appear as legitimate news praising Brown while presenting Kim as a "fake scholar." For anyone with a minimal degree of objectivity, the Yiannopoulos article appears ridiculous, both in tone and content.

⁵² Dorothy Kim, "Teaching Medieval Studies in a Time of White Supremacy," *In the Middle* (blog), 28 August 2017, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/08/teaching-medieval-studies-in-time-of.html>.

⁵³ Kim, "Teaching Medieval Studies."

⁵⁴ The allusion to the sword links it directly to Brown's blog, *Fencing Bear at Prayer*.

The consequences for Kim were severe. Because Brown had posted both Kim's picture and affiliation, she became readily identifiable for Yiannopoulos' enormous number of followers within the alt-right. This call upon a "celebrity" is reminiscent of Melissa Terras' (now at the University of Edinburgh, then at UCL) experience in 2014, which has been partially documented by Amy Earhart as follows:

In a Twitter argument with fellow scholar Adeline Koh over the charge of digital humanities being touted as the "savior of humanities jobs," Terras asked Koh for a citation of such a statement from a DH scholar. Asking for a citation seems a legitimate and appropriate form of academic debate. While a few scholars on Twitter provided some suggested sources, an ugly Twitter firestorm erupted that overrode discussion and ended in an anonymous bot tweet that told Terras that she should "Go get raped by niggers."⁵⁵

What should have been an academic discussion became a series of vicious personal attacks against Terras. This happened because at some point as the pressure to produce evidence for Koh's claims mounted, as the community came up with suggestions, she invoked the Twitter personality, Suey Park.⁵⁶ Park, in turn, exhorted her followers to attack Terras.

At the time, Terras was travelling to give an invited talk in Siberia, so she was not online for the duration of her flight. By the time Terras arrived at her destination, hundreds of angry messages, including atrocious threats such as the one quoted by Earhart, flooded her Twitter feed. Most likely, Koh

⁵⁵ Amy Earhart, "Digital Humanities Futures: Conflict, Power, and Public Knowledge," *Digital Studies/Le Champ Numérique* 9, no. 0 (3 August 2016), <https://doi.org/10.16995/dscn.1>.

⁵⁶ Suey Park has been described as a brawler who in 2014 had 23000 followers in Twitter. She was responsible for the #CancelColbert campaign, among other things Elizabeth Bruenig, "Why Won't Twitter Forgive Suey Park?," *The New Republic*, 20 May 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/article/121861/suey-parkof-cancelcolbert-fame-has-stopped-fighting-twitter>.

did not intend for anything like this to happen, but in calling upon another party, she unleashed a pack of rabid wolves upon Terras.

The same cannot be said about Brown. When she tagged Milo Yiannopoulos she knew what she was doing:

Fulton Brown then spent the next two weeks writing about Kim on her blog, mirroring the tactics of “Gamergate,” intentionally drumming up chatter about Kim so trolls would go on the attack. It worked. The threats started coming in after *Breitbart* posted its story and picked up each time Fulton Brown mentioned Kim by name.⁵⁷

When one mobilizes such a vast number of followers, there is real danger that such an aggressive movement will result in violence against the target. Kim requested an unlisted office, a change of her class locations, and police monitoring of her on-campus residence.⁵⁸

A possible reason for Brown to want to endear herself with the alt-right could be that she sees herself as being in a position to legitimize them from an intellectual perspective. Given that media like *Breitbart* presents barely literate texts, the alt-right might benefit from recruiting academics with moderate rhetorical training.

5. Conclusions.

We have come full circle. Milo Yiannopoulos, who orchestrated, encouraged, and cheered the hordes of trolls launched against women in the wake of #GamerGate, is now actively targeting academics using tactics devised years ago and tested with Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, and Brianna Wu. Moreover, collaborators within academia are willingly reporting anyone who stands up to the neo-fascist regimes installed by the alt-right. As Zoe Quinn has written:

⁵⁷ Gallaher, "War on the Ivory Tower."

⁵⁸ Gallaher, "War on the Ivory Tower."

GamerGate wasn't really about video games at all so much as it was a flashpoint for radicalized online hatred with a long list of targets. The movement helped solidify the growing connections between online white supremacist movements, misogynistic nerds, conspiracy theorists, and dispassionate hackers who receive a sense of power from disseminating disinformation. This patchwork of Thanksgiving-ruining racist uncles might look and sound like a bad joke, but they became a real force behind giving Donald Trump the keys to the White House.⁵⁹

GamerGate was a trial run for more substantial harassment campaigns. Quinn makes a good point: the kind of troll who populates the comments sections of online publications is the same one likely to have voted for Trump, encouraged by Russian trolls and by their previous success with Brexit. In political terms, the influence of social media has become an unpredictable force shaped by those who know how to manipulate it. Yiannopoulos and others like him have learned, through multiple successful campaigns, how to manipulate both people and information online.

Moreover, by the time social media gatekeepers smart up and ban people like Yiannopoulos, he already has another space in which to plot mayhem with his followers. When Reddit cancels misogynistic forums, the incels have already had so much time to organize their hatred and resentment that individuals might still succeed in carrying out terrorist acts.

At every point, we are a step behind in relationship to trolls and their leaders. It would appear that a deep restructuring of social media might be required in order to turn the internet from a lawless town in the Wild West into a place in which people can exist without fear of being harassed or even put in physical danger.

We cannot uphold and transfer some rights, like free speech, without taking into account that there are individuals who by their body or circumstances are vulnerable to be victimized by our society's

⁵⁹ Quinn, *Crash Override*, 4-5.

power structures. Moreover, as a community, we must defend colleagues who have also taken the role of activists and public intellectuals. As academics, we should all aspire to be an inspiration for those seeking knowledge and be inspired by those of us who already transcend the boundaries of the Ivory Tower and the limits of the universities. If professors and researchers are not ready to make the investment that is required for the improvement of our society, then we cannot complain when it deteriorates as it has been doing.

This might be a dangerous article to write, its existence might invite the wrong kind of attention from the worst type of people. Having researched the stories of Amanda Gailey, Dorothy Kim, and Melissa Terras, having read the vile language of the forums of Reddit or 4Chan, part of me wanted to quit. This is probably the most difficult piece that I have written in my career. It has given me a new perspective on colleagues who study difficult subjects (gender studies, postcolonial theory, critical race theory, sociology, ethnography), and have to deal with difficult subjects every day. Depending on their individual circumstances, they might also sit at the intersection of systems of oppression that are likely to make their everyday lives more difficult.