

MOVING FORWARD: CYBER-MISOGYNY AND CREATING SAFER

SPACES ONLINE

Archismita Choudhury

Breakthrough India

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Abstract

Last year in February, Breakthrough India released a feminist remix of a really popular song. The song had alternative lyrics which asked viewers to interrogate their everyday biases and sexism. Unexpectedly, it went viral within hours and comments poured in. Although many genuinely reacted to the video, there was also gender-specific trolling and deliberate harassment. The women who were featured in the video were digitally tracked down, baited and targeted.

These women, also employees of Breakthrough India, were mentally harassed and intimidated by the large number of “trolls” and the viciousness of their attacks. Breakthrough India provided organisational support wherever and as much as possible. This brought to light the magnitude of the impact of such trolling as well as how trolling is also used to silence and shame women for speaking out, or in fact - simply being themselves, as women were sexualised on one hand and castigated for not fitting in to the “ideal woman” trope on the other.

In this paper, we would like to explore the phenomenon of gender-based trolling in digital feminist spaces and how it is used to harass as well as intimidate women who dare to express and utilise agency. We would examine existing strategies to deal with such a phenomenon as well as visualise the making of future digital codes of conduct, tying in Breakthrough India’s work on the same with digital media giants such as Facebook.

INTRODUCTION:

The advent of digital technology has significantly altered the field of human rights activism. Apart from enhancing traditional forms of advocacy, new forms of information and communication technologies (ICT) have also changed the very nature of advocacy. (Dutt and Rasul, 2014) Digital technology further enables people to directly advocate for fundamental human rights, providing new models for engagement and community building. Social media networks and online platforms have become powerful tools when engaging with global audiences. Due to affordability and open access, new media has lowered barriers to participation and encourages public dialogue, leading to an increase in the number of people who engage with political content and are politically vocal. (Dutt and Rasul, 2014)

The online world has significantly influenced feminist progression as well, allowing grassroots movements and organisations to proliferate and collaborate by amplifying their voices, which would reach larger audiences, bring visibility to women's rights issues and lead social change. Although many women still face obstacles which prohibit them from actively participating online, the ascent of social media means that feminists from South Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Muslim world can often raise issues in ways that used to be reserved for feminists in the global North. Feminists have also used social media to have conversations among themselves and hold each other responsible as well - for instance, starting the Twitter hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen to express concerns about the exclusion of women of colour from the mainstream feminist movement in the United States. Mikki Kendall, a feminist blogger, was the woman behind this hashtag which led to multiple conversations and dialogue. Apart from helping activists to raise consciousness, digital activism also helps in influencing legislation, coordinating and mobilising with people online and offline.

However, it is to be admitted that new media technologies come with their own challenges - it can be difficult to look into the authenticity and validity of reports. While digital tools provide efficient, low-cost and innovative ways through which we can engage in activism, the same digital tools can also perpetuate abuse and pose security risks. Social media, blogs, mobile phones, videos and images can be appropriated by governments and non-state actors for surveillance in order to extract sensitive information, collect personal citizens' data and intercept communications. Even though the digital technologies for creating and sharing information - along with tools developed for mass surveillance - have advanced significantly, the policies and international standards governing their use lag dismally behind.

Keeping this as the backdrop, it is important to note here that digital abuse is not limited to the egregious abuses of trafficking and slavery - each day, women and minorities face harassment, bullying and threats online. While aggressive online behaviour exists across internet cultures, specific forms of such behaviour particularly target various identities and engage in hate speech while being reactionary.

In the following sections, this paper will explore the phenomenon of gender-based trolling in digital feminist spaces as well as examine how it is used to harass and intimidate women who dare to express or utilise agency. It will also examine existing strategies to deal with such a phenomenon as well as visualise the making of future digital codes of conduct, tying in Breakthrough India's work on the same with digital media giants such as Facebook.

VIRALITY IS A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD:

A potent dynamic in the functioning of social media is the concept of "virality". Facebook defines virality as "the percentage of people who have created a story from a post out of the total number of unique people who have seen it." (Brooks, 2012) Virality is a crucial component in the

working of social media since that is how information rapidly - and often uncontrollably - propagates across the internet.

Virally spreading social media posts can lead to significant coverage, both positive and negative. In many cases, it may even help in financial gain. A Facebook page grows organically primarily through the virality of its posts. Thus, one of the key objectives of social media practitioners - such as a Facebook page administrator - is to understand what causes virality and orient their postings to increase the chances of this happening.

Researchers have tried to understand what causes online virality (Berger and Milkman, 2012) as well as how content characteristics and emotion shape social transmission. It was observed that emotionally evocative content which is high in arousal emotions - either positive or negative - may be particularly viral.

Last February, Breakthrough India remixed a popular Tamil/Hindi song with a feminist lens. The song had alternative lyrics which asked viewers to interrogate their everyday biases and sexism. Unexpectedly, it was shared multiple times and went viral within hours. It reached around 600,000 people and was viewed almost 84,000 times. Major media houses covered it, including Huffington Post, BBC and India Today, amongst others.

People engaged with the video on multiple levels - liking, sharing, commenting - and expressed their opinions, many of which were appreciative and shared meaningful feedback. The virality of the video meant that we could reach and connect with many people for the first time. However, it also meant that the video received a lot of negative comments which didn't fall into the category of "constructive criticism". Those comments did not focus on the content of the video, if at all, but instead on the women in the video. Vitriolic and abusive messages that were deeply personal in nature also poured in, which we were unprepared to handle. The magnitude and intensity of this was unexpected and led to the realisation that the online space could easily turn hateful and unsafe for women, but there was still no real remedy or accountability for the same.

WHAT IS TROLLING?

Trolling is said to be the act of posting disruptive or inflammatory posts and has been the focus of much recent attention. It involves luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions online (Herring 2002). These discussions are distinguished by aggression, success, disruption (Hardaker 2010) and are often created for the purpose of personal amusement (Hopkinson 2013)

When the feminist remix of “Urvashi” was posted on Breakthrough India’s Facebook page, trolls came forward and posted comments which included words like “cunt” and “fat fuck”. The ferocity and personal nature of some comments were abusive and bordered on, if not qualified as, bullying. With posts that range from teasing to harassing, researchers have enquired into what it means - can trolling be regarded as nothing more than harmless mischief, attempts at humor, and freedom of speech, or is it something much deeper? (Escartin 2015)

Therefore, to get to the core of the trolling phenomenon, intentionality becomes an important component in studying such activity as impoliteness is firmly embedded in the micro (discourse) and macro (social) context (Angouri and Tseliga 2010).

Researchers Corinna and Escartin argue that although trolling and cyberbullying are behaviors that require the use of ICT - such as social media - to transmit information that are often "mischievous" and "annoying", they are distinct from being “potentially hurtful”. A contrast is thus created between trolling and cyberbullying - trolling only aims to get a reaction from the online community. However, cyberbullying is intentionally directed to instil distress or fear on a chosen victim.

From our experience of virality and consequent engagement, it was seen that:

- a. trolling often crossed into cyber-bullying, and
- b. cyberbullying could be engaged in through trolling.

Many of the trolls that came on to our page either had fake profiles or no identifying features.

They couldn't be tracked down to the real people behind them, who had real lives and presumably, real feelings. It has been theorised that when personal anonymity and the existence of a faceless crowd converge in online spaces, it encourages individuals to break rules that they would not have considered doing in "normal" circumstances (Adams 2011).

Freedoms that are brought about by the existence of anonymity and the language of the crowd may bring out the worst side in individuals by lifting ethical constraints as well as social etiquettes which regulate behaviour in other situations. Dissent is easily fuelled and abrasive reactions can be triggered. (Escartin 2015)

It has been argued (Hopkinson 2013; Shariff 2008; Willard 2007) that physical remoteness plays an important role in conditioning the tenor of the discourse, and could introduce a potentially dehumanizing effect (Bryce 2013; Hardaker 2010) when involved in an antagonistic interaction.

Hopkinson as cited by Corinna and Escartin argues that "heightened intensity of antagonism [occurs] as some participants feel licensed to behave towards their opponents with a degree of aggression that they would generally avoid in face-to-face interaction". It follows that perceived anonymity is a factor in determining victim-perpetrator relationship.

GENDERTROLLING - WHAT DO TROLLS WANT?

Having looked into the generic phenomenon of “trolling”, in this section we would like to enquire into the more specific variant of “gendertrolling”. While trolling - aggressive online behaviour - is present across online communities, specifically misogynist variants may be termed as “gendertrolling”. This phrase was coined by Karla Mantilla and has defined and distinctive components, such as:

- a. **The participation, often coordinated, of numerous people:** It involves a coordinated or focused effort on the part of many trolls, their numbers rising in the dozens or even hundreds. They overwhelm the victim, their “target”, with the sheer quantity of attacks over a sustained period.
- b. **Gender-based insults:** The phenomenon also contains specifically gender-based insults, including the extensive use of disparaging terms that are leveled particularly at women - “cunt”, “whore”, “slut” - and comments which are designed to insult and humiliate women, especially concerning their weight and physical appearance.
- c. **Vicious language:** Gendertrolling involves distinctly vile and vicious language as well as intent that can best be described as “hate”, including portrayals of odious and violent acts that the troll claims he - gendertrolls are nearly always men - would like to do to the target.
- d. **Credible threats:** Gendertrolling includes a credible and significant component of threat: rape threats, death threats and threats of torture, amongst others.
- e. **Unusual intensity, scope and longevity of attacks:** Gendertrolling has a tendency to persist over a long time span; several women have been trolled or attacked for years at a time. While generic trolling can of course be extremely cruel, the attacks tend to remain limited to attacks or insults on a couple of websites or social media locations. On the other hand, gendertrolls relentlessly and proactively pursue their chosen targets

across various online sites and at times even into their offline lives. On occasion, they also often pursue the victims' supporters and friends for additional targeting.

- f. **Reaction to women speaking out:** Finally, a distinctive feature of gendertrolling is that it nearly always occurs in response to women speaking out about some form of sexism.

These features, as outlined by Mantilla, are also bolstered by our experiences with gender-based trolling on the digital field. Thus, as Mantilla argues, it can be seen that gendertrolling is a relatively new kind of virulent online phenomenon which is more threatening than the generic trolling described above. It is critical to note that it is not done only "for the lulz", that is, to simply upset the targets of trolling - but that it also often expresses sincere beliefs held by the trolls themselves.

While "traditional" trolls can certainly represent behaviour and values which are depraved (for example, those found on sites like 4chan), and they could very much embody the worst of ableist, homophobic and racist behaviour, Mantilla argues that these features are what makes gender-trolling distinct and specifically as well as dramatically more destructive to its victims.

Gendertrolling has many similarities with other offline targeting of women, such as sexual harassment in the workplace and street harassment. In all these forms of violence, the harassment is about patrolling gender boundaries as well as using insults, hate, threats of violence and/or rape to ensure that girls and women are either kept out of, or play inferior roles in, male-dominated arenas.

Sexual harassment of women is a behavior which aims to keep women from fully occupying professional environments as well as full competing with men (Mantilla 2013). Street harassers keep women from feeling safe in public spaces without a male companion, whoever he might be. It is essential to recognize and acknowledge gendertrolling for what it is: something above

and beyond generic trolling and a phenomenon that systematically targets women to prevent them from fully occupying public spaces, not unlike street and sexual harassment.

Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist activist who was systematically targeted and gendertrolled online, believes that because these online harassment campaigns specifically target women who publicly articulate feminist ideas, the underlying motive is to maintain the online milieu as a male-dominated space (Mantilla 2013). Too many women become intimidated into withdrawing from hogging or being vocal on social media in response to these coordinated campaigns against them.

As Mantilla argues, when date rape and sexual harassment occurred before they were so named, they were often viewed, and thus dismissed, as individual problems. This led to rendering women more vulnerable to such attacks. Activists have creatively raised awareness about how street harassment intimidates women from fully occupying public streets. It is equally important to name and understand the phenomenon of gendertrolling as a strategy to keep women from full participation on the internet.

EXISTING STRATEGIES:

A study conducted by *The Internet Democracy Project* outlines a few non-legal strategies employed by women in their response to online abuse and gender-based trolling. These strategies are indeed used widely by women, as we have seen during our involvement with themes of online safety and abuse. In fact, they were even used by women from Breakthrough India who were trolled after the music video was posted.

They are as follows:

- a. **Ignoring the abuse and the abuser:** The most common response to online abuse and harassment is often ignoring it. Women's responses to online abusers, who often are

anonymous, mirror their strategies when experiencing street sexual harassment. The study also showed that ignoring the abuser was a common response across social media platforms, and one which extended to email groups as well. Especially in their earlier stages, attacks were generally ignored.

- b. **Moderating comments (as and when applicable):** On forums and site that allow for this feature, women also moderate comments that they find to be abusive and threatening towards them. This helps in establishing some control over their digital space.
- c. **Blocking abusers:** A really common method employed by women is that of “blocking” the troll or abuser. On a public platform, such as Twitter or even Facebook, the block feature prevents two people from communicating with each other. Therefore, the individual troll can no longer get in touch with the “target”.
- d. **Reporting abusers:** Mechanisms through which to report abuse as well as the abuser are in place at most major social media sites, including Twitter and Facebook. However, they can’t stop users from creating another account, possibly with a different email address, and accessing the social network.
- e. **Looking for and finding support:** When women are faced with online abuse and harassment, a crucial step that emerged was that of looking for and finding support - either online or offline. Support systems enable women to face harassment that is hurled at them. When there is an outpouring of support for the woman and against the abuser, it usually helps in shutting up the troll or scaring him off. While dealing with abusers, the importance of community - online or offline - has to be highlighted.
- f. **Naming and Shaming:** This response highlights the abuse received by women, who either screenshot it (Facebook) or retweet it (Twitter). One of the reasons behind this is that it comes out in the open and is not operating in a hidden digital space which only exists between the troll and the target. Another reason is that the women who face such abuse want to make it known that they are being harassed so that their support system

can also come into play here, tying in with the abovementioned point.

However, the dynamics keep shifting - especially when the woman being targeted has a significantly higher number of followers than the troll - and sometimes women refuse to engage in this so as to not give the troll “free publicity” and fear that it might encourage more trolls to come up against her.

- g. **Taking the trolls head on:** Very few women recommend or take part in this strategy as they believe it would provide the trolls with more “ammunition” to harass them further.

However, there do exist women who engage with the trolls directly, sometimes using humour or hitting out at “sensitive areas”. This strategy enables women to not only be a part of the public space but also occupy it on their own terms. Keeping in mind that so much of being able to speak freely depends on this ability, it is disconcerting that so few women seek to do so in a proactive manner.

- h. **Self-Censorship:** This response involves self-censoring, or “watering down content” by women themselves. In the study conducted by *The Internet Democracy Project*, while many spoke about how each incident of abuse made them more aggressive in their responses, some also talked about how these experiences of abuse affected their online behaviour in a negative way. A lot of women ended up changing the way they behave and express themselves online.

Hate speech can be considered to be one of the biggest hindrances to free speech on the internet as it limits free expression of opinions. Self-censorship may be one of the ways in which women cope with the daily onslaught of abuse. However, seeing the broad range of topics that trigger gendertrolling, the effectiveness of this strategy remains to be seen. Even though it may help individual women to reduce what their online presence costs them in the short term, it is also plausible that it may undermine the web’s potential for empowerment in the medium to long term. If assumed that the Internet has potential in helping women to truly find their voice, we can also see how misogyny continues to work to undermine that.

FUTURE DIGITAL CODES OF CONDUCT:

Keeping the digital landscape in mind as well as the dynamics that exist between the troll, the target as well as the digital bystanders, Breakthrough India has collaborated and partnered with multiple organisations, including digital media giants such as Facebook and Twitter to work on issues of gender-based trolling and online safety. Following are some of our campaigns which have kept these issues at the forefront:

- a. **#StandWithMe**: The online component of this campaign focused on themes of safety, consent, stigma as well as intergenerational dialogue while participating online. This aims to make digital spaces safer and gender-inclusive, highlighting the important role of the people around us as they can play a critical role in the creation of a better-adjusted digital world
- b. **#IsItACrime**: This campaign was taken forward in collaboration with Nyaaya, India's first free legal repository, where we talked about online safety and gendertrolling from a legal perspective. A huge section of people think what happens on the internet "isn't real" and has no real-world consequences. This campaign sought to take on some of those myths and publicise various laws and the legal recourse available for those who face violence online.
- c. **#PositionOfStrength**: This event, in partnership with Twitter, was conducted in which we talked to/with college-going women on the issue of online safety. It aimed to empower women to raise their voices using a platform like Twitter and to do so without fear of being harassed and abused online. The main focus of the event was to engage young people in a conversation around the issue of online safety and how they can leverage Twitter as a platform to raise their voices.
- d. **#DontLogOut**: This campaign, in partnership with e-commerce website OLX, focuses on the empowering potential on digital spaces while being cognizant of the gendertrolling

faced by women online. It engages with women on the ways in which they deal with trolls and cyber-violence, while not ceding space to the trolls or leaving digital spaces altogether.

- e. **#BeBetter:** This campaign, run in collaboration with Facebook, looks at the digital space as an extension of our “real”, “offline” lives and targets the messaging to “trolls” or potential trolls. Just as a social contract binds us from being unnecessarily rude or threatening towards strangers offline, it aims to take the same ethic online. The crux of it is to create awareness that even though we may be interacting with people from behind a screen, they are people nevertheless, and to not engage in behaviour we wouldn’t offline just “for the lulz”.

PLATFORM RESPONSIBILITIES:

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have features to block and report abuse as well as abusers. However, the safety features as well as their policies can only be a recourse and support-mechanism at best, not a resolution to the issue of gender-based cyberviolence.

Apart from online measures, these digital media platforms would also need to invest resources to engage with users physically so as to understand concerns and issues raised by their users.

Safety features would need to be promoted and amplified with more detailed and user-friendly discussions on how to use them. Taking more responsibility for how abusive reports are dealt with, that is, making sure that the reports are checked by humans rather than filtered by machines is also another measure that would help in creating a safer online space, as context is as important as the words used.

To recognize and disdain hate speech as such, instead of another expression of “free speech”, would also be a step in the right direction, apart from following through on promises made to

create a safer online environment as well as making decisive policies against cyberbullying and gendertrolling.

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