‘Back to the kitchen, cunt’: speaking the unspeakable about online misogyny

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This article explores the signal characteristics of gendered vitriol on the Internet – a type of discourse marked by graphic threats of sexual violence, explicit *ad hominem* invective and unapologetic misogyny. Such ‘e-bile’ is proliferating in the cybersphere and is currently the subject of widespread international media coverage. Yet it receives little attention in scholarship. This is likely related to the fact that discourse of this type is metaphorically ‘unspeakable’, in that its hyperbolic profanity locates it well outside the norms of what is regarded as ‘civil’ discourse. My case, however, is that – despite the risk of causing offence – this discourse must not only be spoken of, but must be spoken of *in its unexpurgated entirety*. There is, I argue, no other way to adequately assay the nature of a communication mode whose misogynistic hostility has serious ethical and material implications, not least because it has become a *lingua franca* in many sectors of the cybersphere. Proceeding via unexpurgated ostension is also the best – arguably the only – way to begin mapping the blurry parameters of the discursive field of e-bile, and from there to conduct further inquiry into the ethical appraisal of putative online hostility, and the consideration of possible remedies.

**Introduction**

In this article, I will be speaking of the proliferation of hostile misogynist rhetoric on the Internet. While the medium of print will obviously not permit me to literally *speak aloud*, I will be quoting – uncensored – representative examples of a type of discourse whose venom and vulgarity have rendered it unspeakable in the metaphorical sense. This discourse – which I call ‘e-bile’ (Jane 2012) – is currently the subject of widespread international media coverage, including debates about policy interventions and the need for faster and more effective responses by platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Yet e-bile has received scant attention in scholarly literature.2 At least part of the reason likely relates to the fact that e-bile is heavily laced with expletives, profanity and explicit imagery of sexual violence: it is calculated to offend, it is often difficult and disturbing to read, and it falls well outside the norms of what is usually considered ‘civil’ academic discourse. Nevertheless, while balking at the close inspection of particularly repugnant Internet exchanges is an understandable scholarly impulse, I fear that a less explicit and more polite way of discussing e-bile may have the unintended consequence of both hiding from view its distinct characteristics and social, political and ethical upshots, and even blinding us to its existence and proliferation – of implying that it circulates only infrequently and/or only in the far flung fringes of the cybersphere. However, research, some of which will be presented here, provides ample evidence to support the contention that gendered vitriol is proliferating in the cybersphere; so much so that issuing graphic rape and death threats has become a standard discursive move online, particularly when Internet users wish to register their disagreement with and/or disapproval of women.

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In previous work (Jane 2012), I have drawn on Roderick M. Chisholm’s discussion of the ‘problem of the criterion’ (Chisholm 1966, 1973, 1988) to explain why – rather than attempting to furnish a univocal definition of e-bile – better progress can be made by adopting a casuistic approach by beginning with exemplars of what we believe a phenomenon such as e-bile to be, and then building up our conception of the phenomenon by extrapolating from these particulars. My intention in the present paper is to engage in exactly this sort of ostensive exercise. By furnishing representative examples of gendered e-bile, I will begin charting the blurry parameters of this discursive field, and illustrating some of the signal characteristics of that sector of e-bile which targets women and/or which deploys gender stereotypes in an arguably hostile manner.

Despite the risk of causing discomfort or offence, my case is that e-bile must not only be spoken of, but must be spoken of in its unexpurgated entirety because euphemisms and generic descriptors such as ‘offensive’ or ‘sexually explicit’ simply cannot convey the hostile and hyperbolic misogyny which gives gendered e-bile the distinctive semiotic flavour that I intend to highlight. Furthermore, the anonymous or quasi-anonymous producers of such discourse are likely to benefit from the fact that their utterances and actions are considered too abhorrent to repeat or discuss in mainstream contexts. In a nutshell, my case is that examining unexpurgated examples of e-bile is the only way to get any meaningful sense of the phenomenological reality of this discourse – a task which must precede the canvassing of possible remedies and interventions. A key goal of this paper, therefore, is to draw attention to an (new) articulation of (old) sexualising misogyny that is slipping between the cracks partly because of the very hostility, odiousness and ineffability that makes it so problematic.

This article begins by detailing the autoethnographic roots of my interest in e-bile before tracking the way this project broadened, particularly after 2011 when women from many different nations and social contexts began speaking publically about the large volumes of sexualised vitriol they were receiving electronically. The textual archive of e-bile I have assembled over the past 15 years contains many thousands of items from a vast range of cyber domains. For the purposes of this article, however, I will be offering examples of e-bile which – either because of their targets and/or their imagery – have a number of profoundly gendered characteristics. Together, these individual instances of e-bile will illustrate the way that large numbers of female Internet users are receiving large quantities of hostile communications involving ad hominem invective (especially caustic judgments about their appearances and sexual appeal) and/or threats of or fantasies about rape (especially anal rape) and other types of violence. E-bile’s self-generative properties will also become apparent, as we see that women who speak publically about being targeted by online invective often receive more of it. While there is good evidence to support the claim that most e-bile targets are women, and most e-bile perpetrators are male, this article will also show the way that this discourse remains distinctly gendered even in those instances where the targets are men. We will also see that e-bile has a quasi-algebraic quality in that proper nouns can be substituted infinitely without affecting in any way the structure of the discourse. Together, these observations will be used to venture a claim about the prevalence of gendered e-bile, and the urgent need for it to be addressed more – and differently – in scholarship.

‘You should have a good arse fuck lasting two hours every day’: retro e-bile

My interest in e-bile began in the late 1990s and has an autoethnographic component in that I received a great deal of such material from 1998 to 2012 when I was a regular
provider of commentary in the mainstream Australian print and electronic media. While I had often received hate mail from disgruntled readers in written form since beginning work as a journalist in 1988, the tone of these communications changed dramatically from 1998 once I began including my email address at the end of my newspaper commentary and it was possible for readers to contact me electronically and anonymously or via pseudonyms. An email typical of the type I received on a weekly, daily and sometimes hourly basis in response to my writing (mostly on social justice and feminist issues) read:

your article reeks of a half ugly lesbian, determined to get her own back on all the men who refused to fuck her over all these years. We all know that for $35 a bloke can get a full body massage, his dick wanked for him, by a pretty little 18 year old, not some sad assed thing like you with a hatred of men. [G. Wright (personal communication, 2002)]

Then there was:

You should have a good arse fuck lasting two hours every day. That would set you right! You look like a tart desperate for cock or maybe you think you’re cool or funky? All feminists should be gangraped to set them right. Plus work in a hore house for a year or so. (cited in Tom 2002)

These examples illustrate a number of recurring characteristics of e-bile in that: they target a woman who is, for one reason or another, visible in the public sphere; their authors are anonymous or otherwise difficult to identify; their sexually explicit rhetoric includes homophobic and misogynist epithets; they prescribe coerced sex acts as all-purpose correctives; they pass scathing, appearance-related judgments and they rely on *ad hominem* invective. These missives are not offered primarily as documentary evidence of personal suffering or to map the contours of individual experience, but to offer a diachronic perspective on gendered e-bile by showing that it has been circulating for many years, and that – as we will see – its rhetorical construct has remained remarkably stable over time. (As an aside, I note that ‘don’t feed the trolls’ – the usual words of wisdom offered to the targets of e-bile – have been resoundingly ineffective in my case. I have never replied or responded to e-bile which has been sent to me directly, or which has circulated about me in online fora. There was, however, no perceivable reduction in the stream of sexualised vitriol I received until I ceased writing journalistic commentary in 2012.)

‘She gave great blowjobs before her fall, now imagine the pleasure she will bring without her front teeth’: e-bile targeting cheerleaders

In 2006, I commenced a doctoral research project into media framings of cheerleading and discovered that much online vitriol targeting these young women was marked by hyperbolic and sexualised vitriol startlingly similar to the material I myself was still receiving on a regular basis. Once again, these texts often involved what appeared to be a combination of desire and disgust, a sort of *lascivious contempt*, in that targets were hyper-sexualised as ‘sluts’ and then derogated for being ‘sluts’ who did not pass muster because they were too ugly, too fat, too small breasted, too old, too lesbian and so on (cf. Jane 2014a, 2014b). Unlike the one-to-one communication involved in private email correspondence, the back-and-forth public banter permitted by online message boards seemed to encourage what looked very much like game play: a spirited competition to see who could generate the most offensive declamations. In a discussion about a photograph of a group of cheerleaders on an Australian gaming site, for instance, a reader describes one of these women as ‘a fucking mong . . . her face is fucking weird like a downy or something’ (paveway commenting beneath ‘NRL Cheerleaders to Go?’ 2009). This spurs
another to add: ‘I go to the football to watch footy, not watch some fat trogs who faces resemble a bucket of smashed crabs’ (casa commenting beneath ‘NRL Cheerleaders to Go?’ 2009).

A similar escalation in graphic and sexualised imagery is apparent in readers’ remarks posted in response to video footage of a high school cheerleader falling from a human pyramid published on a website with the misleading title of Nothing Toxic: One of 65,000 visitors to this page opines that it is OK that this girl has fallen because she is used to ‘bouncing her face on Wood’ (Killerdude commenting on ‘Cheerleader Falls on Her Face in Front of the School’ 2008). Other remarks include: ‘She’s a cheerleader – don’t feel sorry for her’ (sixsixsix commenting on ‘Cheerleader Falls on Her Face in Front of the School’ 2008); ‘Haha stupid cunt’ (Pubikare commenting on ‘Cheerleader Falls on Her Face in Front of the School’ 2008); ‘watching a cheerleader get owned is only topped by watching one get anal’ (spazemunky commenting on ‘Cheerleader Falls on Her Face in Front of the School’ 2008); ‘Odd that she was splitting her minge lips for the audience one second then splitting her other lips on the floor the next’ (markels65 commenting on ‘Cheerleader Falls on Her Face in Front of the School’ 2008) and – perhaps the ‘winning’ entry in the shockability stakes – ‘She gave great blowjobs before her fall, now imagine the pleasure she will bring with out her front teeth’ (Yellaa_Fella commenting on ‘Cheerleader Falls on Her Face in Front of the School’ 2008). Explicit sexual commentary and schadenfreude abound. As we will see, these specific case studies of sexualised vitriol targeting cheerleaders demonstrate a number of broader features of gendered e-bile, including the apparent enjoyment gained by antagonists as they compete to denigrate their targets in the most offensive fashion possible.

‘She’s so fugly, I wouldn’t even bother raping her from behind with a box cutter’: e-bile outed

By the end of 2010, I had assembled a large textual archive of: (a) e-bile directed at me and (b) e-bile directed at cheerleaders (cf. Tom 2010; Jane 2014a, 2014b). Looking back, my conclusions are that these early iterations of e-bile tended to be directed at a relatively narrow set of targets, and tended to circulate less frequently and less publically than e-bile in the contemporary cybersphere. Cheerleaders, for instance, exercise a particular set of cultural anxieties in that they occupy (or, rather, are seen to occupy) a liminal space between the athlete and the sex worker (cf. Tom 2010; Jane 2014b). Further, while the vast bulk of e-bile targeting cheerleaders before 2011 did circulate in public fora, these were mostly niche domains such as the Nothing Toxic site. In 2011, however, women from a vast range of different social contexts, cultures and countries began speaking publically about the misogynist vitriol and threats they were receiving via the Internet. I commenced a broader research project into e-bile because these reports seemed to make a strong, prima facie case that many dimensions of this discourse were accelerating: more e-bile producers were targeting more women and more types of women. Further, more e-bile was circulating in more mainstream and public domains, and was involving far more venomous and threatening imagery. Writing about her receipt of numerous electronic threats to rape, bash, murder and/or urinate on her, for instance, the UK journalist and blogger Laurie Penny recalled that, for criticising neo-liberal economic policymaking, it was suggested she should be forced to fellate a row of bankers at knifepoint (Penny 2011). Australian researcher Nina Funnell discussed the proliferation of online debates about her ‘rapeability’ which flourished after she spoke publically about having been sexually assaulted at knifepoint (cited in Jackman 2011). One person commenting on Funnell’s
assault posted: ‘She’s so fugly, I wouldn’t even bother raping her from behind with a box cutter’ (cited in Jackman 2011).

Over the course of 2012 and 2013, mainstream and new media accounts of e-bile attacks on women increased markedly – as did campaigns calling for policy interventions by various governments, and for improved responses by platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In mid 2012, feminist blogger and gamer Anita Sarkeesian spoke publically about being subjected to a concerted and multi-pronged ‘hate campaign’ of online harassment (Sarkeesian 2012b). Sarkeesian was targeted after launching a crowd-funding campaign to fund a series of short films examining sexist gender stereotypes in video games (Sarkeesian 2012c). This prompted a ‘cyber mob’ attack (Sarkeesian 2012b) which resulted in, among much else: her Wikipedia page being vandalised with pornography and altered so that it read that she was a ‘hooker’ who held ‘the world record for maximum amount of sexual toys in the posterior’ (Greenhouse 2013); her website and YouTube channel being spammed with abusive comments and attempts being made to publically circulate her home address and phone number (Sarkeesian 2012b). In the aftermath, the first result returned by the Google search engine when it was asked to search for her name read, ‘Anita Sarkeesian is a feminist video blogger and cunt’ (Plunkett 2012).

Sarkeesian’s Feminist Frequency website provides a meticulous documentation of the ‘abusive cyber mob tactics’ she maintains were employed as part of a choreographed campaign intended to silence her (Sarkeesian 2012b). In a blog entitled ‘Harassing, Misogyny and Silencing on YouTube’, she posts an unedited screen shot of more than 100 abusive comments that were logged over a two-hour period beneath one of her videos on YouTube (Sarkeesian 2012a). These, she says, represent ‘only a tiny fraction’ of the thousands of comments she received in total and include remarks such as ‘She needs a good dicking, good luck finding it though’ (radioactivetoy89 cited in Sarkeesian 2012a); ‘so you’re a bolshevik feminist jewess that hates White people ... fucking ovendodger’ (haploguy cited in Sarkeesian 2012a); ‘fuck you feminist fucks ... fuck off faggo’ (Arto572 cited in Sarkeesian 2012a) and ‘Back to the kitchen, cunt’ (TheDaveKD cited in Sarkeesian 2012a). In another blog headlined ‘Image Based Harassment and Visual Misogyny’, Sarkeesian re-posts pornographic photo manipulations (such as images in which ejaculating penises have been edited onto her photograph) and ‘rape drawings’ (including a picture of her being sexually assaulted by the Nintendo video game character Mario) that circulated so widely they reached the status of Internet memes. There are also screen shots of an online game called ‘Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian’ which invites players to ‘punch this bitch in the face’ (Sarkeesian 2012b). With each click, a photo of Sarkeesian becomes increasingly bloodied and bruised before it turns completely red. Reflecting on the gendered dimensions of the online campaign against her, Sarkeesian writes:

The image based harassment I’m discussing here is not part of any legitimate discourse but instead falls squarely into the category of misogynist abuse. It’s a critical distinction and is evidenced by the fact that all of the images are attacking my gender or presumed sexuality and rely heavily on pre-existing sexist stereotypes . . . (Sarkeesian 2012b)

‘By the time we are done you will wax nostalgic over the days when all you had to deal with was someone expressing a desire to fuck you up your shopworn ass’: e-bile amplification

Sarkeesian’s points about the gendered dimensions of e-bile are apt. Particularly telling is the fact that all this new media misogyny was mobilised in response to her endeavours to expose new media misogyny. Sarkeesian’s experience is far from unusual: gendered e-bile
frequently spikes in response to feminist activism and perceived feminist gains. Furthermore, women who speak out about these attacks tend to draw even more hostility. A cogent example is the case of Caroline Criado-Perez, a British feminist and freelance journalist who spearheaded a lobby to have Jane Austen replace Charles Darwin on the English £10 note. When news broke, in July 2013, that the campaign had been successful, Criado-Perez received a flood of online abuse for more than a week. At its peak, she was receiving about a threat a minute, with men discussing in unequivocal detail how they would gang rape her, which parts of her body would be penetrated and exactly how they were going to kill her (Criado-Perez 2013d). Comments posted to her Twitter account included: ‘this … one just needs a good smashing up the arse’; ‘KISS YOUR PUSSY GOODBYE AS WE BREAK IT IRREPARABLY’; ‘Everyone jump on the rape train’ and ‘If your friends survived rape they weren’t raped properly’ (cited in Criado-Perez 2013a, 2013d; @picklecopter cited in Philipson 2013). One of her numerous, anonymous critics created a Twitter account called @rapehernow (Schifrin 2013).

Appearing on a British Broadcasting Corporation television program, Criado-Perez said the threats were so vivid and explicit they had consumed her life physically and emotionally, leaving her in fear for her life and causing feelings of ‘total and utter terror’ (Criado-Perez 2013c). In the aftermath of this and other media interviews, the e-bile campaign against her escalated. Twitter users posted what was said to be her home address (Criado-Perez 2013b), as well as messages such as, ‘I’m going to pistol whip you over and over until you lose consciousness while your children … watch and then burn ur flesh’ (@CarolineIsDead 2013). When a number of high-profile women pledged their support of Criado-Perez, they too were subjected to a flood of online communiqués promising they would be tracked down and raped or killed. The British Labour MP Stella Creasy received a message saying her breasts would be sliced off and eaten, as well as threats – issued from Twitter accounts with names such as ‘kill-creasy-now’ and ‘eat-creasy-now’ (Urwin 2013) – such as ‘YOU BETTER WATCH YOUR BACK … I’M GONNA RAPE YOUR ASS AT 8PM AND PUT THE VIDEO ALL OVER THE INTERNET’; ‘If I meet you in an alley you will definitely get fucked’ (cited in Dodd and Martinson 2013); ‘Hi slut … im going to cut off your head and then FACEFUCK your silly little head’ and ‘I AM HERE AGAIN TO TELL YOU I WILL RAPE YOU TOMORROW AT 6PM’ (cited in Urwin 2013).

E-bilers also escalated their attacks on the freelance journalist Sady Doyle in retaliation for her exposing and archiving of misogyny online. For some years now, Doyle has written of her receipt of electronic hate messages such as ‘I will fuck your ass to death you filthy fucking whore. Your only worth on this planet is as a warm hole to stick my cock in’ (Doyle 2011a). Then, in 2011, she published a piece called ‘The Girl’s Guide to Staying Safe Online’ in which she made the case that being harassed by ‘sexist trolls’ had become ‘an inevitable part of blogging while female’ (Doyle 2011b). This prompted an extraordinary – though presumably unintended – act of ostension on a website called A Voice for Men which posted a response called ‘Stalking Sady Doyle’ by a writer called Paul Elam. Elam – whose alias is ‘The Happy Misogynist’ (Elam 2013) – accuses Doyle of screeching, lying and vilifying men (Elam 2011). ‘Simply put’, he writes in a direct address to Doyle, ‘we are coming for you. All of you. And by the time we are done you will wax nostalgic over the days when all you had to deal with was someone expressing a desire to fuck you up your shopworn ass’ (Elam 2011, emphasis in original). Elam’s piece, in turn, prompts bilious comments from readers such as ‘I continue to love the consistently panicked responses from these nasty cunts and their mangina defenders’ (DruidV commenting beneath Elam 2011); ‘Feminists are the
enemy and we must annihilate the enemy’ (Masculist Man commenting beneath Elam 2011) and – in relation to feminists generally – ‘Fumigate the cockroaches’ (Perseus commenting beneath Elam 2011).

More evidence of this sort of e-bile escalation can be observed in the experience of American writer and performer Lindy West who, in April 2013, appeared on television critiquing ‘current permissiveness around cavalier, cruel, victim-targeting rape jokes’ (West 2013a). This prompted what she calls ‘a suffocating deluge of violent misogyny’ in which commentators threatened to assault and kill her, while also claiming West was bitter because she was, in fact, too overweight and unattractive to be raped (West 2013a). Messages included: ‘I love how the Bitch complaining about rape is the exact kind of Bitch that would never be raped . . . . Bitch have you looked in the mirror? Your vagina isn’t being used for shit’ (kaioskaisuka cited in West 2013a); ‘Lindy West is a fat cunt who is completely unfuckable’ (Nox cited in West 2013a); ‘holes like this make me want to commit rape out of anger . . . . I just want to rape her with a traffic cone’ (MyLocalman cited in West 2013a); ‘There is a group of rapists with over 9000 penises coming for this fat bitch’ (xMcLovin420x cited in West 2013a) and ‘What a fucking cunt. Kill yourself, dumb bitch’ (volermuller55 cited in West 2013a). In a later piece, West rejects the received wisdom that Internet trolling is just part of the online experience or that it affects female and male Internet users equally: ‘I’m trying to think of an instance when anonymous women descended, spewing violent rape or castration threats, upon a man for expressing an opinion . . . . It is not, typically, what happens to men on the Internet’ (West 2013b).

‘Wash the encrusted cum stanes off your geriatric fathers beard’: mimesis, performative contradiction and e-bile directed at men

Other key insights into the nature and ramifications of gendered e-bile can be obtained by examining the online persecution of Australian writer, broadcaster, producer and former television actress Marieke Hardy. Hardy was, for many years, the sole target of a hate blog written by someone who identifies himself as James Vincent McKenzie and who refers to Hardy as a ‘bike’11 and ‘slut-juice’ while calling on others to join him ‘pissing down her throat’ (McKenzie 2012). On the subject of intimate involvement with Hardy, he writes: ‘[The] next time Marieke’s on the market, walk up and down Sydney road with a bag of dogshit in your hand and she’ll be on you like AIDS in Rwanda’ (McKenzie 2012). The readers’ posts on McKenzie’s Marieke Hardy is Scum site demonstrate – among other things – the self-replication and performative contradiction associated with e-bile in that many righteous critics of McKenzie express their disapproval in rhetoric stunningly similar to that which they profess to condemn. ‘What a spineless little cunt you are’, proclaims one anonymous respondent (who seems blissfully unaware that failing to attach one’s name to such a critique may also risk accusations that one is a social invertebrate) (Anonymous[a] commenting on McKenzie 2012). Another nameless critic of McKenzie writes:

your penis must be the size of amoeba . . . stop having sex with your sister who also happens to be your mother you filthy little boy. Get a job low life, and wash the encrusted cum stanes off your geriatric fathers beard, it is deplorable. (Anonymous[b] commenting on McKenzie 2012)

Apposite here is René Girard’s contention that on-going antagonisms are characterised not so much by difference, but the erasure of difference, where socio-cultural opposition produces a startling symmetry between opponents (Girard 1979).
The ‘amoeba’ post also exemplifies the way that, when men are targetted by e-bilers, the rhetoric remains sexually explicit, but the content is more likely to refer to deviations from normative ideals of masculinity such as sex with family members, joblessness and a special type of micro-penile disorder (which, if the propositional content of male-targeted e-bile is to be believed, is currently reaching epidemic proportions worldwide). Beyond the casting of aspersions on penis dimensions, it is rare for the physical appearance of male e-bile targets to be mocked; instead such comments are usually directed towards targets’ female partners and/or family members. Thus in an attack on the Left-leaning television talk show host Jon Stewart, the conservative, American-based website Mofo Politics writes: ‘Jon Stewart’s wife Tracey is overweight, unattractive’ alongside a number of photographs supposedly illustrating this fact (Capra 2011). The approving comments beneath this article include: ‘Most lib’s chicks are pigs’ (Rob commenting on Capra 2011); ‘She a liberal. They only come in ugly’ (JAG commenting on Capra 2011) and ‘Looks like a trip to Auschwitz12 might do her some good’ (Matt commenting on Capra 2011). Another instance of an e-biler attacking a man via his female relatives involves the much-publicised case of Australian footballer Robbie Farah who, shortly after his mother died, received a tweet reading: ‘I’d still fuck your mum, I will have to wear a gas mask to help with the smell of decomposing flesh, but I’d fuck her hard’. (@maxpower118 cited in Thomson 2012)

It is revealing that sexual violence remains a leitmotif even when e-bile is directed at male targets. Commenting beneath a blog about the philosopher Georges Sorel, a reader expresses their dissatisfaction with a remark posted by a fellow reader by saying his mouth should be raped by a ‘big black nigger cock’ (VoodooDOLL commenting beneath Kilgoar 2012). In June 2011, meanwhile, the Australian commentator and broadcaster Richard Glover wrote – in his regular column in the Sydney Morning Herald – a piece criticising climate-change deniers (Glover 2011a). In the days afterwards, he received about 3000 emails (2012, personal communication). As Glover reflected in a subsequent newspaper piece:

quite a few threaten me with sexual violence. They say, in various forms, that they want to rape me … TTB, from Nevada, said he had ‘a couple of 9mm hollowpoints with your name on them’. Jonathan, of Sag Harbor, NY, wanted to remove my testicles, while DB wanted to remove my penis. (Glover 2011b)

‘Fat, Ugly or Slutty’: e-bile algebra

As we have seen over the course of this article, one of the most striking characteristics of e-bile is its interchangeability: a prescription of coerced sex as an all-purpose corrective emailed to an Australian newspaper columnist more than a decade ago, reads almost identically to tweets being sent to female politicians in the UK in 2013. The quasi-algebraic quality of e-bile has not gone unnoticed by its targets. The website Fat, Ugly or Slutty classifies remarks received by female gamers in categories such as ‘Crudely Creative’, ‘Unprovoked Rage’ and ‘Lewd Proposals’. Examples filed in the ‘Competitive Spirit’ division of the ‘Death Threats’ section include: ‘your nans dead bcz i face fucked her’; and ‘ima rip your neck open and fuck the gaping hole ald finish off in your eyes’ (PhrixuZ cited in ‘Competitive Spirit’ 2012).

Drawing on a multitude of obloquious messages re-tweeted by women via the #MenCallMeThings thread on Twitter, Doyle also identifies a number of themes and sub-themes of misogynist communications online. These include: the claim that female targets are weak, oversensitive, hysterical, irrational and so on (‘Sady Doyle is a stupid fucking
whiny bitch’); the suggestion that female targets are simultaneously whores and yet ‘not worth fucking’ (‘no one would fuck you, you’re so ugly you look like you have downs syndrome, you’d be thankful to be raped’) and all manner of miscellaneous threats of violence (‘your daughters would be such sluts and end up murdered in a gutter by someone like me’; ‘if you stopped being such a stupid bitch & accepted the raping, you wouldn’t have gotten beaten’; ‘only tragedy is that a bullet didn’t rip through ur brainstem after u were used 4 ur 1 & only purpose in this world’ and ‘you stupid bitch, I should fuck the crazy right out of you’) (Doyle 2011a). Reflecting on this material, Doyle notes the ‘overwhelmingly impersonal, repetitive, stereotyped quality’ of the abuse, the fact that ‘all of us are being called the same things, in the same tone’:

What matters is not which guys said it: What matters is that, when you put their statements side-by-side, they all sound like the exact same guy. And when you look at what they’re saying, how similar these slurs and insults and threats we get actually are, they always sound like they’re speaking to the exact same woman. When men are using the same insults and sentiments to shut down women ... we know that it’s not about us; it’s about gender. (Doyle 2011a, emphasis in original)

Conclusion

This article’s survey of e-bile lends strong support to Doyle’s sombre conclusions. As disturbing as it may be for an individual woman to receive explicit electronic threats of rape (or worse), this phenomenon is diagnostic not so much of a problem a particular man has with a particular woman and her opinions, but of a broader social issue involving issues of gender equity, as well as a tenacious sexism. The cyber medium is new but the e-bile message has roots in a much older discursive tradition: one which insists women are inferior and that their primary function is to provide sexual gratification for men – and then denigrates them for this self-same characterisation. The litany of gendered e-bile examples furnished in this article provides key insights into these new articulations of misogyny. Among other things, we have seen: that such discourse relies on hyperbolic and sexualised derision; that e-bile amplification often follows e-bile exposure and the electronic venom directed at one woman is all but indistinguishable from that directed at another. One of the perverse paradoxes of e-bile is that the most personal of insults, attacks and threats can seem generic, predictable and almost tedious as a result of their ubiquity. By the same token, the anonymous or quasi-anonymous status of the perpetrators – along with the congenerous qualities and prevalence of their communications – also has the effect of erasing the individual and coalescing all these mephitic voices into one.

The increasing number of first-hand accounts and examples of online vitriol make an arguably convincing case that e-bile is becoming more prevalent, as well as rhetorically more noxious. Moreover, while such discourse may once have circulated infrequently or only in Internet niches, gendered e-bile has now become normalised such that it is now acceptable to express even the most minor disagreement through the most affronting, offensive and aggressive sexualised venom. A large proportion of cyber-speak has developed an economy which trades in the rape threat, the snuff fantasy and an endless daisy chain of accusations that yet another ‘slut’ is a ‘dumb bitch ass cum dumpster’ (joeyncarsensmom 2010) who deserves to ‘Choke And Die On That Dick’ (‘Dear Slut, I Hope You Choke and Die on That Dick’ 2013). The prevalence of gendered e-bile, therefore, reveals the tireless way the rhetoric of misogyny and sexual violence continue rising, despite all attempts to put an end to this discourse and its disempowering extra-discursive effects. In this way, gendered e-bile evinces a convincing hydrodynamic/
thermodynamic logic in that attempts to stem the flow of misogynist discourse seem to serve merely as acts of displacement.

In conclusion, I have argued that the risks associated with staying silent or speaking only obliquely about gendered e-bile in scholarship far outweigh the unpleasantness involved in examining this material in its uncensored entirety. There is ample evidence to support the proposition that there is a pressing need for scholars to confront gendered e-bile – in all its unexpurgated ugliness – because: (1) it has become such a dominant tenor of Internet discourse; (2) it has many self-generating properties and is therefore likely to become even more dominant; (3) its cruelty, hostility and misogyny would likely be considered entirely unacceptable if it was present to such an extent in other public domains; (4) it causes suffering and is likely reducing the inclusivity of the cybersphere; (5) it provides critical insight into the degree to which misogynist views are still held by many in the community and (6) for various reasons, thus far it has received insufficient attention in scholarship. This article takes only a small step along the path of what ought to be a much larger project. Given that sexualised vitriol targeting women is only one type of e-bile, further inquiry is required into other types of online invective – discourse couched in the rhetoric of racism and/or homophobia are just two further examples. These taxonomies could then pave the way for further investigation into – among other things – the ethical appraisal of putative online hostility, and the identification and appraisal of possible interventions and remedies.

Notes

1. Previously I published as Emma Tom (See Tom 2002, 2010).
2. As I argue elsewhere (Jane 2012), a review of 30 years of scholarly literature addressing various forms of putatively hostile communications in computer-mediated contexts reveals that research addressing discourse designated as ‘flaming’ and/or ‘trolling’ generally cites communications which are starkly different to the discourse under discussion in this article – chiefly that they are mild in tone, and are not conspicuously gendered in terms of their targets or their rhetorical constructs. Admittedly, hostile communications which are designated in scholarly literature as ‘cyberbullying’, ‘cyberstalking’ or ‘cyberviolence’ have more in common with the type of discourse I call e-bile. However, these terms are generally used to refer to more narrowly delineated phenomena rather than the wider discursive tenor under discussion in this article.
3. I acknowledge the proliferation of other types of online invective such as communications and comments which trade in racist or offensive cultural or religious stereotypes. In this article, however, I will be focussing primarily on gendered e-bile.
4. This is a situation with uncomfortable parallels with off-line sexual harassment and abuse. Certainly many women who have been targets of sexually explicit e-vitriol have said they feel or have felt reluctant to speak openly about the experience because of shame, fear and/or concern about being called – as a female writer on Slate puts it – ‘a crybaby and an attention whore’ (Marcotte 2012).
5. I will not be adopting the convention of writing ‘sic’ after grammatical, spelling and syntax errors in cited electronic communications and online material in recognition of the informality and colloquialism commonly found in such contexts.
6. ‘Don’t feed the trolls’ is the idea that ignoring trolls and other Internet provocateurs will deprive them of the ‘oxygen’ of attention and reaction they crave, and will result in their retreat (Papworth cited in Moses and Hornery 2012).
7. My understanding of ‘downy’ in this context is that it is a colloquial reference to a person diagnosed with Down’s syndrome.
8. My understanding of ‘Wood’ in this context is that it is a colloquial reference to an erect penis.
9. The slang term ‘owned’ is defined on Wikipedia as being used to refer to ‘severe defeat or humiliation, usually in an amusing way or through the dominance of an opposing party’ (‘Owned’).
10. ‘Fugly’ is a portmanteau of ‘fucking’ and ‘ugly’.
11. ‘Bike’ is a slang term for a promiscuous woman, as in ‘[she’s] the town bike (everybody rides her).
12. This reference to the Nazi concentration camp is likely linked to the fact that Stewart is Jewish.

Notes on contributor
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