

The Difference a Gender Makes

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the different ways men and women are treated online and the consequences of coming under social media attack. Through numerous examples and personal experience from the unique perspective of a transgender woman who has experienced the Internet as a man and a woman.
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Résumé

Cet article démontre les différentes façons dont les hommes et les femmes sont traités en ligne et les conséquences des attaques subies dans les médias sociaux. Il le fait au travers de nombreux exemples et d'expériences personnelles, selon la perspective unique d'une femme transgenre qui a fait l'expérience de l'Internet en tant qu'homme et en tant que femme.
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We were on a weekend away and I was walking hand in hand on a beach with my spouse when my phone twittered at me, then again, and again. When I finally found my phone in my bag, I was already dreading what would be on the screen as nothing positive was likely to elicit this flurry of tweets. My fear was confirmed as I looked at the screen and realised that an article I'd written had been picked up by a men's rights group and my Twitter feed was filled with homophobia, misogyny, and transmisogyny.

My gender is central to who I am; as a transgender woman, I've spent so much of my life fighting for it. Transgender people who transition from across the gender spectrum have more insight on the social impact of gender than cisgender people do, as our lived experience shows us how society interacts with gender presentation. Many transgender people don't adhere to normative gender roles, but those who do have experience vital to understanding how gender is lived in society. In my case, I transitioned from assigned male at birth to living life as a woman. The difference in how I was treated before and after transitioning is what I refer to as *social whiplash*.

How the world interacts with you depends on the gender you present to it. When you change that presentation, everything shifts and transgender people are assumed to be magically able to understand and navigate the societal impacts of these changes. We can't, of course. This is the social whiplash of changing something so fundamental as how society as a whole perceives you. We have to go through a period of floundering while we learn how to interact with the world from our new position. It's incredibly difficult and affects every aspect of our lives.

When I shattered society's perceptions and presented as the real me, an openly bisexual transgender woman, I realised I was no longer a member of the shoal. Watching them swim away, suddenly I was in a much smaller group eyed hungrily by predators. In these situations, re-learning how to interact online can

very literally be a case of life and death. Once my appearance became central to how men judged me, perceiving me and my views circumspect and dismissable due to my gender, I found that my online safety moved from something I'd never had to consider to my main priority. How I was able to use the Internet had changed; what I did, said, and presented all had a different consequence with higher stakes.

The Internet is an amphitheatre of the grotesque where perceived anonymity, if not actual anonymity, turns otherwise merely obnoxious boys and men into something highly toxic and dangerous. Minorities have to face this toxicity without fail and without choice. When people assumed I was a heteronormative male, I could do anything online and never worry too much about the consequences. Uploading my photo was something I could do on a whim; correcting or critiquing a man was never a problem. I was viewed as part of the majority, unknowingly swimming safe within the shoal.

Social media has become an abuse enabler that enhances the emotions of its users through the formation of opinion bubbles. Anyone disagreeing with the groupthink within the bubble is open to attack. This behaviour creates an echo chamber feedback loop that reinforces and amplifies the groupthink, regardless of facts or social decency. An example of this is the 2016 United States election: Donald Trump's supporter base used emotion to process information with no regard for facts. Fuelled by Twitter's famed inability to police its product, the bigots on Twitter grew loud and dangerous.

As a woman, my views no longer held the same weight they used to—a shift that many transgender women have experienced. It can work the other way too; after neurobiologist Ben Barres transitioned to male, he discovered some surprising reactions to his work, as shown in his interview published in the *Washington Post* (Vedantam 2006). After a presentation and a discussion, he heard another scientist remark: “Ben Barnes gave a great seminar today, but then his work is much better than his sister's.” Ben does not have a sister; the other scientist was talking about Ben before he transitioned. Ben's skills as a scientist hadn't changed, but his gender presentation had become male, which in turn shifted the perception of his work. A study by Corinne Moss-Racusin et al. (2012) published in *Pro-*

ceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS) produced similar results. The study sent out duplicate resumes to potential employers and only changed the gender of the name (Carroll 2012). The resume that had a feminine name on it always scored lower than the masculine one. Society suffers from an inherent cultural bias where men are seen as inherently more valuable than women.

This is also shown by the rise of the online phenomenon of mansplaining, which I only experienced after my transition. Suddenly, men thought that I couldn't possibly be an expert on any subject and, regardless of their level of knowledge compared to mine, I needed them to explain the topic to me. I experienced other changes in behaviour too: if I expressed anger, it was more readily dismissed and deemed infantile, or joked about as ‘that time of the month,’ even though I don't have a period and never will. It was as though I had discarded my perceived value in society alongside my masculinity.

Outspoken women, and especially transgender women, have become targets online and these attacks can have life changing consequences. A number of women have been doxed (meaning their personal details are released online, usually including an address) for speaking out in favour of feminism or against online abuse, even for voicing an opinion about a movie or video game. Sexual and physical threats follow and frequently include death threats. In May 2017, a Canadian transgender cartoonist, Sophie Labelle, was forced to leave her home after she was doxed during an attack fuelled by transmisogyny, for no reason other than she draws an online comic about a transgender girl (Colley 2017).

The severity of abuse increases with intersections and those who are at the most risk of online and physical abuse are transgender women of colour. Other common types of abuse faced by transgender women include cissexism, homophobia, ableism, and fatphobia. The transphobia towards transgender women in particular is remarkable because of what it says about patriarchal culture. Transgender women who have rejected masculinity bring into question the perceived value of manhood. Some men take this rejection of masculinity as a slight against it, and their fragile masculinity leads them to become abusive.

I've experienced attacks in response to my on-

line articles and it's shocking how often abuse from men is peppered with threats; I had a half hour hate video made about me, which Google has steadfastly refused to remove from YouTube. When you're a cisgender heteronormative white male, putting your opinion online is a simple matter, done without thought because the odds of suffering from society's perception of you are slight. When you're a woman, particularly a woman from a minority, to be outspoken online is an act of rebellion and bravery.

I went through a period of four years when I never used a picture of myself online due to the fear of being attacked online or in person. I only broke this rule when I started raising money to help cover my surgery costs here in Canada. I became more careful with what I said online, yet no matter what I say, my words are policed. It is a truism for all transgender people online that having an audience means anything you say can be analysed and used against you.

It remains the case that many police forces are ignorant in dealing with online hate crime. Laws are frequently fragmented or just not enforced, leading to an investigation rate of just 9% of online hate crimes reported in the UK in 2016 (Laville 2016). No recent data is available for Canada. I was on a committee whose goals included fostering better relations between the police and the LGBTQ2 community and I asked how our local police would respond to swatting (which is a fake call to emergency services to get the police to arrive at your house with guns drawn). My local police had never heard of the term and seemed very confused as to why I'd be worried about this.

Social media companies need to start enforcing the terms of service we all sign up to; Facebook, Twitter and Google have pretty strict guidelines against sexual or gender based abuse, but they are rarely (if ever) enforced. I've reported many instances of abuse across all three social media behemoths and almost never succeeded in getting explicit abuse removed from the Internet. It seems that only in the most blatant cases of abuse is action taken, and this is usually when the abuse targets a celebrity and the news media get involved.

The most privileged group of men, white heteronormative cis-men, need to speak out against online abuse against women wherever they see it. Online bros are perpetuating abuse and rape culture and it has to stop. Women are the most frequent victims of online

abuse and it's women who are leading the pushback against it. It may seem a gargantuan task, but remember that King Kong was tamed by Fay Ray, a woman who achieved what men couldn't do; women change the world.

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