Submission for: Whoops I’m a Woman on the Internet

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 we have lived experience of how society interacts with gender presentation. Many transgender people don’t adhere to these gender roles but those that do have experience that’s vital when discussing how gender is lived in society. In my case, I transitioned from assigned male at birth to living life as a woman and the difference in how I was treated is what I refer to as *social whiplash*.

How the world interacts with you depends on the gender you present it. When you change that presentation, everything shifts and transgender people are assumed 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 effects every aspect of our lives.

When I shattered societies perceptions and presented as the real me, an openly bisexual transgender woman, I realised I was no longer a member of the shoal as they’d swam away and suddenly I was in a much smaller group eyed hungrily by predators. Learning how this changes how you interact online can very literally be a case of life and death. When my appearance became central to how men judged me and my views circumspect and dismissed 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 could 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 previously 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 never worry too much about the consequences. Uploading my photo was something I could do on a whim; correcting or critiquing another 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 to facts. Fuelled by Twitter’s famed inability to police its product, the bigots on Twitter have grown loud and dangerous.

As a woman my views no longer held carried 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 (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/12/AR2006071201883.html). 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. This person 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 published in PNAS concluded the same. The study sent out duplicate resumes to potential employers and only changed the gender of the name. The resume that had a female name on it always scored lower than the male’s. Society suffers from an inherent cultural bias that goes both ways, where men are seen as inherently valued more highly than women. (http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/2012/09/19/scientists-your-gender-bias-is-showing/)

This is also shown by the rise of the online phenomenon of mansplaining, which I only experienced after my transition as men suddenly thought that I couldn’t possibly be an expert on any subject and I needed them to explain topics to me. Regardless of their level of knowledge compared to mine. I experienced other changes too, if I expressed anger it was more readily dismissed and deemed infantile, 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. These attacks can have life changing consequences. A number of women have been doxed (personal details released online that usually includes 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. (http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/transgender-cartoonist-sophie-labelle-hate-death-threats-book-launch-1.4123683)

The severity of abuse increases with intersectionality and those who are at the most risk of online and physical abuse are transgender women of colour, other common types of abuse where this happens includes 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. The rejection of masculinity is taken as a slight against it, the fragility of masculinity then leads to some men becoming abusive.

I’ve experienced attacks in response to my online articles and it’s shocking how abuse from men is so often peppered with threats; I had a half hour hate video made about me which Google has steadfastly refused to take off YouTube. When you’re a cisgender heteronormative white male putting your opinion online is a simple matter done without thought because the odds of you suffering from how society perceives you is 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 where 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 surgery costs here in Canada. I became more careful with what I said online and no matter what I say my words are policed. This is true of all transgender people online that have an audience, what you say is analysed and can be used against you.

Unfortunately many police forces are not knowledgeable on online hate crime, the laws are frequently fragmented or not enforced leading to an investigation rate of just 9% of reported online hate crimes in the UK in 2016 (https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/04/online-abuse-existing-laws-too-fragmented-and-dont-serve-victims-says-police-chief), no recent data is available for Canada. I was on a committee that included the goal of 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 that 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. It seems that only in the most blatant cases of abuse is action taken, this is usually when the abuse is targeting a celebrity as this means that traditional media gets involved as well. I’ve reported many things across all three of those social media behemoths and almost never succeeded in getting explicit abuse removed from the Internet.

The most privileged group of men, white heteronormative males, need to speak out against online abuse against women wherever they see it. Online bro’s are perpetuating abuse and rape culture and it has to stop. Women are the most frequent victims of online abuse and it’s women that are leading the pushback against it. It may seem a gargantuan task but remember that King Kong was tamed by Fay Ray, she achieved what men couldn’t do; women change the world.