

MISOGYNY ON THE WEB:
COMPARING NEGATIVE READER COMMENTS MADE TO MEN AND WOMEN
WHO PUBLISH POLITICAL COMMENTARY ONLINE

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

MISOGYNY ON THE WEB:
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INTRODUCTION

When technology blogger Kathy Sierra received gender-specific, harassing and threatening online comments in 2007, scholars and members of the Internet community wondered whether it was easier to make misogynistic attacks on the World Wide Web. Some concluded through anecdotal evidence that women bloggers were being criticized at a higher rate than men bloggers, especially when women blogged about men-dominated subjects such as technology, politics or sports. Furthermore it seemed that the blog comments, which almost never listed the readers' real names, sometimes had a sexually violent, harassing or demeaning tone that was absent from comments made to blogs written by men. The following thesis homes in on this topic. It is guided by theories that journalism, feminist, psychology and technology scholars have produced that relate to this topic. Using those lenses, it also analyzes data from content analysis of reader comments to blogs and data from a survey given to women and men authors who publish their opinions online.

To narrow the scope of this research, the 16 authors selected for this study are from the United States and are those who write their opinions about U.S. politics. All of the websites these authors publish through allow readers to comment without displaying their true names to the public. However, eight of the 16 websites require readers to register with a valid e-mail address before posting a comment. In this way, the readers' level of anonymity is lower for those eight sites that require a valid e-mail address. The aim of my thesis is to search for negative language in online reader comments to political

commentary or blogs written by women, and to compare the amount negative reader comments to these women's men counterparts. The research also will attempt to understand which types of negative comments are occurring most frequently for the women and men studied. The interviews will be used to provide insights about how these bloggers feel about the comments they receive.

The different types of negative language found in reader comments include: confrontation, patronizing speech, disagreement, personal attacks, personal attacks based on gender, threats, gender-specific threats, name-calling, profanity, gender-specific profanity, sexist stereotypes about women, sexist stereotypes about men, sarcasm, complete comment removal, rape imagery, and gender role affirmation. Some of these negativity types are drawn from previous literature while several are operational definitions created specifically for this study. Even if some women participate in discourse through the Internet's public spaces unscathed, there is still cause for concern that a backlash of misogynistic reader comments aimed at online, opinionated women could shut them out of this medium. The Internet is increasingly becoming a medium for societal communication, and if misogynistic hate speech is discouraging women from participating as often in the online discussion, this could be detrimental for society because a diversity of voices is vital to a healthy democracy.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There has been much discussion by scholars about sexism online and whether the Internet liberates women or simply reinforces the same hierarchy and stereotypes that exist offline. Theory also exists about online hate speech, but not in ways that address women. In fact, few scholars have studied hate speech as it applies to sexist language targeted against women. When it comes to the Internet and readers' perceptions of privacy and anonymity, researchers have come close to the fringe of this thesis topic. Some have studied Internet users' willingness to speak out on the Web and the willingness of people to speak up when they believe their opinions might be chastised.

Women and the blogosphere

The blogosphere is growing at a rate of about 75,000 new blogs each day (Pang & Lee, 2008), and literature suggests that men still dominate parts of this realm. Literature also shows that bloggers seem to gravitate toward and build communities with other bloggers who are like or share characteristics with themselves. Kumar et al. (2004) studied more than 1 million blogs on livejournal.com and about 25,000 other blogs to determine characteristics of blogspace. They found that blogging occurs globally and that bloggers form friendships or online networks with other bloggers who share their interests and who often are similar in age and from their same geographic location. The researchers also tracked the bursts of activity between bloggers in these friendship networks. They concluded: "We expect blogs to remain a pervasive phenomenon on the Web, and fascinating insights into the sociology of bloggers can be divided from the

analysis of the structure and context of blogspace” (p. 5). The authors did not discuss gender differences in their report, but other researchers studying the blogosphere have.

Harp and Tremayne (2006) studied the gender inequality that exists on popular political blogs. In 2004, they wrote, there was a 58% spike in blog readership, and 32 million people in America said they read blogs. A closer look at blogs reveals that many more men than women blog. And the same can be said for opinion writing at legacy papers. In early 2005:

About 19.5 percent of op-ed pieces at the (L.A. Times) were by women, 16.9 percent at the New York Times and 10.4 percent at The Washington Post. Only a handful of female columnists – Maureen Dowd, Ellen Goodman, Molly Ivins – are nationally known (Kurtz).

A look at the number of women in politics also shows a substantial gender gap. Early Internet scholars may have been mistaken when they predicted the Internet would be a great equalizer, and that there would be an equal number of men and women blogging online. After all, starting an independent blog about politics is easier than convincing the editor at a newspaper to hire you as a political columnist. But Harp and Tremayne suggested the discrepancy between men and women political bloggers still exists because of an online good ol’ boys club in which men who blog acknowledge their men cohorts more often than the women’s blogs. This is similar to the idea that Kumar et al. share about bloggers gravitating toward other bloggers who are similar to them. Overall, research also suggests women in the United States have been less interested and less knowledgeable about politics (Verba et al., 1996). Other research suggests that Internet

users tend to keep their “real world” personas while they cruise the Web, at least for the most part.

Women and society

Feminist theorists have presented a mountain of evidence that women live in a world dominated by a culture and set of values originally prescribed by men.

Furthermore, women in current U.S. society still are not treated equally to men. Women lack equal representation in government, where 19% of U.S. lawmakers are women (“How Many Women,” 2011), 26% of state court judges are women (Finn et al, 2008), 23.4% of state lawmakers are women (“Percentages of Women,” 2011), 14% of all state governors are women (“Women Who Became Governors,” 2011), and only 20% of mayors in towns with more than 30,000 people are women (“About the U.S.,” 2011). In media, women make up one-third of the top 100 syndicated opinion columnists (“Black and White,” 2007). One-third of full-time journalists at daily newspapers are women, 29% of top newspaper jobs go to women, 18% of publishers are women (“Women and News,” 2008), and the vast majority of popular movies focus on men and are told from a man’s perspective (Sarkeesian, 2009). Women make 81 cents for every dollar a man makes (“Women at Work,” 2011). In the medical field, for example, men just starting as physicians make an average of nearly \$17,000 more annually than their peers who are women (Lo Sasso et al, 2011).

In 1982, Gilligan hypothesized that the psychology and development of women differed from men, and that all of the studies and theories used to understand the human brain were conducted on male subjects and defined by male terms. Those theories were

then applied to women, and the differences women had with men were viewed as shortcomings. Culturally, this communicated that the way men behaved, thought and approached life were the right ways to conduct oneself, and that the behaviors and thoughts and approaches to life women had were less important. Gilligan further described this male bias in theory:

For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation. Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. . . Women's failure to separate then becomes by definition a failure to develop" (pp. 8-9).

Gilligan concluded that a thorough understanding of male and female perspectives and development are needed in order for society to flourish.

In 1991, Faludi examined the history of the advancement of women in the United States and found that a cultural backlash against women cropped up whenever women began making strides toward equality. The backlash often occurred in media and sold the belief that women and men are already equal; women need not complain. Backlash rhetoric also often asserts that feminism is to blame for much of the sadness in the lives of modern-day women. According to Faludi, any small advancement of women was seen as an infringement on the rights of men:

"Women are taking over" is again a refrain many working women heard from their male colleagues – after one or two women are promoted at their company, but while top management is still solidly male. In newsrooms, white male reporters routinely complain that only women and minorities can get jobs – often at publications where women's and minorities' numbers are actually shrinking. . . At Boston University, president John Silber fumed that his English department had turned into a "damn

matriarchy” – when only six of its twenty faculty members were women. Feminists have “complete control” of the Pentagon, a brigadier general complained – when women, much less feminists, represented barely 10 percent of the armed services and were mostly relegated to the forces’ lowest levels (p. 64).

Feminist theorists have made a case that we live in a culture in which true equality does not exist between women and men, in which there remains a cultural male bias and in which the advancement of women is met with animosity. When the Internet was born, however, many wondered whether the new technology would create a space where people could communicate anonymously, as equals, without gender or racial labels.

Cyber-feminism

Theory has been mixed about whether women have been able to use the Internet as an equalizer. Overall, women and men use the Internet in general at roughly the same rate (Harp & Tremayne, 2006). In 2004, 66% of American men were online compared to 61% of women. Haas et al. (2002) conducted a study about teaching technology to women and girls, and they appeared to believe that women are less familiar with technology than men as a whole. In 2007, van Doorn et al. performed a content analysis on Dutch and Flemish blogs to study how people perform their gender identities on these blogs. They asserted that with the increased popularity of blogs, people have a new way to present themselves. They found that most often, people present themselves on their blogs in ways that are consistent with how they act while offline. Previous studies of gender differences on blogs reveal that men bloggers seem to have shorter pages and women tend to have variety in the length of their blogs and seem to reference their readers more often than men bloggers. The article written by van Doorn et al. suggests

that although people have the capability to change their gender characteristics when they go online, most people they studied tend to use the Internet to reflect who they are in the “real world.”

Daniels (2009) analyzed cyberfeminist efforts and also studied the ways girls and women interact and identify themselves online. Daniels defined cyberfeminism as the expression of feminist practices and women’s empowerment on the Internet. She also discussed differing viewpoints about women and the Internet. She noted that once the Internet became accessible to the general public, some scholars thought using the virtual space to communicate would appeal more to woman than men. This is because talking online mostly meant writing, and the scholars believed women enjoyed communicating with words more than men. Daniels, along with other scholars, believed that although the Internet can empower women in some respects, its users typically reinforce popular stereotypes about race and gender:

The lived experience and actual Internet practices of girls and self-identified women reveals ways that they use the Internet to transform their material, corporeal lives in a number of complex ways that both resist and reinforce hierarchies of gender and race.

Additional literature portrays women who go online as victims of hate, patriarchy and other dangers. For example, women who seek health and human services online may become victims of scams, according to a study by Finn and Banach (2000). But the essay “Women and Children First: Gender and the Settling of the Electronic Frontier” written by Miller (2001) cautions scholars from labeling women online as victims. Miller took to task a Newsweek article that portrays online women as victims in a Web society

dominated by men. The author argued that this frame of mind perpetuates the stereotype that women are a fairer, weaker sex that needs protection, even in the Internet realm where no physical bodies exist and a person's biological sex can never entirely be proven.

Miller mentioned and then quickly refuted the idea that rules should be created to protect women online. Women should be cautious about the idea of a patriarchal and paternalistic society regulating the Internet to protect women, she said, and she believes women bloggers should be able to handle online critics just as well as men. In fact, Miller said, many women remain online despite harsh criticism. One woman Miller quoted said she resents being portrayed as a "shrinking technophobe" and, "If that's what women online are like, I must be a Martian" (p. 220). Miller raises a useful point that cuts to the core of a research topic that aims to identify and measure online misogyny. It leads one to wonder whether information sniffed out about the harassment and hate speech used against women bloggers would be used to further scare women away from these online public spaces. Even if misogyny is prevalent online, it is important to note Miller's point that regulation, if ever suggested, might not be the answer because it could create another scenario in which women must be protected by men against other men. Such regulations could rob women of the autonomy they have as Internet users.

Hate speech theory and its applications to the Internet

In the 2011 book "The Communication of Hate," Waltman and Haas acknowledged that hate is an ambiguous concept and that the definition of hate speech varies depending on whether it's being looked at in an academic setting or in a person's

daily life. That said, the authors used Perry's 2001 definition of hate as an "extreme negative feeling and beliefs held about a group of individuals or a specific representative of that group because of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation" (p. 2). They also added that hate is an emotion directed at a social group, and that the person expressing the hate often "hopes for evil to befall the hated."

Outside of the journalism field, scholars have begun to create theory concerning how the Internet can be used to spur hatred for marginalized groups. Perry and Olson (2009) discussed the ways the Internet allows hate groups such as Ku Klux Klan members and skinheads from across the globe to connect and solidify their cause. This globalization of hate, as the authors put it, is easily conducted through blogs and other social sites. Waltman and Hass also devoted a chapter to hate speech and the Internet. They described many websites designed by people who hate particular racial groups, including Black and Jewish people, and the authors wrote: "the Internet has become the lifeblood of the organized hate movement" (p. 63). Plenty has been written about hate speech in regards to people of color or Jewish people, but not as many scholars have taken a close look at hate speech based on a person's sex or gender.

Lillian (2007) argued that sexist discourse, in many instances, should be considered hate speech. Lillian said that legal experts might not agree, but she made a case otherwise by discussing speech made by Canadian neoconservative William Gairdner. Gairdner refers to feminists as animals and, according to Lillian, "blames women for date or acquaintance rape, and this blame is further illustrated by his description of the phrase no means no as 'garbled' and 'silly'" (p. 726). In other words,

Gairdner said that even if a woman says no to sex, she still sometimes deserves to get raped. Gairdner further said that women who say no to the sexual advances of men, do so to increase sexual arousal, and that they really mean yes. Lillian argued that this is hate speech, plain and simple, because:

It intends to and does inflame the emotions of followers, that it denigrates women, that it aims to inflict permanent and irreparable harm to women, and that its goal is ultimately to conquer and subjugate women (p. 736).

Using this definition that Lillian presents for hate speech, rather than the legal definition, will be beneficial to understanding and discussing any misogynistic language found in this study.

Anecdotes support idea that online misogyny is common

Bartow (2009) described the Internet as a new frontier in which little can be done when a woman is sexually harassed through the World Wide Web. Bartow referenced the violent threats and verbal abuse Kathy Sierra, the tech blogger, received in 2007. Sierra blogged independently at her blog, Creating Passionate Users. She contacted the police after bloggers left comments such as “I hope someone slits your throat” and another posted a picture of Sierra next to a noose and wrote, “the only thing Kathy has to offer me is that noose in her neck size.” Ultimately, the police couldn’t do much against the authors of those anonymous reader comments, and Sierra, who blogs about user-friendly software design, canceled some public appearances and stepped away from the blogosphere because she felt endangered. Some scholars concluded through anecdotal evidence that women bloggers were being criticized at a higher rate than men bloggers, especially in men-dominated subjects such as technology, and that blog comments

attacking women often had a sexually violent or sexually harassing tone. Bartow also mentioned an intriguing point made in a recent news article that states women come under attack most often when they are not obeying their normal gender roles, and: “aggressive and personally abusive discourse found in various spheres of the Internet is disproportionately directed at women and girls” (p. 389).

Sierra’s story is far from the only one about online sexual harassment. Jill Filipovic (2007) wrote about her experience with sexual harassment while on the AutoAdmit forum for prospective and current law students. Filipovic, who studied law at New York University at the time, received flak from anonymous AutoAdmit members about her women’s rights activism. Comments included: “That nose ring is f---ing money, rape her immediately;” “I know that girl. Shes a feminazi;” and “She would be a good hate f---” (p. 296). Filipovic also was added to a list of “The ‘Most Appealing’ Women @ Top Law Schools” and a photo of her in a bathing suit taken from her personal online photo account was posted on AutoAdmit. Filipovic argued that much like sexual harassment in the “real world,” online sexual harassment is used by men to keep women out of the public sphere:

At the heart of this aggression seems to be a more generalized offense at women’s public presence in ‘men’s’ spaces – in politics, at law schools, online . . . Men are generally attacked for their ideas or their behavior; when Internet aggressors go after women, they go straight between the legs. They remind her that even if she is a top student at a top law school, her primary purpose is decorative; they remind her that even if she is a popular blogger, her sexual allure (or lack thereof) makes her not worth listening to; they remind women in general that the punishment for displeasing men – even anonymous men online – will be at best sexually insulting, and at worst sexually violent. (p. 298, p. 303)

According to a New York Times Magazine Article, two women in Yale Law School sued AutoAdmit users “who posted violent fantasies about them” (Schwartz, 2008). Filipovic also pointed to other women bloggers’ experiences with online sexual harassment, including feminist blogger Jessica Valenti and John Edwards campaign bloggers Amanda Marcotte and Melissa McEwan.

Valenti is co-founder of Feministing.com, a blog site that speaks up for women’s rights. The site receives a numbing amount of hateful e-mails and reader comments, said Ann Friedman, a volunteer editor at Feministing.com. In a 2009 interview, Friedman described to me the array of misogynistic feedback she regularly faces:

I definitely think that women especially deal with comments about their appearance. Video blogging is a whole new level in terms of putting yourself out there, and if people don’t like what you have to say, and there’s even a tiny little thumbnail photo of you, every other comment will be like “you’re hot, wanna f---?;” “You’re ugly, you suck;” “You’re hot;” “You’re ugly.” . . . Anyone who has been writing online and openly as a feminist for four years, like myself, is pretty much just used to it. That’s just the way it is.

These anecdotes provide the foundation for the following hypotheses:

H1: Women who write and publish online opinion pieces about politics face more negative reader comments than their counterparts who are men.

H2: Women who write and publish online opinion pieces about politics face more intense reader comments than their counterparts who are men.

H3: Negative comments to women will contain more gender references than negative reader comments made to men.

H4: There will be fewer negative comments made on websites that require readers to provide a valid e-mail address in order to leave a comment.

Prior literature related to this thesis also paves the way for the following research questions:

RQ 1: What is the nature of the negative language found in reader comments to women-authored blogs or columns?

RQ 2: What is the nature of the negative language found in reader comments to men-authored blogs or columns?

RQ3: Is there a difference between the types of negative reader comments received by liberal and conservative authors?

RQ4: Will the type of media, whether it be a blog or a legacy media website, affect the volume of negative reader comments?

Spiral of silence theory applied to the Internet

The idea that people are less willing to speak their minds when they believe they will receive a backlash for what they believe is a well-rooted theory among journalism scholars. A couple of decades ago, Noelle-Neumann coined the phrase “spiral of silence,” positing that people are less willing to share opinions that they think the majority of people will disagree with. Noelle-Neumann hypothesized that the climate of public opinion “depends on who talks and who keeps silent” (p. 4). The author later discussed that public opinion is not just as a tool of creating civic discourse and thoughtful judgments; it also can function as a tool for social control (p. 227). The author wrote:

The concept of public opinion as social control is not concerned with the quality of the arguments. The decisive factor is which of the two camps in a controversy is strong enough to threaten the opposing camp with isolation, rejection, and ostracism (p. 228).

Noelle-Neumann’s theory has been tested repeatedly in areas such as voting, speaking in conversations, talking to media, or even donating to a cause (Glynn et al.,

1997). These authors noted that according to the spiral of silence theory, “individuals who perceive they are in the minority will feel pressure either to express the majority opinion or to remain silent” (p. 452). The concept of self-silencing could be applied to the fifth hypothesis of this thesis, which aims to discover how negative and even misogynistic language has affected women who blog about the men-dominated field of politics. Not only may some women in nontraditional arenas feel that their perspectives will not be accepted, they also may fear that they are at risk of sexual assault or violence for voicing their opinions. Meanwhile, readers leaving sexually harassing comments to women bloggers may feel more willing to do so because they believe their negative opinions about women are more or less acceptable. And perhaps reluctant women see the amount of isolating and hurtful reader comments left on other women-authored blogs and decide that sharing their opinions online is something they can live without. The literature provides ample evidence to support the following research hypothesis:

H5: Women who receive more negative reader comments will be more likely to say that they’ve thought about discontinuing their blog.

One scholarly example of applying the spiral of silence theory is a study conducted by Gonzenback et al. (1999) in the context of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for gay people in the military. The authors examined the relationship between mass media coverage of the debate and whether that coverage affected how willing homosexual men or women in the military were to speak out. The authors found that in some cases, when a person believes her or his opinion is beginning to lose momentum or support, that person may feel even more driven to speak out. This could be relevant to

men who express misogyny online. Since the beginning of the women's rights movement, there have been many men who were uncomfortable and even angry about the idea of women's liberation. Although it is not entirely politically correct to openly hate women, hiding behind reader comments in which the reader doesn't reveal their own name might give some men an easy avenue to try to regain any power lost to the feminist movement.

Psychology of communication on the Internet

People are more likely to use emotional or confrontational language during online purchasing and selling when compared to negotiating purchases during a face-to-face meeting (Johnson et al., 2008). The authors referred to this type of language as "flaming," and defined it as the "anti-normative hostile communication of emotions" (p. 418). They noted that instances of flaming occurred 40% of the time in their pilot study of online negotiations, and 30% of the time in their main study. They speculated that negotiating might cause more flaming than basic communicating online, because parties often disagree about the price of an item while negotiating. The authors argued that flaming could impede negotiations for purchase on the Internet, a medium being used more and more for buying and selling items.

In a study about whether political discussions were more likely to change a person's opinion online or in person, Min (2007) noticed that even when a name was attached to a person's online identity, people seemed more willing to have more antagonistic discussions online than in person. According to Min, this could be because it is easier to be candid without the visual cues present in a face-to-face conversation that

may lead people involved in that conversation to believe someone they are talking to disagrees with them. The author also noted that online groups were more candid and argumentative. If the nature of the Internet inspires more heated debate, questions arise concerning whether heated debates are good or bad for public discourse and whether that heat creates a hostile environment for certain people.

Meanwhile, Ho and McLeod (2008) explored the anonymous nature of online interactions (2008). These authors studied the difference between a person's willingness to express an opinion behind the cloak of anonymity online and their willingness to say how they really feel to somebody's face. The researchers found that people are more willing to voice their opinions on the Internet, and the authors appeared optimistic that fewer restricted opinions online will help create a more democratic society. In Ho and McLeod's study, participants were told one of two scenarios: that they would be asked to discuss their opinion on same-sex marriage in a room full of people who disagreed with them, or that they would be asked to discuss their opinion on same-sex marriage in a chat room full of people who disagreed. More participants spoke out against the perceived majority opinion while online. This study might explain why misogynists might be willing to post women hating reader comments to women who publish their political opinions online.

Many scholars posit that a high level of antagonism is directly related to anonymity. One would not want to openly and transparently call someone an idiot or a deadbeat if it were possible to bump into that person at the grocery store. But if there is no easy way for that person to discover one's identity, what is stopping him or her from

saying how he or she really feels? One thing many scholars agree on is that anonymous online reader comments provide a unique arena for public discussion (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). But the Internet is increasingly becoming a medium for societal communication, and if antagonistic language is deterring some people from partaking in the online discussion, this could be detrimental for society.

Trolling and Cyber-Bullying

Anonymously inflaming emotions or hurting people's feelings on the Internet has been happening for decades. In the late 1980s, when the internet was not available to the majority of Americans, technologists used the term "trolls" to describe a person who anonymously and "intentionally disrupts online communities" (Schwartz, 2008). Trolls started out on small online message boards as pranksters looking to get a rise out of people who the trolls thought took themselves too seriously. The troll would pick a fight with the unsuspecting Internet user, then use the term "LULZ" (a variation of "lol," which stands for laugh out loud) in the online argument to alert other trolls that they had pulled a prank on someone. Trolls then began to congregate together in the seedy underbelly of the Internet, creating a subculture of online bullying. Perhaps the most notorious group of trolls can be found on 4chan.org, an online forum that contains many message boards, including message boards dedicated to providing several types of pornography. 4chan's random-topic message board, simply named /b/, has been the source of many recent online bullying campaigns.

Trolls on the /b/ board have recently launched an attack against 13-year-old Rebecca Black after a music video her parents paid producers to make went viral. Trolls

incited members of the online community to harass the young teen by faxing pornographic pictures to her school with Black's name on them. Trolls even supplied Black's class schedule and the address and other contact information for her school. In 2010, an 11-year-old video blogger who goes by the pseudonym Jessi Slaughter was placed under police protection when a troll-led hate blitz led to death threats against her. Trolls published her home phone number and address and told her to kill herself.

In the 2008 New York Times Magazine article, Schwartz interviewed Jason Fortuny, whose trolling campaigns had gained him much notoriety. Fortuny was the man behind the Megan Had it Coming blog, about a 13-year-old Missouri girl who committed suicide as a result of online bullying. Schwartz said of Fortuny's philosophy: "the willingness of trolling 'victims' to be hurt by words makes them complicit, and trolling will end as soon as we all get over it." Another troll, who would only go by the name of Weev, described trolling another way:

Trolling is basically Internet eugenics. ... I want everyone off the Internet. Bloggers are filth. They need to be destroyed. Blogging gives the illusion of participation to a bunch of retards. ... We need to put these people in the oven.

Weev, a self-described hacker, admitted to Schwartz that he was instrumental in the cyber bullying campaign against Kathy Sierra. He posted her social security number and her address on the Internet alongside a fake resume, and the hatred he helped incite against Sierra eventually led to the misogyny and death threats she received.

User-generated content and journalistic transparency

Since the dawn of the Internet, journalists have been asking how to use new technologies to foster the best public discussions. Allowing for reader comments at the end of news articles became the norm, as did the practice of allowing readers to comment without telling other readers their real names. Since then, managers and other journalists at news organizations have crafted their own policies regarding reader privacy in reader comments, after many faced a constant barrage of what felt like an unusually large amount of arguing and antagonistic talk. Scholars such as Price et al. (2002) examine the accuracy in reader-generated content such as story comments, and whether a higher level of disagreement results in a higher understanding of an issue. They found that “exposures to disagreement does indeed contribute to people’s ability to generate reasons, and in particular, reasons why others might disagree with their own views” (p. 95).

Although there are many issues with accuracy in reader-generated content, as scholars Ashman and Singer (2009) attested, some scholars such as Durreis (2007) have argued that the anonymous nature of the Internet should be embraced and even protected. Instead of requiring everyone generating online content to reveal their true selves, news organizations have developed a variety of policies for online reader comments. Some ask readers to flag comments for removal if those comments seem to cross the line, other organizations require registration to comment, and some even ask readers to provide their full names when commenting. Several policies include a news organization’s ability to allow readers to rank comments, sending the lowest ranked comments to the bottom of

the list (Lampe et al., 2007). These authors argued that such a policy allows for a higher level of democracy among user-generated content.

The same holds true for the blogosphere, where bloggers also grapple with how much accountability and privacy readers commenting on blog posts should have. On his blog AriWriter, Herzog discussed which types of reader comment policies he thinks keeps some readers from making online comments to blog posts. In his 2008 post titled “3 Tips to Keep Me Commenting on Your Blog,” Ari Herzog said he is less likely to leave a comment if “1. You require me to register as a prerequisite to leaving a comment. 2. You prevent me from receiving follow-up comments by email. 3. You moderate comments.” He elaborates that registration thwarts honest discourse and that sites that require registration prior to leaving a comment “fear authenticity.”

But anonymity can come into conflict with the journalistic value of transparency. In *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) noted verification and transparency as crucial to good journalism, including good opinion writing. They also noted that keeping information from readers is usually a “mistake,” and “as citizens become more skeptical of both journalists and the political establishment, this is also a disservice to the public and brings journalism under greater suspicion” (p. 96). Extending this idea, one might argue that those publishing political opinion online could build public trust by requiring readers to provide full names and valid e-mail addresses before posting comments. While this could increase transparency on a website, Herzog and other online anonymity advocates might argue that the invasiveness of comment requirements

could prevent some people from participating in the online discussion, and from speaking as honestly as possible about a topic.

A 2009 study done by American Opinion Research on behalf of the Suburban Newspapers of American Foundation found that 76% of people surveyed thought the public should be allowed to participate on a newspaper's website by leaving a comment, submitting their own media such as photos or video, or by submitting reviews. Many said they thought this was vital for creating a public dialogue that contains a diversity of opinions and allows for freedom of expression. Thirty-six percent of those surveyed said they were more likely to visit a newspaper's website if that site allows readers to post comments. At the same time, however, many readers want at least some guidelines for those leaving comments:

Simply put, users want to post content to newspaper websites; it will increase their use and appreciation of these vehicles. But, they want the newspaper to create a framework for this sharing of information with some mechanism to ensure crude or inappropriate content do not appear (p. 3).

Also, 78% of those surveyed said having to register before leaving a comment has not kept them from commenting on the site. About one-third said readers should be required to provide their real first and last names when leaving a comment.

The purpose of this research was to determine whether online political opinion authors who happen to be women receive more negative comments than their men counterparts, particularly because these women are writing about an arena that is disproportionately male. Historically, men have dominated the political arena, and women still face inequality in this sphere, according to Carroll, author of the 2003 book

Women and American Politics: New Questions, New Directions, and according to many other feminist scholars. Another purpose of this study is to understand the nature of the hate speech and other demeaning comments women receive, how this speech differs from the hate speech or other demeaning comments men online opinion writers might receive, and whether these comments prevent women from sharing their opinions online.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study requires a between-samples content analysis of reader comments as well as a qualitative analysis based on answers to a survey given to the authors that assessed their willingness to continue blogging. The independent variables for the research were gender of the author, political leaning of the author, whether the author wrote commentary for a blog or a legacy media website, and whether their websites required readers to provide a valid e-mail address when leaving a comment. Various types of negative anonymous reader comments were the dependent variables. Those negative reader comments were broken down into a range by placing the types of negative reader comments into the following categories: name-calling, negatively addressing the author by first name only, general threats, threats of sexual assault, general profanity, gender-specific profanity, personal attacks, gender-specific personal attacks, vulgarity, sexist stereotypes about women, sexist stereotypes about men, affirmation of gender roles, sexual assault imagery, disagreement, sarcasm, and comments that are patronizing to the author. If it is clear that comments were removed because of their inappropriate nature, coders noted that as well.

The survey side of the research included the independent variable of gender again, and the dependent variable is the author's willingness to continue publishing her political opinions online. I asked the authors to share some of their recent, inappropriate reader comments, and I asked them about their policy for monitoring anonymous reader comments in order to help inform the thesis in a way content analysis could not do by

itself. This survey contained open-ended and closed-ended questions, as well as descriptive and analytical questions.

In this particular study, I distinguished between authors who publish their opinions on the websites associated with legacy media, such as The New York Times, and bloggers who write opinion for online-only publications. The hypothesis here is that authors writing as columnists for legacy media might have a different philosophy about rules for reader criticism because before the Internet, readers had to attach their names to their criticisms and use venues such as the “Letters to the Editor” section of the newspaper. Because they come from this background, legacy media opinion writers who now publish their work on the Internet might be affected in a different way by negativity in reader comments, especially when the readers do not need to own up to their comments by providing their real names to the online community. In contrast, bloggers who are more familiar with the blogosphere and the culture of online anonymity might be more accustomed to the nastiness in reader comments where readers often are not forward about their real identities.

I examined sites that get regular, daily traffic, and sites that have been lauded on “best of” lists in the blogosphere. For example, many of the women used in this research were suggested in a BlogHer article titled “2010 Must-Read Political Blogs by Women” written by Sara Granger, a contributing editor for the site. BlogHer is a hub for women bloggers to connect, and the website gets an estimated 97,000 visits each day, according to the online Web traffic estimator visualizetraffic.com. All of the authors used for this

study publish their information on a website that gets at least 50 visits each day, but some receive millions of visitors each day.

I also wanted to find out whether readers' perceptions of anonymity had any impact on the negativity in the comments left to the authors in this study. All of the websites allow readers to post comments without using their real names, so the readers are anonymous to other readers. Technically, however, they sometimes are not truly anonymous because readers must register with a valid e-mail address before leaving a comment. Most highly trafficked and well-known legacy newspaper websites and political blogs follow this practice, usually by requiring readers to check their e-mail and click on a registration confirmation link as the final step in registering to leave a comment. But there are some sites that are more lenient with their reader comment policy. Other sites used in this study ask for readers to leave an e-mail address before commenting, but that e-mail address could be a fake. The e-mail addresses are not verified, and sometimes readers commenting even can leave the e-mail address field blank. I wanted to know if having to provide a valid e-mail address when leaving a reader comment has any effect on the way readers treated the women and men who are online political writers.

Using content analysis and surveys

Krippendorff defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). Another content analysis theorist, Holsti, defines the method as “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified

characteristics of messages,” according to Stemler, who wrote an overview of the method in 2001. With this method, the researcher first must state a hypothesis or research question, provide clear, operational definitions about the text research will look for, assign coders to look for the appropriate content based on those narrowly tailored definitions, and then analyze the results to see if they match the hypothesis or at least answer the research question.

Intercoder reliability is a key goal for researchers using content analysis, because they want to make sure that no matter how many coders are used to analyze content within a text, they would produce nearly the same results if looking at the same text. According to Wimmer and Dominick, Scott’s pi intercoder reliability is calculated using the following formula, which applies to nominal data and is applicable when only two coders are used: $(M-N)/(1-N)$, where M is the percent of observed agreement and N is the percent of expected agreement. When using Scott’s pi, the rate of intercoder reliability should be no fewer than 75% in order to achieve statistical significance (p. 169).

Variables

The first variable in this thesis is gender of the authors studied. For purposes of this study, gender is defined as a set of two different types of people: those who identify with a woman gender and those who identify with a man gender. In this study, there are eight authors clearly identified as men and eight authors clearly identified as women, at least according to their online personas.

Other independent variables examined include: the political leanings of each author, the level of anonymity perceived by readers who leave comments, and whether the author writes for a legacy media site, such as the New York Times, or an independent blog. For purposes of this study, political leanings of each author is defined by whether the author is known to be either conservative or liberal, based on conventional wisdom in United States' two-party political system. The level of perceived anonymity is defined by whether the website requires readers to provide a working e-mail address prior to posting comments.

The dependent variables that measure the presence of negative anonymous reader comments are operationally defined below. They are modeled after the definitions used by Anne O'leary and Mohammed El-Nawaway, who conducted a study in 2002 about hate speech in Ireland, as well as by Webster dictionary guidelines. The operational definitions and their coding abbreviations are as follows:

First name (FN) – the reader makes a negative comment that directly addresses or mentions the author by the author's first name only.

Patronizing (PAT) – the reader explains something to the author that the reader thinks the author does not fully understand, and the reader does so with an air of condescension toward the author. For example, the reader might talk down to the author in an effort to communicate with the author, who the reader has deemed less intelligent or sophisticated.

Disagreement (D) – the reader communicates to the author that he or she does not agree with at least part of the author’s opinion in the specific piece the author wrote.

Personal attack (PER1) – the reader attacks the author personally rather than attacking the points made in the author’s specific piece. These can include attacks of character, circumstance, or physical traits, or accusations that the author is biased.

Gendered personal attack (PER2) – the personal attack is related to the author’s gender.

High-degree threat (TH1) – a threat that would make a reasonable person question his or her physical safety.

Threat (TH2) – a statement of intention to inflict pain, injury, damage or other hostile action on the author in retribution for something done or not done; a final statement or rejection of terms, the rejection of which would result in retaliation.

Threat of sexual violence (TH3) – a threat that would make a reasonable person question his or her physical safety, and the threat includes allusions to sexual violence.

Name-calling (NC) – the reader calls the author an offensive or hurtful name to communicate condemnation or rejection, and that name does not classify as profanity. (e.g. stupid, moron, loser, pathetic, crazy).

Gendered profanity (PRO1) – profanity that singles out the author’s gender (e.g. bitch, cunt, whore, slut).

Profanity (PRO2) –abusive, patently offensive or vulgar language aimed at the author. (e.g. shit, piss, fuck, asshole, cunt, cock sucker, mother fucker, bitch, dick, bastard, whore, slut, racial slurs).

Sarcasm (SAR) – the reader uses a sharp, satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut down or hurt the author.

Vulgar (V) – the reader uses crude or sexually lewd language that lacks cultivation or taste.

Removal (R) – The comment has been removed entirely or removed for review.

Sexist stereotypes about women (SS1) – The reader makes generalizations that fit into a common negative stereotype about women.

Sexist stereotypes about men (SS2) – The reader makes generalizations that fit into a common negative stereotype about men.

Sexual assault imagery (SA) – The comment includes jokes, flippant imagery, or serious imagery about rape or sexual assault. (e.g. bend over and take higher taxes, he really screwed us).

Affirmation of gender roles (GR) – Comment makes a suggestion about the way men or women ought to be. (e.g. men shouldn't cry, women should make their physical appearance a top priority).

Procedure I: Content Analysis

The sample size for the content analysis was 1,600 reader comments. To answer the questions associated with this thesis, a content analysis was performed that compared 100 comments from 16 different authors – eight men and eight women. I chose January

26, 2011 as the day to collect story comments. I gathered the most recent 100 comments for each author starting on this date. I collected the first 100 comments on the most recent post by each author, and if that post had fewer than 100 comments, I moved onto the next most recent post, and so on, until I had 100 comments from that particular author. If the author happened to write about a topic that did not cover the broad topic of politics, then I skipped over that post and did not collect any comments directed at that post.

The authors were placed into two sets. The first set was comprised of four men and four women who publish their political opinions on a website that does not require providing a valid e-mail address in order to post a comment. The remaining eight authors were placed in a set in which a valid e-mail address is required to register and comment. Two men and two women in each set published their opinions on legacy media websites, while the remaining four published on blogs. Also in each set, two of the men and two of the women were politically conservative, and two of the men and two of the women were politically liberal.

The authors used in this study are, in alphabetical order, as follows:

Duncan Black is the man behind Eschatonblog.com, a politically liberal blog that does not require readers to leave a valid e-mail address in order to post a comment. His blog gets about 15,700 daily visitors, according to the Web traffic estimation website VisualizeTraffic.com.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a politically liberal man who writes commentary for The Atlantic, a legacy magazine found online at TheAtlantic.com. The Atlantic.com gets about 298,000 visitors each day, and it does not require readers to provide a valid e-mail

address before leaving comments. Coates did not take my survey after initially agreeing to take it.

Gail Collins is a politically liberal woman who writes columns for the New York Times, a legacy newspaper found online at NYTimes.com. The New York Times' website gets about 6.4 million visitors each day, and Collins said she does not know how many of those visitors find her online columns. The paper requires readers to provide a valid e-mail address before leaving online comments.

David, whose last name could not be found, is the creator of the Unreligious Right blog, found online at unreligiousright.blogspot.com. He identifies as politically conservative and does not require readers to provide a valid e-mail address before leaving online comments. Blogspot, which is home to thousands of blogs, has 62.4 million daily visitors, but web traffic estimates were not available for David's individual blog. He did not respond to my survey.

Ross Douthat is a politically conservative man who, like Collins, writes columns for the New York Times. Douthat did not respond to my survey.

Glenn Greenwald is a man who writes politically liberal commentary for Salon, found online at Salon.com. This website, which requires a valid e-mail address to comment, gets about 446,000 visitors a day, but it is unknown how many of those visitors read Greenwald's work. He did not take my survey after initially agreeing to take it.

David Harsanyi is a man who writes politically conservative commentary, which often are published in the Denver Post, Reason magazine, the RealClearPolitics blog and the Townhall forum. For purposes of this research, comments were gleaned from his blog

posts at Townhall.com, which gets about 133,000 visits each day and requires readers to provide a valid e-mail address before leaving a comment. Harsanyi did not appear to know how many of those daily visitors read his political commentary.

Bart Hinkle is a man who writes politically conservative commentary, dubbed “Barticles,” for the Richmond Times-Dispatch, a legacy newspaper found online at TimesDispatch.com. The newspaper’s website gets about 33,800 visits each day, although Hinkle is not sure how many of those visitors read his commentary. Readers do not need to provide a valid e-mail address when leaving a comment in response to his pieces.

Paddy Kraska is a woman who posts politically liberal blogs with another women blogger on The Political Carnival, which is found online at ThePoliticalCarnival.net. The website gets an average of 7,000 hits each day, according to Kraska, and a valid e-mail address is not needed in order to leave a comment.

Carol Marin is a woman who writes politically liberal columns for The Chicago Sun-Times, a legacy newspaper found online at SunTimes.com. The newspaper’s website gets about 377,000 visitors each day, but Marin did not appear to know how many of those visitors come across her columns. Readers do not need to provide a valid e-mail address before leaving an online comment to her column.

Taylor Marsh is a politically liberal woman who writes about politics and provides political analysis on her website TaylorMarsh.com. She also publishes her work on The Huffington Post and The Moderate Voice blogs. TaylorMarsh.com gets about

2,800 visitors each day, according to Web traffic estimates, and readers must provide a valid e-mail address in order to leave a comment on her site.

Kathleen Parker is a politically conservative syndicated columnist who writes for the Washington Post, a legacy newspaper that can be found online at WashingtonPost.com. The Post receives about 1.8 million visitors to its website each day and requires visitors to provide a valid e-mail address before leaving a comment.

Holly Robichaud writes politically conservative commentary as the self-titled “Lone Republican” for the Boston Herald, a legacy daily newspaper found online at bostonherald.com. The website receives about 196,000 visitors each day and does not require readers to register with a valid e-mail address before leaving a comment to Robichaud’s commentary. She did not appear to know how many of the Boston Herald’s online visitors specifically read her work on the site.

Eugene Robinson is a politically liberal columnist who, like Parker, writes for the Washington Post. It is unknown how many visitors to the Post’s website read Robinson’s commentary, and Robinson did not respond when asked to complete my survey.

Adrienne Royer is a woman who writes politically conservative commentary on her blog called Cosmopolitan Conservative, which is found online at AdrienneRoyer.com. She says her blog gets about 50 Web hits each day, and she also publishes her commentary on Blogher.com, RightWingNews.com and on the Smart Girl Nation blog. Readers do not need to provide a valid e-mail address when commenting on her blog.

Debra Saunders is a woman who writes political conservative commentary that is, like Harsanyi, published on the Townhall blog at Townhall.com. Saunders' work is published on the San Francisco Chronicle's newspaper website at SFGate.com, and on RealPolitics.com and JewishWorldReview.com. She did not provide how many hits she receives to her commentary on Townhall, but said her columns on SFGate.com receive about 100 Web hits each day.

Perhaps an easier way to visualize the online political opinion writers and the variables that I collected in this study is to view all 16 authors in a table:

<i>Women</i>	<i>Anonymity</i>	<i>Site type</i>	<i>Party</i>
Gail Collins, New York Times	Valid e-mail	Legacy	D
Kathleen Parker, Washington Post	Valid e-mail	Legacy	R
Taylor Marsh	Valid e-mail	Blog	D
Debra Saunders, Townhall	Valid e-mail	Blog	R
Carol Marin, Chicago Sun Times	No valid e-mail	Legacy	D
Holly Robichaud, Boston Herald	No valid e-mail	Legacy	R
Paddy, The Political Carnival	No valid e-mail	Blog	D
Adrienne Royer	No valid e-mail	Blog	R
<i>Men</i>	<i>Anonymity</i>	<i>Site type</i>	<i>Party</i>
Eugene Robinson, Washington Post	Valid e-mail	Legacy	D
Ross Douthat, New York Times	Valid e-mail	Legacy	R
Glenn Greenwald, Salon	Valid e-mail	Blog	D
David Harsanyi, Townhall	Valid e-mail	Blog	R
Ta-Nehisi Coates, The Atlantic	No valid e-mail	Legacy	D
Bart Hinkle, Richmond Times-Dispatch	No valid e-mail	Legacy	R
Duncan Black, the Eschaton	No valid e-mail	Blog	D
David, Unreligious Right	No valid e-mail	Blog	R

A single coder and I used the coding sheet in Appendix A while we went through the selected story comments. The coder I worked with was a colleague. He is a doctorate student at the University of Missouri and was not paid for his work. The coder and I looked for comments in which readers directly attack the author or the author's message,

and then we checked to see whether those attacks fit into any of the dependent variable definitions on the coding sheet. We also looked for comments that reflected an overall sexism and checked them with the definitions on the coding sheet.

I advised the coder to code every reader comment, even if the reader was addressing another reader and not the author. We looked for negativity that addresses the author, and we also coded for four variables that didn't necessarily need to be aimed at the author (sexist stereotypes against women, sexist stereotypes against men, sexual assault language, and gender role affirmation). It is arguable that these types of sexist remarks could impact the author even if they were not necessarily aimed directly at the author.

While coding, we had access to all of the authors' political commentary that the readers were responding to so that we could refer to those pieces if there was any confusion about what a particular reader comment was referring to or whether the reader was leaving a comment directed at the author's piece. My coder used a print off of the comments while I used an electronic copy of the comments to perform my coding. We marked at the end of each comment any letter code that could apply to that particular comment. The codes were based on the definitions provided on the code sheet. If no code applied, we either refrained from marking any code next to the comment or by marking the letter N to stand for "none" of the codes being present in the comment. We refrained from coding parts of a comment in which the commenter was quoting the author, another commenter or an outside article. I determined intercoder reliability by taking a random sample of 10 comments from each author and comparing my coding on those comments

to the coding done by the other coder. In those 160 randomly selected comments, I determined our reliability at 85.46% when I used the Scott's pi formula (where M is the percent of observed agreement and N is the percent of expected agreement): $(M-N)/(1-N)$. In this case, my M was 1.25 and my N was 2.7202 after I plugged the coder's responses and my own into the Scott's pi matrix used to complete the calculation (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, pp. 167-168).

To provide some examples of the way comments were coded, here is an actual comment collected in response to an opinion piece written by Carol Marin: "Hey Carol, since you have your head up Scott Cohen's rearend why not ask him for cash to help out your new found friends. Mrs. Biggert do you also help minorities or is this just for your type ? Just asking ?" While coding for this comment, I classified it as FN, V, PER1, and SAR because it is a negative comment that refers to Marin by her first name only, the part about her head being up Cohen's rear end is vulgar, "why not ask him for cash to help out your new found friends" is using sarcasm, and the comment includes a personal attack that insinuates she has an unethical bias regarding Cohen.

When it came to coding for SA, or sexual assault language, I considered the following comments or parts of comments to contain such language: "California is so screwed;" "Any excuse to bend us over, and he goes for it;" and "Your constant toadying to right-wing authority figures shows how adept the priests are at destroying boy-souls: taking their pants down gets all the attention, but that's the least of it." Although the term "screwed" is often used metaphorically, its meaning is rooted in sexual assault. When a person says "screw you" or "you're screwed" to another person, it indicates

metaphorically that the person in question should or will receive nonconsensual sex from someone else.

I also added a dependent variable when I was done coding in order to get a better understanding of the big picture. In order to see whether my independent variables had an effect on any types of negativity, I added one more dependent variable called General Negativity, which was measured by a count of the number of comments that contained all of the types of negativity I looked for in this study.

Procedure II: Survey

In addition to performing the content analysis of the comments gathered, I reached out to the 16 authors for a brief survey. See Appendix B for a list of the questions asked in the survey, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board. After contacting them all several times, only nine responded to the survey. Paddy Kraska asked her fellow The Political Carnival blogger, GottaLaff, to also fill out the survey, so I had a total of 10 survey responses to work with. The answers to these questions were not coded, but rather were treated qualitatively to help shed light on my research questions and hypotheses.

After receiving feedbacks from some of the authors I surveyed, I informally asked the authors one more question by e-mail:

Do you receive negative or hurtful comments in e-mails sent to you from readers? If so, how have such e-mails affected you? Do the e-mails ever rise to a point where you feel intimidated?

Taylor Marsh provides a page on her website devoted to sharing some of her worst hate mail. A sampling of her hate mail will be included in this thesis and used to provide a context for what future research into this subject could look like.

Data analysis

Independent sample t tests were used to examine whether the means for each group studied were significantly different when the authors were divided into two groups based on the four independent variables: author gender, blogger/legacy media, political party, and whether verified e-mails are required before readers can post a comment. For the survey data gathered from the survey, the analyses will be qualitative in nature, looking for comments that would help us understand the content analysis results.

RESULTS

On January 26, 2011, America's political landscape was buzzing with discourse surrounding President Obama's State of the Union speech. The issue of gun control was back on the front burner after Jared Loughner opened fire at a political rally in Casas Adobes, Arizona, killing six people and injuring Gabrielle Giffords, a U.S. Representative from Arizona. The race for Chicago mayor was heating up, and former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel was a frontrunner. In an interview earlier that month, former U.S. senator Rick Santorum said he was surprised Obama could support abortion rights, and he compared abortion to slavery.

As bloggers and legacy columnists began tackling these issues and leading the online civil discourse, none of them, male or female, seemed safe from verbal abuse. Nearly all forms of negativity I looked for were found in the comments. Missing were: gender-specific personal attacks, threats of sexual violence, and gendered profanity. The most common types of negative comments were disagreement, patronizing tone and sarcasm. Most authors received their fair share of these. Profanity, name-calling, only addressing authors by their first names, vulgar language, non-sexual threats, personal attacks and various forms of sexism occurred less frequently.

Quantitative results

Table 2 shows the number of comments that had at least one instance of negativity present. Across the 16 participants, the mean number of comments free of any of the negative categories I looked for was about 79%.

A statistical analysis of the 1,600 reader comments does not necessarily support all of the hypotheses I made.

In statistics, an independent samples t-test “compares the means of two samples” when the two groups being studied are independent of each other (Cronk, 2008, p. 58). I performed an independent samples t-test on the following dependent variables: first name, patronizing, disagreement, non-gendered personal attack, name calling, sarcasm, gender roles, sexist stereotypes about women, and sexist stereotypes about men. I left out the dependent variables of gendered personal attacks, all three types of threats, both types of profanity, vulgarities and sexual assault language because comments in which these types of negativity were present happened so infrequently that running a statistical analysis of them would not have been worthwhile. When the t-tests were performed on the dependent variables I did use and grouped by gender, none of the means were statistically significant. For purposes of this study, a p less than .05 means the result is considered significant and a p between .05 and 0.1 is considered marginally significant. By just glancing at the Table 2, one can see that a clear gender difference does not stand out between the authors.

The presence of no gender differences in my quantitative data means my first three hypotheses are not supported. The women authors did not receive more negative comments than the men. The comments women received were not more intense than the comments received by men. For purposes of this study, comments considered intense included threats that would make a person question her or his personal safety and sexual assault language. Threats that would make a reasonable person question his or her

physical safety, and sexual assault language were present in the comments. Furthermore, there were absolutely no comments that contained threats that alluded to sexual violence that also would make a reasonable person question his or her physical safety.

My third hypothesis was that women who write and publish online opinion pieces about politics would receive more comments that contain references to gender than their male peers. For purposes of this study, comments that include sexist stereotypes about men or women, comments that contain sexual assault language and comments that affirm gender roles were classified as those that contain gender references. Comments that affirmed cultural gender roles, comments with sexist stereotypes about men and comments containing sexual assault language were present in this study, but there was no statistically significant difference between men and women authors when it comes to receiving such comments.

When the same test of difference was performed for the independent variable of party, the only statistically significant means occurred for the dependent variables of gender role and disagreement. An independent-samples t-test comparing the mean number of reader comments that had a presence of disagreement found a significant difference between the means of two political groups: liberals and conservatives ($t(14) = -.2669, p = .003$). See Table 1. The mean of the number of comments containing disagreement with the author was significantly lower for liberal authors ($m = 3, sd = 3.588$) than it was for conservative authors ($m = 18.63, sd = 16.168$). Likewise, an independent-samples t-test comparing the mean number of reader comments that had a presence of the affirmation of gender roles found a significant difference between the

means of two political groups: liberals and conservatives ($t(14) = -1.684, p = .000$). The mean of the number of comments containing expressions that affirm gender roles was significantly lower for liberal authors ($m = .63, sd = .774$) than it was for conservative authors ($m = 1.63, sd = 1.506$). A significant difference also was found for patronizing language ($t(14) = -2.781, p = .048$) and sexist stereotypes about women ($t(14) = -1.277, p = .032$). Liberal authors received fewer comments that patronized them ($m = 3.63, sd = 4.749$) than conservative authors did ($m = 17.88, sd = 13.695$), and liberal authors received fewer comments that contained sexist stereotypes about women ($m = 1.13, sd = 1.126$) when compared to conservative authors ($m = 2.5, sd = .2828$).

The third research question asked whether there was a difference between the types of negative reader comments received by liberal authors and conservative authors. Based on the results from the t-tests, conservatives got more reader comments that contained disagreement, gender role affirmations, sexist stereotypes about women, and patronizing language.

The differences in means for two dependent variables were statistically significant when the t-tests were performed on the independent variable of e-mail. An independent-samples t-test comparing the mean number of reader comments that had a presence of name calling found a significant difference between the means of two groups: authors who wrote for sites that don't require a valid e-mail for readers to leave a comment, and authors who write for sites that do. ($t(14) = -1.239, p = .000$). See Table 1. The mean of the number of comments containing name calling directed at the author was significantly lower for authors writing for websites that do not require a valid e-mail address before

leaving a comment ($m = 1.25$, $sd = 1.282$) than it was for authors who write for sites that require a valid e-mail ($m = 2.88$, $sd = 3.482$). Meanwhile, an independent-samples t-test comparing the mean number of reader comments that address the author by first name only found a significant difference between the means of two groups: requiring valid e-mail and not requiring valid e-mail ($t(14) = .780$, $p = .016$). The mean of the number of comments containing expressions in which the author was called by his or her first name only was significantly lower for authors who wrote for sites requiring a valid e-mail ($m = 3.13$, $sd = 2.949$) than it was authors who wrote for sites that do not require valid e-mail addresses to comment ($m = 4.88$, $sd = 5.617$).

The fourth hypothesis suggested that the comments made on sites that do not require a valid e-mail address to post would be more negative. There is some evidence to suggest that requiring a valid e-mail address might cut down on the amount comments with profanity and on the number of comments that refer to the author by first name only, but when it came to other categories of comments, no significant difference was found, except when it came to name calling. Requiring readers to provide a valid e-mail address did not safeguard against name calling in the comments. Therefore it appears requiring readers to give a valid e-mail address has little or no effect on preventing abusive comments made to authors who publish their political commentary online.

When it came to examining media type, an independent-samples t-test comparing the mean number of reader comments that had a presence of name calling found a significant difference between the means of two groups: authors who wrote for media sites and authors who wrote for blogger sites ($t(14) = 1.935$, $p = .002$). The mean of the

number of comments containing name calling directed at the author was significantly lower for authors writing for blogger sites ($m = .88$, $sd = 1.358$) than it was for authors writing for legacy websites ($m = 3.25$, $sd = 3.196$). An independent-samples t-test comparing the mean number of reader comments that contain expressions that affirm gender roles found a significant difference between the means of two groups: authors who wrote for media sites and authors who wrote for blogger sites ($t(14) = .000$, $p = .019$). The mean of the number of comments containing expressions in which gender roles were affirmed was the exact same for authors who wrote for legacy sites ($m = 1.13$, $sd = 1.553$) and authors who wrote for blogger sites ($m = 1.13$, $sd = .991$). The same test comparing the mean number of reader comments that had a presence of non-gendered personal attacks found a marginally significant difference for media type ($t(14) = 3.582$, $p = .097$). Authors who wrote for legacy media sites received more comments with non-gendered personal attacks ($m = 7.63$, $sd = 4.534$) than authors who wrote for blogger sites ($m = 1.25$, $sd = 2.188$).

The fourth research question asked whether there was a difference between the types of negative reader comments received by authors who wrote for legacy media sites or for blogger websites. It appears that for the most part, either no difference was found between the two types of media or that authors who write for legacy websites receive more verbal abuse. Legacy media authors got more non-gendered personal attacks, sarcasm and comments that addressed them by first name only. The only exception was that authors on blogger sites seemed to receive more comments that used non-gendered profanity toward them.

The remainder of the dependent variables not detailed in this chapter did not show a statistically significant difference when comparing any of the author groups. Those dependent variables with insignificant differences include: sarcasm, gendered and non-gendered profanity, vulgarity, sexist stereotypes about men, sexual assault language, complete comment removal, non-gendered personal attacks, and any of the three types of threats categorized in this study.

Qualitative results

What the readers said. When it came to profanity, a commenter who goes by Deacon Blues at W**K made it known how he or she felt about Duncan Black's blog: "Right-Wing Media Declare Obama's SOTU "Boring," Dull," "Flat" As do a fair number of commenters on this shitty blog." Upset about David's post about supporting Wal-Mart on the Unreligious Right blog, a commenter by the name Bret "Ginx" Alan told David: "What I'll never understand is why assholes who claim to love the 'free market' feel they need to tell people where they should shop. Go suck an entitled Walton's cock." A reader asked Adrienne Royer: "What flipping planet is your delusional crazy ass living on?"

When we looked for vulgarities, Bret "Ginx" Alan was at it again. He posed this question to David of the Unreligious Right blog: "If the state put people to death for robbery, would that be justice? Just curious, don't jump all over with me your Nazism, I support your right to compensate for your tiny penis." This comment also includes a sexist stereotype against men by insinuating that men's irrational behavior is directly correlated to the size of their genitalia.

To highlight just a portion of the name calling I observed, readers called Gail Collins a left wing loony; Eugene Robinson a socialist, a Marxist and Mr. Pulp Fiction; Kathleen Parker pumpkin, a hypocrite, an idiot and B.S. queen of the universe; Adrienne Royer crazy, nuts and dumb; Bart Hinkle a cry baby and a right wing ideologue; Carol Marin a phony; David Harsanyi self-righteous, indignant, sanctimonious and holier than thou; and Ross Douthat a crackpot, clueless and ignorant.

Kathleen Parker appeared to get the most non-sexual threats, which were divided into two categories: threats that would make a person worry for their personal safety, and threats that were milder. Here is an example of a milder threat Parker received by someone who said his name was Thomas McMahon of Millis, Massachusetts:

I tell you what Kathleen the day you call on conservatives to halt the use of projection guilt is the day your serious about a more civil discourse . . . So walk the walk and talk the talk or stop your call for civil discourse for it will never happen as I will make this knwn (*sic*) in every post and every newspaper online in the United States. Truth or consequences.

This next threat posted by Micost51 is a bit more serious because it hints that her personal safety might be at risk:

I'm sorry, Parker, but not every loon who owns a gun believes that "Don't Retreat, Instead - RELOAD!" was simply Palin's juvenile rhetorical flourish. when will you actually call out some in your camp like bill "Tiller the Baby Killer" O'Reilly, Glenn "Gog, Guns and Gold" Beck, or any of the others who subtly (*sic*) call on their followers to be ready to do violence? Once again, your hypocrisy shows through. Perhaps you might actually address these issues if these sick people turned on you. Maybe then you'd acquire some humility.

When Parker responded to my request to take the survey she, like me, hypothesized that comments received by women would be more sexual and more negative.

Frontrunners for receiving the most patronizing comments and the highest number of comments containing disagreement were all politically conservative. Ross Douthat got the most of these two types of comments, followed by Adrienne Royer and Kathleen Parker, respectively.

Bart Hinkle, Eugene Robinson and Holly Robichaud received the highest number of reader comments that contained personal attacks, and most of the time the comments included readers calling them shoddy journalists. One reader told Hinkle he was “just writing second hand what his Republican masters tell him to do.” Several readers seemed fixated with the fact that Robichaud was not writing about a conservative figure in the community who came under fire recently. They questioned why she hadn’t written about this man in comments to at least a few different opinion pieces she published online. One reader asked her: “While we are on the subject of Public Safety, Any comment Holly on Jeff Perry’s new 110,000 a year job working for the Republican Barnstable County Sheriff?” Another reader replied: “Jeff Perry is a Republican Hack. That’s why you won’t hear Holly complain about this... If Perry was a Democrat, he would be one of Holly’s new poster children.”

In all of the comments, there were 25 that contained sexist stereotypes against women and 14 comments that contained sexist stereotypes against men. There were 19 comments that included affirmation of gender roles common in American culture. The following is an example of a comment containing sexist stereotypes that I came across while coding. It was posted to politically conservative David Harsanyi’s opinion piece about applying reason to the abortion debate:

“It's going to need more reason”. More reason like not excusing, oopsy (sic) forgot to take my pill, or oopsey (sic) I was too drunk, or oopsey (sic) I'm Catholic so birth control's a big nono. Or is holding women fully accountable and responsible for their own bodies asking way too much, way too politically incorrect for the obviously weaker sex to handle?

This comment I came across includes a sexist stereotype against women and an affirmation of gender roles: “We have some strategists and insiders from the Privileged Beltway class who would never dare fight for our rights, calling for the revocation of said rights for a young man who actually did have the balls to join the military and defend our freedoms.” The gender role is that men should be tough; the stereotype that is harmful to women is that a person needs to have testicles in order to be brave and strong. Another comment gave the impression that men shouldn't cry: “Yeah, instead of Pelosi we get the orange guy who cries all the time. Wonderful.”

What the authors said. Initially 12 of the 16 authors in this study agreed to take my survey. Only nine of those who agreed actually ended up taking the survey, and one author had her blogging partner take the survey. Of those 10 political writers who took the survey, just eight answered the follow up question about hate speech in e-mails. In the online survey, the women who reported the most threats were politically conservative, and all authors said they felt threats were unacceptable for readers to include in comments. Only two of the eight women who responded said they rarely receive threats of sexual violence. The rest of the survey respondents said they never receive such threats. Bart Hinkle, who said site administrators once took down a comment made about his family, said he has largely ignored negative comments and that they do not make him fearful.

Seven of the eight women who answered the survey (87.5%) said they rarely or never saw sexual assault language or readers writing about the way men or women ought to be in their comments. Two women said they sometimes saw sexist stereotypes against men and women in the reader comments. Six out of the eight women (75%) said they found stereotypes about men and women unacceptable while one of the men answering the survey found them acceptable and the other man categorized them as neither acceptable nor unacceptable. Authors were mixed as to whether they found comments that refer to their gender acceptable. Half of them said comments that singled out their gender were neither acceptable nor unacceptable, three found those types of comments acceptable, and two women found them unacceptable.

All of the authors surveyed reported that readers at least sometimes leave comments that attack them personally rather than their work. Debra Saunders said she often receives personal attacks, while Taylor Marsh and Holly Robichaud said the amount of times they received personal attacks fell somewhere in between sometimes and often. Most authors (70%) said personal attacks were neither acceptable nor unacceptable. Marsh elaborated on why she felt personal attacks are not appropriate for her site: “One type of comment I find unacceptable is those that make me the issue, because a conversation in the comments about me is BORING.”

Regarding name-calling, six of the 10 authors surveyed said they found this form of discourse unacceptable, and three said they didn’t find name calling acceptable or unacceptable. Gail Collins said she never encounters name calling in the story comments she sees posted to her columns. Bart Hinkle and Paddy Kraska said the amount of times

they receive name calling in reader comments falls somewhere in between never and sometimes. Adrienne Royer said she is often called names in the comments section on her blog, Holly Robichaud and Debra Saunders said the amount of times they are called names fall somewhere between sometimes and often, and the four remaining authors said they are called names sometimes. When asked to share some of the comments she found unacceptable, Kraska said she does not get many, but she has received “maybe one or two that call me idiot or stupid or tame words like that. I think I’ve been called the C word once.” Meanwhile, Kraska’s fellow blogger on The Political Carnival, who goes by the pseudonym GottaLaff, said: “One mentioned the word ‘jackboot’ and stepping on my neck, as I recall. Others have called me racist or sexist, directed the ‘C word’ at me personally, etc.”

Authors were mixed when it came to saying whether patronizing language in comments were acceptable. Six of the eight women authors reported receiving patronizing comments at least sometimes. The women authors on The Political Carnival were the only ones to say the amount of patronizing language they receive fell somewhere between never and sometimes.

Most of the survey respondents (80%) said that they find 10% or less of the reader comments they receive to be unacceptable. Just two of the women surveyed disagreed – Adrienne Royer said she finds 90% of her comments to be unacceptable and Holly Robichaud said she feels that 25% of the comments she receives are unacceptable. When asked to share some examples of unacceptable comments, Robichaud said: “I got 2,000 offensive posts from one guy including profanity and insults.”

There were several types of negativity that many authors found acceptable. Nearly all of the authors (90%) said it was perfectly acceptable for readers to disagree with them in their comments. Half of the authors said it was acceptable to for readers to use profanity in their comments, and three authors said it was acceptable for readers to be vulgar in their comments. All of the authors found sarcasm acceptable. Adrienne Royer even said, “I’m fine with sarcasm, since I wrote many posts that way. However, disrespect for my views and values is unacceptable.” She was not one of the authors who found profanity acceptable: “I have a rule of no profanity on my site. Overwhelming majority of comments use a profane word or expression. Since my comment rules are clearly posted, I have no qualms with not publishing these.”

Three authors said they often have sarcasm directed at them from the reader comments, two said they sometimes see sarcasm, and three said the amount of times they receive sarcasm from readers falls somewhere in between sometimes and often. Most authors (70%) said the amount of profanity directed at them in reader comments fall somewhere in between sometimes and never, but Adrienne Royer said readers use profanity toward her often, and the women at The Political Carnival, as they’ve shared above, said they get profanity sometimes. When it comes to vulgarities, half of the authors who responded to the survey said they receive such language sometimes, Bart Hinkle and Adrienne Royer said the amount of vulgar comments they receive falls somewhere in between sometimes and often, and the remaining authors said they receive vulgar comments less than sometimes.

Comment moderation. Six of the 10 authors who took the survey said their comments policy includes both screening and retroactively removing comments deemed unacceptable either by themselves or the blog or legacy newspaper they write for. Holly Robichaud was the only author to answer that her publication only retroactively removes comments, which maximizes the likelihood that the authors are exposed to abusive and negative reader responses. Authors who screen their own comments also are exposed to more abuse because they are the first line of defense when it comes to filtering inappropriate discourse.

Several of the websites also rely on other readers to police each other. Readers can flag comments they believe are inappropriate, subjecting those comments to a closer look by site moderators. Paddy Kraska said readers on The Political Carnival do an adequate job of speaking out against generally unacceptable comments posted by fellow readers: “Comments that I find unacceptable I usually don’t delete. You have to get pretty extreme for me to delete a comment, and I have found that other commenters do a bang up job shaming (people) for saying stupid stuff.” As far as I know, the New York Times and the Chicago Sun-Times were the only websites in this study that made it clear to readers when a comment had been removed retroactively. On the Chicago Sun Times’ website, if someone flags a comment as unacceptable, a message takes the place of that comment, letting readers know that the comment has been removed and is under review. If a moderator agrees with whoever flagged the comment as inappropriate, then a message appears where that comment once was telling readers that the comment has been

permanently removed because of its offensive content. Marin said the comments on the Times also are screened.

David Harsanyi said he was not sure of the exact moderation process, but he said he felt that moderation could inhibit debate.

Authors' feelings about negative reader comments. Women authors in this study who are in charge of moderating their own comments reported were more likely to feel afraid, or pessimistic about society or even were less willing to share their opinions in the online public sphere because of negative reader comments. Most of the authors (80%) said they strongly agreed with the statement "I largely ignore them" when it came to negative comments. That said, Taylor Marsh and Adrienne Royer, who both moderate their own comments, said they strongly agree that negative comments have made them think twice about publishing their opinion pieces online. Paddy Kraska and GottaLaff of The Political Carnival said they neither agreed nor disagreed that negative comments affected their willingness to publish online, while the remaining authors who took the survey strongly disagreed that negative comments made them less willing to publish their commentary on the Internet. Authors were mixed about whether negative comments actually made them want to speak up more; six authors (five women and one man) agreed while four authors (three women and one man) disagreed. Marsh, Royer and Gottalaff were the only survey takers who agreed that negative comments have made them fearful, while Marsh, Royer and Kraska were the only authors to agree that negative comments have made them pessimistic about society. Royer expressed the feelings she has when she receives abusive or negative comments:

Fear when I get a comment expressing a desire for something bad to happen to me (sexual violence or death). Frustration that people can't debate political topics without contention and anger that some people don't believe I should be allowed to express my own views on a topic on a site that I pay for out of my own pocket and maintain in my free time.

What about hate e-mail? Shortly after I distributed my survey, I noticed a couple of my respondents bring up negative messages they receive from readers through another online channel – e-mail. Especially in cases where reader comments are heavily moderated, readers can circumvent this buffer and send their nasty comments directly to the author by e-mail. Of the 10 authors who responded to my survey, seven responded to my follow-up question, and all of those seven authors – five women and two men – said they do receive hateful e-mails sent to them by readers. In one instance, an excessive commenter took things one step further by sending a complaint directly to Adrienne Royer. In her response to my question, Royer said: “He mentioned that he read through every single post going back for years to prove me wrong. This came across as strange and on the creepy side. Why does someone care that much? He’s not going to change my mind. He tried following up with an email, but I never responded.” Royer also said, though, that she rarely receives negative or hurtful comments through e-mail. Most of the verbal abuse she receives seems to come through in the comments that she moderates on her own. She said that when people e-mail her, they are usually thanking her for her work or writing that they at least agree with her.

Holly Robichaud also shared a story that seemed to mirror the stalking behavior Royer encountered. Robichaud said that only once did she feel intimidated by e-mail: “Only one guy scared me,” she said, “and that was due to the volume.”

GottaLaff says she “was actually stalked. Someone looked up the info on my bio and used Google Maps to zero in on where I lived. I had to change my bio.”

When asked to share some of the unacceptable comments she has received, Gail Collins said: “My site is monitored so unless people find my personal email, I don’t get such comments.” Even when it comes to e-mails, Collins said she gets e-mails that disagree with her viewpoint, but:

I very seldom get the super-negative stuff. I get emails saying, for instance, that I don’t know anything about guns. Sometimes they make me reassess my pieces but not in a self-destructive way. I don’t get the “you’re an ugly stupid bitch” letters. Once in a blue moon I get a threat by written letter and I turn them over to security. I presume the same thing happens by email but it would be taken care of before it got to me.

Collins has an assistant who screens her publicized New York Times e-mail account.

While Collins seemed relatively protected from abusive language online, Debra Saunders has had a much different experience sharing her viewpoints on the World Wide Web. In response to my follow-up question about hateful e-mails, Saunders said:

I don’t think a week goes by when I do not get an email that trashes me as a human being – with an emphasis on my gender, my looks, my age, whatever. On occasion, readers do threaten me, and yes, that scares me. There are a few people who send me emails with sexual slurs on a regular basis. The worst of it is, for most of these e-mails, it is not even clear what I wrote that bothered my correspondent.

The women writers seemed mixed about whether the hate e-mail they receive is intimidating. Taylor Marsh said she considers 95% of her e-mails as hateful, but that: “None of the emails impact me at all. I don’t depend on the good opinion of others, to use a Dr. Wayne Dyerism.” That said, Marsh includes a page on her website devoted to exposing the hate e-mails she receives. At the top of the page, Marsh has posted a picture

of herself in which her head is tilted back and she appears to be laughing. She explains how she got the idea to post that photo:

When I came to the defense of First Lady Michelle Obama... heads exploded. When you read this one you'll understand why the picture on this page is of my laughing out loud. Screeds like this one are priceless: "Taylor, I've never heard of you before. But you just one of the thousands of stupid elitist media whores out there, pimping for that fat Nazi bitch Michelle. Spare us already!" – Stan Lippman.

Another piece of hate e-mail Marsh shared with me told her that she eats her young. Yet another simply stated: "You suck you liberal skank."

The two men who responded to my follow up question said they both receive hateful e-mails, but neither man seemed too bothered by them. David Harsanyi said that although he "often" receives negative e-mails from readers, "I don't change how I approach the column because of emails – positive or negative." Meanwhile, Bart Hinkle said he gets hateful e-mails, they don't intimidate him and: "The ones that make valid points help me stay open to the possibility that I can be wrong sometimes. The ones that offer only name-calling remind me not to act that way myself."

Summary of Results

These findings contradict my first four hypotheses. There is no quantitative evidence that women who write and publish online opinion pieces about politics face more negative reader comments than their counterparts who are men, or that these women face more intense comments or more comments dealing with sex and gender. There also is not quantitative evidence that sites requiring readers to provide a valid e-

mail address would have a smaller number of comments that contained negative language.

My fifth hypothesis was not one that necessarily could be addressed by my quantitative results. Qualitatively speaking, there is some evidence suggesting that negative comments affect the women political authors more so than their male peers. All of the 16 authors studied received negative comments of some kind. All of the authors who answered my questions about negative comments and hate e-mail all said that dealing with such negativity is common. Although only two men responded to take my survey, they appeared less bothered by hateful e-mails and negative comments posted by readers, saying they largely ignored negative input from readers. Meanwhile, several women reported feeling stalked, intimidated or scared by negative online messages from readers. Some of the women authors who seemed most perturbed were those who were in charge of moderating their own comments. This means they were exposed to the meanest, most disturbing reader messages while other don't see those types of comments because they have someone else do the moderating.

Also, conservative authors appeared to receive more online verbal abuse than liberal authors in this study, and authors who wrote for legacy media websites seemed to receive more abuse than those who published on blogger sites. This may have been the result of including in this study conservative commentators who write for legacy newspapers that have a high number of liberal readers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Inspired by the unfortunate story of Kathy Sierra leaving her job as a blogger because of threatening comments received by readers and Web trolls, I set out to see if similar women authors were disproportionately attacked and negatively affected by reader comments. Rather than looking at Sierra's realm of online technology writing, I turned my focus to men and women who write online about politics, a field that, much like technology, has historically been dominated by men. Operating under the idea that a diversity of voices providing thoughtful political commentary is necessary for a democracy to flourish, I wondered if stories like Sierra's were common. I also wondered if online misogyny in reader comments could work to silence the voices of women on the Internet, a medium being used more and more each day as a platform for the public's discussions about politics and society.

I designed a content analysis of 1,600 reader comments posted to 16 authors who publish their political opinions online. Half of the authors were men and half were women. Half were conservative and half were liberal. Half wrote for legacy media websites and half wrote for blogs. Half of them wrote for sites that required readers to provide a valid, verifiable e-mail address before posting a comment, and half of them did not. I also distributed a survey to the authors that would help shed light on my quantitative data, and 10 authors responded.

My results did not support my hypotheses regarding gender differences in the reader comments. There are a few factors that could have hindered my research.

Moderation of comments is likely one of the biggest barriers to data collection. This thesis demonstrates an argument could be made that at least on the surface, the men and women political authors studied receive an equal share of harassment from readers. Again, this is a surface-level assessment and does not account for the comments that moderators hold back. There is a chance that women get much worse comments than men that never see the light of day on the Internet, or that men receive more of those comments, or that no real difference exists between the comments men and women receive pre-moderation. The anecdotal evidence provided in the literature still suggests that misogyny is a problem on the Internet, and that women are disproportionately hurt by it. The particular topic each author wrote about also could have impacted the comments, as some political comments could be seen as more flammable than others, figuratively speaking. Some authors wrote about zoning laws while others wrote about abortion, and because some topics are more emotional than others, the more emotionally-charged topics could have raise a reader's anger level and caused them to write more hurtful comments to that particular author.

Although both men and women who responded to my survey said they largely ignored negative or hurtful reader comments, women seemed more bothered by online negativity directed at them than the men did. Women talked about having readers who were fixated with them and who exhibited stalker like behavior while the men authors did not bring this up. The women also noted that comments have made them feel pessimistic about society and have made them think twice about publishing their opinions online. The information gleaned from my survey certainly is not conclusive, but if women are

more fearful overall, it could be because women tend to feel less safe in general than men in American culture. Women are told to use the buddy system and not to walk alone at night. For many, street harassment causes fear. One out of four women will experience sexual assault in her lifetime, so the threat of violence might feel more real to women. Instead of seeing negative comments or hateful e-mails as simply words, women authors might be seeing these comments as warning signs, meaning they might be more likely to feel fear when a reader posts comments 2,000 on their work, looks up their home address on Google, or even calls them sexist names.

I was most surprised that websites with the lower level of anonymity for readers leaving comments actually had a higher level of negativity in the comments. Literature has suggested that people are more willing to have antagonistic discussions online than they are in face-to-face discussions, which led me to the assumption that part of that reason is because people have more anonymity online. Providing a valid e-mail address still keeps the reader anonymous to the greater online community, even though they are not completely anonymous to those who maintain the website they are posting their comments on. Perhaps people would be less willing to post negative comments if their real first and last names were attached to their posts, or maybe they would continue to be just as full of animosity because real, face-to-face human interaction has been removed from the situation. Most of the time, a valid e-mail address was only required during the registration process, so it's possible that if readers visit sites multiple times and leave comments, the memory of the fact that they provided their e-mail when they registered could have faded.

I also was surprised to find that conservative writers met more negative comments than their liberal peers. I expected them to be fairly equal. The political leanings of those leaving the comments were unknown. The readers leaving these hurtful or sexist comments could be liberal readers who are angry at the conservative author's opinion or conservative readers who simply don't agree with what the author is writing in that particular article. Also, Ross Douthat of the New York Times received some of the highest volume of negative comments. This could be because he is a conservative columnist writing for a paper that seems to have a higher number of readers who would be more likely to identify as liberal.

When it came to media type differences, legacy sites had more negativity in the reader comments, specifically when it came to comments that contained affirmations of gender roles, name-calling and non-gendered personal attacks. The readership for each type of media might have had an effect on these results. Blogs tend to be focused more on a political niche, while legacy media might have a more politically diverse readership. A more diverse readership could lead to more arguing.

Other factors that could have affected my research include the fact that, despite my best efforts, so few men participated in my survey, and that there were relatively small amounts of negativity found in the reader comments I looked at. For the most part only one-fifth of all comments had a presence of any of the categories I searched for. My results to my t-tests also could have been skewed because I was running so many of them on the same independent variable. According to Cronk:

When we conduct multiple t tests, we inflate the Type I error rate and increase our chance of drawing an inappropriate conclusion. (2008, p. 65).

Implications for action

Women who moderated their own comments seemed more affected by verbally abusive reader comments and some reported feeling more pessimistic about society. Some also reported thinking twice about whether they want to keep publishing their opinions online. Qualitative examples and anecdotal evidence from the literature continue to suggest that women endure sexist language online. Although the online harassment women receive may not necessarily surpass the volume of harassment received by men, the harassment women get appears to be unique in that it uses sexual language to intimidate women and general sexism that has been used to undermine women for decades. A third-party moderation process appears to limit the exposure women authors have to reader harassment somewhat, and an argument could be made that a lower level of harassment leads to higher confidence for women publishing their political opinions online.

Perhaps better moderation systems could be put in place in order to distance independent women bloggers from the hate speech they receive. Literature that has analyzed hate speech websites and exposed a subculture of Internet trolls suggests that spreading hate is easier to do on the Internet, so maybe it is time to address online hate in a new way. Public opinion research about newspaper websites have shown that some readers believe that the people leaving comments on a story online should provide their real names along with that post. Some sites have the capability to block a reader from

commenting if that reader has a history of posting hateful remarks. Legacy newspaper and blogger sites could take another look at their comment policies and make sure they emphasize that hate speech of any kind is not allowed.

Miller's argument cannot be ignored either, if members of media and the online community do eventually attempt to combat misogyny on the Web. If policies are put in place to reduce harassment women receive online, the movement to do so should be spearheaded by women and done devoid of paternalism. Women need to define for themselves what language they find unacceptable during online political discussions and also define how they want to address such language. Take the example of the anti-street harassment movement that recently has gained momentum with the rise of websites such as iHollaback.org, where women can vent about getting groped or hollered at in public spaces. The women involved in this movement have not necessarily sought policy changes or laws to protect them in the streets. Instead, they have created a cultural response to harassment by posting pictures and stories about their harassers online, in the hopes of changing public opinion about street harassment. Perhaps something similar could be thought of to combat misogyny and bullying aimed at women who share their opinions on the Web.

While imagining solutions to combat online misogyny, it is important to note that women are not a demographic that acts in complete solidarity; they make up half of the population and are as diverse as one could possibly imagine. Some women might be completely against censoring any type of speech on the Web, even if that speech is

hateful or intimidating. Others might want to create spaces on the Internet with strict guidelines about respect and language use in order to create a virtual safe space for guest.

Further Research

This study took a snippet of reader comments, post moderation, that online political commentator receive. Further research could take the next step by delving one level deeper and requesting that moderators collect all of their reader comments for a certain period of time, regardless of whether those comments made it past the gatekeeper and into the public realm. Or, further research could ask authors to collect all of the hate e-mail they receive in a given period of time. A content analysis could then be performed on those comments or e-mails. The example of misogyny on the AutoAdmit website may suggest that forums in which women and men are seen as competing with each other for jobs or other commodities. Researchers could determine whether that is true.

Further research also could take a fully qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one, and conduct several interviews with people who share their opinions online in order to get a deeper understanding of how negative or hateful comments make people feel. Or researchers could conduct a qualitative analysis of content through various textual approaches. Content analysis is a quantitative research method, meaning it uses standardized questioning, and it produces results that can be counted and measured. Like any method, it has its strengths and weaknesses. According to Wimmer and Dominick, critics of content analysis argue that this method cannot show the effect of content on those who consume the content. It can only show that certain content exists. Also, the outcome of the research is heavily dependent on the definitions that the

researcher forms, and the method can be time consuming. But researchers do find this method helpful in instances of comparing media content to life in the real world or by examining how a particular group of people is treated in media content.

If researchers followed a design similar to my own, they could try to single out comments aimed at one specific topic of political commentary in order to rule out the topic as a complicating variable in the research. I tried to include authors who write for websites with a variety in the volume of traffic they receive to their sites. One also could research whether the amount of Web traffic an author received on her or his articles had any impact on the comments. While conducting my research, I also came across comments that contained racist and homophobic hate speech. Future research could tackle all forms of online hate speech in comments or hate mail rather than singling out misogyny.

Conclusion

Recent statistics show the blogosphere is growing at a rate of 75,000 new blogs each day, which demonstrates that more members of our society are using the Internet as a platform for discourse. Instead of staying totally anonymous, many Internet users appear to be creating digital footprints of their true identities while online, meaning users often know the gender, ethnicity and other identifiable characteristics of the people they communicate with on the Web. In this way, the Internet has become a reflection of our current culture, with all of its faults, including sexism. There is one area, however, in which the Internet is different than previous forms of communication: while many Internet users are open online about their identities, the Web still provides a way to

remain anonymous for those users who wish to remain hidden from the accountability of others as they unleash hateful messages or attacks.

When it comes to political discourse, the amount of women sharing their political opinions in media still lags behind that of men. Even if men and women who write about politics online receive an equal amount of negative or abusive language from readers, an argument could be made that such abuses are impacting women differently because of cultural norms in our society that keep women more fearful in general. If the quality of discourse depends on a diversity of voices, one could argue that it is important to encourage women to share their political opinions online and to retain the number of women who share such opinions. One also could argue that accepting online misogyny rather than confronting it could create a hostile online environment in which, following the spiral of silence theory, women could become more apprehensive about sharing their thoughts. It has already happened to Sierra, and women in this study have admitted that online negativity has caused them to question whether they should speak their minds online. As members of media continue to debate the level at which online reader comments should be moderated, the necessity of creating an atmosphere where a diversity of voices can flourish should be a priority.

APPENDIX A: CODING SHEET

Date: _____ **Coder's name:** _____

Instructions:

You have been provided with a sampling of 160 online reader comments written in response to the work of 16 different authors who write political commentary. Read through the comments while looking for comments that include a direct attack of the author or the author's message and comments that reflect an overall sexism.

Before reading each comment, make sure you have read the piece that the reader comment is responding to. Do this by clicking the links provided above each group of comments. After you read each comment, review the codes. To the left of each comment, mark any letter code that could apply to that particular comment, based on the definitions provided on this sheet. If no code applies, do not mark any code next to the comment. Do not code parts of the comment in which the commenter is quoting the author, another commenter, or an outside article.

Codes:

FN: *First name* – the reader makes a negative comment that directly addresses or mentions the author by the author's first name only.

PAT: *Patronizing* – the reader explains something to the author that the reader thinks the author does not fully understand, and the reader does so with an air of condescension toward the author. For example, the reader might talk down to the author in an effort to communicate with the author, who the reader has deemed less intelligent or sophisticated.

D: *Disagreement* – the reader communicates that he or she does not agree with at least part of the author's opinion in the specific piece the author wrote.

PER: *Personal attack* – the reader attacks the author personally rather than attacking the points made in the author's specific piece. These can include attacks of character, circumstance, or physical traits, or accusations that the author is biased or not credible.

Mark PER1 if the personal attack has nothing to do with the author's gender.

Mark PER2 if the personal attack is related to the author's gender.

TH: *Threat* – a statement of intention to inflict pain, injury, damage or other hostile action on the author in retribution for something done or not done; a final statement or rejection of terms, the rejection of which would result in retaliation.

Mark TH1 if the threat would make a reasonable person question his or her physical safety.

Mark TH2 if the threat would not make a reasonable person question his or her physical safety.

Mark TH3 if the threat would make a reasonable person question his or her physical safety and if the threat includes allusions to sexual violence.

NC: *Name-calling* – the reader calls the author an offensive or hurtful name to communicate condemnation or rejection, and that name does not classify as profanity. (e.g. stupid, moron, loser, pathetic, crazy).

PRO: *Profanity* – abusive, patently offensive or vulgar language aimed at the author. (e.g. shit, piss, fuck, asshole, cunt, cock sucker, mother fucker, bitch, dick, bastard, whore, slut, racial slurs).

Mark PRO1 if the profanity singles out the author’s gender (e.g. bitch, cunt, whore, slut).

Mark PRO2 if the profanity is gender neutral.

SAR: *Sarcasm* – the reader uses a sharp, satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut down or hurt the author.

V: *Vulgar* – the reader uses crude or sexually lewd language that lacks cultivation or taste.

R: *Removal* – The comment has been removed entirely or removed for review.

SS: *Sexist stereotypes* – The reader makes generalizations that fit into a common negative stereotype about men or women. (e.g. women belong in the kitchen, men are pigs, women are irrational).

Mark SS1 if the stereotype is about women.

Mark SS2 if the stereotype is about men.

SA: *Sexual assault imagery* – The comment includes jokes, flippant imagery, or serious imagery about rape or sexual assault. (e.g. bend over and take higher taxes,

GR: *Affirmation of gender roles* – Comment makes a suggestion about the way men or women ought to be. (e.g. men shouldn’t cry, women should make their physical appearance a top priority).

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Your Name:

2. On a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 = never; 3 = sometimes; and 5 = often, please tell me about how common is it for you to get the following kinds of reader comments.

Comments that attack me personally rather than my work

Negative comments that address me by my first name only

Negative comments that call me names

Negative comments that I find patronizing

Negative comments that disagree with me

Negative comments that refer to my gender

Negative comments that contain a threat to me

Negative comments that threaten me with sexual violence

Negative comments that contain profanity

Negative comments that include sarcasm

Negative comments that are vulgar

Negative comments that combine any two or more of these features: threats to me, reference to my gender, profanity, vulgarity

Comments that contain sexist stereotypes about women

Comments that contain sexist stereotypes about men

Comments that include jokes or imagery that make light of sexual assault

Comments that state the way men or women ought to be

Other (Please specify)

3. Do you find the following types of reader comments acceptable or unacceptable?

Comments that attack me personally rather than my work

Negative comments that address me by my first name only

Negative comments that call me names

Negative comments that I find patronizing

Negative comments that disagree with me

Negative comments that refer to my gender

Negative comments that contain a threat to me

Negative comments that threaten me with sexual violence

Negative comments that contain profanity

Negative comments that include sarcasm

Negative comments that are vulgar

Negative comments that combine any two or more of these features: threats to me, reference to my gender, profanity, vulgarity

Comments that contain sexist stereotypes about women

Comments that contain sexist stereotypes about men

Comments that include jokes or imagery that make light of sexual assault
Comments that state the way men or women ought to be

4. Can you recall and share some examples of what you considered unacceptable reader comments that have been directed at you in response to your opinion pieces on your site?

5. Thinking about all the reader comments you get in response to your political opinions published online, about what percentage of them do you consider to be (all three should add up to 100 percent):

Unacceptable

Negative but acceptable

Not negative and acceptable

6. Listed below are some responses to negative reader comments that an author such as yourself might have. On a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 = strongly disagree; 3 = impartial; and 5 = strongly agree, please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements.

I have largely ignored them.

They have made me want to speak up more.

They have made me fearful.

They have made me pessimistic about our society.

They have made me think twice about publishing my opinion pieces online.

7. Do you or your colleagues screen, retroactively remove, or do anything else to alter the inappropriate reader comments that appear on the website you use to publish your political opinions?

Screen

Retroactively remove

Both

Other (Please specify)

8. If you know, why or why don't you or your colleagues require e-mail verification in order for readers to leave a comment on the website you use to publish your political opinions?

9. Which websites do you use to publish your political opinions, and if you know, about how many Web hits on average do your political pieces get in a typical day?

10. Follow-up question sent by e-mail:

Do you receive negative or hurtful comments in e-mails sent to you from readers? If so, how have such e-mails affected you? Do the e-mails ever rise to a point where you feel intimidated?

APPENDIX C: TABLES

Table 1
Significant and Marginally Significant Independent Samples t-Test Results

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	N	M	SD	T	DF	P*
Disagreement	<i>Liberal</i>	8	3	3.588	-.2669	14	.003
	<i>Conservative</i>	8	18.63	16.168	-.2669	14	.003
Gender roles	<i>Liberal</i>	8	.63	.774	-1.684	14	.000
	<i>Conservative</i>	8	1.63	1.506	-1.684	14	.000
	<i>Legacy media sites</i>	8	1.13	1.553	.000	14	.019
	<i>Blogger sites</i>	8	1.13	1.553	.000	14	.019
Patronizing	<i>Liberal</i>	8	3.63	4.479	-2.781	14	.048
Language	<i>Conservative</i>	8	17.88	13.695	-2.781	14	.048
Stereotypes about Women	<i>Liberal</i>	8	1.13	1.126	-1.277	14	.032
	<i>Conservative</i>	8	2.5	2.828	-1.277	14	.032
Name calling	<i>Valid e-mail</i>	8	2.88	3.482	-1.239	14	.000
	<i>No valid e-mail</i>	8	1.25	1.282	-1.239	14	.000
	<i>Legacy media sites</i>	8	3.25	3.196	1.953	14	.002
	<i>Blogger sites</i>	8	.88	1.358	1.953	14	.002
First name	<i>Valid e-mail</i>	8	3.13	2.949	.78	14	.016
	<i>No valid e-mail</i>	8	4.88	5.617	.78	14	.016
Non-gendered personal attack	<i>Legacy media sites</i>	8	7.63	4.534	3.582	14	.097
	<i>Blogger sites</i>	8	1.25	2.188	3.582	14	.097

Note. * $p < .05$ (Two tailed), marginally significant: $.05 < p < .1$

Table 2
Comment Counts for Each Participant

Author	Gender	Party	Email	Media	Negativity	First Name	Patronizing	Disagreement	Personal 1	Personal 2
Paddy Kraska	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>B</i>	3	0	0	0	0	0
Carol Marin	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>L</i>	25	7	9	4	8	0
Taylor Marsh	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>B</i>	5	0	1	1	0	0
Gail Collins	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>L</i>	10	2	6	4	2	0
Adreinne Royer	<i>W</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>B</i>	44	7	31	34	6	0
Holly Robichaud	<i>W</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>L</i>	20	12	7	4	13	0
Debra Saunders	<i>W</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>B</i>	4	1	1	0	1	0
Kathleen Parker	<i>W</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>L</i>	39	4	21	22	9	0
Duncan Black	<i>M</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>B</i>	2	0	0	0	0	0
Ta-Nehisi Coates	<i>M</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>L</i>	2	0	0	2	0	0
Glenn Greenwald	<i>M</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>B</i>	9	2	1	2	0	0
Eugene Robinson	<i>M</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>L</i>	19	8	12	11	11	0
Unreligious Right	<i>M</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>B</i>	31	0	16	24	3	0
Bart Hinkle	<i>M</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>L</i>	31	13	19	10	11	0
David Harasanyi	<i>M</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>B</i>	21	1	6	8	0	0
Ross Douthat	<i>M</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>L</i>	48	7	42	47	7	0

Author	Gender	Party	Email	Media	Threat 1	Threat 2	Threat 3	Name Calling	Profanity 1	Profanity 2
Paddy Kraska	W	L	N	B	0	0	0	0	0	0
Carol Marin	W	L	N	L	0	0	0	1	0	0
Taylor Marsh	W	L	V	B	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gail Collins	W	L	V	L	0	0	0	1	0	0
Adreinne Royer	W	C	N	B	0	0	0	3	0	2
Holly Robichaud	W	C	N	L	0	0	0	1	0	0
Debra Saunders	W	C	V	B	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kathleen Parker	W	C	V	L	1	1	0	7	0	0
Duncan Black	M	L	N	B	0	0	0	0	0	1
Ta-Nehisi Coates	M	L	N	L	0	0	0	0	0	0
Glenn Greenwald	M	L	V	B	0	0	0	0	0	0
Eugene Robinson	M	L	V	L	0	0	0	6	0	0
Unreligious Right	M	C	N	B	0	0	0	3	0	1
Bart Hinkle	M	C	N	L	0	0	0	2	0	0
David Harasanyi	M	C	V	B	0	0	0	1	0	0
Ross Douthat	M	C	V	L	0	1	0	8	0	0

Author	Gender	Party	Email	Media	Sarcasm	Vulgar	Remove	Stereotype 1	Stereotype 2	Assault	Roles
Paddy Kraska	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>B</i>	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Carol Marin	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>L</i>	5	1	11	0	0	0	0
Taylor Marsh	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>B</i>	0	0	0	2	0	0	1
Gail Collins	<i>W</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>L</i>	1	0	3	1	1	0	0
Adreinne Royer	<i>W</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>B</i>	13	0	0	4	2	0	1
Holly Robichaud	<i>W</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>L</i>	8	0	0	0	1	1	3
Debra Saunders	<i>W</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>B</i>	0	0	0	1	0	2	0
Kathleen Parker	<i>W</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>L</i>	8	0	0	4	2	0	3
Duncan Black	<i>M</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>B</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Ta-Nehisi Coates	<i>M</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>L</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Glenn Greenwald	<i>M</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>B</i>	0	0	0	3	2	0	2
Eugene Robinson	<i>M</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>L</i>	11	0	0	2	0	0	0
Unreligious Right	<i>M</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>B</i>	4	2	0	0	1	0	0
Bart Hinkle	<i>M</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>L</i>	16	0	0	3	0	1	3
David Harasanyi	<i>M</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>B</i>	2	0	0	8	3	0	3
Ross Douthat	<i>M</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>L</i>	18	0	0	0	0	1	0

Note: For gender, *W* = woman and *M* = man; for party *L* = liberal and *C* = conservative; for e-mail, *N* = not valid and *V* = valid; and for media, *B* = blogger site and *L* = legacy media site

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