“Words do hurt me”: The impact of online abuse on gender-based violence.

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As Batty (2017) has outlined, digital tools play an increasingly dominant role in the enactment of public life. Online abuse communicated via the social networking sites that emerged as part of the ‘internet of things’ has increased substantially in recent years. Criminal justice and other social policy agencies have been slow to respond to the immense change that has occurred as a result of the way that individuals interact in the digital space. The emerging nature of the phenomena has created a policy vacuum, with evidence suggesting that a lag in institutional responsiveness leaves victims without adequate protection or recourse. As we celebrate the potential that technology offers in opening up how we experience the workplace, it is vital that the malign impacts that occur are not ignored.

This paper brings together three sources of evidence to examine how online abuse is experienced by women in public-facing occupations:

- an interdisciplinary scoping review of the literature;
• interviews undertaken with women from both the UK and the USA in politics, policing, journalism and academia.
• analysis of Twitter data, to illustrate the volume and nature of online abuse experienced by women across these four occupations.

Preliminary findings indicate that online abuse is damaging and is actively preventing women’s advancement across the public sphere. There is a disjunction between the openness and transparency offered by the sharing of information via online platforms; and the risk that this presents to public figures, who often find themselves grappling with the expectation that they be incessantly available in the online space. The vicious invective typical of online abuse is dangerous to both the individual and to institutions, as women choose to withdraw from the public sphere, or limit their contributions to debates. This silencing of women’s voices is a threat to democracy, as it stops women taking positions of power and importance and acting confidently within these roles. Ultimately, this study has found that online abuse is driven by misogyny and has clear echoes of the historical societal attitudes towards domestic abuse and sexual harassment that were encountered in the 1970s.

This research seeks to devise clear social policy recommendations that will address the existing gap between academic research, the offence of online abuse and the necessary and workable policy solutions that are currently lacking.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Susan Watson is a PhD student at the University of York, UK. She holds a BSc (Hons) in Social Policy and Administration, and an MSc in Criminal Justice Policy from the LSE; and an MA in Social Research from the University of York. Her PhD is considering the role of online abuse in gender-based violence, investigating the impact of abusive communication executed via new technology and how social media changes power relationships and interactions online, particularly in regard to participation in public life. The study adopts a clear feminist perspective, and attempts to explore and understand underlying causes and manifestations of misogyny.  

As a political staffer between 1992 and 2000, she witnessed how, even before social media became the primary vehicle for political communication, and with the web in its infancy; women politicians were subject to a degree of scrutiny and opprobrium that their male counterparts simply did not have to navigate.

Before returning to academia, she worked as a parliamentary researcher, and also undertook a number of roles providing leadership and strategic direction to public sector bodies.