

“Real men don’t hate women”: Twitter rape threats and group identity



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Received 26 October 2014; received in revised form 18 May 2015; accepted 10 November 2015

Available online 23 December 2015

Abstract

On 24th July 2013, feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez’s petition to the Bank of England to have Elizabeth Fry’s image on the UK’s £5 note replaced with the image of another woman was successful. The petition challenged the Bank of England’s original plan to replace Fry with Winston Churchill, which would have meant that no woman aside from the Queen would be represented on any UK banknote. Following this, Criado-Perez was subjected to ongoing misogynistic abuse on Twitter, a microblogging social network, including threats of rape and death. This paper investigates this increasingly prominent phenomenon of rape threats made via social networks. Specifically, we investigate the sustained period of abuse directed towards the Twitter account of feminist campaigner and journalist, Caroline Criado-Perez. We then turn our attention to the formation of online discourse communities as they respond to and participate in forms of extreme online misogyny on Twitter. We take a corpus of 76,275 tweets collected during a three month period in which the events occurred (July to September 2013), which comprises 912,901 words. We then employ an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of language in the context of this social network. Our approach combines quantitative approaches from the fields of corpus linguistics to detect emerging discourse communities, and then qualitative approaches from discourse analysis to analyse how these communities construct their identities.

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Keywords: Trolls; Trolling; Rape threats; Computer-mediated-communication; Twitter; Identity

1. Introduction

This paper investigates an increasingly prominent phenomenon: rape threats made via social networks. Specifically, we investigate a sustained period of abuse directed towards the Twitter account of feminist campaigner and journalist, Caroline Criado-Perez. We then turn our attention to the formation of online discourse communities as they respond to and participate in forms of extreme online misogyny on Twitter. The abuse followed Criado-Perez’s petition which challenged the Bank of England’s decision to remove the image of Elizabeth Fry from the £5 note and replace it with that of Winston Churchill. The premise of the petition was to maintain the representation of influential women on British currency, since the appearance of men only could be deemed a “damaging message that no woman has done anything important enough to appear [on our banknotes]” (Criado-Perez, 2013). The petition was successful and the Bank of England announced on the 24th of July 2013 that author Jane Austen’s image will appear on the new £10 note issued in 2016.

Following the petition, Criado-Perez began receiving an influx of abuse through her Twitter account (@CCriadoPerez), including threats of rape and murder, which were malicious and numerous enough to warrant police intervention. These

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threats subsequently escalated to involve bomb threats of Criado-Perez and other prominent female figures, including Colleen Nolan, MP Stella Creasy and Professor Mary Beard. Following police and journalistic investigations, Twitter users Isabella Sorley, John Nimmo, and Peter Nunn who had each sent abuse to Criado-Perez, were eventually prosecuted and given custodial sentences. However, as shown below, there were many others who sent extreme and sustained abuse to Criado-Perez, yet faced no legal redress. The lack of consequence is due to many contextual and legal factors, including, but not limited to, complications arising from trans-national jurisdiction; inadequate legislation (e.g. the UK's Communications Act 2003); inadequate provision by internet service providers and online platforms; investigative bodies lacking the skills and/or resources to investigate new forms of illegal online behaviour, especially when combined with the ease with which users can remain anonymous online; and the sheer amount of abusive online behaviour that would overwhelm the legal system if every qualifying case were prosecuted. We return to some of these issues below.

In this paper, we address two key issues: (1) the language surrounding sexual aggression on Twitter, and (2) the emergence and construction of communities in response to that sexually aggressive language.

2. Computer-mediated communities

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) refers to human interactions occurring through the use of devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones using formats including email, text messages, and tweets. Although we recognise the multimodal nature of many forms of web-based interaction, we focus here on primarily textual forms of CMC “involving typed words that are read on digital screens” (Herring and Stoerger, 2014:570). From this, we analyse interactions mediated through the social networking microblog, Twitter.

Linguistic scholarship in the area of CMC is now well established. It began with descriptive accounts of CMC as it differed from other forms of linguistic communication but progressed swiftly onto analyses of politeness, conversational turn-taking, and sociolinguistic accounts of dialect, gender, social status, etc. and their influence on language use in CMC. (Herring et al., 2013)

As Herring suggests above, linguists are increasingly turning to social media and networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, since these can provide massive amounts of publicly and freely accessible, organically occurring, easily downloaded language data. When we turn to Twitter specifically, we find that it facilitates many kinds of interaction, and that it is used for a wide range of purposes, such as keeping in touch with friends, sharing multimedia, consuming news, advertising cottage industries, engaging with voters, and gathering real-time customer feedback. As a public-facing social network (unlike social networks designed for private interaction, e.g. Facebook), Twitter provides a space for debate, humour, updates, news, products, gossip, and more besides.

The result of this is that online networks offer many beneficial and unique opportunities, such as education, companionship, and current affairs news. However, users may also come into contact with (or become engaged in) behaviours that pose risks to their personal wellbeing, safety, and security. Issues such as online grooming, cyberharassment, predation, e-fraud and so forth have become a real online threat (see Hardaker, forthcoming),¹ but have also transgressed into the offline world. Reports of suicides linked to cyberbullying and harassment are on the rise, and it is these latter types of antisocial online behaviour—behaviour that poses a risk to others (i.e. ‘risky behaviours’) that this paper is interested in.

2.1. Online and offline identities

Within academia, offline identity has received considerable attention in fields as diverse as gender, im/politeness, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics (e.g. Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Cameron, 1997; Edwards, 1998; Holmes, 1997; Mullany, 2007; Terkourafi, 2005; Verschueren, 2004). However, identity may well be an analytic fiction (Simon, 2004). It is not a ‘thing’, nor a purely cognitive phenomenon. Instead, just as dancing is a dynamic physical process that only becomes apparent when undertaken, identity is a dynamic behavioural, socio-psychological enactment carried out through relational interaction with others (O'Brien, 1999:78).

Identity is sometimes simplistically discussed in terms of two (artificially dualistic) categories: *individual identity*, or one's self-definition as a person in one's own right, and *collective identity*, or one's self-definition as a person in relation to one's group memberships. These categories help to define each other, however:

¹ Because this paper interests itself with antisocial online behaviour, the focus is on the negative side of social networks. It is worth noting, however, that these same sites have enabled extraordinary acts of kindness, charity, and selflessness. The Internet does not cause users to behave kindly or cruelly. It simply facilitates their own choice of behaviour.

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