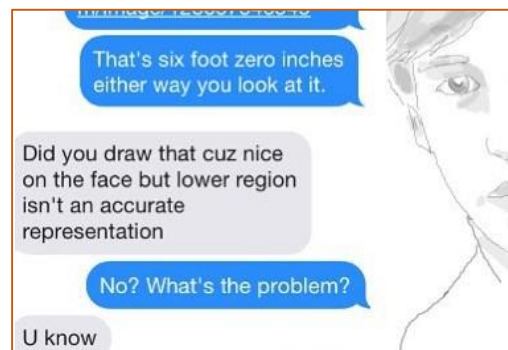




Fighting (Online) Fire with Fire?

The Complex Ethics of Online Harassment and Feminist Counterspeech

In online spaces where hostile interaction is common, women often bear the brunt of malicious harassment which “involves more severe experiences, such as being the target of physical threats, harassment over a sustained period of time, stalking, and sexual harassment” (Duggan, 2014). The Pew Research Center conducted a survey on sex-based negative interactions in online dating spaces which revealed that “57% of female online dating users ages 18 to 34 say someone has sent them a sexually explicit message or image they did not ask for” compared to the 28% reported by their male counterparts (Anderson & Vogels, 2020). Additionally, female users in this age range are roughly twice as likely than male users to report that someone has called them an offensive name (44% vs. 23%) or threatened to physically harm them (19% vs. 9%) on dating sites or apps (Anderson & Vogels, 2020).



Anna Gensler / Instagram /Modified

Legal measures are often ineffective against such bullying or verbal harassment; if it even falls under a criminal statute, authorities are often reluctant to pursue cases against anonymous or semi-anonymous individuals residing in some far corner of the internet. Rather than seeking legal interventions to remedy such misogynistic bullying, some feminists have resorted to counterspeech, which relies on “the idea that ‘bad speech’ can be effectively cured with more speech,” (Stroud & Cox, 2018, p. 294). Counterspeech, however, can take many forms, and like any use of speech, carries with it benefits and drawbacks. The different tactics of Anna Gensler and the organization “TrollBusters” illustrate how counterspeech can tackle misogynistic rhetoric online, ranging from online dating culture to the harassment of female journalists.

When Maryland-based artist Anna Gensler joined the popular dating app Tinder, she was quickly met with offensive and misogynistic messages, such as “Bet your tight” and “If I was a watermelon, would you spit or swallow my seeds?” (Hess, 2014). Wanting to teach these men a lesson that “objectification is a two-way street,” she decided to respond to their harassment with her own take on feminist counterspeech (Richards and Calvert, 2000, p. 554). On her portfolio website, as well as on her Instagram page, Gensler shares her method of “objectifying men who objectify women in 3 easy steps: (1) Man sends crude line via Tinder. (2) Draw him naked. (3) Send portrait to lucky man; Enjoy results” (Gensler, 2019). Her drawings, accompanied by the man’s first name and sometimes his profile picture, are then paired with the pick-up lines used by the culprits and published on her website and Instagram account as part of her “Granniepants” project. In an interview with *Slate*, Gensler claimed that the drawings are all “based off of these guys’ profile pictures... but from there I tried to make them look a little chubbier or scrawnier or just not particularly well-endowed” (Hess, 2014). Despite the positive attention from women who have encountered similar harassment on dating apps, the men



depicted in Gensler’s drawings did not appreciate her artistic counterspeech. On her blog, Gensler notes that she’s received death threats from some of these men, but “more than anything, [she’s] afraid because the police just don’t seem to care” (Gensler, 2014). In a world where authorities don’t care much about death threats, let alone internet objectification, Gensler’s supporters see her tactics as an effective way that women can strike back at online harassers—it publically shames them because of misogynist behaviors and serves as a warning to others as to how they ought to behave.

On one hand, Gensler’s use of counterspeech may be viewed as a way to give harassers a taste of their own medicine. However, because her drawings target specific individuals and may contain identifiable details beyond their first names, ethical concerns might be raised about the similarities of this response to doxxing or even revenge porn, since only “a little information may be enough to find this specific person in the age of image search or online mobs acting as sleuths” (Stroud & Cox, 2018). Like the use of nude images in revenge or nonconsensual pornography (or even in deepfake or fake image editing), none of these subjects gave their consent to be depicted as nude in images connected with their names, ages, and online activities. Furthermore, to draw particular body shapes and sizes (e.g. “scrawny” or “chubby”) with the intent to embarrass or shame these men perpetuates harmful ideas about body image which ultimately hurts people of any gender. On the other hand, Gensler’s form of counterspeech may also be viewed as unjust if one believes *all* human agents, even misogynists, are intrinsically valuable and deserving of respect. Objectifying women on Tinder is wrong and disrespectful, the argument might go, and so is objectifying male perpetrators. Others could argue that objectifying those who objectify doesn’t violate any sort of dignity they are due, but it simply is ineffective—it would probably only increase the hate for women that the targeted individuals would feel.

Given the concerns raised by Gensler’s method to feminist counterspeech, Michelle Ferrier took another approach to the harassment of women with the founding of Troll-Busters.com, an online community which seeks to undo the psychological harm women face in online spaces. The website describes its purpose as a “just-in-time rescue service for women writers and journalists,” using “positive messaging and education to create a hedge of protection around targets in online spaces like Twitter” (Hare, 2016). Instead of responding directly to misogynists or seeking individual revenge, TrollBusters posts “inspirational quotes, safety tips for dealing with harassment, and general words of encouragement to remind women in the public eye who speak their minds that they shouldn’t be ashamed and they’re not alone” (Kabas, 2016). Ferrier’s organization has particularly sought to help female journalists; TrollBusters supports targeted women not only by providing a “counter narrative to drown out hateful trolling” but also by helping them rebuild their digital brand (Sillesen, 2015). Overall, the work of TrollBusters aims to support the target of abuse in a public way, and to show observing individuals that there are supporters when one is under attack online. Trollbusters’s tactics emphasize the path of showing social support in online communities of women. Thus, the organization has proven that just as online harassers can gain momentum, so too can feminist counterspeech create a movement to support victims. While these women may certainly appreciate the support, questions might be raised about how much “protection” TrollBusters



can genuinely provide—do trolls and misogynists really care about supportive messages aimed at their targets? Some skeptics might argue that Trollbusters’ approach is too limited, and that positive messages and education are unlikely to bring comfort to women like Gensler who receive daily death threats from online misogynists and little help from authorities.

As Anna Gensler and TrollBusters work to combat online misogyny, their different counterspeech tactics serve as guidance for others to follow. In the case of Gensler’s art, she publicly exposes her harassers, inviting the public to make judgements of them. Perhaps this attention can serve as a deterrent for other male users of online dating sites and apps who may consider sending crude messages to women. However, there remains problematic ethical implications for the depicted men and safety concerns for women who uses this form of counterspeech in response. Conversely, the work of TrollBusters embodies a more constructive spirit in its social-support based counterspeech methods. While their purpose aims to undo harm and build a positive online reputation for the targeted victims of the online harassment, it is difficult to assess guaranteed success against the “mob” force of online trolls. One thing is certain: misogynistic harassment will continue to be a problem for women online. In our own acts of speech responding to this online misogyny, it is imperative for us to continually consider whether the most effective ways to shame and silence misogynists are also the most ethical ways to protect women and ensure they are safe in online spaces.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is the harassment of women in online spaces ethically problematic? What value grounds your judgment?
2. What ethical values are in conflict surrounding Gensler’s way of using speech to combat online harassment? Do you find her approach defensible?
3. Are there any ethical values in tension with Trollbusters’ approach to using counterspeech?
4. What ethical limits, in general, should counterspeech be subject to in responding to speech that harasses or hurts?
5. What other approaches to using counterspeech against online misogyny might be available? What are their ethical advantages or concerns?

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Authors:

Sophia Park, Kat Williams, & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.
Media Ethics Initiative
Center for Media Engagement
University of Texas at Austin
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