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The Trolls Disappear in the Light: Swedish Experiences of Mediated Sexualised Hate Speech in the Aftermath of Behring Breivik

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Abstract

Feminist journalists have come to expect special resistance, and even threats, from men's groups as part of their work as journalists. However, the biggest threats might not originate in men's groups' activities. A big threat currently comes from Internet trolls' responses to individuals who engage in hate-provoked and hate-provoking attacks on women as women. This is exemplified in the case of Anders Behring Breivik, who blew up government buildings in Oslo in 2011 and murdered youth from the Labour Party at Utøya as part of his explicitly articulated xenophobic and misogynist campaign against the Islamification of Norway. His ideas are still being shared in social media responses to this tragedy across Nordic countries. This paper argues that this demonstrates that the harms to women and to society go well beyond the individual victims of an identifiable incident. Largely because of their role in condemning and rejecting the hateful ideas advanced across social media forums, troll responses to the Breivik tragedy constitute a particular threat to female and especially feminist journalists.

Keywords

Journalism; hate speech; antifeminism; gender; sexualised hate speech; Behring Breivik.

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Introduction

On 22 July 2011 Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people, first by blowing up government buildings in Oslo and then, dressed in a police uniform, by shooting young people at Utøya, a camp organised for the youth of the Norwegian Labour Party. While females and males alike were targeted, more than half of those murdered were young and female (41 of 77). This over-representation of females was not a coincidence. In addition to being Islamophobic and xenophobic, Breivik was avidly antifeminist. In the manifesto that he sent to a thousand recipients only hours before the attack, he made this clear. Indeed, as analysts of Breivik's 1,516 page-long manifesto have noted in their publications and as expert witnesses at his trial (see, for example, Gardell 2013; Walton 2012: 7), misogyny and antifeminism are at the core of Breivik's larger Islamophobic project.

At the time of this writing Breivik's ideas are still being promoted in Internet trolls' responses in Norway, Sweden and other Nordic countries. Internet trolls are people who write offensive things in order to provoke a reaction. The meaning in English indicates that they are trolling for reactions, but in the Nordic countries trolls are also well-known mythological figures who fear the light. This paper argues that the deliberately provocative 'Breivik fanclub' response to the Breivik massacre demonstrates that the harms to women and to society go well beyond the 41 female and 36 male victims of this tragedy. Largely because of their role in exposing and condemning the online forums that disseminate the ideas outlined in Breivik's manifesto, feminist journalists are particularly threatened. In the hope that sexists and trolls will wither in the face of public exposure, this paper offers a critical commentary on the brave ongoing efforts of feminist journalists to bring sexualised hate speech to the attention of the public and authorities.

The Breivik Manifesto

Shortly before the attack, Breivik sent out a 1,516-page compendium entitled *2083: A European Declaration of Independence* (hereafter the manifesto).¹ An expert witness at the Breivik trial, history of religion scholar Mattias Gardell, described the manifesto as an Islamophobic-zenophobic mix in which antifeminism plays a key role. Indeed, Gardell describes the manifesto as a 'hyper-masculine performative act'. Gardell points out that Breivik describes feminists as traitors who promote multiculturalism, care for refugees, the poor and the disabled, who seek to feminise 'Western men who know how to change diapers but have lost their ability to fight' (the manifesto, as cited in Gardell 2014: 140). As documented by Stephen Walton, who also studied the manifesto, Breivik explicitly calls upon men to kill women:

[Y]ou must ... embrace and familiarise yourself with the concept of killing women, even very attractive women, since they not only comprise the majority of cultural Marxists, but also 20% of the police force, and will in any case 'not hesitate to kill you'. (Section 3.46 of the manifesto, titled 'Killing women on the field of battle - directly or indirectly', as cited in Walton 2012: 7)

Legislative and media context

Gender equality and freedom of expression are fundamental values in Western societies and are widely viewed as fundamental to Western democracy. As stated in Article 2 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), everyone, 'without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status' is entitled to human rights and freedoms. These include freedom of expression (Article 19), defined as the individual's right to hold opinions, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW 1979), one of the most highly ratified human rights treaties, re-clarified that gender equality is a universal human right. While some scholars claim that gender equality

considerations should not interfere with freedom of expression (for example, Wolfson 1997), the Council of Europe is clear that these values are connected:

Media freedom (including editorial freedom) and gender equality are intrinsically interrelated. Gender equality is an integral part of human rights. Freedom of expression, as a fundamental right, goes hand-in-hand with gender equality (Council of Europe 2013).

Nordic countries are proud of their strong legislation protecting both gender equality and freedom of expression and, therefore, freedom of the press. The tension between these two fundamental values are, however, ongoing. In Sweden, there have been several failing efforts to legislate against gender stereotypes in advertisements, but freedom of expression has always been the explicit argument for not regulating against gender stereotypes (Svensson and Edström 2014). The first law to protect freedom of the press was introduced in Sweden 250 years ago, in 1766. Safeguarding freedom of expression has been a core value for all the Nordic countries for a long time and it has almost become part of the national identity, with a risk of citizens losing sight of why it should be valued (Petäjä 2009: 23). Nevertheless, gender equality has also become a hallmark of Nordic values, with Nordic countries routinely being among the top five most gender-equalitarian countries in the world as measured in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index.

Political consensus in Nordic countries on the importance of gender equality has affected women's status in the media industry. In terms of numbers, there is parity in many occupational roles in Nordic news organisations, especially in recent years which has seen an increase in the number of women in high ranking editorial positions, both in newspapers and in public service broadcasting companies (Byerly 2013; Edström 2013; International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) 2011; World Association for Christian Communication 2010). Unfortunately, the increased prominence and visibility of female journalists seems to have triggered some men's urges to defame or threaten them as women.

Trolls and sexualised hate speech against female journalists

Threats against and which target identifiable groups constitute hate speech, a form of expression that falls outside legal bounds of free expression. While there is no universal definition of hate speech, the European Court of Human Rights (Council of Europe 2013) has indicated cases in which free expression is considered hate speech, as have individual European countries. Focusing on Sweden, criminal law on hate crime covers hate speech, which is explained as publicly making statements that threaten or express disrespect directed towards groups or a person for their race, skin colour, national or ethnic origin, faith, or sexual orientation, and has been motivated by prejudice based on race, religion, ethnicity and sexual orientation, but not on gender. This legal situation, that hatred against women is not included in the legislation, has been criticised by feminist law scholars (Granström 2007). However, there are criminal code provisions under which hate speech directed against women might be prosecuted, and there are court cases that have resulted in people being convicted and sentenced for sexualised threats and online expressions of hate on the grounds that these constitute unlawful threats or defamation.

As outlined above, trolls are a metaphor in the Nordic countries that signify beings that fear the light; Internet trolls are people who write offensive things in order to provoke reaction. Net hate refers to harmful and hateful comments that appear in various places on the Internet, including blogs, Facebook, and commentary on traditional news media. Sexualised hate speech, the principle concern of this paper, does not exist as a legal term. However, it is commonly used in the debates and public discussions that draw upon the Breivik tragedy. In this discourse, sexualised hate speech refers to the special kind of sexualised and misogynist hate speech that

women in the media receive, to distinguish it from the 'ordinary' threats that come with the job of journalism, which female and male journalists alike receive.

The urge of some trolls to defame or threaten female journalists as women is particularly important given the pervasiveness of Internet media at the present time. Simply stated, traditional media has given way to something that is more individualised and interactive. More people are so-called 'prosumers', people who increasingly both use and produce media (Olsson 2013). At the same time, it has become easier to be anonymous, and thus to raise openly misogynist voices towards feminists, feminist media, feminist journalists and, more broadly, women who speak up. It should be noted that both male and female journalists face threats almost as part of the profession, especially for journalists who cover controversial issues. Indeed, surveyed male and female journalists report receiving threats at approximately equivalent rates (35 per cent versus 32 per cent), but female journalists received more sexualised threats (Löfgren Nilsson 2013, based on 1,372 respondents). The report confirms the findings of a global survey conducted by IWFM in 2014. As Friedersdorf (2014) notes, certain kinds of troll seems especially interested in making journalism miserable for women.

The Mission Investigate 'Men Who Net Hate Women' documentary

Focusing on Sweden, for a long time, sexualised hate speech towards female journalist was unknown to the Swedish public. The guidance from security personnel in media companies and the police was not to give attention to people who threatened others, in the hope of avoiding the likelihood of someone turning threats into actions. In the winter of 2012-2013 this changed. In December 2012, Åsa Lindeborg, the cultural editor of the largest daily tabloid *Aftonbladet*, reported that she could no longer live in her apartment; indeed, she had to live separate from her family due to persistent and serious threats against her. Then, in March 2013, the most prominent Swedish investigative reporting television show, *Mission Investigate*, broadcasted a documentary entitled '*Men Who Net Hate Women*'² (Män som näthatar kvinnor), alluding to the original Swedish title of the book *Men Who Hate Women*, subsequently made into a film, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, by Stieg Larsson.

The *Mission Investigate* documentary revealed how antipathy towards women, feminists and journalists, and xenophobia, intertwine in contemporary online media. As part of the documentary, well-known women journalists read letters and emails with death threats and sexualised hate speech that they had received, some authored by self-identified members of the 'Breivik fan club'.³ The following examples were read by Maria Sveland, a journalist and writer, and Jenny Alversjö, a news anchor. They are exemplary of the messages conveyed to all twelve women journalists who participated in the documentary:

Maria Sveland, I will give you an ultimatum, you either quit your job as a journalist, live your pathetic life anonymously and make a living out of a with a 9 to 5 job, or prepare yourself for war, a life where you never feel safe. One day I will personally cut your throat and leave you with the knife shoved into your pussy. Unlike you I am an intelligent person. I understand that you'll initially seek protection, but in time you'll take risks, believing that you're safe. Your safety is imaginary. I will murder you when you least expect it. To do 12 years in Kumla prison hotel would be an honour, not a punishment, It's up to you, insincere greetings, the Breivik fan club. (*Mission Investigate* 2013)

Now is the time ... for us to have sex, I will be waiting for you outside the building. If you say no, I will cut up your body. Then, your body parts will be hung up on meat hooks. Then I will fry your breasts in butter. Yum, it will taste good. Go on, call the police. I am not afraid of the cop bastards. (*Mission Investigate* 2013)

In addition to documenting hate emails and letters, the *Mission Investigate* documentary followed a young woman who had written a negative comment about the artist Tupac on the Facebook site of the clothing company H & M, who received thousands of harsh comments and threats. *Mission Investigate* reporters Nicke Nordmark and Hasse Johansson recounted that they had tried to track down the perpetrators, making it clear that their intent was that the police would hold those making the threats accountable for their actions. At the same time, they questioned why the police had not responded to such threats in the past. They also questioned the lack of responsibility taken by the company itself, for not sufficiently monitoring their Facebook site.

The *Mission Investigate* documentary was a success in terms of audience; it was one of the most watched investigative programs during that season, and a 6-minute clip of the documentary on *YouTube* had received 369,600 clicks by April 2016. Indeed, the *Mission Investigate* documentary received international recognition, and reporters Nicke Nordmark and Hasse Johansson received the Gold World Medal award at the international New York Festivals World's Best TV & Films festival in 2014.

The *Mission Investigate* documentary also spurred others to think about ways of investigating the phenomena of threats and bad behaviour on the Internet. In 2014, a commercial channel started a TV show called *The Troll Hunters* (Trolljägarna). In the program, well-known journalist Roberts Aschberg hunts down trolls and asks them what they are doing. Assisted by law professor Mårten Schultz, they sometimes took legal action. The merits of the program were intensely debated not only for the unconventional methods it used, but also for the fact that people started pursuing the trolls that had been in the spotlight. The program itself was reported for unlawful threat by a woman appearing on the show as a presumed troll. The dubious methods of exposing people have also caught attention outside Sweden, including an article in *MIT Technology Review* about the development of groups that act like judges and juries (Chen 2014). A Swedish research group, *Researchgruppen*, used large volumes of data to collect information about the most active people giving comments on sites that are connected with racist and extreme right-wing forums. Their investigation indicated persons giving comments were typically middle-aged men from all segments of society. These men may have different agendas, but they were united in their hatred of feminism and feminists (Expressen/Researchgruppen 2013, Researchgruppen 2013).⁴

The above disclosures of the hostile online environment that journalists and especially female journalists face convinced many newsrooms to shift to pre-monitoring of online comments. One of the journalists interviewed in the *Mission Investigate* documentary was Anna-Klara Bratt, the editor-in-chief of a feminist online newspaper, *Feminist Perspective*. She reports that, after the program broadcast, her newspaper noticed a considerable decline in threats.

Reactions from authorities

Following the *Mission Investigate* documentary, the police started to take female journalists' complaints more seriously, especially after the female blogger with one the largest audience in Sweden, the young fashion blogger *Blondinbella*, posted her experiences. Inspired by the *Mission Investigate* documentary, she began writing about the many harassments and threats that she had been facing. She also talked about the lack of response from the police (Löwengrip 2013). The police, who had failed to act on threats against her previously, now started to go through the material and separate libel and unlawful threats from negative comments. They also managed to track down a man who had threatened several female journalists and other women and politicians. This man was sentenced to six months of probation for unlawful threats and sexual molestation (Courtcase B 3963-13). Unfortunately, even though the court believed that this man had threatened hundreds of persons, mostly women, only 12 were included in the court case.

As the *Blondinbella* case was proceeding, the courts began imposing fines on more people, though the value of the fines have been low. One example is a court case from 2014 involving a female journalist who received several threats which she reported to the police. In this case, the court found that it is acceptable to write [translated from Swedish] 'to me gender equality is when you take a sexist feminist whore in the vagina with a large knife'. The court ruled that this statement is protected by freedom of expression, since it a general statement. However, the court clarified that it was not acceptable to include the name of the person, as he also did:

It is sexist feminist whores like [XX] that should shut up. She is just making a fool of herself. Up with a knife in the pussy of sexist feminists (as cited in Court case B 10319-14).

For this the defendant was sentenced for molestation and received a 2 500 SEK (400 AUD) fine. Feminist scholars have criticised this verdict for being counterproductive and serving as an instruction manual for getting away with threats. 'Those who hate adapt. Now they know they should not put the name of the person they are threatening in the postings' said journalist My Vingren (Bohlin 2016).

Both police and prosecutors have publicly complained about the difficulties in taking legal action: 'freedom of expression has become a threat to itself', claimed one prosecutor in a debate among Swedish law practitioners (Greberg 2014). Legal scholars have also called for reform or modification of the legal system (Schultz 2013). The lack of legislation on Internet crime is now an issue for a Swedish government report due in 2016, which is part of the government's claim that it will modernise legal protections for individuals targeted by net hate (Department of Justice Sweden 2014: 74). The government has also commissioned the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention to investigate the scope and magnitude of Internet hate. They have already concluded that there is a lack of IT competence within the police and that most cases do not lead to any further investigations (Brå 2015).

Discussion

The resistance of certain men to women's rights is sometimes explained by changing power relations between men and women in society, which influence some men to blame feminists for their problems (Anderson 2014; Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012). Nordic scholars have tried to develop a more complex analysis that draws upon intersectional understandings (Bredesen 2104; Eriksson 2013; Gottzén 2011; Gottzen and Mellström 2014; Keskinen 2013). This approach recognises that there is a clear connection between racism and antifeminism in Nordic politics. The report *Patriotism and Patriarchy – The Impact of Nationalism on Gender Equality* (Ekerstedt 2014), describes how strong nationalism in Europe affects women's human rights and women's role in society. It raises concern that the growing nationalist parties will join forces with other nationalists in the fight against immigrants, LGBTQ persons, and women's rights. 'Such developments mean that core human rights are at risk of being undermined – and the gender equality successes that the women's movement has achieved during its many years of struggle risk being thwarted' (Ekerstedt 2014: 27). Kvinna till Kvinna and another organisation, Expo, highlight that it is not only women who might fear this development. The nationalists and radical right are also a threat to LGBTQ people, especially if one recognises that homophobia has a connection to normative masculinity (Hannus 2012; Swedish Official Reports 2014).

Cyber mob or a handful of grown men?

Feminist Anita Sarkeesian has pointed out that online harassment and cyber mobs are a kind of social activity in which people can be loosely coordinated and still create a toxic environment. 'They are maintaining and reinforcing and normalising a culture of sexism, where men who harass are supported by their peers and rewarded for their sexist attitudes and women are

silenced, marginalised and excluded from full participation' (Sarkeesian 2012). This was the case in Sweden in 2011 when a theatre in Stockholm began receiving threats on a large scale because they were hosting a performance of the *Scum Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas. The mob threatening the theatre seemed to be huge but, when investigated by the media, it turned out to be a small number of men. It also became clear that some of these men were front figures in men's groups working for 'humanism' and against feminism (*Feministiskt Perspektiv* 2012a, 2012b).

One of the most critical voices was a blogger called Citizen X who in November 2011 was responsible for writing 'A murdered feminist is a good feminist' on his blog (no longer available online but see Billing 2012) and then posting the home addresses of theatre staff. Citizen X explained in another more prominent antifeminist blog why he wrote the threat; it was meant as satire: 'I am an ordinary, white, middle aged man, with a job and family, but also with a large interest in how society is developing' (Billing 2012). Citizen X claimed that it was just satire and it should be clear to anyone. The people he verbally attacks are privileged and should be able to handle some kicks from below, from '... a citizen who only can have a voice through a blog'. One interesting aspect was that the blog host, Per Billing, commented that he thought Citizen X had gone too far, and the combination of talking about murder and giving out addresses was too much. Shortly after revealing that the huge mob in fact consisted of only a handful of men, the activities in these two major blogs decreased sharply.

It is also important to note that some of the antifeminist bloggers are women who make a joint cause with male resistance movements, demonstrating that women and girls are also a part of the net hate problem. In December 2012, the so called 'Instagram riots' took place at a high school in Gothenburg, Sweden, where a mob was looking for a girl they thought had posted degrading content on the web. Fortunately the police could secure the situation for the girl who was later found to be innocent. Two other two girls, just 15 and 16 years old, were sentenced for defamation and had to pay in total 570 000 SEK (91 000 AUD) to the 38 defamation victims. The younger girl was sent to juvenile detention and the older girl received community service (Gye 2013 and Court case B 705-13).

Conclusion

The problems of threats and sexualised hate speech towards female journalists are at least twofold. Firstly, the purpose of the threats is to silence. Many journalists refer to the self-censoring mechanism of threats and hate speech. Is it worth taking up the fight? The harassment might also scare other women and keep them from entering journalism. Secondly, one never knows when words will turn into actions. When the trolls are confronted by reporters they often deny their actions or claim that it was a joke. These threats were never meant to be realised. However, they can inspire others to act. As Breivik was inspired by other bloggers, hateful speech can serve as fuel for action where you least expect it.

Sexualised hate speech can be seen as an expression of power or lack of power. The female journalists under attack are often successful, whereas the person making the threats might not feel that way, and making threats can be a way of controlling and having power over visible, outspoken successful women. That seemed to be the case with the blogger Citizen X who clearly identified himself as an underdog who only had his blog to fight back. Many of the journalists that have been facing sexualised hate speech are not outspoken feminists; their only 'crime' is their visibility as women. Threats and sexualised hate speech may limit female journalists but in Sweden many of the journalists have chosen to speak openly about the threats. As a result, connections between antifeminist and other undemocratic ideas have been revealed. Political shifts towards nationalistic agendas in the Nordic countries tend to include antifeminist themes and threats that affect female journalists not only professionally but also in their private lives.

Technological shifts have opened up new ways of displaying hate but this hate is also contested. The media can choose to highlight antifeminists in many ways. There are examples where antifeminists seem to have free access to television viewers but, as this article describes, the media can also put a critical spotlight on antifeminist activities. Most of the people behind the sexualised hate speech are men, and they appear to both court and fear public attention. This paper participates in raising awareness of the issue in the hope that their position will be weakened as their actions become visible. Like the trolls, they will hopefully disappear in the light.

As mentioned earlier, Sweden has had a web-based feminist newspaper that has been investigating the trolls and countered threats, and that continues to stand up for feminism and feminist journalists. It is also part of international networks and has commissioned a journalist to collect other feminist journalists' stories and strategies. In *Tackle the Hate* (Bohlin 2016), a recently published book initiated by the newspaper, feminist journalists and editors from Spain, France, Sweden and Mexico talk about how they handle threats and why it is so important to be open about the threats.

Since gender is not part of the hate crime legislation in Sweden and freedom of expression is so highly valued, there has been a dearth of response from society to sexualised hate speech. Criminal authorities lack knowledge on how to deal with these issues and, moreover, some laws that might apply – such as unlawful threats and libel – are seldom used. Sexualised hate speech, often protected by law, can truly be seen as a way of silencing women and hindering gender equality.

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¹ According to Norwegian Blogger *Fjordman*, the number 2083 refers to the year Islam should be defeated by a form of Christianity in which patriarchy rules.

² The English title is now changed to *Surfing the Web of Hate* (<http://svtsales.com/programme-sales/surfing-the-web-of-hate/>).

³ The journalists who went public were Karin Hubinette, Åsa Lindeborg, Lisa Magnusson, Ann-Charlotte Martéus, Fridah Jönsson, Maria Sveland, Sanna Lundell, Jenny Alversjö, Titti Schultz, Anna-Klara Bratt, My Vingren and Anna Hedenmo.

⁴ The reason for the Research group finding so few younger men might be explained by younger men's greater likelihood of having better knowledge on how not to leave any tracks on the web, and thus safeguard their anonymity.

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