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EVERYDAY MISOGYNY: DISCOURSES ABOUT DEPP V HEARD ON TWITTER

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Background

Social media platforms are often deeply unsafe spaces for women, particularly women who speak publicly about feminist issues (Marwick and Caplan, 2018; Ging and Siapera, 2018; Barker and Jurasz, 2019). The pressing need to address online misogyny has been clearly articulated by both scholars and activists (see, e.g., Citron, 2009; Mantilla, 2013; Jane, 2014; Massanari, 2017). A series of controversies over the past decade has generated significant public pressure for platforms to take steps to protect women online. Platforms have responded with a range of different design interventions and policy changes but, born of discrete controversies, these have typically focused on the most extreme, unambiguous manifestations of online misogyny: explicit threats of violence; doxxing and stalking; image-based sexual abuse; and clear hate speech.

While dealing with acute harms remains important, this paper focuses on the broader range of harmful, misogynistic behaviours that women face online. Feminist scholarship emphasises that violence against women is systemic, exists on a continuum, and cannot be categorised or ranked by severity (Kelly, 1987). 'Everyday' expressions of misogyny play a significant role in normalising violence against women and reinforcing the beliefs that underpin the more exceptional misogynistic attacks (Gillett, 2018). In this paper, 'everyday misogyny' refers to the subtler, often more insidious manifestations of online misogyny that do not reach the threshold for prohibition or removal under either the law or platform policies. These include misogynistic jokes, and discourses that dismiss women's experiences of domestic and sexual violence.

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This study, a work-in-progress, aims to build a deeper understanding of how everyday misogyny manifests in ordinary language and debates on social media platforms, as a step towards developing better mechanisms for identifying and responding to online misogyny. Combatting online misogyny requires a holistic approach that addresses ‘everyday misogyny’ alongside the more acute manifestations (Suzor et al, 2019). Because digital platforms have so far focused predominantly on the illegal or otherwise extreme manifestations of misogyny, content moderation practices have generally failed to address a wide range of routine content and behaviours that cause real harm to women. Where platforms have introduced interventions aimed at less acute forms of harm, these have been based around counterspeech or individual-level controls, rather than structural change.

The continued focus on extreme content has been supported by technical necessity and path dependency. As major social media platforms have invested heavily in scaling up their human and automated content moderation systems, they have prioritised consistency (Caplan, 2018). It is much easier to consistently identify explicit, egregious pieces of prohibited content than it is to understand context or nuance at scale (Suzor, 2019). Automated tools therefore tend to be better at identifying vitriol or incivility, rather than toxic ideologies like misogyny (Dias Oliva et al, 2021; Trott et al, 2022). Platforms also have a history of making serious mistakes that have caused further harm to already-marginalised groups with policies that wrongly target counter-speech or that are exploited by organised groups of malicious actors (Duguay et al, 2018).

This paper is part of a broader, multi-platform project that examines the role of social media platforms in the manifestation and spread of everyday online misogyny. In this study, we address a crucial preliminary question: how might platforms reliably identify and understand different forms of everyday misogyny in ordinary social discourses? Here we present preliminary findings of a case study of everyday misogyny on Twitter/X in discourses about violence against women. We analyse this data through an interdisciplinary conceptual framework grounded in insights from the scholarly literature on violence against women, combined with an understanding of the capabilities and limitations of content moderation technologies. Ultimately, we hope to help inform ongoing debates in the content moderation literature about what platforms might do – and be required or expected to do – to address structural social harms.

Methods

This paper presents the research design and initial findings of a case study analysis of the public Twitter (now, X) discourse surrounding the *Depp v Heard* trial. *Depp v Heard* was a defamation case brought by Johnny Depp against former partner, Amber Heard, in relation to an op-ed Heard published in 2018 in which she referred to herself as a victim of domestic abuse. The six-week trial was televised and was widely discussed online. The online response to the trial became emblematic of the backlash against the #MeToo movement and the active contestation of social attitudes towards gender-based violence (Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2023).

This paper uses a mixed-methods approach to analyse posts made on Twitter about the *Depp v Heard* trial between 4 April 2022 (one week before the trial) and 8 June 2022

(one week after the trial). We collected 10 million posts using keywords including 'johnny', 'depp', 'deppvheard'. We conducted high-level preliminary analysis of themes in the discourses using topic modelling, and are refining the modelling through an iterative, inductive process. We are now using these topics to guide more in-depth qualitative analysis of subsets of data extracted by combining purposive and random sampling.

Preliminary results

The varied manifestations of misogyny on display in relation to the *Depp v Heard* trial provide a useful opportunity to examine the challenges of addressing everyday misogyny online. The explicit rape and death threats Heard received are already prohibited under platform policies; dealing more effectively with these requires iterative improvements to detection and enforcement processes. More difficult questions arise in relation to the moderation of the widespread jokes, tropes, parodies of Heard's testimony and disinformation about the trial, much of which was grounded in misogyny. While not prohibited under law or platform policy, these everyday expressions of misogyny work to legitimise violence against women, or at least to render it less visible in mainstream culture (Jones et al, 2020; Lockyer and Savigny, 2020; Powell and Henry, 2017).

Our initial analysis raises questions about the usefulness of counterspeech in addressing everyday misogyny on social media platforms. Major social media platforms tend to rely on counterspeech, in some form, as a remedy to content that is harmful but does not reach the threshold for prohibition; this is evident both in their public statements and in proposed interventions like Community Notes (Nunziato, 2020). This approach is premised on the 'marketplace of ideas' theory of speech, that if all ideas can be freely expressed and debated, the best will rise to the top. However, our preliminary analysis challenges this theory where misogynistic themes make debate itself a vehicle for oppression. Our data suggests that Twitter posts about the trial overwhelmingly favoured Depp, often featured misinformation and myths about violence against women, and disproportionately focused on events that were tangential to the main question of the case. This effectively served to obscure Heard's evidence of domestic and sexual violence. Rather than working as a *remedy* to the harms of everyday misogyny, we find that online 'debate' about women's testimonies of violence – the 'digitization of doubt' (Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2023) – may instead be a *manifestation* of everyday misogyny in some circumstances. We are conducting further research to expand on these preliminary findings, and to examine the role of Twitter's technical features and content moderation policies and practices.

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