GENDER AND MISINFORMATION: DIGITAL HATE AND HARASSMENT

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Panel introduction

Social media platforms allow for free expression and speech, but also open possibilities for online misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, harms, and conspiracy theories (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019). Here, gender as an analytical category plays a significant role in understanding how women, LGBTQ+ people, and members of various minorities in particular are disproportionately targeted by hate actors. In fact, through gendered violence and online hate, social media serves to promote structural inequality where gender minorities become the target of harassment (Jane 2014a; Jane 2017). Gendered violence and cyberhate have consequences that negatively impact women and queer groups and pose a threat to political goals through victimization and

reinforcement of patriarchy (Jane, 2014b). Though anonymous in nature, mobilized and networked hate becomes a product of what Castells (1986) refers to as the culture of real virtuality where there is a flow of capital, information, technology, images as well as organizational interaction. In particular, gendered cyberhate targets women in lonstanding discourses that view men as superior to women (Jane, 2014b). Misogyny exists as a connective tissue that legitimizes the subjugation of feminine and othered identities in relation to heteronormative patriarchy (Kaul, 2021).

In particular, online violence against women in politics poses a deepening challenge to democracy, serving as a key tool of illiberalism and democratic backsliding across the globe. Hate speech against women in politics, female journalists and other public figures encompasses all forms of aggression, coercion and intimidation seeking to exclude women from the digital public sphere simply because they are women. Gender misinformation here itself becomes a form of violence that undermines women and othered identities, and weaponizes gendered narratives to promote political, social or economic objectives. This online behavior seeks to achieve political outcomes: targeting individual women to harm them or drive them out of public life, while also sending a message that women in general should not be involved in politics. It is important to note that digital misogyny may not be overt at all times but benign and subtle - involving "everyday, seemingly innocent slights, comments, overgeneralizations, othering, and denigration of marginalized groups" (Anderson, 2010; Anderson, 2015) that although unintentional is insidious and dangerous.

Despite growing concerns about the increasing prevalence of misogynistic or sexist hate speech on different popular digital platforms, research in this field and the attention directed at ways to combat hate online is relatively recent. At this juncture, this panel on Gender Misinformation: Hate and Harassment will provide a forum to discuss how women in politics, journalism, and the film industry are perceived, and what the hate that targets these women looks like in practice in a global context. We bring together scholars whose interdisciplinary and comparative work in Germany, Azerbaijan, Philippines, India and Brazil focuses on prominent women in the digital public sphere and political leaders from racial, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups to demonstrate how misogynistic speech acts to exacerbate patriarchal norms, and operationalize a relationship between gender and power. In addition to the focus on digital hate and harassment in the Global South, this panel also brings together a diversity of methodological interventions

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GENDERED DISINFORMATION AND ITS IMPACT ON FEMALE JOURNALISTS IN THE PHILIPPINES AND AZERBAIJAN

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Introduction

The environment in which journalists and news organizations operate has been deteriorating in the United States and in other parts of the world amidst rising populism and authoritarianism, political polarization, and democratic backsliding. Technological advances have increased the pollution in a complex information ecosystem, sowing distrust and discord between members of the public and journalists. While politically motivated mis- and disinformation–in various forms and to differing degrees–have always been a societal problem, the interconnected infrastructure of the internet provides affordances and constraints that facilitate the targeted spread of false information across populations. Even democratic countries increasingly face institutional legitimation crisis linked to digital news environments characterized by information disorder (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Targeted information campaigns by state actors, foreign and domestic, are increasingly leveraging the attention economy to influence political news media. Social media platforms, and the technological capacity to influence content at scale, contribute to this destabilizing environment, fostering conditions for distrust and digital attacks against the media.

According to Starbird et al. (2019), strategic information operations (SIOs) are "efforts by individuals and groups, including state and nonstate actors, to manipulate public opinion and change how people perceive events in the world by intentionally altering the information environment" (p. 2). While this term is expansive in the types of operations it covers (e.g., disinformation, political propaganda, other forms of online manipulation, etc.), it has not specifically engaged with how SIOs harm journalists and journalism. This paper examines how actors use strategic information operations, including gendered disinformation and harassment, to target female journalists in Azerbaijan and the Philippines. More specifically, the authors investigate the following research questions: 1) What types of strategic information operations are targeting journalists?, 2) How do strategic information operations affect how journalists interact with audiences?, and 3) How do they change journalists' news gathering activities?

Literature Review

Scholars have shown that journalists are increasingly attacked digitally and physically for their work by state and non-state actors (Henrichsen, 2020; 2021; Henrichsen & Shelton, 2022; Henrichsen et al., 2015). These attacks range from sophisticated technical attacks, like Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks and the hacking of journalistic devices (Marczak et al., 2020) to online harassment (Lewis et al., 2020; Reporters Without Borders, 2018; Westcott, 2019) and "mob censorship" (Waisbord,

2020a) in which citizens engage in bottom-up vigilantism "aimed at disciplining and silencing journalists" (p. 1031). These actions can result in a variety of harms to journalists and news organizations from limited digital publicity (Waisbord, 2020b), self-censorship and limited press freedoms (Posetti et al., 2021), to financial concerns (i.e., ransomware), and increased emotional labor among journalists (Miller & Lewis, 2020).

Harassment increasing has a gendered component with female journalists, journalists of color, and those identifying as lesbian and bisexual more likely to receive online harassment and abuse (Chen et al., 2020; Miller, 2020; Posetti et al., 2021). When journalists receive abuse, it typically involves misogynistic and racist elements (Posetti et al., 2021). Female journalists are also more likely to self-censor or leave their job following such abuse, compared to their male colleagues (Miller, 2020).

Methodology

Drawing on the concept of "networked authoritarianism" (MacKinnon, 2011), we use a comparative case study approach, involving Azerbaijan and the Philippines. We selected Azerbaijan and the Philippines as case studies because both countries are technologically developed and have precarious political environments; both countries represent understudied journalistic contexts that, while influenced by Western journalistic norms and values, have developed distinctive professional cultures in response to their respective institutional contexts; and because both countries have high-profile journalistic exemplars with large social media footprints, providing a rich context to assess the impact of SIOs on digitally focused journalists with a strong sense of professional identity.

We interviewed the Azerbaijan journalistic exemplar, Arzu Geybulla, and included first-hand accounts from the Filipino journalistic exemplar, Maria Ressa, who spoke at recent events. We performed a content analysis of nearly 150,000 social media posts, reflecting these two journalists' Twitter data between 2015 and 2022 to see whether, and to what extent, journalists' self-reported reactions were reflected in their online media presence. Social media data was collected through Twitter's academic research API v2.0 by downloading all tweets and retweets made on the timelines of each journalist. Using descriptive statistics from all corpora, we employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) engaging in open, selective, and theoretical coding to connect journalist's experiences to their public presentation on social media.

Findings

This paper extends the boundaries of SIOs by linking them to gendered disinformation operations deployed against an understudied, yet critical population (journalists) in understudied country contexts (Azerbaijan and the Philippines). Through an analysis of the journalistic exemplars' online behavior, we found the SIOs against the journalists affected how they interacted with audiences and affected how they engaged in news gathering activities. While the overall Twitter activity of both Geybulla and Ressa slightly declined over the years, the topic models of their respective tweets show significant variation in the subjects they reported on after being targeted by SIOs. Although Geybulla and Ressa still engaged in significant reporting about their respective national

politics, the likelihood of posting about national elections and political figures declined over time. Following these declines, both journalists were far more likely to post about issues related to press freedom, catalyzed by offline events such as legal actions against journalists and news organizations.

Although both journalists changed their newsgathering activities, they rhetorically reinforced the importance of their journalistic roles. As Mammadov (2021) has noted, Azerbaijani journalists take on unique professional roles as political activists, populist disseminators, and citizen helpers. As political activists, they act as adversaries to government action, a role that Geybulla consistently reflects in her reporting on corruption, protests, and the persecution of journalists. As populist disseminators and citizen helpers, Azerbaijani journalists also take an audience-centered approach to act as a voice of public opinion and connect readers with high-quality information sources that assist in interpreting, rather than merely reporting, events. Here, Geybulla's heavy use of social media and audience engagement - even with her trolls - is reflective of this understanding of her professional journalistic role. Even as she became more dispassionate and detached from reporting on Azerbaijan generally, she continued to embody the unique journalistic roles found in an Azerbaijani context.

In the Philippines, Ressa also reinforced the importance of her journalistic role despite ongoing threats and attacks. Ressa's commitment to the watchdog role aligns with the role perceptions that Filipino journalists have in an era of mis- and disinformation. Balod and Hameleers (2021) found that the most important role conceptions among Filipino journalists in an environment of inaccurate information were those of disseminator and watchdog. As such, journalists view themselves as "truth crusaders" and "advocates of societal reform" more so than interpreters of the news (Balod & Hameleers, 2021, p. 2368). The emphasis that journalists place on the disseminator and watchdog roles stems from the threats to their autonomy and authority amid an environment of rife mis- and disinformation. It also triggers their need to defend the role of journalism to society (Balod & Hameleers, 2021).

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DIGITAL MISOGYNY AND MISINFORMATION: STATE PROPAGANDA IN BOLLYWOOD

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Introduction

I examine the hate campaign against Bollywood actress Rhea Chakraborty on Twitter following the suicide of a prominent Indian actor and Chakraborty's partner, Sushant Singh Rajput. I study how this misogyny is linked to a government sponsored hate campaign against the Bollywood industry and its liberal values. I attempt to uncover traces of vilification and misogynistic hate in the discourse directed against Rhea by examining Twitter hashtags following the actor's death to demonstrate how the focus of this discourse emerges as a form of government political propaganda, and seeks to undermine Bollywood's liberal values.

Background

Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput was found dead by suicide at his Mumbai residence on June 14, 2020. After news of his death broke, Rajput's mental health struggles emerged. Following his death, conspiracy theories circulated that Rajput had been driven to his death by 1) the nepotism in India's film industry, which had hated him for being an outsider, and 2) his girlfriend and live-in partner, Rhea Chakraborty, who was accused of abetment to suicide, theft, cheating, conspiracy and wrongful confinement of the actor.

Following this sponsored campaign, Rhea Chakraborty was subjected to misogyny and media hounding, including on social media where "justice for Sushant" trended for months. The media's character assassination of her has escalated since. Her phone conversations and pictures were leaked to the media, and she was blamed Rajput's suicide. Her lifestyle, education and property became part of public discussion.

Literature Review

India has witnessed a steady rise in the number of Internet users in recent years (Mishra & Chanchani, 2020) with increasing connectivity bringing more Indians online. However, as the largest consumer of social media platforms India is emerging as a breeding ground for online misinformation (Singh, 2019). Given the country's history of communal violence (Brass, 2003), digital misinformation has become a pressing issue. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP party and similar actors weaponized social media platforms to spread disinformation campaigns (Chaudhuri,2020; Mihindukulasuriya, 2020; Neyazi et al., 2021).

The scholarship on Hindutva ideology, its origins in India, and its steady rise since India's independence is vast (Sahai, 1958; Anderson & Damle, 2019; Shani, 2021; Sahgal, 2020). The BJP is a right-wing Hindu nationalist political party that has close

ties to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a "religio-political revivalist ideology that seeks to make Hinduism the dominant and exclusive force of Indian culture and identity" (Khan & Lutful, 2021). Following BJP's 2014 and 2019 electoral victories, India's political campaigns became infused with right-wing Hindutva nationalism, particularly on digital platforms, and increased the possibility of "India becoming a Hindu Rashtra or a Hindu state." The rise of digital Hindutva in recent years can be attributed to the increased number of followers for BJP on platforms such as Twitter, and the party's highly "diverse social media presence" (Udupa, 2019). The BJP and the ideology it espouses have demonstrated "well-coordinated, centralized, and targeted media strategies that create narratives of Hinduphobia in the form of trolling and attacks on critics that create sites of Hindutva knowledge production and dissemination" (Thapliyal et al, 2022; Reddy, 2011; Banaji, 2018).

Whether it is through the dissemination of doctored images on WhatsApp before the national elections (Campbell-Smith & Bradshaw, 2019), or hate campaigns against Indian Muslims (Neyazi, 2019), digital misinformation in the Indian context warrants empirical research to identify and mitigate the concern. According to Mangurkar and Rangaswamy, this misinformation is shaped by an increase in discriminatory discourse against gender minorities, Indian women, and LGBTQIA+ communities in India (2022). Scholarship in feminist literature in India finds linkages to masculine manifestation and patriarchal values as important to the process of nation building. Women are "reproducers of ethnic collectivity, transmitters of culturally sanctioned behaviors, and carriers of honor" within the fabric of nationhood (Pande, 2022). This representation of male power, gender inequality and lack of female agency contribute to structures of nationalism, religious pride, patriarchy and misogyny that begin to emerge on platforms in the form of misinformation campaigns.

Method

I collected a total of 2128 tweets in English and Hindi, one of India's prominent languages, from Twitter using Twitter APIs. I employed specific hashtags as filters including #JusticeforSSR, #SushantwasKilled, and #SSRMurderNot Suicide to collect data between June 14th, 2020 and June 14th, 2021. The majority of tweets I collected included the hahstag JusticeforSSR.

I employed qualitative deductive coding on the dataset to understand the larger cultural patterns that emerge in the form of conspiracy theories against Rhea. I coded several questions including "does this tweet/post denote misogyny against actor Chakraborty," and "does this tweet/post propagate a known conspiracy theory," for each post in binaries of 0 and 1 to indicate the number and type of misinformation that surrounds the death of Sushant Singh Rajput. Using grounded theory, I organized these conspiracy theories in multiple ways. I conducted a textual analysis of tweets to understand how misogyny and hate propaganda emerge on these platforms.

Results

Conspiracy Theories and Gendered Misinformation

166 tweets in the entire dataset indicate misogyny. I have categorized this misogyny in two distinct ways - one that labels Rhea Chakraborty as Sushant Singh Rajput's murderer and the other that is a call for her arrest.

The first category is where tweets characterize Chakraborty as a murderer who killed Sushant. These are a few tweets as representative samples of this categorization. Here, Chakraborty is labelled as a murderer, a thief who stole the actor's money and is a gold digger. As a woman and his partner, she is blamed for his failures in life and his death. Her identity is that of a manipulative gold digger who practices witchcraft, and engaged in money laundering and cheating. A number of tweets engage in elaborate conspiratorial storytelling based on media narratives on how Chakraborty and her associates stole money from Sushant and killed him. I characterize this misogyny as entrenched within different kinds of conspiracy theories on how and why Sushant Singh was murdered, and how the Mumbai Police has stayed silent to protect Bollywood higher ups.

Misogyny and far-right Hindutva

The second category of emerging misogyny is characterized specifically through the calls for the arrest of Rhea, and the use of the hashtag #ArrestRhea. A number of posts that call for her arrest do so by labelling her a drug addict, consumer and peddler. This thread connects far-right misogyny in the case of Chakraborty with government propaganda against Bollywood celebrities and liberal values. A number of tweets call for a boycott of Bollywood and characterize celebrities, including Rhea, as drug addicts.

I argue the Hindutva government is using powerful tools, including media and digital propaganda to curtail the creative freedom of Bollywood, and to label Bollywood actors as drug addicts and peddlers. This is a desire to return to India's traditional values of brahmanical heteropatriarchy, Hindutva puritanism, and masculinity. The outpouring of hatred towards the actress and Internet vigilantes labeling her as a "manipulative murderer" reveals ingrained misogyny. This research contends the campaign against Rhea Chakraborty performs two crucial functions. First, it diverts public attention from government failures in handling COVID-19. Second, it serves to undermine the liberal values Bollywood espouses.

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'THEY MUST FIRST BE RAPED AND MUTILATED':

EARLY EVIDENCE OF THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT OF ONLINE HARASSMENT ON WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS IN GERMANY

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Introduction

Women in elected office are especially vulnerable to online harassment (Bowles, 2016; Carter and Sneesby, 2017; Rheault, 2019). Through the use of online and communication technologies that cause, facilitate or threaten violence (Dunn, 2020; Der Spiegel, 2021; UN, 2015), online harassment can take different forms. These categories include one or a combination of the use of swear words, insults, trolling, cyberstalking, harassment, bullying, personal attacks on someone's private life, attacks targeted at a group, hate speech, sexual exploitation, revenge porn (Rheault, 2019) or deep fakes (Gosse and Burkell, 2020). Despite the severity of these crimes, offending perpetrators are seldom held accountable, and online harassment is often dismissed (Krook, 2017; Krook, 2018), generating mental health struggles for women active in the public eye.

This study provides the first-ever attempt to map the mental health impact of online harassment amongst one of the most visible groups in German society: women elected to the German parliament. The German parliament provides a unique setting for this study. Germany has strong hate speech laws in place and is the first western democracy to institute content moderation laws, but online harassment is pervasive among elected leaders serving in the German parliament. The 2021 federal election highlighted that, despite Germany being ranked as one of the best countries in the world for women (US News, 2023), women politicians continue to be subjected to online harassment in various forms (Schultheis, 2021). Lesser known is the mental health toll that online harassment takes on women in elected office. This study attempts to help fill that gap.

Literature Review

Chadwick (2013) notes that election campaigns in democracies play out intensely over social media channels and especially X (Twitter). Metatexas and Mustafaraj (2012) point out that a defining feature of the digital age is that people choosing to dedicate their lives to politics must be prepared to face a torrent of insults and disparaging comments aimed at them through social media platforms like X (Twitter), Facebook and Instagram. Bowles (2016) and Carter and Sneesby (2017) further affirm that women who occupy leadership roles in elected office and politics trigger negative reactions from the public offline as well as online. Rheault (2019) showed that online harassment is an extension of the offline harassment that women experience.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (2017) and Lomba, et., al., (2021) point to women across Europe and Germany as easy targets for online harassment. Women running for office are judged more harshly, often along the lines of likeability, attractiveness and intelligence. Krook (2017) points out that reports of abuse and harassment have increased since women have become more politically engaged around the world. Despite their severity, these acts have often been relegated to the "cost of doing politics," instead of a negative challenge to democracy (Krook, 2017; Krook, 2018). Wilfore (2021) notes that nearly nine in 10 female parliament members in Germany have been targeted by online threats. A Der Spiegel study indicates that 69% of female members of parliament in Germany have experienced harassment while in office (Wilfore, 2021).

Nearly every study connecting online violence to mental health determines that victims endure harmful effects. Stevens, Nurse and Arief (2021) find that victims of cyberstalking or harassment experience anxiety, depression, sadness, anger, fear, shame, embarrassment, isolation, low self-esteem, paranoia, stomach aches, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), self-harming behavior or heart palpitations. Camp (2016) indicates some victims of online harassment can harbor self-harm thoughts or suicidal ideations.

Rationale & Preliminary Findings

Limited media articles from outlets in Germany and the U.S. have covered online harassment against women parliamentarians. Initial findings indicate that women parliamentarians in Germany experience online abuse. While some parliamentarians have been more open about their experiences with online harassment than others, collected statements from interviews with current women parliamentarians point to the extensiveness of online harassment against women parliamentarians.

Harassment cuts across age, religion and years in office. In other words, women parliamentarians, regardless of age, religion and years served, encounter online harassment at a higher prevalence than men politicians. Women parliamentarians who report online harassment may be new to elected office, and others have served for years. In one example quoted in the press, longtime parliamentarian Claudia Roth reported receiving death threats. She also received emails that she is to be "fu**** to death" (Brandes, 2021). Other parliamentarians report sex-based image abuse (Wilfore, 2021). Several of the parliamentarians respond to harassment in various ways, often including social media. One parliamentarian says she tweeted photos that contain racist and sexist content. Others says that they respond directly on their social media feeds.

Online harassment has led to feelings of stress and anxiety among victims. Some parliamentarians say they have had to take extra security precautions. Chebli travels with police protection. She and other parliamentarians connect online harassment to offline violence. During an interview, Roth says, "in the fantasies of the people who send them, it is not enough for women to be killed – they must first be raped and humiliated" (Brandes, 2021).

The mental health toll on women parliamentarian also ranges. Frustration is a common response. Women parliamentarians express frustration over the lack of legal remedy. Some are challenging the German justice system to take action against perpetrators. For example, one parliamentarian, Sawsan Chebli, a Muslim and the daughter of immigrants, is calling on the German government to take further action. On her X account, she tweeted, "I hope that the German judiciary will take legal action against this man who dares to send me such a racist, Islamophobic, inhumane, sexist letter with his real name and make it clear that this is not freedom of expression" (Chebli X, 2021).

Other parliamentarians are willing to take legal action. For example, parliament member Renate Kunaest, took perpetrators who posted explicit online content about her to court. *Kunaest vs. Facebook* was settled before judges at the German Constitutional Court who ruled in her favor.

Analysis

Online harassment shows no indication of abatement in Germany. Despite more women running for and being elected to office, there is limited understanding and appreciation for the impact online harassment has on women psychologically. This is particularly worrisome, given the seriousness and near ubiquity of the instances. Politicians are reporting being threatened with sexual assault and death, and very few perpetrators are held accountable.

The mental health responses range. Feelings of frustration, anxiety and stress appear to be common among victims. The parliament is the seat of German democracy, and further actions may be required on part of the government to protect women from online abuse and provide institutional services if such instances continue to occur. Legal recourse exists for victims, but few seem willing to take that step. Initial findings indicate that more work remains to understand the mental health toll of online harassment on the psyche of women and what existing laws can do to better protect them.

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