"I have a folder in my email called Hate Mail": academic public engagement, digital hate, and the unequally distributed risks of visibility

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Abstract

Public engagement through 'traditional' and social media is an increasingly important way for scholars to communicate research with wider audiences, with academics encouraged to maintain a public profile to disseminate work. This has important activist potential for radical knowledge production, but only if all voices can participate on equal, safe terms. No existing work on digital hate accounts for the diversity of the academic community, and therefore we cannot adequately account for how certain voices are being excluded from public debate.

Drawing on data from 85 survey responses and 13 in-depth interviews with UK academics across disciplines, this article argues that the risks of visibility are unevenly distributed in ways that exacerbate harm to already marginalised groups. Our data challenges popular notions that visibility is its own reward. We demonstrate how visibility exposes academics to the kinds of online misogyny, racism, ableism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, fatphobia and transphobia that characterise cultures of online hate. We reflect upon how academics in the 'wrong' body are denied intellectual authority in public debate through abuse targeting their intersectional identities and right to belong.[1] Our data finds that digital hate not only affects academics' careers, but also causes significant physical and mental harms that seep into academics' personal lives. There cannot be meaningful, radical potential in public knowledge sharing if we cannot protect those most at risk of harm in the process.

Keywords

Digital hate; intersectionality; academia; public engagement; risks of visibility.

[1] Crenshaw K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167; Grosz, Elizabeth (1994). Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Femininity. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Fisanick, C., 2007. " They Are Weighted with Authority": Fat Female Professors in Academic and Popular Cultures. Feminist Teacher, 17(3), pp.237-255.

Introduction

In an interview on the podcast Empire, historian Professor David Olusoga spoke about needing to employ a bodyguard to accompany him to public events because of racist threats he had received online about his broadcast work on the history of Black Britain.[2] Olusoga reflected on the risks of being a public historian, given the toxicity of public debate in Britain. In a follow-up podcast episode, the presenters read out letters from listeners shocked that Olusoga, a leading expert on Empire, was subject to such extreme levels of hate. Olusoga's experiences dovetail with reports from journalists, politicians, and celebrities on the hate they receive due to being in the public eye.[3]

Public engagement through 'traditional' and social media is an important way for scholars to communicate research with wider audiences, with academics encouraged to maintain a public, online profile to disseminate work. This includes hosting public social media profiles (at the time of data collection, this was most commonly Twitter), hosting websites, publishing blogs or opinion pieces, giving printed, audio or video interviews to online or 'traditional' media outlets, taking part in public seminars and events, and promotion of a wide range of academic activities and research outputs. Whilst our focus is *digital* hate, this cannot be treated in isolation as a solely digital phenomena in a media ecosystem where 'traditional' and social media remediate one another. Our opening example of Olusoga offers a case in which a television broadcast prompted online hate. This flow of content occurs in both directions, for example when academic tweets are quoted in newspaper articles, or television news interviews

[2] Empire Podcast (2022). 'Queen Elizabeth II & Empire (with David Olusoga)'. 13 September, https://open.spotify.com/episode/5fvidV68X1ddQrNLfdJOaz?si=k5G_jGUmR_-XuISgWngI-w

[3] Martin, F., 2018. Tackling gendered violence online: Evaluating digital safety strategies for women journalists. Australian Journalism Review, 40(2), pp.73-89; Mitra, Sreya (2020) Trolled, body-shamed and slut-shamed: the desecration of the contemporary Bollywood female star on social media, Celebrity Studies, 11:1, 101-115; Miller, K.C. and Lewis, S.C., 2022. Journalistic Visibility as Celebrity and its Consequences for Harassment. *Digital Journalism*, pp.1-20; Waisbord, Silvio (2020) Mob Censorship: Online Harassment of US Journalists in Times of Digital Hate and Populism, Digital Journalism, 8:8, 1030-1046

with academics are posted on news outlets' social media accounts.[4] The examples we will discuss in this article show an interrelation of social and 'traditional' media in bringing academics to broader attention.

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement defines public engagement as "the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public.[5] Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit". This is therefore any way that academics communicate their research with audiences outside of academia. In contrast, the Research Excellence Framework defines impact as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia".[6] The onus here is on measuring or quantifying change resulting from research findings. Thus, whilst public engagement may be part of a strategy to generate impact, and these agendas are frequently discussed in combination, they are distinct activities. This article focuses primarily upon online, public visibility as a consequence of growing sector enthusiasm for public engagement, often (but not always) as a pathway to impact. Many universities offer implicit and explicit encouragement for researchers to enter the public eye, for example, one of the authors of this article has been required to attend mandatory training on how to build a Twitter following as a 'pathway to Impact', the other has been invited to training on how to use social media to be a 'more open and impactful academic'.[7] The Economic and Social Research Council tells applicants to its Standard Grants that 'outputs, dissemination and impact are a key part of the assessment criteria, and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council dedicates a section of its UKRI website to impact and

[4] Yelin, Hannah, & Clancy, Laura (2020). Doing impact work while female: Hate tweets, 'hot potatoes' and having 'enough of experts.' European Journal of Women's Studies, 28(2), 175–193

[5] NCCPE (2023). 'What is public engagement?' https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about-engagement/what-public-engagement [Accessed 11/09/23]

[6] UKRI (2022) 'How Research England supports research excellence', https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/research-england/research-excellence/ref-impact/

[7] Donelan H. (2016). Social media for professional development and networking opportunities in academic. Journal of Further and Higher Education, 40, pp.706–729

public engagement.[8] Even where public academic social media profiles are not institutionally mandated, internalised social pressures can lead colleagues to these spaces, because non-participation means missing out on important social capital 'through networking, sharing content, showing appreciation for the work of others, and sharing information about themselves'.[9] Universities require these activities because impact and public engagement are both scored in the Research Excellence Framework, the results of which determine how much funding institutions receive.

There are social and professional rewards for doing this work. In addition to funding, a public profile can translate into standing within the university and parlayed into material for promotion applications. Outside of institutional expectations, in theory, this work has important activist potential for radical knowledge production as part of democratic education beyond the 'ivory tower' of the academy. The ability to connect with different audiences is a vital resource that should be protected, particularly in the context of people searching for reliable sources amongst rising digital misinformation, to which peer-reviewed academic work could be a corrective. Radical knowledge production has many models, including activities such as blogging open-source publishing, grassroots activism, prioritising marginalised voices, decentralising the status of the individual author, arts- or creative-based interventions, and recognising lived experience as a form of expertise, all of which can disrupt institutional power and ownership structures.[10] However, radical knowledge production as activism can be impeded in the context of public engagement work that has been quantified, professionalised, and objectified by universities, often as part of 'impact agendas'.[11]

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[8] UKRI (2023a). 'ESRC responsive mode: research grants round one' https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/esrc-responsive-mode-research-grant-round-one/ [Accessed 26/09/2023]; UKRI (2023b). 'Public engagement – EPSRC'. https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/public-engagement/public-engagement-epsrc/ [Accessed 26/09/2023]

[9] Kapidzic, S., 2020. The social academic: A social capital approach to academic relationship management on social media. Information, Communication & Society, 23(11), pp.1673-1688.

[10] Gregg, Melissa (2006) Feeling Ordinary: Blogging as Conversational Scholarship, Continuum, 20:2, 147-160,

[11] Smith, K.E., Bandola-Gill, J., Meer, N., Stewart, E. and Watermeyer, R., 2020. *The impact agenda: Controversies, consequences and challenges*. Policy Press.

Employer pressure does not account for how public engagement work is experienced by the researchers themselves. As the case of David Olusoga and his bodyguard demonstrates, the negative consequences of public engagement can be extreme. In 2020, we published an auto-ethnographic article on our experiences of receiving digital abuse after our research on Meghan Markle was featured (and misrepresented) in newspapers, news websites and news outlets' social media around the world.[12] In it, we reflected on how, as women, the abuse we were subjected to was often explicitly gendered, and we called for further research on how academics who undertake public engagement might be unequally subject to abuse and harassment according to their intersectional identities. We set up the project Cultures of Digital Hate to account for these wider experiences, and have collected 85 survey responses and undertaken 13 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with UK academics across disciplines and institutions. Following Kimberle Crenshaw's understanding that intersecting social positions such as gender and race shape our lives and positions within systems of domination,[13] we sought to an intersectional understanding of digital hate targeting academics, and their unequal experiences of the risks of visibility: for example, are scholars of colour subject to racist backlash when posting about their research online; are disabled scholars subject to ableism in this context? We work with the understanding that scholars' axes of identity "build on each other and work together; and that, while often invisible, these intersecting power relations affect all aspects of the social world".[14] As such, this article considers how those academics who are considered to have the 'wrong' body to belong in the white, cisheteropatriarchal 'ivory towers' of academia are discouraged from public debate due to experiences of digital hate. We open with a survey of the literature on the intersectional nature of digital hate, and feminist work on intersectionality and 'bodies out of place'. We then describe the severity of the effects of digital hate, and how this seeps into significant personal harms. Considering how our participants talk about their identities, we unpack how the harms of digital hate particularly target academics

[12] Clancy, Laura & Hannah Yelin (2020) 'Meghan's Manifesto': Meghan Markle and the Co-option of Feminism, *Celebrity Studies*, 11:3, 372-377; Yelin, Hannah, & Clancy, Laura (2020). Doing impact work while female: Hate tweets, 'hot potatoes' and having 'enough of experts.' European Journal of Women's Studies, 28(2), 175–193

[13] Crenshaw K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167

[14] Collins, P.H. and Bilge, S., 2020. Intersectionality. John Wiley & Sons, p.5

from already marginalised groups, therefore exacerbating inequality and raising the issue of who is permitted to embody the authority of a public academic.

The neoliberal university and digital hate

Universities encourage academics to use digital platforms for public engagement activities and neoliberalised 'self-branding'.[15] As work that does not appear in university workloads this can be seen as "the free labor that sustains the Internet", as part of a gendered and racialised history of exploitative internet labour.[16] This kind of public academia and digital engagement occurs both on the level of informal cultural expectation - sharing publications, work in progress ideas and calls for participation in conferences and events - and as an explicit directive in forms such as mandatory training and funding requirements.

However, "visibility has drawbacks", especially for minoritised groups given the racist, misogynist, transphobic, classist, homophobic, xenophobic, fatphobic and ableist abuse that flourishes online as a continuation of offline violence and material inequality.[17] A 2021 study by Pew Research found that 41% of US adults have been subjected to online harassment.[18] The Turing Institute similarly found that while 30-40% of UK adults had been subjected to online

[15] Oestreicher-Singer, G, G Hilah and M Saar-Tsechansky (2019). 'Building online personas: Has social media become an exercise in self-branding?'. LSE Blogs, 29 April, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2019/04/29/building-online-personas-has-socialmedia-become-an-exercise-in-self-branding/; Lupton, Deborah, Inger Mewburn and Pat Thomson (2017). *The digital academic.* London: Routledge

[16] Terranova T., 2000. Free labor: producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text*, 18(2), p.48; Gregg, M. and Andrijasevic, R., 2019. Virtually absent: the gendered histories and economies of digital labour. *Feminist Review*, *123*(1), pp.1-7.

[17] Stewart, B (2016). 'Collapsed publics: Orality, literacy, and vulnerability in academic Twitter'.Journal of Applied Social Theory, 1(1), pp.61-86; Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., & Keller, J. (2018). #MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *25*(2), 236–246.

[18] Brooks, Arthur (2022). 'Trolls Aren't Like the Rest of Us'. *The Atlantic*, 17 March <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2022/03/how-to-manage-cyberbullying-internet-trolls/627084/>

abuse, the numbers of people reporting online hate is much lower, and the amount of times action is taken by platforms is even lower still.[19] This suggests that the majority of online abuse passes without consequence for the perpetrators. Multiple studies have noted the intersectional nature of abuse. The Turing Institute identifies that "Black people and those of 'Other' ethnicities are far more likely to be targeted" by online abuse than White or Asian people (ibid.), meanwhile the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that social media platforms fail to act on anti-semitism and anti-Muslim hate.[20] Disabled people are more likely to receive online abuse than non-disabled people.[21] Social media amplifies hate against LGBTQIA+ groups and digital media has been instrumental in the rapid growth of trans-exclusionary gender critical feminist campaigns.[22] Racist, homophobic and antisemitic abuse has risen exponentially since Elon Musk's 2022 purchase of Twitter, now *X*.[23] Universities are dependent platforms that are beset with inequalities and harassment as well as being deeply embedded in surveillance, racialised patriarchy, data accumulation, and the extraction of value from users.[24]

[19] Vidgen, Bertie Helen Margetts, Alex Harris (2019). 'How much online abuse is there?' The Turing Institute https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-11/online_abuse_prevalence_full_24.11.2019_-_formatted_0.pdf

[20] Center for Countering Digital Hate (2022a). 'How tech giants fail to act on user reports of antisemitism' https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Failure-to-Protect.pdf

Center for Countering Digital Hate (2022b). 'Social media platforms are failing to act on anti-muslim hate'. https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Anti-Muslim-Hate-Failure-to-Protect.pdf

[21] Vidgen, Bertie Helen Margetts, Alex Harris (2019). 'How much online abuse is there?' The Turing Institute https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-11/online_abuse_prevalence_full_24.11.2019_-_formatted_0.pdf

[22] Center for Countering Digital Hate (2022c). 'Social Media's Role In Amplifying Dangerous Lies About LGBTQ+ People'. https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/CCDH-HRC-Digital-Hate-Report-2022-single-pages.pdf; Pearce, R., Erikainen, S. and Vincent, B., 2020. TERF wars: An introduction. *The Sociological Review*, *68*(4), pp.677-698.

[23] Frenkel, Sheera and Kate Conga (2022). 'Hate Speech's Rise on Twitter Is Unprecedented, Researchers Find'. The New York Times, 2 December https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/02/technology/twitter-hate-speech.html

[24] Zuboff, S (2018). *Surveillance Capitalism*. London: Profile; Gregg, M. and Andrijasevic, R., 2019. Virtually absent: the gendered histories and economies of digital labour. *Feminist Review*, *123*(1), pp.1-7; Andrejevic M.,

Debates around the role and function of the internet have often asked whether technology is a force for improvement as it acts upon and shapes society.[25] But we take the view that digital hate does not exist in an isolated digital vacuum, but rather both contributes to and reflects the social conditions in which it operates. As Shakuntala Banaji and Ramnath Bhat discuss, online hate is a political, technological, and social 'ecosystem', which must be situated 'within specific socio-political, economic and cultural contexts'.[26] Online and offline are inseparable, and affect one another.[27] Our analysis below demonstrates that often online harms can lead directly to offline harms, and vice versa. However, universities are not taking digital hate seriously as a form of real harm; they are conveniently ignoring the continuum from online to offline harm in ways which minimise the severity of victims' experiences of digital hate.

Scholars have begun the work of examining how digital hate affects academics when they are conducting research online or hosting online events and sharing their research publicly, in particular, examining misogynist digital hate targeting women scholars.[28] Such trolling, as "a continuum of sexual violence", creates "the added labour of 'safety work'"

2007. iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas; Scholz T., 2013. *The Internet as Playground and Factory*. New York: Routledge; Jarrett, K (2022). Digital Labor. London: Wiley

[25] Morozov, E. (2013). To save everything, click here: Technology, solutionism, and the urge to fix problems that don't exist. Allen Lane

[26] Banaji Shakuntala and Ramnath Bhat (2022). *Social media and hate*. London: Routledge, p.18; 1

[27] Gray, K.L., 2020. Black gamers' resistance. Race and Media: Critical Approaches. NYU Press, United States; Benjamin, R. (2019). Race after technology. Polity

[28] Cocq, C., Liliequist, E. and Okonski, L., (2022). Protecting the Researcher in Digital Contexts. In the 6th Digital Humanities in the Nordic and Baltic Countries Conference (DHNB 2022), Uppsala, Sweden, March 15-18, 2022. (pp. 195-202); Branford, J., Grahle, A., Heilinger, J.C., Kalde, D., Muth, M., Parisi, E.M., Villa, P.I. and Wild, V., 2019. Cyberhate against academics. *Responsibility for refugee and migrant integration*, pp.205-225; Yelin, Hannah, & Clancy, Laura (2020). Doing impact work while female: Hate tweets, 'hot potatoes' and having 'enough of experts.' European Journal of Women's Studies, 28(2), 175–193; Parson, Laura (2019) Digital media responses to a feminist scholarly article: a critical discourse analysis, Feminist Media Studies, 19:4, 576-592; Savigny, H. (2020). The Violence of Impact: Unpacking Relations Between Gender, Media and Politics. *Political Studies Review*, *18*(2), 277–293; Pevac, Mikayla (2022) The darker side of feminist scholarship: how online hate

for researchers with marginalised identities.[29] Public engagement work thus raises questions of personal safety on platforms beset with harassment.[30] Houlden et al used an ecological model to analyse survey responses from academics who had been subject to online harassment and suggested there was a gendered inequality in the tenor of abuse.[31] There have been a growing number of autoethnographies from academics reflecting on the intersections of gender, race, and academia in experiences of online hate. Marcia Chatelain reflected auto-ethnographically on feeling at risk as a Black academic woman on Twitter.[32] Saida Grundy describes being Black online in the context of US racial violence where "digitized mob violence ritualistically

has become the norm, Feminist Media Studies, 22:5, 1287-1289; Ringrose, Jessica (2018) Digital feminist pedagogy and post-truth misogyny, Teaching in Higher Education, 23:5, 647-656; Olson, C. C., and V. LaPoe. 2018. "Combating the Digital Spiral of Silence: Academic Activists versus Social Media Trolls." In Mediating Misogyny, edited by Jacqueline Ryan Vickery and Tracy Everback, 271–291. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Cole, KK (2015) '"It's Like She's Eager to be Verbally Abused": Twitter, Trolls, and (En)Gendering Disciplinary Rhetoric', Feminist Media Studies, 15(2), pp.356-358; Veletsianos, George, et al. "Women scholars' experiences with online harassment and abuse: Self-protection, resistance, acceptance, and self-blame." New Media & Society 20.12 (2018): 4689–4708; Hodson, Jaigris, et al (2018). "I get by with a little help from my friends: The ecological model and support for women scholars experiencing online harassment." First Monday https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/9136/7505; Kavanagh, Emma, and Lorraine Brown (2019). "Towards a research agenda for examining online gender-based violence against women academics." Journal of Further and Higher Education: 1–9.

[29] Vera-Gray, F (2017).''Talk about a Cunt with too Much Idle Time': Trolling Feminist Research'. Feminist Review, 115(1), p.61

[30] Sobieraj, S (2018). 'Bitch, slut, skank, cunt: patterned resistance to women's visibility in digital; Ging, D and E Siapera (2018). 'Special issue on online misogyny'. Feminist Media Studies, 18(4), pp.515-524.

publics'. Information, Communication and Society, 21(11), pp.1700-1714

[31] Houlden,Shandell, Jaigris Hodson, George Veletsianos, Chandell Gosse, Patrick Lowenthal, Tonia Dousay & Nathan C. Hall (2022) 'Support for scholars coping with online harassment: an ecological framework', Feminist Media Studies, 22:5, 1120-1138

[32] Chatelain, Marcia (2019). "Is Twitter Any Place for a [Black Academic] Lady?." *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities* (2019): 172-84.

reaffirms white hegemony",[33] and Charlotte Barlow and Imran Awan found that academics who are women and/or of Muslim faith are silenced online.[34]

Conversations on digital hate often focus on individual 'coping' strategies rather than seeking structural understandings and solutions.[35] In contrast, organisations like the Center for Countering Digital Hate and Bot Sentinel have focused on Big Tech, and the responsibilities of these organisations to protect their users. In terms of the experiences of academics, Alex Ketchum has begun the important work of identifying the systems that encourage scholars to participate in public media work.[36] Her research found that only one Canadian university's Media Relations Offices' web pages included information on trolling, doxxing and harassment, and their policies for tackling this were not accessible. She calls for institutional support and resources for public facing scholars. Tressie McMillan Cottom designs a six-point checklist for institutions to ask themselves before benefitting from the "reputational currency" of public academics, including to have a protocol in place for potential threats and providing "first line defense" to protect the academics.[37] Drawing on this, our research calls for institutions to take responsibility for the academics they actively encourage to have a public profile, and in turn risk them being put in harm's way. Public engagement offers alternative forms of knowledge sharing beyond traditional hierarchies of gatekeeping, but only if all voices can participate on equal, safe terms.

Intersectionality, belonging, and 'bodies out of place'

[33] Grundy, S., 2017. A history of white violence tells us attacks on black academics are not ending (I know because it happened to me). *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *40*(11), p.1864

[34] Barlow, C. and Awan, I., 2016. "You need to be sorted out with a knife": The attempted online silencing of women and people of Muslim faith within academia. *Social Media+ Society*, *2*(4), p.2056305116678896.

[35] Martin, F., 2018. Tackling gendered violence online: Evaluating digital safety strategies for women journalists. Australian Journalism Review, 40(2), pp.73-89.

[36] Ketchum, A., 2020. "Report on the State of Resources Provided to Support Scholars Against Harassment, Trolling, and Doxxing While Doing Public Media Work and How University Media Relations Offices/ Newsrooms Can Provide Better Support," https://publicscholarshipandmediawork.blogspot.com/p/report.html

[37] Cottom, Tressie McMillan (2019). ""Everything But The Burden: Publics, Public Scholarship, And Institutions" https://tressiemc.com/uncategorized/everything-but-the-burden-publics-public-scholarship-and-institutions/#

Kimberle Crenshaw describes three dimensions of intersectionality where complex power dynamics shape Black women's lives: structural (how groups of people experience events in qualitatively different ways), political (how laws and policies render intersectionalities invisible), and representational (how culture obscures lived experiences).[38] Crenshaw makes visible 'Black women' as a lens itself to understand the specificity of experience. Our research describes how academics are vulnerable to these dimensions of erasure, particularly when they are made visible in digital publics. That is, digital hate is experienced differently by different groups; university policies do not account for intersectionality; and lived experiences are obscured in discourses which paint a purely positive picture of public engagement work.

The effect of this is that negative or mixed experiences of public engagement are not often taken into account in institutional settings. This disproportionately erases the experiences of those with marginalised identities, given that they are more likely to have been subject to digital hate. Nirmal Puwar's work on "space invaders" has shown how "bodies out of place" in institutional settings "cause disruption, necessitate negotiation and invite complicity".[39] These bodies are marked by their difference. As Sara Ahmed writes of institutional diversity "the body who is 'going the wrong way' is the one experienced as 'in the way'" of institutional momentum (2012: 186).[40] Katherine Sang et al develop the concept of the "ideal worker" to describe how "organisations assume workers are 'disembodied', unencumbered by domestic responsibilities and other aspects of life".[41] However, this disembodiment is reserved for those who have the privilege to be able to *be* disembodied: namely the white, cis-gendered, heterosexual man, who can transcend their body and be associated with 'the mind'. Elizabeth Grosz's work traces the genealogy of this within the philosophical tradition, from ancient Greece to Decartes, who "succeeded in linking the mind/ body opposition to the foundations of knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority over

[38] Crenshaw K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167

[39] Puwar, N., (2004). *Space invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place*. London: Bloomsbury, p.1

[40] Ahmed, S., 2012. On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life. Duke University Press.

[41] Sang, K., Powell, A., Finkel, R. and Richards, J., 2015. 'Being an academic is not a 9–5 job': long working hours and the 'ideal worker'in UK academia. *Labour & Industry: a journal of the social and economic relations of work*, *25*(3), p.256

and above nature, including the nature of the body".[42] Academia perpetuates a potent fantasy of itself as "a mythical, disembodied haven" in which "the only thing that matters is the mind".[43] Our findings demonstrate that the body you occupy matters very much, and transcending the body to become the privileged mind is an escape unavailable when factors like body type, gender identity, sexuality, age, national identity, class, disability, race, and ethnicity render one vulnerable to abuse.

Methods

An intersectional analysis demands understanding of "how intersecting power relations are to be analysed both via specific intersections - for example, of racism and sexism, or capitalism and heterosexism - as well as across domains of power - namely, structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal".[44] We collected 85 survey responses and undertook 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews with UK academics across disciplines and institutions. This mixed methodology sought to collect both breadth of experiences, in terms of understanding how different academics are affected, and detailed data to understand individual stories relating to academics' intersectional identities. Using intersectionality as method "focuses awareness on people and experiences—hence, on social forces and dynamics" with a corrective specificity that means the details of the ways in which power relations operate cannot be overlooked.[45] For the survey, we used Qualtrics to design 16 questions about doing public engagement, positive and negative accounts, support offered by institutions, and any fallout; these were informed by previous research.[46] The survey was tested by the project team and two

[42] Grosz, Elizabeth (1994). Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Femininity. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p.6

[43] Fisanick, C., 2007. " They Are Weighted with Authority": Fat Female Professors in Academic and Popular Cultures. Feminist Teacher, 17(3), p.237

[44] Collins, P.H. and Bilge, S., 2020. Intersectionality. John Wiley & Sons, p.20

[45] MacKinnon, C.A., 2013. Intersectionality as method: A note. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *38*(4), pp.1019-1030.

[46] Cottom, Tressie McMillan (2019). ""Everything But The Burden: Publics, Public Scholarship, And Institutions" https://tressiemc.com/uncategorized/everything-but-the-burden-publics-public-scholarship-and-institutions/#;
Ketchum, A., 2020. "Report on the State of Resources Provided to Support Scholars Against Harassment, Trolling, and Doxxing While Doing Public Media Work and How University Media Relations Offices/

independent colleagues. Once confirmed, we disseminated it via cross-disciplinary subject mailing lists and on social media. Responses were anonymous unless respondents chose to identify themselves in their answers. Questions were structured using a range of formats. However, as qualitative research seeks to understand the nature of participants' experiences, free-text boxes inviting respondents to use their own words featured heavily. Intersectionality methodology is a "Black feminist epistemology with the power to unearth, create, and/or disrupt methodological arguments" by placing "the research problem under study in its appropriate sociopolitical context" and uncovering the "micro/macro level power relations".[47] Respondents were asked about their demographic information, academic career stage and self-identified intersectional identities. Where respondents relate multiple configurations of intersecting identities in relation to their experience of abuse, we work with these intersections; where they speak about being targeted for singular aspects of their identity we analyse accordingly, cognisant that these will also be experienced as intersecting other indices of identity. Respondents raised the following categories of identity: gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, regionality, class, age, body type, neurodivergence, disability and career stage.

In the survey, we asked respondents if they would like to be contacted for interview. We sourced further interview respondents via cross-disciplinary subject mailing lists and on social media. The in-depth interviews were undertaken by one of the project team and lasted between 60-90 minutes, asking interviewees to describe their experiences and any support they had received or wanted. Interviews were transcribed, and both sets of data were coded thematically using NVivo.

Newsrooms Can Provide Better Support," https://publicscholarshipandmediawork.blogspot.com/p/report.html; Houlden,Shandell, Jaigris Hodson, George Veletsianos, Chandell Gosse, Patrick Lowenthal, Tonia Dousay & Nathan C. Hall (2022) 'Support for scholars coping with online harassment: an ecological framework', Feminist Media Studies, 22:5, 1120-1138; Yelin, Hannah, & Clancy, Laura (2020). Doing impact work while female: Hate tweets, 'hot potatoes' and having 'enough of experts.' European Journal of Women's Studies, 28(2), 175–193

[47] Haynes, C., Joseph, N.M., Patton, L.D., Stewart, S. and Allen, E.L., 2020. Toward an understanding of intersectionality methodology: A 30-year literature synthesis of Black women's experiences in higher education. *Review of Educational Research*, *90*(6), pp.751-787.

As academics who have ourselves been subject to digital hate, we reflected throughout on our own positioning. As we have argued elsewhere, neutrality is impossible when analysing harms one has been subjected to oneself.[48] Our knowledge is situated: specific, grounded, contextual, and material.[49] Therefore, we followed feminist approaches of "rendering visible individual experiences [to] enable us to make sense of the ways in which structural contexts operate".[50] Our shared experiences alongside participants helped to create a safe space when sharing trauma and informing a rapport. However, we sought to understand intersectional harms that we were not exposed to as white, cis-women. As we would be asking academics about potentially traumatic experiences, we sought to replicate trauma-informed qualitative research. This involves beginning research with an awareness of the impact of trauma on individuals and communities, establishing safety and trust, self-reflection, and avoiding re-traumatisation.[51] Our findings and sample are not large enough to quantify the scale of the problem, but rather to shed light on the severity of the ramifications for those affected, and the different characteristics of these experiences across academics from a variety of backgrounds. Where participants discuss 'impact' or 'public engagement', we use their terms regardless of any slippage between overlapping definitions.

Academics are suffering: "When the impact strikes back"

Public engagement can be a worthwhile endeavour until, in the words of one respondent, "the impact strikes back". Our data is shocking. Academics are pushed into extreme and traumatising experiences as part of their day-to-day work, experiences which go unacknowledged by their employers. 63 out of 85 (74%) survey respondents said they had been

[48] Yelin, Hannah, & Clancy, Laura (2020). Doing impact work while female: Hate tweets, 'hot potatoes' and having 'enough of experts.' European Journal of Women's Studies, 28(2), 175–193

[49] Haraway, D., 1988. Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist studies*, *14*(3), pp.575-599.

[50] Savigny, H. (2020). The Violence of Impact: Unpacking Relations Between Gender, Media and Politics. *Political Studies Review*, *18*(2), p.13

[51] Alessi, E.J. and Kahn, S., 2022. Toward a trauma-informed qualitative research approach: Guidelines for ensuring the safety and promoting the resilience of research participants. Qualitative Research in Psychology, pp.1-34.

subject to harms as a result of sharing research online, which they are implicitly and explicitly pressured to do by their employers: "What is online is mostly to keep my employer happy. I do just enough posting etc. to keep them happy". The harms that respondents and interviewees reported included outright abuse and threats to academics and their families, including rape and death threats, "stoked and coordinated" Twitter pile-ons, abusive mail and emails, phone tapping, hacking, doxxing, stalking, calls for resignation, and targeted harassment at workplaces and around academics' homes. One academic reported "I have a folder in my email called hate mail", suggesting that the abuse was so regular and of such scale that it needed its own administrative systems. Another said they had multiple spreadsheets, compiled by friends and colleagues, of abusive comments and messages through which they could track repeat offenders. This kind of (post-)traumatic emotional labour is unfairly individualised**,** as added safety labour falls to those experiencing the abuse, often unsupported.[52] Moreover, this labour is not accounted for in university models of public engagement work, despite being necessary for individuals to try to ensure their safety.

Harassment occurred in various forms, for example, "avalanche[s] of hate mail coming into" email inboxes, and handwritten letters sent to university and/or home addresses. This is one risk of having email and office addresses publicly available on university websites: "I live in genuine fear that my office details and my phone number are out there in the world for people to see". Many had emails and letters sent to their university senior management demanding that the staff member be fired. The abuse led to vulnerability, exposure, and isolation: "I kept having to tell the police all the time about these threats and also my phone was tapped. […] That was really bad. Because, I couldn't seek support from my support network […] not on my phone anyway".

Participants suggested that the rise of social media had "sent the abuse levels and threat levels rocketing", and many explicitly identified Twitter. This largely took the form of anonymous 'trolls', who in some cases pursue academics with sustained, persistent harassment: "there are always negative comments, and a few really 'serious' ones including a couple of 'trolls' who respond to everything I write with abuse". The minimal regulation of social media platforms

[52] Savigny, H. (2020). The Violence of Impact: Unpacking Relations Between Gender, Media and Politics. *Political Studies Review*, *18*(2), 277–293.

means that abuse comes "in a less processed way and it accentuates the stuff, like the death threats: the really nasty stuff that 'traditional' media would not be able to publish".

The nature of social media means that the abuse is publicly available for anyone to read. This can harm an individual's reputation, with wide-ranging professional and psychological consequences.[53] Participants worried about the wider effects on others around them, with one reporting "death threats and private threats to me and colleagues/students". Emotively, one respondent shared the personal ramifications of publicly visible abuse, reflecting on trying to protect their teenage son when he searched for articles on his parent: "I won't ever know how that's affected him. Or, how the whole experience of seeing his [parent] in this situation being absolutely… hounded will have affected him". This demonstrates the unbounded nature of online harms as they spill into every area of personal lives and relationships.

For some, this abuse has been long term, "on a daily or weekly basis that has been going on for over a decade". Some cases are continuous, for example, targeting "almost all engagement with anything [one participant has] said or done in the media with [their] 'public profile' hat on". The abuse is constant and its effects unbounded: "it put me in a 24/7 cycle of having to think about and respond to abuse". One respondent described the scale of the task of managing this kind of backlash:

> It just takes all of your time and energy… It's such a waste of our time that we are constantly having to engage with these outrage machines… It takes a lot of time to do the impact work, but it also takes a lot of time to manage the aftermath.

This hate and the challenges of managing both its associated traumatic effects and the administrative demands of safety labour has a massive impact on victims, not only professionally, but also spilling into their personal lives, health and wellbeing: "I couldn't go walking on my own, because of… all the threats". Respondents reported hospitalisations, suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, PTSD and other mental and physical health issues leading to long term sick leave, having to leave their job or move city, breakdowns in personal relationships, lack of self-confidence, fear for personal safety, and impact upon their children or wider families. As one respondent said: "I have been traumatised and re-traumatised."

[53] Batza, C. (2017). Trending now: the role of defamation law in remedying harm from social media backlash. Pepperdine Law Review, 44(2), 429-476.

Such safety issues are rarely accounted for in discussions centred around a positive framing of public engagement and impact. These focus only on the academic's role in service of society without any situated criticality around the fact that academics exist within and are part of the same society and are therefore vulnerable to its currents of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, fatphobia, and transphobia. Impact and engagement campaigns are treated like finite, discrete periods of deliberate activity, but for some they have long lasting ramifications that go well beyond the boundaries of work. Academics are suffering as a result of their online public engagement work. However, this is emotional labour and mental harm that not all academics are forced to engage with. Rather, the risks of visibility are unequally distributed.

Academics from marginalised backgrounds are particularly targeted: "the double whammy of gender and race"

Existing inequalities are intensified by digital hate, exacerbating harm to already marginalised groups. Houlden et al identified a lack of empirical work accounting for the intersectional identities of academics in their experiences of receiving online abuse or harassment.[54] In our data, respondents reported that combinations of their gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, regionality, class, age, body type, neurodivergence, disability and/or career stage had played a role in being targeted by digital hate and the nature of the abuse. What is at stake is the question of which bodies are "weighted with authority":

> White, male, able, heterosexual, and middle-class, the 'normal body' persists even though this physical representation is now a demographic minority… it is also the body that can seemingly overcome its own embodiment and rise above the ghettoed locale occupied by those of us (women, people of color, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, the aged, the fat) who are always already associated with the lived body[55]

Thus, in abuse targeted at certain academic bodies, those academics are dislodged from and denied the role of creator and distributor of knowledge, at the very point of supposed

[54] Houlden,Shandell, Jaigris Hodson, George Veletsianos, Chandell Gosse, Patrick Lowenthal, Tonia Dousay & Nathan C. Hall (2022) 'Support for scholars coping with online harassment: an ecological framework', Feminist Media Studies, 22:5, 1120-1138

[55] Fisanick, C., 2007. " They Are Weighted with Authority": Fat Female Professors in Academic and Popular Cultures. Feminist Teacher, 17(3), p.239

'knowledge exchange'. In the mind/body dichotomy, only certain bodies are allowed to transcend their bodies, to become 'the intellectual'.

Many academics reported "multiple dimensions of domination", for example the respondent who reported being targeted for "the double whammy of gender and race" when subject to racist and sexist encounters as part of public engagement.[56] In her theorisation of intersectionality, devised to explain power relations especially as experienced by Black women, Crenshaw unveils "the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them".[57] When asked whether online abuse ever focused upon personal characteristics, one respondent answered, "I'm a plus-sized, female immigrant who talks about vaccine-related topics. What do you think?" She demonstrates the ways in which our social experiences are shaped by our multiple social identities, while glibly articulating how additional risks for marginalised groups online are an assumed cost of participation. Another said, "I've been called everything! Ugly, fat, vile - as well as a range of homophobic slurs … and slurs relating to disability. I have also been called misogynist terms including whore, slut, and similar". Accounts such as these reflect the complexities of intersectional identities and challenges of accounting for the multiple risks of being visible. One said, "I've been called ugly and a silly girl and fat", and another reported "patronising comments about me being too young/ugly/stupid/ill-informed" highlighting the undermining way that a gendered focus on women's bodies and appearance works to position them as unfit for the 'rigorous intellectual work' of academia. As one of our respondents put it describing the abuse they were subject to, "what the threats are doing is trying to keep that hierarchy in place".

"Go back to your country!" racism, xenophobia, and permission to speak

We asked participants if the abuse they were subject to related to personal characteristics. One reported, "yes, certainly I am aware of [online] comments relating to my ethnicity. I overall try to ignore this stuff, hard as that is". That the best available solution to them is to try to ignore racist abuse, demonstrates the lack of support available from employers or platforms. As with the participant who asked us "what do you think?" when asked if she received abuse, we again

[56] Crenshaw, K., 1990. Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stan. L. Rev.*, *43*, p.1297

[57] Ibid.

see academics from marginalised groups forced to shoulder the burden of abuse as an inevitability of being visible online. Another participant reported that "the abuse is worse because I'm a young(ish) woman of colour", a further female scholar of colour reported that the comments she received "are explicitly racist, they are explicitly misogynist, and they are, a great many of them, very violent both in language and in purported action that the person will take".

These accounts can be understood as part of the trauma of racist experiences within the academy affecting the mental health and wellbeing of Black scholars.[58] This is reflective of wider practices of racialised exclusion and marginalisation in academia, with only 1% of the UK professoriate being Black.[59] Whilst social media can enable Black scholars to undertake meaningful, high-profile knowledge sharing in ways which evade institutional gatekeeping, digital spaces are simultaneously part of the "machinery of hypersurveillance of black women".[60] Marcia Chatelain argues that "truly democratic spaces allow knowledge to be shared without fear of repercussion or backlash": an experience our participants did not have.[61] The threat of backlash, and the emotional trauma of previous experiences, prompted one scholar of colour to note "I feel very policed… even if it's self-policing". Surveillance prompts self-discipline.[62] Sara Ahmed reflects on the silencing effect of being a person of colour in a predominantly white institution, where to speak out is to stand out.[63] Therefore, as in the case of the respondents forced to accept online racism as part of their working life, it is often simpler to say nothing at all, leaving the exclusionary hierarchies in place.

[58] Arday, Jason (2022). 'The Black professoriate: assessing the landscape within British Higher Education'. *on_education*, 13 (April)

[59] HESA (2022). 'Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK 2020/21 released' https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/01-02-2022/higher-education-staff-statistics-uk-202021-released

[60] Chatelain, Marcia (2019). "Is Twitter Any Place for a [Black Academic] Lady?." *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities* (2019): p.180

[61] Ibid.: 181

[62] Foucault, Michel (1975). *Discipline and Punish*. London: Pantheon

[63] Ahmed, S., 2012. Whiteness and the general will: Diversity work as willful work. *PhiloSOPHIA*, *2*(1), pp.1-20.

Scholars from Asian ethnicities reported both experiencing and anticipating racism and "abuse focusing on perceived nationality". One said they carefully self-surveilled their online engagement because:

> I don't have the head space to deal with some bots, or god forbid some actual real person saying, 'fuck off back to China', which I'm not even… it's not even my country… I think if you are not the bog standard 'normal', or whatever normal is, you get abuse.

This respondent, and others, reported racist language which reflects the xenophobic, anti-immigration rhetoric that fuelled the Brexit vote, and is prevalent in key figures in the UK government, like Home Secretary, Suella Braverman.[64] Another of our respondents recalled: "abuse about, oh you go back to your country, all that sort of thing… just because that person does not look white". Abuse centring on telling people of colour in the UK to 'go home' has intensified post-Brexit, as a form of fear-mongering around immigration.[65]

These discourses are a further mechanism policing the boundaries of which bodies are permitted the authority to speak (and on which topics). Scholars of colour felt kept out of public discourse, because of invented boundaries around 'belonging' (regardless of whether, as was the case for some of our respondents, they were born in Britain or had British citizenship). Another respondent added that they felt at risk because of "having a nationality which is foreign to the country I research", suggesting that the 'outsider' status of immigrants - inflamed in political rhetoric - impacts upon academics' ability to research international spaces. This is despite the long history of white academics building their careers on the study of foreign nations. The abuse received by David Olusoga accused him of "talking Britain down" by criticising the British Empire's imperial history.[66] That is, as he argued, an accusation levelled primarily at academics of colour. Similarly, a respondent researching white supremacy "in a

[64] Chakrabortty, Aditya (2023). 'Suella Braverman proved it again: racism is a fire the Tories love to play with'. The Guardian, 19 January https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/19/suella-braverman-racism-tories-holocaust

[65] Jones, Hannah et al (2017). *Go Home: The politics of immigration controversies.* Manchester: Manchester University Press

[66] Empire Podcast (2022). 'Queen Elizabeth II & Empire (with David Olusoga)'. 13 September, https://open.spotify.com/episode/5fvidV68X1ddQrNLfdJOaz?si=k5G_jGUmR_-XuISgWngI-w

country in which [she does] not reside" fielded "accusations that [she] should stay out of other countries' business".

From "get back into the kitchen" to "you should have your child taken off you": gender identity, sexuality, and public/private porosity

We have previously reflected on our own experiences of receiving gendered abuse as female academics when we were made visible for contributing to public debate: people called for us to be silenced; our appearance, femininity and bodies were scrutinised and criticised; and we were threatened with practices like doxxing, which expose the dangerous porosity of the public/private divide.[67] A defining characteristic of digital media is the way in which it has "facilitated new fissures in an already (at times deliberately) porous division between public and private",[68] for example how digital surveillance means our private data is tracked, quantified and commodified.[69] Digital platforms "bind our involvement, willingly and unwillingly, in complex landscapes of mobility, surveillance and control" and reinforce hierarchies where bodies "without the correct comportment … become risky subjects to be surveilled at the peripheries of sociotechnical systems".[70]

Our new data demonstrates that we are far from alone and these are common experiences for female academics: "it's all very gendered, very misogynistic". In an extreme case where one woman academic had spreadsheets detailing thousands of abusive comments, she noted "nearly all the hate mail was from men. I think I only ever got one email from a woman". This abuse involved violent threats which were explicitly gendered:

[67] Yelin, Hannah, & Clancy, Laura (2020). Doing impact work while female: Hate tweets, 'hot potatoes' and having 'enough of experts.' European Journal of Women's Studies, 28(2), 175–193; MacKinnon, C.A (1987). Feminism Unmodified. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

[68] Yelin, Hannah (2020). *Celebrity Memoir: From Ghostwriting to Gender Politics.* London: Palgrave

[69] Zuboff, S (2018). *Surveillance Capitalism*. London: Profile

[70] Gregg, M. and Andrijasevic, R., 2019. Virtually absent: the gendered histories and economies of digital labour. *Feminist Review*, *123*(1), p.4; Amrute, S. (2019). Of Techno-Ethics and Techno-Affects. *Feminist Review*, *123*(1), p.123

> threatening violence but in a very gendered way, along the lines of witch burning and burning her at the stake, this kind of thing. And also threats of violence like 'slap her so hard that her teeth chatter'

As a consequence, academics are working in conditions that feel unsafe, as a different participant said of being subjected to gendered abuse: "I don't think I felt particularly safe or adequate".

As scholars like Silvia Federici have detailed, 'witch burning' has historically been a way of shaming and disciplining women who do not 'conform' to gendered norms.[71] Rape threats have been used in silencing women.[72] Our respondents reported being "sexually harassed - and propositioned (by men)" through online messaging platforms. Another respondent was told "why don't you go and get raped?". Jilly Boyce Kay writes about communicative injustice, and a long history of punishment and humiliation for women who dare to 'speak out', such as the 'ducking stool' to which women deemed to be 'gossips' were strapped and submerged in water.[73] Today, as Kay writes, the capacities of digital cultures mean that such abuse flourishes easily. For our participants, sexist tropes were again used to undermine their status as public experts. One respondent was told: "How I should get back into the kitchen. How I only write about sexual violence because nobody would want to have sex with me because I am so ugly". The domestic sphere is once again evoked to drive women out of the public sphere, alongside an evaluation of women's worth, not in their contribution to public discourse, but in domestic and sexual service.

Many respondents talked about their experiences as situated in the intersections of gender identity and sexuality. One participant said, "abuse…has been focused on my identity as a queer woman, or as a bi-sexual woman". Others reported that the "majority of abuse focuses on my appearance and gender", including when someone had a "gender non-conforming appearance", which was then connected to a "perceived sexuality", leading to homophobic

[71] Federici, S., 2004. *Caliban and the Witch*. Autonomedia.

[72] Cole, KK (2015) '"It's Like She's Eager to be Verbally Abused": Twitter, Trolls, and (En)Gendering Disciplinary Rhetoric', Feminist Media Studies, 15(2), pp.356-358

[73] Kay, J.B., 2020. *Gender, media and voice: Communicative injustice and public speech*. Springer Nature, p.3

abuse. While cis-women were told to "get back" into the home, trans scholars reported abuse which centred on their unsuitability to the domestic sphere:

> I suddenly got all this shit about 'you're trans, you should have your child taken off you'. All this kind of bullshit, because a tweet of mine had been put in [a national broadsheet] without me knowing.

This scholar said that this abuse had a "personalness" that went beyond their research, because it began to implicate the safety of their family. They went on:

> My whole approach to the internet became quite different. Not putting pictures of my child on Twitter, which felt like quite a social place. And being careful not to name specific areas I live in and just trying not to be identifiable, because I didn't want anything to come off the internet into real life.

This respondent, and others, are doing added safety work, where the harms of being 'made public' blur the personal and the public. Work on self-branding and the commodification of academic life has focused upon honing an appropriately 'scholarly' public persona,[74] but our respondents show that being able to separate work and home is a privilege not permitted to those whose bodies do not fit cis-gendered, masculinist norms. As a consequence of these experiences, when dealing with the aftermath of the 'Twitter storm', this respondent was effectively doxed, and "forced" to "come out as trans" to their university. Digital hate thus had real life implications in terms of dictating both how they could engage with their job and how they were able to safely conduct their family life, creating a dangerous porosity between the two. When the national newspaper published their tweet, this respondent was on parental leave: "I wasn't even at work, I wasn't being paid to be at work, but suddenly you are having to go back on and think who should I contact at the university". The abuse forced them to prioritise doing safety work rather than spending time with their newborn baby.

"I simply cannot afford it to get into such a shit storm": disability, class, and the (un)availability of informal systems of support

Alison Kafer argues that "the inability to value queer lives is related to the inability to imagine disabled lives. Both are failures of the imagination supporting and supported by the drive

[74] Tregoning, J., 2016. 'Build your academic brand, because being brilliant doesn't cut it any more', Times Higher Education https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/build-your-academic-brand-because-being-brilliant-doesnt-cut-it-anymore

towards normalcy and normalisation".[75] This drive underpins the Othering at work in digital hate targeting those that do not match the white, cis-male, non-disabled academic of the collective imaginary. The resulting rhetorical erasure of those inhabiting other locations sees "both queers and crips rendered unnatural, sick, degenerate and deviant".[76] As a consequence, the time and energy "to manage the aftermath", as one participant put it, of public engagement work is demanded from those who have least to spare. The seeping of abuse into people's personal lives therefore has implications on who is able to do the public engagement work in the first place. A disabled respondent said "I've a lot of health issues that have priority. I simply cannot afford it to get into such a shit storm that I can't control". There is privilege in having the time, resources, and health to be able to put oneself in a position of risk. Without appropriate support, this inherently builds inequity into the public engagement model. Such inequalities are also built into platform work; labour which relies on individual investment while being beset with precarity, insecurity, and lack of organisational structure.[77]

Ableism that includes "social exclusion, non-accommodating environments and a lack of opportunities" has increased over the past decade and creates "persistent barriers" for academics.[78] Our respondents reported that disability and neurodivergence made them targets for online abuse. A neurodivergent respondent reported receiving online abuse "for being autistic". One disabled scholar reported that she has "received threats because [she is] a disabled woman", while another received "slurs relating to disability". Surveys have found that ableist abuse online has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, putting disabled and neurodivergent scholars more at risk, while demanding additional labour through masking to appear neurotypical.[79]

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[75] Kafer, A., 2013. Feminist, queer, crip. Indiana, USA: Indiana University Press, p.45

[76] Ibid.

[77] Schor, J.B., Attwood-Charles, W., Cansoy, M. *et al* (2020). Dependence and precarity in the platform economy. *Theory and Society* 49, 833–861

[78] Lindsay S, Fuentes K (2022). It Is Time to Address Ableism in Academia: A Systematic Review of the Experiences and Impact of Ableism among Faculty and Staff. *Disabilities* 2(2):178

[79] Renke, Samantha (2021). 'The pandemic has worsened the online bullying of disabled people'. Metro, 16 February https://metro.co.uk/2021/02/16/the-pandemic-has-worsened-the-online-bullying-of-disabled-people-14082839/

bell hooks wrote of her time at university: "individuals from class backgrounds deemed undesirable… [are] encouraged to betray our class origins".[80] This is a further example of an embodied experience of occupying the 'wrong' identity to be afforded the authority to be a public academic, forcing working-class academics to undertake the labour of faking habitus, adopting new accents, or masking their background at a psychological cost. However, class inequality inherently comes with material insecurities. As one respondent noted, "I don't have a permanent position and job security. I don't have a network of folks who will come to my support". Many of our other respondents noted that when they did not get support from their institution, they sought informal support from friends and colleagues. However, university precarity, which often entails frequently moving between cities, means that independent scholars and those employed on fixed-term or fractional contracts often do not get the time or space to build these relationships that might offer alternative forms of support, nor can they apply for union membership. This puts them at an even greater disadvantage when the university does not offer adequate support. Yelin argues elsewhere that careers which are built around online visibility through platform work are characterised by the "exposure without insulation" fundamental to the digitally enabled gig economy.[81] Contemporary neoliberal academia has been described as having entered its "age of precarity", where growing competition for scarcer resources has resulted in "ever shorter, lower paid, hyper-flexible contracts and ever more temporally fragmented and geographically displaced hyper-mobile lives".[82] 66% of UK academics are precariously employed.[83] Precarious academics from marginalised backgrounds undertaking precarious platform work are therefore rendered triply vulnerable to overlapping, uninsulated exposure.

[80] Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, New York: Routledge, p.182

[81] Yelin, Hannah (2020). *Celebrity Memoir: From Ghostwriting to Gender Politics.* London: Palgrave. P.153

[82] Ivancheva, M.P., 2015. The age of precarity and the new challenges to the academic profession. *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai-Studia Europaea*, *60*(1), p.39

[83] UCU (2023). 'Precarious work in higher education – update August 2023'. https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14007/Precarious-work-in-higher-education--Aug-23/pdf/UCU_precarity-in-HE_Aug23.pdf [Accessed 27/09/2023]

Our respondents were left without formal or informal support structures while they undertook the undervalued and unaccounted for labour of safety work in dealing with abuse for their class, regionality, and precarity. Rickett and Morris have observed working class academics' "difficulties with feeling they belong" and a disproportionate expectation of providing emotional labour to students "to enable feelings of value and belonging" despite this labour being "devalued, unaccounted for and potentially harmful to those who do engage in it" and "reinforcing a class and gender stratified UK academy".[84] Multiple respondents reported comments about their regional accent: "someone complained about my northern accent", and "[I received abuse] for being too 'Northern'". Theresa Crew's work on working-class academics has shown that being seen to have the 'wrong' accent is a "physical embodiment of habitus", as scholars battle to accumulate capital to 'fit in' in elite institutions.[85] However, as Beverley Skeggs writes of being a working-class woman in academia, "you are never absolutely sure what 'getting it right' would be".[86] Receiving abuse about perceived accents 'outs' working-class academic bodies as different, as not 'fitting in', adding to feelings of imposterism.[87] The abuse our participants were subject to uses regionality to dismiss expertise, suggesting that there is a 'right' class embodiment for an academic (i.e. middle-class, received pronunciation). Class-based abuse suggests that working-class academics are 'rising above their station', entering into public discourse without the appropriate habitus.

Conclusion

Crenshaw centred the experiences of Black women in her conception of the intersecting categories of identity and how these situate us in relation to power. Many of our respondents spoke about their subjection to online abuse in terms of such overlapping identities, through intersectional lenses including racialised femininity, queer disability, trans parenthood, young womanhood, queer femme, or fat immigrant perspectives. Other respondents spoke about

[84] Rickett, B. and Morris, A., 2021. 'Mopping up tears in the academy'–working-class academics, belonging, and the necessity for emotional labour in UK academia. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *42*(1), p.87

[85] Crew, Teresa (2020). *Higher Education and Working-Class Academics.* London: Springer, p.71

[86] Skeggs, Beverley (1997). *Formations of class and gender.* London: SAGE, pp.130-131

[87] Rowell, C. and Walters, H., 2022. 'Friends First, Colleagues Second': A Collaborative Autoethnographic Approach to Exploring Working-Class Women's Experiences of the Neoliberal Academy. In The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station (pp. 41-55). Emerald Publishing Limited.

abuse targeting a singular aspect of their identity including gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, regionality, class, age, body type, neurodivergence, disability and/or career stage. In both cases, the data demonstrates that scholars participating in online public engagement are exposed to manifold harms and it is scholars from already marginalised groups who are targeted, exacerbating existing barriers to participation in public discourse. In line with Crenshaw's model of the structural, political, and representational, we have shown how groups of people experience digital hate in qualitatively different ways.[88] This counters the erasure of such intersectionalities, both in policy and in accounts of public engagement work, giving voice to lived experiences beyond the straightforwardly positive. Not only do academics from intersecting, marginalised identities have to counter environments that make them feel like they do not belong in academia, but their complex – and at times negative – experiences of public engagement are not accounted for in dominant narratives of knowledge exchange as a social good.

The risks of visibility are unevenly distributed, and so are the rewards. Many of our respondents reported that the abuse had damaged their careers, and yet they worried about the potential career damage should they refuse to undertake public engagement. As one said:

> there may well start to be more penalties for people that don't do it, or just more rewards for the people that are able to do it. Obviously being able to do impact is a function of various forms of advantage in other ways. It's who you know, but it's also who can be taken seriously. It's who's got the time to put into it. It takes a lot of time to do that kind of work, so it's not evenly distributed.

This presents significant inequalities in academic spaces, where not taking on personal risk leads to career harm. And yet, the consequences we heard about went far beyond damage to individual careers, and spread into considerable physical and mental harms. This included hospitalisations, suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, PTSD and other mental and physical health issues leading to long term sick leave, having to leave their job or move city, breakdowns in personal relationships, lack of self-confidence, fear for personal safety, and impact upon their children or wider families. Our respondents were left traumatised by their experiences at work, and moreover, were left unsupported by the institutions that encouraged them into the public eye in the first place. These are harms sustained while undertaking activities that are

[88] Crenshaw K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167

required by institutions and funding bodies, and the aftermath is usually dealt with alone. These institutions have a duty of care towards university staff, who they are encouraging into harm's way. We have developed Recommendations for Higher Education Sector Leaders on how to improve structural support. These are available in full on our website https://culturesdigitalhate.wordpress.com/, and include:

- Digital hate needs to be treated as seriously as any other workplace health and safety concern, with fully-resourced policies, protocols and support services proactively in place before issues arise.
- Digital hate is an issue of equality, diversity and inclusion. Universities subscribe to Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter to work towards workplace equality, yet digital abuse is targeting marginalised academics unchecked.
- Institutions should offer training for all staff involved in ushering people into the spotlight to understand the varied risks of public engagement.
- Institutions must recognise the time requirements of additional safety labour for those most likely to be affected by digital hate.

Many institutions have anti-bullying and workplace harassment policies, but these do not explicitly include digital abuse as resulting from public engagement work. The University and College Union has developed a cyber-bullying policy factsheet, but the information is significantly dated and only mentions the risk from students 'spreading malicious and unfounded comments' on 'chat rooms such as Facebook, Bebo and MySpace'.[89]

We are only at the beginning of a conversation which seeks to shift the uncritically positive framing of public engagement, knowledge exchange and 'impact' to consider who can participate safely. There is ultimately a mismatch between our proposed interventions and the scale of the problem, given that universities cannot be wholly responsible, and platforms must take responsibility for fighting digital hate. Nonetheless, these shifts in approach would bring much needed nuance into the turn towards impact and public engagement within the neoliberal university.

[89] UCU (n.d.). Cyber-bullying: the invisible hand of bullying. https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/3133/Cyber-bullying-the-invisible-hand-of-bullying---UCU-factsheet/pdf/hsfacts_cyberbullying.pdf [Accessed 26/09/2023]

There is a tension here, as academics involved in radical knowledge production online are often providing labour for digital platforms as a result, in addition to the labour they provide for their university employer, and the labour of seeking social justice and community. In the neoliberal university, on platforms deeply embedded in surveillance, racialised patriarchy and data accumulation, these tensions cannot be neatly reconciled. Public engagement is often considered a way of divesting from the white, cisheteropatriarchal 'ivory towers' of academia. In many ways, it is a radical form of knowledge sharing. Even in the cases outlined here that caused horrific harm to the wellbeing of the researcher, some of these coexisted with feelings of gladness that the dissemination of their research contributed to a public good. However, the high cost of participation, especially for those already marginalised in our racist, ableist, xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic, fatphobic, sexist, classist society keeps those with the 'wrong' body out of the debate. The unequal distribution of power amongst normative voices reproduces the very hierarchies that public engagement aims to dismantle.

As we have shown, academics are managing their own experiences of trauma and abuse in the workplace, unsupported or even fearful of further career costs from their employers. For academics from marginalised backgrounds, this abuse feels inevitable. They are working to avoid further backlash, in fear of drawing further attention to themselves in digital media cultures beset with exclusionary silencing and the cost of speaking out is frequently too high. As one scholar put it, "I just keep quiet". However, keeping quiet is not a solution, and we will never achieve the circumstances for radical knowledge production whilst such inequalities persist. Research such as this, which creates opportunities for academics to speak back to both the toxic cultures of abuse and the institutions that fail to support them, makes important steps towards fostering such circumstances.

Further recommendations and resources are available on our website https://culturesdigitalhate.wordpress.com/

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