

Chapter Six

‘They Think You’re Fair Game’ – Challenges Encountered by Women Serving in Public Facing Occupations

Abstract

This chapter explores two factors that are specific to online activity within public sphere occupations: the expectation that those holding positions within academia, journalism, policing and politics be always accessible online and that occupational seniority can act as an insulator from abuse, not by preventing pernicious communication, but by limiting exposure to it. The chapter then considers the consequences that can result for both the individual and their organisation when they are targeted for online abuse. This chapter identifies the elements specific to public facing occupations that make a sustained onslaught of online abuse particularly problematic. The chapter concludes by discussing the various benefits accrued from maintaining an online presence, highlighting why advising women to simply abandon their professional online activity is neither a realistic nor acceptable solution to online abuse.

Keywords: Online abuse; public sphere; online space; occupational seniority; mutual support; feminism

Introduction

This chapter continues to draw upon empirical data to analyse the factors that are intrinsic to the online experience of working in the public sphere. These factors were identified by interview participants as having had a specific impact on their

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use of online technologies and affected the nature and severity of the online abuse that they subsequently received.

Expectation that Women in Public Facing Occupations Be Active Online

Many of the participants in this research expressed the opinion that there was an expectation from the public that they have an active online presence and they will be constantly available. However, this assumption must be viewed with a degree of caution, as those expressing this view were already active users of a range of social media platforms. The demand for the constant availability of those in the public sphere is not always beneficial, especially to the individual. Research by Walby and Joshua (2021) highlights how the Canadian police force use social media platforms as a way of improving their engagement with the community, whilst also seeking to increase their legitimacy. However, as both this study and the work of O'Connor (2017) suggest, the intention of police communication online is typically to provide information, rather than engaging in a public dialogue. However, this assumption by police forces fundamentally misunderstands the nature of social media sites, which operate upon a premise of engendering a greater openness with the public (Wessels, 2010). By adopting a model of one-way communication, the police service as an institution frequently chooses to ignore the public's response to its online activity (O'Connor, 2017). For whilst an organisation may choose to operate its social media communication in a unilateral manner, this is not always equally adhered to by a public that wants to engage in an online dialogue. In the event of a communication mismatch, the responsibility for responding to individual members of the public often falls to individual officers.

Furthermore, as highlighted in the experiences of journalists (e.g. Antunovic, 2019; Searles et al., 2020) and academics (Kapidzic, 2020), the expectation that women in public facing occupations habitually engage in online dialogue reframes the online presence from a purely leisure pursuit into a facet of occupational activity and thus the consequent online abuse into a form of workplace harassment. This supports the work of both Hochschild (2012) and Vera-Gray (2017) in their wider interpretation of the emotional impact of malign workplace activity and supports the discussions in Chapter Two, which defined online abuse as another form of the occupational sexual harassment first identified in the 1970s (Croall, 1995):

There's pressure as an academic to have an online presence and to be disseminating your work in that way. We have an impact factor in academia, and you have to prove that you are being impactful. As a young academic it is expected that I am on social media and that it is accessible to my students. My social media is part of my work, and we talk about workplace safety, but I don't have health and safety worrying about my online presence, even though I'm constantly encouraged to be putting things online. (Christie, Academic at a UK university)

I've just signed the contracts for my new book, and in my contract, it said I'm obliged to tweet about my books when they come out. The reason I joined social media in the first place, is because my first book was coming out and there was that same expectation in writing that you would be on social media. I really didn't have any interest in joining it. I tried not to use it as a personal platform, just work stuff. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

I need it [social media] for the job that I do. People want you to be open and accessible and visible. So to delete it and not have that presence would have a detrimental impact on my professional life. (Wendy, Local Councillor)

These contributions highlight the commonality of this experience across the public sphere, confirming that women feel a huge pressure to be visible and accessible online despite the potentially negative consequences associated with doing so. Once again, participants positioned the issue of gender at the forefront of their experience. This contribution proved particularly apposite:

I definitely got more online abuse than my male colleagues, but that's legit. Right? That is fair game. I'm in the public eye. (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

The phrase 'fair game' was used repeatedly by interviewees when describing their role and the online activity that it generated, and in particular, the expectation of an active online presence, echoing the findings of Veletsianos et al. (2018):

I think people feel that we're fair game. And I think the way the media treat people has really deteriorated ... in the run up to the last election, there was quite a lot of unpleasant social media content. We just hid it, but when you actually click the button and realise it is somebody you go running with ... I think people do just forget that you're human ...(Nicola, Member of Parliament)

People will always say 'you're in politics, grow a thick skin', but I don't accept that at all, because I think everybody, regardless of how thick your skin is, is a human being. And you see the abuse all the other women MPs get, and you think ok, by doing this you're putting yourself in the lions' den for further abuse, that that's part of the job. (Smita, Local Councillor)

You're fair game, I think. I can imagine how difficult this must be for actual public figures. I'm just a journalist, but for politicians and pop stars and such, it must be horrendous. I can't even imagine what they go through all the time, the number of lies that gets spread about them online and they really can't do anything. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

Interviewees frequently minimised their own experiences of online abuse, as illustrated in Linda's contribution. The reasons for doing so remain unclear but may be symptomatic of women downplaying their occupational achievements and career experiences (Lopata, 1993), or a reflection of the institutional failure to take online abuse seriously (Dragotto et al., 2020; Powell & Henry, 2018), with it instead being seen as part of the 'wallpaper of sexism' (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 531) all too frequently associated with working in the public sphere:

I've been lucky actually, I don't know why but a lot of my fellow activists have had it a lot worse than I've ever had it ... (Mary, Academic at a UK university)

I do sometimes wonder whether because I am a law enforcement officer, I get slightly less than other people? When I look at politicians' accounts, when I look at accounts from women in media, and when I look at some of the female Police and Crime Commissioners, I definitely don't get as much as they do. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

One participant not only sought to minimise the online abuse she had received during an election campaign, but expressed a sense of guilt for not standing for political office again, partly as a result of her experience:

I feel a bit of a coward actually for not wanting to be a candidate again, because I look at people like Jess Phillips or Diane Abbott and I see the strength that they have, and the admiration I have for them, and I feel like I'm letting people down. (Klaudia, Politician in Scotland)

However, not all participants felt an expectation from either their employer or the wider public that they are active in the online space:

Having an online presence is a personal choice. We don't tell officers they have to have an online presence as a senior policewoman. Certainly I don't feel under pressure to have an online presence, and nobody's ever told me to. (Geetika, Senior Police Officer)

Police forces do not force you to have an account, and don't want everyone to have an account. There are Chief Officers who use it as a tool, but certainly in my force nobody is made to do it. (Karen, Senior Police Officer)

Seniority of Position Provides Insulation from Abuse

By speaking to women holding a variety of positions within the occupations of academia, journalism, policing and politics, it became obvious that whilst having a senior role in an organisation frequently earmarked an individual as a target

for increased amounts of online abuse, at the same time, the more senior a person became, the more likely they were to have staff members who would deal with the abuse for them. Until Elon Musk took over Twitter in October 2022 (Rohlinger et al., 2023), women holding senior positions in public facing occupations were frequently granted 'verified' account status. This is the process whereby an individual was independently deemed by Twitter to be judged 'of sufficient public interest in diverse fields, such as journalism [or] politics' (Paul et al., 2018, p. 1). When account verification was first introduced in June 2009 (Cashmore, 2009), Twitter asserted that the process of verification 'lets people know that an account of public interest is authentic. To receive the blue badge, your account must be authentic, notable, and active' (Twitter, 2021, p. 1), with a detailed set of criteria to be met. However, there were concerns that the process was opaque, with decisions surrounding verification made arbitrarily. Nevertheless, securing account verification provided those whose accounts were verified with a 'blue tick' a number of additional controls, which together created an additional level of protection from abuse. For example, it enabled verified users to limit their notifications, meaning that they were unlikely to receive the same number of alerts as a standard user of the platform. This allowed holders of verified accounts to take measures to avoid the mass attacks of online abuse commonly described as 'Twitter storms' and 'pile-ons' (Cover, 2023). However, the advantages of having a verified account relied on both an individual correctly receiving verified status and also relied on those holding verified accounts being aware of the tools available to set the appropriate privacy settings.

Less than one month in to taking ownership of the social media platform, Elon Musk announced his intention to launch a subscription service for Twitter users, denouncing what he described as the 'lords and peasants system for who has or doesn't have a blue checkmark' (Barrie, 2023, p. 2), alluding to the high status that has become attached to the possession of a blue tick since its inception in 2009 (Barsaiyan & Sijoria, 2021). Twitter Blue was introduced in November 2022, with Musk claiming that opening up verified status to anyone willing to pay a monthly fee provides 'power to the people' (Musk, 2022, p. 1), whilst also declaring that that the \$8 charge to retain (or indeed acquire) a blue tick was necessary, in order to 'pay the bills somehow' (Cruse, 2022, p. 1), referring to the precarious financial position in which many social media companies find themselves (Bobrowsky, 2022). However, the evidence presented in this research shows that the move to a subscription model is likely to further jeopardise the safety of women in the online space, by removing the content filters that facilitate safer participation on the platform. These tools act as a shield against abusive and threatening contact, as well as providing the ability to connect with women in other public facing roles who are able to offer support. To be clear, the verified account status available to individuals in the public sphere between June 2009 and November 2022 did not stop online abuse, but it did go some way towards providing women the space they needed to maintain an online presence without experiencing the psychological trauma of seeing multiple abusive comments. When the range of different protections on a verified Twitter account were optimised, it meant that whilst the abuse still occurred, its targets did not see it, leaving perpetrators shouting into a virtual void (Watson, 2022).

Differences in the Nature of Online Abuse within Public Sphere Occupations

This research has identified differences in the nature of online abuse *within* the occupations of academia, journalism, policing and politics. For during conversations with women working in these areas, it became apparent that women operating at different levels of a professional hierarchy experienced online abuse in contrasting ways. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when individuals reach a certain level of seniority, they are more likely to have access to a range of protective measures that insulate them from seeing and experiencing the worst excesses of online abuse. These measures would have originally taken the form of the Twitter verification process discussed above but now occur through the management of an individual's social media profile by others.

Sarah, a senior Police Officer, explained how being part of a large organisation offered a buffer from the worst ravages of online abuse:

So, I have some layers of... protection's too strong a word because it isn't really protection, but I've got an extra set of eyes looking at it to protect me. I've never reported anything to the police, because to be frank, if it were to reach that sort of level, probably the security team within [the named force] would investigate it for me.
(Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

Similarly, when women reach a senior position in politics, they typically see less of their social media even though the actual amount of abusive communication being directed at them increases:

When you are in a position of leadership, you have to withdraw from social media to an extent, and in some ways that gives you a lot of freedom. Because I wasn't seeing the abuse, I wasn't aware of it. My staff were having to wade through it all, and it was taking hours.
(Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

In contrast, it became clear that for politicians, women at a relatively junior level were frequently left to manage their own social media presence, as the few staff members they employed were almost entirely engaged in constituency casework:

When I was a junior minister I would still be reading my Twitter mentions, I would see sometimes that people would tag me and also Nick Clegg or David Cameron, and I'd get lots of abuse. But obviously David Cameron and Nick Clegg weren't reading their Twitter mentions. And so I think that some of the people who probably end up bearing the brunt of the impact of such abuse, are either the staff of those whose positions are in leadership, or people who are in senior roles like being an MP, or an academic or journalist who are

in the public eye, but who are not always operating at a level where they would have staff to manage it for them. Such as backbench MPs or junior ministers. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Furthermore, the organisation of the Parliamentary system at Westminster does little to provide universal institutional support to individual members. Instead, the House of Commons has been described as:

659 individual small businesses, working under an ever-increasing load and more complex environment. They now deal with issues and communicate in ways unheard of a few years ago. They require more backup staff, more computer resources, and more allowances to enable them to travel back and forth to Parliament, living away from home for days at a time, while keeping in touch with the problems and issues of their constituents (Besley & Larcinese, 2011, p. 292).

This problem is exacerbated for local authority Councillors, who have no staff support, and who receive only very limited expenses, and are often simultaneously undertaking paid employment.

Holding a position of seniority within the public sphere is also likely to provide women with greater access to the police and other law enforcement agencies if they find themselves on the receiving end of online abuse. For politicians in particular, this appeared to be a broadly positive relationship, encouraging them to report incidents of online abuse or threatening behaviour. In addition, the police often work in co-operation with the Parliamentary security team, to monitor the social media accounts of politicians, as Patricia explained:

I was on a coach down to London for the People's Vote march¹ and the police called me to say they'd picked up this tweet and that they were worried. I hadn't even seen it. So, fair dues to the police for doing a good job there. They handled it really quickly. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Charmaine illustrated how her staff had worked with the police and parliamentary security to identify a perpetrator of abuse:

I had one case where someone who made a threat towards me had sent multiple unpleasant tweets and emails in the past, and my staff recorded it all on a spreadsheet. So that was more ammunition for the police. So, the police went around and arrested him. Sometimes the police took action, sometimes it was more a kind of tracking

¹23 March 2019

and using parliamentary security services. I felt like parliament had really upped its game and the police took it really seriously. It felt that they were professional in providing that support, so that was good. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Loretta recounted a similarly positive relationship with the police in her constituency:

The [local] police have been amazing, they have taken this seriously from the word go. I know this is very different for my colleagues from all parties. From the point this all started, we have emailed [threats or abuse] to a point of contact, we've emailed with copies and screenshots of anything we've seen. And they've assigned a police officer to look at all of the communications from this person over the last couple of years, and the police have built a much bigger case from the cumulative effect of the posts, and linking them to stronger, more unpleasant language. The police have been really good. (Loretta, Member of Parliament)

However such positive experiences were not universal. Peggy demonstrated how, whilst generally well-meaning, the treatment she received from her local police force often necessitated having to relive the abuse she had encountered, which was traumatising:

When I initially received multiple rape threats [in 2015], I went to the police and back then I think they were less prepared for this sort of digital crime. I think they are better now. But like any victim of a crime, and violence against women and girls crimes seems to be the worst, the onus is on me to do the work. When I initially went to the police, they gave me hundreds of pages of evidence of people saying stuff to me [online], and I was expected to read though it all. I just gave up because it made me feel ill and I didn't want to do it. It's very, very time consuming and I don't have a lot of spare time. And that hasn't changed. To get a conviction against people who are perpetrating online abuse, I have to be caused harm; so the mechanisms that I would use to protect myself, they have to be undone in order for me to take cases to court. I will be caused harm, because I will read it and I will read the things about how they want to kill my children, and it's very harmful to me. And it's harmful to how I behave in the future. And there is a problem with that, it shouldn't be me who has to do it. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

Peggy's experience reflects wider concerns about the way women are treated by the criminal justice system when they seek to report gender-based violence (Jackson, 2021).

Jane (2017a, p. 88) has been more forthright in sharing her view that criminal justice agencies have 'done little to support women, to bring offenders to account, or to even acknowledge the problem of gendered cyberhate as a problem', an assertion that is supported by the finding that the police in England and Wales rarely enforce legislation relating to online abuse (Salter, 2017).

The explanations presented for this are both diverse and complex and encompass issues of misogyny, power and freedom of speech.

For women employed in public facing occupations outside of the political sphere, and particularly those based in the USA, their interactions with the police when reporting online abuse were far more varied, which is more consistent with the findings of Jane (2017a) and Koziarski and Ree (2020):

When I had received a threat online, I called the police and they literally said ... 'we have nowhere in our system to record this'. And they said we feel for you, but we have no way to record this information ... good luck to you. They were utterly uninterested. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

I have reported online abuse to law enforcement in the past, although nothing's ever come of it, so I've stopped doing that. (Judith, Journalist based in the USA)

Both Sophie and Judith chose to forego contact with the police when faced with episodes of online abuse instead seeking to block known abusers, or increase security settings on their online accounts. They implemented these solutions themselves, without intervention from criminal justice agencies, which they believed would be futile.

Catalysts for Online Abuse

It is not only the role that they hold that singles out women in public facing occupations for online abuse. The abuse is frequently exacerbated by the news cycle, the political landscape, the nature of the debate and certain key contentious issues, any (or all) of which can coalesce with an individual's perceived position of authority within an organisation to create a toxic combination where abuse appears to flourish. Sometimes abuse may be triggered by a trivial event or throwaway comment. Nevertheless, this study has discovered that there are certain issues that act as a catalyst for abuse. These issues are predominantly those that require people to adopt a binary position. Three issues which were repeatedly mentioned were the issues of Scottish independence, Brexit and gender identity.

Scottish Independence

The referendum on Scottish independence took place on 18 September 2014. In a hard fought, and often tempestuous campaign, Scotland voted by 55.3 per cent to 44.7 per cent to remain part of the UK (Mullen, 2014). The result was not

uniform across the country, however, and some areas, including Glasgow and Dundee, voted heavily for independence (Mullen, 2014). Despite a decade passing since the campaign, Scottish politicians continued to identify the referendum as being a catalyst for online abuse, with supporters on both sides of the debate frequently engaging in derogatory communication.

I know there are some who want to tell us that the referendum campaign was wonderful, which Salmond² himself said was terrific and joyous, I can tell you it wasn't. It was utterly horrible, foul, nasty and abusive and it gave the public permission to be exceptionally bad. I was seeing it online. I responded to a comment which was 'scum out of Scotland' or something, and they just shouted abuse at me ...
(Sally, Politician in Scotland)

Even politicians from other parts of the UK who expressed support for the 'NO' campaign (those wishing Scotland remain part of the United Kingdom), found themselves the target of abuse:

You would know if you posted something about campaigning to remain in the Union, that you would get this onslaught from Scottish Nationalists, or trolls or whoever. Within minutes, you'd get a hundred and something [tweets] based on what you'd said on Twitter.
(Loretta, Member of Parliament)

Wendy, a local councillor in Scotland, similarly felt that her position on the Scottish independence issue made her a target for online abuse:

The SNP, being the front for independence, we are a very targeted group in terms of online abuse. (Wendy, Local Councillor)

The Scottish referendum campaign presented what some believe was the first orchestrated campaign of online abuse against women politicians in the UK:

I think the independence referendum was the first mass political campaign that generated online abuse, certainly in a UK context. I believe Scotland was the petri dish ... for really rabid online abuse. It's not exactly a very proud thing for Scotland to have been first in! I don't know what the Scottish independence referendum would have been like without social media. It's hard to think how it could have been any worse. (Klaudia, Politician in Scotland)

²Alex Salmond, who was Leader of the Scottish National Party at the time of the independence referendum of 2014 (Mullen, 2014).

Research in this area (McKay, 2020) confirms that the independence referendum of 2014 saw female politicians receiving a large amount of sexist and homophobic abuse. Set against a backdrop that depicts Scotland as an open and inclusive society that is more egalitarian than other parts of the UK (Nicolson & Korkut, 2022), it could be assumed that the online environment in Scotland is similarly equitable. The reality is very different, with research confirming the perpetuation of a gender gap in online political engagement, both throughout Scotland and the wider world. Men in Scotland are more likely than women to use social media and other online forums to discuss political and current affairs (Quinlan et al., 2015). The reasons for this are complex but are likely to include the enduring presence of sexist viewpoints that believe women in politics are subverting traditional gender norms (Childs, 2008), an ideology that is likely to be magnified in the case of LGBTQ women (Pedersen et al., 2014).

Many contributors felt that the continuing campaign for independence brings together several controversial issues:

I think there were different groups of people who I annoyed by existing. So, there was kind of Brexit, UKIPy people, there were the cybernats. Obviously the Brexit people said how dare I want to remain in the EU, the cybernats said how dare I want to stay in the UK, the Corbynistas said how dare I have been in coalition with the Conservatives! (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

The Scottish independence referendum was one of the first times that binary identity politics was felt so strongly by so many. Brexit is another. The Scottish independence referendum was about the idea of losing your country ... (Klaudia, Politician in Scotland)

In the run up to, and in the aftermath of, the Independence referendum, that's when it [social media debate] was at its most heated. And that's because we push people to extremes, and people become less tolerant of each other. And when there's only two answers to one question, that's compounded. (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

Julia continued, drawing parallels between the Scottish independence referendum, and other binary debates that have taken place in the UK since 2014:

There's no doubt in my mind that political culture's got harsher and less tolerant because we've been obsessed with binary questions. We face complex questions presented as having two easy answers when really, the truth is that you can't resolve these things with a tick box exercise ... (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

Since the evidence discussed here was collected, there have been major changes to the political landscape in Scotland, affecting both the Scottish and Westminster

Parliaments. In February 2023, the resignation of Nicola Sturgeon as First Minister and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) elicited widespread surprise (Carrell et al., 2023), which was only surpassed by the subsequent police investigation into alleged financial irregularities within the Scottish National Party (Gecsoyler & Carrell, 2023). Sturgeon's resignation came just weeks after the resignation of New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern (Muzaffar, 2023), with the departure of two strong women leaders (Diers-Lawson, 2022) in quick succession increasing concern over the demands placed on women politicians (Cowper-Coles, 2020; Harmer, 2017). Pivotal to these concerns is the growth of online abuse.

Brexit

The neologism 'Brexit' was first coined in 2012 when it emerged in reference to debates about the UK withdrawing from the European Union (EU) (Fontaine, 2017). The subsequent referendum produced a national vote in favour of leaving the EU by a margin of 51.9 per cent (Matti & Zhou, 2017) to 48.1 per cent (Mavragani & Tsgarakis, 2019). Like the Scottish independence referendum, the decision to vote 'leave' was not uniformly reflected across the country, with wide geographic and demographic variations in the result (Matti & Zhou, 2017). The rancorous nature of the Brexit referendum campaign, coupled with the tortuous parliamentary negotiations that followed, as the UK government attempted to pass into law the results of the legally non-binding result (Smales, 2017), has led to a large amount of debate and scrutiny. There have been several studies highlighting the rise in online abuse that occurred in the Brexit referendum campaign and its aftermath (e.g. Evolvi, 2019; Gorrell et al., 2020; Ward & McLaughlin, 2020; Watson, 2019). It was unsurprising, therefore, to find that Members of Parliament had found themselves similarly targeted:

[Brexit] was vicious. There was an attempt to really make me feel as though I was not welcome here. And that was UKIP, and there's been some really vicious stuff in this area from UKIP. Really vicious stuff against other women. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

I don't think they would have done that [online abuse] to the men. There are male MPs who took the same Brexit position as me, and both ultimately have lost their seats, but they didn't get the abuse. It was just legitimised. The lack of respect and the aggression was horrific. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

The Brexit referendum definitely polarised people... I am seen as just a Brexiteer. There's nothing more to my personality, according to some people online, than me being a Brexiteer, and that makes me terrible. [In their opinion] I'm scum, I'm a traitor, I'm all sorts of stuff, which I was never really getting before. (Simone, Member of Parliament)

Despite being the target of online abuse, some were philosophical about the consequences of such a polarised debate, believing it inevitable:

In terms of Brexit ... I received both abuse and support, both from Remainers and Brexiteers, because there was no way that you're ever going to make everyone happy in the Brexit debate. Broadly speaking, everybody got a level of abuse about Brexit because you couldn't have it otherwise. I campaigned for Remain, I also then voted for the deal because I think it needs to be over, and my constituents voted Leave, and so I was pragmatic in my approach towards Brexit ... Everybody got a level of abuse. If I'd had been very pro-Remain, I'd have got loads of abuse from Brexiteers, and vice versa. I mean, some of the more middle-class abuse I got from Remainers was quite entertaining. (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

I think particularly after Brexit and the way in which politicians were treated by the media [online abuse increased]. Because it divided the country in two ... there weren't many people who were indifferent! And therefore, by their very nature, they were going to be confrontational. (Nicola, Member of Parliament)

However, what was surprising was that women in other areas of politics, such as Members of the House of Lords, and local authority representatives, were also targeted. Smita confirmed the rise in Islamophobic abuse on social networking sites post-Brexit:

Whenever something big happens, like Brexit, or if there's been a big terrorist incident ... then I know that I've just got to deal with things online, in a different way. After the abuse I received during Brexit, I discussed it with other BME councillors, and we picked it up with the [council] leader, and she recognised it as a wider issue, and just said, 'look, if anybody feels that they are under attack or they are receiving abuse as a result of Vote Leave, then you've got to report it straight away', and I think she reassured us a little bit that we weren't on our own at that point. And then a lot of the colleagues around the room stood up and said, you know, I voted to leave but there's no way that I would ever endorse that kind of activity. So, that reassured us a little bit. (Smita, Local Councillor)

Similarly, women across the other three occupations being investigated also found themselves receiving more online abuse both during and after the Brexit referendum.

I do think – this may just be a coincidence – my book came out last summer, which was after the Brexit vote, that there is a little bit more confidence among racists to be openly racist now, which they didn't have before. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

We were involved in an investigation into something that was connected to the referendum. The abuse against me, from both sides of this argument, massively increased at that time. Whenever I've tweeted about the police's role in providing advice to government on the use of the EU powers, I get a lot of comments saying 'oh, she must be a Remainer', a complete poo-pooing of any professional views I might have. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

Gender Identity

The third catalyst for online abuse is the issue of gender identity. Unlike the other two events discussed in this chapter, this is a debate that has not been subject to a public vote. Indeed, some have gone so far as to argue that it is a debate that has occurred predominantly online (e.g. Colliver, 2021). Nevertheless, despite lacking an overt and more traditional political platform, the debate around gender identity has gained a notoriety for generating online abuse.

Debate has centred around the awareness of the structural rights (Colliver, 2021) of (mainly) transgender women to access public spaces using their preferred gender identity and the concerns of others that some single-sex spaces remain (Aspani, 2018). In Scotland, this debate has coalesced around the discussions that have arisen as a result of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill (2022) (Pedersen, 2022). Debate on this issue has been notable in several ways. In addition to being located predominantly online, it has also brought together people with a number of different intersectional identities and has proven challenging for many women who have previously found their identities as feminists and champions of women's rights unchallenged by a dominant hegemony. However, in common with the Scottish independence campaign, and the Brexit referendum, this issue has once again seen women in public facing occupations become the target of unpleasant and violent abuse:

I just need to put a photograph of a [trans] flag out, and you get the abuse coming in. I receive online abuse fairly regularly because some of the things I put out on social media are clearly linked to trans rights and trans issues. I do find it quite upsetting. Most of what I put out is not controversial. But I get abuse back that's political: 'what are the police doing ... the police should be out locking up burglars', and all that kind of thing. That's one thing. Then there's the complete anti-trans stuff, which is really hurtful. (Samantha, Senior Police Officer)

Samantha then discussed what had happened when she had tweeted about the police using preferred pronouns:

I knew that it was always going to have a degree of controversy, because many people will say, 'what right has anybody got to tell me what pronouns I should be using?'. I knew that would be the case.

I never expected it to get over one million views. I think if I had, I'd have probably spent a bit longer planning it. That said, I don't think I'd have changed anything about what I said. (Samantha, Senior Police Officer)

It was not just in the realm of criminal justice that gender identity was a point of conflict:

The gender identity issue has also led to a massive reaction. I tweeted something asking people to fill in a consultation response, something that's not controversial, just asking people to fill in a government consultation, and then I'll get replies to that, saying that I hate women, or that I am a misogynist. (Wendy, Local Councillor)

When I've been engaging very carefully in a debate around trans issues and whether trans women should be able to compete at the Olympics, on the back of something I tweeted, I had an email from an individual saying, 'we're watching your Twitter account, you tweeted two things from the Daily Mail, how dare you, if you tweet a further thing from the Daily Mail, you'd better watch out'. (Agita, Member of the House of Lords)

I will not engage in any conversation about trans rights, no matter what I think, because it doesn't matter how carefully people phrase what they're thinking. If you do it wrong ... you get absolutely hammered. And it genuinely scares me. (Rose, Academic based in the USA)

Lack of Nuance in Debate

What these catalysts for online abuse share is a demand that individuals adopt an immovable position on a given issue. Such an insistence leads to the forming of very binary opinions. Many participants in this study highlighted this lack of nuance in important debates.

The increased polarisation of opinion, as described by participants in this research, echoes the work of Sunstein (2009a) on group polarisation, and Pariser (2012) on filter bubbles, first discussed in Chapter Four. Whilst not directly referencing either theory, participants did describe their concerns over the polarisation of debate. Of most concern, was the perceived lack of nuance in discussions that occur over social media (Harlow et al., 2020):

What's been demonstrated to me is that we've lost the nuance of debate. And I think that's one of the things that social media has exacerbated. (Esther, Member of Parliament)

In reality, lines are fuzzy and humans are awkward, and there will always be someone that you annoy. There will always be an exception

to the rule, and [people online] do not want to deal with exceptions. They don't want to deal with nuance and complication and humanity. They want everything to be simple. If we don't manage to get a set of manners on how we interact on social media, and we spend more of our lives in fact on social media, then we lose the ability to debate. (Rose, Academic based in the USA)

One of the problems with our political system is nuance is dead. People are looking for ulterior motives and debate has gone. (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

For Esther, a Member of Parliament elected for the first time in 2019, there is a link between the lack of nuance in debate, and both the Scottish Independence and Brexit referenda, which only offered a binary choice to voters on important issues. It has been argued that making decisions in this way traduces political debate and increases polarisation (Reisach, 2021):

I think we like to put people in boxes. We like to know what categories people fit into, before we can attach all our assumptions onto them, and I think there's no doubt that both referendums have been incredibly divisive. (Esther, Member of Parliament)

Speaking to people for this research has revealed support for a possible link between the lack of nuance in debate and a growth in intolerance, as suggested by Sunstein (2009a):

I feel that people are being radicalised and egged on by others [online] in a way that is much more impactful than a random group of friends that meet down the pub. A part of it is because people gravitate towards others that are like them, so the people who are most extreme find others who are extreme. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

The reason we're in this situation is that we're in such a polarised world now ... and social media really amplifies that. If you have a face-to-face conversation, there's much more nuance. [But when] you get on social media, suddenly you have to pick a side, then you have to stick to that side, and people dig their heels in. And you're not allowed to say, 'I don't know', or 'I haven't thought about it'. You have to have an opinion. And that's very dangerous, because if you look at [many] debates, you're not allowed to say 'I just don't know' because social media doesn't give you that space for grey. It's all very black and white. (Michelle, Journalist based in the UK)

Twitter can be very divisive. I think that nature of the beast has changed a lot over the years. It was very different ten years ago.

It was quite gentle; it wasn't the way that it is now. It's really morphed into something else since. I do think the extremist elements online are successfully dominating those platforms more and more, making it more difficult for everyday people with nuanced opinions ... most of us don't hold very extreme opinions ... to exist online. I think we're getting pushed further and further away. (Sally, Politician in Scotland)

Sally is not alone in identifying an increase in the polarisation of political discussion in Scotland. This issue was also highlighted by Bennett et al. (2021) in their identification of the various political cleavages in Scotland, including independence, Brexit and the relationship with the Westminster parliament. It is clear from both the literature and this empirical research that entrenched differences in opinion create silos not only between political parties but also within them, as the continuing fissures in both the SNP and the Labour Party have demonstrated (Julios, 2022).

Linda, a journalist based in the UK, felt that the voices most often heard in online debates were white and male, reflecting research undertaken by Kasana (2014) that reported that the most vocal online political commentators fitted that description:

If you happen to be a woman, or you happen to be a minority, and a minority woman in particular, then it's almost impossible to be heard without receiving abuse. It's really unfair. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

Linda made an important distinction, however, between opinions aired on online platforms and the reality. Her opinion chimes strongly with that of Bruns (2019), who is sceptical about the power attached to filter bubbles and echo chambers:

I think it's a very poor gauge of public opinion. I think the people who are on it [social media] are certain kinds of people. And it's definitely not representative of the population at large. And I think it's becoming more unrepresentative as time goes on, because of the extremist element who are so disproportionately active on it. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

Julia, a politician who has worked on numerous campaigns, agreed with Pariser's (2012) description of online filter bubbles, believing that political discussion that occurs on online platforms is likely to reinforce the views of those contributing:

It delivers on a confirmation bias, where you convince people that agree with you already that you are even more right in your outlook, but what you don't do is persuade people of your cause ... (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

Several contributors felt that the polarisation of debate in itself was a contributory factor in the growth of online abuse:

I think Brexit has changed the conversation in terms of what people think they can tweet. (Agita, Member of the House of Lords)

In politics generally, the atmosphere is so toxic. I'm not sure we can divorce social media from everything else in this respect, it's just one of the more intense expressions of the horrible state that the country's in at the moment. The country's in a dark place. It's frightened, it's negative, it's scapegoating everything and everybody, including the European Union. Social media has become a really focused and intense expression of that. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

If you dare to say, 'it's not as clear cut as that' [about any issue], then you're immediately attacked ... they'll pile on. And otherwise-rational people tell you you're cruel and heartless. People get very worked up and they grab on to things very tightly and I think that creates an environment where abuse becomes a natural byproduct. As soon as you take this to its logical end, abuse is the end point, and it is almost always abuse of women. (Rose, Academic based in the USA)

Consequences of Online Abuse

There are many consequences of experiencing online abuse. At an individual level, one of the main consequences is withdrawal from the online space. However, the consequences of online abuse are broader than this, and frequently extend into the occupational and organisational sphere.

Two further consequences of online abuse have been identified in this research: the occupational impact; and the framing of abuse as an attack on the wider organisation that women in public facing occupations represent.

There is a value in analysing the impact of online abuse at a wider level, namely the harm that is inflicted on an individual's occupation. Once again, the four public facing occupations of academia, journalism, policing and politics are scrutinised, drawing upon the experiences of women employed across these areas.

In October 2019, the House of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights (House of Commons, 2019b) published the report of their inquiry into threats posed to Members of Parliament. Following a detailed investigation, the report concluded that 'MPs are regularly threatened with physical violence and are subject to harassment and intimidation whilst going about their wider public duties. This undermines our democracy and demands action' (House of Commons, 2019b, p. 3). It is a fact that MPs have always faced a threat to their safety. The terrorist murder of David Amess MP in October 2021 and the assassination of Jo Cox in June 2016 (Durie, 2021) are only the latest deaths of politicians. Before

these most recent attacks, seven other Parliamentarians had been killed, including the Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, who was killed in 1812 by a man who blamed the Conservative government for his wrongful imprisonment in Russia and Anthony Berry, who was staying at the Grand Hotel in Brighton when it was bombed by the Provisional IRA in 1984 (Power, 2019). However, the investigation undertaken by the House of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights (2019b) identified that online platforms present a new source of hazard. The committee declared that:

The advent of social media means that the whereabouts of MPs, whether at home or at work, are very widely known. Social media is important for MPs to communicate directly with their constituents and account for what they are doing on a regular basis. It can be a tool to foster democracy, to enable people to discuss the issues of the day and to allow people to learn about and assert their rights. But it is also used by people who anonymously threaten MPs and by those who whip up hostility and violence towards MPs. (House of Commons, 2019b, p. 5)

This concurs with research published by Amnesty International (2017) and is echoed in the empirical evidence presented here.

As well as having a significant negative impact on individuals, the online abuse and associated threats detailed in this study has a similarly malign effect on an individual's ability to do their job effectively. This has far-reaching effects on both their professional standing and their ability to serve the public in the way they intend:

It [online abuse] has an impact on my job. I find it really hard to do surgeries, I only have one surgery a month. I would love to do more, but to do four surgeries a month on my own ... I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that. So, I do one a month, and I do that alone. I know my male colleagues do more. It limits my participation in politics. (Wendy, Local Councillor)

Of course it [online abuse] does impact all the time, that's why we do the job in a totally different way than we did. So, for instance, I never advertise where I'm going to be. I used to do open surgeries all over the constituency: supermarkets, libraries. People would just roll up. Now, we do them all in the office, where we've got huge security. Every person who comes into the office, must provide their name, their address. If anybody's coming, we know who they are, where they live, and if we have any worries, we'll just do the surgery over the phone. It's massively impacted the way we do the job. (Loretta, Member of Parliament)

It is not only politicians who face curbs on their occupational activity as a consequence of online abuse. As Veletsianos et al. (2018) reveal, women academics

are also frequent targets for abuse, which damages their occupational impact. The demands of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) also expose UK academics to online abuse. The pressure to build professional collaborations (Kapidzic, 2020) and perform successfully in the REF leads many academics to increase their online presence, in a bid to evidence public engagement with their research (Barlow & Awan, 2016). But this in turn has led to an increase in the amount of abusive and threatening communication they receive. Writing in advance of the REF in 2014, Alison Phipps urged that ‘HEFCE³ and the higher education sector in general need to understand and acknowledge what they are asking academics to do, offer us better support, and pay particular attention to the problems faced by women in the public eye. It is harder for us to have impact in the first place – and when we do, it comes at a price’ (Phipps, 2014, p. 1). Christie confirmed this when recounting her own experience, believing that the safety work (Vera-Gray, 2018) that women are necessitated to engage in is a manifestation of institutional gender bias:

It’s unfair to say, ‘well because you’re a woman you need to operate differently and potentially limit career opportunities for yourself because it’s unsafe’. That’s just entirely unequitable. It’s a real point of contention ... I’m constantly having to unfortunately argue to do things that are less safe, for the purposes of my career.
(Christie, Academic at a UK university)

In the USA, academics must achieve tenure in order to obtain job security and career progression (Shreffler et al., 2023). One way that a candidate is judged suitable to be awarded tenure is through their level of public engagement (Tierney & Lechuga, 2010), with online platforms increasingly used as a mechanism for securing public engagement in research (Barlow & Awan, 2016). The targeting of women academics for online abuse and threats is having a deleterious effect on this process. Eileen is an academic from the USA; at the time of this research, she was on a secondment to mainland Europe but recounted her experience aiming to secure tenure in the USA:

My job is my ability to speak as an expert in this field. So, in the US we have the tenure system for faculty ... basically you’re in a job and then you have six years to demonstrate that you are an expert in your field, and if at the end of that time they say yes, you’ve demonstrated that, you get to keep your job. And if you don’t, you’re fired. And women are denied tenure at a much higher rate than men. And so, if something is affecting your ability to be an expert and speak out as an expert, and if you’re dealing with harassment all the time, instead of writing papers, it just continues to widen that gap. And so online

³Now the Office for Students and UKRI

abuse is not about thoughts and feelings. It's about how it affects my job, and that affects my pay cheque, that's the bottom line. Online abuse has a real consequence to it. (Eileen, Academic at a European university)

The early investigative work undertaken by journalists to document the existence of online abuse (Cranston, 2015), means that there is a larger amount of evidence of the online abuse received by women journalists than many other professions. In one of the first pieces of quantitative research to be undertaken into online abuse, Gardiner et al. (2016) analysed the comments that were made in response to articles published on the Guardian newspaper's website. Their study found that:

whilst the majority of our regular opinion writers are white men, we found that those who experienced the highest levels of abuse and dismissive trolling were not. The ten regular writers who got the most abuse were eight women (four white and four non-white) and two Black men. Two of the women and one of the men were gay. And of the eight women in the 'top 10', one was Muslim and one Jewish (Gardiner et al., 2016, p. 1).

As well as highlighting the gendered nature of online abuse, Gardiner et al. (2016) confirm the negative impact that intersectional identities have on those engaging online. More recent research has concurred with this view, emphasising that being the target of online abuse can have a negative impact for both the journalist and their publication (Searles et al., 2020).

Three journalists spoken to during this study recounted the impact that online abuse had had on their ability to work effectively:

There is one kind of online abuse that is becoming more common, which is ... taking offline action. So, they're calling your employer. I've heard stories about abusers calling the Department of Family and Children's Services, trying to have somebody's kids taken away. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

If and when I move on from [current employer], it will be really nice not to do this every day. (Michelle, Journalist based in the UK)

I've had people tweet at and call my previous employers saying that I should be fired for my political views. (Judith, Journalist based in the USA)

In comparison to the other three occupations being investigated in this research, there is little research into the experiences of police officers in relation to the occupational impact of receiving online abuse (Lee, 2020). This was borne

out by the data in this study, which confirmed that police officers are less likely to receive online abuse that makes a direct threat:

What is interesting, and I can only conclude that it must be because I am a law enforcement professional ... perhaps they conclude that I can do more about an overt threat than an average member of the public. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

This further strengthens the finding that police officers are more likely to be targeted for abuse that questions their integrity or ability or criticises their appearance, voice or age, rather than making direct threats.

Online Abuse as an Organisational Attack

By exploring the online experiences of different occupations, it is possible to reframe episodes of online abuse into organisational rather than a personal attacks:

I and other women I know, have given up real opportunities in our work, such as speaking engagements, because of threats and bomb threats to our organisations (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

I don't see [perpetrators] as dangerous. I think they're abusive, and I think they are trying to discourage you from doing the kind of reporting you do. Ultimately they're trying to discourage you from covering the topic that is criticising them. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

For some contributors, realising that the online abuse they received had an organisational target, rather than being intended for them as individuals, made it easier to deal with:

When you look at the profiles of some of the people that dish out the abuse, they are anti-establishment, anti-everything. I look at them and think, I wouldn't want to meet you, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with you. (Samantha, Senior Police Officer)

Some accounts ... every time you tweet something, immediately respond with some sort of insult, based on a real or perceived view they have of your organisation, or what it might stand for. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

Impacts Specific to Women in Public Facing Occupations

Online abuse directed at women in public facing occupations can impact at multiple levels. Many of these impacts are specific to the public sphere due to the nature of the role and the public exposure that it often brings. This is especially the case in two key areas: the impact on women's participation in certain occupations and the wider impact on democracy.

On 4 July 2024, the greatest ever number of women MPs – 263 – were elected to the House of Commons (40 per cent of the total). Following this General Election, 46 per cent of Labour MPs are women, 24 per cent of Conservative MPs are women, and 44 per cent of Liberal Democrat MPs are women (Cracknell & Baker, 2024, p. 8). 90 non-white MPs were elected in 2024, 50 of whom are women (Helm, 2024). This makes the 2024 Parliament the most ethnically diverse in history, with 25 more non-white MPs than were elected in 2019. The majority of these are Labour Party representatives ($n = 66$) (Katwala & Rutter, 2024).

The 2024 General Election also saw 132 Members of Parliament stand down (Cracknell & Baker, 2024), a figure significantly higher than the 77 MPs who retired in 2019 (Belam et al., 2019). 33 of those standing down were women (Priddy, 2024). However, unlike in the run-up to the General Elections of 2019 and 2017, there was not a significant amount of media coverage citing online abuse as an underlying cause of these resignations. Whilst *some* women MPs did reference their experiences of online abuse as a factor in their decision making, with Mhairi Black, Dehenna Davidson and Joanna Cherry each mentioning the online abuse that they had received as a factor in their decision to leave the House of Commons (Drysdale, 2023; Ivers, 2023), there was less discussion of the issue of the online abuse of politicians in the 2024 General Election, than there was in other campaigns. It seems that this lack of coverage belied the reality on the ground. Jess Phillips, an MP who has spoken openly in the past about the online abuse she has received (e.g. Galpin, 2022; Ginsberg, 2019; Phillips, 2017), was heckled whilst making her acceptance speech following the most recent election. The reception she received prompted her to describe in visceral detail the morphing of digital threats into tangible physical dangers, claiming that 'this election has been the worst campaign I have ever been involved in' (Haynes, 2024, p. 1). In the days following the General Election, the Electoral Commission announced that they were launching an investigation into the treatment of parliamentary candidates, in response to reports of an increase in the harassment of those standing in the General Election, which 'did put people off campaigning, did put people off hustings' (Ouaguira, 2024, p. 1). Speaking shortly after polling day, the Chief Executive of the Electoral Commission, Vijay Rangarajan, said 'We also saw, in addition, a tremendous amount of online abuse of MPs, of candidates in general, and some of those were really quite disturbing - manipulated videos, misogynistic videos in particular' (*ibid.*). By summer 2025, the Electoral Commission report is yet to be published.

The General Election of December 2019 also saw what was then a record number of resignations ($n = 77$) (Belam et al., 2019). Just as in 2024, the reasons for the departure of so many MPs in 2019 were varied and undoubtedly affected by internal disputes occurring at the time in both of the two main parties. However, upon announcing their decision not to stand again, several women cited the online abuse they had received as a reason (Watson, 2019). For example, the former MP for South Cambridgeshire, Heidi Allen, told her constituents in an open letter printed in the local newspaper that:

I am exhausted by the invasion into my privacy and the nastiness and intimidation that has become commonplace. Nobody in

any job should have to put with threats, aggressive emails, being shouted at in the street, sworn at on social media, nor have to install panic alarms at home. Of course public scrutiny is to be expected, but lines are all too regularly crossed, and the effect is utterly dehumanising. In my very first election leaflet, I remember writing ‘I will always be a person first and a politician second’ – I want to stay that way. So, I have reluctantly come to the decision that I will not re-stand when the next general election comes (Pengelly, 2019, p. 1).

This sentiment was shared by a number of politicians spoken to in this study:

My feeling when I lost was at first shock, and then the next day relief. It was just relief that I didn't have to put up with it anymore. That it was worth paying the price of losing my job, losing my career, and everything, because it meant the end of social media abuse. That's how much it weighed on me. I remember saying to friends, it's like being in an abusive relationship and if I saw a friend of mine like that I'd say get out, you're better than this, you don't have to put yourself through this, no one should have this just because they're trying to do their job. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

When Brexit was at its height and divisions were strongest amongst political parties, I did hear a few of my colleagues say I wonder whether this is worth it, my family are upset. (Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

All of my children, at some point over the last two or three years have said to me, is this really worth it Mam? Do you really want to stand again? All have thought, perhaps you should just not do this anymore, which is quite a thing coming from the type of family that we are. There's quite a lot of people in politics at the minute, who have not been able to cope with it. It's had an impact on their health. (Loretta, Member of Parliament)

As well as affecting their own decisions to stand for public office, several politicians expressed concern about the possible impact online abuse could have on women choosing a political career:

I'm forever encouraging women to get involved, but I know one hundred percent there are young women that look at the replies that I get on Twitter and look at how I deal with things on Twitter, and they say to me, 'oh, I couldn't deal with that, I couldn't do that, I couldn't do what you do'. I know it's putting women off. (Wendy, Local Councillor)

I felt hypocritical, because [when I was an MP] I would go into schools on a Friday and encourage people to get involved in politics, going 'it's great, hopefully you guys will be MPs one day', and in my heart I was thinking I wouldn't touch it with a barge pole. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Two women (who had previously sought public office) revealed that their experiences of receiving explicit and violent online abuse had prompted them to seek alternative careers:

About fifty per cent of the reason why I'm not standing is because I am not putting myself up for public scrutiny in the way that Diane Abbott is, or Dawn Butler is, having no support or ownership from their own party. (Souad, Academic at a UK university)

One of the things that puts me off getting back into politics in a serious way is the compromise you have to make in terms of the persona and the realness ... I think that the two aspects of the abuse, the abuse that you get and the level of accountability that you are held to unreasonably, frankly drives anyone normal away from politics, and then you end up just having very ideologically driven sociopaths being the only people who are willing to get into that space, and if they fill the vacuum, it just makes matters worse. (Klaudia, Politician in Scotland)

Klaudia's view is echoed in research by McKay (2020), which confirms that the Scottish independence campaign led women politicians to receive a large amount of sexist and homophobic abuse. The reasons for this are complex, underpinned by cleavages in political opinion, social class and national identity (Bennett, 2021; Nicolson & Korkut, 2022). In addition, the enduring presence of sexist viewpoints which assert that women in politics are subverting traditional gender norms (Childs, 2008) remains a potent tenet (Julios, 2022). In addition, instances of misogynistic, sexist and racist abuse are frequently minimised (Scott et al., 2020) and branded as 'banter' (Scott et al., 2019, p. 122), creating an online environment that is hazardous to navigate.

It is not solely in the occupation of politics that there are problems of recruitment and retention. There is growing evidence that women from other public facing occupations are also leaving the workplace. Kavanagh and Brown (2020) highlight the deleterious impact that online abuse has on women academics, substantially harming their professional progress (Citron & Norton, 2011):

We have different tolerance levels. The thing that got me really involved in doing this [interview] was the number of women that I knew that were stopping their public engagements. (Eileen, Academic at a European university)

Similarly, whilst the number of women serving at a senior level within the police service has increased over the last decade, only a third of senior officers are women (Allen & Zayed, 2024). Evidence obtained for this study suggests that one of the many factors that may be acting as a disincentive to more women applying for promotion within the police service is the hostility that they may encounter online:

I do know a lot of women who have talked to me about not wanting to get into really senior positions because of online abuse. They just think that intrusion is too great. (Imogen, Senior Police Officer)

If women serving in public facing occupations leave these professions, or choose instead to follow a career in the private sector, multiple negative consequences will result. These were succinctly summarised by Julia:

The idea that people might choose not to participate in democratic activities because of their fear of abuse, in a digital or a physical sense, I find really disturbing ... I fear about the future of politics, because what you'll end up with is more very confident, privately educated, 50-year-old, white, middle-class men. We all pay a price. (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

The organisational and structural ramifications associated with a decline in the number of women in public facing occupations, as predicted by Julia, could include a roll back in efforts to counter sexual harassment in the workplace (Jane, 2018), a widening of the gender pay gap (Kavanagh & Brown, 2020) and a policy vacuum at the heart of government. Ultimately, when online abuse forces women out of public life (in whatever form), the outcome is a further silencing of women's voices, this time at a level that jeopardises women's power and representation across society (Ginsberg, 2019).

In addition to these potential structural impacts that could be precipitated by the online abuse of women in public facing occupations, there is an even greater structural threat posed by pejorative communication – namely, a threat to democracy itself. Whilst such a claim may appear exaggerated, evidence gathered during this research has concurred with the findings of Gorrell et al. (2020), Krook (2020) and Majó-Vázquez et al. (2021) that the targeting of one section of the population for abuse, threat and violent invective in this way is of profound concern.

The potential threat to democracy posed by online abuse was most clearly articulated in this research by politicians, who recounted their experiences during the numerous Parliamentary debates following the publication of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. The Bill was first presented to MPs in July 2017 (Walker, 2021) with the passing of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 finally becoming law, having received Royal Assent, on 23 January (Walker, 2021). The tortuous legislative process, which included the resignation of Theresa May as Prime Minister and the 'snap' General Election of December 2019

(Prosser, 2021), was accompanied by numerous protests and demonstrations outside the Palace of Westminster (Elbaum, 2019), which frequently left MPs feeling at risk for their safety:

In that period outside of Parliament when we had all those demonstrators, it got very difficult at one point to walk down the street without people shouting after me and being told I was a traitor. This was from the Brexit side particularly. I knew it was going to be really hard and that's exactly how it turned out. There was an awful attempt to shout me down, I was having abuse thrown at me, online and in person. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Patricia proceeded to express her frustration with the advice that was given to Parliamentarians not to engage in certain activities:

When all the people were demonstrating outside, the Parliamentary authorities would say things like 'don't go over to interviews unaccompanied'. But that is what being an MP is all about. The media were camped out on College Green, and we were being asked to go out there and do stuff, and that's what MPs do. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Lauren also referenced the same demonstrations, emphasising the risk to the safety of those working within the Parliamentary estate:

It was especially hard when the Brexit debates were on, people were outside the Palace [of Westminster], chanting and goodness knows what else. Things got heated if there were protests, so I'd always make sure that my staff contacted me on the WhatsApp to make sure they got home safely. (Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

It is important to note that it was not just in Westminster that MPs were being threatened:

Just before the run up to the General Election, with the 'Surrender Bill'⁴ bollocks that Boris Johnson and his allies were advocating, there was a massive piece of graffiti appeared up in my constituency that called me a Nazi ... Now given how well documented my [Jewish] faith has ended up being, there are definitely interesting connotations to all of that. That completely freaked me out

⁴Prime Minister Boris Johnson used the phrase 'Surrender Bill' in the autumn of 2019 to describe the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) Act 2019, which the Conservative government opposed (Mason, 2019).

because I'd not had that kind of stuff in the constituency before.
(Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Some actions towards MPs were investigated by the police and remained the subject of criminal proceedings:

There are a couple of people at the moment who are on a charge. They have been charged with criminal offences from the Brexit angle because of an attack they made on me on social media. They threatened me with a weapon. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

In its investigation into the abuse of MPs and the associated threat to democracy, the House of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights (2019b) emphasised the danger of such threats:

MPs should be able to get on with their work and with the job for which they were elected, vote without looking over their shoulder and freely engage with their constituents and the wider public. No MP should face a barrage of abuse for doing their work as a holder of public office. It is in no one's interest, if to stay safe, MPs retreat and become far more remote for constituents (House of Commons, 2019b, p. 23).

This assertion was substantiated by Phyllis, an MP until December 2019, who spoke about the impact that online abuse had on her ability to properly fulfil her responsibilities as a constituency MP:

You can't be a very good MP if you're protecting yourself. It's not just about the physical thing of being out there, it's a psychological thing. You can't be a very good MP if you're defensive and you think people are against you and everyone's out to get you and you feel threatened. You've got to go out there smiling and shaking hands and saying hello to everybody and wandering around being pleased to see them. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Peggy highlighted how attacks made on online platforms can cross over into the offline space, becoming a genuinely physical threat:

A man attacked my office, because of what he thought I had said about people who voted Brexit. He was charged, and he was convicted of causing public disorder. I have since met with him and talked to him, which is good because it meant that I got to find out why he felt that way about me. And the reason that he felt that way about me was because of things he'd read about me by these people who troll me online. He said to me, 'I read that you said that people

who voted Brexit were stupid'. So, I showed him a video of me at the People's Vote march where I'm stood on the stage in front of all the Remain campaigners and I start my speech by saying I never ever want to hear anybody saying that the people who voted Brexit are stupid. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

Within the confines of the House of Commons chamber itself, the fear of the threat to personal safety had a huge impact on the behaviour of some politicians, who made decisions that ultimately risked jeopardising the democratic process:

Once we got into the votes against Article 50, or the votes against the Withdrawal Bill, any of those votes, there was a lot of stuff [online abuse] that looked like it was coming from the constituency, to give you the psychological frighteners, to criticise and undermine and get you to vote in a different way. I was worried about people's psychological resilience during large votes, so when we had a big vote on the Prime Minister's deal on Brexit, colleagues would go out and brief the media that they were going to vote with the Tories and then over the course of the day there would be a Twitter pile on, and then by the time it came to voting, there'd be twelve tonnes of anguish and then they'd vote with the Opposition. I'm worried that people's [MPs] minds were changed by social media. I'm worried about the fact that they can be swayed politically by it. I think that's bad for democracy. (Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

I've sat in rooms with colleagues who have said that they voted, that they felt frightened about the way that they might vote and have changed the way that they were going to vote in Parliament, based on online abuse. It was women who were saying it. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

There was one time where I had voted in a particular way and I was going to put something out on Twitter about it, but it was quite late at night, and I just thought, I really don't need this now, so I didn't say anything. (Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Peggy highlighted that it was not just on debates around Brexit that politicians' votes were swayed by the impact of online abuse. The validity of other votes, including those on military action, and time limits on abortion, was also jeopardised:

In matters of war, I remember there was a significant amount of abuse sent to the women who were considering voting for the bombing in Syria, and I certainly suffered this. There was a huge amount of images sent to me of decapitated bodies and stuff, but those pictures were not in any way associated with allied forces. They were

not even in that country. You get quite a lot of that in the abortion debate as well, sending you graphic images of dead foetuses and things. And that can change... it won't change the way a person thinks, but it makes people [MPs] think I'm just going to abstain from this. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

Whilst it is politicians who are predominantly affected by the threat to democracy posed by online abuse, potential disruption to the democratic process as a consequence of online abuse is also felt by women in other public facing occupations. In the USA, the register of electors in many States is a public document, available for anyone to access (Bennett, 2016). Whilst some voters may request that their home address remain confidential, this is frequently only permissible if the individual can prove that they have previously been a victim of domestic violence (Roberts, 2024). Online abuse, targeting or other victimisation is not included as a reason for exclusion from the registers, leaving many women fearful of being targeted:

I have a friend who eventually just took herself off of the voting rolls because she was so anxious ... and that's bad, right? Not being able to vote, as a citizen. But even if you spent a lot of time and money, which many of us do, removing our private information from the Web, in the United States at least, your address is public information if you vote. Also, something that I've been talking to legislators about, there needs to be a way for people's public information, their residential and private information not to be public facing, as a function of their being able to exercise their right to vote. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

If you have very basic information about someone, and you know where to look you can find their information in the voter rolls; or if you're willing to lie you can buy a tranche of voter rolls very cheaply, that's likely to have your person in it. It's very easy, through the voting rolls, to find somebody's real address. I know people who don't vote because of this, who literally have been disenfranchised ... because they decided that the risk calculus goes a different way for them. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

It is clear from the empirical evidence presented here that women across the public sphere are deeply concerned that online abuse is negatively impacting on the articulation of democratic freedoms in many countries:

These trolls are stopping us from exercising democracy in this country. That is the message I want to get out there. These people are stopping us exercising democracy. It is serious stuff that they're doing. (Jill, Member of Parliament)

Negative online activity gives space and oxygen to the types of views and commentary or communities that polite good manners would have prevented previously, and it has an impact on how people are seen in the public eye, which is broader than them just not wanting to be in it. It is actually undermining. You're seeing people being taken down [online], and shamed, and that has a fundamental impact. It is not helpful for our democracy and for the way in which women are perceived in society. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

The pollution of the digital space ... which was once termed a great democratic space is anti-democratic. That's the sorrow of it. That we've allowed the information space to become so polluted that it's eating its own baby. (Helen, Academic based in the USA)

A number of the politicians who contributed to this study have now left the UK Parliament. Whether they had chosen to not stand again, or were beaten by an opponent, many found that once they had left the public sphere their online interactions both decreased and became less abusive:

Before the election, I said if I lost, the one thing I would do would be to throw my phone in the sea and not have any social media. And of course, I've set up my own Facebook account now, but actually it's nice to enjoy it as a normal person and member of the public. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

I remember after the election when I lost my seat feeling I don't want to go onto Twitter because of the gloating, which I was sure would happen because the abuse was quite bad when I was a minister. And when I finally did go on a few days later I was like, woah, this is quite lovely, because it was like a tap had turned off. As soon as I lost my seat, the abuse stopped. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

It all stopped once I was no longer in the public eye. I like the lack of pressure, I'm mostly quiet. I don't care. For me, not being in the public eye so much now, is good. It's a tool I can have, like when I want to go onto Twitter, I can choose how I want to use it. So I get in less bother! (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

The experiences of these three women upon leaving the political arena confirms the exhaustive nature of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012), and the toll it takes on women across the public sphere.

However, despite the multifarious malign effects experienced and recounted by the women in this book, there remain huge benefits to individuals serving in public

facing occupations as a result of having and maintaining an online presence. The data presented here have highlighted three key benefits of online interaction as a facet of work in public facing occupations, namely its value as a communication tool, the importance of having and maintaining a voice in the online space and the opportunities provided for mutual support, especially from other women also working in public facing occupations.

The benefits offered by the multiplicity of online platforms as tools to communicate with the wider public are potentially innumerable, but at the most basic level, include the opportunity to interact directly with constituents and other members of the public, beyond the confines of traditional media (Coleman, 2005), and the scope to gain a snapshot of public opinion in a much quicker way than would have been possible before the advent of the internet (Sooontjens, 2021).

Despite their personal experiences, the vast majority of participants remained able to capitalise upon the use of online platforms as a means of communication:

I get an awful lot of casework come through Facebook. A constituent can contact me via Twitter, via Instagram, via any of those means, I think it's useful being that open and transparent, and giving people as many possible ways to get in touch with you as they can. (Simone, Member of Parliament)

The social media accounts you have during the campaign you always maintain, so people are instantly able to contact you once you're elected. You walk in on a Monday and look at a laptop and the email is already up and running. People's expectations of contact and response are different to what they were twenty years ago. (Esther, Member of Parliament)

It was a tool for me to communicate with my constituents. Sharing your insights with people and noting future predictions or observations that are slightly left field can be very validating, and that's one of the things where I think a different gender or different race perspective can come in and allow parity of being heard. So, that's why I think online platforms are important. Everyone's equal. (Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Even those who have now left frontline politics still appreciated the benefits of online interaction:

For me, even though I'm not in the public eye so much now, [social media] is still in some ways good. It's a tool I can have, like when I want to go onto Twitter and have a conversation, I can choose how I want to use it. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

The communication benefits were the most apparent for politicians, but women in other public facing occupations also harnessed the benefits accrued from having an online presence. Nevertheless, the threat posed by online abuse remained:

I wrote an article that was shared a hundred-thousand times or more. It actually does mean that people are interested in talking, and there was lots of positive stuff that happened, and I had lots of journalists and writers and historians got in touch, and that was really interesting. It created a community. (Emma, Academic at a UK university)

You have to balance the benefit of tweeting out and informing people as to what it is that we are up to as an organisation, against being the subject of ridicule and abuse. (Stacey, Senior Police Officer)

Academics including Crawford (2009), Jackson and Banaszczyk (2016) and Harp et al. (2018) have written in detail about the role that social media platforms have in giving women a voice, and many of the women contributing to this study support this viewpoint:

It's really important. It gives me a channel to the outside world, that I wouldn't otherwise have. Because we're a small party, and our political system and our media's quite hostile in a way to small parties. It is really important for me to have a way of putting my perspective out there (Maya, Politician in England)

People have the right to information. National media has not shown themselves to be terribly adept at always promoting what is correct. (Nicola, Member of Parliament)

In addition, several women spoke of the importance of maintaining their own Twitter account, as a means of having an 'authentic' voice, over and above the corporate channels of their organisation that were frequently run by internal PR teams:

I wanted to make sure that [my organisation] had its own voice separate to mine. [The organisation] can't say things that I can say, and vice versa, and I wanted to make sure that was clear. (Souad, Academic at a UK university)

I have had over time, particularly from communications professionals, people suggest that they run my Twitter account. But then I think you do lose [my] voice, and over time it just becomes a corporate account which I think is less interesting. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

I felt that it was important to maintain an authentic first-person presence on Twitter, because that was the most effective way of using it.

People wanted to believe it was you and they were engaging with you, and that I was responding to things. (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

However, as the online space has become more crowded, some felt that their ability to make their voice heard effectively had waned, and they found themselves moving away from social media:

Being in the public sphere I'm actually really introverted, and I think I just naturally gravitate away from places where there's noise, where I have to fight to be heard. (Nicole, Academic at a UK university)

Balancing the desire to maintain 'authenticity', fight through the accumulated 'noise' within the online space and preserve personal safety highlights once again how exhausting working in the public sphere can be. It also has echoes of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012), with much of this effort going largely unnoticed.

There is also clear evidence in the literature (e.g. Dragiewicz & Burgess, 2016; Huntemann, 2015; Salter, 2013) that women have sought out and formed a variety of informal networks to counter the personal and professional impact of online abuse. Over time, and as awareness of the issue has increased, these networks have become more occupation-specific, and it is now possible to access the support of academics (Hodson et al., 2018), journalists (Gardiner, 2018), police officers (Tomin et al., 2015) and politicians (Al-Rawi et al., 2021) when faced with an onslaught of abuse as a result of activity in the public sphere. Furthermore, organisations such as Women's Aid, long tasked with supporting victims of gender-based violence in the physical space have also launched online versions of their services (Women's Aid, 2023), whilst other purely online campaigning groups have also been instigated, to both amplify the existence of abuse, and seek to mobilise a movement against such nefarious activity. A good example of this is the #EverydaySexism project, founded by Laura Bates in 2013, where women from around the world submit examples of the sexism they have experienced, in both the online and physical space (Bates, 2016). The campaigning organisation, Glitch, launched in 2017, focusses specifically on tackling the impact of online abuse in the public sphere, particularly for women of colour in the UK (Sobande, 2020). Glitch has had some notable successes, such as the 'Draw the Line' campaign in association with BT Sport (Glitch, 2021). However, this campaign focusses on combatting issues of racist abuse in sports, and whilst a worthy cause, is not specifically concentrated on addressing the underlying misogyny intrinsic to much of the abuse discussed in this research. For the women spoken to during this study, the importance of informal networks remained crucial, and far outweighed their use of more formal support mechanisms, echoing the findings of Hodson et al. (2018):

Our [senior] women officers group recognises the need to support one another, but that's not because we feel in any way isolated from our male colleagues. When I talk to colleagues who've suffered it

[online abuse] and come out the other side, they say there's something hugely affirming about how many supportive messages they get, how much action is taken that they don't have to ask for, so that you don't feel alone when it's going on, and that's really affirming. (Imogen, Senior Police Officer)

I think sometimes what has helped is talking to other female politicians about it, to say, 'oh well, it's not just me'. I watch out for other people as well, so when I've seen other people getting online abuse I kind of check in with them to see how they are. I've become much more aware of it. (Agita, Member of the House of Lords)

I get emails, because people know I work on this issue, saying things like 'oh I've a colleague who's going through this sudden deluge out of the blue, how do I help them?' ... Or 'I know a woman whose partner is stalking them online' ... it's become part of our job to triage other people – nobody's paying us for this, it is yet another tranche of women's work ... (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

Sometimes, this support had a protective purpose, especially during a Twitter storm or similar form of online attack, and can help turn the narrative from a negative to a positive:

When I see individuals receiving some sort of negativity, I always chip in with a positive comment, and you can see other people doing that as well. So, you can see that there's a lot more people trying to throw in more positive stuff, when there are individuals that have to be negative about everything. (Smita, Local Councillor)

I run my own social media accounts unless I'm being deluged by an online attack, at which point I have a few friends who will take it over for me temporarily, so that I can know what's coming in without having to drink directly from the feed. My roommate at the time of my first experience of online abuse was the first person to do it, and she just said, 'I will monitor [it], I will tell you what's going on'. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

The informal networks forged online are even more vital for women of colour:

I have been online for twenty-five years, fully knowing that this is not a friendly space, this is not a safe space, but it's the only way I can contact my community of fellow women of colour who are political activists or activists ... We know this. And that means the community was also very quick at sharing information about how to protect ourselves and what to do. We share techniques and strategies; we speak up for each other. It's a constant process of solidarity that's

in place. We know we see the world differently. We are able to say uh-uh, we don't believe that. (Emma, Academic at a UK university)

A number of women shared their own experiences, which confirmed how crucial informal support networks are for women experiencing online abuse in the course of their work:

It is important too for women who were victimised ... when you join with other women it does help, you feel a little bit more empowered. We can be emboldened and able to take the forefront on some of these issues as long as we're not fearful of actual physical bodily harm. (Tiprat, Academic based in the USA)

Women of colour have always come with that attitude [of distrust in the platform] online, as well as elsewhere, because frankly we know we can't trust the cops, we can't trust the institutions, we can't trust our employers. The only way it works is if we protect ourselves. (Emma, Academic at a UK university)

In this day and age, when our leaders are really intent on leading by fear and division, connection is one of the most radical things we can be building with each other. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

However, whilst informal networks are valuable, there was also the call for more formal support, financed by the technology platforms:

Somebody needs to be doing this work and the companies aren't doing it, at least not in any effective way and so we're all picking it up and no one even notices it's getting done ... (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

We need to translate existing mechanisms of law into the online realm. And even though it doesn't necessarily help you in real time, there's some comfort in knowing you're part of trying to campaign for this stuff to improve. We're trying to do the heavy lifting to get those who wield power and have responsibility for these platforms, as well as the legal system, to catch up with the twenty first century and put protections in place that'll make things better for women now, and our daughters and their daughters and the generations that are coming after. (Maya, Politician in England)

We're now seeing start-ups that are trying to find solutions to online abuse and harassment, all led by women. What we're seeing from younger women is a feeling of... 'I'm not putting up with this and

you shouldn't either'. Younger women really want things to be better.
(Rose, Academic based in the USA)

However, whilst the empirical evidence presented here demonstrates the value of informal support systems and grassroots campaigning around the issue of online abuse, it is important to recognise that the opportunity to utilise support is not equally shared (Salter, 2013).

Conclusion

This chapter considers the facets of a career in public service that appear to initiate and exacerbate online abuse. The chapter has also identified three issues that appeared to provoke online abuse: the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, the referendum on membership of the European Union, which took place in June 2016, and the debate around gender identity. Whilst very different issues, all three of these topics are potentially binary in nature, forcing people to favour a particular 'side', a position that appears to be exacerbated by the nature of discussion on social networking sites (SNS), where there is a clear lack of nuance. The latter sections of the chapter outline the consequences of online abuse, at an individual, organisational and democratic level. The final section considers the role that online platforms play in providing a mechanism for mutual support for women in public facing occupations, and how these support systems, both formal and informal, can be particularly valuable for women who are members of minoritised communities.