

9 Not Quite Kicking Off Everywhere: Feminist Notes on Digital Liberation

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Abstract

Increasingly, women's experience of online life seems to run counter to the optimistic expectations of the cyberfeminists of the 90s and the utopian fervour of the present. Female journalists and internet users find themselves at the receiving end of a level of verbal abuse online previously unthinkable in the public sphere. Women are showing greater signs of alienation from the online arena of political debate than in the culture of parliamentary politics and 'old media' institutions. In spite of the ever mounting evidence that digital liberation is not for all, the polemic of the universal emancipatory power of the internet continues to shape mainstream opinion and capture the political Left's imagination. While there have been sceptical female voices challenging these ideas since the early 90s, they have tended to be too rare, too marginal and too unwilling to make strident and fundamental challenges to the dominant cyberutopian narrative. This has meant that the women who speak out about the phenomenon of the remarkable prevalence of misogyny in online culture have been unable to link their experience to any wider politics and have been unable to articulate a coherent feminist critique to challenge the largely gender blind utopian orthodoxy. Focussing on one particular media moment sparked by the *New Statesman*, this chapter argues for the need to build such a discourse.

Keywords: women, cyberfeminism, cyberutopia, networked individualism, verbal abuse online.

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1. Introduction

Years after Haraway (1991) and later the Cyberfeminist Manifesto set the utopian tone of women's writing on the virtual world, Balka (1999) exclaimed "Where have all the feminist technology critics gone?" (title, emphasis removed). Today, I argue, feminist media critics remain critical of the power structures and the cultural politics of print, television, radio and film but the online world continues to get a curiously free pass, characterised in ways that echo the utopian fervour of the early cyberfeminists. So what happens when we are faced with information that suggests that the optimism of this school of thought might have been misplaced?

In November 2011 nine female journalists and bloggers went public, in the *New Statesman*, with their experience of verbal abuse online. This shocked many and set off a wave of women describing similar experiences in other newspapers and magazines, in opinion columns, blogs and on *Twitter*. These revelations appeared against a backdrop of the internet-centric Occupy movement, the rise of hacktivism as a form of protest, and prevailing cyberutopian fervour in the press and in academia¹. Symbolism of the hacker group Anonymous who emerged from 4chan/b² were to be seen at every demonstration and the publishing industry was churning out books celebrating the brave new egalitarian world that the internet would bring³.

For a brief moment it seemed that the weight of damning evidence presented by these women would spark a new feminist critique of the cyberutopian fervour of the moment, arguing that the non-hierarchical, countercultural wave of digital liberation being trumpeted at the time in the media, in academia and among the political Left, was not gender blind and was not the egalitarian force it was often described as being. However, this moment never came. The story quickly petered out and no such critique emerged. The women were exposing evidence

1. See Castells (2011), Postills (2012) and Coleman (2012) for examples.

2. <http://boards.4chan.org/b/>

3. See Mason (2012), Shirky (2008) and Brooke (2011) for examples.

that ran counter to the dominant cyberutopian narrative that was sweeping the Left at that time, but no sure-footed articulation of that challenge emerged. This conspicuous absence is examined here.

2. You should have your tongue ripped out

In her contribution to the *New Statesman* piece, feminist and trade union activist Cath Elliot wrote:

“If I’d been trying to keep a tally I would have lost count by now of the number of abusive comments I’ve received since I first started writing online back in 2007. And by abusive I don’t mean comments that disagree with whatever I’ve written – I came up through the trade union movement don’t forget, and I’ve worked in a men’s prison, so I’m not some delicate flower who can’t handle a bit of banter or heated debate – no, I’m talking about personal, usually sexualised abuse, the sort that on more than one occasion now has made me stop and wonder if what I’m doing is actually worth it. [...] I read about how I’m apparently too ugly for any man to want to rape, or I read graphic descriptions detailing precisely how certain implements should be shoved into one or more of my various orifices” (in [Lewis, 2011a](#), Cath Elliot section, para. 1-2).

Feminist comedian Kate Smurthwaite added:

“The vast majority of the abuse is gender-related. There is a clear link to internet pornography. Much of the language used could have come straight from pornographic sites. For example, from this week: “IF THIS TRASH TALKING K*NT HAD HER F*CKNG, TONGUE RIPPED OUT OF HER SUCK-HOLE...”” (in [Lewis, 2011a](#), Kate Smurthwaite section, para. 2, emphasis in original).

Blogger Dawn Foster wrote:

“The worst instance of online abuse I’ve encountered happened when I blogged about the Julian Assange extradition case. [...] Initially it was shocking: in the space of a week, I received a rabid email that included

my home address, phone number and workplace address, included as a kind of threat. Then, after tweeting that I'd been waiting for a night bus for ages, someone replied that they hoped I'd get raped at the bus stop" (in [Lewis, 2011a](#), Dawn Foster section, para. 1-2).

The piece quickly generated a lot of debate online and following on from this, the next day [Penny \(2011a\)](#) wrote on the subject in *The Independent*, saying:

"You come to expect it, as a woman writer, particularly if you're political. You come to expect the vitriol, the insults, the death threats. After a while, the emails and tweets and comments containing graphic fantasies of how and where and with what kitchen implements certain pseudonymous people would like to rape you cease to be shocking, and become merely a daily or weekly annoyance, something to phone your girlfriends about, seeking safety in hollow laughter. [...] Most mornings, when I go to check my email, Twitter and Facebook accounts, I have to sift through threats of violence, public speculations about my sexual preference and the odour and capacity of my genitals, and attempts to write off challenging ideas with the declaration that, since I and my friends are so very unattractive, anything we have to say must be irrelevant. [...] Efforts were made to track down and harass my family, including my two school-age sisters. After one particular round of rape threats, including the suggestion that, for criticising neoliberal economic policymaking, I should be made to fellate a row of bankers at knifepoint, I was informed that people were searching for my home address. I could go on" ([Penny, 2011a](#), para. 1-7).

[Lewis \(2011a\)](#) who wrote the original piece for the *New Statesman* got such a strong reaction from women who had had similar experiences that she began collecting them and published some more shortly after.

Sex writer Petra Davis said that she wrote pseudonymously under male, female and gender neutral names and that it was only when she wrote as a female that she received regular misogynist abuse and threats. She wrote:

"When I started getting letters at my flat, I reported them to the police, but

they advised me to stop writing provocative material. Eventually, I was sent an email directing me to a website advertising my services as a sex worker, with my address on the front page under the legend ‘fuck her till she screams, filth whore, rape me all night cut me open’, and some images of sexually mutilated women. It was very strange, sitting quietly in front of my screen looking at those images, knowing that the violence done to these other women was intended as a lesson. [...] Of course, it didn’t take long to take the site down, but by then I was thoroughly sick of the idea and more or less stopped writing about sex from any perspective” (in [Lewis, 2011b](#), para. 10).

In response to a piece about police violence Nina Power found herself the topic of discussion on a blog popular with police, in which one commenter said, “Nina seems quite pretty. After we disband the Police, let’s see pretty Nina walk through a shitty estate [...] and see how well her idea works out when the Gangstas decide they deserve to have her as a toy” (in [Lewis, 2011b](#), para. 15).

Picking up on this, the American feminist writer Sady Doyle started a hashtag on *Twitter* called #mencallmethings which gathered thousands of tweets from women dealing with similar levels of abuse online from across English speaking cyberspace. Many men joined in expressing shock and male writers like [Cohen \(2011\)](#) wrote opinion pieces in solidarity with the women, criticising the willingness of editors to publish misogynist abuse of their female staff in comment threads.

The *New Statesman* story should not have come as a surprise. Women have recounted similar experiences for many years, although they are remarkably less theorised than acts of cyberfeminist subversion ([Plant, 1998](#)) or *Twitter* and *Facebook* revolutions. Internet fetishism and suspicion of feminism have been online bedfellows long before Julian Assange uttered the words “the Saudi Arabia of feminism” (cited in [Colvin, 2011](#), para. 16). New Economy ideologue and futurologist [Gilder \(1994\)](#) quite comfortably married his ideas about the internet to his ultra-conservative ideas about women in the early 90s.

In 1994 internet culture magazine *Fringwear Review*'s edition on *chicks in psyberspace* gave female internet users the chance to describe their experiences of online life. What they described is remarkably similar to more mainstream online culture today, with the same ideas carrying over from geeky hacker subcultures to, almost two decades later, mainstream newspaper comment threads and global internet giants like *YouTube*. In a section called *How to pick up chicks on the internet* the final piece of sarcastically delivered advice reads:

“If all else fails and she continues to bypass your brilliant email, rip her to shreds in public. Don't neglect to let your virtual friends know that she is one of the following: a dyke, a slut, virtually frigid or, better yet, that she's really a 14-year-old boy in Toronto. Send hatemail – women love to take abuse from men after all” (Whiteway & Brown, 1994, p. 44).

This is notably familiar to read today because it so perfectly characterises the online misogyny that women, from mainstream journalists to regular users of chat forums still repeatedly describe. Expressions like Tits or GTFO (get the fuck out) and memes like Idiot Nerd Girl and Annoying Facebook Girl are spread far beyond the confines of geek or gaming culture today and female bloggers and political commentators shock audiences when they reveal the extent of the threats and verbal abuse they receive from men online.

From conservative MP Louise Mensch receiving emails so threatening that she had to get a restraining order (Morris, 2012) to socialist feminists like Cath Elliot and Nina Power finding themselves the subject of descriptions of gang rape in online forums and comment threads, it seems women's experiences online are remarkably similar across the political spectrum.

So what was the outcome of the *New Statesman* furore and all the momentum built by these expressions of anger about women's treatment online? The media-dubbed 'stamp out misogynist trolling campaign' never became a real campaign. Some suggested greater comment thread moderation; others warned against allowing this to damage the greater project of online freedom, while others openly admitted that they simply did not know how to address the situation.

Beyond tacitly conceding the imperfection of the democratising medium, there were no clear or coherent challenges articulated to the cyberutopian orthodoxy of the day. Within days, the issue died down and went off the media radar again. It would prove not to be the first or last time.

Columns and blogs on this subject typically begin with outrage but end with bewilderment:

“The fact of the matter is these kinds of pressuring tactics do work to silence women’s voices, and that alone is reason enough to take them seriously. But how to do so without causing permanent shifts to your blood pressure? If anyone can figure out the strategy there, I’d love to hear it” (Marcotte, 2012, para. 3-4).

In the *New Statesman* piece Caroline Farrow concluded, “What can be done to reduce it? Nothing, nor would I support any moves to legislate for trolls” (in Lewis, 2011a, Caroline Farrow section, para. 7). Feminist blogger Natalie Dzerins wrote “As for a suggestion on how to make it stop? I’m afraid I have none. While we still live in a sexist society, any woman who sticks her head above the parapet will encounter misogynistic abuse” (in Lewis, 2011a, Natalie Dzerins section, para. 4). And Kate Smurthwaite concluded,

“There is an underlying issue though the people who post these comments reveal a deep-seated hatred towards women. I find that unsurprising in our culture. Violent, extreme pornography is normal internet fare. Gang rape and prostitution are subjects for popular music. At least 95 per cent of actual rapists are still on the streets. That’s the real problem. We need to address that” (in Lewis, 2011a, Kate Smurthwaite section, para. 6).

Despite the backdrop of a great deal of gender blind talk of digital revolution at that time, particularly in left-leaning media, none of the women saw their experience as grounds for questioning that tendency.

Morozov (2011) criticised the inherited cyberutopianism of American foreign policy thinking as a “voluntary intellectual handicap” (p. xvii). Perhaps contemporary mainstream discourse on online misogyny too is marked by the

same kind of intellectual handicap because of how we, and the women who bring this issue to light, think about the internet. With experiences that run so counter to the dominant cyberutopian polemic of both the crypto-anarchist Left and the mainstream Silicon Valley free marketeers, the women who bring this subject to light seem unable or unwilling to use this information to directly challenge the inherited cyberutopian mythology that is all around us: that the network trumps the hierarchy, that hacker culture and amateurisation are radical challenges to power, and that the internet is a democratic, radicalising and liberating technology. To understand this we must first look at the language and ideas about the internet, which we have inherited.

3. The return of cyberutopia

Electronic Frontier Foundation cofounder Barlow (1995) told *New Perspectives Quarterly* that:

“All the current power relationships on the planet are currently being disassembled, it’s going to be up in the air. Ultimately, centralized anything is going to be greatly deemphasized and redistributed” (cited in Jacobs, 2001, p. 350).

Figures like Barlow within hacker culture and figures in more mainstream discourse like *Wired’s* Kelly (2010) made hubristic promises about the digital future, but their ideas were not unlike those that circulated in the academy. Many cyberfeminists have embraced these ideas too. While much of the more pessimistic analysis of the internet was based on the fear that it was a technology that would be impossible to regulate, Plant (1998) celebrated the anarchy of the internet because for her, the out of control technology signalled a break from male control.

In the years after the dot com bubble burst, visions like Negroponte’s (1995) of a digital future in which the political effects of the internet would be so profound that “there will be no more room for nationalism than there is for smallpox” (p. 236) began to look absurd, and thinkers like Gilder (1994), Castells (1996)

and Haraway (1991), once the cutting edge, soon began to look more like the false prophets of the so-called new economy years.

However, in 2009 when Iranian protesters poured onto the streets demanding the resignation of Ayatollah Khomeini, Western commentators soon dubbed it the ‘Twitter Revolution’ because of the role that social media played in organising and facilitating the uprising. Internet guru Shirky (2009) said, “This is it. The big one. This is the first revolution that has been catapulted onto the global stage and transmitted by social media” (para. 2). Blogger Malkin (2009) wrote “[i]n the hands of freedom-loving dissidents, the micro-blogging social network is a revolutionary samizdat – undermining the mullah-crazy’s information blockades one tweet at a time” (excerpt, para. 5). As partially internet-facilitated uprisings spread across the Arab world, later dubbed “the Arab Spring”, it seemed to many to be a confirmation of what thinkers like Negroponte (1995) had predicted long before.

While internet boosterism has been at different times the preserve of everyone from crypto-anarchist countercultures to Ronald Reagan to Silicon Valley free marketeers, the events of 2011 set off a seemingly unstoppable wave of cyberutopian fervour across a broad spectrum of the Left. Inspired by the Arab Spring, the indebted and underemployed youth of Spain and later America and the rest of the West, began to organise protests online, livestream events as they happened and build alternative online media and communities to resist government enforced austerity. The Spanish indignados and later the Occupy movement led the zeitgeist of the moment described by BBC journalist Mason (2012) “a hand brake turn for humanity” (p. 134).

These new internet-centric protest movements saw many aspects of 90s cyberutopianism becoming part of the organised Left, borrowing from the imagery, language and ideas of hacker culture, with the Guy Fawkes mask of the hacker collective Anonymous becoming a permanent fixture on demonstrations. Rheingold’s (1993) vision of The Virtual Community represented an antidote to Putnam’s (2000) less flattering vision of an atomised society and, for some on the Left, like Mason (2012), a digital formation of

Marx's *species being*. The hacker ethic, with its meritocracy of ideas and libertarian free speech advocacy is described in popular polemics as “the digital equivalent of Enlightenment coffee houses” (Brooke, 2011, p. xx) and we are told that “technology is breaking down traditional social barriers of status, class, power, wealth and geography, replacing them with an ethos of collaboration and transparency” (Brooke, 2011, p. ix).

A typical example of the kind of upbeat feminist perspective we have seen would be a TED talk called *Social media and the end of gender*. Blakley (2010) told an international web audience that “the social media applications that we all know and love, or love to hate, are actually going to free us from some of the absurd assumptions that we have as a society about gender. I think that social media is actually going to help us dismantle some of the silly and demeaning stereotypes that we see in media and advertising about gender. If you hadn't noticed, our media climate generally provides a very distorted mirror of our lives and of our gender and I think that's going to change” (video file - 00:30/01:03).

Whereas networked individualism was once the preserve of New Economy boosters and viewed with suspicion by some Marxist thinkers like Henwood (2003) and Barbrook (2007), since the events of 2009-2011 the Left has embraced the networked individualism of a younger generation of radicalised digital natives. Sceptics have, to varying degrees, always been marginal, but by the time women like those in the *New Statesman* came to experience and write about the dramatic backlash against women evident online, the cyberutopian vision of Silicon Valley that had at least taken some marginal criticism from the Left had now moved into the Left.

4. Digital mythologies

Barthes (1972) wrote that “myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification and making contingency appear eternal” (p. 142). To understand why women's experience of online life has not articulated itself as a

challenge to the orthodoxy it runs counter to, we must look at the narratives, the language and the mythologies of cyberutopia. Making the case for the necessity of a critical feminist analysis, which can engage with the popular and the political requires a contrasting of these digital mythologies with the ever-expanding body of contradictory evidence of women's lived experience.

4.1. The cyborg body is transcendent

In cyberpunk fiction, cyberspace was imagined as “a disembodied zone wilder than the wild west, racier than the space race, sexier than sex, even better than walking on the moon” (Plant, 1998, p. 180). Cyberfeminists were overwhelmingly optimistic about the potential that the virtual and new communications technologies held for women. In Gibson's (1984) *Neuromancer*, the natural human body was referred to as “meat” (p. 6). Cyberfeminists like Haraway (1991) thought women should embrace detachment from naturalistic notion about the body, saying she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. For her, the cyborg held radical potential as a new way of thinking of the body; a mythology that would constitute a break from conceiving of the female body in terms the nature-culture dichotomy. The cyborg subject's ability to escape the biological body, which had been such a site of female oppression, was to be welcomed.

Wajcman (2004) for example, wrote that “[i]n cyberspace, all physical, bodily cues are removed from communication. As a result, our interactions are fundamentally different, because they are not subject to judgements based on sex, age, race, voice, accent or appearance but are based only on textual exchanges” (p. 66) but how many female internet users today can say their experience chimes with this description?

In 2007, tech writer, programming educator and blogger Kathy Sierra had been the keynote speaker at *South by Southwest Interactive* and a kind of mainstream tech guru when the personal backlash against her among anonymous commenters was so extreme that she had to close down her blog, withdraw from speaking engagements and public life and call the police. Personal details

about her family and home address were posted among highly sexualised and threatening comments on various blogs and forums. Some of the posts included photoshopped images of her with a noose beside her head, a shooting target pointed at her face and of her being gagged with a thong. When she explained in her blog why she had to step back from public life, writing, “I have cancelled all speaking engagements. I am afraid to leave my yard. I will never feel the same” it sparked a whole new wave of hate online, with commenters saying she had taken things too personally and was making a fool of herself by overreacting (cited in [Walsh, 2007](#), para. 9).

In this case the threat to her very real body was a sharp reminder that the theoretical work of the cyborg imaginary has some limitations. Playing a central role in the construction of identity and the policing of gender norms in online forums, the body has been aggressively, almost compulsively, reasserted online from the explosion of hardcore pornography through to the obsessive references to female anatomy and violence against women that characterises online countercultures such as the website 4chan/b/.

The very language of digital liberation is filled with depoliticised normative terms. Central to hacker culture, to *Wikileaks* and to the ‘information revolution’ has been the notion that there is a truth, which, if known, will liberate mankind. Julian Assange has earned the press title “Truth Warrior” in a “Truth Revolution”, calling himself an “information activist” ([Choney, 2010](#), para. 2).

But when we look at phenomena like ‘pro-Ana’¹ online communities it hugely complicates the implied or explicit assumption that all communication is simply ‘information’ and that all ‘information’ is liberating. If we apply definitions used by [Castells \(2007\)](#) and popularised by *Wired magazine* here, the pro-Ana internet users must be doing something liberating by definition. They are pooling their resources, sharing information and asserting their autonomy through the internet, just as Iranian tweeters and Syrian bloggers have done.

1. Pro-Ana online communities are predominantly female pro-Anorexia internet users who use forums to spread information promoting anorexia and encouraging fellow anorexics to remain dangerously underweight.

4.2. The network trumps the hierarchy

In his study of Spanish internet users, [Castells \(2007\)](#) wrote:

“The more an individual has a project of autonomy (personal, professional, socio-political, communicative), the more she uses the Internet. And in a time sequence, the more he/she uses the Internet, the more autonomous she becomes vis-à-vis societal rules and institutions” (p. 244).

Central to the hacker and neo-left cyberutopian polemic about this new internet-led radicalism is the notion that the network trumps the hierarchy. Thinkers like [Castells \(1996\)](#) and [Hardt and Negri \(2004\)](#) created an intellectual framework for the multitude, the newly empowered networked individuals and what would later be called the smart swarm in tech start-up parlance. And yet we increasingly see distinctly hierarchical gendered patterns in online behaviour, often more rigidly policed along gender lines than those overtly hierarchical democratic institutions that are considered hopelessly stuffy and outdated by internet radicals.

Here in Ireland for example, the most popular political discussion forum [Politics.ie \(2010\)](#) surveyed their readers and found among respondents only 14% were female, making female participation on the website lower than it is in government. Feminists continue to criticise government and ‘old media’ institutions for their low female participation and their male dominated cultures but the same problems online are ignored and the mythology of the internet, that the network must trump the hierarchy, that decentralisation and democratisation of media are empowering us remain largely unchallenged by women. Even when, in the case of the writing sparked by the *New Statesman* piece, women are experiencing and describing evidence that might deeply problematise these notions, no such critique emerges.

The Irish example only reflects broader trends. A study by the University of Maryland’s school of engineering showed that chatroom participants using female names were 25 times more likely to receive threatening and/or sexually explicit private messages than those with male or gender-neutral names

(Meyer & Cukier, 2006, p. 470). And for every feminist blog and celebrated act of countercultural transgression, there are also an abundance of explicitly misogynist memes, websites and cultures¹. While mainstream forms of social media such as *Facebook* are used more by women, the untamed anonymous counterculture, which has been praised by many Left thinkers, appears to be extremely hostile to women. What if, counter to what Castells (1996) and internet boosters in big business and on the Left have been saying, the network does not trump the hierarchy? What if the tyranny of structurelessness at work in the more anarchic corners of the online world is actually worse for women than organised hierarchies found in ‘old media’? What if the user-generated online world, without the influence of capital, without the big media institutions and without editorial judgement displays a greater hierarchy in practice?

4.3. Hackers are the digital vanguard

The Guy Fawkes mask, symbol of the hacker collective Anonymous, has become the iconic image of the Occupy movement and associated campaigns for internet freedom, such as the anti-SOPA campaign. Countless newspaper articles and opinion columns on Occupy for many months used the image of the mask. Penny (2011b, 2011c), one of the most vocal bloggers against anonymous internet misogyny after the *New Statesman* piece was published, was among the many on the Left to praise the group and to cheer their actions against others. She tweeted “Anonymous have threatened the Tea Party. This makes my evening so much better” (Penny, 2011b, tweet). She also called DDoS hacking “the digital equivalent of a sit-in” (Penny, 2011c, para. 4).

Describing the pranking and attacks orchestrated by hacker collectives and trolls against others, Penny (2011c) wrote: “For cyberactivists, it has always been about poking fun: an anarchic collision of satire and direct action that makes a mockery of the powerful and self-satisfied. They do it “for the lulz,” in cyberspeak” (para. 4).

1. These include viral pornographic material that has become a popular internet reference such as ‘2 girls 1 cup’ and memes like Women Logic.

Penny's (2011c) depiction very much chimed with the largely unchallenged view on the Left and hacker culture's own flattering description of itself. Only a few years earlier, however, before hacktivism and 'lulz' had been embraced by many on the Left, feminist magazine *Bitchmedia* had a less flattering report on their experiences with the internet rebels. Friedman (2008) was blogging at *Feministe.com* when they came under attack from groups of commenters posting violent rape fantasies and threats about the writers and shutting down the site using DDoS attacks:

“Then I got word that a loosely organized cybermob known as Anonymous was attempting to crash feminist sites, including *Feministe*, flooding comments sections with misogynist rants and threatening feminist bloggers with rape and other violence. This had happened before, but never with such organized force. No one was sure which systems would hold and which would fail; we didn't even know which site would be attacked next. Privately, we worried about our safety and strategized about how to defend our sites and ourselves. [...] They zeroed in on one particular blogger, whose online name is Biting Beaver, posting her home address and calling for Anonymous members to kidnap her son and place damning phone calls to her neighbors and her local police” (Friedman, 2008, para. 3-10).

Quite contrary to Penny's (2011c) view, which became fashionable on the radical Left after the *Bitchmedia* piece, it described 'lulz' in less emancipatory tones: “While Anonymous's targets may be random, their methods are not. The culture of lulz is saturated with juvenile, racist, misogynist, and homophobic language and imagery” (Friedman, 2008, para. 7).

Praise for the radical hacktivist aspect this culture has come to almost completely drown out these unpleasant details. One is less likely to hear, for example, that hackers also attack feminist websites with some regularity, including the International Women's Day site (Sterling, 2011). In her essay *Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action*, Coleman (2011) says that the prankster sensibility and anti-leader ethic that characterises the anarchic 4chan/b/ site contains a self-correcting democratising mechanism. And yet,

it is hard to imagine a newspaper, a TV show, a film or an advertisement celebrating and organised around explicit misogyny to the extent that typifies much of 4chan/b/ the culture of 'lulz' and it is harder still to imagine such a cultural product being praised widely today in the academy and on the political Left.

5. Conclusion

All of this suggests that a critical feminist analysis of cyberutopia and the online counterculture, were it to exist, would have to challenge several dominant ideas about the nature of online communication and the sexual politics of the online counterculture. It would have to start by considering the possibility that when we look at online cultures which are anarchic, decentralised, uncensored, unregulated and not organised by powerful institutions or market forces we do not necessarily find something that is better for women, we may even find that it is worse. Feminist media analysis, and in particular Marxist-feminist analysis, would therefore have something entirely counterintuitive to theorise, and it would have to do so against the dominant gender-blind academic and Left wing cheerleading of hacker culture, open source software, pirate culture and 'lulz' culture.

What we see in the *New Statesman* piece is the first step toward a recognition in public discourse that something does not add up about the dominant mythology of the internet-as-liberator. Perhaps the next step needs to involve a challenge to the flattering but constructed founding mythologies surrounding the user-generated, democratised, online world which have shaped our belief in its liberating potential.

Haraway's (1991) cyberfeminism was conceived as an ironic non-innocent creation myth to subvert all of those creation myths that had been woven into our language and our ways of thinking about womanhood. Over a quarter of a century later, it is the mythology of the virtual world, which Haraway (1991) helped to write, that needs to be deeply challenged and subverted, as the reality

of women's experience throws up complications so profound that they simply cannot continue to be seen as mere exceptions to the rule.

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