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## **Gender and Online Politics: Digital Media as Friend and Foe in Times of Change**

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# **Gender and Online Politics: Digital Media as Friend and Foe in Times of Change**

## **Introduction**

At the beginning of 2018, Time magazine announced Silence Breakers as the 2017 Person of the Year. This recognition highlights the collective efforts to raise awareness of sexual violence. Social media was a critical tool for sharing women's experiences of sexual violence, producing tens of millions of Tweets and Facebook posts using #metoo and related hashtags. Beyond social media, metoo was used as a Google search in 196 countries (Langone, 2018). Across the globe, people were paying attention to sexual violence, but more broadly, women's voices were being heard. These collective efforts raise important issues related to the struggle for gender equality. Is digital media an effective tool in this struggle for social change or is digital media a tool for those working against the cause of gender equality?

## **Content of the Special Issue**

This special issue aims to describe the gendered experiences of online politics and understand its potential impact. This volume includes examples of digital media being used as a tool for creating communities of support related to sexual violence (Núñez Puente et al., 2019; Suk et al., 2019) as well as a tool for feminism, more generally (Heger & Hoffmann, 2019). However, this volume also includes examples of digital media being used as a tool to silence women through uncivil comments and harassment related to one's gender (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2019). The constant fear of harassment shapes women's, more so than men's, willingness to engage in political discussion online, particularly on social media (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2019; Koc-Michalska et al., 2019). However, this may not manifest in all cultural contexts (Van Duyn et al., 2019). Nonetheless, these gender differences in online expression have implications on the use of social media as a proxy for public opinion (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019) and for the quality of the public sphere (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2019; Van Duyn et al., 2019).

Women are less likely to post online about politics, compared to men (Koc-Michalska et al. 2019; Van Duyn et al. 2019). Looking at online political engagement more broadly, women are less likely to participate, compared to men (Wagner et al., 2019; Heger & Hoffmann, 2019). However, there are certain topics of discussion where women might be more inclined to participate online (Van Duyn et al., 2019) and the impact of online political discussion may be greater for women than men (Wagner et al., 2019).

The articles in this volume offer a variety of reasons for gender differences in participation in online politics, including that women are socialized not to discuss politics (Van Duyn et al., 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2019) and women feel less efficacious about participating in politics (Heger & Hoffman, 2019). These articles also explore explanations beyond the individual. These submissions highlight the structural factors that might explain lower levels of political expression and participation, including cultural norms and inequalities in domestic responsibilities (Wagner et al., 2019) as well as inequalities in political representation

and political institutions (Van Duyn et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2019). In addition, the articles discuss important contextual factors to explain gender differences, including that women are viewed as less credible political commentators and political actors (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2019) as well as experiences of harassment ranging from unpleasant comments to abuse (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Nadim & Fladmoe, 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2019). The enduring gender inequalities likely relate to a combination of personal attributes and the larger social and political context.

The articles use qualitative and quantitative analysis as well as use digital trace data and survey data. Despite differing data sources, the articles offer some consistency in findings. For example, Nadim and Fladmoe (2019) find that men are more likely to receive unpleasant and hateful comments, when using survey data of Norwegians; Southern and Harmer (2019) offer similar findings in an analysis of tweets directed at British Members of Parliament. Both studies distinguish negative comments directed at one's opinions or policy views, compared to negative comments directed towards one's identity. This distinction is important for understanding the gendered experiences of online incivility (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2019). Both studies explore harassment directed towards one's race and sexual orientation, recognizing that these experiences are more complicated than the binary categories typically associated with gender (see discussion of third-wave feminism in Heger & Hoffmann, 2019).

Despite the challenges of using digital media for social change, women are using digital media for activism, particularly feminist-identifying women in Germany (Heger & Hoffman, 2019) as well as the communities attached to #metoo discourses (Núñez Puente et al., 2019; Suk et al., 2019). Wagner et al. (2019) also highlights the #FreeTheFive and #WoYeShi movements in China, which provide important context for understanding how gender influences the relationship between critical digital engagement and support for protest. These studies reveal how digital media can be a tool for social change. The studies reflect the use of Twitter to give testimony to sexual assault as well as create communities supporting unity and solidarity in the fight for social change (Núñez Puente et al. 2019; Suk et al., 2019). Núñez Puente et al. (2019) illustrate that while Spain's laws on sexual violence frame women as victims, Twitter discourse related to #8M and #NiUnaMenos does not emphasize victimhood, as much as it promotes solidarity and unity. Suk et al. (2019) find that the Twitter posts reflected key events covered in major news outlet. Calls to action became more popular when the perpetrator was a politician. Both studies document the incredible impact that a small set of political actors can have on political discourse (Núñez Puente et al., 2019; Suk et al., 2019). Not all women will benefit from using digital media as a political tool, as Heger and Hoffmann (2019) document differences in political efficacy and online political participation based on feminist ideologies and age. In addition, Koc-Michalska et al. (2019) document that mansplaining targets a particular group of women: young, well-educated, and left-leaning women.

The collection offers consistent findings across a variety of national contexts (China, Germany, Norway, Spain, the United States and the United Kingdom). The consistency of results reflects that the online sphere is a very much a global sphere. As such, while some countries have more structural gender equality (e.g., Norway), than other countries; online experiences are not

attached to a particular country's structures or cultural norms. Trolls can reside within one's country or outside one's country; they may communicate in many different languages through Twitter and other digital media (Southern & Harmer, 2019). Suk et al. (2019) identify a multilingual community connected by the metoo hashtag (see their appendix). Table 1 summarizes the submissions' methodological approach, geographic focus, and key finding related to the theme.

**Table 1: Summary of articles in the special issue**

Authors	Geographic Focus	Method	Key Findings
Van Duyn, Peacock, & Stroud	USA	Surveys	- Men are more likely than women to comment online, particularly on state, national, or international topics; women are more likely to post about local issues, compared to men.
Koc-Michalska, Schiffrin, Lopez, Boulianne, & Bimber	USA and UK	Surveys	- Men are more likely than women to post their political views on Twitter; political discussion on Twitter correlates with experiences of mansplaining.
Wagner, Gainous, & Abbott	China	Surveys	- Men are more likely than women to be critically digitally engaged, but digital media use may have larger impacts on women compared to men.
Heger & Hoffmann	Germany	Surveys	- Women who identify as feminists are more likely to participate in politics online, compared to non-feminist women, closing the gender gap in online political participation.
Nadim & Fladmoe	Norway	Surveys	- Men are more likely than women to experience online harassment, but these experiences affect women's, more so than men's, willingness to express their political views online.
Southern & Harmer	UK	Twitter trace data	Women MPs are less likely to receive uncivil tweets, but the uncivil tweets are more likely to relate to gender stereotypes and question their position as elected representatives.
Suk, Abhishek, Zhang, Ahn, Correa, Garlough, & Shah	English-language	Twitter trace data with data from MediaCloud	- Twitter is used to acknowledge sexual violence experiences and Twitter activities relates to media coverage of #metoo events; tweets turn into calls for action when the accused is a politician.

Núñez Puente, D'Antonio Maceiras, & Fernández Romero	Spain	Twitter trace data	-Tweets are about diffusing messages of support and unity, rather than conversations; tweets do not frame women as victims as much as they frame women as capable political actors.
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Van Duyn et al. (2019) use two surveys to examine gender differences in the likelihood of posting to the comment sections of news websites in the United States. They find that perceived incivility reduces the likelihood of commenting on these sites, across a range of topics from local to international issues. Koc-Michalska et al. (2019) examine platform differences in posting. They find that platform matters for the experience of mansplaining, as men posting on Twitter are more likely to be accused of mansplaining and women are more likely to be mansplained. Both papers demonstrate women's reluctance to fully express their political opinions online (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Van Duyn et al., 2019).

Wagner et al. (2019) examine online exposure to and exchange of critical information concerning the government in China. They find that distrusting traditional media is positively correlated with critical digital engagement. Heger and Hoffmann (2019) find that feminist women report higher, on average, political efficacy. They also find that feminist who identify with second-wave feminist ideas are more active in politics online, than other feminists.

Nadim and Fladmoe (2019) also use two Norwegian surveys to examine the range of negativity online, from unpleasant comments to harassment. They find that 17% of people reported unpleasant comments and 6% of people reported receiving hateful comments online. Southern and Harmer (2019) also offer research on online incivility, however from the elite point of view, focusing Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom. They analyze an extensive number of tweets sent to MPs and find that less than 10% of tweets to UK MP's were uncivil.

The two final papers focus on the online activity within feminist hashtag activism. Suk et al. (2019) identified 9,832 tweets that related to network acknowledgement of sexual violence experience and 5,569 tweets related to activism, which point to demands for investigations and an end to violence. The communication evolves over time from network acknowledgement to activism discourse. Núñez Puente et al. (2019) examine Twitter based activism against gender-based violence connected with 8M movement in Spain. The research indicates that #8M served to disseminate information circumventing the invisibility of the topic, rather than served a conversational purpose; approximately 1% of tweets were replies. The question, however, remains as to what extent the online discussion transfers into offline collective actions. There are many examples of perpetrators of sexual violence losing their jobs in the aftermath of these Twitter events (Núñez Puente et al., 2019; Suk et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2019).

**Summary**

The proposed special issue highlights gender issues related to using digital media for online politics. The submissions offer a balanced perspective about the role of digital media - this tool can be used for social change or to limit social change. The manuscripts use qualitative and

quantitative analyses of digital trace data and survey data to present a rich perspective on gender and online politics. The collection offers a cross-national perspective, including research on China, Germany, Norway, Spain, the United States and the United Kingdom.

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