Feminist Digilante Responses to a Slut-Shaming on Facebook

Emma A. Jane

Abstract
This article examines feminist digilantism in response to the “slut-shaming” of an Australian woman on Facebook in 2015. The activism is used to highlight the nature and significance of the feminist pushback against the worsening problem of cyber violence against women and girls (cyber VAWG). This article builds on my previous research into feminist digilantism and is part of a much larger, mixed-methods, multi-modal study into gendered cyberhate. It uses approaches from Internet historiography, ethnography, and netnography, alongside data drawn from qualitative interviews. Sufficient evidence is available to support the broad argument that the feminist digilantism involved in the case study under analysis was efficacious as well as ethnically justified given the dearth of institutional interventions. That said, I demonstrate that while such activism has benefits, it also has risks and disadvantages, and raises ethical issues. This critique of digilantism is not intended as yet another type of victim blaming which suggests the activist responses of cyberhate targets are flawed. Instead, my case is that appraising the efficacy and ethics of such forms of extrajudicial activism should take place within a framing acknowledging that these actions are primarily diagnostic of rather than a solution to cyber VAWG. As such, the increasing prevalence and strength of feminist digilantism lends further support to the case that gendered cyberhate is a problem demanding urgent and multifaceted intervention.

Keywords
digilantism, cyberhate, cyber violence against women and girls (cyber VAWG), slut-shaming, feminism, e-bile

Introduction

On August 25, 2015, a 23-year-old Australian woman, Olivia Melville, became the target of a flood of online abuse after a stranger took a screenshot of her profile from the Tinder dating app and posted it to his Facebook page. The man involved, Chris Hall, accompanied his post with a derogatory caption implying that Melville was not “classy” because her profile included the citation of risqué lyrics, originally performed by the Canadian rapper Drake. These lyrics, “Type of girl that will suck you dry and then eat some lunch with you,” are suggestive of a woman with an appetite for both sex and food. Hall’s Facebook friends responded with a series of demeaning comments about Melville. These included posts calling her disgusting, a slut, and “a grubby bitch,” as well as claims she deserved to be raped. Some particularly violent and threatening messages were posted by a person called Zane Alchin, who represented himself as the arrival of “the cavalry” (cited in Chalmers, 2015).

When Melville learned of Hall’s post, she shared it—and its accompanying comments—on her own Facebook page. This prompted one of her friends, Paloma Brierley Newton, a 23-year-old student, to implore (via Facebook) others to tell Hall and Alchin what they thought of their behavior. An increasingly heated exchange on various Facebook platforms followed, during which Melville and her friends received increasingly graphic rape and death threats. The women reposted these in a manner which identified the Facebook profiles of the authors. The incident received international media coverage and, in the aftermath, Melville’s employers asked that she greatly curtail her social media presence; Hall was fired from his job for breaching his employer’s social media code; Alchin was arrested and plead guilty to the Australian Federal criminal offense of “using a carriage service to menace, harass or cause offence” (in July 2016 a magistrate placed him on a 12-month good behavior bond); and
Melville’s friends formed an advocacy group called Sexual Violence Won’t Be Silenced (SVWBS) to combat online sexual harassment.

What I will henceforth call the “SVWBS case study” is significant because it highlights three broader phenomena: (1) the worsening problem of what the United Nations (UN) refers to as cyber violence against women and girls (cyber VAWG), which I have elsewhere referred to as “gendered cyberhate” and “gendered e-bile” (Jane, 2014b); (2) the dearth of adequate institutional responses to this problem; and (3) the increasingly forceful feminist digilantism emerging as a result of (1) and (2).

In 2015, the UN released a report warning that the increasing prevalence of cyber VAWG risked “producing a 21st century global pandemic with significant negative consequences for all societies in general and irreparable damage for girls and women in particular” (The Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender, 2015, pp. 6–7). The report validated anecdotal accounts from female media commentators worldwide of intensifying gendered violence on social media platforms and via email (Hess, 2014; Jane, 2014a, 2014b; Sandoval, 2013). Yet, as I will go on to demonstrate, despite the worsening nature of the problem, platform managers, policy makers, and police have, for the most part, failed to adequately respond. This helps explain why some female targets may feel they have no other option than to take matters into their own hands.

In this article, I show that feminist digilantism has become increasingly visible, forceful, and, in some ways, effective, as gendered cyberhate has become more prevalent and noxious. That said, a close examination of the digilantism involved in the SVWBS case study shows that this emerging form of feminist activism has risks and disadvantages, as well as raising some ethical questions. As I have argued elsewhere, one key—and counterintuitive—danger of feminist digilantism is that celebratory media coverage of the activism, without inadvertently or insidiously suggesting that the responsibility for solving cyber VAWG lies with female targets. Instead, the increasing visibility and force of feminist digilantism can be used to lend yet more support to the UN case that the proliferation of gendered abuse online is a problem demanding multifaceted interventions—including by States, corporations, and regulatory and policing authorities—as a matter of urgency.

My hermeneutic is interdisciplinary and works across feminist and gender theory, legal theory, and cultural and media studies. To map the textual universe of the key incident under investigation—as well as media and new media discourse about this incident—I used screenshots and web captures in line with approaches from the emerging field of Internet history (Brügger, 2010). Data collection for the SVWBS case study also involved ongoing qualitative interviews with key players supplemented by approaches from media ethnography and “netnography” (Kozinets, 2010). This enabled me to blend observation and interpretation to produce a thick description of the events, and of the cyber feminist community in which these events played out (cf. Brennen, 2013, pp. 161–163; C. Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2010).

This article builds on my previous research into feminist digilantism in response to gendered cyberhate (Jane, 2016a, 2016b) by focusing on a case study which lies at the more extreme end of the spectrum, in that antagonists were publicly named and shamed in a manner which led to significant offline repercussions. It is part of a much larger and ongoing mixed-methods and multi-modal study into the nature, manifestations, prevalence, etiology, and ramifications of gendered cyberhate. I have been archiving manifestations of and reports about gendered harassment, abuse, and threats in Anglophone domains since 1998. While this article focuses on a single case, its arguments are informed by a close study of this entire archive. This article also utilizes preliminary data from a series of in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 52 Australian women (including Newton) aged between 19 and 52 who have been targeted by abuse or hostility online. Again, while this article focuses primarily on interviews with only one subject from my research (Newton—Melville’s friend and media spokesperson), it draws on preliminary insights gained from all 50 interviews.

I will now define and highlight some features of digilantism, with reference to literature on vigilantism in offline domains. I will then return to the SVWBS case study to show examine the various possibilities and limitations of feminist digilantism without suggesting: that female targets and activists are solely or primarily responsible for solving cyber VAWG, and/or that female targets and activists are doing the “wrong” sort of feminism?

My proposal is that feminist digilantism be framed from the outset as being primarily diagnostic of rather than a solution to cyber VAWG. This move makes space for unpacking and critiquing some of the interesting features of this form of activism, without inadvertently or insidiously suggesting that the responsibility for solving cyber VAWG lies with female targets. Instead, the increasing visibility and force of feminist digilantism can be used to lend yet more support to the UN case that the proliferation of gendered abuse online is a problem demandi...
the way it is representative of broader trends in contemporary feminist digilantism and is therefore extremely useful as an entry point for unpacking the legal justification, social efficacy, and ethical quandaries of such activism.

**Crowd-Sourcing Justice**

While vigilantism has a relatively tightly delineated scope in legal scholarship (cf. K. D. Hine, 1998; Johnston, 1996), the term “digilantism” is amorphous and used to describe a spectrum of do-it-yourself attempts to secure justice online. Synonyms include “e-vigilantism,” “cyber vigilantism,” “internet vigilantism,” “cyber avenging,” “trial by social media,” and “flash mob justice.” They include practices such as identity theft, “scam baiting” (the practice of turning the tables on Internet scammers by scamming them back), “hacktivism” (referring to the unauthorized access to and disruption of computer systems in the name of socio-political agendas), and denial-of-service” (DoS) or “distributed denial-of-service” (DDoS) attacks (which result in a computer or online network becoming unavailable to users). These practices may involve any combination of trickery, persuasion, reputation assaults, surveillance, public shaming, calls to action, and so on (cf. Byrne, 2013; Clune, 2013; Nakamura, 2014; Trotter, 2015). For Devin Coldewey (2013), the crowd-sourcing of justice around the 2013 Boston marathon bombing marked the “dawn of the digilante.” This was not because digilantism was new, but because it was suddenly discovered by the world at large in a manner likely to stimulate “astronomic growth” in the activity (Coldewey, 2013).

While much has been written on vigilantism in offline contexts, there is little scholarly coverage of similar practices in online domains. Notable exceptions include the work of Dara N. Byrne (2013) and Lisa Nakamura (2014), which engages with the racism involved in digilante practices targeting Africa email scammers. Daniel Trotter (2015), meanwhile, notes the coexistence of citizen-counterpower and state and corporate power on social media platforms, especially with regards to vigilante digital practices such as citizen-led surveillance (p. 209). Trotter (2015) also provides a useful working definition of digital vigilantism as being “a phenomenon where policing is performed by a self-organizing crowd of users” (p. 221).

I will use the term “digilantism” to describe politically motivated (or putatively politically motivated) practices outside of the state that are designed to punish or bring others to account, in response to a perceived or actual dearth of institutional remedies. These include deeds that are illegal or legally liminal, as well as those acts that are entirely lawful and therefore have family resemblances with other types of advocacy or activism, including awareness-raising and education.

Feminist digilantism in response to cyber VAWG includes the establishing of dedicated blogs, web sites, and hashtags established to bring public attention to gendered hate speech and abusive material that might otherwise have only been viewed by individual recipients or small groups. A common approach involves “calling out” or “naming and shaming” online attackers, or attempting to bring antagonists to account by contacting their employers or members of their families. Such activism resonates with broader online phenomena such as “call-out culture” (Ahmad, 2015), “vengeance culture” (Hai-Jew, 2014), and what Jon Ronson (2015) calls “a great renaissance of public shaming” (p. 9). The use of technology to voice personal narratives of sexual violence also chimes with rape survivors’ use of “technosocial practices” in counter-public online spaces to secure “informal justice” (Powell, 2015, esp. pp. 8, 12).

Feminist digilantism offers many benefits to individual participants as well as bolstering broader political projects (Jane, 2016a, 2016b). In relation to cyber VAWG, for instance, it has the potential to raise public awareness about a serious social problem that has been ignored, downplayed, dismissed, or otherwise inadequately addressed by those governing online environments, from platform managers to media regulators. This type of “consciousness raising” digilantism also has the potential to humanize key actors (including the attackers, the targets, and the onlookers) in what might otherwise be dismissed as disembodied, machine-based discourse. Activists often cite unexpurgated examples of the abuse, to make the case that it does not simply constitute harmless or misunderstood jokes, only likely to upset those women who are “delicate” and “peculiarly sensitive,” as one male media commentator from the United Kingdom put it (O’Neill, 2011).

Some feminist digilantism involves outing and/or engaging directly with individual attackers in public fora. An example from 2014 involves the Australian gamer journalist Alanah Pearce who contacted the mothers of underaged boys who had been sending her rape threats on Facebook. Pearce then publicized her digilantism by tweeting a screenshot of her text message exchange with one of the boys’ mothers, who had replied, “omg little shit . . . IM SO SORRY” (cited in Jane, 2016b). Pearce’s decision not to publish the identities of her attackers (or their parents) contrasts with another example, from 2012, involving the Canadian feminist Steph Guthrie. She tracked down and identified the 25-year-old man responsible for making an online game called “Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian,” which invited players to punch an image of the feminist games commentator so as to digitally mutilate her face. Guthrie confronted the man publicly on Twitter and passed his details onto the media and potential employers in his local area after asking her Twitter followers whether she should “sic the internet on him” (cited in Jane, 2016b).

The Pearce and Guthrie examples demonstrate that individual instances of feminist digilantism can be located on a spectrum in terms of the activism’s potential to have an impact on targeted individuals. At one end are those cases in which abuse is re-published or cited in a way which does not
identify attackers. This type of digilantism serves awareness-raising purposes and corresponds with what might otherwise be simply called “activism.” At the other end are those instances—such as the SVWBS activism—in which attackers are identified and there is an explicit call for others to take some kind of action against them. This type of digilantism involves more force, carries more risks for both the digitallists and their targets, and raises more ethical questions.

To begin unpacking the efficacy and ethics of digilantism, it is useful to look to legal scholarship where it is accepted that while vigilantism, by definition, cannot be legally justified, in some cases, it may be morally justified. In her work on battered woman’s syndrome, for instance, Elisabeth Ayyildiz (1995) argues that while “vigilante” is generally interpreted as a pejorative, a more neutral definition of a vigilance committee is “a group of persons organized without legal authorization professedly to keep order and punish crime when ordinary law enforcement agencies apparently fail to do so” (pp. 146–147). This paves the way for various defenses of vigilantism, such as Kelly D. Hine’s (1998) use of a social wealth maximization model to argue that “violent self-help” and the provision of a “private source of criminal justice” may come about as a logical and inevitable response to deficits in public law enforcement (pp. 1223, 1233, 1248). As such, she advocates a “justified vigilantism” defense in the criminal justice system (K. D. Hine, 1998, pp. 1252–1253). Paul H. Robinson (2015) goes even further, arguing that in cases where society fails to hold up its end of the social contract, vigilantism may not just be morally defensible, but morally demanded (p. 405). Persuasive arguments have also been made in relation to female vigilantes, for whom vigilantism can be a “social necessity” given systemic and oppressive gender inequity (Sen, 2012; cf. Ayyildiz, 1995; White & Rastogi, 2014).

It follows that the actions of digilantes, like those of vigilantes, can be ethically justified depending on the context. But digilantism (once again, like vigilantism) still carries risks and may be ethically problematic, especially in its strongest forms. Among other issues, it may: deny targets the opportunity to tell their—potentially exculpatory—sides of the story; punish innocent people because of issues relating to mistaken identity; mete out disproportionate punishments; and/or provoke hostile counter-responses.

Furthermore, as I have observed elsewhere, what might seem like reasonable street justice from one viewpoint may well resemble vengeance-motivated lynching or even sadism from another (Jane, 2016b). In other words, following H. Jon Rosenbaum and Peter C. Sederberg (1976, p. 21), digilantism may become a semi-legitimate avenue for those who are not motivated by a genuine social issue, but who simply wish to do harm. This is especially true in situations where mobs “pile on” to targets during digilante activism, even if they have very little association with or investment in the original offender or offense. Trotti (2015) also notes that digital vigilantism may violate privacy and data protection rights, and may involve discrimination in that targets are selected based on “visible identifiers, such as ethnicity and religion” (p. 220).

Some risks of digilantism can be linked to issues of temporality in that acts of offline and online vigilantism tend to occur swiftly, with relatively little time passing between the offending event and the retribution. Furthermore, the type of informal justice delivered by digilies is not blind—in that it is often delivered by those with a vested interest, if not by the victims themselves. For K. D. Hine (1998), “the imminence of the harm and the exigency of the circumstances surrounding vigilant action promote extremism” (p. 1250). In other words, the immediacy of the harm from crime can distort a victim’s perception of the broader social impact of crime, as well as the effectiveness of the established criminal justice system. This may help explain “the excessive violence endemic to the vigilante qua vigilante” (K. D. Hine, 1998, p. 1251).

Like vigilantism in offline contexts, digilantism can also place activists at risk of further and sometimes worsening attacks. In their work on feminist vigilante gangs in India, for instance, Aaronette White and Shagun Rastogi (2014) acknowledge that female vigilantes risk being dangerously attacked themselves (p. 225). With regard to cyber domains, Powell (2015) also notes that some rape victims have committed suicide after receiving negative and victim-blaming responses in response to “new informal justice mechanisms” online (p. 8).

Given that the legality, efficacy, and ethics of digilantism are highly contingent, I will now return to the SVWBS case study in order to appraise this particular activist moment. Attention will be paid to its awareness-raising potential, ability to return agency to cyber VAWG targets, unpredictable outcomes, and ethical issues.

Appraising the SVWBS Digilantism

In the Tinder/Facebook incident, Melville and Newton’s early digilante efforts were extremely successful in drawing media attention to their specific situation, as well as to cyber VAWG more generally. Within hours of the women’s pushback against Hall, for example, the incident had come to the attention of the Australian feminist commentator Clementine Ford. Ford shared a post by Newton—including its graphic screenshots of rape and death threats—with the 55,000 followers on her public Facebook page, writing,

“This is what rape culture looks like. This is what cyber sexual violence looks like. This is what a fucking creep who needs to be reported to the police looks like . . . The internet is a battleground for women. People need to be aware of exactly how bad it is, and protest it. This shit is not . . . a light hearted joke . . . (Ford, 2015)

The women’s digilante activism also spurred debate about the oppressive double standards that still exist
around gender and sexuality. Melville’s initial re-publishing of Hall’s original post on August 25, for instance, prompted many of her friends to condemn Hall and his friends for what they regarded as “slut-shaming.” Her supporters pointed out that Tinder is well known as a sexualized space (in that its location-based services facilitate casual sexual encounters or “hook ups”). Yet a young woman was being publicly shamed simply for using the app for its intended purpose. As Newton puts it, it wasn’t as if Melville had cited the Drake lyrics on “bible.com.au . . . It was the right platform” (personal communication, September 10, 2015). Other commentators noted a further sexism double standard in that, as a male hip-hop artist, Drake had received international acclaim—rather than public humiliation—for performing the same sexualized lyrics Melville had cited. In addition to the awareness-raising achieved via social media, the women’s formation of the advocacy body SVWBS formalized the activist potential of the group.

It can be seen that digilantism of the sort prosecuted by Melville and Newton has the potential to return agency and empowerment to women being abused and threatened online because they are able to “talk back”—not only to their individual assailants but to misogyny in the broader culture. Newton, for instance, says Melville’s decision to “out” Hall and his post on her Facebook page was so that she could “take back the control . . . of being shamed . . . to publicly shame him for attacking her sexuality” (personal communication, September 10, 2015). By sharing the original and subsequent abuse, the women also invited others to bear witness to their experiences. This has some similarities with legal scholar Anastasia Powell’s (2015) account of the “informal justice” opportunities available for rape survivors online, in that

. . . sharing one’s account of victimization with a supportive online audience who can immediately acknowledge the serious and wrongfulness of the assault and place it in the context of other known patterns of sexual violence offers the advantages of participation, voice, validation and vindication. (p. 11)

Unpredictability, however, is a key characteristic of both vigilantism and digilantism because of the speed, chaos, and ad hoc decision-making often involved, and we can observe this playing out in relation to the women’s agency in the SVWBS incident. Talking back to Hall offered Melville a sense of control initially. Yet the publicity generated by the move resulted in a request from her employers to stop speaking publicly about the incident and to severely curtail her social media use. As Newton recalls, Melville

had to delete her Twitter and . . . completely change her Facebook so that it’s not under her name and . . . there’s no picture indicating that it’s her which . . . was really frustrating because the whole point was about not being silenced and then the person that it originally happened to has literally been silenced. (personal communication, September 10, 2015)

In other words, the strategy Melville used in an attempt to regain agency ultimately resulted in a reduction of some aspects of it.

Newton also experienced both a sense of power and of powerlessness as a result of her digilante efforts. Her involvement in the activism was not planned. She recalls waking up “quite hung over” on August 25, and then reeling as she began to “wade through the debate” (personal communication, September 10, 2015). Within hours, Melville had been asked to withdraw and Newton had stepped in as her friend’s de facto media spokesperson, posting on Facebook and talking to media outlets on Melville’s behalf. Along with other friends, Newton continued sharing screenshots of the abuse, many of which identified the Facebook profiles of the people posting the hostile comments. Newton accompanied these screenshots with a message which read, “feel free to contact these guys and tell them what you think of what they said.” As the online arguments became more heated and attracted more participants, Newton and her friends also began receiving graphic rape and death threats. These included photographs of Newton posted along with captions such as “Your parents fucking yolo’d it not using a condom look at that fucking disaster” and “Kill it before it breeds” (cited in Newton, 2015a).

The above examples demonstrate the way that—like vigilantism in offline contexts—digilantism can place activists at risk of further and sometimes worsening attacks. As Newton recalls, the more she told Alchin “how disgusting his comments were, the more personalized they became” (personal communication, September 10, 2015). Newton’s experiences also demonstrate the emotional toll born by feminist digilantes. Once she realized what was happening to Melville, Newton remembers her initial response as being “cool and collected” (personal communication, September 10, 2015). She then became increasingly angry and disconcerted after being personally targeted by Alchin. These emotions were followed by an extended period of anxiety. Several months after the original incident, Newton disclosed that the stress and anxiety associated with the case had begun to affect her personal life (personal communication, November 2, 2015). She had also agonized about whether she had done the right thing in calling for people to communicate their disapproval to Hall and Alchin. This call to action, Newton says, was issued in the heat of the moment to what she erroneously assumed was a small group of friends: “I didn’t think of the ramifications” (personal communication, September 10, 2015).

At this juncture, it is worth noting that, even if Newton had the luxury of time to consider the potential ramifications of her actions, it is unlikely she would have been able to either anticipate or steer events. Chaos, speed, unpredictability, strong affect, and spur-of-the-moment decisions are
hallmarks of not only digilantism but social media contexts in general. In the immediate aftermath of Hall’s initial post, for instance, Melville and her friends responded quickly and instinctively rather than as part of a considered strategy. Even the formation of the SVWBS lobby group came about as the result of an informal gathering at one of the activist’s houses after Newton had returned from reporting the incident to police, on the evening it occurred.

Examining the contours of the responses and counterresponses to the women’s initial posts, it can be seen that shares, comments, and re-posts can endow a social media moment with an unexpected momentum and a trajectory outside the control of the originating actors. For instance, while Newton’s call to action was relatively measured, some of the comments in response contained vitriol and threats. This resonates with others’ observation that naming and shaming online can lead to the formation of large, hostile mobs that can attack with extraordinary viciousness (Citron, 2014; Clune, 2013; Ronson, 2015).

Issues of mistaken identity also arose during the SVWBS incident. For instance, a Facebook user with a name similar to Alchin’s was, according to a post by his father, “wrongly accused” (cited in Newton, 2015c). The man said his son’s “employers were called and Facebook messaged by lunatics encouraged by this mob. He was accused of being a rapist and so on and I was also messaged with the same” (cited in Newton, 2015c). This man described the SVWBS movement as a “witch hunt” run by “moron[s]” (cited in Newton, 2015c). Both he and his son engaged in an arguably hostile way with Newton whose response to them was that—while neither she nor anyone else associated with SVWBS had urged members of the public to make contact with the man or his son—the son did need to take some responsibility for having been supportive of Hall and Alchin’s slut-shaming posts about Melville in the first instance (cited in Newton, 2015c).

Another aspect of the SVWBS case study that speaks to the ethical dilemmas of digilantism concerns the way the animosity between the two sides began to mirror each other. This raises the question of whether feminist activists can claim to inhabit the ethical high ground if they use the rhetorical tools and tactics deployed by their attackers. Melville’s initial, retaliatory response was to use the same technology and social media platform as her antagonist, as well as a similar public shaming strategy. That is, she tracked down and recorded a screen capture of Hall’s online activity and—just as he had done—relocated this image from a mostly friendly (or mostly neutral) online environment to a mostly hostile one.

Contextually, however, these two acts are very different. Hall’s initial post was (according to his own appraisal) uploaded solely for amusement in that he saw Melville’s profile on Tinder, “thought it was sort of funny” and posted it on Facebook for “a bit of a laugh” (cited in Workman, 2015). Yet, regardless of Hall’s own assessment of his motivations, his caption was sexist and derogatory and, by making the post available to his Facebook friends, he was presumably inviting endorsement or more of the same. Melville’s response, in contrast, was a defensive move. Presumably she was also hoping for validation and support from her friendship circle; however, she was operating from the position of an underdog, in that she was under attack and seeking to recover a sense of power. Melville was being publically mocked and shamed about her Tinder profile in a broader society whose cultural norms slut-shame girls and women around sexualized social media use in a way which boys and men do not experience. Given the underlying power imbalances involved, there are, therefore, ethical justifications for Melville’s actions which are not available to Hall.

A degree of “doubling” is evident in the escalation and rhetoric of the abusive messages posted by the two groups of Facebook interlocutors. The increasingly pernicious and sexualized vitriol sent to Melville, Newton, and their other female supporters included comments such as

- you cunts deserve to be taken back to the 50s were you will learn to know your role and shut your damn mouth;
- I’d rape you if you were better looking
- you’ve proven the only thing good a women’s mouth is useful for is to get face fucked til she turns blue then have a man hot load shot straight down it;
- Sure as hell I wouldn’t let these cunts taste their own shit off my dick; and
- the best thing about a feminist they don’t get any action so when you rape them it feels 100 times tighter. (Cited in Chalmers, 2015; cited in Geary & Eddie, 2015)

Remarks posted by women in response included,

- This savage is an absolute disgrace to the human race. Reading those comments has made me feel sick. SHAME HIM;
- start sending these screen shots to their jobs, family I’m sure those sick fucks would love for their moms to see what they say to women!;
- would be great to find out where they work, if the cops can’t do anything, perhaps their employers won’t be too found of managing such assholes. get this [Alchin] fired;
- What a fucking piece of shit, let’s hope [Alchin’s] impotent so he never reproduces;
- This guy is a spineless prevert, ppl who abuse women like this should be shot at sight. (Cited in Newton, 2015a, 2015b; cited in Chalmers, 2015)

There were also remarks supporting Melville from male Facebook users, including
“F*** him! As a human person I am disgusted he does NOT speak for men he is a cruel asshole who deserves a hard lesson;

somewhere there is a father that is planning a beating for this sick bastard;

I’m pretty sure he’ll be lovin getting and sucking the D in jail. Fucking prick;

can we lynch him? find him and i know a couple of blokes who’d be happy to;

That asshole needs a bullet to the brain. (Cited in Newton, 2015a)

Once again, while there is some similarity between those posters supporting Hall and those supporting Melville in terms of ad hominem invective and violent rhetoric, it would be inaccurate to frame these two groups of comments as mirror images of each other. My analysis of the debate in toto suggests that overall the comments posted by people supporting Hall and Alchin were more graphically violent and directly threatening in nature. Furthermore, at least initially, Hall’s friends were attacking while Melville’s friends were responding defensively (and, again, within the larger framework of systemic double standards vis-a-vis gender and the expression of sexuality). Newton (2015a) also publically urged restraint, asking some of the more extreme commentators to “do this the legal way.” That said, these considerations arguably became less relevant as strangers without a direct attachment to the case or a personal knowledge of the protagonists began chiming in. At this point, the hostile discourse from both sides can be framed as more of an agonistic game, a type of “recreational nastiness” (Jane, 2014b) rather than political activism.

There is much to explore about the moral philosophy and ethical reasoning evident in the interactions that played out here, but in legal terms, the SVWBS case does suggest parallels with positions on offline vigilantism. K. D. Hine’s (1998) case is that a vigilante is providing a social good and should be spared from criminal liability if (1) her actions are a rational response to a failure of the established criminal system and are based on an accurate perception of social need and (2) if she “keeps the imposed sanction within socially tolerable bounds” (p. 1253). The SVWBS case easily meets the first condition. In its 2015 report on cyber VAWG, the UN outlines the manifest lack of policy, regulatory, or other measures to adequately support female targets or implement appropriate remedies to online hate crimes (The Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender, 2015). It draws attention to widespread public ignorance and a culture of “destructive” victim blaming around cyber VAWG, as well as “failures of law enforcement at all levels to comprehend the emotional, professional, and financial toll of misogynistic online intimidation” (The Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender, 2015, pp. 28, 30, 32). Indeed, the UN found that law enforcement agencies and the courts in 74% of Web Index countries were guilty of failing to take appropriate actions for cyber VAWG (The Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender, 2015, p. 39). These observations comport with critiques made by multiple cyberhate targets and media commentators (Hess, 2014; Sandoval, 2013), as well as by a growing number of scholars (Bartow, 2009; Citron, 2009, 2014; Franks, 2012; Marwick, 2014; Simons, 2015). Thus, the SVWBS vigilantism clearly fulfills the first of Hine’s requirements.

K. D. Hine’s (1998) second criterion is that imposed sanctions fall within “within socially tolerable bounds” (p. 1253). Establishing whether the SVWBS meets this second condition is not as straightforward. This is partly because the initial sanctions called for by the SVWBS group (i.e., for people to express their views directly to the men online) were not the only actions that transpired (for instance, people allegedly contacted Hall’s employers). Hall’s view is certainly that he was persecuted in an unjust manner. In the days after the Facebook exchanges, he rang the Australian youth radio station Triple J during a live broadcast involving coverage of the story. During this call, Hall inferred that it had been activists associated with SVWBS who had informed his employer about the incident and that this was the reason he had lost his job. Sounding shaken, he said,

I just couldn’t believe how much it’s erupted. And I don’t deserve that. I never commented anything bad. I never used bad words, anything. I’m getting recognized even when I’m out. I went out on the weekend and people are coming up to me, people are pointing at me, I just can’t believe it. (Cited in Workman, 2015)

Hall is correct in his assessment of his Facebook comments as not being as graphic, sexualized, or threatening as those of others in his social network and beyond. He was, however, responsible for initiating an action that shamed Melville, and which implicitly invited others to join him in shaming her. Furthermore, his sacking came about due to a combination of vigilantism and institutional action, based on a corporate social media policy being applied to the content of an individual’s social media account. Whether this is a socially tolerable approach to speech regulation and social behavior is a subject for further debate. However, there have been widely publicized instances in many jurisdictions in which people have lost their jobs because of their behavior on social media (Ronson, 2015). This outcome is therefore in a different category than, say, an offline lynching which is both initiated and carried out by vigilantes. Thus, I conclude that SVWBS’s initial call for action, as well as those actions that eventuated but were uncalled for, are both within socially tolerable bounds. The SVWBS vigilantism can therefore be classed as morally justified within Hines’ legal model.
Conclusion

In this article, I have appraised the forms, efficacy, and risks of feminist digilantism in response to the growing problem of cyber VAWG by focusing on a case study involving the slut-shaming of a young Australian woman on Facebook. The activism of the SVWBS feminists can be deemed extremely successful in terms of raising public awareness via social media networks and mainstream media coverage. Furthermore, the significance of Alchin’s arrest and sentencing cannot be underestimated. The fact that police took action in response to a report of cyber VAWG is extremely unusual. This gives us reason to be optimistic about the potential efficacy of feminist digilantism to trigger regulatory responses to cyber VAWG.

Again, however, it is important not to become so enamored with the strategies or results of feminist digilantes that their activism is seen as obviating the need for broader structural interventions. Digilantism can be risky for activists and—as demonstrated in the case of Newton—can exact a significant emotional toll. Individuals and society as a whole may also pay a price in terms of the various risks associated with digilantism, for example, the persecution of innocents, disproportionate punishment, disillusionment with the justice system, strengthening of extrajudicial cultures online, and so on. Given that digilantism is increasingly being used as a feminist strategy in other contexts (Jane, 2016a, 2016b), cyber feminists would do well to consider the ethical dilemmas of such strategies before choosing to adopt them. Questions such as “are my actions ethical?” “are my actions likely to achieve the desired results?” “should I impose limits on my actions so they do not mirror the perpetrators?” “have I crossed a line from activism into vengeance?” and so on would be useful starting points for feminist reflection.

However, a degree of feminist digilantism can be seen as legally and ethically justified as well as socially necessary while various authorities are persuaded of the seriousness of the cyber VAWG problem. Certainly, supporters of SVWBS are openly declaring themselves ready for more—and more “vehement”—action (Peterson, 2016). They have heralded 2015 as the year that saw the rise of “the girl-gang mentality” and are encouraging other women to form such gangs and engage in more combative action to fight online harassment (Peterson, 2016). In this respect, the SVWBS case underlines the UN case that effective legal and social controls on gendered violence and related criminal behavior online are a matter of urgency (The Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender, 2015, pp. 1–2). Regulatory responses are required not only to address the central problem of gendered cyberhate but to remove the need for feminists to engage in digilante action against it.

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Notes

1. My decision-making around the use of protagonists’ real names has been informed by careful consideration of the recommendations of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) with regard to harm minimization when researching human subjects in digital contexts (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 3). While I initially considered using pseudonyms for protagonists whom I did not personally interview as part of my research project, I subsequently elected to use their real names. This reflected the fact that their names have been widely published in the media, as well as being part of open court proceedings.

2. The original lyrics—“Type to wanna suck you dry and then eat some lunch with you”—are from Drake’s contribution to the 2014 Nicki Minaj song “Only.”

3. In 2014, for instance, an Australian gamer’s decision to track down and engage with the mothers of boys sending her online rape threats was celebrated by a large number of international media commentators as constituting the “perfect” solution to the problem of rape threats on the Internet (Jane, 2016b).

4. Slut-shaming “is the act of criticizing women or girls for their real or presumed sexuality or sexual activity, as well as for looking or behaving in ways that are believed to transgress sexual norms” (Karaian, 2014, p. 296).

5. My understanding of “yolod” in this context is that the slang acronym YOLO (You Only Live Once) is being used as a verb.

6. Consider, as just one example, the way cyber safety campaigns targeting teens and young people tend to frame self-respect as an obligation for females rather than males (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016, p. 2). Such approaches reify “a sexual double standard which, cultural and legally, has resulted in girls’ sexual activities being . . . judged and punished more harshly” (Karaian, 2014, p. 286).

7. The World Wide Web Foundation’s Web Index covers 86 countries and measures the web’s contribution to social, economic, and political progress.

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**Author Biography**

Emma A. Jane (PhD, University of New South Wales) is a Senior Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales. Her research interests focus on the ethics of emerging technologies, and include misogyny online, cyber feminism, Internet mobs, vigilantism, digital divides, and non-legislative interventions for technology-related crime.