

# WOMEN VETERANS' ADVOCACY USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

## Curating and Responding to Trolling

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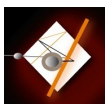
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Women veterans frequently engage in online advocacy to heighten awareness of military sexual assault and use social media for such advocacy. Their experiences with online trolling as a result raises questions about the benefits and consequences of computer-mediated communication technologies like social media for conducting such work. The study described in this article investigates the impact of online trolling on the advocacy work of two women veteran advocates. We conclude that although their public profiles revealed little publicly visible evidence of trolling, when trolling was described by our participants, the trolls were often military-affiliated themselves (or convincingly claimed military affiliation). Additionally, trolling via social networking tools did occur, but because these advocates engaged in constant social media curation, trolling was not often visible externally (but the effects were still felt).

**Keywords.** Online trolling, Gender trolling, Social media.

In January 2017, Marine veteran Thomas Brennan reported to Marine Corps headquarters that male Marines were sharing nude photos of female active-duty military personnel and veterans, without consent, in a Facebook group called “Marines United” (Brennan, 2017).<sup>1</sup> While Marine Corps headquarters responded immediately to the Marines United scandal by removing responsible accounts and



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initiating a formal investigation, it was revealed that the photo sharing involved other branches and social networks (Szoldra, 2017).

This scandal once again raised important issues of gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the U.S. military as well as its relationship with social networking technologies. Brennan noted that while the scandal “underscores ongoing problems of sexual harassment within military ranks, [it] could hurt recruitment of women,” demonstrating the importance of changing public perceptions not only of sexual harassment and sexual assault, but also of women veterans. In addition to its history of gender discrimination, the United States military has a complicated history with social networking technologies, and the Marines United scandal is unfortunately not the first military social networking scandal. As a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) technology, social networking tools have raised many questions about the future of communication within and among varied groups, including the U.S. military (see Harper, 2014, Cohen, 2015, and Ronson, 2015, for instances of social networking scandals both within and outside of the military).

The Marines United scandal brings to light important issues that women veteran advocates have long addressed. In contrast to other military scandals in which military personnel stick together and protect one another, Marines United showed servicemen publicly harassing and debasing their sisters-in-arms. As the military is founded upon ideals of camaraderie and trust, when women are victimized by the very individuals that they are also expected to trust with their lives (and vice versa), it becomes clear that military culture, particularly attitudes relating to gender equality, sexual harassment, and sexual assault, has a long way to go. As well, with increased use of social networking worldwide, further attention to military social networking use and its connections to online harassment as well as activist efforts to counter harassment is necessary.

The work of women veteran advocates, then, is more important than ever, as are the social networking tools that many veterans use to conduct their advocacy work, to extend their ability to reach supporters and veterans in need of support and services worldwide, and to connect veteran communities (Irani, 2010). However, women veterans’ online advocacy to heighten awareness of military sexual assault

raises questions about the benefits and consequences of CMCs for conducting such work. Considering how frequently *all* women online are subjected to digital harassment, it stands to reason that women veteran advocates, particularly those who conduct their advocacy work online, would be targets of harassment.

Our interest in the ways in which digital harassment impacts the work of women veteran advocates led us to conduct this study, which investigates the impact of online trolling (making deliberately provocative or offensive comments in order to rouse someone's ire or get them to respond) on the advocacy work of two women veterans. This study features an in-depth interview with and an in-depth social networking profile analysis of two advocates: Laura Westley, author of *War Virgin*, and BriGette McCoy, founder of the Women Veteran Social Justice Network. Based on these interviews and profile analyses, we conclude that although the public profiles of the women veterans in our study revealed little publicly visible evidence of trolling, when trolling was described by our participants, the trolls were often military-affiliated themselves (or convincingly claimed military affiliation). Additionally, trolling via computer-mediated technologies—specifically social networking tools—did occur, but because these women veteran advocates engaged in constant curation of their social networking profiles, trolling was not often visible to external audiences (but the effects were still felt). These conclusions further support the need for a cultural shift within the armed forces until gender equality is achieved.

Additionally, while our study revealed that certain spaces seemed to invite trolling more than others, it also revealed that anonymity may not be as high of a priority for trolls as it once was (see, for example, Cho & Acquisti, 2013, and Karppi, 2013). In fact, most trolling observed in this study took place in the comments section of articles posted on public news sites via Facebook, with each comment associated with the user's Facebook profile. Though Facebook has recently cracked down on fake profiles and more diligently enforced its real-name policy, it is also simple for someone to create an account solely for trolling.<sup>2</sup> However, such accounts are often simple to spot.

Finally, for the women veteran advocates who participated in our study, social networking tools are *vital* to their work. Social networking is not tangential

to or supplementary to their work; instead, social networking tools enable these women to build connections and extend their reach in ways that would be impossible otherwise. Additionally, as participant BriGette McCoy explains:

I would've never been able to gain the level of power and influence [that I have gained through social networking] in the traditional market. As a woman of color, as a disabled person, it seems all of those things were barriers, whereas on social media, education and information is centralized. You don't have to go to an institution or go to a person that spent 40 years doing this work. Instead, someone who is just read up or knows a lot of information or knows a lot of people [can be an] expert.

McCoy's observations here are in line with Goodling's (2015) assertion that social networking technologies, and other forms of digital media, have the potential to

effectively disrupt the existing power dynamics in politics and media, making it an ideal situation for activists to do their work. This shift in dynamic puts the power in the hands of the user as one who transmits and circulates at her will, on her timeframe, and to the extent she desires.

While the benefits of social networking technologies are clear for our participants, we also argue that their military experience uniquely prepares women veterans to respond to trolls; however, it is unfortunate that these trolls are often military-affiliated themselves.

In the next section, we further explore the concept of trolling by offering multiple definitions from the literature; we complicate discussions of trolling by illustrating that trolling can take multiple forms. Through discussions of both negative forms of trolling (i.e., digital harassment) and neutral or positive-leaning forms (i.e., humorous trolling or trolling for digital activism), we illustrate that trolling is complex and that understanding trolling behaviors is important when considering CMC use for activist purposes.

## **What is Trolling, Anyway?**

Hadaker (2010) argued that “a definition of trolling should be informed first and foremost by user discussions.” Her analysis revealed four predominant characteristics of trolling—deception, aggression, disruption, and success—resulting in the following definition: “A troller is a [CMC] user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement” (p. 237). Hadaker (2013a) expanded on her previous definition by noting several issues that emerge when defining trolling, such as determining intention (e.g., a recipient may believe behavior to be trolling when that was not the communicator’s intent) and classifying trolling behaviors, which is subjective. As she noted, some behaviors, “though described as trolling by users, had developed into far more serious behaviours such as cyberharassment and cyberstalking (e.g. doxing, blackmailing, stalking),” illustrating that any attempt to define trolling means considering the many subtle gradations to this task (p. 67). Phillips (2015) noted the shift in the literature from studies that focused mainly on trolls’ intent to studying trolling as subcultures, with participants “marked by a set of unifying linguistic and behavioral practices” (p. 17).

Indeed, as Phillips explored further, certain behavioral markers are common among trolls, particularly self-identification as such:

Trolls of the subcultural variety self-identify as such. Simply flaming, or saying provocative things online, does not necessarily make someone a subcultural troll, nor does grieving . . . Engaging in racism or sexism or homophobia, disrupting a forum with stupid questions, or generally being annoying does not automatically make one a subcultural troll. (p. 24)

Phillips’ work articulated the differences between trolling subcultures and the various forms of trolling behaviors and intentions. Thus, as both Hadaker and Phillips noted, participating in trolling is itself a form of social networking, of

building relationships within a subculture, but does not have to be; trolling can also be digital harassment, stalking, or merely (as Phillips explored) joking around “for the lulz” (p. 26). Phillips (2012) described “lulz” as “a detached and dissociated amusement at others’ distress,” and Milner (2013) further articulated lulz as “the fundamental logic of trolling” (p. 66).

Following Hadaker, we also consulted definitions of trolling composed by internet users. The Urban Dictionary definition, for example, focuses on the deceptive nature of trolling, noting that “your victim must not know that you are trolling; if he does, you are an unsuccessful troll” (Zerotrousers, 2009). Based on the evidence we gathered from these internet-generated definitions, we note that successful trolls must be deemed legitimate members of the community; they must work to convince other users that they believe what they are writing, to disrupt or cause conflict, and to do so for their own amusement. Successful trolling relies on the ability to assimilate—to join an online community, pass as a legitimate community member, and, *without being identified or revealed as a troll*, incite conflict among community members for personal enjoyment.

Thus, in this study, we distinguish trolling behaviors as those with characteristics of deception, aggression, disruption, and success that seem motivated by the troll’s amusement. However, our research revealed that deception was not entirely necessary for successful trolling, given that our participants were frequently trolled by other military members. These trolls did not need to craft a particular persona in order to demonstrate the necessary ethos to participate in conversations about veterans’ affairs; they were already part of this group. Interestingly, our study also revealed (in contrast to the subtle gradations revealed in the literature) that for our participants, trolling was much less nuanced, often only encompassing flaming behaviors such as name calling. Though we are certainly interested in the effects of other types of negative online communication, such as flaming, once we discussed more nuanced definitions with participants, we determined that they had less experience with trolling than they, or we, initially believed.

Finally, before we move on to our discussion of women veterans, digital advocacy, and trolling, we pause to note briefly the importance of Anonymous in

any discussion of trolling. That is, in an article about connections between trolling and digital advocacy, we would be remiss if we did not mention Anonymous; as a hacktivist collective, Anonymous tends to employ trolling for social justice efforts, particularly to resist perceived abuses of power, government control, and censorship. It has been associated with vigilante justice efforts, some successful (e.g., saving animals from abuse) and some which have failed. For example, Potts and Harrison (2013) explored how 4chan and Reddit users admirably attempted to uncover the identity of the Boston Marathon bomber, but “the execution . . . was problematic at best and destructive at worst” (p. 7). Thus, while Anonymous’ motives may be honorable, their tactics certainly reveal their trolling roots. We find it particularly interesting, however, that Anonymous illustrates how trolling can be used as a tool to both uphold and resist social justice and activist efforts in digital spaces.

In the next section, we discuss women veterans’ use of social networking technologies for digital advocacy. In doing so, we showcase how these CMC tools provide them benefits but also expose them to trolling. We illustrate that our initial assumptions that trolling would take the form of publicly visible and anonymous harassment on social networking profiles was not supported by our research; instead, these women activists faced trolling behaviors in publicly visible comments often connected with trolls’ real names in sites like Facebook.

## **Women Veterans and Digital Advocacy**

Social networking technologies have been identified as useful tools for veterans seeking support and services (Branham, 2016; Grohowski, 2015; Hart, 2012). The perceived privacy and widespread accessibility of social networking technologies enables women veterans, many of whom may not have received the help they needed from their local Veteran Affairs office, to connect with various resources and support.

One of the more important ways that social networking technologies can be used for support of veterans, and women veterans in particular, is in responding to military sexual assault and trauma (MST) issues. MST, like sex crimes in the civilian sector, is underreported and affects both men and women. Statistics suggest

that while a larger *number* of men report experiencing sexual assault in the military, a much higher *percentage* of women report MST (Morrall et al., 2014). Assault victims often suffer additional consequences beyond the trauma of the attack itself when reporting it to commanding officers, as many victims are urged to remain quiet, removed from their unit, urged to leave the military, and face retaliation from their peers or military leaders (Calvert, 2014). In the next section, we articulate the possibilities for MST advocacy in social networking technologies. At the same time, we gesture toward the online trolling and harassment advocates can face.

Social networking technologies have been examined by many scholars for their potential use in furthering advocacy work and digital activism. While critiqued by some as mere slacktivism (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009, 2011), these activist efforts that occur within and among digital platforms have been shown to have measurable effects in the offline realm (Valenzuela, 2013; Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014; Tremayne, 2014; Vie, 2014; Vie, Carter, & Meyr, 2017). Additionally, in her call for the importance of digital advocacy, Goodling (2015) argued that social media spaces provide opportunities for counterpublics to organize, allowing “individuals to cultivate their ideas and message in a way that might previously have been cost- or politically-prohibitive.” We argue that women veterans are a counterpublic, as they are “othered” not only by civilians, but often by male military peers as well. It is also important to attend to gender when discussing social media activism given that women frequently engage in labor that is made invisible by these digital platforms; as Boler, Macdonald, Nitsou, and Harris (2014) explored, women provided “indispensable, yet largely invisible, organizing and activist leadership in the [Occupy] movement” through “collectively built friendships and networks that have the ability to sustain and strengthen the movement” (p. 3, 7). Given that such labor is often devalued as emotional labor (see deWinter, Kocurek, & Vie, 2016), yet plays a crucial role in online activist efforts, it is clear that gender is an underlooked but significant aspect of the potentials of digital activism in social networking technologies.

While both men and women face online harassment and trolling, Warren (2015) noted that “when men are targeted with online abuse, it is rarely because they are men.” He continued, “This is in stark contrast to the type of abuse most frequently



directed against women—rape threats, sexist comments about their appearance, explicit sexualized language—all of it specifically gender-related.” Thus the term gendertrolling was born. Mantilla (2013) coined the term gendertrolling, describing it as a “virulent, more threatening online phenomen[on] than . . . generic trolling. Crucially, it is not only done for the lulz—to simply upset the targets of the trolling—but it also often expresses sincere beliefs held by the trolls.” Similarly, Emma A. Jane (2016) termed it “gendered e-bile” and defined it as accumulated rape threats, sexualized vitriol, and technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment (p. 286). Mantilla (2013) argued that gendertrolling most often occurs in response to women speaking out online about gender inequality and also noted that gendertrolling “has much in common with other offline targeting of women such as sexual harassment in the workplace and street harassment” (p. 565, 568). Tanja Carstensen (2014) agreed, noting that women activists become more visible online via social media, but this increased visibility opens them up to “greater rejection and aggression” (p. 490). Thus, for many women veterans who conduct advocacy work, social networking is an important tool, but is also a space where women expect harassment will occur. Additionally, as our study reveals, much of the trolling we observed in the comments sections of online articles by or about our participants can be classified as gendertrolling.

## **Methods**

After receiving IRB approval, primary research was collected in two ways: interviews with women veteran advocates and coding their public social networking profiles. We identified several women veteran advocates who leveraged social networking technologies to conduct advocacy work, found their public-facing social networking profiles, and invited each to participate in an interview about their experiences with trolling; two women consented. Both were given the opportunity, in accordance with IRB approval, to participate confidentially or to associate their responses with their names and organizations, and both waived confidentiality. We then coded the public social networking profiles of these women veteran advocates for evidence of advocacy and trolling. During this analysis of our participants’ social networking

profiles, we followed links to any shared articles that were written by or about our participants, coding the comments for evidence of trolling.

## Participants

Our first participant was Laura Westley, West Point graduate, OEF/OIF War Army veteran, author of the memoir *War Virgin*, and advocate for mental health and gender equality in the armed forces. Westley, who identifies as “War Virgin” on social networking sites, maintains public profiles on [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#). She conducted an in-depth interview with us, and we coded the entirety of her public YouTube and Instagram profiles (consisting of 43 videos and 33 posts, respectively) and one year of Facebook and Twitter posts (consisting of 105 posts and 358 posts, respectively), from June 28, 2016 - June 28, 2017.

Our second participant was BriGette McCoy, Gulf War Army veteran and CEO and founder of the [Women Veteran Social Justice Network](#). McCoy maintains two public Facebook pages, one associated with her name and one associated with her organization; we analyzed the latter. Similarly, McCoy maintains two public Twitter profiles, and again we analyzed the organizational [profile](#). McCoy is a prolific social media user, with 142 Facebook posts and 147 tweets from May 23, 2016 - June 23, 2016, leading us to code one month of her usage on these sites. McCoy also maintains a public [Instagram](#) profile (41 posts), and though she does not share videos via her YouTube profile, there are a number of interviews featuring McCoy, which we opted to analyze after she noted that she always reads the comments on interviews she conducted that were posted online.

## Results

**Laura Westley, “War Virgin”.** Westley attended West Point and graduated in 2001 with a bachelor’s degree in chemistry and a minor in nuclear engineering. She served on active duty in the U.S. Army from 2001-2006 and participated in the Iraq Invasion. Westley achieved the rank of captain during her military service and earned her MBA. However, after separating from the military and working in the

civilian sector, Westley struggled with job satisfaction and mental health. After a 2014 suicide attempt, she renewed her dedication to advocating for women veterans.

Westley read a number of memoirs written by successful West Pointers in her youth, but after attending West Point, she realized that none provided a realistic description of West Point, military service, or war. So, she set out to write a memoir that would not only provide a healthy dose of realism, but also expose significant issues faced by military women, including sexual harassment and assault. Westley published her memoir, *War Virgin*, in 2016, and subsequently produced and starred in a musical of the same name. After a brief tour of the musical, Westley returned home to Florida where she continues to speak out in the media about issues facing women veterans today.

After conducting an interview with Westley and analysis of her social networking profiles, we found that while Westley has experienced significant digital harassment, she had little interaction with those who could be classified as successful trolls. In fact, the only trolling behaviors we identified were located in the comments sections of articles written by or about Westley that, while shared by Westley through her social networks for self-promotion, were published in other venues, such as *The Washington Post*. In part, this can be attributed to Westley's careful curation of her social networks. For instance, Westley discussed a situation when her private Facebook page was trolled by a former mentor and West Point graduate. This individual, a staunchly conservative Trump supporter, was described by Westley as someone "who loves to troll and fight with [liberals] on Facebook." When Westley posted about feeling ashamed that her West Point nomination was associated with the name of a politician who supported the 2017 Republican-drafted health care bill, this individual commented, defending his views and directing hostility toward other commenters. After this individual called Westley's friends names like "cunt" and "whore" and insulted her mother, she privately messaged him to stop. He refused, calling Westley a hypocrite and accusing her of wishing to live only in her bubble, after which Westley unfriended and blocked him, effectively removing all of his comments from her private page. The ability to self-regulate one's own social networking profile is likely connected to our observations

of trolling occurring primarily in the comments sections of articles regulated by corporations, rather than on individual advocates' profiles or sites.

**Facebook.** Her public Facebook page, which has 635 followers and 654 likes, shows Westley as both humorous and provocative. From her sexualized avatar to War Virgin's slogan/motto, "Make Love at War" (Figure 1), Westley is bold, passionate, and unapologetic. Advocating for topics such as veteran mental health and military sexual assault, it *seems* as if Westley would be prime fodder for trolls. However, our study revealed Westley has *not* had much interaction with trolls. To be clear, this is *in no way* to suggest that Westley hasn't experienced her fair share of harassment online, from flaming to sexual advances to "mansplaining." However, as our analysis reveals, much of the harassment aimed at Westley occurs via private spaces *or* in the comments sections of her op/ed pieces published in other venues and in articles *about* Westley, her writing, and her advocacy work, rather than on her public social networks.

Of the 105 Facebook posts we analyzed, 104 were coded for evidence of advocacy. Eighty are self-promotional posts in which Westley promotes *War Virgin* (book and musical). Twenty are self-promotional, but share Westley's other

**Figure 1**

*War Virgin's Facebook Banner*



writing or interviews with her where *War Virgin* is not the focus. Four additional posts were coded for advocacy, but were not connected with self-promotion. One post, featuring an amateur painting Westley made, was coded as other. Her posts received no outwardly negative reactions, and no evidence of trolling.

However, the links that Westley shared to public op-eds she had authored, particularly those that enable comments, tell a slightly different story. Westley's Facebook posts led us to 22 articles, including her op-eds, interviews with her, and reviews of *War Virgin* (book and musical). In addition, we examined two articles published prior to the year of posts that we analyzed that Westley mentioned specifically in her interview. Nineteen have no comments, either because none were made or because the site disabled comments. Of the remaining five articles, four demonstrate some evidence of trolling.

**Task and Purpose.** On September 19, 2016, Westley shares *War Virgin's* first official book review, published in *Task and Purpose*. Interestingly, Westley discussed in her interview that, rather than using her headshot or the book's cover image, *Task and Purpose* led the article with a somewhat provocative photograph of Westley. Westley believes that *Task and Purpose* specifically chose this photograph as a form of click-bait. Westley asserted that she received a proof of the article from the author, but:

What was published was different than what he wrote. It was sexed up. . . . It's like my boobs [and] the provocative edits were used as clickbait to get more people to read the article, and definitely, I was told that it spawned a lot of trolls.

While the post on her Facebook profile gained two comments and 16 reactions, none overtly negative, the book review itself received 115 comments, some positive, some negative, many misogynistic, but only a small portion of which seem to fall under the purview of trolling.

Interestingly, *Task and Purpose* uses a Facebook plugin to manage comments on articles, so users' comments are attributed to their Facebook profile. Thus, some level of anonymity is immediately sacrificed. However, it is also

important to recognize, as previously mentioned, that while Facebook encourages users to register with the site using their “real” identities and placed measures intended to enforce this “real-name” policy, such as limiting the number of times a user can change their name, Facebook is not impervious to trolls. While some Facebook trolls are willing to sacrifice their anonymity, some are not; as a result, some users establish Facebook profiles for the sole purpose of trolling.

Of the 115 comments, the first that appears upon opening the comments section seems troll-ish in nature (Figure 2). It is likely that Howard Loomis understood

## Figure 2

*Howard Loomis' Response to Westley's Op-Ed in Task and Purpose*



**Howard Loomis** · Omaha Benson High School Magnet

Girls in the Military are "brig bait" Girls have zero place in the military.

Like · Reply · 17 · Sep 19, 2016 10:43am



**Don Vance** · Denham Springs, Louisiana

"Girls" have always had a place in the military or didn't you learn that in history classes??? Some of the best soldiers I had were female!! You, Howard Loomis, have failed to recognize the force multiplier that female soldiers are. I'm glad that I never served with you!!

Like · Reply · 44 · Sep 19, 2016 10:50am



**Gwen Stacy**

3 words: Female Engagement Team. BOOM!!

Like · Reply · 24 · Sep 19, 2016 11:18am



**Brian Jopek** · News director/Journalist at The Lakeland Times

I have even more words: females in the combat zone even well before female engagement teams (those in MP and aviation units come to mind) ...

Like · Reply · 22 · Sep 19, 2016 3:37pm

that his comment would incite anger. He uses the term “brig bait” (Figure 2, p. 14) and, as discussed below, his personal Facebook page positions Loomis as military affiliated, both of which allow Loomis to assimilate. Here, Loomis successfully assimilated, as evidenced by the number of commenters who express gratitude that they never had to serve by Loomis’ side. Loomis’ comments received 28 replies from 23 individual accounts, some of which support his perspective that “girls” don’t belong in the military, while others defend women in the military (often pointing to Loomis’ use of “girls” in his original comment). Interestingly, Loomis never returns to the conversation, even when personally attacked, which may indicate Loomis is just here for the lulz. Of these 28 responses to Loomis’ original comments, seven clearly support the role of women in the military. Some of these comments were from commenters who identify as female veterans and others were from commenters who identified as male veterans. An additional three comments offered support for women in the military while also directly insulting Loomis, while three comments only offer personal insults. Three comments supported Loomis’ perspective, offering perspectives on why women should not be in the military, with one commenter indicating that “most” women military personnel were “garbage in combat” (Figure 3, p. 16). Seven comments included interactions between those who replied to Loomis, with one comment showing solidarity with another user’s anti-female sentiment, four comments insulting commenters other than Loomis, and two comments thanking users who offered support for women in the military. Finally, one comment was uncodable, as it contained only emojis and it was unclear to whom the comment was directed.

Four days after his first comment, Loomis began another thread, with the comment: “Girls might make adequate soldiers [sic] if we could just figure out how to protect them from men” (Figure 4, p. 17). Obviously contradictory to his previous statement, this comment garnered only three replies, two of which comment on Loomis’ use of “girls” rather than “women.” Visiting Loomis’ Facebook page provided more evidence that Loomis is, indeed, a troll. One commenter, Catherine Caughlin, noted that Loomis “like[s] to blame rape victims” on his Facebook page (Figure 3, p. 16). Loomis’ account, which appears to be

### Figure 3

*Allen Biltoft's Response to Westley's Op-Ed in Task and Purpose*



**Allen Biltoft** · Army School For Gentleman

Sorry, most women are garbage in combat. Most, not all. There isn't many who could drag a fellow soldier hundreds of yards to med evac. That's a problem for me. If I go down in combat from a ied i want people who can take care of me.

Like · Reply ·  2 · Jan 30, 2017 3:57am



**Lauren Taylor** · Washington, District of Columbia

Absolutely "girls" don't belong in the military ...luckily they only take adults ... (this guy sits here on the internet saying women don't belong in the military something he wouldn't be able to do without the contributions to computing made by Grace Hopper ... a woman in the military)

Like · Reply · Mar 16, 2017 8:20pm



**Catheen Caughlin**

If you look at his Facebook page he like to blame rape victims also. Therefore his character it's completely shitty and I'm glad I never have to serve with a blue falcon like you.

Like · Reply · Apr 16, 2017 6:56am

largely public, contained no personal images and was only connected with two “friends.” Finally, though Loomis’ birth year is listed as 1957, one of only two personal posts on the page (i.e., not related to a news story or sharing a military-related image) indicated that Loomis started studying at Omaha Benson High School Magnet in February of 2017.<sup>3</sup> However, all of the content posted on Loomis’ page indicates that he is military-affiliated, particularly with the Army Rangers, though there is no tangible evidence of this affiliation. Much of the content on Loomis’ page was misogynistic and also related to the military. Loomis shared several articles about military sexual assault, accompanied by comments that



## Figure 4

Howard Loomis' Second Response to Westley's *Op-Ed* in *Task and Purpose*



**Howard Loomis** · Omaha Benson High School Magnet

Girls might make adequate soldiers if we could just figure out how to protect them from men.

Like · Reply · Sep 23, 2016 9:10am



**Danielle Holder**

They're women not girls.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Dec 17, 2016 6:35pm



**Guitpickin RayMondo CowHippy**

Danielle Holder Correctly, they are females, and are comprised of a mixture of women, girls, and sometimes androgenously indeterminable...

Like · Reply · Dec 19, 2016 6:56pm



**Sarah White**

Shut up Papaw.

Like · Reply · Jan 13, 2017 12:40am

indicated that the men convicted for sexual assault in these cases were “the real victims.” In addition to the “life event” of beginning high school and a birthdate, the only personal post from Loomis read: “I love life. Never been happier.”

Here, Loomis' trolling is successful. Loomis assimilated into the audience of military-affiliated individuals that *Task and Purpose* targets; his comment is aggressive in nature, and he incites aggression from and between other commenters; he disrupts the space and its intentions, as the commentary in this thread *never* discussed Westley's book or the review; and, though Catherine Caughlin outs Loomis as someone whose “character is completely shitty,” Loomis is never outed as a troll.

The remainder of the comments written in response to this book review range from support of women to clearly misogynistic, as well as comments coded as

flaming, such as King Conger's comment that "This article should be aborted. Just like the author should of [sic] been." Additionally, we classified Patrick Hewlett's comment as flaming. Hewlett wrote: "what a waste of time. she is pathetic. long live the Infantry that really are going 6 or 9 months without pussy or alcohol becuz their acutally fighting a war!" [sic]. While there are a number of responses criticizing Westley, the author of the book review, *Task and Purpose*, women in the military, and the military in general, no other comments or responses on this thread appear to have the characteristics of trolling or flaming.

This is not the only instance, however, when *Task and Purpose* mentioned *War Virgin* in an article. On April 10, 2017, Westley shared on Facebook a link to a *Task and Purpose* article, "10 Must Read Books About Women in the Military," where *War Virgin* was featured. Westley's Facebook post received no comments, but was shared once, and gathered 8 positive reactions (like, love, and wow). The article on *Task and Purpose's* site, however, gained 20 comments, two of which are certainly antagonistic, but none seem to fall squarely into the arena of trolling (Figure 5, p. 19; Figure 6, p. 20).

Agnon Peregrinian's Facebook profile is largely private, so his military affiliation is unclear, but his profile's publically visible content indicated various moves to military bases in the US and abroad. Further, he employs language in this post that indicates familiarity with military operations (Figure 5, p. 19). Additionally, some of his language might be viewed as aggressive, such as his reference to "PC crap," the "feminist bandwagon," and "female superiority." However, in a somewhat anti-trollish move, he wrote: "but most are just doing a job and want to be part of the team. Let's just let them do that without making them into some kind of superhumans," which seems to indicate that Peregrinian accepts the presence of women in the military, though his earlier comments indicate he is threatened by this. Finally, if Peregrinian is indeed a troll, he is certainly successful, as evidenced by the fiery response from Jamie Dannen, who is clearly outraged by his comment (Figure 5, p. 19).

Paul Pitt's comment (Figure 6, p. 20), though certainly contrary to the article and critical of *Task and Purpose*, does not seem trollish. However, it is

## Figure 5

*Agnon Peregrinian's Response to Task and Purpose's "10 Must Read Books About Women in the Military" List*



### **Agnon Peregrinian**

Really? Women's History Month, misandrist SHARP training, pro female DOD produced print propaganda in every building, the fawning undeserved attention leaders give to females for mediocre performance, and the popular media's message about female superiority. I get enough PC crap at work and now T&P is on the feminist bandwagon. Here is my suggested reading selection: March 2017 Record of Court Martials (with females as the accused). Some females are good, some are bad, some are shit hot, some are just shit but most are just doing a job and want to be part of the team. Let's just let them do that without making them into some kind of superhumans. With time they will prove their worth to all and we won't have to be preached to about how valuable they are.

Like · Reply ·  2 · Apr 10, 2017 8:11am



### **Jamie Dannen** · Public Affairs at Veterans Health Administration (VHA) - U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

One wonders why you have such a hateful response to a book review. As an Army Veteran and the first female track vehicle mechanic ever tasked to 1/41 Field Artillery, your response just sounds like so much jaw flapping. I heard similar unimportant sounds when I first got to the motor pool, "don't let that girl touch my vehicle" then one year later, after I proved myself the best damned mechanic in the pool, it was all "please have Mobley work on my vehicle and nobody else." You see, we don't need you or your kind to appreciate our ass kicking. We'd just like you to shut up while we do it.

Like · Reply ·  4 · Apr 11, 2017 9:31am

## Figure 6

*Paul Pitt's Response to Task and Purpose's "10 Must Read Books About Women in the Military" List*



**Paul Pitt** · All-IN-ONE at Self-Employed

To say " but their contributions are typically missing from historical" is simply false. Task & Purpose is merely an extreme liberal news with an agenda (and not pro veteran .. it is anti veteran). T&P lists a number of books about women serving the U.S. The play "South Pacific" is about women (RNs) in WWII. The life of Calamity Jane is well documented in historical narrative. Numerous cinema plays have very strong parts about women in war "Counterfeit Traitor," "Harm's Way" .. no effort was made to hide it. U.S. audiences liked it. I recall many ads and newsreels about women helping to win the war .. including Tilly the Toiler and the women who ferried planes to combat zones. T&P is a liberal rag with a "filter" that only sees what it likes and then offers fake news. as fact.

Like · Reply · Apr 10, 2017 8:31am



**Jamie Dannen** · Public Affairs at Veterans Health Administration (VHA) - U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

I don't think anyone needs you to approve of these books or this website. Why are you on here if it's fake news? And I'm wondering why you're so angry about this particular book list. Seems odd, don't you think?

Like · Reply ·  3 · Apr 11, 2017 9:34am



**DeAnna Ashley-Calderón** · Austin, Texas

Yes, women in support roles, but not women in combat.

Like · Reply · May 15, 2017 7:35pm

interesting that Jamie Dannen, the same woman who responded to Peregrinian's earlier post, is clearly offended by Pitt's comment, and dances around calling him a troll when she wonders why he is visiting the site if he does not find it credible, and why he seems so angered by this particular article. However, she stops short of doing so. We argue that this is an instance of misinterpreted trolling—while Pitt may not be interested in developing a dialogue, he is also not engaging in deception, aggression, or disruption.

**The Hill.** During our interview, Westley mentioned an op-ed she had written for *The Hill*. In it, Westley advocated for stricter gun control laws for veterans, an opinion that she knew “was going to ruffle feathers because guns are popular in a veteran population that tends to be more conservative.” She addressed her own suicide attempt, crediting her lack of access to a gun for giving her the necessary time to reflect on her decision and instead reach out for help. However, Westley ultimately chose not to read the comments on this piece because:

I saw the first comment, and they called me a narcissist [Figure 7, p. 22]. Here I was saying, “I’m lucky I didn’t die, and here’s what I learned, and here’s how I want to help people. And so somebody called me a narcissist. I think it was probably a fellow West Pointer who just is annoyed by what I do.


Westley’s article was shared 540 times, and received 15 comments, only one positive in nature, in direct opposition to the reactions Westley typically received on her *own* public Facebook page. Additionally, comments in articles published in *The Hill* are not enabled by a Facebook plugin, and commenters are identified by usernames, rather than their real names. As is consistent with the literature, an increased degree of anonymity seems to invite a greater number of hostile and contradictory posts. While the commenters on this article attribute Westley’s argument to anti-gun propaganda (Figure 8, p. 22), with one commenter calling her a “twit” (Figure 8) and another suggesting that there is no connection between gun ownership and suicide because those who are “serious about offing themselves will figure it out,” these posts do not fit the characteristics of trolling (since for the purposes of this article, we define trolling as deliberate actions encompassing deception, aggression, disruption, and success that seem motivated by the troll’s amusement—not simply name-calling or insensitive comments).

**The Washington Post.** Also during our interview, Westley spoke of her first op-ed piece, published in *The Washington Post* on November 23, 2012, under Westley’s married name, Cannon. In this article, Westley argues against the restrictions placed on sexual activity between soldiers at war. In the fourteen days following its



## Figure 7

### *Cadet X's Response to Westley's Op-Ed in The Hill*

 **Cadet X** · 2 years ago

This article is essentially the public ramblings of an ill-informed narcissist who has confused their feelings on a subject with facts and logic. The argument to eliminate gun ownership boils down to three unconnected and irrelevant anecdotes. Just because your lack of gun prevented a suicide has no bearing on gun ownership as a Constitutional right, nor does it demonstrate correlation or causation for how to reduce Veteran suicides. The other two anecdotes about your "friends" are equally as useless. The vague allusion to them both as a form of proof actually serves to weaken your argument. The rest of this trash drivell is hardly worth acknowledging. This is an embarrassment of an article. The Hill should be embarrassed that they published this crap writing. I am embarrassed to share an Alma Mater with the author. The Army should be embarrassed that you continue to represent yourself as a member of the profession. Go back to your YouTube videos and desperate pleas for attention on the stage. Horrible. You earn a low zero, double-underlined ANS.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›


## Figure 8

### *FiftycalTX and Steve's Responses to Westley's Op-Ed in The Hill*

 **FiftycalTX** · 2 years ago

Just more anti-gun lies. Probably bought and paid for by Bloomturds "mommies demand attention" What is next? Is she going to demand an end to "high places"? People that are serious about offing themselves will figure it out.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **Steve** · 2 years ago

What a fabulous recruitment pitch. "Hey young men! Please enlist to fight for your country! And if you survive you can look forward to a lifetime ban on gun ownership!" What a twit.

And if enlistment drops off the libs can reinstate the draft knowing that when the troops finish their hitch they will go on a roster of veterans that will disqualify them from gun ownership.

The world is upside down.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

publication (the *Post* turns comments off after 14 days), the article garnered 478 comments. Similar to *The Hill*, these commenters are identified by usernames, and comments are not enabled via a Facebook plugin. A number of comments suggest that Westley, by admitting and publicly discussing her own sexual encounters (some consensual and some not) during wartime, inadvertently “proves” that women do not belong in the military (Figures 9-10, pp. 23-24), while others personally attack Westley (Figures 11-14, pp. 24-26). Many commenters attacking Westley also claim military affiliations. Additionally, there does seem to be an instance of failed (or possibly misinterpreted) trolling, in which one commenter is accused of being a troll by other commenters (Figures 15-18, pp. 27-30).

## Figure 9

*Christmo88's Response to Westley's Op-Ed in The Washington Post*



**christmo88**

11/28/2012 8:41 AM EST

Laura Cannon inadvertently makes precisely the same argument many of us made back in the early 1990s for keeping women off of Navy combat ships; and the same arguments that should be made in response to the current lawsuit filed by female soldiers who want access to combat jobs (reported elsewhere in today's Post.) You can't mix young men and women in their late teens and early twenties on a ship or in a rifle squad and not expect good order and discipline to take a big hit. Every single person I know in the Navy, 200+ people of all ages, from E-3 up to O-6, and both sexes, have numerous stories about the young people on their ship fooling around, and the detrimental impact on order and discipline. The service academies have all the same problems in what could be called a very mild simulation of a combat environment – long hours of stressful life, not much privacy, not much opportunity to go off base and meet members of the opposite sex. Miss Cannon's argument that the academies should loosen the rules on sex is just the same people who pushed for gender integration in the first place now demanding that we ignore and even condone the principal problem that integration causes. Next up will be demands that the Navy ignore

fraternization at sea, or the other services ignore fraternization on deployment. It was a slippery slope when the services first opened some jobs to women, and now it's getting a little steeper and more slippery.

2 ·  Like Share

## Figure 10

*Glen Ellen's Response to Westley's Op-Ed in The Washington Post*



**Glen Ellen**

11/27/2012 12:18 AM EST

This lady makes the argument for why women and gays should not be allowed into the military. Serving in combat is not about having sex, and if that is what the situation is degenerating into, it's a problem.

5 ·  Like Share

## Figure 11

*Crabstu's Response to Westley's Op-Ed in The Washington Post*



**crabstu**

11/25/2012 4:39 PM EST

I just reread the article. This line jumped out:

"But I reflect on it almost every day. There's nothing that compares to making love at war."

What is this, Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen. The author was/is and immature individual who had no business at West Point or leading others as an Officer.

20 ·  Like Share





**dallas21**

11/25/2012 5:14 PM EST

You sir are no romantic and very likely a bore in bed - if you have ever been in a bed with a woman. Is your name by chance Neidermyrer? (pan to vision of dead horse in Animal House)

3 · Like



**mrdoug**

11/25/2012 5:35 PM EST

Agreed, Crab. You have nailed it. What a pathetic article this is.

7 · Like

## Figure 12

*Continuation of Crabstu's Response to Westley's Op-Ed in The Washington Post*



**crabstu**

11/25/2012 6:03 PM EST

dallas,

You'll never know. Neither would a "girl" like Laura Cannon. I prefer ladies.

6 · Like



**TMK76**

11/25/2012 9:41 PM EST

He's completely right. I knew her at West Point. She had no business in the corps.

4 · Like

---



**JMarkDavison**

11/25/2012 10:05 PM EST

I remember her at West Point as a studious and hardworking, with a good sense of humor. For some reason she's since regressed into the narcissistic teenager she never had a chance to be.

For the rest of us, we got all that out of our system in 6 months at our officer basic course, then we moved on and led soldiers without having sex with any of them. I am embarrassed that she said she is from our class and West Point.

5 · Like

### Figure 13

*DQuixote1's Response to Westley's Op-Ed in The Washington Post*



**DQuixote1**

11/25/2012 11:37 AM EST

Laura...you are truly an embarrassment to your Alma Mater.

3 · Like Share



**DQuixote1**

11/25/2012 11:49 AM EST

Thank you or your service...glad to know you're retired.

2 · Like

### Figure 14

*Jan99's Response to Westley's Op-Ed in The Washington Post*



**Jan99**

11/24/2012 5:46 PM EST

So now my tax dollars have to pay for this woman's Valtrex and birth control while she is allegedly defending the country?

3 · Like Share

## Figure 15

### *Cutelittlepuppy's Response to Westley's Op-Ed in The Washington Post*



**cutelittlepuppy**

11/23/2012 11:53 PM EST

A friend of mine who attended West Point told me that students are taught to chant things like "Blood Makes the grass grow". Is this true?

Like Share



**steves\_59**

11/24/2012 12:00 AM EST

What's this got to do with the article?

Like



**cutelittlepuppy**

11/24/2012 12:06 AM EST

She's a graduate of West Point. She might answer me, or another West point graduate may read the article and comment section and provide confirmation.

Like



**cutelittlepuppy**

11/24/2012 12:09 AM EST

My friend left the academy. He liked the military and the history but he wasn't prepared to be conditioned to kill. He always was smart.

1 • Like

## Figure 16

### *Usna1974 and Steves\_59's Responses to Cutelittlepuppy*



**usna1974**

11/24/2012 12:19 AM EST

I would not want a military officer who had a pre-developed attitude toward killing...I call those people sociopaths. By the same token, you don't choose boxing as a career if you are not willing, if necessary, to throw a punch....even if you like the looks of the gloves...

Like



**cutelittlepuppy**

11/24/2012 12:20 AM EST

Like My Lai?

1 • Like



**cutelittlepuppy**

11/24/2012 12:21 AM EST

He was and is a responsible person. He left.

1 • Like



**steves\_59**

11/24/2012 12:34 AM EST

I figured you were just in here trolling away. That's why I asked what your question had to do with the article.

You'd be the first one hiding behind the guys with the guns if the crap ever hit the fan.

## Figure 17

### Continuation of Usna1974's Responses to Cutelittlepuppy



**cutelittlepuppy**

11/24/2012 12:40 AM EST

Hiding behind the guys with guns? I wouldn't be anywhere near them.

2 · Like



**usna1974**

11/24/2012 12:51 AM EST

Gimme a break - My Lai was a gross anomaly...I can totally understand how someone can snap from the stresses of combat (I served with spec ops during Desert Storm) but professional military personnel probably value life more than most other people because they have witnessed horrible death...I agree that the military is not for all, or even most. But if you are trying to tarnish the vast majority of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines from that comment, it will not work.

1 · Like



**usna1974**

11/24/2012 1:02 AM EST

puppy - I do not know if you have an agenda on this one or not. I personally would not respect an individual who would not have the capacity to kill under certain circumstances (a husband to save his wife, a mother to save her child). That being said, the purpose of the military is not and has never been to kill as a primary role. the purpose of the military is to achieve an objective - strategical, operational, or tactical...it is only because of resistance to that objective that fighting may be required, and in the course of fighting, deaths may ensue. I do not think you can understand this distinction, any better than most people can understand how a lawyer can defend a rapist, pedophile, murderer, what have you if he knows his client is guilty.

## Figure 18

### Final Responses to Cutelittlepuppy's Thread



**samscream**

11/24/2012 7:23 AM EST

She's not speaking German, Russian or Chinese but apparently hasn't a clue as to whom she has to thank for that.

Like



**steves\_59**

11/24/2012 9:12 AM EST

USNA- don't even try to engage. The mutt is a troll.

Like



**JMarkDavison**

11/25/2012 9:17 PM EST

a light amount of nitrogen- and protein-rich blood actually will help the grass grow.

Like

When considering the comments on *The Washington Post* versus *The Hill* or even on Westley's own Facebook page, it is evident that the further one gets from Westley's own self-curated social networks, and the laxer the requirements for non-anonymity, the more trollish the behaviors become. Westley is able to curate her own social networking pages and most trolling occurs behind the scenes or is quickly cleaned up, and on other sites where users are associated with their real names, some trolling occurs but not nearly as much as on a site like *The Washington Post*, where users are not identified by real names, only usernames.

**YouTube.** War Virgin's [YouTube channel](#) consists of 43 videos since joining on 10/16/2012. The channel has 52 subscribers and the description reads: "A hilarious, shocking, tell-all journey of repression, temptation and liberation,"

while also providing a link to War Virgin's website. After coding these YouTube videos, we noted that Westley mainly used this platform for self-promotion (e.g., *War Virgin* the musical rehearsal clips; readings from the book; other non-*War-Virgin*-related parody music videos). Indeed, we were surprised to see little evidence of trolling or harassment in Westley's YouTube presence given the stereotypical perception of YouTube comments as overtly harassing. (Similarly, Westley's Instagram profile revealed no visible trolling.)

The absence of trolling here is significant, we argue, for three reasons. First, YouTube comments are a well-known and popular venue for trolling (Dredge, 2013; Fumudoh, 2015; Moreau, 2017; Vie, Balzhiser, & Ralston, 2014), even in spite of YouTube's 2013 policy changes aimed at reducing trolling, including measures such as giving users control over comments on their own channel (Dredge, 2013). Second, the absence of trolling is important here precisely because Westley *did not notice its absence*. In fact, nine of the ten comments her videos received were positive, and she received more thumbs up than thumbs down, indicating positive public reception of her persona and her advocacy work. However, negative comments and reactions tend to make more of an impact than positive ones. In fact, when we were coding Westley's YouTube channel, before tallying the thumbs up and down reactions, we believed the tally would reveal more negative reactions than positive reactions. Even to us, the negative stood out more than the positive, a point which might help to explain public perceptions of trolling as pervasive. Finally, the absence of trolling here is particularly interesting because, in one of her videos, "Dear War Virgin Haters," Westley directly addresses her "haters," who she referred to in our interview as trolls. In this video, Westley reads some of the comments she received on her first op-ed in the *Washington Post*, but as previously discussed, few of these comments were coded as trolling. However, the comments Westley chose to read in this YouTube video are certainly unpleasant and contain insults and harassing language, again pointing to the need to more precisely define trolling in the public sphere as well as the need to more effectively address issues of gender equality in the public sphere.

**Twitter.** War Virgin’s public Twitter profile, also consistent with the War Virgin brand, is similar to her Facebook profile. Most tweets promote *War Virgin*, but a large portion also promote her other publications and speaking engagements in ways that her Instagram and YouTube do not. Additionally, Twitter is a political space for Westley, with many tweets promoting democratic ideals and progressive political viewpoints. We analyzed one year of War Virgin’s 502 total tweets, from June 28, 2016 to June 28, 2017, for a total of 358 tweets. Of these, 126 promoted *War Virgin*, while 73 additional tweets promoted Westley’s other publications and speaking engagements. Thus, 199 posts were coded as self-promotional and advocacy, with an additional 32 posts advocating for veterans, for a total of 231 tweets spreading some form of advocacy. Sixty-seven tweets were political in nature, while 11 tweets were Instagram shares and four were YouTube shares. The remaining 45 tweets were coded as other (e.g., personal photos, inspirational quotes, and sports commentary).

One-hundred-eighty-one tweets were original and 177 were retweets. For the purposes of this study, we did *not* code likes and/or comments made on retweets, as we cannot track likes and retweets back to Westley’s shares. The 181 original tweets that we analyzed accrued 49 retweets and 111 likes, but somewhat surprisingly, no replies. Clearly, since no replies were present to analyze, no evidence of trolling was found (outside of the comments on linked articles, already coded and discussed above). All of the pieces written by or about Westley that were shared through her Twitter were also shared through her Facebook.

**BriGette McCoy, Women Veteran Social Justice Network.** Brigitte McCoy, founder and CEO of the Women Veteran Social Justice Network (WVSJN), is a US Army, Gulf War era veteran. McCoy, a victim of both sexual assault and sexual harassment during her military service, provided testimony to the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services Hearing on Sexual Assaults in the Military (2013) in which she expressed doubts that “the military chain of command will consistently, prosecute, convict, sentence and carry out the sentencing of sexual predators in uniform without absconding justice somehow.” WVSJN began in 2006



as a way to connect women veterans with employment opportunities. Eventually, McCoy realized that while there are several organizations dedicated to providing services to veterans, few of them were connected in truly meaningful ways, and WVSJN, a network of veterans and resources, emerged.

Like Westley, McCoy often gives interviews and pens editorials, though Westley publishes more frequently than McCoy. Also like Westley, we found no evidence of trolling on McCoy's public social networking sites. However, after speaking to McCoy, we were unsurprised by this, as she noted that, as an early adopter of online technologies and a vocal member of the veteran community: "I don't experience trolling at the level that other people have. I think again because of how I came into the community—people can be mad as fuck with the fact of whatever I say, but I have street cred and I came in this community long before other people were in the community." Additionally, while Westley does not engage trolls, and purposefully avoids the comments sections, McCoy seeks out comments and *does* engage with trolls, in what she describes as a form of psychological warfare. Rather than allowing trolls to affect her emotionally, McCoy attempts to engage genuinely, asking them questions such as: "Can you explain more about what you're saying, because maybe I'm misunderstanding your point of view?" Or maybe, "That's an interesting lens." Those are the kinds of words I use." She did note that "most trolls aren't ready for that level of engagement."

Surprisingly, McCoy noted that much of the harassment and trolling that she receives is from women veterans who have experienced MST, particularly when McCoy discusses race. McCoy attributed this viewpoint to the idea that all veteran women have the same experiences. When McCoy speaks or writes about the ways in which race has impacted her veteran experience, particularly in connection with MST, she noted that any harassment or trolling directed at her is predominately from white women veterans. This resonates with Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's (1991) discussions of intersectionality as it aligns with identity politics, social justice, and violence against women; as she noted, ignoring "difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (p. 1242).

We did not find any evidence of trolling in the portions of McCoy's social networking profiles that we analyzed. Thus, informed by our observations of Westley's profiles and McCoy's admission that she always read the comments, we sought out pieces written by and about McCoy. Of the 14 pieces we analyzed, including a YouTube video of McCoy's testimony, interviews with McCoy, and pieces about McCoy, only one article, published in *The Guardian*, showed evidence of trolling.

**The Guardian.** McCoy's op-ed, published in *The Guardian* in 2014, was shared 597 times and received 29 comments. In this piece, McCoy identified as a survivor of MST and criticized the military's failure to respond appropriately and effectively to issues of sexual harassment and assault in the armed forces. Similarly to *The Washington Post*, comments on articles published in *The Guardian* are attributed to usernames rather than using a Facebook plug-in to manage comments. Because of this similarity, we anticipated that we would find clear evidence of trolling in the comments section of this article, and though we did find evidence, it was not the evidence we expected.

Four of the 29 comments associated with McCoy's op-ed were removed by moderators for violating standards of decency (Figures 19-21, pp. 34-36), our first instance in this study of encountering evident erasure of harassment and/or trolling. While three of the removed comments were responses to the article (Figure 19; Figure 21, p. 36), rather than replies to comments posted by other users, we have no information about the content of these posts or how they violated *The Guardian's*

## Figure 19

*SPMARG'S Response to McCoy's Op-Ed in The Guardian, Removed for Violating Community Standards*



**SPMARG** 2 May 2014 8:54

This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our [community standards](#). Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see our [FAQs](#).

## Figure 20

### Deegeees49's Response to McCoy's Op-Ed in The Guardian, with Thazinred's Response Removed for Violating Community Standards



**deegeees49** 2 May 2014 9:08

2 ↑

Yes, yes, yes. The Military services should do everything they can to eliminate sexual assaults in the ranks.

But the problem was self inflicted from the beginning. Military service involves hundreds of thousands of healthy, energetic young men whose "male-ness" must be catalyzed in order to be and remain an effective fighting force. Service involves long periods without access to sexual release, other than masturbation. These are facts.

And into this environment, our utopian social manipulators have launched program after program to inject more and more women into - now - all areas of this environment, including combat units. What did they expect? Putting it crudely, what do you expect to happen if you place a cadre of women into an army of horny men?

Any time a significant change is made to the military, the ONLY relevant question should be: Will it give us a more effective fighting force? If not, then the change should not be made.

Our Nancies in Congress and the White House are more concerned with, questions like, "Will it make us feel better about ourselves?" "Will it make us more like Switzerland?" "Will it get us any votes in the next election?"

So now we have women in combat units. And we are "shocked...SHOCKED!" that there is an upswing in sexual assault.

How stupid are we?

← Share

Report



**ondelette** → **deegeees49** 2 May 2014 10:21

1 ↑

Yeah, except that rape and assault are crimes of violence, not an overabundance of sexual urges. Did you know that many of the predators in the military attack both men and women? The goal is denigration of the victim and power to the perpetrator. If your view of sexual attacks is that they are about going too long without sex, you seriously need to update first to the 20th century and then to the 21st century. Hopefully, you'll be able to do that on an ASAP basis, because this problem really needs to get some attention and solution, not some antiquated pseudo-debate yet again about lonely men and available women.

← Share

Report



**Thazinred** → **deegeees49** 2 May 2014 11:44

This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our [community standards](#). Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see [our FAQs](#).



**FuriousKale** → **deegeees49** 2 May 2014 16:33

0 ↑

How stupid are we?

Having read your post, which is essentially an apology for the rapists, I really do have to wonder how stupid you are.

← Share

Report

## Figure 21

### *Cheld Adex and Khagaraj Sommu's Responses to McCoy's Op-Ed in The Guardian, Removed for Violating Community Standards*



**Cheld Adex** 2 May 2014 11:38

This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our [community standards](#). Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see [our FAQs](#).



**Khagaraj Sommu** 2 May 2014 12:51

This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our [community standards](#). Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see [our FAQs](#).

community standards. However, one removed comment is in reply to a commenter who argued for the distinction of rape and assault as violent crimes that are about exertion of power rather than sexual urges and desires (Figure 20, p. 35). Again, while we do not know the content of this removed post, it is likely that the content of the post is trollish or harassing in nature. As seen in a visible comment in this thread, in which user FuriousKale calls another user stupid (Figure 20, p. 35), name-calling and common insults do not seem to result in a comment's removal from the site.

In fact, *The Guardian* maintains clear guidelines for community standards and participation, noting that “personal attacks (against authors or other users), persistent trolling and mindless abuse will not be tolerated.” Additionally, these guidelines dictated the removal of content that “others might find extremely offensive or threatening,” noted an intolerance for “racism, sexism, homophobia or other forms of hate-speech, or contributions that could be interpreted as such,” and “reserve[d] the right to redirect or curtail conversations which descend into flame-wars based on ingrained partisanship or generalisations.” However, while many online publications, including *The Washington Post*, have similar community standards in place, we saw no evidence of this type of moderation occurring in the comments sections of other articles included in this study.

**WVSJN's Social Networking Profiles.** WVSJN's public [Facebook](#) profile, which has 11,482 likes and 11,224 followers, projects professionalism. WVSJN's profile picture is an image of the company logo (Figure 22), while the page's banner image is a word cloud of language collected from the organization (Figure 23, p. 38).

**Figure 22**

*WVSJN's Logo and Facebook Profile Image*







## Discussion

After conducting our interviews and analysis, it was evident that McCoy and Westley use social networking very differently. For McCoy, social networking enables her to build rich networks of veteran advocates while also resisting existing power structures that often inhibit marginalized individuals from providing *or* accessing important resources. McCoy is particularly cognizant of social capital's power, particularly when it is distributed among various groups. While the benefit of the network is important to Westley as well, as seen in the previous section, most of Westley's social networking use promotes her own advocacy work by promoting *War Virgin* (both book and musical). Westley is a more prolific author than McCoy, so the former has a variety of publications to share, and participated in many interviews publicizing her book and musical. In contrast, McCoy ended up in the spotlight after a 2013 testimony to Congress on military sexual assault; while there are many articles and interviews *about* her, only one (as far as we can tell) piece linked to her social networking site use is authored by her. One advocate, then, uses social networking sites to spread awareness primarily through publicizing her writing that deals directly with military sexual abuse and harassment. The other uses social networking sites to funnel audience members directly to her advocacy network, offering a more direct avenue to support services.

Additionally, the two differ in their social networking proclivity, with one advocate (McCoy) posting more frequently than the other. While Westley's public Facebook page has 105 posts in one year, McCoy's has 142 in one month. McCoy's public Twitter profile boasts a total of 6,408 tweets, while Westley has 505. Similar to Westley, however, the majority of McCoy's posts perform advocacy work, and very little, if any, personal information not connected to her advocacy is shared in these spaces.

Though our sample size is small, our study suggests that, in many cases, women veteran advocates are trolled (and harassed) by other military-affiliated individuals. In the case of Loomis (Figure 2, p. 14; Figure 4, p. 17), this military affiliation may simply be deception. However, both Westley and McCoy noted how often their online aggressors were military affiliated. Interestingly, however, much

of the trolling and harassment aimed at Westley came from male military personnel or veterans, while many of McCoy's trolls were women.

While McCoy attributed much of her harassment to a belief that discussions of race somewhat discredit her experiences with sexual assault and harassment, Westley attributes much of the harassment she has received to a recent cultural shift in which white men, particularly conservatives, increasingly desire to defend themselves, their beliefs, and their place in the world. Westley noted:

I think in their minds, they're defending themselves. And I think that there are some good men in the military that don't partake in harassment, and there are also some men that are advocates. ... But I think that a lot of men are feeling like they're under attack. I've been told it's really hard to be a white middle-class male in society now because they feel they're under attack.

Westley's observation supports arguments associating trolling with whiteness and maleness (Phillips, 2015; Hardaker, 2013ab). This is not to say that all trolls are white males, but that the act of trolling typically relies on displays of whiteness, masculinity, and often, privilege. It also aligns with research exploring the "manosphere" (Ging, 2017), a particularly vitriolic response spreading across social media in response to feminism. As Ging noted, "masculinity politics have reached a deeply affective and toxic juncture, representing a significant threat to the capacity of digital feminisms and women generally to operate online" (p. 17). It is precisely because of the perception that privileges have been taken away from men and given over to women that men who participate in the manosphere--which can include trolling and harassment behaviors--exert the ideological, psychological, and material power in social networking spaces that they do (p. 17).

Westley also observed that much of the negative feedback she receives is no longer sent to her directly. She attributes this to two things: the increasing ubiquity of social networking technologies and her growing public platform. Westley noted that, while in 2012, when she published her *Washington Post* op-ed, in addition to negative comments posted on the site, she received a number of harassing emails, including one death threat. In addition to noting the ways in



which the ubiquity of social networking sites increases access to articles and streamlines the process of responding to a piece, she believes that, as her public platform has grown, trolls and digital harassers might worry that she will share private messages with her network, thus bringing unwanted attention to these individuals. Such attention has real-world consequences, like the case of Justine Sacco, whose off-hand tweets to her audience of friends resulted in her public shaming, the loss of her job, and the permanence of the many articles written about her living on in internet results. When searching for her name, one of the top articles to appear, “How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco’s Life,” is in *The New York Times*.

## **Conclusion**

As long as individuals have enjoyed the World Wide Web, they have faced harassment and trolling. Even early analyses of trolling noted that successful trolls could have extremely damaging impacts on online communities. Julian Dibbell, author of 1993’s “A Rape in Cyberspace,” described in a 2016 interview with Dale Eisinger that trolling as a problem never really goes away. Dibbell noted that, thanks to years of studies of trolling, today “everyone knows that trolls aren’t loners. They have their own communities, they have their own cultures, they have their own weird set of ethics.” But, he points out, social networking today allows users a different kind of agency to cultivate their own media presence: “People get to say: this is my Facebook thread. I get to decide what’s in it.”

Herring et al. (2002) provided an impetus for our study when they called for further analysis of the role of “technical tools that give participants greater control over the online environment” in response to trolling (p. 382). What our study reveals is that such tools give advocates greater agency (i.e., they can more easily curate their social networks to remove trolling and harassment) but at the same time this control can make it appear that trolling online doesn’t happen as often as we may think, or that it doesn’t happen disproportionately to women. For example, Westley and McCoy engaged in constant curation of their own social networks, and addressed trolling behaviors or harassment through erasure. The

advantage is that they are able to make harassment invisible, though its effects are still felt; however, the disadvantage is that it can appear to an unaware audience that everything is fine when it is not. That is, engaging in digital advocacy and activism opens women up to digital harassment, and pointing out the toxic effects of the manosphere is important. Otherwise, it can appear that women do not face constant digital harassment simply for engaging in online spaces or for speaking out. However, at the same time, the constant harassment and curation/erasure of said harassment is itself a form of emotional labor—again, an activity that is often devalued and overtly feminized.

However, this erasure of digital harassment has the potential to contribute to the development of filter bubbles, described by Pariser (2011) as “unique universe[s] of information for each of us . . . which fundamentally alter the ways we encounter information” (p. 9). Placed in a political context, Pariser explained the existence of filter bubbles as contributing to many people’s surprise when a political candidate who opposes their beliefs is elected; when we are surrounded in online spaces by those who share our political, social, and cultural perspectives, we run the risk of allowing ourselves to believe that these beliefs are not widely held. Thus, when women remove evidence of trolling, particularly instances of gendertrolling, they also limit the exposure of those in their social networks, such as men, who may not experience the same type of harassment and, as such, may not understand the extent to which many women face gender-based harassment online. Again, the need for a clear definition of trolling is evident; dismissing contrary views as trolling, whether erasing the trolling or simply discounting the troll’s views as invalid/insincere, also contributes to the development of filter bubbles.

Particularly for advocates working within digital spaces with populations that function as counter-publics, however, the erasure of trolling is often a vital component of their advocacy work. Many women veterans, particularly those who have experienced MST, are disconnected from resources and are unsure of where to turn for support. Social networking spaces provide safe spaces for women veterans to organize, and advocates often feel responsible for maintaining the safety of these spaces for their participants. Thus, advocates such as McCoy and Westley

engage in the curation of their social networking profiles in part to protect the members of their network from encountering harassment.

Finally, our study is limited in that we observed a small sample of women military advocates, and further research could expand this initial set of observations by drawing from a larger pool of digital activists who use social networking tools. Also, while the social networking technologies we analyze here—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube—are some of the more popular platforms at the time of this writing (at least in the United States), they are not the only CMCs available for advocacy work, and so analyses of less well-known, niche platforms would add further complexity and depth to our exploratory discussions of digital advocacy and social networking here. We have here focused on women engaging in digital activism and advocacy, and given the literature on digital harassment and its impact on women, this focus is apt; however, we would urge continued research to explore what, if any, differences might emerge when male advocates engage in social networking use to promote advocacy and activism for military women. ■

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Brennan is the founder of *The War Horse*, a nonpartisan online news source and data repository dedicated to providing a “home for responsible reporting on and conversation about the war, with the explicit intent of foster[ing] understanding.”
- <sup>2</sup> Additionally, as van der Nagel and Frith (2015) pointed out, “Anonymity and pseudonymity are not neutral states”—that is, both can be beneficial for CMC users, and as the authors point out, while online articles often “link anonymity and pseudonymity with criminality and chaos,” this linkage is no fait accompli.
- <sup>3</sup> However, this simply could be the result of a lack of knowledge about how to change the date when adding a school or workplace affiliation; this is a common error when users unfamiliar with the site begin adding details to their profile.

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