

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

24 August 2012, 11.29am AEST

Misogynists and nut jobs: Gillard stares down blogosphere

AUTHOR



Jenna Price

Senior lecturer at University of Technology, Sydney

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Jenna Price is a feminist, journalist and academic at the University of Technology, Sydney.



Julia Gillard yesterday blasted those on the internet for recycling rumours about her, part of what she calls a sexist campaign. AAP Image/Lukas Coch

Prime minister Julia Gillard took aim yesterday at the “misogynists” and “nut jobs” on the internet posting about her conduct 17 years ago while working as an industrial lawyer.

The Prime Minister said claims in *The Australian* that she had been involved in setting up a questionable trust fund while at Slater & Gordon (since retracted) had been fuelled by internet rumours. She then gave an **hour long press conference** to confront the issue.

Ms Gillard said the claims aired in *The Australian* were “false and highly defamatory”, but they came from a “sexist smear campaign” that started on the internet, and should have been ignored by the mainstream media.

Putting aside the claims and counter-claims around her conduct, what Gillard rightly points to is a new kind of news cycle –

the recycling of unchecked material on the internet which then feeds into the mainstream media and back again on an endless loop.

This loop has no end in sight, as Gillard said, "In terms of people who continue to circulate these claims, will the misogynists and the nut jobs on the internet continue to circulate them? Yes, they will."

But what role does misogyny and sexism play in this – and what, if anything, can be done about it?

Misogyny and the internet

Martha Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Distinguished Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, has spent a lot of time examining the boundaries of morality and decency. Lately, she's examined communication on the internet.

When asked last night about Gillard's assertion, Nussbaum said the Prime Minister was absolutely accurate about those who post on the internet: "She is entirely correct and [**our book**] discusses many examples of internet misogyny," she said.

The word "nutjob", sadly, is not a word with which too many Chicagoans are familiar. But take the ethics professor's story of one particular website: "[It] existed only to defame named female law students by writing pornographic stories about them, and which caused serious employment problems for them, was protected from all liability. Only the posters were liable, and they were anonymous."

We don't have the same – legal – problem in Australia. After all, courts have used mechanisms to make internet hosts cough up the IP addresses of those who post. But professor of journalism at Bond University and author of **Blogging and Tweeting without Getting Sued**, Mark Pearson says it's rare. "Thousands of messages are unactioned every day." And embedded in those thousands – thousands - of messages is unadorned hatred of women.

Tory Maguire, editor of The Punch, remembers the night of the Rudd spill. Maguire, a meticulous comment moderator, was up late into the night, sifting through the river of posts that were coming in. "The comments coming in, the torrents of misogyny, were quite shocking to me," she says.

Easy sexism

For me, this misogyny is not new. I've always had hate mail. Even the kind where the author is so keen to preserve their anonymity they've cut out individual letters and then pasted them on to sheets of paper. I've had those, threatening to kill me and my kids.

But the effort of putting together anonymous origami hate mail is great, it takes time and so there was never much of it.

These days though, the comments flood my email inbox, my Facebook messages, my Twitter feed. It can be just as anonymous and takes far less effort.

A column I wrote about the obscene funding of Olympic athletes had this response in my Facebook inbox from someone called James "Bolo" Gurr: "All you achieved in your article is making yourself come across an angry, bitter and ignorant woman who either had no dreams, or never came close to achieving them ... for people as ignorant as yourself, here is your cut: a middle finger from, I can almost guarantee, every athlete who dared to be great. Throw in a laugh at [your] profile picture, I can see why you are angry at the world."

Policing piled on hatred

Greg Jericho, blogger and author, has documented internet misogyny in his new book **The Rise of the Fifth Estate** and he even has a word for what happens. For example, when Mia Freeman **couldn't gear herself up** to thoroughly endorse Cadell Evans's victory in the Tour de France, she was the victim of what Jericho calls a "pile on". Freeman **said** she was "called every name you can think of - bitch, dog, skank, mole, idiot, loser, cow, slut".

The comment explosion might, he says, just be a response to what he describes as political correctness – what men can

no longer say in public, they say anonymously on the internet. Jericho, of course, is not endorsing it, just observing it.

So what can be done about this “piled on” anger and sexism?

There’s no question, it’s hard to police – if policing is what we want. But maybe the internet needs the kinds of policing we expect in the rest of our civil society.

Sometimes it’s up to individual bloggers. William Bowe, wrangler of Poll Bludger, says he won’t stand for misogynist posts and moderates assiduously. He won’t allow the use of the word “bitch” – but as a general proposition, he’s all for free speech. “It’s up to the marketplace of ideas,” he says.

Internet misogyny or just misogyny?

Gillard’s comments come in a week where the Chief of the Defence Force, David Hurley, has **acknowledged** he and other senior military officers will have to make serious changes to the way our armed services operate, in order to attract and make it safer for women to serve. And Gillard’s comments come just two weeks after the Financial Services Institute of Australia released figures showing it only takes a tiny percentage of women in management positions for men in those organisations to think women have equal representation.

Australian writer Eva Cox says it’s not internet misogyny. It’s just misogyny. Ann Curthoys, ARC Professorial Fellow at the University of Sydney agrees. She says the anonymity of the internet just allows misogyny to be expressed more freely.

Is anonymity the new marketplace?

That’s where Michael Sandel, professor of government at Harvard University’s new book, **What Money Can’t Buy**, might offer some explanation. At the end of his discursive analysis on how we might protect moral and civic goods, he concludes: “Markets leave their mark.”





And in this market, in this marketplace, the mark we leave on women is that they are ugly and old; criminals, sluts and whores.

REPUBLISH THIS ARTICLE



We believe in the free flow of information. We use a **Creative Commons** license, so you can republish our articles for free, online or in print.

SHARE

 Email	 Twitter
 Facebook	 LinkedIn

Like us on Facebook

 Follow us on Twitter

 Sign up to our free daily newsletter



Your email address

Australia