

Chapter 11. Toward a Feminist Ethic of Self-Care and Protection When Researching Digital Aggression

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Land Acknowledgment. The land on which this chapter was written is the traditional territory the Bodéwadmikiawen (Potawatomi), Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Miami, Očeti Šakówiŋ (Sioux), Peoria, Sauk, and Meskwaki Tribal nations. We must not only learn and understand the history of their genocide and forced removal from these lands, but we must also resist the erasure of their knowledges and cultures.

Content warning. Due to the malicious nature of digital aggression, readers should be prepared to encounter narratives about and references to sexism and misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and racism, with specific references to violent actions such as death and murder, bodily injury, harm, and assault (particularly to women's (cis and trans) bodies), stalking, doxing, and swatting.

Digital aggression has become a growing focus in digital rhetorics. L. Cagle recently analyzed “strangershots”—or nonconsensual photos taken of strangers and posted online—as violations of privacy. Kaitlin Clinnin and Katie Manthey acknowledge the pervasiveness of vitriolic comments and posit a technofeminist framework for approaching them. Jessica Reyman and I edited a collection of fourteen chapters that addressed a range of topics in digital aggression studies, including design and policy, academic labor, video games, and pedagogy, among others. I have also previously published a study on 4chan and how anonymous spaces develop uncritical memetic behaviors and influence users, as well as one on how woman YouTubers must develop tactics for addressing aggression in their comments sections. This is a small sampling of the digital rhetoric scholarship beginning to address the many facets of digital aggression, and they show that new approaches are required to meet the unique challenges of studying hostile spaces.

Bridget Gelms points to a large issue in this burgeoning subfield: we often foreground participant care and protection because, traditionally, researchers are not put in precarious positions by their research. Similarly, when I studied 4chan's /b/ board¹ in 2015 for my own dissertation, not only was I ill-equipped for the

1. 4chan is a multi-forum imageboard known widely as “the asshole of the internet.” While this is true, it's also overly simplistic. There is no central registration (all users are known as “anonymous”) and moderation is inconsistent. As a result, there is little accountability for the content posted there, which results in a unique and confusing blend of

mental exhaustion and dispirit I would experience while collecting data from a digital space that at its very core sees me—a queer, (at the time) femme-presenting, and feminist academic researcher—as “subhuman,” but I was also unprepared for what would happen when the community I studied found my work post-publication. I argue that it is an ethical obligation for us to protect ourselves as researchers and humans, and so in this chapter I use my experiences studying aggression coupled with others to posit a feminist ethic of self-care and protection that researchers can incorporate into their methods and methodologies when building a research plan involving digital aggression.

The Need for A Feminist Ethic of Self-Care and Protection

An ethic is a set of guiding principles for action, and as such I see this ethic as a framework that can help researchers begin to conceptualize and prepare for the risks and dangers they may face as they begin a research project on digital aggression. I want to begin this section with a series of stories and experiences that demonstrate why a feminist ethic of self-care and protection is necessary to build early in a research plan and to refer to often throughout a research trajectory.

Researching Digital Aggression: The Need for a Feminist Ethic of Self-Care

I researched 4chan’s /b/ board in 2015 for my dissertation on rhetoric and aggression in memes and digital spaces.² I had spent quite a bit of time on 4chan in my youth, but I’d either forgotten how bad it could be or it had gotten worse over the decade or so since I’d last visited. Alongside general shitposting,³ 4chan is also renowned for its attempts to shock and offend, which it accomplishes through posts like gore porn, or images and videos of people dying or being killed, being beaten, or suffering extreme bodily injuries. As you can imagine, encountering this kind of content could be quite horrifying. As the study went on, I got better at recognizing and avoiding it, but even still, encountering it was an inevitable part of the study.

4chan also notoriously presents itself as anti-woman and often anti-LGBTQ+.⁴

wholesome, disturbing, and outright aggressive content. While most of the boards follow a set theme, /b/, or Random, is one of the most popular boards, known as a space where anything goes, usually without repercussion.

2. Here’s the thing. This book is open access, which means basically anyone with a computer and an internet connection can find and read it. Anons, have fun reading through to make fun of my SJW bullshit and/or call me a feminazi/femoid.

3. Posting content that has no real meaning or point. It is often meant to be funny and ironic but can sometimes be used as a trolling tactic to derail conversations.

4. As well as racist, but I’m white so, while such content is problematic and toxic, it does not directly challenge my own identity in the same way anti-woman and an-

If a woman wants to self-identify in the forum, she's met with the phrase "tits or gtfo," which translates to "show your breasts to prove that you're a woman or leave the site." Posts about women are full of vitriol and misogynistic language. Pornographic images, including creepshots,⁵ revenge porn,⁶ and other nonconsensual images show up frequently. Sometimes images of women who have been beaten appear, and I have seen video of a trans woman violently attacked outside of a convenience store. Anons—a shortened version of Anonymous by which users on the site identify themselves—categorically reject many LGBTQ+ identity markers, particularly trans*.⁷ Additionally, anons regularly use the terms "f*ggot" and the n-word to refer to anyone, regardless of sexual orientation or race, and regularly disparage those who identify as either, let alone both. Although 4chan claims that their content is ironic,⁸ as Ryan Milner, Whitney Phillips, and I have each pointed out, recirculating hateful content even in the service of ironic critique—which is not what 4chan is doing—is harmful for normalizing aggressive and marginalizing discourses.

I knew all this going in, but after a few weeks of spending time in this space, I was exhausted and dispirited. I lost sleep, and relationships with my loved ones became strained. This was a space that seemed—even if only ostensibly ironically—to be against the very notion that I should be treated as a human, let alone that I should be allowed to research them.

I'm not the only researcher of hostile spaces who has felt this way. Leigh Gruwel and Bridget Gelms⁹ are two women-identified scholars of digital rhetoric

ti-LGBTQ+ content does.

5. Images taken of women's bodies without their knowledge or consent.

6. Images of nude or mostly nude women who likely consented to the photo but not to its mass circulation in a public space.

7. Defined broadly to include those whose gender identity does not match that which they were assigned at birth, including but not limited to nonbinary, genderqueer, two-spirit, and agender. The irony with this rejection is that many on the board are queer and/or attracted to trans women (sometimes called "traps"). The vitriol directed at these identities appears to be grounded in a weird form of self-hatred that manifests as hate for the larger targeted group. At one point while I was studying 4chan, I observed anons trying to get #transage trending on Twitter, a trolling operation meant to devalue trans* movements by associating them with pedophilia (the core argument was based in a slippery slope fallacy that if someone could identify as another gender, then someone could also identify as another age, meaning an adult should be able to legally have sex with someone underage because they identify as the same age). I also discuss the treatment of trans* identities on 4chan in more detail in "Digital Social Media and Aggression: Memetic Rhetoric on 4chan's /b/ Board."

8. The tagline under the /b/ banner says "The stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood. Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact," but let's not pretend like that isn't a huge copout for not taking responsibility for what they post.

9. Thank you to Leigh and Bridget for reviewing this piece and helping me contextualize their work accurately and productively.

and online aggression. Gruwell highlights the complications of enacting feminist research values of reflexivity, reciprocity, and transparency on the toxic web. She summarizes her experiences researching these spaces:

I was surprised by—and thus unprepared for—the intense emotional reactions I experienced after spending hours at a time sorting through hateful, violent, misogynistic language. The process of researching online harassment not only angered me, but made me feel tired and defeated. At its worst, the harassment I was researching got to my core, making me question the value of my worth as a woman and researcher. Most research is draining in one respect or another, but there was something especially taxing about intentionally reading content meant to silence women like me—feminists committed to identifying and resisting sexism, racism, and homophobia online. (Gruwell, “Feminist Research” 92)

In her dissertation on the volatile visibility of women online, Gelms explains, “in conducting inquiry into online harassment, a researcher is likely to expose herself to shocking, depressing, and triggering stories or language” (*Volatile Visibility* 43). She acknowledges that doing research in these spaces can have detrimental effects on researchers, particularly those who are women-identified. In later work, Gelms discusses the effects of seeing digital aggression: “Witnessing or knowing about online harassment can be traumatizing, fear-inducing, and silencing” (“Volatile Visibility” 191). Here she is referring to everyday women-identified users, demonstrating that intentionally observing aggressive content on a regular basis as part of a research study can be detrimental to researchers.

Publishing About Digital Aggression: The Need for an Ethic of Protection

In November 2017—three months after “Digital Social Media and Aggression” was published—I received an email from an anonymous burner account letting me know that my article was being discussed on /sci/, a less active forum on 4chan. I immediately found the thread—which featured a screencap of the abstract—and read it, noticing that the anonymous emailer had even boasted about contacting me. I had intentionally chosen *Computers and Composition* as a venue for my article because it was behind a paywall, and I knew it would be more difficult for aggressors to find. But a well-meaning colleague at another university assigned my article in his graduate digital rhetoric course and linked the PDF on his publicly accessible course website. Once /sci/ got their hands on the abstract, they attempted to discredit it¹⁰ and insult me,¹¹ despite clearly not having read the

10. Ironically proving my article’s argument right in the process.

11. Although at one point an anon called me “basically the feminist final boss,” and I

whole piece.¹² At one point someone talked about posting it to /b/, a much more active hub of 4chan and the space I had studied; another poster briefly mentioned doxing me.¹³ It was a tense few days before the thread fell inactive and slipped from the main board.

A few years later, Jessica Reyman and I negotiated with Routledge to be able to release three chapters of *Digital Ethics: Rhetoric and Responsibility in Online Aggression* as open access on a professional website. But this also put us in a difficult position to choose which chapters we would post. We wanted to be able to represent the awesome feminist work some of our authors did but doing so would put some authors—mostly women-identified—at risk for being targeted by the communities that they studied. We ultimately decided on a chapter written by two white men and another written by two white men and a woman, although the latter is a bit precarious because it also talks about Milo Yiannopoulos, a former Breitbart writer and alt-righter with a near cult-like following online (although it has dwindled greatly since he was banned from Twitter). As of this writing, the book has been out for just over a year, and to my knowledge none of the authors have yet seen negative repercussions from the communities or publics that they studied. This could be due to our post-publication considerations, the fact that the book is insular to specific academic communities and hasn't been found by aggressors, something else, or some combination of factors.

In their chapters in *Digital Ethics*, Gruwell and Gelms document the ways their work on digital aggression has made them targets. Gruwell faced backlash after her article on Wikipedia was published and then featured on a Twitter account called @RealPeerReview, which incorrectly summarized her article as “Wikipedia is anti-feminist because its editorial policy doesn't allow you to just make things up” (Gruwell, “Feminist Research” 97). She explains, “While most young scholars might be pleased to find their research featured in such a visible platform, it was more than a bit shocking to see my work spotlighted in what was clearly meant to be a derogatory way” (Gruwell, “Feminist Research” 97). Comments on the tweet called her names, insulted her, and even made thinly veiled threats of violence and death.

When Gelms publicized her research survey on Twitter, she received odd emails and was added to Twitter lists meant to track (and presumably harass) her. In her dissertation she discusses the anxiety and insomnia she experienced after receiving upwards of 30 notifications when she logged into her account: “Each

consider this a great accolade.

12. A few claimed to, but their summaries of the article were so off the mark that it was hard to believe that they had read it. As for the rest—if you're going to insult my work, at least try to read it.

13. Making someone's private information—potentially including but not limited to legal name, address, phone number, workplace, family members' names, and so on—public to threaten and intimidate them.

time this happened, I experienced a twinge of nervousness that when I would click on my notifications, I would find that I been [sic] doxxed. Part of me was simply waiting for it to happen” (Gelms, *Volatile Visibility* 41). She details her legitimate fear that someone could show up at her house, or that she could be swatted:¹⁴

Thinking about all of the women I read about or met who had been swatted or had men show up at their houses in the middle of the night to threaten or assault them, I popped out of bed to triple check that all of my doors were locked. I went to the sliding glass door off of my dining room, confirmed that it was indeed locked, and idled there staring out into the darkness of my backyard. I imagined what it might look like if a group of law enforcement officers, dressed in all black and carrying rifles, crept across my property in the night on a phony tip that I was, maybe, a bombmaker. (Gelms, *Volatile Visibility* 42)

Gelms also documents the unwanted attention she received on Twitter about her survey, including sock puppet accounts¹⁵ that were following only her and angry tirades about the value (or, in their opinion, lack thereof) of her research.

Whose Research Is Targeted?

These narratives provide a brief snapshot of a few experiences of what researching and publishing about hostile digital spaces can look like, as well as what some other researchers have reported in their scholarship. Everyone is undoubtedly different, but there is a key similarity: most of us who research digital aggression AND have felt mentally, emotionally, spiritually drained and dispirited by it AND have experienced backlash for our research and publications have been women-identified/interpreted¹⁶ and women-identified/interpreted people of color. This isn't to say that men-identified/interpreted researchers don't also receive harassment for their work on digital aggression—they do, but not to the same extent (Chemaly). Part of this disparity could come from volume: publications and

14. Calling in to the police to report a false offense worthy of a SWAT response. The danger from this tactic comes when authorities come to your door thinking that you are armed and could potentially mistake a phone or TV remote for a gun or other weapon.

15. Fake accounts created to deceive, often used specifically for aggressive—and in Gelms's case, surveillance—purposes.

16. I am being intentional here in my use of both “identified” and “interpreted.” I do not personally know every author that has been cited in digital aggression studies, and so I cannot presume everyone's gender identification. But I use “interpreted” to indicate that I recognize that there are nonbinary researchers whose names code feminine or masculine, which impacts how aggressors interpret their gender and thus how they devise their responses.

scholarship on digital aggression seem to be produced in higher volume from woman-identified/interpreted authors.

I created a list of 51 authors who have written about digital aggression in the last seven years; I have decided not to include this list here because doing so would be unnecessarily exposing authors doing this kind of work. The list is non-exhaustive, but I generated it from authors that were published in the *Digital Ethics* collection, others who recently published digital aggression research in the field, and the scholars those pieces and my own research have cited. As such, they tend to be situated in the humanities.¹⁷ I classified the names of the authors as woman identified/interpreted, man identified/interpreted, or nonbinary from the perspective of an aggressor attempting to determine their gender since our genders are often central in their discussions about our work:

- Woman identified/interpreted names: 32
- Man identified/interpreted names: 18
- Nonbinary names: 1

Of the woman identified/interpreted names, five have multiple publications on the topic of digital aggression; of the man identified/interpreted names, two do. Further, many of the woman identified/interpreted authors write about aggression that they have faced as researchers; eight of them even use titles directly quoting the vitriol they have received. None of the man identified/interpreted authors address aggression from the perspective of being targets themselves, although some talk about gendered aggression generally.

When talking about researching digital aggression with a feminist ethic of self-care and protection, it is crucial to recognize that all researchers are impacted differently along the axes of their intersecting identities. The list I compiled here focuses on gender presentation through the lens of an aggressor, but many of these authors are also white, which also affords certain levels of power, privilege, and protection. A queer woman of color researcher has the potential to face different challenges to her mental health when researching hostile spaces than a straight white disabled woman; although their identities intersect at their gender, they will each receive and respond differently to hostilities directed toward their sexuality, race, and disability. Likewise, when these same researchers publish their work, depending on the spaces they have studied, they could both be opening themselves up for backlash—and for different reasons based in their different identities—than a straight white man might face, although he may also face some retaliation. Some researchers will face different challenges than others, but it remains crucial that we develop a feminist ethic of self-care and protection early in the research process. This ethic has two distinct parts (self-care and

17. But a quick glance at this kind of research in other fields reveals an even wider gender gap; and if I expand this list beyond the past seven years, the quantitative gap gets wider still.

protection) that operate independently of each other but also work together to safeguard the researcher.

A Feminist Ethic of Self-Care

Since the early 1980s, feminist researchers have been theorizing feminist care ethics (Gilligan; Noddings), positing care as an ethical virtue for a just society. Many have written about what this “care” looks like, complicating it from the perspectives of gender, race, class, and disability (Raghuram), showing that it is important to ask who cares for others, who is expected to care for them, who is cared for, who is excluded from care, and what does it mean to care/be cared for? These discussions hinge on relationality to the world around, and while many peripherally mention the importance of self in the larger schema of care and others, few have conceptualized what self-care can really mean, particularly in a professional or academic context.

Teresa Lloro-Bidard and Keri Semenko—environmental education teachers—discuss the importance of a feminist ethic of self-care when teaching dark and heavy topics like climate change. They focus on women, who they point out often “disproportionately bear the emotional costs of teaching” (22). I argue that a feminist ethic of self-care is pressing for researchers of all genders. While women, BIPOC, disabled, and LGBTQ+ researchers have a higher likelihood of encountering aggressive content aimed specifically at their identities, men are also not immune to these discourses; in fact, some of these discourses surrounding gender define certain kinds of masculinities as inferior or superior, which is potentially damaging. While self-care has often been conceptualized as feminine, radical and political self-care by all genders is necessary for dismantling and pushing back against neoliberal institutions that value our productivity over our wellbeing.

Christine Eriksen—a geographer—writes about the need for self-care to be incorporated into researcher ethics training. She regularly studies traumatic events such as bushfires in Australia and notes that she has experienced “vicarious traumatization” as a result of her “exposure to the emotionally and politically charged narratives of disaster survivors” (274). Eriksen notes that part of this vicarious traumatization results from feelings of helplessness and an inability to tangibly help survivors. It strikes me that because digital aggression researchers both bear witness to others’ trauma and view aggressive content regularly, they may also experience trauma, vicarious or otherwise.¹⁸ Eriksen calls for institu-

18. Little has been written about trauma in online harassment and digital aggression, but Gelms opens up in a recent article about how long after she defended her dissertation, “the trauma of the experience still lingers... despite it being four years later” (“Social Media Research” 2). She also refers to “the lasting impact [digital aggression] has on those who experience its most severe forms” (“Social Media Research” 5). This article documents many moments of panic and anxiety that could have turned to trauma.

tional support in self-care training, but in lieu of such guidance, researchers must consciously develop their own self-care regimes.

Importantly, when I talk about self-care, I am not referring to what I like to call “white lady self-care,” which is often grounded in capitalism and privilege. Countless blogs, articles, and thinkpieces talk about self-care as spa days, pedicures, shopping sprees, and other forms of “treating yourself.” While I’m sure we could all use some indulgence now and again, not everyone has the resources for this kind of self-care; not all of us have the money to pay for it or the time to spend hours on it. Audre Lorde said that “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (228). That is, the very nature of caring for oneself is an active and intentional pushing back against capitalist ideals about the functions of our bodies and minds in a capitalist society. Andre Spicer explains that many marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ+, women, and BIPOC communities, took up this idea as “a way of preserving yourself in a world that was hostile to your identity, your community and your way of life,” but modern self-care has made its way to mass market spaces and is largely no longer the act of “political warfare” Lorde had originally intended. Resources such as PEN America’s “Online Harassment Manual” (which has a section dedicated to self-care) and Heartmob’s “Self Care for People Experiencing Harassment” provide some pertinent advice for enacting self-care while experiencing digital aggression. They acknowledge that go-to “self-care buzzwords [... like] eat healthy! Medi[t]ate! Take a relaxing bath!” are largely unhelpful to most (Heartmob), although ensuring that we take time to enjoy things like “head[ing] into nature,” “mak[ing]” your bed, and “turn[ing] off your phone” are also little acts of self-care that we can engage in when experiencing harassment¹⁹ (PEN).

However, these guides are largely aimed at the everyday person, and not researchers specifically, so it is crucial to define what we mean by self-care in the context of completing research. When I talk about an ethic of self-care, I mean deliberate acts of caring for ourselves as whole beings, as resisting institutional ideologies of productivity and our worth as scholars and teachers. To this end, an ethic of self-care must also always be feminist; that is, it must always prioritize humans and health over product and production. Sara Ahmed says, “in directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting care away from its proper objects” (np). If the “proper objects” are our research projects, then self-care is directing our energy, time, and attention away from them, even if only for a brief time. This also means that self-care will look differently for everyone. It can mean stepping away from research to spend time with our families or going for a run to clear our heads and prioritize our physical health. Or it can mean none of those things. It’s genuinely up to each of us what “self-care” looks like; we all come to this research with our own positionalities and our own physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

19. And honestly, whenever we’re feeling overwhelmed by life in general.

The way I conceptualize it currently, a feminist ethic of self-care for digital aggression research does five things:

1. *It urges researchers to be mindful of their mental and physical health while researching.* The stories highlighted above only represent a small fraction of researchers' experiences studying aggression, and there are certainly more. Eriksen also talks about the psychosomatic effects of her vicarious trauma, noting that without proper outlets her mental turmoil turned into physical pain. It is crucial that researchers check in with ourselves on a regular basis and honestly assess our mental health.
2. *It reminds researchers to step back and take a break when they feel they need to.* As part of these regular mental health check-ins, it is crucial to recognize when we need to step away for a moment. When we recognize that our research is having a negative impact on us, taking a break early and recuperating rather than letting that negativity build is going to help us in the long run. Rather than burning out and being forced to take a break, we can make a conscious effort to keep ourselves healthy.
3. *It encourages researchers to build a flexible research timeline that we can adapt as needed throughout the process.* Because we may need to take these breaks, and because there is no way of knowing how many or for how long, it is crucial that we build flexible timelines that will allow us to do so. We must understand that a digital aggression research project has the potential to take longer than other kinds of projects and create realistic research schedules that will allow us to take the breaks we need. Consider building them into the trajectory intentionally.
4. *It is inherently anti-capitalist and anti-institutional.* Prioritizing our health and safety over productivity means resisting institutional expectations to complete our work by certain milestones. But obviously, we don't live in a world where this is always possible. The tenure clock doesn't stop because our research is difficult; we still have deadlines and productivity quotas to meet. I also recognize the inherent privilege I hold when I say, "take a break when you need to," because some researchers will not have the luxury of prioritizing their health over their productivity every time they need to; for some, powering through to get a job and/or meet tenure requirements is an act of self-care because they need job security and/or a salary raise.
5. *It urges us researchers to create community and belonging with others.* Both in addition to and in lieu of taking breaks, it is crucial for researchers studying digital aggression to talk to each other. This can be a challenge since it is often difficult to talk about our own mental health with others, especially if we do not know them well. But there are a lot of us who have experience and are happy to listen and talk. By the same token, though, these conversations are also emotional labor for both parties, and some of us may not be able to always perform it, and that should be honored as well.

These five aspects of a feminist ethic of self-care are incomplete, and perhaps can never be fully completed since they must be able to adapt to individual needs. They are meant to guide researchers toward developing tactics for protecting their mental health while researching. Importantly, I'm only talking about digital aggression researchers here, but as Eriksen's narrative demonstrates, a feminist ethic of self-care could be useful for a variety of disciplines, fields, and research topics, not only digital aggression research; most researchers experience some level of mental strain and fatigue during the research process, and this ethic could help alleviate some of that.

An Ethic of Protection

Earlier, I highlighted examples of women-identified/interpreted scholars—myself included²⁰—who received and/or feared backlash for our research post-publication and the considerations my co-editor and I took to protect the authors in *Digital Ethics*. These instances demonstrate what Bridget Gelms calls “volatile visibility,” when women's—especially women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities—very existence in digital spaces makes them more likely to receive digital attacks. As those of us who exist at the intersections of these identities continue to publish on aggressive communities, we will continue to make ourselves more visible. And, as Leigh Gruwell stated during a roundtable on digital aggression hosted by the CFSHRC in December 2020, and as her narrative above shows, feminist scholars who study digital spaces are also at risk by virtue of being both visible and feminist. Importantly, because of the connectedness of our digital world, when we become more visible, our families and friends often also become more visible, and there have been records of aggressors targeting them for hurtful and hateful messages.²¹ So, considering this volatile visibility, protecting ourselves as researchers and our family and friends is an ethical obligation.

As I have begun to conceptualize it, an ethic of protection asks us to do six things:

1. *Carefully consider where we publish our work.* When digital aggression researchers publish, we need to think several steps ahead and deeply consid-

20. It is perhaps important to note that while I identified as a woman while doing and publishing the research mentioned in this article, I have since come out as trans nonbinary. However, my name continues to code as “woman” for people who do not know that about me.

21. This was demonstrated clearly after the Charlottesville riots in 2018 when ostensible do-gooders took to social media to identify the rioters. While many lost their jobs and reported being ostracized by their communities, an unintended effect was people sending harmful messages to the rioters' friends and family members, many of whom were not involved and did not condone their actions (Ellis; Miller)

er the rhetorical velocity of our work. Who will have access to it? How and where can it be shared? What are some unintended audiences who could encounter it? With the rise of open access, some scholars are actively seeking to publish in spaces where the public could have easy access to their work, but I am conflicted. If I had published my 4chan article in one of our field's open access journals such as *enculturation* or *Kairos*, would this added visibility have made me more vulnerable to attack? Almost certainly. I chose instead to publish behind a paywall, which unfortunately also limits public consumption of knowledge. And I am taking a measured risk by publishing this chapter in this open access collection, but I hope its visibility will afford more benefit than harm.

2. *Consider adding disclaimers.* This suggestion goes beyond publication to venues like conferences as well. With the rise of live tweeting, some researchers have opened by asking viewers to avoid certain phrases or words, or to even refrain from tweeting altogether, to help them avoid detection from the communities they research. /sci/ found my article on 4chan because it was posted to a public course website, so perhaps disclaimers like these on published work could also be warranted. By the same token, if we find ourselves live tweeting during a talk where the author has asked us to avoid certain words, or if we are distributing course materials for students where the author has asked that we not share it publicly, we should heed the disclaimers.
3. *Consider our fellow researchers in your citation practices.* Importantly, when thinking about protection, it is crucial that we think about ourselves as a network of digital aggression researchers and not just as individuals. When drafting this chapter, I contacted the researchers whose stories I shared above and received permission to quote and cite them. Originally, I was also going to share a third perspective from another researcher, but after talking with them, we decided that citing them in an open access piece could unnecessarily increase their risk. Since the people we cite become more visible through our citation—the volatile visibility Gelms describes—it is necessary to consider our citation practices. Because I was highlighting vulnerable moments from others' work, it seemed necessary to alert them, ask for permission, and allow them to review a draft of the chapter.
4. *Lock down our digital identities.* The threat of doxing looms over many of us who do this work, so we need to make ourselves harder to find on social media and through internet searches. I have begun compiling some resources and tips as part of my involvement with the Digital Aggression Working Group that meets annually at Computers and Writing.²²

22. In "Feminist Research on the Toxic Web," Leigh Gruwell also offers a series of useful questions researchers should ask themselves when developing a feminist research plan for hostile digital spaces.

- Search for your name in white pages databases. These sites often contain public but sensitive information like addresses, phone numbers, and even family members' names. Some of the major sites include Intelius, Radaris, and MyLife, but also check Spokeo, PeopleFinder, Been Verified, White Pages, Pipl, ZabaSearch, TruePeopleSearch, PeekYou, Classmates, FamilyTreeNow, TinEye, and TruthFinder. And don't stop there. Sites like these appear and disappear frequently; they are moving targets. Removing your information can take a long time and involve many emails between you and the site,²³ but it is necessary that you do this.
- Google yourself. Look through as many pages of results as you can and begin the sometimes slow and tedious process of deleting unnecessary items from the internet. This will likely mean contacting various web-hosts to manually have your name removed.
- Call your local Circuit Court to have your public records removed from the internet. Your success will vary by state since some will only remove information for judges, law enforcement, and survivors of domestic violence.
- Lock down the privacy settings on your social media. Set your profile to private and make it unsearchable. Make your posts unshareable. Use a nickname/handle/pseudonym that cannot be traced to your own. Also, consider social media sites that you might not have used in a while but still have active profiles; delete them if you don't need them.
- Set up two-factor authentication on as many accounts as you can. This will make it harder for people to hack into your accounts.
- Set unique passwords for every account. Use a password manager if necessary.
- These websites also have some useful resources:
 - **Crash Override Network** (<http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com/index.html>) CEO Zoe Quinn was the main target of GamerGate in 2014, and she founded this network of experts and survivors to help people experiencing online abuse. Their Resource Center (<http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com/resources.html>) has links that can help researchers prepare for and deal with aggression. Unfortunately, it seems as if the network has not been active since possibly 2016, although the resources are still useful.
 - **FemTechNet** (<http://femtechnet.org>) Their Center for Solutions to Online Violence (<http://femtechnet.org/csov/>) is a wealth of information and resources, with specific links for survivors, educators, and journalists as well as tips for how to lock down your digital identity.

23. I have been in a back-and-forth with MyLife for over a year now. They refuse to take down my information, but other aggression researchers have had better success.

- **Hollaback** (<https://www.ihollaback.org>) This website provides resources for bystander training in workplaces, in the streets, and online. In particular, their online harassment guide (<https://www.ihollaback.org/resources/>) includes ways to engage in counter-speech without escalating, how to protect yourself against harassment, a comprehensive list of supportive organizations (https://iheartmob.org/resources/supportive_organizations) and other important resources.
 - **PEN America** (<https://pen.org/online-harassment/>) This organization has developed an Online Harassment Field Manual (<https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org>) that is one of the best resources I have found. It walks users through how to prepare and respond to aggression and includes information on legal rights and self-care.
5. *Consider notifying our employers.* Our institutional faculty pages are often one of the first results in an internet search for our names. These pages often include our faculty email addresses, phone numbers, and office and classroom locations,²⁴ and they of course easily link to our employers, including department chairs, college deans, and university provosts. I recommend that you alert your employers when publishing something that could receive aggressive backlash. One way that aggressive attacks have been carried out against researchers involves emailing higher ups (in the case of academia, this could be administrators such as the chair, dean, provost, or even the president of the institution) to attempt to smear the target's reputation and/or to make physical threats. At the same time, our administrators have likely never had to deal with anything like this before, and almost certainly do not know how to.²⁵

When my 4chan article began receiving negative attention in Fall 2017 (my first semester in my tenure-track position), I emailed both my department chair and college dean with a list of advice and resources for what

24. Consider asking if this information—including classroom meeting locations and times—can be taken down from public areas of your institution's website. It is likely that it will not be since this information needs to be readily available to students, but it is worth a try.

25. L. D. Burnett's recent piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* documents her experience being attacked by right-wing aggressors. She emailed her dean and briefed them on what to expect, and she copied her president on some of her replies to aggressors. The president emailed an all-faculty listserv about the incident and, in a PR move meant to save face, ultimately blamed Burnett for her own harassment. Burnett made all the right moves, but her college president was ill-prepared to handle the situation. Her experience demonstrates the importance of educating our administrators on the proper ways to respond when something like this happens.

they should do if aggressors began contacting them. Thankfully, I'd had prior conversations with both and alerted them to this possibility shortly after I began teaching there. I include the full text here as a template should anyone want to use it:

Hello Dean ***,

I want to inform you that my article on 4chan is currently the subject of a discussion on a 4chan board that has included potential intent to dox or harass me outside of the forum. We talked at lunch last month about how this is a risk of my kind of scholarship. Nothing has happened yet (and hopefully won't), but I have been preparing for it just in case. Since you are the dean of the college, I want to give you a heads up on what this might entail and how you or the university might be involved. I also sent a version of this to ***, the chair of the English department.

The most likely harassments would be emails to you and/or *** that attempt to discredit me. Ways that this might happen could include crude insults, photoshopped images, or "proof" that my scholarship is invalid.

In rarer cases, aggressors like these have sent threats to departments or universities. Things like "Fire [him/her] or [something bad will happen]." As I said, these instances are much rarer and never has anything come of them.

- Do not respond to any of them. Even one response proves that you are listening and will instigate more.
- Do not believe any of them. Their goal is shock, not truth.
- Tell me what's going on and keep the lines of communication open between me and any other recipients (i.e.: ***, etc).

The American Association of University Professors has a statement on "Targeted Online Harassment" that includes two recommendations, the first of which would be most relevant to this situation (it also has some other general information about faculty intimidation): <https://www.aaup.org/news/targeted-online-harassment-faculty>

Here are some other instances of faculty who have been targets and how universities have handled it (often, quite frankly, very poorly) (many of these examples are also linked to politics, but I would expect the kinds of harassment to be similar if it happens to me):

- <https://academeblog.org/2017/08/29/online-harassment-of-faculty-continues-administrators-capitulate/>
- <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/06/26/professors-are-often-political-lightning-rods-now-are-facing-new-threats->

over-their

- <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/02/aaup-says-colleges-should-defend-professors-targeted-online-harassment-due-political>
- http://www.syracuse.com/su-news/index.ssf/2017/06/syracuse_university_chancellor_defends_prof_after_tweet_sets_off_right-wing_back.html

Statements of solidarity are also common in these situations, usually with the intent of protecting the target's employment:

- <https://academeblog.org/2017/06/19/statement-of-solidarity-with-professor-dana-cloud/>

As of right now, the conversation is tame and has not turned toward any concrete plans (although they also might not necessarily talk about it before doing it), and my hope and suspicion is that it will stay this way. I only send you this email preemptively, but with the hope that it will prove unnecessary.

I am of course willing to meet with you and talk about this at greater length if you would like.

Cheers,

Erika

However, I also want to acknowledge that alerting employers and administrators has the potential to backfire depending on how much you feel you can trust your department to offer protection and support. In my experience, transparency has led to both, but for some, mentioning any kind of risk could put them in a (more) vulnerable position. As such, I recommend that you trust your instincts about when/how/if you will contact employers and/or administrators.

6. *Consider alerting local authorities.* Swatting is also a risk of doing this kind of research, so it might be wise to alert local authorities to the work you do and the potential for this risk. However, two caveats: 1) Getting them to understand can be tricky because many law enforcement agencies do not have the tools or knowledge to deal with digital aggression. 2) Some researchers do not have the privilege of being able to trust law enforcement. Again, trust your instincts.

Conclusion: A Feminist Ethic of Self-Care and Protection in Action

At this point in the chapter, I recognize that I have potentially made researching digital aggression sound overly dangerous or scary. It's not, but researchers do

have to be careful. While this work is exhausting and dispiriting in many ways, I also personally find it rewarding and inspiring. What's more, this work is necessary, and it's especially necessary for those of us with some level of privilege to do it. With the rise of alt-right aggressors in all facets of digital life, alongside the seemingly more innocuous trolls who are aggressive "for the lulz," digital spaces are increasingly fraught for a range of marginalized and multiply marginalized identities. My research often highlights moments of rupture, or moments when a response tactic against aggression can effectively combat it, providing space for more diverse voices (Sparby, "Reading Mean Comments"). Others perform similar research, often looking at how to improve platform design, moderation practices, and other proactive approaches (such as the chapters in the *Digital Ethics* collection). Many of us share one important thing: we are looking at moments of triumph against aggression. While it may be difficult to find those moments, uncovering and bringing them to light, to me, makes this kind of work extremely worthwhile. Gelms argues "rather than simply avoiding online harassment research projects, we should determine what we can do methodologically to acknowledge this difficulty and plan for it" ("Social Media Research"). Gelms, Gruwell, and I have worked to develop some of these methodologies to work toward ensuring researcher safety, although there is much more to be done.

What's more, the kinds of attacks being perpetrated against us for what we research are also carried out against us for what we teach and say on social media. Turning Point USA has a "Professor Watchlist" with the names of professors across institutions who they accuse of discriminating against conservative students on college and university campuses. NPR did an exposé that highlights the stakes of what it means to be a professor doing social justice and antiracist work and includes snapshots of several professor's experiences with backlash from what they published (All Things Considered). These examples and others show what is at stake when it comes to digital aggression against researchers and teachers: academic freedom. It is crucial that we learn how to disrupt aggressive discourses and develop response tactics so that they can become spaces that recognize and honor multitudes of identities, perspectives, and ways of knowing. How can we claim to value diversity and inclusion in university settings when many of us who teach from anti-racist, pro-LGBTQ+, and other social justice approaches are concerned that what we say or do in a classroom could result in being doxed or attacked in digital spaces? Simply put, we can't.

I want to close by offering some suggestions of what a feminist ethic of self-care and protection can look like in action by explaining what I wish I had done when studying and publishing on 4chan. As with anything, the way you develop your own ethical guidelines will likely be unique to you, your situation, and your project.

First, a feminist ethic of self-care recognizes that hostile digital spaces can cause exhaustion and emotional distress. I collected most of my data over the span of three months. At one point, I was spending upwards of seven hours a day,

at least four days a week, on /b/ watching threads and collecting screencaps. That was a lot of time to be in such a hostile space, and it took a toll on me. If I would have known the impact it would have had on my mental health, I would have built a longer timeline for data collection and analysis into my research plan, with deliberate breaks to take care of myself. I also wish I would have been able to connect with others doing this kind of research so we could talk about our experiences, but I didn't know many other people in the field at the time and didn't know how to reach out. Including this framework in a research methodology gives the researcher permission to step away and regroup before continuing research while also encouraging them to reach out to friends, family, and supportive colleagues.

Second, an ethic of protection recognizes that personal safety is paramount. It urges researchers to consciously think about the repercussions of their work post-publication and to lock down their digital identities. I have noticed an uptick in digital aggression researchers asking audiences at conferences to refrain from live-tweeting or using certain words and hashtags, which is something I wish I would have done when I presented my preliminary 4chan research at Cs in 2016. I also wish I would have added a disclaimer asking that my article not be reposted in public or semi-public venues. Obviously, I do not mean to prevent sharing articles with students as course readings or research; I mean not putting them on public course websites or other highly visible spaces, which is where mine was found. Doing either or both things could have lowered my visibility to 4chan. Making these kinds of considerations early in research projects helps the researcher conceptualize the afterlife and publicity of their work and prepare them for any backlash they may face.

Finally, I began the title of this chapter with the word "toward" because this is by no means a comprehensive approach to self-care and protection when studying digital aggression. It is largely based on what has worked for me and what I wish I would have done. While being a queer nonbinary person in some ways puts me in a vulnerable position when I do this research, I also recognize that as a white and able-bodied researcher on the tenure track, I have a lot of privilege that likely shields me from seeing a fuller picture of what a feminist ethic of self-care would look like for others in different positionalities. What does it look like for a disabled researcher? What about a queer Indigenous researcher? Or a non-tenure track Black man researcher? These are important questions to ask moving forward as we all develop our own self-care and protection ethics for our research projects.

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