

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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UNITED STATES

The flame war on women



Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and May First/People Link

Mallory Knodel and Alfredo López
www.apc.org and mayfirst.org

Introduction

The case of Adria Richards

Obsessive public debate over women's bodies, behaviours and careers is nothing new in the US, though increasingly we see them spark in online spaces, ignite with social media and then burn up and out with the help of mass media.

This story is about sexism, racism, techie culture, corporate "hide-from-accountability" amorality and the lack of job protection that jostles the ground under most techies' feet. Adria Richards is a prominent writer and consultant who was in attendance at the 2013 PyCon (Python Conference) on behalf of her employer SendGrid, an email service provider. During a plenary session, Richards overheard what she thought were sexual jokes being made by two men sitting behind her.¹

The jokes sounded offensively sexual to Richards, so she took their picture and posted it on Twitter with a tweet asking that something be done about their offensive behaviour. Conference officials were on the scene immediately. At their request, she pointed the men out to them and the conference organisers quietly asked them, one by one, to come out to the hallway for a chat.

One of the men, who worked for a game marketing company called PlayHaven, was fired soon after the conference. Criticism of Richards exploded online. Richards' website was hacked, the SendGrid website was hacked (allegedly by activists from Anonymous) and Richards received several death threats (one accompanied by a grotesque tweet with a picture of a decapitated woman on a bed).

The surge of public debate about whether or not Richards' "public shaming" of the men was warranted led to an announcement by SendGrid that Richards had herself been fired.

Sarah Milstein, a speaker, writer and consultant specialising in social media, put the reactions into perspective very well:

I find it more than a bit damning of the tech sector and SendGrid that PlayHaven and PyCon, two of the several players in this episode with considerable power, acted with great respectability, and yet Adria – a player without much power – was attacked at a level we don't see often, with intent to harm and silence her.²

Blowback

Of course, no one should have a lost a job as a result of this. Men learning lessons about their sexist behaviour is a central part of the struggle against sexism. But if that man is fired, how is he going to apply the newly learned lesson? And if you fire the woman for offering the lesson, who will give the next lesson?

Beyond the unfortunate response by SendGrid, Adria Richards' story is part of a larger, growing trend in online spaces. Incidents of violence against women online are on the rise in the US for several reasons.³ More women are online than ever before.⁴ Misogynistic hate speech is a deliberate tactic used to exclude women from public spaces, which includes online spaces.

Groups in the US that seek to exclude and silence women in online (and offline) spaces are often self-proclaimed men's rights groups.⁵ Their aims are certainly reactionary and are one manifestation of a severe backlash against women's human rights the world over. These US-based men's rights groups are, like their counterparts overseas, often religiously fundamentalist, though not always. The severity of online trolling has caused several journalists to reduce or stop publishing online.⁶ It is not just trolling. Kathy Sierra, a popular web developer, author and blogger, went into hiding after receiving gruesome threats online. Rape and

1 butyouareagirl.com/14015/forking-and-dongle-jokes-dont-belong-at-tech-conferences

2 www.dogsandshoes.com/2013/03/adria.html

3 www.genderit.org/node/3753

4 www.genderit.org/node/3748

5 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men's_rights_movement

6 www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/05/women-bloggers-hateful-trolling

murder threats force women bloggers and writers to actually leave the internet behind to stay safe. Writer and activist Deanna Zandt said:

I'm a veteran of the misogynist flame wars – I've been the victim of and helped other women through them since I got online in 1994. And now, I'm looking forward to the day when we discuss how to prevent massive flame wars that hound women into hiding. I'm also looking forward to leaving behind this ugly cultural focus on how women can stop themselves from getting viciously attacked, over and over and over.⁷

It is not individual women who must end violence against themselves, but society that must address violence against women at its roots.

Squelching the fire

Nobody is advocating repressive control of expression or speech – in fact, just the opposite. A robust and open discussion of the issues that the Richards case raises is the best, indeed the only effective way of moving towards solving this problem.

But free speech does not mean speech that prevents half the human race from participating. It is not a licence for abuse. It should be protected as it has always been progressively defined: the right to express opinions openly without an expectation of being attacked or bullied out of the conversation and without that attack and bullying being the intent.

Setting rules to any discussion and explaining them clearly as tools of inclusion rather than exclusion is not censorship. On the contrary, it is a way of assuring an open discussion. Any discussion between people either openly or implicitly involves “rules of exchange” – every socialised human being knows that and would support it. That should be the norm on the internet.

Conclusions

Some analysts and activists, many progressive and well intentioned, have sought to position the Richards case as either an isolated incident or a reflection of the way the “code of conduct” or culture of internet events is insensitive to gross sexism. But the case reveals a much deeper problem and difficult challenge.

The internet, structurally, is controlled by men, as evinced by the predominance of men within the ranks of technologists, server administrators and

software developers – the communities that “form” internet culture, use and practice. The issue is brought into relief by a question: Why are women such a minority within these populations in the US (a country where anti-sexist struggles have been relatively successful in affecting popular culture)?

Or, the connected and possibly more important issue: How does this absence of women affect the quality of the internet and its various components (including its software)? In fact, what happened to Adria Richards is not only not an isolated case but, given how male predominance has impacted communications technology, it is unsurprising and epidemic. Technology, in its terminology, development concepts, collaboration procedures and staff structuring, is based largely on male experience, and women who try to participate in this world must demonstrate considerable resolve.

This problem has sparked an impressive number of programmes and efforts designed to bring women into the “driver’s seat” of online technology. The Gnome project, a “server administration” training programme for women activists, co-sponsored by a group of progressive organisations, is one such effort. The People of Color Techie Training Program, sponsored by APC member May First/People Link, also addresses the issue by prioritising the participation of women of colour. Others are planned and will certainly grow.

But there must be a consciousness about this problem and a commitment to resolving it within the progressive movement in the US (and the world) and specifically within the technology community. It must be identified as a problem and its solution must become a priority discussion.

Action steps

- Our action steps are directed to starting that process, but they are only “first steps”.
- Women’s rights groups who are already talking about hate speech online should be brought to the forefront of this discussion. They should also engage women’s rights groups who deal with hate speech and harassment offline.
- People-centred research must be conducted to collect incidents of hate speech and violence against women online in order to support evidence-based policy advocacy at national and international levels.
- The US, in concert with women’s rights groups, should propose a resolution on women’s rights and discrimination to the UN Human Rights

⁷ www.forbes.com/sites/deannazandt/2013/03/22/why-asking-what-adria-richards-could-have-done-differently-is-the-wrong-question

Council that addresses online harassment, as part of a larger movement to recognise technology-related violence against women.

- Civil society must continue to discuss and clarify the lines between online censorship and hate speech and lobby both governments and corporate spaces to put in place policies that protect women while respecting freedom of expression.
- Corporate spaces such as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit, as well as news sites, must implement strong user policies that draw lines for acceptable commentary. Threats of illegal acts such as sexual or physical violence should never be tolerated.
- One major lesson learned from the case of Adria Richards is the enormous value in community-defined codes of conduct, such as the one developed and published by the Python community.⁸ Events, online spaces, participatory groups and campaigns should be encouraged to adopt such codes of conduct, especially in spaces where women are under-represented.
- It is important to shift culture online. This is a slow process, but not one without a well-paved path. Tactics to stop online harassment of women range from listening to women's stories of harassment⁹ to being able to flag abusive content on Twitter.¹⁰ ■

8 github.com/python/pycon-code-of-conduct/blob/master/Attendee%20Procedure%20for%20incident%20handling.md

9 msmagazine.com/blog/2013/01/23/how-some-men-harass-women-online-and-what-other-men-can-do-to-stop-it

10 www.apc.org/en/blog/tweets-women-reflections-challenging-misogyny-onli