Book Review

"Digital Suffragists: Women, the Web, and the Future of Democracy." Marie Tessier, MIT Press, 2021.

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Drawing on many years of experience in journalism and in women's organisations, and most crucially on her two decades moderating the thousands of comments posted to the *New York Times* comment section, Tessier's *Digital Suffragists* presents an important and incredibly relevant case study in epistemic injustice. Her personal experience is supported throughout the text by a rigorous assay of empirical research in this growing area of study. The suppression of women's voices, and their conditioning towards silence, is not a newly discovered phenomenon, and has been a focal point for sociological, philosophical, and psychological research (as well as political activism) for many years. However, Tessier's book places the digital word under the microscope and provides the reader with a detailed exposé of the many factors contributing to women's online silence and its political ramifications, making the case for considering this a failure of democracy.

Most of the population in Western countries use a smartphone, tablet, and/or laptop on a daily basis, relying on the web for a significant proportion of their communication, work, entertainment, and other key aspects of life. In light of this, as Tessier rightly points out, any consideration of whose voices are heard must take into account their online expression and the responses they receive, whether in comment sections, on social media, in by-lines, or other forms of the digital press. Her core argument is that "democracy is failing when half the population is not fully represented in civic debate, and technology companies and public affairs forums have an obligation to fix it" (p. 17). Over the course of seven chapters, Tessier expounds the problem of women's (lack of) equality online, pointing to the root causes, manifestations, and wider socio-political consequences of this gap in representation, as well as highlighting strategies for closing that gap.

The first chapter of the book focuses on one aspect of public participation in current affairs which will be familiar to many: the comments section of news websites. Building her case not only from her own experience at the *New York Times*, but from the results of many recent studies of this phenomenon, Tessier draws the reader's attention to the remarkable discrepancies between men's and women's commenting behaviours. Why is it that men air their opinions online so much more frequently, and on a wider range of issues? What hidden barriers to women's expression exist on supposedly egalitarian forums? Does the possibility of anonymous expression enable open discussion, or does it simply preclude safety from antagonists and 'trolls' now free to reproduce existing power dynamics in the online sphere? Some of these questions are answered in this chapter, whilst others remain open to further analysis, drawing on points raised later in the book.

One issue that Tessier discusses here is the practical difficulty of identifying users' sex from their usernames, which will often contain a traditionally male or female name (such as 'Trevor' or 'Samantha') but may sometimes be entirely

ambiguous; women's presence in comment sections is nonetheless observably diminished in comparison with men's. Reasons for this divergence become clearer in Chapters 2 and 3, when Tessier looks at broader social norms influencing women's hesitancy to speak up on- and off-line, and the linguistically gendered behaviour that can indicate a user's sex despite the purported anonymity offered by an ambiguous or gender-neutral handle. These patterns have been with us from the earliest days of online forums and comment sites, as consideration of early 1990's research demonstrates: "scholars documented the way that men and other high-status members of online groups dominated conversations on academic discussion boards. This was true when using full names and under conditions offering anonymity" (p. 83). In light of these observations, however, it would have been interesting to see more detailed consideration of the different ways in which race and gender are visible, and influence behaviour, in these online contexts. Tessier notes that profile pictures are rare in comment sections, leaving usernames as the greatest indicator of a person's identity, but these are far more likely to indicate sex than race or nationality.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Tessier steps back from the online sphere to give us a broader picture of women as "the silent sex", examining narratives and data pertaining to women's representation and influence in society. The tendency to ignore women's voices in day-to-day social and political contexts is vividly demonstrated through statistics pertaining to women's share of speaking time in school board meetings and town hall meetings, their representation in leading positions in politics and business, their voting patterns and their presence in biotechnology and information technology doctoral programs. It should not surprise us that women's online voices are disproportionately quiet when, as Tessier observes, "In law and culture, women have been silenced for millennia" (p. 72). Representation is not merely a numbers game; Tessier highlights important distinctions between metrics of political power, noting that higher numbers of women elected to committees or political office "do not consistently increase their influence, or the substantive representation of women's distinctive priorities and perspectives" (p. 59). Factors that make a more significant difference to whether these voices are heard include whether a woman or man is *chairing* a meeting, which can make the difference between women's voices having equal time relative to their representation level, or half as much time as their representation would suggest (p. 67).

In reading Tessier's description of women's reluctance to speak up in a college class she taught in 1991, I was struck by how little has changed in this regard. This passage (p. 80) stirred memories of my own much more recent experience, sitting in a political economy class in 2015. I was one of only three women in an otherwise male-dominated classroom, and of those three, the only one to ever speak. The situation frustrated me to the point of pleading with the other two girls (to no avail) to say something in class. As Tessier observes, the expectation of women's silence is relative: whilst a strong influence on women's behaviour in the presence of men, it does not have the same inhibitory effects in spheres more often conceived as 'women's domain', or in all-female groups. Building on the statistical assay that she provides, it would be fascinating to compare the *actual* data for women's share of public speech with the *perception* of their representation. It is one thing to examine the numbers that Tessier has collated in this book, and see that women objectively have much less time on the proverbial floor; but is this something that people consciously recognise? Tessier gives a few examples of women (including, of course, herself) noticing the dearth of women's commentary online, but the reader may wonder whether men will make the same observations. Here we may reflect on older research carried out by scholars such as Dale Spender, whose experiments on perception of speech famously found that (whilst women's estimates were generally

accurate) male participants dramatically overestimated women's share of the conversation (1980).

In Chapters 3 and 4, Tessier describes ways in which the broader expectation of female silence is actively reinforced, on- and offline, in the form of backlash against women who break the mould. On the internet, however, "the opportunities for anonymous mob attacks on particular targets have reached terrifying new speed and intensity" (p. 79). Here, we are provided with a classification of the forms in which adversarial culture manifests online, including terms to describe very particular forms of sexist, hostile behaviour, such as "cybermisogyny", "manosphere", and a distinction between "garden variety" and "subculture variety" trolls (pp. 95-97). Tessier once more makes excellent use of recent quantitative and qualitative research to elucidate the specific ways in which women are targeted online, and the impact that this has on their freedom to speak up. As she is careful to note, data on the frequency with which women and men experience online harassment, bullying, and threats of sexual violence must be interpreted with one eye on their differential risks of experiencing sexual violence in life: "Women have real reasons to feel fearful of threats that a man in a similar position might more easily shake off" (p. 113).

Despite her discussion of sexual harassment, revenge porn, and threats of sexual violence as methods by which women's public participation online is suppressed, it is somewhat surprising to note that Tessier does not engage with feminist critique of porn as itself a means of silencing women. The arguments of scholars such as Catherine Mackinnon (1987), Rae Langton (1993) and Jennifer Hornsby (1993) – all of whom share the stance that the representation of women and of sexual activity through porn damages women's freedom of speech – seem particularly relevant to her investigation; yet whilst Tessier objects explicitly to the failure of online platforms to recognise purported jokes and 'memes' as hatred when they dehumanise and sexually objectify women (pp. 116-119) and to the use (or threatened use) of revenge porn to intimidate them, she does not extend this line of thinking as far as a critique of porn more generally. It may well be that she does not share this view, but the complete absence of this discussion feels like a strange omission – if the objectification of or representation of sexual violence against women serves to force them into silence when designed as a 'joke', then not apply a similar analysis to this other, vast proportion of the internet devoted to sexual objectification and sexual violence?

In chapters 6 and 7 of the book, Tessier turns her attention to the sexist biases that shape the representation of women's voices and interests, from the news media to consumer products. A particularly striking anecdote she shares with the reader here is her visit to the meeting of Chinese women in Beijing in 2000, assessing the progress made in pursuit of women's equality in the five years since the United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women. Having applied for journalist credentials to attend the conference, pitched the story to six different newspaper editors, and yet received only one reply. "A story about the political advancement of half a billion women in China was either ignored or relegated to the section that talked about lifestyle issues" (p. 146). Another story that starkly illustrates the tendency to overlook women's interests may be familiar to those who remember Apple's *faux pas* in releasing their Health app: this "allowed users to track blood pressure, steps, blood alcohol content, sleep patterns, respiratory rate, the intake of calories, fiber, fat, iodine, and magnesium, as well as other aspects of health" (p. 149). It did not, however, include a period tracker. The picture is not entirely bleak, however, and Tessier describes strategies enacted in recent years by broadcasting companies, educational institutions and businesses to actively combat implicit bias. The final chapter of the book continues by introducing tools for gender-informed product design, developed in recent years and increasingly used by companies

aware of the gender gap in consumer experiences and uptake of their products. As Tessier pragmatically points out, inclusive design processes are not just required by considerations of justice, they are also good for a healthy bottom line.

Women's unequal representation in positions of economic and political power is a longstanding problem, which feminists have highlighted time and time again. Whether one can speak *and be heard* is crucial not just to equal democratic participation, but to life itself – as Rebecca Solnit tells us, "Credibility is a basic survival tool" (2012). However, *Digital Suffragists* presents a powerful argument for paying attention not just to women's voices on the parliamentary floor, but in places we might not expect: the comment section, the news website poll, the social media thread. These, Tessier argues, are key forums of civic debate in our increasingly online world, or as she puts it, "a society where conversations online are the new public square" (p. 191). She makes a convincing case for equal speaking time as a measure of democracy and of women's equality, and provides concrete recommendations for institutions to pursue that benchmark, by elevating women's voices, recognising bias, and combatting cyberharassment. Some of the problems she points out have simple solutions, which require us only to embrace readily available technological tools; others, however, demand public bodies and institutions take responsibility for addressing systemic issues which they have yet to acknowledge.

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