Post-Truth Politics as Discursive Violence

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Post-truth politics as discursive violence: Online abuse, the public sphere and the figure of 'the expert'

Charlotte Galpin and Patrick Vernon

Abstract

'Post-truth politics' indicates a contemporary state of public distrust around the legitimacy of knowledge, shaped by the hybrid media landscape. In the present moment, women, LGBTQ+ and racialised individuals also receive unprecedented levels of online abuse. Scholars have attributed responsibility for disinformation to social media and linked post-truth discourse to angry accusations of lying and dishonesty. Yet, online abuse of experts/academics has not been conceptually or empirically connected to post-truth. We analyse Facebook comments on right-wing news articles that question the expertise of academics during Brexit. Using queer theory, we argue that online abuse of experts staged by newspapers is a form of post-truth communication involving a process of bordering through which gendered, sexualised or racialised *bodies* are considered incompatible with academic expertise. This process legitimises extraordinary abuse including threats of sexual violence. Only by asking intentional questions about gender, sexuality and race can we fully understand the post-truth condition.

Keywords

epistemological populism, gender, harassment, hate speech, hybrid media system, intersectionality, online abuse, post-truth, public sphere, queer theory, sexuality, social media

Introduction

'Post-truth politics' is a phrase that has been used to describe the recent state of democratic politics particularly in Western societies, most notably since the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union (EU). Both political campaigns seemed to typify this supposedly new style of politics (Flood, 2016). Although used as an 'umbrella term' encapsulating a 'whole range of interlinked phenomena' (Conrad and Hálfdanarson, 2022: 3), post-truth is typically applied to situations of

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declining trust in political authority, expertise and media (see, for example, Farkas and Schou, 2019; Harsin, 2018; Michailidou and Trenz, 2021). In a statement that became characteristic of so-called post-truth discourse, Vote Leave campaigner and then Justice Secretary Michael Gove claimed that the 'UK has had enough of experts', in response to economists' predictions of Brexit's negative economic impact. In June 2017, Charlotte Galpin, one of the authors of this article, was the topic of an article in the tabloid newspaper *express.co.uk* drawing attention to remarks she made about British sovereignty which resulted in hundreds of critical, derogatory and often abusive comments that questioned her status as an expert on European politics. Later that year, a letter sent by Conservative MP Chris Heaton-Harris to university vice chancellors requesting a list of academics teaching about Brexit precipitated Daily Mail articles about so-called 'Remainer universities'. For Galpin, this experience resulted in significant anxiety surrounding public engagement. Noting that the article itself quoted her accurately and was not explicitly critical, she started to reflect on the links between legacy media, its use of social media commenting and gendered silencing of 'expertise'. Described by Amnesty International (2018) as a 'human rights issue' affecting freedom of expression, online abuse overwhelmingly targets women, racialised and LGBTQ+ people and can lead to their withdrawal from public debates (Jane, 2014: 542). In fact, several women politicians stepped down from political office citing the abuse they received after their input into the Brexit debate (Galpin, 2022a).

Scholarly literature on post-truth describes a climate of distrust, uncertainty and anxiety around 'truth' in the contemporary hybridised media context, involving a range of different repertoires of communication such as disinformation, fake news and rumour bombs (Harsin, 2018: 7) as well as information that is 'exaggerated, sensationalized, selective, or assembled from a web of partial truths in hybrid networks of reputable and less reputable sources' (Chadwick et al., 2018: 4258). We contribute to this literature by arguing that studies of post-truth communication also need to examine abusive practices of the media, thus filling a significant gap in the literature. Jayson Harsin (2018: 2) notes that post-truth can be empirically recognised in the 'constant discursive obsession with and accusation of dishonesty, especially lying, and by the public anxiety and distrust it generates'. He further observes that political actors who are perceived to engage in disinformation or untruthful discourse frequently engage in performances of 'hate, rage, intimidation, insensitivity and violence' (Harsin, 2020: 1062–1063). Giulia Evolvi (2022) finds that Islamophobic and anti-Semitic hate speech was integral to disinformation spread by far-right parties on Twitter. Yet, 'post-truth politics' has largely been theorised separately from online abuse, despite the relatively wide body of feminist and queer work on online abuse itself (see, for example, Jane, 2014; Vera-Gray, 2017; Yelin and Clancy, 2021) and the Council of Europe's designation of hate speech and harassment as part of the broader 'information disorder' (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017: 20). In fact, some studies have explicitly excluded such discourse and, for example, labelled content 'intended to harm others (e.g. slurs based on racial, sexual or gender identity)' as 'non-deceptive messages' (Freelon and Wells, 2020: 145). This oversight is significant: ignoring online abuse in the study of post-truth risks perpetuating the existing and potentially worsening gendered, racial and sexual inequalities in the public sphere.

In this article, we consider online abuse as an important element of the contemporary post-truth landscape. More specifically, we ask how and to what extent online abuse is staged by newspapers with regard to particular target groups positioned explicitly as 'experts'. We argue that the legacy media provokes online comment threads that involve

violent bordering practices over modes and bodies of expertise that do not simply 'insult' or 'slur' individuals but (de)legitimise academic or professional expertise in gendered, sexualised and racialised ways. These threads police the boundaries of factuality itself, contributing to the broader climate of post-truth by revealing concerns that expertise perceived in different ways as 'illegitimate' is shaping political outcomes such as, in this case, Brexit.

To demonstrate this, in the first section we outline our conceptualisation of post-truth politics as a 'periodizing concept' describing epistemic struggles shaped by a changing news landscape. We interrogate the ways in which news-making assemblages associated with the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017: 73) also induce online abuse of experts/academics. We then outline our understanding of online abuse in this context as hostile online communications involving bordering practices that re-draw historical boundaries between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' *kinds* of expertise – 'epistemic modes' (Valaskivi and Robertson, 2022), and re-define which people or groups, that is, epistemic *bodies*, can and cannot be considered as experts. These interconnected struggles over '*what can be said* and *who is allowed to speak'* (Valaskivi and Robertson, 2022: 4) reflect the historical division between the public and private spheres in which claims to 'rationality' and 'objectivity' associated with White masculinity were used to remove non-male, non-White and non-heterosexual bodies from the public sphere (Galpin, 2022b; Hooper, 2000). In the following section, we set out our original theoretical and methodological approach that, building upon existing queer work within political science (Smith and Lee, 2015; Weber, 2016), outlines the process of subjectification (Butler, 1993; Foucault, [1976] 1990) involved in the construction of figure of 'the expert' in online abuse. Queer theory allows us to investigate processes of categorisation, revealing those bodies who appear as 'unintelligible' subjects (Rahman, 2010). We then outline our data selection, the style of discourse analysis and some limitations of our research. In line with our understanding of post-truth as public anxiety around truth and knowledge, and our narrower focus on the 'expert', we select articles in right-wing newspapers that sensationalise or degrade the expertise either of 'academics' as a group or particular individuals framed as experts in the Brexit debate and that feature large numbers of Facebook comments. While the articles themselves may occur within the parameters of so-called 'civil' debate, the corresponding comments often go far beyond this.

Based upon queer-informed discourse analysis of comments, we show how historical structures of power are re-imposed through new forms of communication to produce high volumes of very public, violent and sexualised messages that contribute to the broader context of public anxieties over legitimate knowledge. While disinformation about minoritised groups, including women, racialised and LGBTQ+ folk, has long been part of the legacy media arena, such groups now have greater access to the public sphere than ever before. It is, therefore, precisely their framing here as experts that invites outrage and, crucially for newspapers, clicks that generate advertising revenue. The ensuing comments threads do not appear in a vacuum but emerge in response to the presence of minoritised people as producers of knowledge. This, in turn, legitimises extraordinary abuse up to and including threats of physical and sexual violence, which reaffirms dominant understandings of academic expertise as White, masculine and heterosexual and can result in those receiving abuse withdrawing from the public sphere. Only by asking intentional questions about the operation of gendered, sexualised and racialised violence in the contemporary media landscape, we argue, can we fully understand the post-truth condition.

Post-truth, online abuse and bordering over expertise

We situate ourselves within a critical communications studies tradition that views post-truth politics as a 'periodizing concept' helping us to analyse continuity and change in a particular historical era (Green, 1995; Harsin, 2018). While related to postmodernism, a periodizing concept of the late 20th century, in its preoccupation with challenging universal claims to truth, post-truth refers to a 'historically particular' climate of public anxiety, distrust and suspicion around the legitimacy of knowledge and 'truth-tellers' in public life (Harsin, 2018: 2). It does not describe a 'time beyond, after, or without truth' but the contemporary context of evolving power relations and media dynamics (Harsin, 2018: 2). As such, we diverge from approaches that conceptualise post-truth as disinformation circulated exclusively on social media, a phenomenon attributed to the decline in relevance of legacy media and increasing fragmentation of public spheres (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; Freelon and Wells, 2020; Lewandowsky and Van der Linden, 2021). These conceptions of post-truth arguably create a 'nostalgia for the mass communication age' (Farkas and Schou, 2019: 4; Harsin, 2018: 6) in which traditional gatekeepers such as journalists filtered and monitored published information (see also Marshall and Drieschova, 2018: 90). The idea that the legacy media holds itself to the highest standards of objectivity itself reflects a 'racial amnesia' that 'we once lived in an era of unproblematic truth' that benefitted everyone equally (Mejia et al., 2018: 113). Disinformation regarding women, racialised and LGBTQ+ people has, therefore, long underpinned political projects of exclusion from the public sphere, through which powerful actors seek to preserve the status quo (Piras, 2020: 33). In the UK context, tabloid newspapers in particular produced 'news of dubious civic value' well before the social media age (Chadwick et al., 2018: 4259).

Instead, we understand post-truth as an epistemic conflict involving a 'hegemonic struggle' to define contemporary politics, in which factuality itself is subject to increased contestation (Farkas and Schou, 2018: 300, 309). This epistemic conflict is inextricably linked to the development of news-making assemblages in which the logics 'of supposedly "new" online media are hybridised with those of supposedly 'old' broadcast and newspaper media' (Chadwick, 2017: 73). We, therefore, need to speak not of two distinct media orders, but a hybrid one in which traditional news outlets use social media to promote stories that will be liked and shared, in order to maximise exposure and therefore profit (Chadwick, 2017). While elements of what we are describing have long existed, such as the exclusion of minoritised groups from the public sphere, social media has changed the way traditional news works, replacing a 'mass media logic' of broadsheet and television news with a 'social logic that favours user engagement, shareworthiness and virality' (Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2019: 46). This logic shapes the process of 'seeding', in which journalists or editors decide what to post directly on social media platforms in order to resonate with readers (Park and Kaye, 2023: 637). Social media platforms thus 'facilitate and privilege emotional engagement' that can be monetised by traditional news organisations (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 2). As such, 'post-truth' as an historical era is shaped by a 'digital communications infrastructure' oriented towards the 'attention economy' under neoliberal consumer capitalism (Harsin, 2018: 12).

In this context, the new social logic encourages what Alison Phipps (2020: 85) describes as the 'outrage economy' of contemporary media. News organisations whip up anger, for example, via sensationalist or controversial articles about 'experts' (Park and Kaye, 2023: 637; Anderson and Huntingdon, 2017). Emotionality can constitute important elements of

journalistic practice but can also stoke hatred and exclusion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 2). Charlotte Galpin and Hans-Jörg Trenz (2019: 784) have found that comments forums on right-wing news sites do not promote democratic will-formation but become 'platforms for populist mobilization' that contest the political system itself. Along these lines, comment threads constitute forms of post-truth communication to the extent that they create distrust and anxiety around knowledge and expertise. As Eugenia Siapera (2019: 33) suggests, in an era in which women, racialised and LGBTQ+ people have greater access to universities, education and the media than ever before, online misogyny constitutes a new struggle over the division of labour in the emerging 'techno-capitalist' system, intended to exclude certain groups from 'having any say in the direction of this future and from sharing it equitably'. Women's access to higher education has been described as 'one of the central social changes in recent history', albeit one that has not been accompanied by major shifts in political and socio-economic gender relations (Williams and Wolniak, 2021: 7). Analysing online abuse as post-truth communication, then, calls attention to the re-imposition of a highly exclusionary public sphere that is perceived to be under threat, and a denial of minoritised groups' equal stake in the production of knowledge through the violent bordering of dominant notions of expertise. It highlights how such comments threads are staged towards different groups of 'experts' who in different ways may be perceived as 'illegitimate' or 'unintelligible' as experts, provoking commentary that is abusive in gendered, racialised and sexualised ways.

Understanding 'post-truth' as a contest over factuality (Farkas and Schou, 2018: 309) rather than an 'act' of disinformation challenges the idea of a singular and easily accessible truth, and shifts the focus of study to representative practices that function to exclude particular bodies from the production of knowledge (Foucault, [1976] 1990: 94–95). Analysing the content of abusive posts, comments, or messages online, we argue, can reveal a lot about the character of contemporary news-making assemblages. This approach allows us to see post-truth not as a 'rupture' in a previously democratic and inclusive public sphere but to capture how long-standing patriarchal, White and heteronormative structures of power that have historically shaped perceptions of the expert (Glasson, 2012; Ylä-Anttila, 2018) are re-asserted in a changing media landscape in a way that produces a broader contestation over the legitimacy of knowledge and expertise. To do this, we conceptualise online abuse in broad terms, following Emma A. Jane's (2014: 533) notion of 'e-bile', defined as 'any text or speech act which relies on technology for communication and/or publication, and is perceived by a sender, receiver, or outside observer as involving hostility', usually involving swearing, personal insults and criticism and graphic descriptions of violence, typically of a sexual nature. While we do not intend to introduce a strict definition as Jane (2015) warns against, the profanity and threats of sexualised violence that are characteristic of such content mean that misogyny and racism typically underpin many hostile messages sent online. As 'denunciatory speech acts' (Jane, 2015: 66), that is, speech or text that publicly condemns individuals or groups, instances of e-bile can, in the post-truth context, be used to contest the legitimacy of expertise in several ways that involve processes of bordering of the public sphere and notions of (il)legitimate authority.

As outlined above, online abuse, or e-bile, may include bordering over legitimate types of expertise that we have referred to as 'epistemic modes' (Valaskivi and Robertson, 2022). These modes are intricately connected to discourses of gender, sexuality and race. Popular definitions of post-truth state that objective facts become secondary to 'appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford Languages, 2016), reflected in Gove's claim that

the British people have 'had enough of experts'. Through populist discourses which centre the idea of a 'pure people' juxtaposed against a 'corrupt elite', 'experiential knowledge' or 'common sense' is accorded greater importance than academic or scientific knowledge (Ylä-Anttila, 2018: 358; also Glasson, 2012). The latter forms of knowledge are understood as having been created by experts perceived to be 'estranged' from people's everyday lives. According to Tuukka Ylä-Anttila (2018: 358), however, the contemporary post-truth context is not anti-factual per se but often advocates an alternative kind of expertise (referred to as 'counterknowledge') that is deeply gendered. Populist counterknowledge, he argues, actually embraces a masculine conception of scientific knowledge that prioritises 'rationality', 'logical reasoning' and 'objectivity', usually through statistical methods (Ylä-Anttila, 2018: 378). Ylä-Anttila's (2018: 595) findings are also reflected in Barbara Read's (2018) study of US anti-elitist discourse that, she finds, involves accusations of feminised emotionality or 'irrationality'. Feminist research, in particular, is often discredited along these lines, judged to be 'inferior' as well as 'emotive rather than evidenced' in a way that 'position[ed] "male knowledge" as more valuable' (Yelin and Clancy, 2021: 182–183). Feminism's centring of 'personal experience (as a) foundation for the production of knowledge' (Budgeon, 2021: 249) has therefore been a site for contestation in the 'post-truth' context. The intertwining of anti-intellectual and anti-feminist commentary of this kind thus functions as a 'form of social control, in/directly attempting to silence public feminist critique' (Budgeon, 2021: 179). Brexit understood as an issue of 'hard politics' (Guerrina et al., 2018), therefore, implies the existence of masculinist expectations around the kind of expertise deemed worthy of contributing valuable knowledge. It also implies expectations around *who* is permitted to contribute knowledge.

Online abuse may, therefore, extend far beyond public criticism of epistemic modes, involving a process of bordering that defines the epistemic *bodies* considered to be legitimate experts or, even, to possess the right to participate in the public sphere at all. Anti-intellectual discourse that constructs 'knowledge elites' (e.g. academics, scientists) or 'epistemic authorities' (here, institutions such as universities or think tanks) as enemies of the 'common people' (Ylä-Anttila, 2018: 359; see also Glasson, 2012) by extension challenges existing hierarchies around '*whose* knowledge is to be legitimized and whose is to be questioned or shunned' (Valaskivi and Robertson, 2022: 3). The 'expert' has historically been culturally embodied in the figure of the English gentleman, who has endured as an image of stability, Whiteness, masculinity and reverence for both tradition and liberal modernity since colonial times (Gopinath, 2013: 7). However, in populist discourse, Benjamin J. Glasson (2012: 107) notes that 'the intellectual' tends to be associated with 'Aborigines, recent immigrants, refugees, women, the aged, the disabled and the queer', indicating a shift in gendered, sexual and racialised understandings of expertise that requires further inquiry. Using the example of Boris Johnson campaigning for Britain to leave the EU, Muireann O'Dwyer (2018) demonstrated that White men are more likely to be believed and perceived as knowledgeable, even when they promote 'political bullshit'. Harsin (2020: 1062), furthermore, coined the concept of 'emo-truth' to describe an 'aggressive masculine performance of trustworthiness' that legitimises 'popular' over 'scientific' or 'institutional' truth-tellers. In turn, those who do not conform with these criteria of authority or believability are likely to be disbelieved.

Given these intimate connections between gendered, sexual and racialised stereotypes and dominant understandings of expertise, online abuse in this context needs to be considered as a part of the struggle over truth that marginalises particular 'truth-tellers' over

others through *ad hominem* attacks. As Heather Savigny (2020: 284) has demonstrated, what women academics experiencing online abuse have in common is not that they all do feminist research, but that they receive explicitly gendered abuse, and in the case of women of colour, racialised abuse. Academics reported receiving comments assessing the physical attractiveness of their bodies, referencing their marital status, sexuality or race, involving instances of slut-shaming and threats of sexual and racial violence. Misogynistic slurs and sexually violent language is characteristic of e-bile, when directed at women often involving 'charges of unintelligence, hysteria, and ugliness . . . combined with threats and/or fantasies of violent sex acts which are often framed as "correctives"', and when addressed to men 'commonly impugn(ing) their masculinity via derogatory homophobia or the suggestion that they suffer some kind of micropenile disorder' (Jane, 2014: 533). Online violence may even take the form of what Briar Dickey refers to as 'ontological delegitimization' which, in his research on anti-trans 'truth-telling' discourse, involves assertions that trans women 'have no basis on which to make the claims because they are simply not *real*' (Dickey, 2022: 17). Dehumanising narratives are also targeted at women of colour who, through the 'coloniality of gender', are constructed as external to the European gender order (Runyan, 2018: 4). These overlapping instances of bordering are also connected to nationalist discourses. As Glasson (2012: 104) notes, to be an 'out of touch intellectual' is 'to be dismembered from the body politic' while the 'national subject' is viewed 'as the "authentic" subject'. Online abuse can, therefore, reproduce constructions of the nation in which particular subjects are included in imagined visions of the national community, while others are excluded through sexual and racial processes of categorization (Anzaldúa, 1987; Puar, 2017; Sedgwick, 1993: 8).

Such discourses are not only significant in their own right, but have significant implications for public knowledge. Feminist scholars have noted that online violence constitutes 'disciplinary rhetoric' that aims to 'silence the women participating in public' (Cole, 2015: 356; see also Siapera, 2019). As Galpin has argued elsewhere, sexualised violence 'symbolically reduces women to their bodies, transporting them out of the public arena into the private sphere of sexuality' (Galpin, 2022a: 165). As this article's analysis explores, similar processes take place through the abuse of queer and racialised people in online discussions about Brexit. Attention to *bodies* of expertise, therefore, constitutes 'a means to regulate women' and other minoritised people resulting in epistemic violence as those individuals – and those observing the secondhand treatment of others – retreat from public commentary (Savigny, 2020: 285). Until now, exclusive characterisations of expert bodies, which are interwoven with online abuse towards women, racialised and LGBTQ+ folk, have not been investigated as being constitutive of the post-truth condition. In the next section, we set out the theoretical and methodological framework that we use to do this.

Queering mediated depictions of expertise

The cultural figure of 'the expert' is one that has been central to discussions of Brexit, often deeply maligned as biased, untrustworthy, incompetent or worthy of abuse. Queer theory enables us to trace how particular ideas and practices gain the status of 'facts' or 'common sense' knowledge' (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody, 2019: 167), including whose *bodies* get accorded the status of an 'expert' due to gendered, racialised and heteronormative understandings of expertise. While queer is often used as shorthand for tracing the social, political and academic legacies of heteronormativity, we adopt an understanding of queerness as a process of interrogating and resisting processes of categorisation. Doing

so, we build upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1993: 8) understanding of queerness as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically' (see also Anzaldúa, 1987). This understanding of queerness offers a much broader understanding which refers to those subjects who defy dominant characterisations of subjectivity. We apply this understanding to the subject-position of 'the (academic) expert' and the gendered, sexual and racialised stereotypes which exclude certain bodies and forms of expertise from being integrated into this category.

Exploring how subject-positions are produced in line with dominant discursive frameworks, a key concern of queer theory is subjectification. Subjectification is most closely associated with the work of Michel Foucault ([1976] 1990: 43), whose *History of Sexuality* looked at the power relations that constructed 'the homosexual' as a subject requiring legal/medical intervention. Also using this framework, Judith Butler (1993, 2004) understands the production of the subject in more personal terms, looking at the operation of cultural discourses in the individual psyche. Butler interrogates the ways in which the subject is constructed outside of themselves; the constitution of a 'you' through 'cultural norms that precede and exceed us' (Butler, 2004: 45). Reflecting on the subject-position of 'the expert', this framework recognises that academic expertise is constituted beyond the self, lying, for example, in holding a tenured position at a respected institution, having publications in particular journals or using particular methodological tools, and, as we are exploring, having certain (perceived) gendered, sexual and racial characteristics. A key criticism of queer theory's subject-less critique comes, however, from the queer of colour critique, coined by Roderick A. Ferguson (2004) and drawing heavily upon intersectional feminists such as Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). This critique dissects universalizing tendencies to look at gay and lesbian as cultural categories, highlighting the role that race and racism play in constructing uneven terrains of desire and perceptions of worth (Manalansan, 2018: 1288). Given that queer theory arose partly in opposition to what it perceived to be intersectional theory's tendency to over-focus on discrete identity categories, it is somewhat unsurprising that it orientated itself firmly towards the discursive. The queer of colour critique, however, proposes that queer theory maintains its focus on the construction of the subject, but in such a way that is attendant to the roles that capitalism and racism play in this.

In order to capture the radical insights provided by both queer theory and intersectional feminism, therefore, we use Momin Rahman's (2010) innovative and queer approach to intersectionality. This approach looks at subject-positions that are located at an intersection but are rendered unintelligible due to them challenging their constituent identities. Rahman (2010: 945) studies gay Muslim identities, as they challenge both the category of Muslim, which is framed as antithetical to Western cultural values (including LGBTQ+ rights), and the category of 'gay', which is seen as representing sexual diversity incompatible with Muslim culture (Rahman, 2010: 947). Also underpinning our approach is Cynthia Weber's discipline-defining approach to queer international relations (IR) that looks at different figurations of 'the homosexual' in relation to the sovereign man of the state. Resisting the way in which the (heterosexual) self and increasingly the Western LGBTQ+ subject represent normality in contemporary IR, Weber has coined the term 'queer logics of statecraft' to highlight those subjects that destabilise IR's either/or binary (e.g. normal/perverse, domestic/international, safety/danger) and figure as simultaneously normal and/or perverse (Weber, 2016: 191). It is by drawing upon Rahman's

(2010) reading of the queer Muslim as an unintelligible figure and Weber's (2016) queer logics of statecraft that we analyse the figure of the expert. In particular, we look at figures who are constructed as unintelligible in line with dominant either/or logics (Weber, 2016: 195) that govern who is allowed to speak with authority and, in particular, contribute academic expertise. It is through the application of this analysis to various key figures in the Brexit debate that we hope to better understand how online abuse affects public discussions on European integration.

Operationalising this approach, the collection of our data proceeded in several stages to account for the hybrid media system. First, using the electronic newspaper archive NexisUK, we collected newspaper articles using the search terms 'Brexit' and 'academic' within online versions of three right-wing UK newspapers: *The Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. Given the association between post-truth politics and pro-Brexit campaigns, we decided to focus on Eurosceptic newspapers, including one broadsheet, one mid-range and one traditional tabloid newspaper. These three newspapers actively utilise social media to disseminate stories and have been identified as the three most-shared sources of news article on pro-Brexit Facebook pages (Brändle et al., 2021). We collected articles published during 2016, 2017 and 2019, when the EU and Brexit were highly politicised. In line with our conceptualisation of post-truth as a context of high public anxiety and distrust around knowledge, we collected articles that entailed one or more of the following: gendered, racialised or otherwise inflammatory language; a personal attack; a narrative questioning the authenticity/reliability of academics, universities or others framed as experts; or discussion of free speech.

Using the Crowdtangle URL checker, we then excluded any article that had not been posted publicly on Facebook. Facebook is used by around three quarters of UK adults who consume news via social media (Ofcom, 2022), meaning that it is a key platform for understanding how social media users engage with the news. We took a purposive sample of nine Facebook comment threads with the highest engagement (likes, reactions, comments and shares) on different types of articles, most of which were shared directly on the newspapers' own Facebook pages, while some were shared on large right-wing, pro-Brexit pages or groups. We understand high engagement to be an indicator of debate about and controversy over the article's content and therefore likely to include a significant amount of 'e-bile'. Following Jane's (2015: 80) caution against 'overly-narrow definitions' of e-bile that results in under-coding of potentially valuable material, we do not attempt to untangle specific instances of online abuse from comments that may simply qualify as harsh but valid criticism; instead, we understand an individual comments thread to be an 'analysable whole' that is likely to include a high level of 'vitriolic communications [with] a multitude of commonalities' (Jane, 2014: 533). This approach is also in line with Galpin's experience with the Daily Express. It was the existence of the threads *as a whole* that was brought into being by the circulation of the article that she found to be abusive, rather than individual comments of a particularly violent nature.

In our purposive sample, we selected articles about AC Grayling, a White male professor and Master of the New College of the Humanities, who has been prominent in anti-Brexit campaigns, but who we perceive as largely conforming to stereotypical understandings of expertise as White, masculine and heterosexual. To understand the way in which (White) women academics are discussed, we selected discussion threads about Charlotte Galpin, Associate Professor in German and European Politics at the University of Birmingham and co-author of this article, as well as Victoria Bateman, Fellow and College lecturer in Economics at the University of Cambridge who, after appearing in

media settings naked while wearing the slogan 'Brexit leaves Britain naked', was the subject of several articles. Finally, we selected articles/threads involving criticism of universities in general, as well as the attacks on judges/lawyers that took place following the High Court/Supreme Court rulings that Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty had to be approved by Parliament. This was due to the absence of any articles about racialised academics or those perceived to be LGBTQ+. Seeing race and sexuality as also constitutive of dominant notions of expertise, we focused on criticisms of experts in this court case on the basis that we could understand how racialised and heteronormative understandings of expertise would inform abuse against LGBTQ+ or racialised academics. These comment threads involve homophobic abuse against judges who made the ruling, and racist abuse of Gina Miller, the lead complainant and a Black British woman who needed round-the-clock security due to online abuse (*guardian.co.uk*, 2019). We later use our analysis of the comments directed at these key figures to structure our analysis.

Following the recommendations of Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace (2016: 13) around the ethics of social media research, we have taken steps to protect the anonymity of users by ensuring that directly quoted comments cannot be traced back to individuals. We do not, therefore, list the specific articles chosen nor do we attribute individual comments to specific threads. While analysing empirical material that includes comments about one of the article's authors may invite criticisms of a lack of objectivity, we situate ourselves within a feminist epistemological tradition which challenges the positivist separation between 'researcher' and 'researched' (Ackerly and True, 2010: 469). For feminist scholars, knowledge is always situated in a particular context and therefore 'the conditions of our research must be studied, critiqued if necessary, and certainly made explicit' (Ackerly and True, 2010: 465). From this perspective, excluding Galpin's experience and related material would have the impact of obfuscating her connection with this topic while simultaneously losing out on her personal reflections as an additional source of knowledge.

After manually collecting and anonymising the Facebook comment threads, we then coded them using qualitative data analysis software *QSR Nvivo* according to dominant themes of abuse we found in comments responding to articles on different public figures. We mobilised the work of Rahman (2010) and Weber (2016) to carry out a queer theory informed discourse analysis of the comments to reveal 'how power relations are constituted and maintained in the production of social and political meanings' (Nash and Browne, 2010: 6). We initially began by identifying broad themes through open coding (Shepherd, 2021: 37) before engaging in deeper textual interpretation using our key theoretical concepts. Following Jane's (2014: 533) strategy to 'speak the ostensibly unspeakable' in relation to e-bile, we do not censor comments in our analysis. These include racist, xenophobic, homophobic, sexualised and misogynistic comments and threats of violence and death. We do this with the explicit intention to 'avoid participating in any tyranny of silence' over the nature of social media comments directed particularly at people from minoritised groups (Jane, 2015: 67). According to Jane (2015: 70), the widespread tendency of academics to generalise or cite only mild examples of e-bile downplays its impact on both the targets of abuse and on the democratic public sphere.

It is also important to briefly reflect on some of this project's limitations. First, this study focuses only on the case of Brexit. Online abuse of experts is prevalent across many different issues, including Covid-19, the elections of Trump, Bolsonaro and Modi and trans rights. We plan to look at some of these issues, and in particular the uniquely hostile abuse levelled at trans women, in future research, while hoping that our findings are of use to academics researching online abuse in different contexts, including against trans

and disabled communities, with abuse against the latter community largely undiscussed. Second, although Facebook is the most popular UK platform for news consumption, this focus is admittedly likely to exclude comments from younger demographics who tend to use different sites. It also does not incorporate significant developments, such as Elon Musk's recent takeover of Twitter. By having a focused approach, we hope that our analysis offers deep and specific insights into discursive violence in online debates on EU integration, which other scholars can use as a springboard for their own areas of study.

Brexit and belonging: Sexual, gendered and racialised understandings of expertise

Our findings demonstrate that abusive online comments directed at people framed as experts should not just be considered as 'uncivil' or 'insulting' language but as discursive violence that attempts to remove gendered, racialised and sexualised bodies from the position of 'expert'. Through public staging on highly visible Facebook platforms of mainstream newspapers, this violence contributes to the broader condition of post-truth politics as a context of distrust, anxiety and struggle over factuality and 'legitimate' truth-telling. Having established that online newspaper articles often aim to elicit a social media debate that taps into the post-truth context of public distrust and anxiety over legitimate forms of expertise, and having selected news articles that single out individuals positioned as experts, we now turn our attention to the comments themselves. We begin our analysis by looking at generic criticisms of academics as a collective group and Grayling specifically, finding a general congruence which, we argue, highlights the existence of 'the academic' as a White man in the British public imaginary. These criticisms, we note, relate to academics' mode of expertise, that is, how they produce knowledge, what kind of knowledge they produce, rather than their body of expertise, *who* they are. In the second section, we look at criticisms of Galpin and Bateman. Comments about Bateman were particularly extreme, routinely reducing her to her body with a much more significant amount of violent and graphic gendered language emerging. This response, we argue, stems from Bateman's explicit promotion of a feminist agenda. Cumulatively, we note that comments about Galpin and Bateman referred not just to what they spoke *about* or what they were *doing*, but about who they *are*, crudely using their gender to delegitimise their very presence as experts within the public sphere and the academy. Finally, we identified both homophobic and ageist comments about the judges and, most significantly, extreme and often profoundly dehumanising and violent racist comments about Gina Miller that even contest her existence within civilisation itself. Throughout our analysis, we view these comments as violent and highly public acts of bordering that are responding to the appearance of what are perceived as 'illegitimate' bodies of expertise in Brexit debates. We conclude by reflecting on the unique vulnerability of LGBTQ+, racialised and women academics within this epistemic context.

Academics in their ivory towers

Academics are often seen to be out of touch through discourses of epistemological populism (see, for example, Glasson, 2012; Ylä-Anttila, 2018) which, we argue, constitutes a criticism of epistemic *modes* that stokes distrust in academic knowledge. Through accusations of a left-wing plot against Brexit, some comments about academics and AC Grayling accused universities of being 'driven by leftist liberal loonies' or 'left wing

twats'. Grayling is described as a 'typical academic', somebody who is 'highly educated low on common sense' or who has 'little, if any, practical knowledge of the subjects he thinks about'. He is sometimes explicitly gendered as male, for example as 'Mr Academic', or as one commenter shouts, 'JUST BECAUSE HE WAS AT OXFORD, PEOPLE THINK THAT HE KNOWS MORE THAN THE AVERAGE MAN!'. In these comments, the working-class subject is framed as a truth-teller delivering the hard reality of how life *is*, mobilising a popular form of knowledge associated with working-class masculinity which is, following Shelley Budgeon, 'reconstituted as a site of injury' (Budgeon, 2021: 254).

We also find evidence of national bordering of the public sphere that associates legitimate expertise with the nation and arouses suspicion that academic knowledge is shaped by foreign actors. Academics are accused of collaborating with external enemies, here, the EU and Germany. Commenters accuse academics of 'car[ing] for nothing other than keeping their noses in the EU trough', while Grayling is suspected of 'generat[ing] his income from European students [so] will say whatever to keep his gravy train rolling'. Grayling is accused of treason, of being one of the 'lefty snowflakes' seeking to 'overturn a democratic vote by the indigenous people of this Great Country, to live in a dictatorship ruled by Germany nine nine nine'. Collective memories of war are evoked elsewhere, for example, 'corrupt! !back stabbing traitors! !We deserve to get our country back!! Our forefathers gave their lives for our country!' In this sense, criticisms of academics and Grayling attempt to border the national space, by demanding they live up to what the commenters see as their patriotic duty to protect British sovereignty. They are, however, not excluded from the nation, but rather accused of 'collaborating' with the enemy through corruption. The way in which these comments about Grayling neatly match with criticisms of academics as a collective nevertheless speaks to assumptions about the cultural figure of 'the academic' within the British political imaginary that aligns with the figure of the 'elite' academic man.

While accusations of bias, corruption and existing in an ivory tower are familiar themes in populist discourse, discourses of sexuality were also present in a way that equates 'perverse' sexuality with an academic epistemic mode. Pro-remain academics were sometimes collectively framed as perverting or grooming children, with one commenter explicitly asking whether there is 'any moral difference between political and sexual grooming' Another typical comment states that 'they are told what to think they are groomed to hate Britain'. Comments like this have the effect of discrediting and therefore depoliticising the students' opinions while simultaneously framing them in vulnerable and feminised terms. This framing reflects the logics of reproductive futurism, through which the political sphere is encapsulated by a heteronormative agenda of creating a better future for tomorrow's children (Edelman, 2004: 2). The construction of students as children and lecturers as nefarious (male) adults is a powerful binary which maps onto notions of innocent/evil and normal/perverse which construct the domestic/international binary (Weber, 2016). In this context, commenters see themselves as defenders of British sovereignty, highlighting the way in which children are being led astray with potentially severe political consequences, namely, the derailing of the Brexit process.

Some comments about Grayling do draw on feminising tropes of 'irrationality', drawing attention to the epistemic body. Questions are raised about his mental capacity, with comments calling him delusional or mad, describing him as a drug addict or alcoholic, or one of those 'old farts that should not be allowed to vote'. Cumulatively, however, comments on academics as a collective group involve criticism of an 'elite' and 'academic' epistemic mode that contradicts the popular knowledge of 'normal citizens'. While

Grayling did receive some ageist and sexualised abuse, the convergence of comments about him and academics as an imagined collective group indicates an understanding of academics as White men who belong in the national public sphere. Comments about Grayling or academics in general largely engage more with what they are *doing* (albeit wrongly), their methods or *modes* of knowledge production as academics, rather than who they *are*, their *bodies*. Accusations of grooming relate to what is considered improper academic behaviour, a perversion, but it does not call Grayling's status as an academic per se into question. This changes, however, when people who are not White men express pro-remain views.

'Stupid women' and the academy

On the one hand, women academics are also abused through popular *modes* of expertise that distinguish between academic 'elites' and ordinary people. For example, Galpin receives typical anti-intellectual accusations of being an 'airy faire pseudo academic' or 'educated in one of our lefty fucktard campuses'. Bateman is also imagined as a 'liberal' academic: 'usual left wing, hairy, gender neutral, vegan, im offended, got a fekin degree, gluten, lactose/pot noodle/hard work intollerant twat'. Academic knowledge is juxtaposed with 'common sense', for example, Galpin serves for one commenter as evidence of 'how academic political views are out of touch with what the real world sees!', while Bateman's protest is considered proof 'that education and common sense do not always go hand in glove!' Like those about Grayling, these comments reflect epistemological claims to common sense as an alternative, and more authentic *mode* of expertise.

On the other hand, the abuse that is levelled at academic women is qualitatively different, constructing them as 'unintelligible' figures (Rahman, 2010) on account of their *bodies*. Misogynistic references to Galpin and Bateman's intelligence were common, for example, 'that is what #brexit is all about, you stupid woman!', 'stupid blinkered bitch!' (Galpin) and 'stupid attention seeking and nothing to do with brexit' (Bateman). While they are denied the right to comment on Brexit specifically, they are also denied the status of academic, for example, 'Scary that she's lecturing at Bham uni' (Galpin) and, with it, the right to a public platform: 'How this bloody stupid cow ever got a doctorate beggars belief, STOP GIVING THIS SILLY ARSE AIR TIME' (Bateman). Both, but particularly Bateman, were also accused of being 'in desperate need of psychiatric help' or of needing to be 'sectioned'. Bringing feminist politics into connection with forced detention evokes the long history of women being incarcerated for challenging masculine social norms. This creates a double bind for women who seek to resist the gender norms that constrain them; it is this process which is often used to exclude women, and in particular feminists from the academy (Ahmed, 2017). Commenters, therefore, revert to the gendered discourses that are routinely used to silence women. It is Galpin and Bateman having a voice, a platform and political opinion that is being challenged, rather than the content or mode of expertise itself.

There are two other key themes that emerge about Galpin and Bateman. First, we find evidence of national bordering of legitimate expertise. Due to her research specialism, Galpin was widely presumed to be German. Commenters drew clear boundaries around the national public sphere, for example, 'why do all these bloody foreigners think they know what's best for Britain'. Again, the world wars are often referenced, for example,

> You couldn't conquer is in two world wars so don't think you can take our sovereignty away now, we are and always will be Great Britain, with Queen Elizabeth as our sovereign head of state, god save the Queen, stuff the European Union 🤚.

This comment situates British sovereignty in the historical context of Anglo-German military conflict and equates EU membership with another iteration of this. Another particularly vicious reference comes in the statement 'fucking nazi kraut bitch. Fuck off'. Revealing the toxic masculinity associated with post-truth politics (Harsin, 2020), this slur also reveals the gendered character of national bordering. Overt racism is also present, with some Islamophobic comments linked to Germany's acceptance of refugees, for example, 'it's migrants bandit country now the law favours the migrants they won't even protect there women' and 'all of Europe will be a MUSLIM CALPHATE SOON !!!!'. These comments must also be situated within the context of Vote Leave framings of Turkish EU membership as inevitable. Overall, these comments demonstrate the interconnectedness of misogyny, anti-intellectualism, and national bordering through racism and xenophobia.

Second, most notable regarding Bateman was the sheer quantity of comments which made personal, degrading and dehumanising comments about her body. In using nudity to simultaneously make a pro-remain and feminist point about the routine objectification of women, Bateman fundamentally destabilised understandings of academic expertise. Her 'impossibility' sparked a furious torrent of sexualised abuse that dehumanised her or removed her from ideas of morally respectable public life altogether. Here, we think it is useful to view these comments in a list, as they would appear online:

> What a stupid self centered excuse for a Women if she cant explain her views with out degrading her sex she should not be in work. What a Tartish Exhibitionist she Is

> Slag advertising her profession on a morning media program before school starts

> I hope she at least had a paper bag over her head

> Has she shaved that beaver yet lost your keys in there you would never find them

> Stick yer slogis back on love n back to tree hugging! You got a bush thicker than a Devon hedge no go away! 🙄

Many comments also reflect Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry's (2007) observation that women are routinely framed as either (and exclusively as) mothers, monsters, or whores in public discourse. As we can see, Bateman is reduced to her body and/or genitals or framed as a 'whore' due to her politicisation of the female body, which renders her position as an academic unintelligible. Some may respond that by appearing naked in a professional setting, Bateman is provoking this kind of commentary. By contrast, we would argue that Bateman is responding to this social context, using the perceived incompatibility of female nudity with the public sphere to comment on Brexit and highlight the violence perpetrated against women in public debates. Consider the largely positive responses to topless images of male politicians receiving their Covid vaccination jabs (Williams, 2021). This could equally be read as the use of male sexuality to make a statement in a contentious culture war debate, but the response was nowhere near as violent. In comparison, women politicians are routinely abused for revealing 'too much' of their bodies; for example, Labour MP Tracy Brabin was called a 'slag' and a 'tart' for wearing an off-the-shoulder top while speaking in Parliament (Rawlinson, 2020). Brabin's experience demonstrates that a woman does not need to be completely naked to receive this

kind of abuse. Rather, accusations of 'whoredom' are part of the everyday sexualisation of women's bodies and reflect capitalism's reliance on sexuality remaining 'antithetical' to the economy and workplace (Smith, 2020: 2). Representing an even more intensified version of the comments about Galpin, these comments fundamentally *contest the existence of women's bodies in academic life and public spaces*.

Our absent friends: LGBTQ+ and racialised folks

While there were articles on White men and women academics in our sample, there were none about racialised people within the academy or those framed as representing the academic LGBTQ+ community. We interpret this as reflective of the severe under-representation of these groups within academia. Seeking to capture comments about LGBTQ+ and racialised experts, we analysed comments about Gina Miller and the High/Supreme Court judges who ruled that Parliament had to invoke Article 50. Here, we noticed the prevalence of ageist and homophobic comments levelled at the judges such as

> What do them old tossers know?? They haven't got long left before they kick the bucket the British people have spoken so let's get on with it!!!! I suppose they are having their pockets lined with someone's cash.

Particularly significant here is the idea that older people should not be listened to because they are likely to die soon. There were also homophobic remarks such as 'A bunch of self opinionated POOFTERS dressed in [legal] drag and totally out of touch with reality'. These comments discredit judges' expertise on the basis that they are gay, drawing on historical discourses of the perverse homosexual subject (Foucault, [1976] 1990: 43). While these comments criticise judges rather than academics, we see the way in which these characteristics are brought into connection with populist discourse of being 'corrupt' or 'out of touch'. The circulation of such beliefs is testament to the existence of sexuality and age as other vectors used to frame certain *bodies* as incompatible with dominant White and heteronormative notions of expertise.

Where online abuse reaches its most intense, however, is when directed at Gina Miller. Populist themes about 'elite' modes of expertise that appeared in comments about Grayling, Galpin and Bateman are present, with Miller described as corrupt and anti-democratic, 'probably being paid by the EU to meddle' or 'to much money not enough sense'. Extensive focus on her wealth constructs her as part of the economic 'elite' working contrary to the interests of democracy. Commenters, however, often infantilise her as a 'spoilt brat [who] will do anything to satisfy her own needs' or accused of 'having a temper tantrum'. As with Galpin and Bateman, abusive comments about Miller criticise her intelligence or expertise, for example, 'suck it up buttercup. For a "lawyer" you have a lot to learn about law'. She is also stripped of her agency by commenters who perceive her to be controlled by others, 'someone with a seemingly bottomless pit of someone else's money who has an inflated view of her importance and influence'.

These sexist comments also intersect with racism, speaking to Kimberley Crenshaw's (1989) observation that the oppression experienced by Black women is more than the sum of being Black and a woman. First, the sentiment that Miller is being controlled or bankrolled by 'elite hidden interests' often have strong antisemitic undertones. The idea that she is a 'paid front for some shadowy establishment figures' or questions about the 'the puppet master pulling her strings?!' reproduce long-standing antisemitic tropes of Jews

secretly controlling governments (Langer, 2022: 25). Likewise, several commenters also assume that she is funded by 'the likes of Soros, Blair & those globalists!' As a well-known Jewish individual, Soros is now commonly utilised as an anti-Semitic dog-whistle in far-right online conspiracy theories (Langer, 2022: 25). Miller's intervention also prompts comments such as 'she is a nobody and a foreigner it's nothing to do with her even if she as money', thus discursively removing her from the national community. One of the more extreme comments states that

> All foreigners (whether holding British passports or not) should be subject to deportation if they become 'enemies of the state' and their presence in the UK is not in the national interest'. Left wing morons please note, this is not the action of a police state (dropping people out of aircraft, etc) these are common sense measures to remove undesirables from the UK.

This comment explicitly deprives racialised people of the possibility of Britishness and with it the right to participate in the public sphere while simultaneously calling for a popular mode of thinking through 'common sense'. Even more concerning are comments such as 'this woman is a parasite', 'Best she get back in her kennel' and 'please someone just shut this creature up once and for all'. Framing Miller as sub-human (as an animal, bacteria), in turn, authorises threats of violence against her that are more extreme than those experienced by other people we have studied, for example:

> She has the kind of face that you would never want to stop punching.

> I hope this breaks her, totally and absolutely

> Why is that fascist Cow still alive?

These violent comments not only border the public sphere and national space, but also civilisation, imagined as a White, democratic and liberal project which excludes racialised people, and particularly women of colour, from the scope of humanity (Chakrabarty, 2007). The sheer intensity and unpleasantness of these comments show the way in which people who figure as impossible in line with racist and gendered understandings of expertise are subject to potentially life-changing abuse.

Conclusion

We argue that online abuse is an important form of post-truth communication when it is used to publicly delegitimise knowledge, often violently excluding particular gendered, racialised and sexualised bodies from the status of the 'expert'. This occurs through processes of bordering of the public sphere, the nation and civilisation itself. We argue that there is a qualitative difference to be found in the abuse directed at White men compared with people from minoritised groups, with the former accepted in their position as 'academics' and their conduct or knowledge refuted, while the latter are denied their right to be academics or even to exist at all. This online abuse of women, LGBTQ+ and racialised people thus works to re-create the public sphere as the domain of White heterosexual men while simultaneously devaluing critical forms of knowledge (e.g. feminist, queer or postcolonial thought) as specialist and marginal. In the context of academia, this means that bodies and forms of knowledge that maintain the status quo are understood as 'expert'

while those that challenge it are violently shuttered out of the debate. While these long-standing stereotypes associated with British and European colonialism are not new, minoritised groups have greater access to the public sphere than ever before. Their presence as experts in debates particularly around masculinised areas of policy-making prompts floods of derogatory and violent messages that delegitimise this presence. The sheer volume and very public nature of this abuse facilitated by the news-making assemblages of the hybrid media system present a new and significant challenge to public trust in knowledge and expertise. This, in turn, has the potential to threaten the albeit limited progress made by marginalised groups in achieving access to academic positions, as those receiving or witnessing abuse partially or fully withdraw from the public sphere.

In making this case, we showed how generic criticisms of academics as a collective group and comments about individual academics, particularly of AC Grayling, drew on well-versed ideas of corrupt elites, ivory towers and brainwashing of students, who are framed as innocent children in need of protection (Edelman, 2004: 2). Despite some feminising and ageist comments about Grayling, the congruence between comments about academics generally and Grayling in particular, we argue, highlights the existence of 'the academic' as a White man in the British public imaginary. These criticisms, we note, speak about what academics and Grayling are *doing* and *saying* rather than who they *are*. Comments directed at women, however, challenge their very existence in public life. Comments about Galpin and Bateman coalesced around the theme of them being stupid or silly women. Comments about Galpin also take on a xenophobic character, with all too familiar cries of 'bloody foreigners'. Bateman was subjected to extreme sexualising and degrading comments about her body that, we argue, stems from her explicit challenge to stereotypes about women's bodies. Comments about Miller were racist and dehumanising to an extent that we did not see with the other individuals. We view these comments as violent acts of bordering of the public space, national space or civilisation generally. We do so in the knowledge of the severe affective impact of being abused online, and the lack of support often offered to the targets of these comments. These findings demonstrate the unique vulnerability of LGBTQ+, racialised and women academics within this epistemic context.

Our findings have several implications. First, we demonstrate the central role played by legacy media in the post-truth context. Due to declining print sales, legacy newspapers rely on social media clicks for advertising revenue. We can see the deliberate publication of articles likely to whip up a frenzy on social media platforms. This brings into question the effectiveness of strategies that tackle disinformation solely by regulating social media platforms without sufficient regulation of the press. The Online Safety Bill currently going through the UK parliament, for example, includes requirements that social media companies remove 'harmful content', but gives special protections to user comments precisely because they are 'crucial for enabling reader engagement with the news and encouraging public debate, as well as for the sustainability of the news media' (GOV.UK, 2022). In their direct attachment to legacy media output, abusive comments threads, therefore, become part of journalistic output itself. Through this, the 'bordering practices' around the public sphere that delegitimise certain kinds and bodies of expertise are not just a generally present phenomenon within the public sphere as they have always been, but gain explicit protection as an essential component of journalism and a guarantee for the future of news media in a digital age. Our study demonstrates that mainstream newspapers, alongside social media platforms, need to be held accountable for their role in facilitating and monetising abuse, and with it for their role in shaping the post-truth context.

Second, our study demonstrates the implications of post-truth politics for democracy in a wider sense than hitherto acknowledged. Following Nancy Fraser's feminist critique of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990), online abuse in this context functions to dismiss the contributions of women and people of other marginalised genders to public, democratic debate (Galpin, 2022a: 164). This abuse can be described as 'paradigmatic misogyny' which functions 'not only to symbolically punish and silence these prominent women but also to discipline and deter other women witnessing these attacks' (Siapera, 2019: 26). From an intersectional perspective, we have shown the way in which different vectors of identity coalesce to shape the nature of abusive messages. Minority women and non-binary people face more extreme, targeted and dehumanising attacks. In an international context in which we are witnessing the growing erosion of reproductive rights and trans rights that will have a disproportionate impact on racialised folk, the extreme violence faced by multiply marginalised people in online discussions violates Fraser's (2007: 61) concept of the 'all affected' principle for legitimate public debate which should be 'open to all with a stake in the outcome'.

Third, these concerns also add further weight to Heather Savigny's (2020) cautionary argument about the impact agenda in higher education that fails to acknowledge the likelihood of violence faced by minoritised academics. We acknowledge the distinctive role that material conditions play in dominant understandings of the expert. Neoliberalism creates precarity that forces some academics into accepting poor working conditions or discrimination (Savigny, 2020). Material conditions regulating access to academic positions also provide the very opportunity to engage publicly about research in a way that produces the 'expert' subject. White women's access to the academy has been significantly expanded, while Black, trans and queer women remain excluded from secure academic positions at 'prestigious' universities (AdvanceHE, 2021). In that sense, we recognise there is in some way a 'privilege' in having a platform significant enough to result in one's expertise being publicly discredited. Nevertheless, we have shown that being in the public sphere and expressing a critical opinion carry a real risk of violence for women, LGBTQ+ and racialised academics. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that the impact agenda and its expectations of academics to engage in self-promotion and research dissemination via social media will disappear. In this context, corporate inclusivity schemes require critical attention. Despite their widespread presence throughout the sector, working conditions remain poor for minoritised academics while universities market themselves on the basis of having women, LGBTQ+ and racialised staff at the institution (Yarrow and Johnston, 2022). Without radical collective action involving broad coalitions, conditions are unlikely to change. We hope that this article contributes, in a modest way, towards laying the groundwork for this.

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