Digital hostility, internet pile-ons and shaming: A case study

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Abstract
Digital hostility poses a grave risk to the health and wellbeing of its targets. This study addresses digital hostility levelled at public figures, and does so through the case study of Wilson Gavin. Gavin had cultivated a minor public profile in Australia through his conservative activism. In January 2020, after protesting at a drag storytelling event in Brisbane, Gavin was subject to significant online abuse; a day after the protest, he died by suicide. This study examines the forms, themes and frameworks of that abuse as it played out across a small sample of publicly available Twitter posts. The study also addresses Twitter responses to the death. These responses are significant in that they individualise Gavin’s suicide and portray him as unable to protect himself and thus inherently vulnerable to taking his own life. Conversely, the study suggests that Gavin’s death points to the need for an understanding of how digital hostility harms those who are subject to it and how public figures can become resilient to that hostility.

Keywords
Digital hostility, online shaming, resilience, public figures, Twitter, mental health, suicide, LGBTQI young people

Introduction
Hostility in online communication is a significant element in contemporary digital culture. Public figures are especially prone to this hostility. There have been several high-profile cases in which online hostility has resulted in serious career loss and detrimental impacts on health, mental health and wellbeing, including suicide. For example, in February 2020, British TV presenter Caroline Flack died by suicide following a newspaper scandal over a fight with her partner for which she was arrested, and a subsequent internet pile-on in which she was personally attacked (Marshall, 2020). These examples indicate the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between scandal that emerges through news reporting, how such reporting helps generate online
hostility, and whether contemporary celebrities have enough support from their agencies, employers, and media industries. As Meghan Markle articulated in relation to encountering racist hate speech online: ‘not many people have asked if I’m okay’ (cited in Acevado, 2019). So what are the conditions for having a liveable life in an era of digital hostility? How does one cultivate a sense of resilience against digital hostility?

This study analyses the mechanics of online hostility through a close reading of one particular Australian case study. On 12 January 2020, Wilson Gavin (a member of the conservative Queensland Young Liberal Party) protested a drag queen storytime event at Brisbane Library. Gavin had cultivated a minor public profile through his social media presence, including vox populi interviews on political issues uploaded to YouTube, and his activism around conservative issues. That activism included his opposition to same-sex marriage (Gavin himself identified as gay). In the hours following the library protest, he was subject to an internet pile-on, which included shaming. One day after this pile-on, Gavin died by suicide.

This study suggests that the Gavin case demonstrates an urgent need to understand how hostility directed at public figures is understood by digital media users and the public, particularly in cases where a public figure becomes the subject of scandal, shaming or ridicule; and where those hostile behaviours negatively impact on identity, mental health and the risk of suicide. There is a pressing need, the study argues, for better understandings of digital hostility and its effects. This understanding can lead to better protections and support for all internet users.

The study begins with a brief survey of some extant literature on digital hostility and its impact on the mental health and wellbeing of recipients. The study then addresses the Wilson Gavin case, with a specific emphasis on the reception of the protest and the discourse by which Gavin’s subsequent suicide and the grief surrounding this circulated on Twitter. As this study argues, responses to the young man’s death tend to individualise it, explaining the death as a ‘personal’ failure to cultivate resilience against online hostility. This is true even of the overtly performative expressions of grief. This study suggests that these responses to Gavin’s suicide provide an opportunity for thinking about how to more adequately conceptualise online hostility, especially the harm that this hostility can cause those individuals who are subject to it; and how these individuals can cultivate a sense of resilience to cope with adverse online communication.

Digital hostility, public figures and health

Digital hostility is a cultural condition which has emerged as a practice of communication; and an attitude or mode of disposition towards others that reflects and is produced by the instantaneity of online communication. This hostility can be traced to a number of factors. These include the instantaneity of online communication, which will be discussed in the next section. Digital hostility can stem from an inability to read social cues in online spaces, and thus get a sense of whether one’s actions might be more hurtful than helpful (Voggeser et al., 2018: 1). Such hostility can also stem from the disinhibition that an internet user can feel when in online spaces, and which results (partly) from the absence of social and facial cues (Suler, 2004: 324).

From an ethical perspective, digital hostility can be perceived as an interpretive framework that prevents the perception of the subject addressed as a human subject, a subject worthy of recognition or dignity (Butler, 2009: 50). In that sense, the inability to perceive the subject of address as worthy, or as differentiated from the self-worth of the hostile communicator, is the source of a particular Dispositif of digital communication. The ethical framework of digital hostility, then, is related to broader cultural formations and emergences. As Rob Cover suggests, these formations and emergences include the rise of interactive engagement (Cover, 2006) and the expectation that the
expression of hostile attitudes is a right (Cover, 2013). The latter can be witnessed in the framework of contemporary populism (Blassnig et al., 2019; Ostiguy, 2017).

This study foregrounds two forms of online hostility: the internet pile-on and online shaming. The study uses the term ‘internet pile-on’ to describe the cultural practice in which an individual is publicly shamed by internet users in numbers that range from two or three to thousands or even millions. The authors draw the term ‘internet pile-on’ from its use in an opinion piece by Australian journalist James Marsden (2017) who discussed cases of outraged users taking advantage of social media to respond to the faux pas of public figures (e.g. an interviewer fat-shaming author Roxane Gay). While the concept of the pile-on is not yet used heavily in academic literature on digital hostility; it is an important concept because it allows the experience of hostility to be re-framed from one focused on individual or repeated content (e.g. hate speech, abusive language, and name-calling) to one which acknowledges that relatively mild content repeated by very large or uncountable numbers of individuals.

The internet pile-on takes cyberbullying into a new register marked not by the anonymity of bullies online but by the sheer numbers of perpetrators of bullying. In fact, these terms are not interchangeable. That is, cyberbullying is often recognised as carried out by an individual or a small group led by an individual, can be carried out by only one individual, as the following definition suggests: ‘A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students (cited in Olweus and Limber, 2018: 139). The pile-on, however, restores to the narrowcast framework of online communication concepts of the mass and the mob (Urry, 2007: 8), whereby it is not the fact of particular kinds of speech but the fact of particular numbers of users criticising simultaneously, repeatedly or en masse that signifies hostility.

Shaming is a transformative affect that operates through drawing attention to forms of non-belonging among individuals by a larger body representing social codes of behaviour (Corry, 2021; Probyn, 2005). As Elspeth Probyn (2005) argues, the normative mode of shaming is to discipline and normalise, and can often be understood as generative in fostering ethical relations or producing forms of behaviour change. In its online form, shaming can draw greater attention to problematic behaviours in a more widespread manner. An example is when Justin Trudeau (the current Prime Minister of Canada) was revealed to have adopted ‘blackface’ (Rogers 2019). In this example, online shaming and ‘call-outs’ drew attention to the racism that has historically surrounded the use of blackface, and obliged Trudeau and others to reassess future practices. As it stands, however, online shaming in combination with the pile-on frequently involves not remedial arguments about ethical behaviour or practices, but an online bombardment of hatred from internet users. Internet pile-ons and online shaming overlap: the Wilson Gavin case is an example of this, where by some participants in the pile-on attempted to shame Gavin for his library protest and his politics.

Public figures are especially likely to be recipients of digital hostility that takes the form of pile-ons and shaming.¹ This study uses ‘public figures’ as an umbrella term to describe individuals whose work and/or persona is known outside their own personal and professional spheres. This includes figures who become known to the public in ways traditionally aligned with the concept of ‘celebrity’, for example, actors and musicians (Redmond and Holmes, 2007). ‘Public figures’ encompasses micro-celebrities (e.g. social influencers), who achieve notoriety largely or exclusively via their online activities (Khamis et al., 2017). ‘Public figures’ also encompasses individuals who attract media attention, whether in the form of media scandal reporting or in the framework of online interest – two fields which only sometimes coincide.

No quantifiable data have ever been gathered on the extent to which public figures are subject to online hostility as a result of their contributions to public life. There is, however, evidence regarding
the depth of the problem for some figures who are in public roles, where scandal, hostility, trolling or internet pile-ons have led to career disruptions, withdrawal from public life, and/or a negative impact on their health, mental health and wellbeing. The suicides of Caroline Flack and Wilson Gavin are two examples of this evidence.

The term ‘liveable life’ encompasses an individual’s capacity to practice social engagement with a sense of futurity and social participation. There is no one blueprint on what such a life might entail; there are, however, a number key features. For example, a liveable life is one in which the individual feels that they belong in a particular setting (e.g. a home, a workplace, or a city) that they are not made to feel as though they are unwanted or intruders in that space. A liveable life is one in which the individual is accorded respect by others; they are not disrespected, or viewed as being inferior or less than human (Butler, 2004: 2; Rogaly and Taylor, 2009: 46).

Although there are grounds for significant ongoing work on the relationship between digital hostility, health and mental health, one aspect that warrants urgent attention is a stronger understanding as to how the public perceive and respond to digital hostility in its various forms. A temporal ‘intervention point’ occurs in the period just subsequent to a suicide or harm that has arguably resulted from digital hostility (White and Kral, 2014: 131). The remainder of the article thus examines some of the online speech on Twitter in the 3-day period before and after the suicide of Wilson Gavin, whose opposition to aspects of LGBTQ culture resulted in an internet pile-on and online shaming. This hostility appears to have played a crucial role in his decision to take his own life.

**Tweeting the Wilson Gavin case**

Understanding the impact of digital hostility on public figures such as Gavin involves more than merely cataloguing instances of harm, injury or upset caused by digital hostility in ways that might not have been experienced in a hypothetical framework of pre-digital culture. Such cataloguing attempts to present alternative scenarios or nostalgic representations. Moreover, it is marked by discourses designed to alienate digital communication from the everyday. Conversely, this study understands the emergence of online hostility as being as an integral part of everydayness, subjectivity and contemporary practices of identity, belonging and liveability.

In that context, the study sought to examine how an internet pile-on and online shaming occurred in the context of Gavin’s everyday life, not as something unfortunate, alien and incomprehensible in the subjectivity of a minor Australian public figure, but as something experienced in its ordinariness as a disruption in public belonging and as an aspect of culture that could lead to self-harm and suicidality. The researchers examined a series of tweets posted about Gavin over a 72-hour period, between 12 January and 14 January 2020. 12 January was the date of the protest; 13 January was the day Gavin died; and on 14 January, this death continued to be discussed online.

In selecting tweets from this brief timeframe, the study aimed to capture a sense of the instantaneity that characterises much social media communication (Herzogenrath-Amelung, 2016). For Zizi Papacharissi (2015), instantaneity, which marks contemporary social media forms such as Twitter, describes the unfolding, recording and instant reporting of events in such a way that turns those events into stories. Instantaneity ‘exposes the temporal incompatibility of Twitter with our conventional definitions of what is news, what separates fact from opinion and subjectivity from objectivity’ (44). In this context, it is not the fact of hostile utterances that is of concern; rather it is the instantaneity of the pile-on which produces a subject positioned to perceive themselves as not having been worthy of considered, slow and critical judgement but, as in stereotyping, the recipient of prejudice (as a pre-judgement).
The tweets posted directly before and after Gavin’s death were instantly (or almost instantly) posted, to respond to a changing (if heightened) turn of events. A total of 60 tweets were collected. The tweets were screenshot for analysis and coding 4 months after Gavin died; they were located by typing the name ‘Wilson Gavin’ into the Twitter search engine and restricting the search to 12–14 January 2020. All tweets were taken from publicly available accounts; any posted by users with restricted privacy settings were not included. To protect the privacy of users, direct quotes from the tweets selected are mostly summarised, rather than provided in full. The users who posted about Gavin’s protest and death comprise figures from the media and politics, as well as many who have no apparent stake in either field. Some users align with a specific political standpoint or party, either explicitly (e.g. they name the political party that they are affiliated with) or implicitly (e.g. their personal politics is evident in what they have written); others do not. Few of the tweets within our corpus appear to have been posted by the same individual.

Several tweets mention that previous tweets had been deleted. There could be a number of reasons for these deletions; for example, one person admitted that they deleted a tweet they had posted about Gavin’s death, before urging others to be ‘sensitive’. The suggestion is, even those who tweeted about the death (as opposed to the library protest) may have been conscious of the distress this tweet could have caused other Twitter users. Twitter may have deleted certain tweets due to their being hate speech. Thus, the corpus is necessarily incomplete, although it is important to acknowledge that the disparities in permanency mean that some users may have greater access to – and capacity to share – tweets that were deleted, while others may be blocked from seeing any at all. We are also not arguing that the material is the same sum or format of tweets that was witnessed by Gavin. Thus, while the corpus accessed for the purposes of this study is relatively small and not necessarily generalisable, it nevertheless provides an important insight into the discourses that are drawn upon in tweeting hostile remarks, in reconsidering those remarks, and in the framework and context of hostile speech.

The researchers expected two kinds of responses: one in which Gavin was depicted in as a (perhaps self-loathing) homophobe who warranted calling out, and another in which he was framed as a victim of an intolerant left-wing politics. In this context, the researchers had anticipated an older left-right culture war would provide the grounding for an attitude towards the causality of his suicide. That is, that his liveability was put at risk as a result of negative commentary and call-outs by those interested in social justice actively shaming him for his right-wing, anti-transgender and anti-queer stance. Although not addressed in this article, the study found that online hostility directed towards Gavin in the day prior to his death played out to a significant extent along familiar politicised lines that articulated a political position with considerably violent hate speech. Some of this related to same-sex marriage debates in Australia which were simultaneously politically polarised and involved an array of diverse views held by young people (Cover et al., 2020). For example, one tweet (posted on 12 March) circulated a link to an article that depicts some of Gavin’s opposition to same-sex marriage, suggesting that this activism was evidence Gavin was suffering from emotional or psychological problems. Another tweet posted on the same date described Gavin in pejorative terms.

The choice of Twitter as a site of data collection is not incidental. This was the platform where some of the most impassioned online commentary about Gavin’s protest took place. Twitter as a site of data collection is also important given the affordances of that platform. As one study notes, ‘it is possible, with a little effort and sufficient technical resources, for researchers to gather very large archives of public tweets concerned with a particular topic, theme or event’ (Burgess and Bruns, 2012, unpaginated). Twitter functions thus as a kind of repository of publicly expressed views on any given issue; a virtual public sphere. The popularity of a certain issue can be suggested by the
spreading of hashtags (Meese et al., 2015). Wilson Gavin himself appears not to have been the
subject of a hashtag, though the protest he led and his subsequent death provided rich fodder for
Twitter users. To illustrate: on 12 January, he was the subject of 13 tweets; in the 2 days that
followed, Gavin was the subject of 21 tweets (13 January) and 26 tweets (14 January). The authors
used a framing analysis to examine the tweets. According to Robert Entman:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived
reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular
problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the
item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe. (1993: 52; emphasis in original)

Accordingly, framing analysis explores the ‘aspects of perceived reality’ that are made ‘salient’
in a particular text (e.g. Fahmy, 2010; Pan and Kosicki, 1993: 56). Through framing analysis, the
study has been able to draw insights on the forms, types and discourses that reveal the extent to
which our anticipated frames are meaningfully reflected, and what other interpretive frames
governed responsiveness to Gavin’s death.

A framing analysis of the 60 tweets across the 3-day period indicated that a casual prediction that
the majority of tweets might discuss online hostility, political perspectives and the causes of Gavin’s
death were incorrect. Rather, a broader range of related topics about Gavin were uncovered that did
not fit easily into any of the anticipated frames about his actions and death.

Discussing Wilson Gavin’s library protest

1. Hostile towards Gavin’s protest, including ad hominem attacks = 9
2. Commending Gavin’s protest and actions = 1
3. Calling out Gavin over discrimination = 1
4. Specifics of Gavin’s relationships with other members of the conservative Liberal National
   Party = 3
5. Other related to the protest = 3

Explaining his suicide

1. Gavin was a victim of social media-driven hostility = 3 tweets
2. Gavin was a victim of an intolerant, censorious, online Left = 6
3. Gavin was killed by internalised homophobia, which was reflected and exacerbated by his
   involvement with conservative politics = 1
4. Gavin did not kill himself = 1
5. Other related to suicide causes or protections = 4

Communication and grief subsequent to suicide

1. Expressions of grief = 9
2. Announcing his death = 4
3. Jokes about Gavin’s name = 2
4. Disparity in grief for Gavin and grief for others = 1
5. Other protests related to grieving = 3

Miscellaneous
1. 9 tweets

Through investigating the above tweets, the researchers had sought to determine ways in which hostility was represented, changed and framed in the context of that which was seen by members of the public as Gavin’s infraction, and the public revelation of his suicide. However, in the context of the *immediacy* of delivering and receiving messages, what we uncovered were not considered responses that could be framed by the possibilities of an ethical engagement with either digital hostility or suicidality (Battin, 1995). Rather, the researchers uncovered forms of response that are affective, presenting ‘attitudes’ as a visceral orientation towards an object of thought without warranting a careful evaluation of those thoughts (Cover, 2013). The process of coding revealed a less refined framework that points to the thematic representation of anomalies which draw attention to assumptions about available and unavailable discourses governing communication (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019: p. 261). The following section discusses the discourses underlying the discussion of Gavin’s suicide across three registers: (A) Explanations of his suicide; (B) Practices of grieving; and (C) Perceptions of resilience subsequent to online hostility.

**Explaining Wilson Gavin’s suicide**

In the wake of Gavin’s suicide being reported by the media, there were attempts by Twitter users to ‘explain’ this tragic and sudden outcome. Several tweets frame the online hostility which Gavin experienced as playing a key role in his decision to die by suicide. For example, one tweet draws a link between the experience of digital hostility and suicidality. Importantly, this framing draws on an extant knowledge framework related to bullying and cyberbullying. A link between bullying and suicide became prominent in the early 2010s, particularly in relation to reports of queer youth suicides in North America (Italie, 2010; McKinley, 2010; Tomazin, 2010), whereby the disciplinary environment first of schools and then of online culture (cyberbullying) were increasingly depicted as sites that victims of bullying sought to flee, with suicide often understood as being a final resort (Cover, 2012). As a response to digital hostility experienced by LGBTQI individuals, suicide has been represented in terms of what Edwin Shneidman described as the insight that it is possible to put an end to suffering by stopping the unbearable flow of consciousness... In this context, suicide is understood not as a movement toward death (or cessation) but rather as a flight from intolerable emotion (1985: 36).

That is, digital hostility does not destabilise the mental health of a subject, but becomes that which is so intolerably painful to experience, deal with, respond to or be aware of that suicide becomes a kind of ‘social logic’ (Kral, 1994) for escape.

Other tweets blame Gavin’s suicide on his political opponents. These opponents are described as ‘left-wing’ and as waging a ‘campaign’ against him. Only two tweets articulated a notion of suicide resulting from an ‘internalised homophobia’, noting that although Gavin was aligned with a conservative anti-LGBTQ politics, he was openly gay-identifying. These tweets draw on a discourse of much older beliefs about suicidality resulting from a pathological self-ridicule and thereby ‘the impossibility of reclaiming or achieving a sense of social place’ (Mokros, 1995: 1096), in addition to a broader perception of the link between non-heterosexual identity, self-hatred and suicide (Cover, 2016b; McLaren, 2016). At times, this reflects a deeper cultural assumption of young gay men ‘as vulnerable and as victims who are inherently without strategies for coping with adversity’ (Cover, 2016a: 351), thereby linking suicidality with minority status and making minorities accountable for their
own self-management in face of adversity. Arguably, as there was no other evidence of internalised homophobia but, instead, a more complex post-stereotypical framing of Gavin’s politics as differentiated from the cultural norm, this argument indicates an unwillingness to perceive the role of digital hostility and practices of shaming (over the politics). This deflects ideas of suicide causality to the internal, and to a shame related to identity rather than digital relationality.

Some tweets acknowledge the complexity of suicide; for example, one acknowledges that the suicide of a gay person cannot be exclusively attributed to their homosexuality. Those tweets indicate the possibility of a more complex array of factors in Gavin’s death, which may include both the experience of digital hostility and other factors related to his sexuality or sexuality-related experience of belonging and social inclusion in both digital and other aspects of being. This suggests that there might be a diversity of frames through which Gavin’s death can be understood. Frames, after all, allow us ‘to locate, perceive, identify and label’ a phenomena or occurrence (Goffman, 1974: 21; and see Pan and Kosicki, 1993: 56).

Practices of grieving

The coding frames deployed by the researchers did not anticipate the grief expressed on Twitter in the wake of Gavin’s death. This is even despite the research on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook as sites of grieving, mourning and memorialisation (Meese et al., 2015: 1821; Willis and Ferucci, 2017). Some tweets indicated a refusal to grieve or to find Gavin a grievable subject on the basis of his politics or actions. Some used the #sorrynotsorry tag, while another stated that grieving a man with his political activist history was unfair. Other tweets were more active in separating Gavin’s grievability from his politics. One tweet is posted by an individual who claims that Gavin was ‘kind’, and thus very different to his public image. Several others have been posted by users who were opposed to Gavin’s political stance on gender and sexuality-related issues, but who acknowledge the tragedy of his death. Those latter performances of grieving described above separate his political actions from his worthiness as a human being. They express a framework of regret at the digital hostility that was the response to his political activities. Yet, they also exonerate or ignore the role of the pile-ons and shaming practices in Gavin’s suicide, and focus on the act instead of separating his political convictions from his worthiness to live a liveable life. The researchers use the term ‘liveable life’ to suggest a life where the individual experiences feelings of happiness, satisfaction, self-worth; a life that the individual feels is worth sustaining.

Do such posts represent Gavin’s life as having always been grievable? This seems unlikely. Judith Butler (2009: 22–23) has argued that for a life to be grievable and grieved, it has to have been perceived as a life per se. Butler notes that precariousness and grievability are differentially allocated: only some lives are marked as worthy of grief, while others are not. Certain discourses, communication practices and interpretative frameworks prevent some people from apprehending the lives of certain others (e.g. minorities and non-nationals) as being worthy of grief if and when their lives are lost. While those who are unable to see the lives of others as grievable are not fully accountable for the interpretative frames that mark only some subjects as worthy of such grief, it remains that the distance, difference and othering that culturally frames digital practices of communication and the culture of social networking has the potential to reduce the capability of recognising the recipient of abuse as worthy of grief. Conversely, online communities have the potential to perform particular modes of grief that may not necessarily be grieving.

By turning to performances of grieving – ironically in the same site at which Gavin was subject to digital hostility – the grief-related tweets ignore the fact his being subject to such hostility without regard for its impact on his capacity to live a liveable life is likely to have played a role in his
suicidality. While it has become increasingly well-understood that there is a correlation between online hostility and negative mental health issues (e.g. Gorman, 2019; Lewis et al., 2017: 1475), in the Gavin case, social media posts that perform the language of grieving deflect the possibility of a broader public sphere discussion about the effects that internet pile-ons and online shaming have on the ability to live a liveable life.

Perceptions of resilience subsequent to online hostility

A small number of responses articulated a discourse about the need for greater resilience in the face of digital hostility. For example, one tweet suggested that Gavin was driven to suicide by feelings of hopelessness. Posts such as this one assume an inherent lack of resilience on Gavin’s behalf; an inability to not kill oneself, in the face of online hostility. Hopelessness has a long association with suicidality as both a social and individual risk factor (Holden et al., 1989: 500). Whether within institutional settings of psychology and psychiatric assessment, or in broader pedestrian knowledge frameworks, much contemporary framing of the idea of hopelessness presents a discursive linkage between the affective feeling of a lack of futurity and being overwhelmed by something adversarial. For example, Aaron T. Beck’s ‘Hopelessness Scale’ (which is used in much psychiatric assessment for suicidality) draws a link across a series of true-false survey questions asking the subject about feelings in relation to the future, expectation and self-motivation. Beck and colleagues attempted to provide an objective measurement for hopelessness rather than leave it treated as a diffuse and vague state of feeling in patients with depression. Questions include: ‘I might as well give up because I can’t make things better for myself’; ‘I can’t imagine what my life would be like in ten years’; ‘My future seems dark to me’; and ‘All I can see ahead of me is unpleasantness rather than pleasantness’ (Beck et al., 1974). Responding true to these contributes to a score of hopelessness. Responding with ‘false’ to some of the following also indicates hopelessness; ‘I can look forward to more good times than bad times,’ and ‘When things are going badly, I am helped by knowing they can’t stay that way forever’ (Beck et al., 1974). When situated within the contemporary experience of digital hostility, it is important to consider the relationship between feeling overwhelmed by hostile speech on the large scale an internet pile-on can produce, in conjunction with not knowing how to address those feelings or respond in a way which restores a sense of dignity for those who are being subject to that hostility. These are arguably detrimental to the possibilities of persisting in a liveable life that is lived in online settings as much as in offline and through face-to-face relationships (Cover, 2016b).

The tweets that suggest that Gavin should have been more resilient in the face of digital hostility rather than choose escape through suicide (Shneidman, 1985) reflect a neoliberal, individualised approach to resilience as a trait of being able to self-manage adversity (Cretney 2014: 637). Such approaches fail to account for newer understandings more appropriate for a digital era in which exposure to adversity on a massive scale in the public sphere. Approaches such as Michael Unger’s (2012) ‘social ecology of resilience’, move beyond psychological understandings of ‘bouncing back’ from adversity, and re-conceive resilience as a social function operating in the interaction between individuals and their environments. As Unger notes,

resilience is a shared quality of the individual and the individual’s social ecology, with the social ecology likely more important than individual factors to recovery and sustainable well-being for populations under stress (2012: 17).

In the context of digital media, such ecologies and environments include the digital resources to which a person has access. They also include the more traditional supports such as family, institutions, and health practitioners. These resources also include the frameworks of digital
engagement as a central aspect of social existence: that is, a sense of belonging in online settings in which one can speak or act without fear of shaming, humiliation or adversity.

Thus, the cluster of tweets which framed the Wilson Gavin story as one of failed resilience deploy an older understanding of resilience as giving up on social change altogether. Yet, those tweets have also opened the path for a more sustained public sphere discussion on the need to combat digital hostility, and how to reduce the need for public figures to self-manage their responses to the experience of online shaming, internet pile-ons, in order better to foster online resilience. In stating this, the study does not suggest that internet users are responsible for the online hostility they may be subject to, nor does suggest that resilience will necessarily eliminate that hostility. The researchers contend that cultivating resilience can enable individuals (including public figures) to withstand the abuse they may endure online and reduce their risk of suicide.

Conclusion

This study has explored the internet pile-on and shaming that Wilson Gavin was subject to on Twitter following his library protest, as well as the immediate internet responses to his death. The article has undertaken this via a framing analysis of tweets dated from 12 to 14 January 2020. Although at 60 available tweets the corpus of material studied is small, framing analysis allows us to draw nascent conclusions about three discourses which respond to the relationship between hostility and suicidality: explanations that individualise, how people perform grief online, and perceptions of resilience as a form of immunisation against hostility. Across the corpus, then, there is an emphasis on the shortcomings of the subject who suicides rather than on the wider cultural problem of digital hostility. Here, the ‘crisis’ of hostility is re-figured as secondary rather than opened for examination in the tweets.

The study suggests that the post-death tweets are especially problematic in that the majority are based on the assumption that Gavin was inherently vulnerable, unable to protect himself, and therefore destined to be driven to suicide by internalised homophobia, online attacks, or the machinations of political opponents. The study has argued that public discussion which discounts the role played by pile-ons and shaming ignores the significance of that hostility. This study has also suggested that this discussion shifts attention away from the need to begin advancing strategies of support and resilience among public figures who are subject to online hostility. The latter is an area that deserves further research.

Notes

1. This vulnerability to online hostility can be further amplified by race and gender (see KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018; Lumsden and Morgan 2017).
2. Herzogenrath-Amelung discusses the internet pile-on (though she does not use that term) surrounding immunologist Tim Hunt following sexist remarks he made at a 2015 conference.
3. Same-sex marriage (SSM) was legalised in Australia in November 2017, following a controversial and non-compulsory public survey (see Thomas et al., 2020).
4. Conceptualising Twitter as a virtual public sphere is not without limitations, as several studies have demonstrated (e.g. Yang et al., 2017). This conceptualisation is useful because it suggests how a broad range of views on any given topic can be expressed in a single, public setting.
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