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Editorial. **Addressing Antisocial Behaviour and Toxic Communication Online**

Introduction

We live in an increasingly digital society. It is a hyperconnected world; a world where digital technologies, and social media in particular, are deeply embedded in our everyday lives. Such is the nature of this hyperconnectivity that, for many of us, we would be unable to work, learn and socialise without our internet-enabled devices and online platforms. Indeed, even our civic participation and engagement with our public institutions increasingly requires our digital presence. The very notion of a digital society invokes an understanding of the mutually shaping and co-constituting relationship between humans and digital technologies; and this entanglement arguably presents many different, complex, and sometimes harmful, effects. Though criminology and criminal justice scholars have long examined technology-enabled crime and criminality, there has been comparatively little engagement with a diverse range of non-criminal harms in our digital society. It is such harmful, antisocial behaviours, and toxic communications that this *Special Issue* seeks to highlight. As we go onto to discuss below, many of the harmful behaviours and communications in our digital society, and therefore the challenges to be met, are social more than technical. It is our intention, then, to draw the criminological imagination to the fundamental question: *what kind of digital society do we want to 'live' in?* Criminological thinking is uniquely positioned to engage in this important and timely debate.

From *Cybercrime* to *Digital Criminology*

Criminological literature on crime and deviance in 'cyberspace' has boomed since the 1990s. Cyberspace, *per se*, is simply a social space connecting people and facilitating commerce. However, some of its characteristics (e.g., it is virtually unlimited, and enables both instantaneous and asynchronous communication) makes it particularly prone to the carrying out of countless harmful behaviours in very effective ways. Many early studies within criminology focused on a limited range of acts against the law, ranging from hacking and

malware attacks to online fraud and child sexual exploitation (so-called 'cybercrimes in a strict sense'), often with a positivistic focus, and with most attention focused on the policing and forensic investigations of these crimes in the Anglosphere. An emerging orthodoxy within this field of research emphasised the novelties of cyberspace (as distinct from terrestrial or in-person crimes) and many studies applied routine activities and/or social learning theory in an effort to understand how individuals' engagements with these 'new' technologies might cause greater opportunities for either victimisation or perpetration of criminal behaviours online (see Holt & Bossler, 2014 for a critique).

Over the last decade, however, some scholars have been slowly broadening and deepening the criminological imagination by challenging the very restricted view of 'what (cyber)crime is'. Indeed, there has arguably been a shift in scholarly attention to consider broader forms of online deviance and harmful behaviours (such as certain crimes against persons, or crimes of deception), that were initially largely overlooked. In this way, new forms of harmful and antisocial behaviours, capable of causing great human suffering, have started to receive attention within criminology. By recognising that a wide-meshed, but still legalistic approach fails to capture the seriousness of many acts that are facilitated by digital means, but which cause very tangible and real detriment to their victims, within the realm of *digital criminology* there has been in the past few years increased attention on behaviours that hurt individuals and society, even if they might not necessarily infringe specific laws (consider, for instance, our previous work in Stratton et al. 2017; Powell et al. 2018; Powell, et al., 2021; Lavorgna 2020, 2021a,b). By definition these are not *crimes*, and might not even be clearly labelled as *deviant* acts or behaviours, as they may in fact have become mainstream in certain communities or subcultures. Nonetheless, they can produce negative financial, psychological even physical effects on individuals and society alike, and as such, their social acceptance has been changing in recent years. A *digital criminology* then, seeks to engage the criminological imagination in questions of ethics, justice and equality within a digital society (Stratton et al. 2017; Powell et al. 2018; see also Knight & Van De Steene, 2020; Smith et al., 2017; Flynn et al. 2021).

This special issue furthers this path by focusing on antisocial behaviour and toxic communication online, here broadly defined as those communicative practices happening in our digital society, willingly or unwillingly causing social harms. An umbrella term, toxic communication can comprise very different behaviours, ranging from information pollution to various type of antagonistic online behaviours. These are a major contemporary sociotechnical

issue that still go largely unchallenged and unregulated. The ubiquitous presence of cyberspace in our societies, and the increasing role of the virtual self in people's identity can amplify targets' vulnerabilities and communications' reach. By normalising a potentially dangerous or hostile mode of discourse, antisocial behaviour and toxic communication threatens the safety, inclusivity and civility of both online and offline interactions.

The issue of online antisocial behaviour and toxic communication, has, so far, been addressed by several academic disciplines, but generally with distinct disciplinary-bound approaches to research, and in fragmented ways. A number of studies relevant to the topic – mostly focused on the interactions between online accounts to investigate the spreading and the polarization of specific types of misinformation – have been carried out by computer and data scientists. Other researchers, often grounded in social and cognitive psychology, have investigated predictors of engagement and participation in toxic social media environments, such as personality characteristics or cognitive biases. Researchers with an interest in digital journalism and science communication have focused on the role of news engagement and consumption. Only very recently some in-depth studies have been carried out in the socio-legal sciences and criminology, an effort that we have sought to further encourage through this special issue.

As we will see, addressing, regulating and even defining toxic communication is intricate. In investigating toxic communication online, there is an important tension among fundamental (if at times, antithetic) principles: the dignity/safety of the target(s), the accuracy of the information propagated, and freedom of expression. Finding a balance between those principles is extremely challenging, but it is fundamental in cyberspace, where toxic communication can be particularly harmful as potentially more accessible. Furthermore, inflammatory, false, provocative or otherwise damaging information published online has the capacity to catalyse hostility exponentially, reaching like-minded people all over the world and worsening opinion polarisation with severe social and political effects. Looking at toxic communication through a social harms lens, rather than through a strictly legalistic approach, allows us to broaden the scope of criminological enquiry to important, yet often overlooked, research areas. Moreover, as the notion of what 'toxic communication' actually varies in time and space, a social harm approach allows for more flexibility: by fostering new critical thinking on the actual harms, rather than on the letter of the law, it can facilitate international, comparative and cross-disciplinary research on the topic, in an attempt to increase awareness, reduce victimisation, and mitigate harms to past and current targets.

Key themes of this *Special Issue*

The articles in this special issue represent a heterogeneous series of studies focusing on a variety of examples of antisocial behaviour and toxic communication. Together, the contributing authors represent very diverse communities from different countries, as well as differing methods, standpoints and theoretical traditions. Each of the articles engages with underlying tensions between the urge to address the harms of antisocial behaviour and toxic communication, whilst finding practical, effectual and ethical ways to prevent, deter and/or control it. In doing so, the authors' critically examine key themes and issues such as gender-based hate, right-wing extremism, social exclusion, digital vulnerability and disruptive forms of interactions in gaming communities, as well as legal and social responses.

In 'Mainstreaming The Blackpill: Understanding The Incel Community On TikTok', Anda Solea and Lisa Sugiura argue that the increasing presence of 'incel' (involuntary celibates) discourse in mainstream social media platforms represents a harmful extension of misogyny, sexism and rape culture within broader society (Solea & Sugiura, 2023). They note the technological affordances such as global reach, anonymity, audience and community that enable what might otherwise be fringe subcultures to become increasingly normalised within mainstream understandings and culture. Yet, in case of incel discourse, there is also a convergence with existing mainstreaming of sexism and misogyny which arguably eases the amplification and reach of more extreme incel tropes.

Yi Ting Chua and Lydia Wilson further examine online misogyny in 'Beyond Black and White: The Intersection of Ideologies in Online Extremist Communities', alongside other forms of hate speech against marginalised communities (Chua & Wilson, 2023). In particular, they note the potential radicalisation pathway from what might be understood as more mainstream sexist and misogynistic content, through to increasingly racialised and radical far-right extremism.

In 'Mobilising Extremism in Times of Change: Analysing the UK's Far-Right Online Content During the Pandemic', Jonathan Collins further elucidates the machinations of online far-right extremist communities (Collins, 2023). Collins argues that such communities exploit what he terms *collective anxiety* in order to expand their networks through narrative that simultaneously exacerbate societal anxieties while also offering simplified and divisive 'solutions'. In

particular, Collins discusses the specific context of societal insecurities and anxieties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this further illustrates the role of collective anxiety in the proliferation of far-right extremism. Ultimately, Collins notes that content removal may only be one part of a strategy to address such far-right extremism; that it also requires tackling some of the societal factors (such as marginalisation and ostracization) that represent vulnerabilities to far-right manipulation of societal anxieties.

Different forms of social insecurities are explored in '"100% they are destroying our beautiful town": Toxic Conversations about Homelessness on Public Facebook Community Groups', where Abigail Robillard and Steph Howells focus on an often neglected form of digital vulnerability: i.e., the ways that individuals' experiencing homelessness are 'othered', shamed and exposed through toxic online communications (Robillard & Howells, 2023). They argue that social media further exacerbates both the risks, and inherent paradox, of unhoused people attempting to live their private lives in public spaces. Moreover, it is not only that toxic communications about unhoused persons can feed negative stigmas and perceptions of homelessness; but, as Robillard and Howells demonstrate, there are potential further harms that arise from calls for 'vigilante' action and violence against those experiencing homelessness.

Toxic communication, however, does not target only categories of people (e.g., women, marginalised communities), but also specific individuals. This is exemplified in 'Too Lucky to Be a Victim? An Exploratory Study of Online Harassment and Hate Messages Faced by Social Media Influencers' by Noelia Valenzuela-García, Diego J. Maldonado-Guzmán, Andrea García-Pérez and Cristina Del-Real (Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). The authors focus on an understudied category of victims of antisocial behaviour and toxic communication online – i.e., social media influencers. By drawing on original survey data and a digital ethnography, this contribution discusses the characteristics, impact and reactions to cyber victimisation among Spanish influencers, reflecting on their 'non-ideal victim' role, and on vulnerability among those more digitally exposed.

The relationship between digital exposure and vulnerability is also explored by Ajay Sandhu and Daniel Trottier in 'The Criminal Selfie: Conveying Grievance while Livestreaming Crimes and Antisocial Behaviour' (Sandhu & Trottier, 2023). As smartphones and wearable recording devices are enabling social media users to create amateur content broadcasting ordinary and special aspects of lives, they are also used to document their own or others' wrong doings

(ranging from road rage and shoplifting to sexual assault and mass shooting) via images and videos, possibly to crystallize certain actions, humiliate victims, or for political or personal grievances. In their contribution, Sandhu and Trottier reflect on the changing relationship between visibility and criminality in contemporary digital society, evidencing how these forms of self-expression – which are increasingly popular forms of toxic communication online – can become means of empowerment to some, but certainly present new forms of vulnerability to public scrutiny and legal punishment, as the content is offered to an online audience for consideration.

Specific forms of toxic communication are common, nowadays, in online gaming. With video games playing an increasingly important role in the formation of digital communities, allowing new dimensions of encounter and cooperation, understanding the extent and the type of antisocial behaviours homed in these digital fields, and how they can best be addressed, offers important insights to the discussion. In 'The enemy hates best? Toxicity in League of Legends and its content moderation implications', Jesús Aguerri, Mario Santisteban and Fernando Miró-Llinares present an original analysis of matches by Spanish streamers in the leading online video game League of Legends, discussing the normative implications of antisocial behaviour on popular digital gaming spaces, and the potential and limitation of their content moderation policy (Aguerri et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, in 'Players Don't Die, They Respawn: A Situational Analysis of Toxic Encounters Arising from Death Events in League of Legends', Louise Anker Nexø and Søren Kristiansen analyse the interactions of a sample of Danish *League of Legends* gamers (Nexø & Kristiansen, 2023). Drawing on the work of Goffman, they provide examples and discussion of the rituals of interaction that can escalate into disruptive and often toxic group behaviours during online game play. Together, these two papers highlight the importance of understanding the norms of online gaming communities, both formal and informal, when seeking to identify and address harmful online behaviours.

The final two contributions to this Special Issue shift our attention respectively to legalistic and social attempts to curb some of the antisocial behaviour and toxic communication manifestations we have previously encountered. In '"Is this a hate speech?" The difficulty in combating radicalisation in coded communications on social media platforms', Benjamin Farrand explores the EU's current attempts to regulate content on social media by presenting

an interesting case study – that of hate-focused radicalisation efforts through coded communications, such as internet memes where messages of hate are conveyed in the form of humour –, questioning the considerable discretion afforded to private sector operators of platforms in tackling the problem (Farrand, 2023).

Finally, in "Antifa's Political Violence on Twitter: A Grounded Theory Approach", Lachlan Jaccoud, Lorena Molnar and Marcelo Aebi analyse a large Twitter dataset to explore contemporary Antifa (short for antifascism)'s use of doxing against individuals suspected to be alt-right, white supremacism or (neo)fascist activists (Jaccoud et al., 2023). Moved by a distrust in the state, when Antifa backers collect and disseminate personal data on suspected individuals they engage in a form of online vigilantism that, while inspired by a relatable ethos, is a form of digital harassment and can enable intimidating actions against those targeted.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, an unfortunate reality emerges from these contributions: antisocial behaviour and toxic communication online are widespread, and tacking them is hard. They can escape traditional judicial means; they raise transnational challenges, but transnational regulatory harmonization and intervention are severely hindered by the presence of different historical and constitutional traditions of individual countries. Even when they translate into (cyber)crimes, traditional policing is limited: not only because of the usual problems encountered when dealing with the vastness and technicalities of cyberspace, but also because the targets may experience stigma, victim blame, and not be taken seriously *in primis*, or the targets might not be identifiable. Given these difficulties, from an harm prevention and mitigation perspective alternative mechanisms for countering antisocial behaviour and toxic communication online are fundamental: self-help, education, and auto-regulation and monitoring (by peers and by social media moderators) have been acknowledged as important lines of defence; the key role of Internet service providers and social media companies is recognised, but these actors have traditionally been reluctant to arbitrate and police the boundaries of acceptable content online, and in any case such delicate decisions should not be left at the mercy of private, profit-driven companies. What is certain is that the complex nature of these social phenomena defies a single-policy solution or best strategy, but, rather, necessitates a combination of diverse approaches.

Yet, there is cause for some optimism. As can also be seen from the range of papers in this special issue, researchers from across the world, including those here from Canada, Denmark, Spain, Switzerland, the US and the UK, are engaging in innovative research that considers the harms posed by online antisocial behaviour and toxic communications. As we asserted at the outset of this introduction, criminological thinking is uniquely positioned to engage with the fundamental question: *what kind of digital society do we want to 'live' in?* Throughout this special issue, the contributing authors' present new and varied engagements with this question and, we hope, inspire further criminological examinations of the harms posed by our digital society, as well as the critical issues of ethics, justice and equality that we must not fail to uphold as we seek to address these harms.

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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