

Emma Alice Jane
University of New South Wales, Sydney



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**Savage burns and salty clapbacks:
the complex function and force of feminist internet humour**

Stark increases in the volume and toxicity of abuse, harassment, and threats targeting women online have seen corresponding rises in popular feminist humour designed to expose, ridicule, and push back against gendered cyberhate and its perpetrators. “Savage burns” and “salty clapbacks” (internet slang for sharp strikes and counterstrikes) deployed by feminists in response to unsolicited images of men’s genitals (aka “dick pics”) have achieved particularly strong social media traction, with celebratory media coverage describing these as “brilliant”, “genius”, “ingenious”, “hilarious”, and so on. Yet some feminist commentators and scholars have critiqued such humour as being a form of apolitical entertainment rather than political activism. Others have argued that, given the seriousness of the gendered cyberhate problem, male perpetrators should be subjected to the full force of the law rather than being laughed at as jokes. In this presentation, I will argue that contemporary feminist internet humour cannot easily be categorised as one thing (savvy politics) or another (apolitical entertainment and/or trivializing levity). To illustrate this complexity, I will show that there exists a tendency: (1) to *overstate* the political efficacy of feminist humour that can be figured as a form of digital vigilantism or “digilantism”; and (2) to *understate* the political function of jokes that might seem intended primarily for entertainment and/or private or in-group amusement. With regards to (1), my case is that feminist digilante humour – which tends to be the most celebrated feminist humour online – is eminently understandable given the dearth of insitutional interventions for gendered cyberhate. Yet it is also subject to the downsides of other forms of extrajudicial activism such as: risk to individual digilantes; risk to targets who have been named and shamed; and deliberate or inadvertent contribution to escalating mimetic aggression that further underscores antagonistic and exclusionary gender binaries. To complicate matters further, positioning ostensibly somber feminist digilante practices such as hunting down and publicly exposing men who send rape threats as only or primarily something *other* than entertainment overlooks the fact that recreational nastiness and schadenfreude rate as entertainment par excellence in many online scenes. With regards to (2), my case will be that the catharsis afforded by making jokes about painful or difficult subjects and/or reappropriating trauma as forms of amusement are underestimated as feminist strategies, not least because such processes tend to be explicitly or implicitly located in the feminized domain of emotions and psychology rather than politics. Yet both my research of and personal involvement in feminist internet humour suggests that joking and levity can play critical roles in transmuted harrowing personal experiences into sustained activism. Invisibilising or ranking such processes as being less important than, say, “traditional” feminist activist practices such as attending a demonstration, therefore misses key features of the force and function of feminist internet humour, as well as contributing to the unhelpful demarcation of “soft” phenomena such as emotional labour as belonging to domains other than “hard” politics. By nuancing understandings of the force and function of feminist humour online, my hope is to pave the way for more considered scholarly assessments and activist deployments of these under-researched types of feminist activism.