



# The New Normal or More of the Same? Everyday Sexism and the Response of Traditional Media to an Internet Sensation during Lockdown

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*Nouvelle normalité ou déjà-vu ? Le sexisme au quotidien et la réponse des médias traditionnels à une sensation internet pendant le confinement*

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# The New Normal or More of the Same? Everyday Sexism and the Response of Traditional Media to an Internet Sensation during Lockdown

*Nouvelle normalité ou déjà-vu ? Le sexisme au quotidien et la réponse des médias traditionnels à une sensation internet pendant le confinement*

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## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> Soon after the start of the first national lockdown in England consequent on the COVID-19 pandemic, commentators began recycling the notion of a *new normal*. The phrase had been coined earlier with reference to the changed circumstances brought on by the 2008 financial crisis. By early 2020, in the context of the pandemic it was being reused as a means of capturing the host of transformations (social distancing, home schooling, remote working, etc.) people were being required to rapidly adapt to in their collective and individual lives. Prompted by government, over the summer of 2020 the discourse of the *new normal* developed to include *build back better*.<sup>1</sup> Commentators from an ever-widening field of expertise reflected on changes to how we live, work and think, on what needed to be done differently and what needed to stop being done altogether. This article makes a modest attempt at uncovering a possible change in thinking and behaviour in one sector of the media industry, namely traditional media, on one issue, namely the framing of sexism during the period of national lockdowns in England.<sup>2</sup> It follows the story of an internet sensation that started as an attempt at calling out an incident of everyday sexism. The incident occurred during a meeting of the Handforth Parish Council Planning & Environment

Committee (HPCP&EC) that was held online consequent on the requirement that meetings of local authorities be held virtually during lockdowns.<sup>3,4</sup> An edited version of the full-length recording of the meeting held by Zoom went viral on social media in early February 2021, two months after the council meeting and a month after the UK had entered its third lockdown. The popularity of video calling as a means of keeping in touch during lockdowns became known as a global *Zoom revolution*.<sup>5</sup> With just a few hundred thousand users at the start of 2020, Zoom had more than 13 million in the UK by the end of the first lockdown (May 2020).<sup>6</sup> Many of these users were new or not well versed in the use of on-screen technologies, particularly when practiced from home. Shared moments of awkwardness in online meetings were recognised in the rapid spread of a 30-second video of the virtual meeting of HPCP&EC, which millions of people drew on as a source of humour and light relief during quarantine.

- 2 The successive lockdowns from March 2020 to May 2021 in the UK also coincided with a period referred to as the *post-#MeToo era*: the period following on from late 2017 when a series of sexual abuse allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein trended across social media platforms. Following the brief period of optimism that something might change now that media were giving space to celebrities reporting on male sexual violence and domestic abuse of women,<sup>7</sup> the post-#MeToo era has been one in which campaigners have had to continue to fight to keep conversations about abuse at the forefront of the media. Quoting from an article published in 2019 by Zelda Phillips – a former assistant of Weinstein – in which Phillips expressed the misgiving ‘*that people have already been slightly inured to it (sexual abuse and harassment)*’, Heather Savigny recently asked: ‘*will anything really change as a result of #MeToo? What is it that is stopping the sort of change people initially hoped for?*’.<sup>8</sup> Savigny directs attention to cultural sexism: the ways in which gendered power works across the media so as to normalise sexist values. By means of tracing the origins of the short video of the HPCP&EC Zoom meeting and responses by traditional media to its viral spread on the internet, this article considers the role of traditional media in the sorts of acts of everyday sexism that comprise the roots of violence perpetrated by men against women. At a time when changes to personal and working lives were requiring people to adapt to a new kind of normal, were there signs that the widely anticipated change in ways of thinking brought on by living through the pandemic would also apply to media attitudes towards everyday sexism?
- 3 This article addresses this question by means of examining the response of traditional media to the 30-second video of the HPCE&PC Zoom meeting that went viral during the third lockdown. The rationale for the focus on media reactions to relatively minor forms of abuse is provided by the recent attention to everyday sexism as part of a continuum of sexist acts, which is in no small part due to digital feminist campaigns.<sup>9</sup> The role of the media in normalising acts of abuse by men of women is outlined, prior to focusing in on reporting by the British tabloid press on domestic violence and abuse during the period of the first lockdown. The aim here is to see how the link between everyday acts of sexism and serious incidents of sexual violence was being addressed by traditional media at the time when the abuse of a female government official at a town council meeting took place. The focus on news reports on domestic violence and abuse is first explained by considering the grounds on which acts of sexual violence are judged to be newsworthy by traditional media in the UK.

## Everyday sexism, cultural sexism and media reporting on sexual violence<sup>10</sup> during the first COVID-19 lockdown

- 4 By the time that #MeToo started trending on Twitter from 2017, the important role of digital feminist campaigns (also referred to a 'hashtag feminism') in increasing awareness of misogyny, abuse, harassment and rape culture had been recognised.<sup>11</sup> Experiences being reported online by women revealed a wide range of incidents, from those which in isolation may appear to cause very little harm to violence and sexual assault. Laura Bates' work on the Everyday Sexism Project has been important in this respect. The project started in 2012, when Bates launched a website where women and men can share their experiences of daily acts of sexism.<sup>12</sup> Initially expecting around 20 to 30 women in the UK to report on an experience, Bates found that during the first 18 months, over 15,000 women from around the world had added their stories.<sup>13</sup> These accounts of *everyday sexism* make clear that the ideas and attitudes underlying more minor incidents of sexism and harassment are the same ideas and attitudes that underlie the more serious incidents of man to woman assault and rape.<sup>14</sup>
- 5 Heather Savigny, with reference to Bates' findings, argues that acts of everyday sexism form a cultural backdrop of cultural sexism, which renders generally acceptable these experiences:  
 (T)hese harms which in isolation may be very small (or not) cumulatively form a cultural backdrop, which legitimizes and normalizes sexism and its manifestation in sexual assault, harassment, violence and abuse.<sup>15</sup>
- 6 Feminist campaigns like #MeToo brought widespread public attention to the consequences of normalising everyday acts of sexism, and highlighted the need to tackle the cultural sexism that is ingrained in the patriarchal power structures of Western media. In this article, cultural sexism is examined in the responses of traditional media to the popularity of a short video of the HPCP&EC Zoom meeting that went viral on the internet. Before moving on to examine the video, the context in which the acts of everyday sexual abuse represented in the recording took place is examined.
- 7 Based on a literature review and analysis of the British tabloid press, Cynthia Carter shows how reporting on male violence against women helps to normalise certain preferred ways of understanding such incidents.<sup>16</sup> When compared to police statistics, reports in the media on femicide and rape are far more prevalent than reports on domestic violence.<sup>17</sup> As well as a disproportionate emphasis being placed on femicide and rape, reporting on cases in which the perpetrator is unknown to the victim is considered more newsworthy than *too ordinary* incidents occurring within a relationship. Carter argues that gendered patterns of news coverage of such 'extraordinary' incidents of male to female violence *may, 'in turn, encourage readers to accept certain ideological justifications for male sexual violence as a typical even inevitable feature of everyday life'*.<sup>18</sup>
- 8 The kidnapping, rape and murder of Sarah Everard, when a police officer is believed to have used COVID-19 regulations in a false arrest in early March 2020,<sup>19</sup> was one such *newsworthy* crime. This led to a national debate on male violence and misogyny, women's safety, and the response of the police and prosecution services. Part of this

debate took place in Parliament when, during the annual International Women's Day debate, Jess Phillips MP read out the names of the 118 women killed by a man in the last year.<sup>20</sup> In her introduction, Phillips made clear that the collection of data on women killed by men is not part of official government statistics nor has it been the subject of a government report. The availability of the Femicide Census is due to the tireless efforts of Karen Ingala Smith and the team of the Counting Dead Women Project. Started in 2015 in order to address the absence of official statistics on femicide, the project details how over the last decade one woman has been killed by a man in the UK every three days<sup>21</sup>. When Ingala Smith reported in her blog that 14 women had been killed during the first three weeks of lockdown (23 March – 12 April 2020),<sup>22</sup> the circumstances of the lockdown made *ordinary* femicides and domestic violence newsworthy. Reports on these statistics and domestic violence in the daily tabloid press in England during the first lockdown throw light on its role in normalising certain preferred ways of understanding such incidents.

9 The last part of this section of the current article provides an analysis of news accounts of sexual violence drawn from five British daily tabloid newspapers as they appeared during the period of the first lockdown.<sup>23,24</sup> Like the earlier analysis of tabloids conducted by Carter, rather than setting out 'to quantify the unquantifiable nature of patriarchy',<sup>25</sup> the aim of the present analysis is to address the ways in which male sexual violence against women is presented by an influential component of the British media: the daily tabloids. At the time of Carter's study in the early 1990s, 59% of all adults over 15 years read a national newspaper on an average day.<sup>26</sup> By the early 2020s, the circulation of print newspapers had decreased substantially (24%) and although more people were reading digital newspapers (19%), this did not make up for print losses; making an allowance for use of both sources (print and digital), the total reach of all newspapers (tabloids and the quality press) was 38% in 2022.<sup>27</sup> Although the reach of all newspapers has declined since the early 1990s, the tabloids continue to hold the largest share of the newspaper market in Britain.<sup>28,29</sup> Moreover, the influence of the tabloids' generally more sensational news content is still considered to be important.<sup>30</sup> An analysis of the role of tabloids in framing acts of male sexual violence therefore remains pertinent almost 30 years after Carter's study. Using a different methodology to that used by Carter, the present study makes no attempt at replicating Carter's analysis of tabloids' coverage of sexual violence. Carter used quantitative content analysis of 840 news articles from six daily tabloids appearing between November 1993 and January 1994. The total number of articles found by the current author in five daily tabloids for the period of the first lockdown (26<sup>th</sup> March to 15<sup>th</sup> June 2020) was 100, making it suitable for a contextualised, qualitative social analysis of selected features of the texts rather than quantitative content analysis.<sup>31,32</sup> Notwithstanding the use of different methodologies, the two studies share in common the broad purpose of trying to capture and illustrate the ways in which the tabloid press in Britain presents the range of abuses women are subject to.

10 On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced the first lockdown in the UK, ordering people to 'stay at home'.<sup>33</sup> Lockdown measures legally came into force on 26<sup>th</sup> March and lasted until 4<sup>th</sup> July, during which time people were prohibited from leaving home without a reasonable excuse. For people living with domestic violence, restrictions on movement put them at increased risk. One month into the lockdown, in evidence to the Justice Committee in the House of Commons, Dame Vera Baird QC (Victims Commissioner for England and Wales) pointed to domestic violence having

increased ‘*exponentially*’ as a consequence of restrictions on movement.<sup>34</sup> This she characterised as an ‘*epidemic within the pandemic*’, which she believed the Government had not been prepared for.<sup>35</sup> Earlier on in the lockdown the tabloid press picked up on the increase in incidents of domestic violence as reported to helplines and charities offering refuge to victims. *The Daily Express* reported a ‘*surge in calls to helplines and online services*’ after two weeks of the lockdown.<sup>36</sup> Using percentage figures in order to draw attention to the large relative change, *The Sun* announced that: ‘*Calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline rocketed 120 per cent in just one 24-hour period*’.<sup>37</sup> Making a link between the lockdown and domestic violence, *The Sun* referred to ‘*the shocking rise in domestic violence sweeping the UK as families isolate during the coronavirus pandemic*’.<sup>38</sup> Not to be outdone in pointing to the exceptional circumstances of the lockdown and its link with domestic violence, *The Mirror* reported a ‘*700% increase in calls to (Refuge’s) helpline in a single day*’ of the second week of the lockdown.<sup>39</sup>

- 11 The tabloids’ use of statistics to highlight what they considered as being extraordinary circumstances of male to female violence during the lockdown was fully exploited following the posting by Ingala Smith of numbers of women killed during the first three weeks of lockdown. *The Daily Express* quoted from Ingala Smith in the title to its article ‘*Domestic killings “more than doubled”*’;<sup>40</sup> while *The Sun* in its article ‘*Size of the crisis*’ reported ‘*Domestic abuse killings rise by 160% as 16 people die during three-week coronavirus lockdown*’.<sup>41</sup> Explanations for these departures from underlying trends were offered in terms of the particular circumstances of the pandemic and restrictions on movement. Victims were reported as being ‘*isolated in hell*’;<sup>42</sup> or, quoting the Home Secretary Priti Patel, ‘*trapped “in horrific cycle”*’.<sup>43</sup> Male perpetrators were described as ‘*gain(ing) power in isolation*’. A person known to one family in which the husband killed his wife and two children during lockdown was quoted offering a possible explanation: ‘*It might have been that there were issues over finance or it might have been issues over people living together in confined conditions*’.<sup>44</sup> In a report in the same article on another murder of a wife during lockdown, a neighbour expressed the opinion that ‘*lockdown had driven (the perpetrator) “over the edge”*’. The circumstances of the pandemic in terms of its impact on gender roles was also offered as a means of understanding the increase in men’s violence against women. A forensic psychologist was quoted at length from an interview in which she described the impact of lockdown on men’s lives. Loss of self-esteem due to changes brought on by the pandemic to their role as ‘*breadwinners*’ (working from home, reduced income, unemployment) was cited as contributing to “*a perfect storm*” of toxic levels of stress, loss of control and anger, resulting in explosive violence’.<sup>45</sup>
- 12 The balance between reports on domestic violence and murder in the tabloid press shifted towards the former amidst concern about the impact of lockdown on victims of domestic violence. Whether this redressed the tendency to report on murders of women by strangers and the general social denial of the extent to which the male violence happens in private<sup>46</sup> is called into question by the stress on the link made between increases in domestic violence and the circumstances of the pandemic. While acknowledging violence in the domestic sphere, the use of statistics to point to aberrations described as ‘*surges*’ and ‘*soaring numbers*’ render underlying trends if not acceptable, then at least ordinary. When publishing the number of women killed by men during the first three weeks of lockdown, Ingala Smith stated: ‘*I am counting dead women, but I would never say that it is only the dead women who count*’.<sup>47</sup> The title to her post made clear that ‘*Coronavirus doesn’t cause men’s violence against women*’. She warned against making overly simplistic correlations between increases in abuse and the



circumstances of the pandemic, which misunderstood the dynamics of abuse. This was confirmed when the upturn in abuse was soon after followed by a decline, making 2020 the year with the lowest number of women killed by men since records began in 2009. Collecting the data and monitoring these trends, Ingala Smith and fellow campaigners consistently called for attention to be focussed on what lay beneath the need for such statistics in the first place: sex inequality and the multiple ways in which it is expressed, or what Laura Bates refers to as *everyday sexism*.

## The HPCP&EC 30-second video and #jackieweaver

- 13 As ‘an increasingly pervasive form of contemporary social communication’,<sup>48</sup> internet memes can provide insights into the role of the media in everyday sexism. One meme that spread on social media just a fortnight after deaths from COVID-19 in the UK peaked in January 2021 had its origins in an edited recording of a town council meeting that took place online using Zoom during the first lockdown. The meeting featured Jackie Weaver, a previously unknown local government official, whose name trended on Twitter through hashtags such as #JusticeForJackie and #jackieweaver. Weaver, employed by the Cheshire Association of Local Councils, in the absence of the parish clerk, had been invited to facilitate an extraordinary meeting of the HPCP&EC amid accusations of poor councillor behaviour.<sup>49,50</sup> The meeting took place on 10 December 2020, but became a social media sensation on 4 February 2021 when 30 seconds of footage from the meeting was released on Twitter. It soon received 5,000 retweets and 32,000 likes, and millions of views as it was shared on other social media platforms.<sup>51,52</sup>
- 14 The background to the release of the 30-second video is instructive in terms of the motives of its creators, which are obscured by the variant versions hastily arrived at as the tweet went viral. Following the release by the parish council of the recording of the one-and-a-half hour meeting, an 18 minutes highlight reel was made and uploaded to YouTube by the comedian-writer Steven Morgan.<sup>53</sup> This was later found by Shaan Ali, a 17-year-old from London. Ali’s interest in the video was in part due to the humour to be derived from how it portrayed the shared experience of many people during lockdown who were learning how to use the technology for online meetings:

You know the world we’re living in at the moment is quite bleak ...while we are all stuck in lockdown and I think that just seeing that council meeting just brought everyone a bit of a laugh because, you know, it’s relatable content. I’m really pleased I’ve played a part in bringing joy to so many people.<sup>54</sup>
- 15 While he was also concerned by the sexism of three male councillors in their treatment of Weaver in the meeting, he was not given the opportunity to develop this in later interviews.<sup>55</sup> Ali shared the video with his friend Janine Mason, who Tweeted the 30 second version which became an online success on Twitter, TikTok and YouTube as a source of memes, GIFs (image files) and jokes.<sup>56,57</sup> When commenting on the media’s attention to the two young people behind the posting on Twitter, Morgan tweeted:

The focus should be on the video itself, the bullying shown in a meeting that’s paid for by taxpayers, and demonstrates how off putting getting involved in local politics can be. Behind the jokes, there’s a sad reason this has resonated so much.<sup>58</sup>
- 16 The video recorded the verbal aggression by three male councillors of Weaver as she endeavored to open the meeting in place of the town clerk. The bullying of town clerks, the vast majority of whom are women, was already a concern of the Society of Local



Council Clerks (SLCC). In a 2019 Committee for Standards in Public Life report, the SLCC was quoted: *'The impact (of bullying) often includes serious ill health, loss of employment, loss of confidence and a long-term detriment to (the clerks') personal and professional lives.'*<sup>59</sup> While the video could have been an occasion to bring to public attention everyday forms of sexual abuse, this aspect was largely ignored by traditional media in their commentary.

- 17 The response on social media to the low quality 30-second video of the Zoom meeting was soon picked up by traditional media. The morning following the video's posting on Twitter figures were quoted on how the video was trending<sup>60</sup>. The popularity of the video, featuring a local government official removing difficult councillors from a meeting by use of Zoom controls, was considered to have made its protagonist into an unlikely celebrity. *The Sun* referred to Weaver by her age (*'the 62-year-old'*) in two of its articles, while ITV News described her as *'one elderly parish clerk in the starring role'*.<sup>61</sup> Her unpremeditated success at a time of heightened competition for attention in online social networks was highlighted in an interview Weaver gave on Channel 4. Described as having become *'the most famous person in Britain in 24 hours'*, Weaver herself commented on having been previously unaware of both Twitter and trending.<sup>62</sup>
- 18 The celebrity status of Weaver on social media flowed over on to traditional media, where she soon appeared in interviews on radio (BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* 5 February 2021, LBC *Matt Frei* 6 February 2021) and television (ITV *Good Morning Britain* 8<sup>th</sup> February 2021, Channel 5 *5 News* 5 February 2021, Channel 4 *The Last Leg* 5 February 2021, ITV *Loose Women* 10 February 2021), and in newspapers (*The Sun* claimed an *'exclusive interview'* with Weaver on 5 February 2021<sup>63</sup>). Invitations were later accepted by Weaver to appear on: *The BRIT Awards* (BBC One, 11 May 2021), *The Archers* (BBC Radio 4, 22 August 2021), *Steph's Packed Lunch* (Channel 4, 28 September 2021), *Have I Got News For You* (BBC Two, 29 October 2021), *Celebrity Master Mind* (BBC One, 5 February 2022) and *Make Me Prime Minister* (Channel 4, 18 October 2022). In her role as the Chief Officer of the Cheshire Association of Local Councils, Weaver used these media appearances in order to promote herself as an expert on town and parish councils<sup>64</sup> and to encourage people to take part in local government.<sup>65</sup> The short video was evidence of bullying and intimidation of one woman by three men on a predominantly male council. As this could reasonably be expected to discourage participation, particularly by already under-represented groups such as younger women, Weaver was concerned in interviews to direct attention away from this behaviour or to present it as exceptional. The evasive and euphemistic form that mentions of abuse often took in much of the coverage made this easy to do.<sup>66</sup> On other occasions, however, sexism and aggression were mentioned directly. In an interview with *The Sun*, after stating that there was *'a sense of sexism (to men) trying to bully me'*, Weaver stated: *'But 99.9 per cent of council meetings are just not like that. They're often less exciting than we might hope.'*<sup>67</sup> On *Good Morning Britain* (GMB), Piers Morgan used breakfast television's characteristic tone of combining the serious with the trivial.<sup>68</sup> Following an introduction in which Weaver was mentioned as *'possibly the greatest feminist icon since Emily Pankhurst'*, who had to face *'hectoring quite unpleasant misogynists'*, she deflected questions on her personal life in order to address the work being done by town councils.<sup>69</sup> When sexism was cited by the interviewer for LBC as the possible reason behind *'this level of aggression'*, Weaver acknowledged that it *'is part of it'*, but hoped that the video would be treated as *'light relief'* and encourage *'people to come forward and get involved'*.<sup>70</sup> In an interview on *Loose*

Women (a television talk show with an all-female panel) on 10 February 2021, Weaver continued to play down the male aggression: *'There's a lot of serious stuff around it and there's a lot of serious stuff we could talk about. But ultimately, when you see grown men shouting hysterically, it is a bit like a toddler tantrum'*.<sup>71</sup> Weaver made the (sexist) claim that men's poor communication skills account for verbal aggression: (Women) *'are better at negotiating. I kind of feel that men don't have that ability and often what you see is that they just raise their voice'*.<sup>72</sup> Earlier in February, she had apologised for the bad publicity, which she hoped would have a positive outcome for town councils: *'Sorry if it's a negative thing you're seeing at the moment, but if I can use it to raise the profile (of town councils)... that would be fabulous'*.<sup>73</sup> An article in the *i* cited research by the leading gender equality campaigner the Fawcett Society on sexism in local councils: *'sexism is commonplace in the council building, with almost four in ten female councillors reporting that they have received sexist comments'*.<sup>74</sup> When quoted in the article Weaver steered clear of sexism in order to focus on gender representation, and particularly young women on town councils: *'It is about sex, but it's wider than that – it's age'*.<sup>75</sup>

- 19 *Woman's Hour*, a long-running (since 1946) radio news magazine programme which has waived BBC impartiality in order to promote feminism,<sup>76</sup> secured an early interview with Weaver. After having framed the interview by claiming that the behavior at the council meeting was exceptional,<sup>77</sup> Weaver did make clear that she had been bullied in the meeting and that efforts were being made to address such behaviour in council meetings:

There is an element of bullying and bad behaviour in local councils and a lot of us are working very hard, and that includes central government, to try and do something about that.<sup>78</sup>

- 20 The sexist nature of the bullying was passed over by the interviewer's mention of Weaver having been *'shouted down'*, allowing Weaver to highlight how the verbally aggressive behaviour had become a source of amusement: *'I don't mean that the principle of it is funny but actually...clearly there's amusement in the way somebody has just lost it and it's harsh to take some pleasure from that'*.<sup>79</sup> Weaver was invited by *Woman's Hour* to a second interview following her appearance on the BRIT awards in May 2021. The theme of the episode was women defying expectations and the importance of women claiming their space, as made clear in the excerpts from acceptance speeches made by women at the BRIT Awards which were used in the introduction to the episode. The focus of the interview was to be on Jackie Weaver's defying expectations and her self-belief. Weaver sidelined questions about the importance of women following their ambitions and whether she felt that she had been held back in her life by addressing (what had now become her standard response) how the media had allowed her to platform the role of ordinary people on town and parish councils. The interviewer closed by asking Weaver if she could confirm rumors that she would be appearing on *Strictly Come Dancing* (a highly popular dance contest on BBC One, featuring celebrities and professional dancers). This attested to not just the 30-second video but Weaver herself being little more than a source of light entertainment.<sup>80</sup>
- 21 The subject of Jackie Weaver's treatment as a web phenomenon or object rather than a real person who'd been subjected to bullying was taken up by a number of commentators. In a relatively long article (3,330 words) published in *Vice*,<sup>81</sup> town councils are described as *'a chance for people to project their most nightmarish and base and feral emotions onto the blank placid canvas of "Jackie Weave"'*.<sup>82</sup> The article goes on to

compare the workings of governance at the level of town councils with that at national level: *'the petty bureaucracy of the Handforth Parish Council video is...a microcosmic portrait of our own national politics.'* The twin concerns of the object status of Weaver and the realities of how governance operates were also addressed in an article on the Jackie Weaver meme in the *Huffington Post*.<sup>83</sup> The main argument of the article is that viewing the meme as only being funny misses the point: what happened to Jackie Weaver (a real person and not a meme) at the meeting.<sup>84</sup> The article goes on to raise concern about the audience's ability to distinguish between memes and critical issues of uses of authority and accountability, ending with the remark: *'The next meme may have bigger stakes than a parish council meeting.'*<sup>85</sup>

- 22 A rare focus on the aggression Weaver experienced was addressed in an article in *Grazia*, which drew attention to the gendered nature of the bullying: *'Male members shouted at her and belittled her'*.<sup>86</sup> Although the article did not make explicit reference to the idea of a continuum of sexual violence,<sup>87</sup> the journalist made clear how the verbal aggression experienced by Weaver could be related to more serious acts of assault of women by men. With reference to the issue of male abuse raised in a number of responses to a Tweet by an *Evening Standard* columnist,<sup>88</sup> the journalist for *Grazia* noted: *'Some questioned how funny it was when so many women will have experienced this kind of male rage. To survivors of domestic abuse, it will be hard to see the funny side when it comes to men screaming in a woman's face.'*<sup>89</sup> This instance of traditional media expressing anxiety at the mild sexual aggression experienced by Weaver is important in terms of its role in making other kinds of assault, abuse or harassment of women by men unacceptable. It stands in contrast to the majority of reporting on the 30-second video which has been analysed in this article. The latter either ignored the aggressive content or drew on the context (a town council Zoom meeting that went viral during lockdown) and Weaver's claims that she was largely unaffected by the bullying. When the verbal aggression took the form of death threats received by Weaver soon after the release of the 30-second video, any link between minor and more serious acts of aggression was passed over by the expression of surprise. In an interview given on *GMB*, Weaver disclosed that one troll wanted her *'locked in a burning building and not let out'*.<sup>90</sup> *The Sun* opened the title of its article covering this aspect of the *GMB* interview by repeating the *GMB* interviewer's sense of disbelief: *'"Are you serious?"'*.<sup>91</sup> A violent threat, which went on to be the subject of a criminal investigation, was reported by a regional newspaper as having left Weaver *'unconcerned'*.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusions

- 23 Existing research on news media coverage in the UK of male on female aggression has drawn attention to the way in which the extraordinary is normalised into the ordinary. This has been done by the media focusing attention on more sensational stories of rape and murder, and particularly those involving strangers, while giving far less attention to everyday acts of sexism, including domestic violence. This article's analysis of reporting by the tabloids on the release of figures on the number of domestic violence killings and calls to domestic violence helplines during the first lockdown was not an exception to the tabloids' focus on the sensational. Attention was focused on the sharp rise in numbers, which was related to restrictions limiting women's movements from home during lockdown. The longer-term trend in domestic violence was largely

ignored in the coverage, thereby rendering the acts of abuse, bullying and misogyny comprising the trend if not acceptable then at least ordinary. Against this background a 30-second video of an everyday act of male aggression against a woman went viral during the third lockdown. The focus of attention of traditional news media on this story was mainly in terms of the newsworthiness of the victim in terms of her being cast as an unlikely celebrity, who had emerged as a consequence of changed lifestyles during lockdowns. The commentary in traditional media that drew attention to the sexist nature of the treatment of a local government official in the course of performing her tasks was mainly in reaction to this point having been overlooked in most of the coverage.

- 24 The popularity of the low-quality video of a town council meeting held remotely, in which a local government official expelled difficult councillors by placing them in a virtual waiting room, can be accounted for by its amusement value: elderly people arguing and struggling to use Zoom, the background noise of people doing things off camera, a person putting their head round the door during the meeting; all things that people could identify with as they tried to stay connected while socially distancing during successive lockdowns. However, as an insight into the practices of local governance, its content raises concern about the realities of sexist bullying and how everyday sexist acts of shouting and abuse are covered (or not) by traditional media. As the chief officer of an association of local town councils, who overnight became recognisable on social media and the following day on traditional media, Weaver used her celebrity status in an attempt to promote the work of town councils and to redress their democratic deficit by encouraging more young women to take part. In order to do this, the aggressive behaviour of three male councillors towards a female officer was played down or, contrary to research on the subject, presented as atypical. In the real world, town councils are generally viewed as both challenging and unattractive. Weaver's attempts to alter this image by using the media to present a narrative that played down the male to female sexual aggression she'd experienced did little to encourage women's participation in town council elections.<sup>93</sup> Weaver, or rather #jackieweaver, disappeared from the web almost as quickly as it had arrived<sup>94</sup>. By doing no more than laughing at an incident of sexist bullying at a town council meeting, members of the audience - who may reasonably be expected not to find such behaviour acceptable in their own place of work - were complicit in making it acceptable in local government.
- 25 This article has focused on the response of a sample of traditional media to the popularity of a short video evidencing the difficulties being faced by town council members in understanding and performing their duties during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the diversity of traditional media between and within formats in Britain, the sample of sources from television, radio, newspapers and magazines makes no pretence of being representative. The findings may, however, provide pointers for future research on the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The response of the authorities most directly concerned with the disciplining of council members could provide further insights into attitudes towards everyday sexism during the pandemic.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, research on the content of #jackieweaver memes and the responses to them on social media during the pandemic could provide insights into the thoughts of internet users on life during lockdown. Such research could be used in order to test the findings from the current research, which indicate a *continuing* rather than a *new*

normal in cultural sexism in traditional media during the pandemic. The need to test this finding beyond traditional media is important. The HPCP&EC video, which originated from a YouTube video posted by a commentator concerned to call out everyday sexism, is part of a dynamic infrastructure of memes, gifs and online comments. Whether these holdout hope for digital feminism redressing cultural sexism and possibly encouraging younger women to take on the challenges of representing their community as a town councillor is worthy of examination.

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## NOTES

1. The then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, first used the phrase *build back better* on 28 May 2020 before using it to formally introduce the government's economic-recovery plan on 29 September (Adam Forrest, *Independent*, 5 November 2020 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/biden-boris-johnson-build-back-better-b1613419.html> [4 August 2023]).

2. In this article the term *traditional media* is used in reference to print media, such as newspapers and magazines, and broadcast media, such as television and radio. *New media* is taken to include digital media, such as social media and internet. Although the availability of online subscriptions for many forms of traditional media has blurred the distinction between these two categories of media, they continue to be widely used.

3. Handforth is situated in the administrative county of Cheshire East, in north west England. In November 2021 the council changed its name from Handforth Parish Council to Handforth Town Council (Jamie Grierson 'Handforth parish council changes name to move on from "toxic" past', *The Guardian*, 3 November 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/nov/03/handforth-parish-council-changes-name-move-on-toxic-past-jackie-weaver> [consulted 6 August 2023])

4. The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Crime Panel Meetings) Regulations 2020 permitted council meetings to be held virtually. It was enacted on 4 April 2020 and expired on 6 May 2021.

5. The term *Zoom revolution* is used in reference to the rapid take-up of a variety of on-screen technologies (e.g. Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.) for professional and personal meetings during the pandemic. (Viv Groskop 'Zoom in on your lockdown meeting techniques', *Financial Times*, 8 April 2020 <https://www.ft.com/content/7e0380ee-7044-11ea-89df-41bea055720b> [5 August 2023]).

6. Ofcom *Online Nation 2021 Report* 9 June 2021 p.3 [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf) [20 January 2023]

7. Identifying the perpetrator and victim by gender ('male sexual violence against women' as opposed to 'sexual violence') is an important means by which to call out rather than hide the dominant role of men in violent acts and aggression against women. Heather Savigny, *Cultural Sexism* (Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2022) pp.132-33.
8. *Ibid* p 2.
9. Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, Jessalynn Keller *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2019).
10. In this article, the term *sexual violence* is used as a general term with reference to all forms of abuse, coercion and force committed by men and directed at women.
11. Hester Baer 'Redoing feminism: digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism', *Feminist Media Studies* 16(1) (2016) pp.17-34. Candi Carter Olson '#BringBackOurGirls: digital communities supporting real-world change and influencing mainstream media agendas', *Feminist Media Studies* 16(5) (2016) pp.772-87
12. <https://everydaysexism.com/>
13. Laura Bates 'Everyday sexism' TEDx n.d. 6m46s [https://www.ted.com/talks/laura\\_bates\\_everyday\\_sexism?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/laura_bates_everyday_sexism?language=en) [consulted 20 January 2023]
14. Laura Bates *Everyday Sexism* (London, Simon & Schuster, 2014); Laura Bates *Misogynation* (London, Simon & Schuster, 2018).
15. Heather Savigny, 2022, p.14
16. Cynthia Carter 'When the extraordinary becomes ordinary: everyday news of sexual violence', in C. Carter, G. Branton and S. Allan (eds) *News, Gender and Power* (London, Routledge, 1998), pp.219-32.
17. *Ibid*. pp.221-2, p.228
18. *Ibid*. p.221
19. Courts and Tribunals Judiciary 30 September 2021 'Sentencing remarks for Wayne Couzens' para. 2 <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Wayne-Couzens-Sentencing-Remarks.pdf> [consulted 3 January 2023]. The murder of Sarah Everard occurred prior to the first lockdown.
20. The reading of lists in the House of Commons is prohibited. In acknowledgement of its importance and sensitivity, the Speaker granted Jess Phillips permission for it to be read. A recording of the Deputy Speaker's introduction and Phillips reading the list is available at: Heather Stuart and Jessica Elgot 'Boris Johnson comes under pressure to make UK safer for women' *The Guardian* 11 March 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/11/boris-johnson-comes-under-pressure-to-make-uk-safer-for-women> [consulted 20 January 2023]
21. *The Femicide Census* n.d. <https://www.femicidecensus.org/reports/> [consulted 20 January 2023]
22. Karen Ingala Smith 'Coronavirus doesn't cause men's violence against women' blog post 15 April 2020 <https://kareningalasmith.com/tag/coronavirus/> [20 January 2023]
23. The *tabloids* comprise the popular press e.g. *The Sun*, and the middle market tabloid format e.g. *The Daily Mail*. They are also referred to as the *red tops*, and distinct from the so-called *quality press* titles (the former *broad sheets* or *compacts*, e.g. *The Times*).
24. Articles from the daily tabloid press in England (*The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Star*) which mentioned domestic, 'violence' and/or 'abuse', were analysed for the period of the first lockdown (26 March to 15 June 2020 as defined in House of Commons 'A history of English lockdown laws' 2021 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9068/> [consulted 20 January 2023].
25. Heather Savigny 2022 p.3.

26. House of Lords Select Committee on Communications *Written evidence from the National Readership Survey*, 2008 < <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldselect/ldcomuni/122/122we07.htm>> [3 August 2023].
27. Ofcom *News Consumption in the UK: 2022* 21 July 2022, figure 6.4 p39 [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/241947/News-Consumption-in-the-UK-2022-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/241947/News-Consumption-in-the-UK-2022-report.pdf) [3 August 2023].
28. *Ibid.*, figure 6.1 p36.
29. Comparable statistics on the circulation of tabloid newspapers from the early 1990s to 2020 are not available. This is due to changes in the newspapers (titles) comprising the corpus of tabloids, accounted for by newspapers ceasing or commencing circulation over the period. Longitudinal analysis has recently been made more difficult by the decision of some newspapers to keep their circulation figures private since the start of 2020 in order to counter the 'negative narrative of decline' (BBC News, 'ABC figures: newspapers will no longer have to publish sales', 20 May 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52754762> [3 August 2023]).
30. Juhi Javed Husain 'The power of the British tabloids' Medium 29 September 2020 <<https://medium.com/@juhijaved/the-power-of-british-tabloids-54117e12a9ab>> [3 August 2023]; Kathryn Simpson and Nick Startin 'Tabloid tales: how the British tabloid press shaped the Brexit vote', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 61, 2 (2023) pp.302-322.
31. Number of articles from searches using Pressreader: *Daily Express* 18, *Daily Mail* 16, *Daily Mirror* 14, *Daily Star* 10. Number of articles from a search using Europresse: *The Sun* 42
32. Norman Fairclough *Analysing Discourse: textual analysis for social research* (London, Routledge, 2003) p6
33. Institute for Government 'Timeline of UK coronavirus lockdowns, March 2020 to March 2021' n.d. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf> [consulted 20 January 2023]
34. House of Commons Justice Committee 'Oral evidence: work of the Victim's Commissioner' HC 305, 28 April 2020 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/319/pdf/Q11> [consulted 6 August 2023]
35. *Ibid.*
36. *The Daily Express* 'Domestic killings "more than double"' 16 April 2020 p.6.
37. Brittany Vonow 'Size of the crisis' *The Sun* 15 April 2020 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11401697/domestic-abuse-killings-rise-16-coronavirus-lockdown/> [consulted 20 January 2023]
38. Eimear O'Hagan 'Murdered in lockdown' *The Sun* 10 May 2020 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/11567119/rise-domestic-violence-coronavirus/> [consulted 20 January 2023]
39. Oliver Milne & Tom Pettifor 'Cases: Deaths' *The Daily Mirror* 16 April 2020.
40. *The Daily Express* 'Domestic killings "more than double"' 16 April 2020 p.6.
41. Brittany Vonow 'Size of the crisis' *The Sun* 15 April 2020 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11401697/domestic-abuse-killings-rise-16-coronavirus-lockdown/> [consulted 20 January 2023]
42. Rebecca Pocklington 'Isolated in hell' *The Sun* 25 March 2020 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11217376/coronavirus-self-isolation-domestic-abuse-victims-survivors/> [consulted 20 January 2023]
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44. Jenny Francis 'Coronavirus crisis' *The Sun* 14 April 2020 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/11397678/abusers-coronavirus-isolation-gain-power-survivor-roxy/> [consulted 20 January 2023]
45. Eimear O'Hagan 'Murdered in lockdown' *The Sun* 10 May 2020 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/11567119/rise-domestic-violence-coronavirus/> [consulted 6 August 2023]
46. Elizabeth Stanko *Everyday Violence* (London, Pandora, 1990)

47. Karen Ingala Smith 'Coronavirus doesn't cause men's violence against women' blog post 15 April 2020 <https://kareningalasmith.com/tag/coronavirus/> [consulted 20 January 2023]
48. Kate Barnes *et al.* 'Dank or not? Analyzing and predicting the popularity of memes on Reddit' *Applied Network Science*, 6:21, 2021 p.1
49. Town and parish councils (otherwise styled as neighbourhood/city/village councils) are statutory bodies comprising the first tier of government and primary access point of democracy, i.e. the most *local* level of government in England (and Wales, where they are known as community councils). There are around 10,200 town councils, with approximately 100,000 town councillors in England. They cover about 40% of the population, and are mainly located in rural areas. Carl Baker and Mark Sandforth *Unitary authorities: the role of parish and town councils*, 2020 (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/unitary-authorities-the-role-of-parish-and-town-councils/> [consulted January 2023])
50. According to a report published by Cheshire East Council, it was later found that Weaver 'was not acting in an official capacity' at the meeting (Watterson, Kaleigh 'Handforth Parish Council: Jackie Weaver "did not have the authority"', BBC News, 29 March 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-60913569> [consulted 6 August 2023]).
51. The 30-second video (posted at 5.52pm on 4 February 2021) and the thread for 4 and 5 February 2021 can be seen here: <https://twitter.com/janinemas0n/status/1357371421442396162> [@janinemas0n consulted 6 August 2023]. It was posted by Janine, the owner of the @janinemas0n Twitter account, who on 6 August 2023 had 1,393 followers (data on the number of followers in February 2021 is no longer available).
52. Martin Farrer and Helen Pidd 'Insults and expletives turn parish council Zoom meeting into internet sensation' *The Guardian* 5 February 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/05/handforth-insults-and-expletives-turn-parish-council-meeting-into-internet-sensation> [consulted 20 January 2023]
53. Steven Morgan 'Best of the Handforth Parish Council Planning & Environment Committee Thursday 10 December 2020' YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgGmYeAm0jk> [consulted 20 January 2023]
54. Channel 4 News, Interview with Shaan Ali, 6 February 2021 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=401107397853918> [consulted 20 January 2023]
55. Commenting on Twitter on an interview Ali gave on BBC London soon after the release of the video on Twitter by Janine, one commentator said: 'Lovely lad, pity interviewing takes over him and closed him down when he was just getting going on misogyny in the interview'. (Louisa MA @Feudaltimes Feb. 8 2021, <https://twitter.com/CratusComm/status/1358856287568748545> [consulted 20 January 2023])
56. Shann thanking Janine for posting the video, and comments can be found at @shaanthePenguin 4 February 2021 <https://twitter.com/shaanthePenguin/status/1357397851245002752> [consulted 20 January 2023]
57. A collection of memes originating from the 30-second video is available at Lydia Venn 'Everything you need to know about \*that\* chaotic Handforth Parish Council meeting' *The Tab* n.d. <https://thetab.com/uk/2021/02/05/handforth-parish-council-jackie-weaver-memes-explained-193968> [consulted 20 January 2023]
58. Steven Morgan Twitter thread of 5 February 2021 (available at @flavaadit <https://twitter.com/flavaadit/status/1357951029720076288> [consulted 20 January 2023])
59. Quoted in Emmeline Pilson, *Legal Feminist* 14 February 2021 as part of the reaction to #jackieweaver (<https://www.legalfeminist.org.uk/2021/02/14/standing-orders-are-a-feminist-issue/> [consulted 20 January 2023])
60. Martin Farrer and Helen Pidd 'Insults and expletives turn parish council Zoom meeting into internet sensation' *The Guardian* 5 February 2021, reported 5,000 retweets and 32,000 likes (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/05/handforth-insults-and-expletives-turn->

parish-council-meeting-into-internet-sensation [consulted 20 January 2023]). Later that day Andy Jehring and Brittany Vonow, with reference to the evening following the release of the video on Twitter, claimed: 'For hours yesterday Jackie....was trending number one on Twitter', 'Beam me up' *The Sun* 5 February 2021 (<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/uknews/13957084/handforth-parish-council-star-angry-meeting-chaos/> [consulted 20 January 2023])

61. Andy Jehring 'Zoom and gloom' *The Sun* 26 March 2021 (<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/14470792/online-zoom-meetings-hindrance-workers-researchers/> [consulted 20 January 2023]), Andy Jehring and Brittany Vonow 'Beam me up' *The Sun* 5 February 2021 (<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/uknews/13957084/handforth-parish-council-star-angry-meeting-chaos/> [consulted 20 January 2023]), ITV News 5 February 2021 (available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7TXI0885Ow2m15s> [consulted 20 January 2023])

62. @TheLastLeg '@TheLastLeg speaks to the legend that is Britney Spears Jackie Weaver' (available at: @Channel4 Tweet 5 February 2021 <https://twitter.com/Channel4/status/1357825960104636417> [consulted 20 January 2023])

63. Jehring and Vonow *The Sun* 5 February 2021

64. Weaver's self-help guide (Weaver, 2021) includes advice on participation in local government.

65. The response of governmental and non-governmental organisations to bad behaviour by clerks and councillors in local government is the subject of ongoing research by the current author.

66. The range of terms used for the online aggression directed at Weaver include: bad behaviour, hostility, shouting, bellowing, hectoring, bullying, yelling, swearing and lashing out at. The male to female nature of the aggression is seldom mentioned. One of three independent investigations into the meeting described Weaver as having been placed in *unusual and difficult circumstances*, Mark Brown 'Jackie Weaver had "no authority" after all, investigation finds' *The Guardian* 29 March 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/mar/29/jackie-weaver-had-no-authority-after-all-investigation-finds> [consulted 20 January 2023]

67. Jehring and Vonow *The Sun* 5 February 2021

68. Benjie Goodhart 'God knows how we got on air!' *The Guardian* 17 January 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/jan/16/40-glorious-disastrous-years-of-breakfast-tv> [consulted 20 January 2023]

69. ITV *Good Morning Britain* 'Who is viral sensation Jackie Weaver?' 8 February 2021, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ij4BaN-pIhA> [consulted 20 January 2023]

70. LBC *Matt Frei* 5 February 2021, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZGvGXrtf7w> [consulted 20 January 2023]

71. *Loose Women* interview 10 February 2021 imbedded in Monica Greep 'Handforth Parish Council's...' *Mailonline* 10 February 2021 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-9245473/Handforth-Parish-Council-Jackie-Weaver-hailed-icon.html> [consulted 20 January 2023]

72. Monica Greep 10 February 2021

73. Tom Barton 5 *News Interview* 5 February 2021 available at <https://twitter.com/tombarton/status/1357652087388188673> [consulted 20 January 2023]

74. Maria Collinge 'Jackie Weaver: we need more women at parish council meetings – and younger ones than me' *The i* 5 March 2021 <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/jackie-weaver-local-government-young-women-councils-899738> [consulted 20 January 2023]. The *i* is a British quality newspaper, which was launched in 2010 as a sister to The Independent newspaper.

75. *Ibid.*

76. Roger Bolton *Radio 4 blog* 11 April 2014 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/radio4/entries/54cbdddf-d1aa-3648-8f21-61815167378a> [consulted 20 January 2023]

77. Weaver (24-27seconds): 'actually 99.99%...of council meetings are just not like that'. (A video of the interview is available at BBC News "'I made Handforth Parish Council go viral'" 5 February 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-55955288> [consulted 20 January 2023])

78. Quoted in Martin Farrer and Helen Pidd 'Insults and expletives turn parish council Zoom meeting into internet sensation' *The Guardian* 5 February 2021 (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/05/handforth-insults-and-expletives-turn-parish-council-meeting-into-internet-sensation> [consulted 20 January 2023])
79. *Ibid.*
80. *Woman's Hour* 12 May 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000vx2t> [consulted 20 January 2023]
81. *Vice UK* was launched in 2002 by Vice Media. Its readership is concentrated among persons aged 20-30.
82. Joel Golby 'Let's all rejoice in the chaos of the Handforth Parish Council video' *Vice* 5 February 2021 <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qjpmww/jackie-weaver-handforth-parish-council-video> [consulted 20 January 2023]
83. Harrison Gowland *Huffington Post* 17 February 2021 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/jackie-weaver-meme-viral\\_uk\\_602d2db6c5b67c32961a85a4](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/jackie-weaver-meme-viral_uk_602d2db6c5b67c32961a85a4) [consulted 20 January 2023]
84. Weaver later in a *Woman's Hour* interview on 12 May 2021 confirmed her own feeling of having been objectified: 'when you talk about Jackie Weaver, for me you're talking about somebody else'. *Woman's Hour* 12 May 2021 4m 25s-33s <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000vx2t> [consulted 20 January 2023]
85. Harrison Gowland *Huffington Post* 17 February 2021
86. Anna Silverman *Grazia* 5 February 2021 'The best memes and internet reactions to Jackie Weaver and the parish council debacle' <https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/in-the-news/jackie-weaver-parish-council-video-watch-best-memes-internet-reactions/> [consulted 20 January 2023]
87. Liz Kelly 'The continuum of sexual violence'. In Hanmer, J. and Maynard, M. (eds) *Women, Violence and Social Control, Explorations in sociology*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1987) pp. 46-60.
88. @ayeshahazarika Ayesha Hazarika 5 February 2021 'After days of rowing about patriotism & flags, can we agree that Jacking Weaver & that zoom meeting make us proud to be British.' <https://twitter.com/ayeshahazarika/status/1357466477209784320> [consulted 20 January 2023]
89. Anna Silverman *Grazia* 5 February 2021
90. Amanda Devlin 'Are you serious?' *The Sun* 8 February 2021 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/13980797/susanna-reid-horro-jackie-weaver-death-threats/> [consulted 20 January 2023]
91. *Ibid.*
92. Marc Waddington 'Police probe Jackie Weaver threats after Handforth Parish Council meeting' *Cheshire Live* 22 February 2021 <https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/police-probe-jackie-weaver-threats-19892661> [consulted 20 January 2023]
93. Local council elections took place in May 2019 and May 2021. A comparison of the gender of elected councillors at the two elections shows no change in the gender distribution (38% female and 59% male at both elections). National Association of Local Councils *Report: local council elections 2021* (London, NALC, 2022) (<https://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/our-work/elections-1/3658-local-councils-elections-2021-report/file> [consulted 20 January 2023])
94. A web search of the use of the term 'jackie weaver' in Google searches by UK-based internet users shows a steeply rising trend to the top of index (100) at the start of February 2021, before slumping to 1 by the end of March. Search for the last five years conducted by the author using Google Trends on 26 January 2023.
95. Incidents of bullying like those at in the Handforth Parish Council virtual meeting reflect the choices of parliament to abolish most of the sanctions available under the old standards regime, and in place of regulating such behaviour to excuse it. On 23 November 2022 an Early Day Motion on intimidation in town and parish councils was tabled in parliament by Dr Julian Lewis MP. This calls for tougher sanctions to be introduced, including those for the suspension of poorly behaved councillors. UK Parliament EDM 611: tabled on 23 November 2022 (<https://>



edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/60320 [consulted 20 January 2023]). NALC, in collaboration with other local council organisations, in July 2022 introduced the Civility and Respect Project. This aims at countering bullying, harassment and intimidation in town councils. By 7 August 2023, 1,318 councils had signed the Civility and Respect Pledge <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/civility-and-respect-project> [consulted 7 August 2023].

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## ABSTRACTS

This article examines the responses of traditional media to an incident of everyday sexism that occurred in a town council meeting held online during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. The incident received a brief period of notoriety consequent on the uploading on to Twitter of a 30-second video of the complete video of the meeting, which went viral during the third lockdown. The context for the incident and the media response is provided by the post-#MeToo era, during which feminist campaigns have persisted in drawing attention to the consequences of normalising everyday acts of sexism, and highlighted the need to tackle the cultural sexism of Western media. The normalisation of male abuse of women by traditional media is illustrated in the article by an examination of the tabloid press during the period of the first lockdown. In terms of practices of governance at the lowest level of representative democracy in England, the incident at the meeting occurred at a time when bullying, intimidation and harassment were a concern of the town council sector. The examination of a sample of traditional media reporting on the short video finds attention having been drawn to the video's online success, which is mainly attributed to its amusement value. The female victim of abuse is portrayed as an unlikely celebrity, who then uses her media platform to deflect attention away from the realities of sexist bullying in local government. The case study illustrates attention having mainly been drawn to the workings of celebrity culture in the new normal of home working and video meetings, and a continuation of the longer standing normalisation of male abuse of women in some of the coverage by traditional media.

Cet article examine les réactions des médias traditionnels face à un incident de sexisme ordinaire (everyday sexism) qui a eu lieu lors d'une réunion virtuelle d'un conseil municipal pendant le premier confinement de la pandémie de Covid-19. L'incident a connu une brève période de notoriété suite à la publication d'une vidéo de 30 secondes sur Twitter de la réunion qui est devenue virale lors du troisième confinement. Le contexte de cet incident, ainsi que la réponse médiatique, s'inscrivent dans l'ère post-#MeToo, au cours de laquelle les campagnes féministes ont continué à exposer les conséquences de la normalisation des actes sexistes du quotidien, et ont souligné la nécessité d'aborder la culture du sexisme que l'on retrouve dans les médias occidentaux. La normalisation du harcèlement envers les femmes via les médias traditionnels est illustrée dans cet article à partir d'un examen des *tabloïds* (presse populaire) lors du premier confinement. En ce qui concerne les pratiques de gouvernance au niveau local de la démocratie représentative en Angleterre, l'incident de la réunion du conseil municipal a eu lieu à un moment où le bullying, le harcèlement et l'intimidation étaient des préoccupations des conseils municipaux. L'analyse du reportage des médias traditionnels concernant la courte vidéo démontre que l'attention qu'elle a reçue grâce à son succès sur les réseaux sociaux est principalement attribuée à sa valeur humoristique. La victime est dépeinte comme une célébrité improbable qui va ensuite utiliser sa plateforme médiatique dans le but de détourner l'attention

des réalités des abus sexistes pratiqués à l'échelle politique locale. Cette étude de cas démontre que l'attention a été principalement centrée sur les travaux de la 'celebrity culture' dans la nouvelle réalité (*the new normal*) du télétravail et des réunions virtuelles, et une continuité de la banalisation du harcèlement envers les femmes dans certains reportages des médias traditionnels.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** réunions en ligne, conseils municipaux, confinements, sexisme quotidien, médias traditionnels

**Keywords:** online meetings, town councils, lockdowns, everyday sexism, traditional media

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