

Making Gender Divisive: 'Post-Feminism', Sexism and Media Representations of Julia Gillard

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The sexism inherent in media representations of Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has been well acknowledged. These discourses implied that women's bodies were out of place in leadership roles, making Gillard's attempts to address gender-related issues appear politically manipulative. As the media played a role in making gender divisive, it is important to consider the role of the media and the significance of media products - including newspaper, online sources, television programs and social media - in the perpetuation of sexist political representations. However, new understandings of this phenomenon can be drawn from thinking about the media paradigm, and its 'post-feminist' vision of society, into which such representations were circulated. Within this 'post-feminist' paradigm, the media questioned Gillard's apparent failure to fundamentally change Australian politics at the same time as perpetuating a focus on gender, rather than policy, as the characterising element of her leadership.

In June 2010, Australia welcomed its first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, with a flurry of excitement. *The Age's* Michael Gordon lauded Gillard as a "consummate parliamentary performer" who could "master a brief, communicate a message, demonstrate wit and go for the kill" [Gordon, 2010]. However, by February 2011, a perceived broken promise surrounding the introduction of carbon pricing crystallised the media backlash that had already begun, leading to increasingly hostile representations of the Prime Minister. *The Stalking of Julia Gillard* (2013), by federal parliamentary press gallery journalist of 25 years Kerry-Anne Walsh, claims:

Gillard was continually cast as a liar and policy charlatan, and lampooned for her hair, clothes, accent, arse, even the way she walks and talks. If ever the deck was stacked against someone, it was Gillard. [Walsh, 2013, xiii]

The discourses surrounding Gillard gained further significance due to their preoccupation with gender, as they demonstrated the mainstream media's widespread complicity in the creation of sexist political representations. The media constantly perpetuated myths that drew attention to the newly "gendered" prime ministerial body, suggesting that women's bodies continued to be out of place in leadership positions. Gender slurs, which were repeated ad infinitum, became magnified as Gillard herself was repeatedly accused of using her gender for political gain through the phrase "playing the gender card." As a result, gender itself became divisive and political references to gender inequality were seen as polemical. This discussion, however, was generated within a media paradigm that assumed a "post-feminist" vision of Australian society, with political implications not just for Gillard, but for

women in future leadership positions, political or otherwise. It is therefore necessary to investigate *how* gender became divisive, and determine the role of the media and the significance of media products - from newspaper and online sources to television programs and social media - in the perpetuation of sexist political representations.

The media perpetuation of gendered representations of former Prime Minister Julia Gillard contributed to a divisiveness that shaped public political discourse. In the public sphere, politics is communicated via the mainstream national media and the imagined communities it creates. According to Benedict Anderson, the nation is imagined "as a *community*" because it is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" [Anderson, 2006, p. 7 and 167]. Within this community, the construction of national identity is instilled "through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations," and so forth. The mainstream media inevitably conveys ideas about the relationship between politics and gender, yet this is often understood in terms of a popular (as in, non-academic) "post-feminist" paradigm [Barrett, 2000, p. 46]. Cultural theorist and scholar Angela McRobbie suggests that 'Post-Feminism' refers to "an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined ... while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism" [McRobbie, 2004, p. 255]. The mainstream media perpetuates the myth that women can affect positive change within politics, according to communications scholar Mary Douglas Vavrus, alongside this post-feminist vision that "encourages women's private, consumer lifestyles rather than cultivating a desire for public life and political activism" [Vavrus, 2002, p. 2]. The Australian mainstream has media operated within

a similarly imagined post-feminist paradigm, where the focus upon Gillard's gender existed alongside the assumption that sexism and misogyny remain characteristics of the "unenlightened" past. The concurrent failure of women to be well-represented within politics, and their inability to fundamentally change the political landscape, is thus framed *not* as the result of an ongoing patriarchal system of politics, but rather as the failure of individual women. In this post-feminist media marketplace, discussions pertaining to gender or self-identification with feminism consequently incur media hostility and, effectively, political punishment.

While post-feminist media assumes women's "equality," it concurrently presented Gillard as an aberrant political body because of her femaleness. According to Emeritus Professor of Political Science Marian Sawer, Gillard was "subjected to sexist misrepresentation" in the Australian mainstream media and beyond [Sawer, 2013, p. 111]. For example, in 2010, *The Australian* suggested that to improve Gillard's appearance, her hairdresser should be sacked and she should get "smart clothes that fit her properly" when meeting President Barack Obama in 2011; while the *Herald Sun* reported that "Gillard blushes, like a high school girl"; and Howard Sattler of 6PR radio repeatedly questioned Gillard about the sexuality of her partner in 2013 [Savva, 2010, Carlyon and Vaughan, 2011, Robinson and Blake, 2013]. These instances reveal not only how sexism and institutionalised misogyny work within the political and social landscape, but also demonstrate how long-standing issues surrounding the "relationship between feminism, female politicians, and the news" remain problematic [Vavrus, 2002, p. 11]. From 2010 onwards, the media sought to frame Gillard's disproportionately emphasised "failings" as beyond the realm of sexism, but rather as personal flaws - of character, personal bearing and authority - unfit for a prime minister. While the ongoing nature of the gender-related abuse experienced by Gillard meant that it could not be overlooked entirely, public attempts to address the issue were invariably and increasingly labelled as "playing the gender card" [Divine, 2012, Scott, 2013, Smith, 2013]. Gillard's legitimate claim to challenge discriminatory treatment, however, meant that the so-called "gender card" became another media catchphrase, and sexist slurs against her were framed as isolated incidents rather than sequences of discriminatory language. This post-feminist vision meant that the media constantly worked to make gender divisive, thus polarising attitudes toward Gillard and the Labour Party in the eyes of the Australian public.

Media constructions of gender, particularly

surrounding understandings of "appropriate" gender roles, have a fundamental influence upon public perceptions of leaders. Sociological research has long reiterated that the media has "a significant and sometimes controversial role" in setting the public agenda and determining public views.¹ Modern democracy remains shaped by a male-dominated, heteronormative body politic, which became especially clear in the case of Gillard. The ideological marks of past exclusionary practices remain, as "othered" bodies - for example, women, non-white and LGBTIQ people - remain rhetorically, and sometimes substantively, beyond full political inclusion and discourses of power.² In 2009, *The Australian's* Ross Fitzgerald used gendered language to emphasise that, as Deputy Prime Minister, "Julia Gillard is the darling of the Canberra press gallery."³ However, when Gillard stepped beyond this subordinate position of leadership, the discomfort toward women in positions of ultimate political leadership blatantly emerged. The linguistic questions that continue to surround the male partners of female leaders further demonstrate the patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions of politics. In 2010, Gillard's partner Tim Mathieson became the "First Bloke," guiding journalists to accentuate his qualities as "a man's man" in order to demarcate this new-age style of masculinity. In an attempt to disrupt gender stereotypes, Kerry-Anne Walsh and Matthew Benns stated: "He's wary of the tag 'manbag', can do a blow-wave at 4.30am with one eye shut and is happy to cook and care for his partner" [Walsh and Benns, 2010]. Yet by indicating that hairdressing and cooking continue to be unconventional male pursuits, this description ultimately continued to delineate acceptable forms of masculine and feminine behaviour. As a result, a variety of media perspectives still worked toward the gendering of Gillard.

In spite of the record numbers of women in political leadership during Gillard's term - including Quentin Bryce as Governor-General, Anna Bligh and Kristina Keneally as Premiers of Queensland and New South Wales respectively - her position as the dominant Australian leader was still problematic. This growing female political presence is not yet "normalised," Sawer suggests, because of the degree to which it remained "a matter of debate and controversy" [Sawer, 2013, p. 105 and 109]. Prominent gender and leadership scholar Amanda Sinclair maintains that performances of leadership remain entwined with the concept of "heroic masculinity"; as this is achieved through "tough, out-front decisiveness or 'greatness,'" an adjective predominantly associated with men, it renders women's leadership beyond the norm.⁴ The discipline of history has often relied upon the

rhetoric of male political leaders, while the scholarly and media focus on “great men” has “obscured the voices of women and other minority groups” [Vonnegut, 1992, p. 31-32]. In an attempt to include Gillard within this existing linguistic paradigm, both positively and negatively, some journalists endeavoured to perpetuate the possibility of women becoming political “heroines,” thus continuing to delineate assumptions of political power upon supposedly post-feminist but clearly gendered lines [Shanahan, 2007, Kovac, 2012, Lizodool, 2012]. This makes it important to further investigate the role of the media in both revealing and shaping the “gendered nature” of politics [Sawer, 2013, p. 105].

The media complicity in the perpetuation of gender assumptions meant that Gillard was unable to escape the derision of what Anne Summers, AO, has described as “the usual misogynist media crowd” [Summers, 2013a]. Such an accusation of misogyny exists jarringly alongside the post-feminist media paradigm, but the two continue to inform each other. As a feminist editor, publisher, and former head of Australia’s Office of the Status of Women, Summers believes that “the misogyny factor” in the mainstream media and beyond works to “[deny] women inclusion, equality and respect” [Summers, 2013b, p. 10]. In the 2012 article, “Her Rights at Work: The political persecution of Australia’s first female prime minister,” Summers demonstrated the depth of sexism and misogyny - via emails, private cartoons by Larry Pickering and other public but not publicised material - within the political milieu.⁵ Despite the political vitriol that has increasingly characterised “normal” political debate, Summers outlined how Gillard experienced a specialised variety of maliciousness:

[W]hat is NOT normal is the way in which the Prime Minister is attacked, vilified or demeaned in ways that are specifically related to her sex (or, if you like, her gender). There are countless examples [of this.] [Summers, 2012, p. 20]

However, these gender-based discourses were not relegated to the sphere of politicians, but became equally evident to the public via the mainstream media. From the “Ditch the Witch” and “JuLIAR . . . Bob Browns BITCH [sic]” placards that donned a rally outside Parliament House in 2010, to Alan Jones’ highly personal remarks that Gillard’s father “died of shame” and indecent Liberal Party fundraiser menus, the gendered and highly sexualised nature of media and public commentary became vastly apparent [Thompson, 2011, Aston, 2012, Jabour, 2013]. Yet these discourses need to be contextualised within the post-feminist media paradigm that

continues to attach traditional gender assumptions to female politicians.

As the Prime Minister, the primary Australian figure of authority, Gillard’s inability to fulfil acceptable political stereotypes and apparent transgressions of “feminine” qualities caused a negative media backlash. Although media scholars Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read indicate the post-feminist potential to overcome out-dated and redundant distinctions between “feminist” and “feminine,” these parameters remain problematic in the political realm [Moseley and Read, 2002], as well as media representations thereof. Political science scholar Kathleen Dolan suggests that voters interact with political stereotypes to ascertain whether certain characteristics render individuals “capable of governing or not,” but perceptions of “political gender stereotypes” continue to relate to existing assumptions about women [Dolan, 2010, p. 70]. In addition, politicians often engage in gendered self-representation in regards to the persona they present to the public [Herrnson et al., 2003]. When women in leadership positions emulate male behaviours, even if successfully, Sinclair suggests that the public still does not necessarily view or judge women as leaders.⁶ Anticipated “feminine” behaviours include virtues such as passivity and truthfulness, while political attempts to emulate “masculine” behaviours are habitually constructed by the media in terms of gender transgression. Therefore, the media becomes complicit in the process of creating and perpetuating public outcry regarding in the purported transgressions of gendered behaviour.

The public perception of Gillard’s active collaboration in a political coup of the Labour Party meant that she was seen to have transgressed the supposed womanly virtues of passivity and politeness, an infringement - or “failure” - to which the media drew incessant attention. Rhetoric scholar Karlyn Kohrs Campbell identifies passivity, alongside submissiveness and patience, as a traditional virtue of womanhood [Campbell, 1989, p. 13]. The post-feminist media paradigm perhaps does not expect complete passivity from women in public positions, but the ultimate subordination of powerful women to even more powerful men remains an implicit political expectation. Regardless of the actual situation that precipitated the Labour Party’s desire for a new leader, Gillard’s first purported transgression was political activeness and a concurrent lack of desire to apologise, according to Paul Howes of *The Australian*, for the apparent travesty of “dumping a sitting prime minister” [Howes, 2010]. In August 2010, *The Courier-Mail*’s Neale Maynard and Emma Chalmers emphasised the media and public interchange inherent in this

situation. The article, “Readers vent anger at Julia Gillard’s partial apology for knifing Kevin Rudd,” drew attention to disillusioned reader comments, posted as public responses on the couriermail.com.au, thus legitimising accusations that the Prime Minister was “a back-stabbing fake” [Maynard and Chalmers, 2010]. In hindsight, Walsh emphasises that no matter what Gillard said to counteract these claims, she would be disbelieved [Walsh, 2013, p. 6]. The public’s perspective on Gillard’s statements post-controversy therefore led to even more perceived transgressions regarding Gillard’s version of the “truth.”

Popular understandings of politics give little weight to the veracity of political statements, as the public has little expectation that politicians will actually tell the truth. This was demonstrated by political theorist Hannah Arendt, in a 1967 article, entitled “Truth and Politics,” published in *The New Yorker*.⁷ However, because truth telling has been weighted as a virtue more necessary in women, these popular assumptions coexist awkwardly when it comes to women and politics. As have many journalists since 2010, *The Daily Telegraph*’s Piers Ackerman questioned Gillard’s honesty in relation to the carbon tax, in an article entitled “PM’s minor attitude to the truth” [Ackerman, 2010]. In 2011, Deputy Opposition Leader Julie Bishop likewise labelled the carbon tax “Gillard’s Inconvenient Truth” [Bishop, 2011]. The idea that such political decisions do not have gendered implications never held media sway, as Gillard’s actions were constantly presented as transgressions of acceptable feminine behaviour within a pre-existing post-feminist paradigm. Moreover, legal scholar Julia Simon-Kerr has suggested that “basic questions about truthfulness have differed on gender lines” in a manner that is often connected with perceptions of women’s chastity and sexual virtue [Simon-Kerr, 2008, p. 1854]. In light of the media attention granted Gillard’s de facto relationship status, this adds a new dimension to public interpretations of her propensity for “truth-telling.” Such conclusions make it difficult to overlook Van Badham’s assertion, in *The Telegraph*, that Gillard’s primary problem was that “from beginning to end, she remained female” [Badham, 2013]. Yet the media complicity in foregrounding and perpetuating this gendered image of Gillard remained the overarching problem.

The media’s constant use of the appellation “Julia,” rather than the more formal and respectful “Gillard,” was another linguistic choice that systematically emphasised *womanhood* rather than *politician*. According to French linguistics scholar Claire Michard, the “use of a first name, as opposed to that of the patronymic, has the effect of immersing women in the class of females,” and

thus demonstrating contempt for (and the partial erasure of) female identity.⁸ For Gillard, expressions of media contempt drew attention to her femaleness - and therefore aberrant political body and voice - in order to juxtapose her presence in the traditionally male office of prime minister. This was often achieved through linguistic puns surrounding the feminine prénom “Julia,” which repeatedly worked to undermine her political authority. Moreover, articles such as *The Australian*’s “Why Julia is a heroine to creaky feminist gorgons,” by Angela Shanahan, emphasised informality as a tool of ridicule [Shanahan, 2007]. This was most startlingly portrayed in the ABC television miniseries, *At Home with Julia* (2011).⁹

A variety of gendered assumptions structure *At Home with Julia*, from the emphasis on the title character’s lack of commitment to her personal life, to the show’s conclusion, and its reaffirmation that women should place more importance on their relationship than their job. The lyrics of the theme song, a love-letter sung by Julia (Amanda Bishop) to Tim (Phil Lloyd), demonstrate the discrepancy between her role as Prime Minister and the significance of her personal life:

When I am down here on the floor
You give me something more
And I could sail around the world.
When you’re here with me
There’s nothing I can’t be -
You keep my sky from falling.
You make it all come true;
Oh oh, you come and see right through;
You make it all worthwhile;
You make it all worthwhile.¹⁰

This song suggests the possibility of a thoughtful meditation on the role of political “husbands,” in response to the significant cultural and scholarly interest that exists regarding the role of public wives and first ladies.¹¹ Yet instead, the show outlines the supposed post-feminist gender transgressions of the fictitious Julia as a romantic partner, and the resultant emasculation of the fictitious Tim.

At Home with Julia begins with Julia missing “date night” (again!), leaving Tim - or “Mr. Julia,” as the gardener (Michael Denkha) calls him - disappointed, lonely and even more bored in his role of stay-at-home “husband.” The gardener’s own name, Jesus, is used to comment upon the real Gillard’s supposed “bogan” qualities, as Julia mispronounces *Jesus* (“jee-zus”) where Tim says *Hāsoōs* (“hay-zoos”).¹² Tim quickly becomes the target of a group of neighbourhood boys, who incessantly bully him with gendered taunts such as “first lady,” “Mrs. Prime Minister” and “handbag.” The realisation of his “emasculation” gives rise to an

ongoing identity crisis, epitomised when a Canberra newsagent suggests that it would be easier register Tim's address under the name "Gillard," rather than "Mathieson." Within their de facto relationship, Tim is disenchanted by the way he ultimately fulfils the "feminine" role, where femininity is constructed along the traditional gendered lines of the public wife [Scharer and Bissell, 2000, p. 57-59]. When Bob Katter (Drew Forsythe), Rob Oakeshot (Jim Russell) and Tony Windsor (Peter Carmody) end up at The Lodge for dinner and negotiations, Julia announces that Tim is "PM of the kitchen," further delineating their relationship along reversed gender lines.¹³ Julia's priorities are also questioned when she is late for Tim's public hairdressing media event; the security team fear that she has been kidnapped, but Tim instead concludes: "she's just late - she always is for my stuff."¹⁴ Although her lateness resulted from getting locked in the bathroom, Tim is only too ready to view Julia's her absence as yet another example of how she undervalues their relationship and privileges her job.

As the pair remains unmarried, the narrative focuses upon the disillusionment Tim experiences because he is only a "husband." When the supermarket meat salesman (Glenn Hazeldine) asks if Tim is shopping for a special occasion - a "wedding anniversary?" - Tim can only despondently answer "no. . .," establishing his ongoing narrative desire to propose to Julia. The overarching implication is that if the pair were to become a committed, married couple, their gender role "confusion" would subside and the gender hierarchy could be restored. Tim's dissatisfaction would thus abate with the renewal of his "masculinity," while Julia's "femininity" could become properly subordinated. This point is demonstrated when Tony Abbott (Nicholas Cassim) asks Tim: "When are you finally going to make an honest woman out of her - as much as you can of a Labour pollie!"¹⁵ The tension between the couple's view of marriage is demonstrated when wires get crossed regarding what could constitute a "change" in their relationship: Tim believes Julia would like to get married, while Julia believes Tim would like to be relieved of his jobless boredom, instating him as the federal Headlice Taskforce Manager. As a result, the ambivalence Julia shows toward the institution of marriage is framed as yet another undervaluation of their relationship.

The couple break up on account of this misunderstanding, leading to the most problematic element of the narrative. Julia loses her voice as a result of this trauma and loss, leading to a political catastrophe and the need for a voice impersonator (Gabby Millgate) to fill her place for a radio interview with Alan Jones (Geoff Moxham). However, the way Julia's loss of voice frames the

series' narrative conclusion relates to broader issues regarding women's public speech. The "suppression of women's voices," according to literary scholar Grace Farrell, is "a central form of patriarchal control" [Farrell, 1996, p. 404]. The awkward sounds made by Julia during this interlude create a negative commentary regarding the deviant and discordant nature of women's political voices. Moreover, the rediscovery of women's public speech and rhetorical history is crucial, according to Campbell, because "for much of their history women have been prohibited from speaking" [Campbell, 1989, p. 1]. The narrative conclusion in which Julia is rendered near incapable of appearing on the ABC's *Q&A*, with Kevin Rudd (Paul McCarthy) only too happy to replace her, is highly contentious within the historical paradigm of women's silenced political voices.¹⁶ Therefore, the fact that Julia loses her voice as a result of a relationship breakdown, and only regains it when that relationship is restored, is problematic from both a political and personal perspective. *At Home with Julia* thus concludes by providing retribution toward women who are unable to fulfil their personal and work-related duties, without somehow neglecting both.

Interestingly, the media reception to this series was overwhelmingly negative and aghast. While other political satire of course exists - Clarke and Dawe provide a prominent example - *At Home with Julia* defies previous boundaries with its emphasis on the personal, rather than the political. Although the programme was "certainly disrespectful of the office of PM," John Warhurst of *Eureka Street* concluded, its lack of precedent meant that he could not see it as particularly different from the disrespect endured by other prominent politicians [Warhurst, 2011, p. 23]. However, such a conclusion overlooked the overt sexualisation of Gillard throughout the series. The scene in which the fictitious Julia and Tim are swathed in the Australian flag after intimate relations in the Prime Minister's office presented a definitive departure from previous representations of Australian prime ministers. Should the hypothetical show *At Home with John and Jeanette* have depicted similar content, Walsh conjectures, it would have been considered "so heretical and disrespectful that the storm troopers in the Liberal Party would have shut the ABC down overnight" [Walsh, 2013, p. 76]. In spite of the criticism levelled, there was a general consensus that the show was "powerfully unfunny" without an interrogation of its gender-related discourses [Carlton, 2011]. Furthermore, Walsh has identified the prevailing problem: the media outrage surrounding *At Home with Julia* consistently managed to outshine reporting on the actual Prime Minister's achievements during this period [Walsh, 2013, p. 75-76]. This was a structural issue not

limited to reporting of this television programme.

Repeatedly, media reports surrounding Gillard frequently discussed trivial issues more prominently than political issues. This extended to a variety of personal factors, demonstrating the media's complicity in the construction and maintenance of gendered political assumptions. Gillard's childlessness was constantly levelled against her and, as discussed by Sinclair, provided "evidence [that] 'she doesn't have much love in her'" [Sinclair, 2012, p. 10]. When Gillard was the Deputy Labour Leader, prominent Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan maintained that she was unsuitable to lead the nation because she remained "deliberately barren," with no understanding of "the relationship between mum, dad and a bucket of nappies" [News.com, 2007, Sawyer, 2013, p. 111]. Although Heffernan retracted this statement, the original assertion was reiterated in prominent news stories [Harrison, 2007a, Harrison, 2007b]. Similarly, when Mark Latham drew attention to her purported lack of empathy, due to childlessness, the media emphasised how Gillard's own political milieu reiterated similar claims [Kelly, 2011]. The existing focus on Gillard's body heightened when she became Prime Minister, as she was portrayed in a way that rendered her "less leader-like," according to Sinclair, through a "public commentary of her hips, hair roots and wrinkles" [Sinclair, 2012, p. 10]. Haircuts from over the years became newsworthy to the point of ridicule, so much so that *At Home with Julia* presented neatness of hair as a barometer of the fictitious Julia-Tim relationship.¹⁷ Throughout her prime ministership, Gillard's "image" - make-up versus naturalistic appearance, glasses versus no glasses - also became a focus of media commentary. Upon Gillard's announcement of the 2013 election date, *The Advertiser* claimed: "It was a spectacle that threatened to overshadow the announcement of the federal election date: The Prime Minister is now wearing glasses" [Advertiser, 2013]. Others, at least, attempted to point out the degree of absurdity, as did Karen Brooks' article, "Focusing on Julia Gillard's glasses shortsighted [sic]," in *The Courier-Mail* [Brooks, 2013]. However, while the first article purposefully attempted to draw attention away from and undermine Gillard's announcement, the second article - in its attempt to negate that position - only brought more attention to this ongoing structural problem.

The constant heckling endured by Gillard, from the media and other politicians alike, resulted in her now famous "misogyny speech" and the resultant polarisation of the national versus the international media. In direct response to explicit text messages sent by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Peter Slipper, but in a more general response to

the sexist attacks she continually faced, the Prime Minister addressed Opposition Leader Tony Abbott in parliament:

I will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man, I will not. And the government will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man. Not now, not ever. The Leader of the Opposition says that people who hold sexist views and who are misogynists are not appropriate for high office. Well, I hope the Leader of the Opposition . . . wants to know what misogyny looks like in modern Australia, he doesn't need a motion in the House of Representatives, he needs a mirror. [Gillard, 2012]

While Australian political commentators such as *The Australian's* Janet Albrechtsen, and members of the Canberra press gallery more generally, showed ambivalence toward this speech, the international response proved the opposite [Walsh, 2013, Albrechtsen, 2012]. The online clip of the speech - in spite of its 15 minute length - went viral, sparking an internet sensation and positive reviews worldwide regarding the substance of the Australian Prime Minister. *The New Yorker's* Amelia Lester suggested that Americans "might be wishing their man would take a lesson from Australia" [Lester, 2012]. While this international adulation often existed within a similar post-feminist paradigm to that of Australian mainstream media, these reports sought to praise rather than demean Gillard at the same time as fostering an international self-congratulation on the progress of women. An exception from the post-feminist media paradigm was provided by the American feminist website *Jezebel*, which reported: "Best Thing You'll See All Day: Australia's Female Prime Minister Rips Misogynist a New One in Epic Speech on Sexism" [Morrisey, 2012]. The international media's sympathetic perspective continued in 2013 (following the aforementioned menu and radio debacles). For example, Pádraig Collins' article in *The Irish Times*, entitled "Treatment of Julia Gillard shows the extent to which sexism is tolerated in Australia," showed a willingness to accept the sexism inherent in the case of Gillard in a way that national media would not [Collins, 2013]. The differing perceptions of Gillard nationally and internationally demonstrated the degree to which media representations shaped Australians' perceptions of their Prime Minister, in the mainstream media and beyond.

Social media plays an expanding role in the perpetuation of mainstream media attitudes, making it a problematic site for the further dissemination of political sexism and misogyny. In this new

media space, social networks are built by individual interaction through online communities, wherein individuals create profiles that (re)present public personas their networks to the greater online community [Acquisti and Gross, 2006, p. 37]. While social networks purportedly “democratise” the media, communications scholar Zizi Papacharissi argues that such technologies have the potential to “truly revolutionise the political sphere” at the same time as reproducing the status quo [Papacharissi, 2002, p. 9-10]. It has also been suggested that facebook and Twitter constitute a new form of “imagined community,” due to the ability of users to be implicit in the creation process [Gruzd et al., 2011, Acquisti and Gross, 2006]. Political personas such as Gillard, Rudd and Abbott have official facebook pages, along with a presence on other social media such as Twitter, but satirical spin-off pages also appear. For example, a facebook page entitled “Julia Gillard - Worst PM in Australian History,” created in July 2011, included numerous examples of sexist hate speech through Photoshopped images of nudity, references to menstruation and other crude, sexual suggestions.¹⁸ Designated as facebook “Community Pages,” more recent user-created and user-run satire pages such as “Jula Gilerd,” “Keven Rud” and “Tone Abet” likewise construct imagined communities of mutual interest and understanding.¹⁹ Herein, the dissemination of differing political views exists alongside the potential to foster hate speech and sexual vilification.

In light of the aforementioned mainstream media representations of Gillard, online satirical pages were undoubtedly influenced by a pre-existing tolerance toward sexism which was inevitably recreated - indeed, often surpassed - in the new media sphere. Through an adapted version of Lolspeak, an internet language most famously attributed to Lolcat “Kitty Pidgin” memes, the Gilerd, Rud and Abet pages engaged in cartoon political commentary.²⁰ While the Abet page maintained a surprisingly level-headed comedic political commentary during the 2013 Gillard-Rudd leadership struggle, the Rud and Gilerd pages, upon Rudd’s re-election, became quickly and overtly sexualised. The Rud page depicted a *Star Wars: Episode VI - Return of the Jedi* (1983) spoof meme, based on the original movie poster, entitled “Return of the Rudd.”²¹ This meme presented Gilerd as the enslaved Princess Leia, with Rud as Luke Skywalker and Abet as Darth Vader. Another photo collage meme, depicted from the perspective of Keven, was prefaced by a facebook heading: “Wach out jula im comin [sic].”²² The photo collage itself featured pictures of the real Rudd (looking smug and smiling), placed behind the real Gillard (looking surprised), alongside the meme’s caption: “bite the pillow im goin in dry

[sic].” The deplorable popular culture concept of “surprise sex” (as opposed to rape) was the premise of this meme, with Gilerd as the victimised party.²³ Yet the Gilerd page also presented sexually explicit content featuring Abet and Rud.²⁴ A waist-up photograph of the real Rudd and Abbott, the former in front of the latter, was transformed into a meme through cartoon hand-drawn additions that depicted (presumably) consensual sex between the two. These images were based upon highly problematic sexist and homophobic assumptions directly related to gender, sexuality and power, while demonstrating facebook’s ongoing problem with gender-related hate speech [Smith, 2010, Johnston, 2013]. All three politicians were depicted in a sexually explicit manner in these user-created memes from within the realm of online media. However, only Gilerd was presented in terms of her ability to be sexually possessed, with an emphasis on a resultant lack of sexual and personal autonomy. Therefore, the phenomenon of new media demonstrates how the sexist tone of mainstream media can be taken as a platform, and reproduced to the point of offensive incongruity.

Following Kevin Rudd’s reinstatement as Prime Minister in June 2013, the media commentary surrounding Gillard saw an immediate transformation. The new approach was characterised by a wistful discourse about Gillard’s political achievements that existed alongside introspection regarding the gender-related criticism she continually experienced [Australian, 2013, Hinton, 2013]. While Clair Weaver of *The Australian Woman’s Weekly* maintained that Gillard “used gender as a means of undermining political opponents,” other reports demonstrated an understanding of the difficulties surrounding media representations of a female leader [Weaver, 2013]. Tanja Kovac of *The Australian* outlined how “heroic tales” confine women to the “bit parts of virgin mother and whore”; as Gillard was “none of these,” the media did not know “what to do with the flame-haired woman vying for the leading role in the story” [Kovac, 2013]. As media outlets began to admit the potential divisiveness of gender, Gillard’s farewell speech emphasised her belief that “it will be easier for the next woman and the woman after that and the woman after that” [Gillard, 2013]. As poignant as this may be, it cannot be underestimated how much easier this process could become if the media, too, was on board.

From 2010 onwards, the Australian media perpetuated a political commentary surrounding the first female prime minister which, structured as it was by gender-related comments and slurs, became the news that *was* Gillard. When policy did dominate discussions surrounding the carbon tax,

media commentary continued to focus on gendered interpretations Gillard's supposed "lies" and the Opposition's recurrent emphasis on her inability to be an arbiter of the "truth." The post-feminist media landscape into which these myths about Gillard were circulated further contributed to shaping her supposed "failure" - *not* because she was a woman, apparently, but because she transgressed essential feminine qualities such as political passivity, truthfulness, motherhood and legitimated sexuality. If and when Gillard did not live up to these expectations, it became acceptable to outline the Prime Minister as a *female*, and somehow lacking because of this immutable fact. In this way, the Australian media worked to make gender divisive and, rather than paying attention to policy, gender became *the* talking-point that characterised Gillard's leadership.

Notes

¹[McCombs, 2004, viii]. See also: [McCombs and Shaw, 1972, Milburn, 1991, Rozell, 2003, Gale, 2004].

²LGBTIQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Questioning. See [*Sexual Orientation and the Law Blog*, 2007].

³[Fitzgerald, 2009]. Walsh also reiterates this point: "As [Kevin Rudd's] deputy and a then-darling of the press gallery, Gillard was the only person in the frame to step up if the balloon went up" [Walsh, 2013, p. 167].

⁴[Sinclair, 2012]. The statistical emergence of the Labour Party's supposed "bloke problem" under Gillard's leadership demonstrates this ongoing difficulty. See [Green, 2013].

⁵[Summers, 2012]. See also [Sawer, 2013, p. 112].

⁶[Sinclair, 2012, p. 3]. See [Rayner, 2013].

⁷See [Arendt, 2005].

⁸Claire Michard, *Le Sexe en Linguistique: Semantique ou Zoologie?* (Paris: LHarmattan, 2001), 13. Translated by Catherine Orian in [Orian, 2013]

⁹*At Home with Julia* (Sydney: ABC television, 2011), television.

¹⁰Theme song, *At Home with Julia*.

¹¹See: [Caroli, 2003, O'Connor et al., 1996, Rosebush, 1987, Böck, 2009].

¹²Walsh relates a Question Time incident wherein Julie Bishop questioned Kevin Rudd about his trip to Bougainville, Papua New Guinea as a metaphor: "'Bogaville' is the former prime minister's searing private put-down of The Lodge's current inhabitants" [Walsh, 2013, p. 22].

¹³Episode 1: "Date Night," *At Home with Julia*.

¹⁴Episode 2: "Code Ranga," *At Home with Julia*.

¹⁵Episode 3: "The Leaker," *At Home with Julia*.

¹⁶Episode 4: "Citizens' Assembly," *At Home with Julia*.

¹⁷[*Woman's Day*, 2010]. Episode 4: "Citizens' Assembly," *At Home with Julia*.

¹⁸[Sawer, 2013, p. 112]. A facebook page entitled "Tony Abbott - Worst PM in Australian History" has recently emerged. While this page clearly fosters hate speech (although somewhat tempered, in the greater scheme of things, as moderators have made an effort to engage users in reasonably respectful debate), it is unlike its predecessor in that it is devoid (so far) of sexualised or explicit themes and imagery.

¹⁹"Jula Gilerd," *facebook*, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Jula-Gilerd/448164675274587?fref=ts> [Accessed 29 June 2013]; "Keven Rud," *facebook*, <http://www.facebook.com/presidentofaustralia> [Accessed 29 June 2013]; "Tone Abet," *facebook*,

<http://www.facebook.com/TheRealToneAbet?fref=ts> [Accessed 28 June 2013].

²⁰[Fiorentini, 2013]. Interestingly, the Rud page is no longer in existence.

²¹"Rud," *facebook*.

²²Ibid.

²³Surprise sex: "Unconsented intercourse that is technically constructed as rape. When performed on your girlfriend, it's surprise sex. When performed on an even hotter chick, it's rape." "Surprise Sex," *Urban Dictionary*, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Surprise%20Sex> [Accessed 30 August 2013].

²⁴"Gilerd," *facebook*.

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