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# **Domestic Violence on #qanda: The “Man” Question in Live Twitter Discussion on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Q&A**

Molly Dragiewicz and Jean Burgess

*La violence conjugale connaît actuellement une visibilité accrue en Australie. Les auteures du présent article utilisent les réseaux sociaux pour analyser les débats publics sur cette violence selon un cadre théorique précis, qu’Adrian Howe a appelé la question de « l’homme » : où et comment les hommes sont-ils visibles ou invisibles dans les récits de leur violence envers les femmes? L’article présente une étude qualitative d’une conversation sur Twitter au sujet d’un épisode axé sur la famille diffusé en février 2015 dans le cadre de l’émission Q & A, à la télévision nationale d’Australie. Nous avons remarqué que dans cette conversation la place des hommes était remise en question. Certains tweets privilégiaient les voix et les craintes des hommes, comme l’ont fait les organisateurs et les producteurs de l’émission. Cependant, il y avait une forte présence de voix féministes dans la présentation des faits, légitimant le point de vue des survivantes et relevant des éléments culturels antiféministes afin de défier les discours hégémoniques et patriarcaux sur la violence des hommes envers les femmes.*

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*Domestic violence is currently undergoing a period of heightened visibility in Australia. This article uses social media to analyze public discussions about this violence with respect to a specific theoretical frame, which Adrian Howe has called the “Man” question: where and how are men visible or invisible in narratives about their violence against women? The article presents a qualitative study of the Twitter conversation surrounding a special episode of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s television program Q&A, themed around family violence, which aired in February 2015. We found that the place of men in this conversation was contested. Some tweets privileged men’s voices and concerns, as did the organization and production of the program. However, feminist voices were also highly visible via presenting facts, legitimating survivor voices, and recuperating anti-feminist memes to challenge hegemonic patriarchal discourses on men’s violence against women.*

## *Introduction*

In February 2014, Greg Anderson murdered his eleven-year-old son Luke Batty at a children's cricket practice in Victoria, Australia. The context of the homicide was familiar. Luke Batty's parents were estranged. Anderson had a history of domestic violence heavy on controlling behaviour, stalking, and threats against Luke and his mother Rosie Batty. Anderson had legal rights to access his biological son despite never having been responsible for his care. Anderson was using custody and access proceedings to continue to abuse and harass Rosie Batty. There had been repeated police failures to serve domestic violence orders or respond to breaches despite Rosie Batty's efforts to elicit a police response. Anderson was presumed to be mentally ill but undiagnosed.<sup>1</sup> However, unlike most of the domestic violence homicides that take place on average each week in Australia, this case captured the public imagination.<sup>2</sup> Australia has experienced a rediscovery of domestic violence in the ensuing months,<sup>3</sup> accompanied by a deluge of both mainstream and social media discussion of the issue, and widespread official activity to acknowledge the problem. This article presents a qualitative study of the live Twitter conversation about a Family Violence Special episode of Australian Broadcasting Corporation's television programme *Q&A* broadcast in this context in February 2015. The article explores what Adrian Howe termed the "Man" question: where

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1. Geoff Thompson & Lisa McGregor, "Rosie's Story", *Four Corners* <[www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories](http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories)>; Rosie Batty & Bryce Corbett, *A Mother's Story* (Sydney: Harper-Collins, 2015). These indicators for lethal risk have been extensively documented in the international and Australian domestic violence death review and lethal risk literature. See, for example, Brynn E Sheehan et al., "Intimate Partner Homicide: New Insights for Understanding Lethality and Risks" (2015) 21 *Violence Against Women* 269; Desmond Ellis, Noreen Stuckless & Carrie Smith, *Marital Separation and Lethal Domestic Violence* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014); New South Wales Domestic Violence Death Review Team, *NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team Annual Report 2012–2013* (Sydney: Justice and Attorney General, New South Wales Government, 2015) <[www.coroners.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/dvdrt\\_2013\\_annual\\_reportx.pdf](http://www.coroners.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/dvdrt_2013_annual_reportx.pdf)> [NSW DVDRT, *Annual Report*].
  2. The largest survey of the incidence and prevalence of domestic and sexual violence in Australia is the Personal Safety Survey. The most recent study was completed in 2012. For full details, see Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Personal Safety Survey 2012* (2013) <[www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0)>. Australia has an average of about forty-five homicides identified as domestic violence related each year. Domestic and family homicides make up 41 percent of all homicides in Australia. See Tracy Cussen & Willow Bryant, *Domestic/Family Homicide in Australia*, Research in Practice no 38 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2015) for further details.
  3. Australia has experienced previous waves of attention to, and public recognition of, domestic violence starting in the 1980s. See Suellen Murray & Anastasia Powell, "'What's the Problem?' Australian Public Policy Constructions of Domestic and Family Violence" (2009) 15 *Violence Against Women* 532 for a discussion of evolving policy definitions.

and how are men visible or invisible in narratives about their violence against women? We found that while men's place in these accounts continues to be contested, social media offer a shifting landscape for popular discussion of violence against women.

### *The Australian Context*

Anderson's murder of Luke Batty galvanized discussion of domestic violence to an extent previously unseen in Australia. For example, Rosie Batty was named Australian of the Year for 2015, signalling the importance of domestic violence as a shared national concern. Also in 2015, the Australian state of Victoria established a Royal Commission into Family Violence to "inquire into and provide practical recommendations on how Victoria's response to family violence can be improved."<sup>4</sup> The government of Queensland assembled a Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence, which produced a report including 140 recommendations for systems change in less than six months.<sup>5</sup> The New South Wales Domestic Violence Death Review Team published a ten-year review of domestic violence homicides, noting that none of the homicides were of men battered by female abusers.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in his first major initiative upon taking office, Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull denounced domestic violence and pledged AUS \$100 million in federal funds to address the problem.<sup>7</sup> The scale of public discussion of domestic violence in Australia in 2015 parallels that around the Montreal Massacre of fourteen women by an anti-feminist gunman in Canada in 1989 or O.J. Simpson's trial for murdering Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman in the United States in 1991. As in the Simpson case, media coverage of domestic violence has become pervasive in Australia. As with the Montreal Massacre, the facts of the incident are undisputed because the crime took place in public and there was a substantial paper trail documenting events leading to the crime. Nonetheless, "a discursive battleground regarding violence against women" and how to understand it persists.<sup>8</sup>

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4. "Australian of the Year 2015: Rosie Batty, Family Violence Campaigner", *Australian of the Year Awards* <[www.australianoftheyear.org.au](http://www.australianoftheyear.org.au)>; *Royal Commission into Family Violence* <[www.rcfv.com.au](http://www.rcfv.com.au)>.
  5. Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland, *Not Now, Not Ever: Putting an End to Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland* (Brisbane: Queensland Government, 2015) <[www.qld.gov.au/community/documents/getting-support-health-social-issue/dfv-report-vol-one.pdf](http://www.qld.gov.au/community/documents/getting-support-health-social-issue/dfv-report-vol-one.pdf)>.
  6. NSW DVDRT, *Annual Report*, *supra* note 1.
  7. See, for example, Ellie Cooper, "Turnbull Commits \$100 Million to Stop Domestic Violence" (24 September 2015), *Pro Bono Australia*, <[www.probonoaustralia.com.au](http://www.probonoaustralia.com.au)>.
  8. Maureen Bradley, "Report: Reframing the Montreal Massacre: Strategies for Feminist Media Activism" (2006) 31 *Canadian Journal of Communication* 929 at 929.

### ***Domestic Violence Terminology in Australia***

Since the key terms differ from place to place, it is necessary to define domestic violence as it is used here.<sup>9</sup> In Australia, it is common to use the term domestic violence to refer to abuse by an adult against an intimate partner, regardless of marital status, with a particular focus on the types of control, coercion, and threats that used to be called “battering” or “wife beating.” For example, Queensland’s domestic and family violence law says:

Domestic violence means behaviour by a person (the first person) towards another person (the second person) with whom the first person is in a relevant relationship that:

- (a) is physically or sexually abusive; or
- (b) is emotionally or psychologically abusive; or
- (c) is economically abusive; or
- (d) is threatening; or
- (e) is coercive; or
- (f) in any other way controls or dominates the second person and causes the second person to fear for the second person’s safety or well being or that of someone else.<sup>10</sup>

While the law is gender neutral, the preamble of the Queensland *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* explicitly recognizes sex differences: “Domestic violence is most often perpetrated by men against women with whom they are in an intimate partner relationship and their children; however, anyone can be a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence.”<sup>11</sup> It is common in Australian policy to refer to “domestic and family violence” together, where family violence is used to include domestic violence and other types of abuse against family members, such as child abuse and children’s violence toward their parents. Family violence is also sometimes used when referring to abuse in Indigenous families, in recognition of the extended family structures that are more common in Indigenous households and communities. The terms domestic and family violence are not mutually exclusive, and foreground different salient contexts for a continuum of

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9. The authors acknowledge that the naming of domestic violence is a contentious issue with each term having benefits and drawbacks about which reasonable people could disagree. For a discussion of these issues, see Molly Dragiewicz, *Equality with a Vengeance: Men’s Rights Groups, Battered Women, and Antifeminist Backlash* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2011) at 8–10 [Dragiewicz, *Equality with a Vengeance*].

10. *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* (2012) Act no 5, s 8 (Queensland) <[www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/ACTS/2012/12AC005.pdf](http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/ACTS/2012/12AC005.pdf)>.

11. *Ibid.*

types of abuse.<sup>12</sup> Although each Australian state and territory has its own criminal code, domestic violence laws are substantially equivalent across Australia.<sup>13</sup>

One of the central debates in global discussions about domestic violence is whether or not it is a gendered issue. This debate is a key part of the struggle for authority over the meaning of domestic violence that has been prevalent since early in the women's movement. While feminist scholars have linked men's greater violence to patriarchy and its cultural, interpersonal, and structural manifestations, anti-feminist men's groups have asserted that violence cannot be a gender issue if women do it too.<sup>14</sup> This is one of the key arguments of anti-feminist men's groups. Accordingly, "men's rights" groups have campaigned for degendered approaches to domestic violence and rape with some success in Australia, the United States, and Canada, including launching public harassment campaigns against individual scholars they identify as feminist.<sup>15</sup> The rest of this article takes up issues of gender, sex, and violence in public discussion about domestic violence. We investigate "the discursive place occupied, or more usually vacated, by men in accounts of their violence against women"<sup>16</sup> by analyzing tweets about a special "Family Violence" episode of the ABC panel-style news and current affairs program *Q&A*, which was broadcast on 23 February 2015.<sup>17</sup>

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12. Murray & Powell, *supra* note 3.

13. National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children, "Domestic Violence Laws in Australia" (2009) at 13, *Australian Government Department of Social Services* <[www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05\\_2012/domestic\\_violence\\_laws\\_in\\_australia\\_-\\_june\\_2009.pdf](http://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/domestic_violence_laws_in_australia_-_june_2009.pdf)>.

14. Molly Dragiewicz, "Patriarchy Reasserted: Fathers' Rights and Anti-VAWA Activism" (2008) 3 *Feminist Criminology* 121; Molly Dragiewicz & Yvonne Lindgren, "The Gendered Nature of Domestic Violence: Statistical Data for Lawyers Considering Equal Protection Analysis" (2009) 17 *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy and the Law* 229.

15. See Michael Salter, "Men's Rights or Men's Needs? Anti-Feminism in Australian Men's Health Promotion" (2016) 28:1 *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 52; Dragiewicz, *supra* note 14; Dragiewicz & Lindgren, *supra* note 14; Lise Gotell & Emily Dutton "Sexual Violence in the 'Manosphere': Antifeminist Men's Rights Discourses on Rape" (2016) 5:2 *International Journal of Crime Justice and Social Democracy* (forthcoming); Ruth M Mann, "Men's Rights and Feminist Advocacy in Canadian Domestic Violence Policy Arenas: Contexts, Dynamics, and Outcomes of Antifeminist Backlash" (2008) 3 *Feminist Criminology* 44.

16. Adrian Howe, *Sex, Violence and Crime: Foucault and the "Man" Question* (Hoboken, Australia: Taylor and Francis, 2008) at 1 [Howe, *Foucault and the "Man" Question*].

17. The full program details (including video) are available at "Q&A", *ABC* <[www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/txt/s4173309.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/txt/s4173309.htm)>.

### *Framing the Domestic Violence Debate*

As with other social issues, media frames play an important role in the struggle over what domestic violence is and what to do about it:

Frames are persuasive devices used by movement leaders to recruit participants, maintain solidarity, drum up support and, in some instances, demobilize opposition . . . When successful, frames foster a sense of injustice, identity, and collective efficacy-cognitions that a situation is wrong, that it is not immutable and that "we" can battle "them" in order to change it.<sup>18</sup>

Feminist anti-violence advocates have sought a shift in frames for men's violence against women using these tactics. Efforts to redefine domestic violence, shifting it from a private interpersonal issue to a public community concern, have been an important part of feminist movements around the world. In Australia, as in many other countries, one of the demands of women's movements was for improved state responses to men's violence against women.<sup>19</sup> Historically, this has been a powerful part of feminist mobilization for a number of reasons. Men's violence against women in the home is a potent symbol of patriarchal oppression. A large body of research and official records documenting the prevalence and seriousness of the problem has helped this issue to command mainstream attention in a way that other feminist issues have not. In addition, shifts in state responses to crime have incorporated domestic violence into their justificatory narratives. As a result of public demand, Australia has implemented changes such as new criminal, civil, and family laws that address domestic and family violence. Like any social movement, battered women's movements have not simply replaced prior approaches to dealing with men's violence against women. Instead, domestic violence has been assimilated into other discourses, which have recuperated and assimilated some aspects of the new frames without completely supplanting the old ones.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Francesca Polletta, "Contending Stories: Narrative in Social Movements" (1998) 21:4 *Qualitative Sociology* 419 at 421.
  19. Jan Horsfall, *The Presence of the Past: Male Violence in the Family* (North Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1991); Del Martin, *Battered Wives*, 2d ed (Volcano, CA: Volcano Press, 1981).
  20. Alberto Godenzi, "Style or Substance: Men's Response to Feminist Challenge" (1999) 1 *Men and Masculinities* 385.

## ***Violence against Women and Media Research***

Scholarship on representations of gendered violence has identified various media formats as contributing to the social construction of crimes such as rape, domestic violence, and murder as well as collective responses to them.<sup>21</sup> This literature is part of a long-standing tradition of critical analysis of representations of women and gender in media. Many of the early works focused on the disparities between women's real lives and the ways in which we are represented in news and entertainment.<sup>22</sup> These analyses were concerned with the personal and political implications of the gap between representation and reality.<sup>23</sup> There is a twenty-year tradition of feminist scholarship critiquing the misrepresentation of men's violence against women. It has documented the emergence of domestic violence as a public issue as well as efforts to contain the threats to social order presented by the recognition of men's violence against intimate partners. In general, this literature has found increasing visibility of men's violence against women over time, combined with efforts to decontextualize and depoliticize this violence. The research has documented a number of patterns: the lack of news coverage of domestic violence relative to other violent crimes;<sup>24</sup> periodic forgetting and rediscovery of the epidemic of violence;<sup>25</sup> minimization of the seriousness of men's abuse of female

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21. Cory L. Armstrong, ed, *Media Disparity: A Gender Battleground* (Lexington, KY: Lexington Books, 2013); Nancy Berns, "Degendering the Problem and Gendering the Blame: Political Discourse on Women and Violence" (2001) 15:2 *Gender and Society* 262 [Berns, "Degendering the Problem"]; Nancy Berns, *Framing the Victim: Domestic Violence, Media, and Social Problems* (Herndon, VA: Transaction Publishers, 2004) [Berns, *Framing the Victim*]; Drew Humphries, *Women, Violence, and the Media: Readings in Feminist Criminology* (Lebanon, NH: University Press New England, 2009); Moira Peelo et al, "Newspaper Reporting and the Public Construction of Homicide" (2004) 44 *British Journal of Criminology* 256.
  22. Cynthia Carter, "Sex/Gender and the Media: From Sex Roles to Social Construction and Beyond" in Karen Ross, ed, *The Handbook of Gender, Sex and Media* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 365.
  23. Keith Soothill & Sylvia Walby, *Sex Crime in the News* (London: Routledge, 1991); Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels & James Benet, eds, *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
  24. Susan Caringella-MacDonald, "The Relative Visibility of Rape Cases in National Popular Magazines" (1998) 4:1 *Violence Against Women* 62.
  25. Adrian Howe, "'The War against Women': Media Representations of Men's Violence against Women in Australia" (1997) 3 *Violence Against Women* 59 [Howe, "'The War against Women'"]; Jenny Kitzinger, "Transformations of Public and Private Knowledge: Audience Reception, Feminism and the Experience of Childhood Sexual Abuse" (2001) 1:1 *Feminist Media Studies* 91; Wendy Kozol, "Fracturing Domesticity: Media, Nationalism, and the Question of Feminist Influence" (1995) 20:3 *Signs* 646.



partners;<sup>26</sup> victim blaming;<sup>27</sup> promulgation of rape myths;<sup>28</sup> reinforcing stereotypes;<sup>29</sup> pathologizing and individualizing the problem;<sup>30</sup> erasing the perpetrators;<sup>31</sup> redirecting responsibility for domestic violence onto already othered groups, including people who are poor, racialized, immigrants, and feminists;<sup>32</sup> and efforts to assert that highly gendered forms of violence are not gendered.<sup>33</sup>

Adrian Howe analyzed a series of news articles on men's violence against women in 1993, during one of the previous waves of Australian discovery and concern about domestic violence. Howe observed that the stories deployed what Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray<sup>34</sup> call "strategies of recuperation,"

such as editorial disclaimers, to minimize men's responsibility for their own actions and distance its purportedly neutral view from that of feminist extremists. The effect was to reinscribe its critique of men's pervasive violence against women within hegemonic narratives of gender relations in which women acquiesce in domestic violence, feminists vilify men, and men as a group are much maligned and not to be held accountable for the behavior of a small, aberrant minority.<sup>35</sup>

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26. Nicholas Chagnon, "Heinous Crime or Acceptable Violence? The Disparate Framing of Femicides in Hawai'i" (2014) 3 *Radical Criminology* 13; Jim McKay & Philip Smith, "Exonerating the Hero: Frames and Narratives in Media Coverage of the OJ Simpson Story" (1995) 75 *Media Information Australia* 57.
  27. Berns, "Degendering the Problem", *supra* note 21; Marian Meyers, *News Coverage of Violence against Women: Engendering Blame* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997) [Meyers, *News Coverage*]; Marian Meyers, "News of Battering" (1994) 44 *Journal of Communication* 47 [Meyers, "News of Battering"].
  28. Renae Franiuk et al, "Prevalence and Effects of Rape Myths in Print Journalism: The Kobe Bryant Case" (2008) 14 *Violence Against Women* 287.
  29. Cathy Ferrand Bullock & Jason Cubert, "Coverage of Domestic Violence Fatalities by Newspapers in Washington State" (2002) 17:5 *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 475.
  30. Berns, *Framing the Victim*, *supra* note 21; Meyers, *News Coverage*, *supra* note 27; Meyers, "News of Battering", *supra* note 27; Nancy Worthington, "Progress and Persistent Problems" (2008) 8 *Feminist Media Studies* 1.
  31. Howe, "'The War against Women'", *supra* note 25; Meyers, *News Coverage*, *supra* note 27.
  32. Chagnon, *supra* note 26; Dragiewicz, *Equality with a Vengeance*, *supra* note 9; Howe, "'The War against Women'", *supra* note 25; Yasmin Jiwani & Mary Lynn Young, "Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse" (2006) 31 *Canadian Journal of Communication* 895; Meyers, *News Coverage*, *supra* note 27.
  33. Berns, *Framing the Victim*, *supra* note 21; Joycelyn M Pollock & Sareta M Davis, "The Continuing Myth of the Violent Female Offender" (2005) 30:1 *Criminal Justice Review* 5.
  34. Linda Alcoff & Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" (1993) 18:2 *Signs* 260 at 268.
  35. Howe, "'The War against Women'", *supra* note 25 at 72–73.

Despite identifying frequent attempts to undermine critical understandings of violence, feminist media scholars have also noted the opportunities presented by increased attention to gendered violence. High-profile case coverage, awareness campaigns, and research have cemented the shift from private to public.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, criminologists have used news coverage of crimes as a supplementary source of data for understanding under-identified phenomena such as domestic violence homicide. For example, one study of domestic violence homicide used news stories to document and ameliorate the failures of official records.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to these significant bodies of research, there is an emerging literature on social media and gendered violence. This research incorporates social media-focused iterations of traditional communication research on representations of violence against women. It also considers the ways that abusers are using social media as tools of abuse.<sup>38</sup> Other scholars have studied the ways that victims of crime and their allies use social media to seek justice outside the legal system.<sup>39</sup> Early speculation about the impact of the Internet and social media, which tended towards utopian and dystopian visions of the impact of new media technologies, has given way to consideration of the continuity of social media with more traditional media as well as new opportunities for interpersonal communication, community organizing, and research.

The interactive and interpersonal, yet simultaneously public or quasi-public, character of social media communication has facilitated the growth of research on

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36. Kitzinger, *supra* note 25; Kimberly A Maxwell et al, "Covering Domestic Violence: How the OJ Simpson Case Shaped Reporting of Domestic Violence in the News Media" (2000) 77:2 *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 258; Worthington, *supra* note 30.
  37. Brian J Biroscak, Patricia K Smith & Lori A Post, "A Practical Approach to Public Health Surveillance of Violent Deaths Related to Intimate Partner Relationships" (2006) 121 *Public Health Reports* 393.
  38. Armstrong, *supra* note 21; Laurie L Baughman, "Friend Request or Foe: Confirming the Misuses of Internet and Social Networking Sites by Domestic Violence Perpetrators" (2010) 19:3 *Widener Law Journal* 933; Justine A Dunlap, "Intimate Terrorism and Technology: There's an App for That" (2014) 7 *University of Massachusetts Law Review* 10.
  39. Dunlap, *supra* note 38; Nina Huntemann, "No More Excuses: Using Twitter to Challenge the Symbolic Annihilation of Women in Games" (2015) 15 *Feminist Media Studies* 164; Michael Salter, "Justice and Revenge in Online Counter-Publics: Emerging Responses to Sexual Violence in the Age of Social Media" (2013) 9:3 *Crime, Media, Culture* 225; Michael Salter, *Violence, Gender and Social Media* (London: Routledge, 2016).

the ways in which meaning is contested in public communication.<sup>40</sup> Social media have provided opportunities to document and critique sexism on and offline.<sup>41</sup> Social media platforms have been a site for campaigns intended to repudiate feminism by insisting that violence is not a gendered phenomenon. They have also been used to deploy threats and representations of violence to silence women.<sup>42</sup> In other words, social and other online media have provided a rich resource for scholars interested in differing views on violence against women. These are potentially produced by a much broader cross-section of the population than is captured in “representative” sample studies using telephone landlines or university students. They may also skirt the socially desirable responses produced by communication and attitudinal research using surveys, focus groups, or interviews because the social media communication is spontaneous rather than elicited by a researcher.

### *Twitter and Q&A*

Scholars of social movements have documented the importance of online contexts for organizing, identity formation, and activism in the service of competing social and personal values as well as for live audience participation in news, sporting, and entertainment events (sometimes called “social television”), and there has been a growth of such scholarship drawing on empirical studies of Twitter. Partly because of its distributed, public dynamics, and partly because of easy access to large-scale data, Twitter has been used by media scholars as a tool for studying political and

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40. Shira Chess & Adrienne Shaw, “A Conspiracy of Fishes, Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity” (2015) 59 *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 208; Adrienne Shaw, “The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet” (2014) 11:3 *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 273.
  41. Tara L Conley, “From #RenishaMcBride to #RememberRenisha: Locating Our Stories and Finding Justice” (2014) 14 *Feminist Media Studies* 1111; Ryan Bowles Eagle, “Loitering, Linger, Hashtagging: Women Reclaiming Public Space Via #BoardtheBus, #StopStreetHarassment, and the #EverydaySexism Project” (2015) 15 *Feminist Media Studies* 350; Tanya Horeck, “#AskThicke: ‘Blurred Lines,’ Rape Culture, and the Feminist Hashtag Takeover” (2014) 14 *Feminist Media Studies* 1105; Elena Pavan, “#TakeBackTheTech and #WhatAreYouDoingAboutVAW: Reclaiming ICTs and Soliciting Stakeholders’ Responsibility to End Violence against Women” (2015) 15 *Feminist Media Studies* 159; Carrie Rentschler, “#Safetytipsforladies: Feminist Twitter Takedowns of Victim Blaming” (2015) 15 *Feminist Media Studies* 353; Samantha C Thrift, “#YesAllWomen as Feminist Meme Event” (2014) 14 *Feminist Media Studies* 1090; Sherri Williams, “Digital Defense: Black Feminists Resist Violence With Hashtag Activism” (2015) 15 *Feminist Media Studies* 341.
  42. Williams, *supra* note 41.

interpersonal communication.<sup>43</sup> Significantly, audience commentary on media such as television shows provides an opportunity to empirically investigate attitudes about social issues.<sup>44</sup> Like other forms of social media, audience participation, and communication, Twitter provides a written record of the continuum of perspectives on an array of social issues. Stephen Harrington, Tim Highfield, and Axel Bruns identified three of the distinct ways that Twitter commentary can provide insight into audience perspectives. These include: tracking activity around specific broadcasts; identifying key contributors to the conversation; and qualitative thematic analysis of the discussion.<sup>45</sup> We utilized the first and third approaches in order to investigate comments about domestic violence as part of the live Twitter commentary that occurred in the lead up to, during, and following a 2015 episode of the Australian television program *Q&A*.

*Q&A* is a weekly live network television talk show produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation—a federally funded, national public service media organization. The program consists of a panel of guest speakers who comment on timely and contentious social issues. *Q&A* is intentionally structured to elicit audience interaction—both in the studio and online. It incorporates a live audience that asks questions, explicit encouragement to use the #qanda Twitter hashtag,<sup>46</sup> a Facebook page, as well as curating and screening video and written questions submitted online. The *Q&A* website says that “*Q&A* is about democracy in action—the audience asks the questions. It doesn’t matter who you are or where you’re from—everyone can have a go and take it up to our politicians and opinion makers. *Q&A* is live to air—happening as viewers watch—and it’s all about encouraging people to engage with politics and society. If you want a chance to ask the questions, register online now, submit a video question or tweet your question during the program using #QandA and @qanda.”<sup>47</sup> *Q&A* is a particularly significant forum because it is arguably the most successful hybrid of broadcast and social media for the purposes of deliberative democracy that exists, if not in the world, then most definitely in Australia, and previous research has found it plays a significant role in national political processes.<sup>48</sup>

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43. Stephen Harrington, Tim Highfield & Axel Bruns, “More Than a Backchannel: Twitter and Television” (2013) 10:1 Audience Interactivity and Participation 405.

44. Axel Bruns & Jean Burgess, “Researching News Discussion on Twitter” (2012) 13:5–6 Journalism Studies 801; Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, *supra* note 43.

45. Harrington, Highfield & Bruns, *supra* note 43 at 406.

46. *Ibid*; Gay Hawkins, “Enacting Public Value on the ABC’s Q and A: From Normative to Performative Approaches” (2013) 146 Media International Australia 82.

47. *Q&A*, “About the Show”, ABC <[www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/about.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/about.htm)>.

48. Jean Burgess & Axel Bruns, “(Not) the Twitter Election: The Dynamics of the #ausvotes Conversation in Relation to the Australian Media Ecology” (2012) 6 Journalism Practice 384.

Each episode garners thousands of questions and responses, and the show serves as a catalyst for conversation about controversial issues in Australia. Even people who have not seen a given week's episode would be likely to have a peripheral awareness of the topic, especially when there is a high profile or particularly controversial issue discussed. The events that occur during the show itself often make the news. The live character of the show notwithstanding, the perspectives that make it to air are managed and moderated—in particular, the tweets posted using the hashtag #qanda are carefully curated before being displayed on screen, and only a handful of questions submitted by other means make it onto the show for the panelists to discuss. However, the remainder of activity on the Twitter hashtag constitutes a less moderated venue for discussion of the issues featured on the show, and it is highly likely that many Twitter users participate in the hashtag discussion without even watching the show.

Normally, *Q&A* discusses newsworthy events of the week, but occasional specials focus on a single topic. The Family Violence Special in February 2015 was one such episode. The host, Tony Jones, was joined by panel guests: Rosie Batty, who became an anti-domestic violence advocate after her son was murdered by his father; Natasha Stott Despoja, Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls; Tim Cartwright, Victoria Police Acting Chief Commissioner; Charlie King, a Local ABC radio sports broadcaster with an interest in child protection; and Simon Santosha, managing director of Men and Family Counselling and a consulting business.

### *Methodology*

This study analyzes the tweets around the *Q&A* Family Violence Special episode aired Monday, 23 February 2015. The relevant data were extracted from a dataset of 648,709 tweets containing #qanda collected using the Your Twapperkeeper tool between December 2013 and April 2015. The data was imported into Tableau and converted from AEST to AEDT to reflect the time zone in which the majority of the audience were watching. It is, however, important to note that the show screens at different times in different Australian states, and the data reflect this difference.

Tableau was used to visualize weekly, hourly, and minute-by-minute spikes in the data. The Family Violence Special episode had an unusually large and vocal audience. It was the episode with the fifth-highest number of tweets since December 2013 (when we began collecting data).<sup>49</sup> Our analysis for this article relates to a focused dataset spanning the time between 5:00 pm on the day of the broadcast

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49. The Twitter data used in this article was archived as part of a larger study of social media. See note 51 in this article for information about research ethics clearance. To provide some context for the large number of comments, the program with the third highest number of tweets was the previous week's episode on 16 February 2015 with

and 3:00 pm the following day, 24 February (to allow for a build-up of conversation in response to promotions as well as ongoing discussion the next morning). The 23 February dataset contained a total of 15,427 tweets. Building on methods used in Shaw and colleagues,<sup>50</sup> a temporally representative 10 percent sample (1,543 tweets) was created for manual thematic coding, by including every tenth tweet where the dataset was ordered chronologically. This technique gave us a sense of the topics covered in busier periods during the show's duration as well as covering the preliminary and post-show discussion.

Based on the project's theoretical framework and research question, the smaller data set was then coded for explicit mention of men or masculinity (coding for semantically rich content words such as "men," "male," "bloke" but ignoring simple referential uses of "he" to refer to a panelist or audience member). Of the 1,543 tweets, 272 contained such explicit references to men as a social identity or to maleness or masculinity as socio-cultural phenomena. In a separate field, each of these tweets was annotated with a first pass at a thematic categorization, and a set of higher-level themes was distilled, sufficient for the purposes of our discussion here.<sup>51</sup>

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guests Malcolm Turnbull (who has since become prime minister), Catherine King, Lisa Wilkinson, Bryan Stevenson, and Greg Sheridan. It is possible that, in addition to occurring around the time that most Australians were back at school, university, or work after the summer break, the episode was of particular interest to Australians because of leadership speculation surrounding Turnbull's potential to replace then unpopular Prime Minister Tony Abbott. The 16 February episode also included discussion of the death penalty, which was timely as two Australian citizens were fighting execution in Bali over drug offences at the time. The episode also addressed a recent report on the abuse of children in offshore detention centres outsourced by the Australian government. These were political issues of central concern to Australians at the time.

50. Frances Shaw et al, "Sharing News, Making Sense, Saying Thanks" (2013) 40 *Australian Journal of Communication* 23.

51. Note on research ethics: this project was conducted according to the conditions of a Negligible Risk exemption for working with publicly available social media data (Queensland University of Technology clearance number 1400000260). The dataset comprises only tweets explicitly tagged with a very public (and televised) hashtag, and they are unquestionably public speech. However, due to the potentially sensitive nature of the material and the possibility that tweets were posted in emotive circumstances, we have elected to withhold the identification of individual Twitter users, or the verbatim quotation of their tweets, in most cases. Where the Twitter accounts are associated with political or activist organizations or well-known public figures, we have both quoted and attributed them.

## *Discussion*

The tweets about the *Q&A Family Violence Special* provided an excellent resource for empirically exploring “the Man question” guiding this inquiry: What was the discursive place occupied or vacated by men in accounts of their violence against women?<sup>52</sup> Our analysis found that this discursive space was hegemonic yet contested.

### *Men in the Majority*

In a literal sense, men occupied a privileged place on the *Q&A* panel for the Family Violence Special. Men comprised the majority of panelists, outnumbering women two to one. Our analysis found as many tweets commenting on the gender imbalance of the panel as there were on any other topic. Audience members noted that the panel included four men and two women, no domestic violence experts, and no service providers who specialize in violence against women. In fact, the sex imbalance on this episode was even greater than on average *Q&A* episodes. The producers had gone out of their way to create this sex imbalance. They encouraged men to sit on the panel and be in the audience, personally contacting men in the Sydney area and encouraging them to attend. Their zeal to have men heavily represented on the program allegedly extended to inviting panelists from the anti-feminist groups *A Voice for Men* and *1 in 3*, declining the groups’ efforts to place their female ally on the panel instead.<sup>53</sup> Given their numeric over-representation, it is not surprising that men’s discursive place on the episode was dominant. Twitter commentators noted that men’s voices, putative interests, and needs were foregrounded during the episode. Viewers also commented that the men on the episode were speaking for, instead of or over, the women on the panel in addition to outnumbering them.

### *Men in Peril*

Despite the marked over-representation of men on the panel itself, there was a strong theme in some tweets about the need to acknowledge that men can be victims of violence and may also be in need of protection (including from emotional violence) and support. Tweets included statements such as “remember that men can be victims too,” and included personal testimony on, for example, “emotional scars”

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52. Howe, *Foucault and the “Man” Question*, *supra* note 16.

53. Greg Canning, “Q&A Tackles ‘Family Violence’”, *A Voice for Men* (22 February 2015) <[www.avoiceformen.com](http://www.avoiceformen.com)>; Bill O’Chee, “Q&A Domestic Violence Program Ignored Male Victims”, *Brisbane Times* (25 February 2015) <[www.brisbanetimes.com.au](http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au)>.

in some cases. Such statements use a common equivalency tactic, appropriating female survivors' comments about how psychological abuse experienced in the context of physical violence is even more traumatizing than physical violence itself, to equate emotional abuse experienced by men with physical abuse of women.

Tweets also suggested that men needed protection from feminist speech about men's violence against women, protesting against the association between men and violence or the perceived feminist argument that "men are intrinsically violent." Such tweets reproduce a common complaint that confuses the naming of men's role in violence with the often imagined allegedly feminist claim that all men are violent.<sup>54</sup> To the contrary, from the earliest days of research on violence against women, feminists have argued that masculinities are socially constructed and changeable. Calls to change patriarchal masculinity norms that produce violence remain one of the central aims of the battered women's movement.<sup>55</sup>

Some comments used demands for formal equality or false equivalencies to resist recognition of men's greater violence—for example asking with mock incredulity whether the show was "really going to go a full episode on the assumption that the woman is always the victim." Others argued that talk of men's violence against women was somehow sexist, urging the assembled audience to "stop discussing the issue like 'men' are inherently different to women" in the name of "equality." Some tweets used personal anecdotes to suggest that ("real") Australian culture condemns men's violence against women, often harking back to a more "gentlemanly" era where fathers told their sons "you don't hit women." This kind of comment is a common rejoinder to feminist assertions that the culture condones men's violence against some women in some contexts. While there is indeed a cultural norm that proscribes "hitting girls," it does not erase competing exculpatory accounts of violence that emerge when women fail to engage in prescribed feminine behaviours, such as fidelity, or engage in prohibited behaviours such as dating wealthy men (presumed to be "gold-digging").

### *What About the Men? Feminist Interventions into Masculinist Accounts*

While the episode and Twitter discussion reproduced many familiar hegemonic, status quo-preserving discourses about men's violence against women, it also

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54. This claim is so popular that it has become a popular meme #notallmen. See the following article and comments by Erin Gloria Ryan, "Your Guide to 'Not All Men,' the Best Meme on the Internet", *Jezebel* (5 August 2014) <[www.jezebel.com](http://www.jezebel.com)>.

55. Rebecca Emerson Dobash & Russell P Dobash, *Violence against Wives: A Case against the Patriarchy* (New York: Free Press, 1979); Chic Dabby & Grace Poore, "Engendering Change: Transforming Gender Roles in Asian and Pacific Islander Communities" (2007) *Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence* <[www.api-gbv.org/files/Engendering.Change-Report-APIIDV-2013.pdf](http://www.api-gbv.org/files/Engendering.Change-Report-APIIDV-2013.pdf)>.



facilitated ruptures to those narratives, seizing on the speakers' comments and those of other Twitter users. Indeed, our overall impression is that, at least in the Twitter backchannel on that episode of *Q&A*, there were more critiques of male-centred and anti-feminist discourse than there were explicit examples of such discourses. Twitter users were quick to affirm statements that they felt advanced a progressive or feminist agenda:

@kristineolaris: Thank you @AusAWG for stating so quickly the “inextricable link” between gender inequality and men’s violence against women #qanda

Using humour, especially in the form of “snark,” was a common way to pre-empt or respond to anti-feminist comments. Well-known Australian feminist author and broadcaster Clementine Ford made a number of such interventions:

@clementine\_ford: I’m giving it 7 minutes before some old white dude OR Young Liberal in the audience asks “what about the men.” #qanda

@clementine\_ford: Oh good, tweet on the screen about WHAT ABOUT THE MEN. Would HATE to miss that important issue. #eyeroll #qanda

Twitter users deployed memes in circulation elsewhere,<sup>56</sup> effectively recuperating anti-feminist campaigns and turning them against themselves.<sup>57</sup> For example, tweets spoofed the “1 in 3” statistic, used in Australia to suggest that men are one third of domestic violence victims. They also reappropriated hashtagged concepts associated with gender-based controversy: including #notallmen—part of the #gamergateuniverse and shorthand for the “not all men are violent” argument; and #mansplaining—in wide circulation as a shorthand for patronizing and condescending male behaviour and, therefore, available for repurposing in the context of men speaking for women on the panel on the topic of violence against women. The fact that the ABC live curators chose to display a tweet containing the #notallmen hashtag during the show caused a number of alarmed responses by other Twitter users, including interventions from male users urging men to take responsibility and not use the #notallmen defensiveness as shorthand for “not my problem.”

Even without this shorthand, there was a noticeable thematic category of tweets that used comments displacing women from the centre of the conversation as evidence of how much work needs to be done to truly challenge men’s violence against women, noting particularly “the number of men tweeting ‘what about violence against men’” and the need for woman-centred responses—for example, “women’s shelters, run by women for women,” and that “you only have to see the

56. For more explanation of memes and sexist aggression online, see Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

57. Chess & Shaw, *supra* note 40.

abuse on Twitter” occurring as part of the live-tweeting audience discussion to know that “men have a long way to go” in accepting the significance of domestic violence.

Many of the tweets countered false equivalencies of men’s and women’s domestic violence through a rhetorical appeal to facts.

@WLSAnetwork: Important fact: The vast majority of family violence victims are women. Only 4% of violence against men is in the home

@TakedownMRAs: There is no corresponding pattern of female violence against men. It just does not exist <http://t.co/W2duY2EZl1#qanda>

@TimWattsMP: Women are 3 times likelier to be injured as a result of violence than a man, 5 times likelier to be hospitalised ...

@JaneTribune: Over 98% of rape victims are women and over 95% of offenders are men and 78% of DV homicides are women so SHUTUP about [#notallmen]

Overall, our analysis illustrates the ongoing discursive struggle over the issue as “domestic violence,” “family violence,” or “men’s violence against women.” It also articulates their disparate political implications. These different frames suggest different responses to violence and abuse. The *Q&A* special was perceived by many Twitter commenters to have been engineered to favour hegemonic and male perspectives on domestic violence through the selection of panel speakers and tweets featured scrolling across the screen. However, Twitter discussion of the episode not only critiqued but also facilitated a robust counter-narrative to these hegemonic discourses. *Q&A* appeared to attempt to appease men by foregrounding their accounts of violence. Still, many men complained that the episode was too woman-centred, despite men’s over-representation on the panel and in the tweets presented onscreen.

The hegemonic ways of accounting for domestic violence without disrupting patriarchal masculinities that Howe described in 1993 remain prevalent twenty years later. However, our sample of tweets also provided evidence of a positive development thanks to social media. Our sample contained more critiques of the ideologies associated with anti-feminism than instances of anti-feminist #notallmen rhetoric. Similar to the ways that anti-feminist groups have appropriated formal equality language in efforts to undermine recognition of persistent sex inequalities,<sup>58</sup> as part of a much broader and intensely volatile struggle around contemporary feminism online (most visible around the #gamergate controversy but far more widespread than that), feminists are turning anti-feminist rhetoric into memes, countering them with both humour and facts. These memes are subsequently available as shorthand to respond to, and pre-empt, anti-feminist frames for domestic

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58. See Miranda Kaye & Julia Tolmie, “Discoursing Dads: The Rhetorical Devices of Fathers’ Rights Groups” (1998) 22 Melbourne University Law Review 162.

violence. Even in the space of 140 characters, these political memes are available to be redeployed in the specific context of #qanda.

We do not mean to suggest that Twitter discussions in general, or the political climate outside of Twitter, are dominated by feminist framings of domestic violence. Indeed, the prevalence of comments critical of men's rights-centred approaches to domestic violence speaks to women's frustration with pervasive anti-feminist frames and expectation that they would saturate discussion of the program like they do in other contexts. This discussion, does, however, represent a significant disruption to discourse as usual on domestic violence as well as a location where feminist voices can be heard in public. Our analysis also suggests that efforts to roll back framings of violence that take gender into account are not simply being accepted. Rather, there is a robust debate about them in the public sphere. While social media offers the space for more diverse "ad hoc publics" to emerge around issues, and potentially for more diverse perspectives to emerge than may be accommodated by mainstream media fora, their impact on policy or legislative processes remains dependent on effective advocacy and formal political participation.<sup>59</sup>

## *Conclusion*

Cultural norms about domestic violence may have shifted in recent years in Australia. Greater attention to domestic violence from politicians is an indication that the issue has a higher public profile than in the past. However, despite popular assumptions that Australians need to be made more aware of domestic violence, awareness has not eliminated cultural ambivalence about it. Our study of tweets about the February 2015 *Q&A Family Violence Special* found evidence of a range of contradictory attitudes about, and understandings of, domestic violence (including the very naming of the problem) that were actively contested, informed by other discourses, and imbricated with gender politics. This result is consistent with social science research on attitudes about violence against women, which finds widespread condemnation of violence against women and high levels of awareness of the behaviours that comprise violence and abuse alongside justification of such violence. For example, the 2013 *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey* found that 24 percent of young men and 23 percent of young women reported that "[d]omestic violence can be excused if people get so angry they lose control," and 33 percent of young men and 20 percent of young women reported that "[d]omestic violence can be excused if the violent person regrets it."<sup>60</sup>

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59. Axel Bruns & Jean Burgess, "Twitter Hashtags from Ad Hoc to Calculated Publics" in Nathan Rambukkana, ed, *Hashtag Publics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015) 15.

60. Anita Harris et al, *Young Australians' Attitudes to Violence against Women: Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey for Respondents 16–24 Years* (Victoria: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2015).

These findings indicate that reports of justifications for violence against women are actually higher among young people than the older adults included in the sample. These contradictory outcomes point to the gap between awareness of abuse and the attitudes that contribute to abusive behaviours. Online comments are only one site of the struggle over whether to define men's violence against women as either violent or not, common or not, and unacceptable or acceptable. These knowledge contests are an under-acknowledged, but central, part of domestic violence promotion and prevention. It is essential to acknowledge that Australians, like most populations, are not all on the same page when it comes to violence against women. Social media present a unique opportunity to empirically investigate conflicting social norms and attitudes about violence and abuse. Our findings suggest that Australians are not yet in agreement about domestic violence. In fact, the issue is not only controversial itself but tied up with even more contentious, explicitly political issues such as feminism. As a result, increased awareness of domestic violence is unlikely to decrease violence on its own.

### ***Directions for Future Research***

Our study points to several directions for future research. Subsequent analyses of this sample of tweets might investigate more fully the claims and arguments made, key players in the conversation, extra-textual references, assumptions about feminism, and the ways that gender is conceptualized in the discussion. There is a growing body of research on the ways that social media formats deal with feminism and violence against women and how these relate to broader discussion of these issues. Publicly available large-scale data on public communication on particular topics, as in archived tweets, can provide an ideal opportunity for learning about the range of norms, values, and beliefs in circulation around these issues. In addition, research on the cultures of social media platforms such as Twitter can shed light on theories of violence such as patriarchal peer support, expanding it beyond local peer networks and into digitally mediated spaces. Twitter also provides a means to analyze the tactics used by social movements and counter-movements and the ways in which these tactics change over time. Arguably, while these forms of communication are performative, they may be less contrived than those elicited in traditional social science research that rely on artificial lab environments and survey research that direct and constrain the terms of discussion. Significantly, social media research allows scholars the chance to observe the articulation of norms and values as well as the struggles over them in their natural environment.