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Chapter 3:

“I Want to Kill You in Front of Your Children” is Not a Threat. It's an Expression of a Desire’: Discourses of Online Abuse, Trolling and Violence on r/MensRights

Karen Lumsden

Abstract

This chapter adds to the growing body of literature on online misogyny and studies of Reddit by focusing on an online culture which perpetrates and encourages forms of ‘online ‘othering’, including misogyny and violence. It focuses on Men’s Rights Activists’ (MRA) discussions of trolling and gendered violence, and their online othering of ‘outsiders’. This includes the denigration and abuse aimed at feminists and social justice warriors (SJWs). Findings are presented which focus on: denial of women and feminists as victims of online violence; the victimization of men online; and constructions of online violence. These previously unexplored online discourses provide us with a valuable insight into the construction of notions of online acceptability and deviance vis-à-vis digital communication, the boundaries between online/offline violence, and culture wars.

Keywords: feminism; men’s rights; online othering; Reddit; trolling; victim

Introduction

Recently there have been a plethora of studies of online misogyny, e-bile (Jane, 2014), trolling (Herring et al., 2002; Mantilla 2015; Phillips 2015) and online hate. This includes the abuse

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received by feminist activists online (Megarry 2014; Lewis et al., 2016). However, abusive online discourses and representations of online misogyny are still relatively understudied (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017), as are victims’ everyday experiences of online abuse, and the ways in which it is framed, defined, constructed and understood by online users – both victims and perpetrators. Moreover, to date there have been few studies of the American social news site, Reddit. The site has become embroiled in many recent controversies such as the sharing of leaked celebrity photographs on r/TheFapping, its involvement in #GamerGate and the Pizzagate¹ conspiracy, and controversial subreddits such as pro Donald Trump subreddit r/The_Donald and banned subreddits such as r/FatPeopleHate. Reddit has been described as a ‘toxic technoculture’ (Massanari, 2017a; Massanari and Chess, 2018), and can be viewed as part of the ‘manosphere’ (Ging, 2017; Marwick and Caplan, 2018).

This chapter focuses on a community of Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) on the subreddit r/MensRights. It presents findings from a qualitative analysis of threads and comments in this subreddit and focuses on findings including: 1) the denial of women and feminists as victims of online violence; 2) the victimization of men online; and 3) constructions of online violence. The chapter adds to the growing body of literature on online misogyny and Reddit by focusing on an online culture which perpetrates and encourages forms of ‘online othering’, including misogyny and violence. It focuses on Men’s Rights Activists’ (MRA) discussions of trolling and gendered violence, and their ‘online othering’ of women and feminists. This includes the denigration and abuse aimed at feminists and social-justice warriors (SJWs). These unexplored online discourses and interactions provide a valuable insight into the construction of notions

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of online acceptability and deviance vis-à-vis digital communication, the boundaries between online/offline violence, and (online) culture wars.

The first section of the chapter outlines the background behind Reddit, and more specifically, the subreddit which we focus on herein – r/MensRights. It then outlines recent studies of Reddit which highlight its controversial nature, its role in the presentation of self and identity online, anonymity, and its promotion of toxic and abusive online behaviours – particularly towards women, feminists and social justice warriors. The chapter then outlines the history of Men’s Rights movements and the development of the ‘manosphere’. After a discussion of methods, I present findings which centre on: denial of women and feminists as victims of online violence; the victimization of men online; and constructions of online violence.

Researching Reddit and toxic technocultures

The rise of Reddit

Founded in 2005 by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian,ⁱⁱ Reddit describes itself as the ‘front page of the internet’ and aims to bridge ‘communities and individuals with ideas, the latest digital trends, and breaking news’ through its online bulletin board system (Reddit, 2017). The American social news site includes features such as web content rating and discussions. Reddit users (referred to as ‘Redditors’) participate in more than 45,000 communities to find, share, rate, and discuss content and opinions in real time from all over of the web (Reddit Help, 2017). Reddit is the fifth largest site in the United States and is the most influential online community. As of January 2017, Reddit had 274 million unique visitors. 54 per cent of the audience were from the United States and 64 per cent were international. In addition, 63 per cent of users were

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under 25 years old and 87 per cent were under 35 years old (Reddit Help, 2017). Research by the Pew Research Center (2013) found that young men are especially likely to visit the site with 15 per cent of male internet users aged 18-29 saying they used the site in 2013, in comparison to only 5 per cent of women in the same age bracket.

Reddit consists of various communities known as ‘subreddits’, which focus on different topics and themes. In 2016 there were approximately 11,400 active subreddits (Digital Tracking Blog, 2016). If a subreddit gains enough subscribers it can become part of the default homepage, driving additional traffic and subscribers. For instance, communities like r/atheism and r/minecraft now appear regularly on the front page (Silverman, 2012). Any user can create a subreddit. Members of Reddit can submit content to the site which includes posts, links, videos and images. According to Caplan and Purser (2017: 5): ‘Each post to a subreddit contains multiple comment threads, with a parent comment replying directly to the poster and a child comment replying to the parent, thus creating an intricate nested system of ongoing comments.’ These comments are ‘up-voted’ or ‘down-voted’ by other members. This unique feature of Reddit displays discussions hierarchically, with more popular posts at the top of the page (Caplan and Purser, 2017). Reddit users can also show appreciation for a user’s comments by giving them Reddit gold, which is paid for by the giver in actual money or Bitcoin as part of an enhanced membership option (Caplan and Purser, 2017). Each link and comment also displays a score which corresponds to the number of ‘upvotes’ and ‘downvotes’ an item has received and this score translates into ‘karma points’ for a user’s account (Massanari, 2017a: 331). Reddit accounts are also pseudonymous which means that elements of play are

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encouraged on Reddit, with administrators assuming a ‘hands off’ approach to moderation and content (Massanari, 2017a: 331).

r/MensRights

The Mens Rights subreddit (r/MensRights) describes itself as ‘a place for those who wish to discuss men’s rights and the ways said rights are infringed upon.’ At the time of conducting the data collection in 2016 it had approximately 118,566 readers. The front page of r/MensRights typically contains various posts tagged under ‘feminism’ (i.e. ‘Critique these feminist arguments people!’) ‘discrimination’ (i.e. ‘Man arrested and convicted of lewd act for receiving oral sex on a train. Woman was let off with a warning’), ‘legal rights’ (i.e. ‘Man arrested and accused of sexually assaulting his 7-year-old autistic son based on evidence provided by a psychic vision’), ‘marriage/children’, ‘education/occupation’ (i.e. ‘US universities are now blatantly funding social justice and radical feminist ideology’), and ‘social issues’. In its Frequently Asked Questions section, r/MensRights is defined as: ‘...a subreddit consisting of both men and women who believe that there is serious discrimination against men inherent in western societies...’ (r/MensRights, 2015)

Massanari and Chess (2018: 5) argue that because anyone can create a community on Reddit it has become a hub for the alt-right and related communities (i.e. r/KotakuInAction, r/mensrights, r/theredpill, r/The_Donald, etc.) which ‘share misogynistic worldviews and believe that “political correctness” is stifling free speech’. Reddit has been a focus of controversy because of this and its ‘hands off’ approach to moderation. It played a key role in #GamerGate and also in the sharing of nude celebrity photographs on the subreddit

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r/thefappening which were accessed via the hacking of iCloud (Topinka, 2017). The majority of subreddits demonstrate that Reddit is largely anti-feminist and although there are some progressive and resistant subreddits, Massanari (2017b: 2) notes that on Reddit ‘...women, people of color, LGBTQIA folks, and anyone else potentially seen as harboring “social justice” tendencies serve as potential threats to be silenced, harassed, or objectified.’

Studies of Reddit

There are few studies of Reddit despite the rich data which is publicly provided via its various subreddits. Studies to date have focused on presentation of self and the construction of identity on Reddit (Shelton, Lo and Nardi, 2015; Robards, 2018; Bergstrom, 2011; Van der Nagle and Frith, 2015), racist nationalism (Topinka, 2017), online misogyny and toxicity (Massanari, 2017a; Massanari and Chess, 2018), and feminist humour on progressive and resistant subreddits (Massanari, 2017b). Shelton, Lo and Nardi (2015: 10) analyze how Reddit users refer to content in external websites and offline conversations in order to ascertain how unique features of the anonymous Reddit communities impact on self-presentation, and how shared histories diffuse into external interactions. They argue that anonymous media sites such as Reddit emphasize the use of anonymity which gives rise to ‘a culture of disinhibition and open disclosure’ (see also Massanari, 2017a). Many of the users they interviewed made strategic decisions about what to reveal to individuals offline about Reddit, including not discussing content from Reddit in person. Van der Nagle and Frith (2015) focus on the behaviours enabled through anonymous identity construction on the subreddit r/gonewild: a subreddit in which Redditors submit nude or semi-nude photos of themselves. They argue that the richness of these communities (even if they offend sensibilities) could ‘be lost in a rush to embrace the

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singular identities of the “real name” Internet movement’ (p. 2). Robards (2018) has conducted research on the sub-reddit r/TotallyStraight, concluding that it serves as a space for the sharing of pornography and personal narratives about sexual identity. Finally, Bergstrom (2011) provides an example of a Reddit community member who failed to provide an authentic representation of their offline self. As a result, accusations of trolling were used to justify shutting down debates about community expectations, as well as actions that violated the Reddit terms of service.

A growing body of recent work has highlighted the toxic and offensive behaviours facilitated on/through online sites such as Reddit. Topinka (2017) discusses the racist nationalist discourse in comments and images posted on r/I’mGoingToHellForThis, a subreddit which emerged in the week following news coverage of the photograph of Alan Kurdi (a Syrian boy whose dead body was photographed on a beach in Turkey). These discourses included the ‘mocking of political correctness’ (p. 2) and ‘resistance in the shape of racism and resurgent nationalism through the cloak of anti-politically correct humor’ (p. 3). Topinka (2017: 4) argues that ‘redditors use freedom of speech and humor to cloak racist and nationalist ideologies and agendas’. Massanari’s (2017a: 330) ethnography of Reddit culture further highlights how its design, algorithm and platform policies support ‘toxic technocultures’ which incorporate problematic aspects of ‘geek masculinity’.

Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) and the manosphere

The history of men’s rights movements

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Coston and Kimmel (2013) argue that the Men’s Rights movement was born out of the seeds of second-wave feminism in the 1970s which prompted a crisis of masculinity as traditional gender roles and meanings were challenged (Kimmel, 1987; Messner, 1998). ‘Men’s Liberation’ was born in a critique of the male sex role and the argument that men were ‘... exiled from the home, turned into soulless robotic workers, in harness to a masculine mystique, so that their only capacity for nurturing was through their wallets’ (Coston and Kimmel, 2013: 369). The ‘Men’s Liberation’ movement subsequently split into two factions – pro and anti-feminist (Messner, 2016); the latter representing a ‘backlash’ (Flood, 1998). This split was due to what they deemed to be the cause of men’s problems: ‘... the critique of the oppressive male sex role, and the desire to free men from it, morphed into a celebration of all things masculine, and a near-infatuation with the traditional masculine role itself’ (Coston and Kimmel, 2013: 372).

This anti-feminist movement is reactionary and explains its role as defending the rights of men (Halberstam, 2012). It mainly consists of ‘angry, straight, white men’ (Coston and Kimmel, 2013: 380). In his article on men’s rights intellectuals and literature, Allan argues that the movement ‘co-opted the language of affect, emotion, feeling, and the personal being political to meet its own ends’ thus appropriating ‘the language of feminist consciousness-raising’ (2016: 26). Members of the movement view themselves as victims of feminism (Allan, 2016). Feminism is the enemy and is a political strategy which aims to take power away from men (Coston and Kimmel, 2013). However, MRAs’ positions on a number of issues is contradictory. For example, in relation to women, some members are approving of the

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traditional ‘women’s role’ (i.e. as wife, mother and housekeeper), while other denigrate it pointing out that women in this role are merely ‘gold-diggers’:

So Men’s Rights activists hate those traditional women because they enslave men, gluing them to gold-digger trophy wives, who spend, preen, and otherwise ignore their hardworking husbands. No, wait. Men’s Rights activists love traditional women who won’t compete outside the home for scarce jobs that should go to men anyway ...
(Coston and Kimmel, 2013: 372)

Some members argue for the rejection of traditional (hegemonic) masculinity, while others champion it (Kimmel, 2017[2013]). As a result, the feelings of MRA communities have turned to that of rage and anger with the main aim being the (re)appropriation of power. Although they maintain most of the power in public and work life, these men feel that women have all the power. Kimmel (2017[2013]) argues that white men’s anger stems from the fusion of two sentiments: ‘aggrieved entitlement’ and a sense of victimization. In the 1990s the Southern Poverty Center in the United States included MRAs in their survey of hate groups, as a result of the virulent misogynistic and hateful discourses they propagated, which included encouraging acts of violence against women and children (Coston and Kimmel, 2013: 376).

Scholars have argued that the men who are part of contemporary online MRA movements are not hegemonically masculine (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). According to Nagle (2016) the ‘beta rebellion’, which takes place on MRA sites and in some ‘geeky subcultures’, should be viewed as the sign of a ‘new net-bred brand of misogyny’. The ‘beta male’ is a form of

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identification which includes self-mockery and belonging (Nagle, 2016). This rebellion has its roots in the ‘libertarian ethos’ which permeated the early hacker cultures of the 1960s and 1970s, and the ‘Californian rebel capitalism of the dotcom neoliberalism of the nineties.’ Members of these largely all-male online cultures have been referred to as ‘geeks’ or ‘nerds’ (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). Ging (2017) argues that we should describe them as ‘hybrid masculinities, whose self-positioning as victims of feminism and political correctness enables them to strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously compounding existing hierarchies of power and inequality online’. For Bridges and Pascoe (2000: 246), hybrid masculinity ‘refers to men’s selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities.’ Nagle (2016) points out that the beta-male rebellion in these online spaces runs counter to the arguments of sociologists of masculinity such as Kimmel and Connell because it draws from a ‘countercultural genealogy and identifies itself against feminism but also against social conservatism, political correctness, mainstream consumer culture, and ... hegemonic masculinity...’

The manosphere

According to Marwick and Caplan (2018: 1) the internet has been crucial to the success of MRAs. They refer to the ‘manosphere’ⁱⁱⁱ as a ‘loose online network’ which consists of ‘a set of blogs, podcasts, and forums comprised of pickup artists, men’s rights activists, anti-feminists, and fringe groups’. Ging (2017) notes that the term which has been adopted by the MRA, also features in media coverage of online misogyny and high profile events such as mass shootings and college campus rape in the USA. The politics of the manosphere centres on the idea of the

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Red Pill:

... an analogy which derives from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which Neo is given the choice of taking one of the two pills. Taking the blue pill means switching off and living a life of delusion; taking the red pill means becoming enlightened to life’s ugly truths. The Red Pill philosophy purports to awaken men to feminism’s misandry and brainwashing ... (Ging, 2017: 3)

Participants of the manosphere have adopted a common language and believe that ‘feminist values dominate society that this fact is suppressed by feminists and “political correctness,” and that men must fight back against an overreaching, misandrist culture to protect their very existence’ (Marwick and Caplan, 2018: 4). Using the example of #GamerGate, Marwick and Caplan highlight how many of the networked harassment techniques used by groups were introduced by groups in the manosphere. ‘Misandry’, which refers to hatred of men, is used as a ‘boundary object’ in order to ‘coordinate and convey meaning amongst ingroup and outgroup participants, depending on the source of its use’ (p. 11). In addition, by: ‘Setting up feminism—and feminists—as villains, and men as victims’ MRAs can justify ‘the networked harassment that often emerges from the manosphere’ (Marwick and Caplan, 2018: 5). Ging (2017) also outlines the characteristics of the manosphere and the new ‘hybrid masculinities’ which characterize this online space. They are preoccupied with the ‘operationalizing tropes of victimhood’, ‘beta masculinity,’ and ‘involuntary celibacy (incels)’ (Ging, 2017: 1).

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The new anti-feminist politics present in these online spaces involves features such as ‘transnational homogenization’, ‘extreme misogyny’ and ‘proclivity for personal attacks’ (Ging, 2017: 8). The discourses characterizing these cultures include the ‘othering’ of those outside of the culture, a rationalistic masculinity, and applications of evolutionary psychology (Ging, 2017: 8). Massanari and Chess (2018) have researched the construction of social justice warrior (SJW) memes on Reddit by alt-right supporters.^{iv} SJW is ‘used as a pejorative within these communities to describe individuals who they claim are overly invested in identity politics and political correctness. The “SJW” is a humorless shrill who takes pleasure in demonstrating their superiority by policing the behavior of others’ (Massanari and Chess, 2018: 2). They argue that these memes are deployed by Redditors ‘to emphasize opponents as having non-normative, problematic bodies, different brains (ones ruled by emotion rather than logic), and monstrous characteristics’ (p. 1). They also entail dehumanization and an eliminationist and genocidal rhetoric which can be viewed as hate speech. The former entails the use of images pertaining to disease or demonic identities (i.e. ‘the monstrous feminine’) (Massanari and Chess, 2018: 14; see also Goldhagen, 2009) However, they are also keen to point out that feminists may have the necessary tools to recreate the SJW as an image of power.

Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016: 171) use the term ‘networked misogyny’ to refer to this ‘virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments’. This ‘othering’ includes a tendency to view women as sexual objects or ‘unwelcome interlopers’. The ‘fear of female encroachment’ in online spaces extended from the early internet forums of the 1990s and the trolling and meme cultures of the 2000, through to recent gaming cultures (i.e. exemplified in #GamerGate), social media platforms, and communities on Reddit and

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4/chan). As Benet-Weiser and Miltner argue, this fear of encroachment extends to the place of women in offline technological and industrial spaces, with the accusation that women are taking men’s jobs (2016: 173; see Lumsden and Morgan, 2017). A growing body of literature now exists which acknowledges that these types of online spaces are hostile to women and that online discourse is gendered (i.e. see Massanari, 2017a). Often, the aim is to silence women or oust them from these male-dominated spaces (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017). Moreover, online harassment and sexism can also be framed as acceptable by constructing it as a form of humour (Drakett et al., 2018).

This chapter adds to this body of work by analyzing discourses on the subreddit r/MensRights. It provides a valuable insight into the construction of notions of online acceptability and deviance vis-à-vis digital communication, the boundaries between online/offline violence, and (online) culture wars. It also highlights the rampant misogyny aimed at women and feminists online. In particular, the ‘othering’ of women and feminists by these MRAs is evident in and via their denial of victim status, denial of injury, and appeal to higher loyalties.

Methods

The study involved a search of the r/MensRights subreddit for threads which contained the words ‘troll’ and/or ‘trolling’ in the title post or comments. From a search conducted on 5 October 2016, a total of $n=24$ threads were identified which contained one or both of these terms. This resulted in a total of $n=1931$ comments for analysis. The date of the original posts for each thread ranged from 6 June 2010 to 20 April 2016.

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The research aimed to explore the discourses of trolling that emerged on r/MensRights and included five initial questions: 1) How do MRAs discuss trolling on the Reddit sub-forum? 2) How do MRAs construct digital violence or abuse against women and feminists? 3) How is feminism and online feminist activism constructed in MRA online discussions? 4) How do MRAs justify their online interactions? The study aimed to contribute to significant gaps in social scientific literature including understandings of MRAs on Reddit, and on online abuse and trolling, by investigating how individuals in an online space typically conceived of as deviant in relation to its views against feminism and social justice, engaged in online othering, and how members constructed notions of digital violence, online abuse and trolling.

I used qualitative analysis ‘to document and understand the communication of meaning, as well as to verify theoretical relationships’ (Altheide, 1987: 68). This is a distinctive form of analysis because of the reflexive and interactive nature of the investigator, concepts, data collection and analysis. With this interpretive approach, the idea is to allow for reflexivity, ‘while being systematic and analytic, but not rigid’ (Altheide, 1987: 68). I allowed my initial research questions, categories and themes to guide the analysis, but others also emerged throughout the analysis. In particular, thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the r/MensRights comments which allowed for the identification of key themes and patterns emerging from the transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Microsoft Excel was used to record, categorise and code each of the threads and respective comments.

As with previous studies of online spaces such as Reddit, the decision was made to view the comments posted on the r/MensRights subreddit as public comments (Kitchin, 2002). I cleaned

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all data including removing the user name of the person posting. As Caplan and Purser point out: ‘even though posts are written under anonymized screen names, the nature of Reddit and other social media sites means that a community often forms and people become “known” by screen name’ (2017: 11). The study received institutional ethical approval from the university.

In the discussion below I focus on the findings relating to the second research question: 2) How do MRAs construct digital violence or abuse against women and feminists? I analyze comments from three of the threads – 2, 22 and 24, which focus specifically on celebrity and UN attempts to classify online abuse and trolling as violence. Thread 2 followed on from a post and link to a Guardian press report detailing that celebrity Ashley Judd intended to report Twitter users who sexually harass her to the authorities.^v Thread 22 focuses on an Alternet report detailing how women who are outspoken on social media are subject to online abuse and threats (Diels, 2013).^{vi} While thread 24 focuses on a Time article on a United Nations report detailing that cyber violence is the equivalent to physical violence (Alter, 2015).^{vii} The themes discussed below focus on: 1) denial of women and feminists as victims of online violence; 2) the victimization of men online; and 3) constructions of online violence.

Findings: the construction of digital violence and abuse on r/MensRights

Denial of women and feminists as victims of online violence

Repeatedly in each of the threads, women’s status as ‘legitimate’ victims of online violence, abuse or trolling was questioned and denied (Sykes and Matza, 1957). In the below comment which relates to women’s experiences of sexual harassment online, the user mockingly refers to ‘the feels’ as the rationale for a woman believing an action to be sexual harassment, and thus

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explicitly denies them victim status. Stereotypical constructions of women as ‘irrational’ and ‘emotional’ were prominent in the comments:

Because of the *feels*^{viii} man because of the feels. If it *feels* like sexual harassment, then clearly it must be even if it is nowhere near the actual definition. (Thread 2, emphasis added)

Women were constructed as having underlying motives for drawing attention to online sexual harassment and violence, or the under-representation of women in various spaces. For example, women who reported online abuse were referred to as ‘damsels’ who wanted to be ‘protected’ by men, or of trying to ‘appeal to [men’s] chivalry’, while online comments were viewed as ‘offending their sensibilities’. In relation to the article about celebrity Ashley Judd, a user wrote:

Sounds like she making an appeal to chivalry. Damsel must be protected. Tradcons^{ix} and feminists can agree on one thing: Women must be protected. Generation after generation has been indoctrinated to believe such drivel. It’s too bad this protection turns them into spoiled entitled, whiny hyper-sensitive children who can get away with cold blooded murder. *Ashley Judd is like...making a change or something by framing redundant run of the mill abuse as like...a woman only problem*. (Thread 2, original emphasis)

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While denying the celebrity (and women who report online abuse) any form of victimhood, this MRA is also denigrating the traditional sex role of women as weak, vulnerable, and sensitive. The claim that they were exaggerating online violence or abuse was coupled with frequent use of ‘eliminationist’ and ‘genocidal rhetoric’ (Goldhagen, 2009; Massanari and Chess, 2018). For example, the above MRA draws on ‘eliminationist’ language in their reference to women’s calls for action to tackle sexual harassment as akin to ‘cold-blooded murder’; ultimately a threat to men who are viewed as the ‘true’ victims of discrimination and abuse. We can also see the use of ‘eliminationist’ and ‘genocidal rhetoric’ in the below references to terrorism, torture, and the holocaust:

Comment 1: Next time, they’ll insist it to be called ‘torture’. And ‘terrorism’ next time. Who knows, exaggeration treadmill may reach ‘holocaust’ level sometime.

Comment 2: At this point, it wouldn’t surprise me very much. They’ve completely lost any sense of proportion they once might have had. (Thread 2)

Other stereotypical assertions included female celebrities being ‘desperate’ to have their five minutes of fame thus using accusations of online violence to do so, of women ‘crying violence’ or ‘throwing around rape accusations’:

Oh look, yet another washed up ‘celebrity’ desperately trying to have her fifteen minutes of fame again. Some do it by throwing around rape accusations, others by crying about violence against women over social media. (Thread 2)

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Moreover, in relation to sexual harassment in online spaces, one user commented that sexual harassment could not be experienced as such if it had been perpetrated by strangers:

You ... can't experience sexual harassment from strangers ... Sexual harassment happens at work or in a place of education and is done by the institution that fails to provide equal protection or service to you based on your sex. ... (Thread 2)

Women were also viewed as ‘money-grabbers’. For instance, the campaign in the UK for a woman to appear on a bank note was referred to by users as an example of ‘abusive shit’ towards men, and of another means through which feminists were attempting to gain power without having ‘earned it’:

Because you know damn well they didn't just ask for Jane Austen to get out on the bill. They brought up all sorts of lying bullshit about how ‘wommin were oppressed by men’ and complained about how men get too much credit and shouldn't be on all of the bills. That's fucking bullshit. You don't get ahead by tearing down other people and expect to be respected for it ... That deserves abuse. How about you EARN it instead of always demanding special treatment just because you have a vagina? ... (Thread 24)

In the above excerpt, the MRA *de*-legitimizes women as victims of online violence or trolling. In addition to denying victim status, users also associated blame with some women who they claimed were ‘asking for it’ because of their feminist views about men. This reflects an attitude which is supportive of online ‘rape culture’ and violence or abuse towards women online. For

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instance, in this all-male online space ‘a definitional climate’ has been fostered which is ‘conducive to the neutralization of negative attitudes’ toward online rape and/or abuse and in which women are ‘asking for it’ because of their feminist views and/or calls for gender equality (Boeringer, 1999: 83). ‘Feminist views’ were seen as threatening, abusive towards men, and a means of ‘verbally attacking’ MRAs, while feminism itself was viewed as a dangerous ideology:

‘Women who say abusive shit about men get verbally attacked by men.’ Are they really fucking surprised? STOP SAYING ABUSIVE SHIT! (Thread 24, original emphasis)

Hence the MRAs were able to both normalize and justify online abuse and attacks against feminists as they viewed this as a response to feminism as ‘the enemy’ (Kimmel, 2017[2013]), and as engaging in its own forms of abusive, violent and trolling behaviour(s) in online spaces.

The victimization of men online

In the MRA subreddit, the message was frequently repeated that feminism erases men’s victimization (Gotell and Dutton, 2016). Comments centered on men as the ‘real’ victims of online violence and harassment as the below excerpt demonstrates:

Why do women get special protection from online harassment? How is this sexual harassment other than a few gendered words being part of it? These were tweets in response to her posting sports opinions. Many men who post sports opinions get harassed, abused, and trolled with much stronger language, and it also often includes

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gendered words ... A man being called a dick is the equivalent of a woman being called a cunt ... (Thread 2)

The evidence presented for online violence was also challenged or questioned by users. In addition to being questioned, online violence was also viewed as part and parcel, the ‘norm’, of online communications and ‘part of the territory’. As Gotell and Dutton (2016) have noted in their study of MRAs, there is also a tendency to present sexual violence as ‘gender-neutral’:

...I see no conclusive evidence that women are the primary victims of this type of harassment. I’ve been advocating men’s rights for years and years, and I can’t count the amount of times people have attempted to bully me into silence ... People have attempted to publicly humiliate me, I’ve received death threats, I’ve had people conveniently bring up my own address in private messages – but I don’t complain. I know this is part of the territory ... (Thread 24)

Users also questioned the evidence presented in reports and studies, claiming that more men are victims of online harassment. Here, we also see the emergence of the ‘socially maladjusted male’ as the ‘main target’ and thus victim of trolling:

...where are they taking their statistics from? Didn't the latest Pew study show men are actually more likely to be harassed online? Men are often the biggest victims of harassment and trolling I've seen, just look at most of the trolling/shaming subreddits and see who the main targets are. (Hint: It's socially maladjusted males)

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Why do I have the feeling they're only taking into account occurrences of a sexual nature when it comes to so-called cyber violence? ... (Thread 22)

Women’s claims of having experienced online violence were also viewed by some users as evidence of feminists attempting to ‘reclaim’ or ‘take back’ power, part of the wider ‘feminist agenda’ and conspiracy against men:

Comment 1: ... Feminists don’t care about consistency.

Comment 2: Yes, with the exception of anything that gives them more power. They’re pretty consistent about that. (Thread 2)

The MRA reaction was also a backlash against the gains which women were viewed to have achieved regarding equality and power. As Sylvia Walby (1993) argues backlash is not only about resisting feminism, or seeking to slow its progress; it is also a means of reaffirming the patriarchal domination of women. In the excerpt below, progress towards equality for women was viewed as having been achieved at the expense of men (Kimmel, 2017[2013]). Women are also accused of lying and being able to falsely accuse by ‘crying rape’ (Gottell and Dutton, 2016):

When those gains are explicitly at the expense of men, such as their ability to abandon their traditional gender role en masse, while still insisting, with threat of law, that men continue theirs? ... The ability to cry rape, and have no consequences to you, but

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massive damage to the accused even if you are shown, often even if there is evidence that you were lying? ... Hell yes those ‘gains’ need to be stripped away ... (Thread 24)

Constructions of online violence: ‘you need a good smashing up the arse’ is not a threat

In addition to denying victimhood to women and feminists who reported experiences of online violence, and claiming that men were the victims, MRAs denied that online abuse was a form of ‘violence’ and also denied the female victim’s injuries (Sykes and Matza, 1957). They claimed that there was: ‘No such thing as verbal violence’ or ‘online violence’ and that: ‘You can’t experience violence over the internet’.

More specifically, MRAs would distinguish between the wording of a ‘threat’ and a ‘taunt’. They normalize these forms of communication (‘mean comments’) as part of the everyday discourses and expectations of online spaces, the *lingua franca* of these communities (see Phillips, 2015; Lumsden and Morgan, 2017), as the below comment demonstrates:

... A threat is a threat. Telling someone to shut up is not a threat, nor is there any implied threat ... ‘This is a systemic issue, the people doing this, this is their hobby, they just move from target to target, they’re like a roaming gang of some kind,’ explains developer and consultant Adria Richards. That’s exactly how you know these aren’t actually threats, they’re just mean comments. (Thread 2)

In relation to definitions of rape threats on Twitter, the same MRA goes on to explain that:

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... ‘You need a good smashing up the arse’ is not a threat. A threat requires the expression of intent, such as ‘I’m going to give you a good smashing up the arse,’ though even with the latter, context will tell if it’s meant to just be a nasty remark or if it’s meant to convey actual intent. (Thread 2)

He then goes on to provide a dictionary definition of ‘threat’ to further demonstrate how ‘I want to kill you ...’ is different from the intent (‘I will kill you ...’):

Merriam Webster: ‘an expression of intention to inflict evil, injury, or damage’ Black’s Law: ‘A communicated intent to inflict harm or loss on another or on another’s property.’ It’s not my definition of threat, it’s the definition of threat. So no, ‘I want to kill you in front of your children’ is not a threat. It’s an expression of a desire, not of an intent ... (Thread 2)

Online violence which was seen to include acts like trolling, was also viewed by members of the MRA subreddit as different from *offline* violence, demonstrating the problematic dichotomous framing of the online/virtual world as having no offline ‘real world’ consequences, while offline harassment was taken seriously. Online violence was not viewed as harmful like physical or verbal violence in the offline world and anecdotal evidence and examples are drawn on to demonstrate their points:

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Commenter 2: If physical attacks were equal to psychological attacks, you could even claim self-defense when attacking someone who shouts at you, since he could have driven you to suicide.

Commenter 1: Good point! ‘Officer, he hit me with his words and hurt my feels. an urge to kill myself flooded my mind, so in self-defense I punched him in the throat and cut out his tongue. I think he got off easy really.’

Commenter 3: If words were equal to physical attack, I wouldn't have been so afraid to beat the living shit out of my bullies in high school who pushed me to the brink of suicide.

Commenter 4: ‘911 how may I help you?’ ‘I'd like to report an incidence of violence! Somebody punched me at the bar...’ ‘I'm sorry ma'am but all resources have been diverted to catch a person that ridiculed another's ideas online so you will have to wait.’

(Thread 22)

In the final sentence above, the MRA’s denial of online violence can also be seen to entail an appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes and Matza, 1957), in that the moral values of policing and responding to calls of violence should coalesce on taking physical violence seriously.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an analysis of MRA discussions of online violence and victimization on the r/MensRights subreddit. It focused on findings including: denial of women and feminists as victims of online violence; the victimization of men online; and constructions of online violence. It argues that these previously unexplored online discourses and interactions provide

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us with a valuable insight into the construction of notions of online acceptability and deviance vis-à-vis digital communication, the boundaries between online/offline violence, (online) culture wars, and the ethos and attitudes of MRAs on the ‘manosphere’ (Ging, 2017; Marwick and Caplan, 2018).

Although there has been a plethora of studies of MRA campaigns on parenting and father’s rights (see Boyd, 2004; Collier, 2009), and domestic violence (Dragiewicz, 2008; Mann, 2008), there are few studies of MRAs engagement with feminists, views of feminism, and/or discussions of online violence and trolling. The findings above echo the observations of previous studies such as the work of Gotell and Dutton (2016) who analyzed sexual violence on North American and Canadian anti-feminist MRA websites. They also note the rise in online ‘rape culture’ and also the assertion made by MRAs ‘that rape culture is a feminist-inspired moral panic is a predominant theme within a broader backlash to anti-rape feminism’ (Gotell and Dutton, 2016: 75). They draw attention to the ways in which these campaigns focus on young men as the main victims of feminism. In their analysis of MRA websites, Schmitz and Kazyak (2015) also observe how these communities promote men’s entitlement to social power, which was evident in the above MRA discussions of men as the victims of online abuse, and their efforts to present sexual violence as gender-neutral (Gotell and Dutton, 2016). In Schmitz and Kazyak (2015) study of MRA websites which they classify under the theme of ‘Cyber Lads’, they found that users frequently degraded women, demonized feminist tenets, viewed feminism as the source of men’s oppression, and demeaned the feminist principle of gender equality via humour and jokes. Moreover, the above findings demonstrate that Men’s Rights while still occupied with issues of family law and parenthood, have also shifted to an

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intensely personal and anecdotal focus (Ging, 2017). This is reflected above in users’ accounts of what they deem to be their own victimization and victim status (Coston and Kimmel, 2013; Kimmel, 2017[2013]).

The above discourses also entailed dehumanization and an eliminationist and genocidal rhetoric which can be viewed as hate speech (see also Massanari and Chess, 2018; Goldhagen, 2009). The ‘othering’ of women and feminists by these MRAs is evident in and via their denial of victim status, denial of injury, and appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes and Matza, 1957) in terms of the correct policing and definition of ‘real violence’ and ‘threats’ as opposed to online violence and harassment, accounts of which were de-legitimized. Moreover, women’s accounts of sexual harassment online were either presented as ‘gender-neutral’ (Gotell and Dutton, 2016) and/or were dismissed via anecdotal accounts that men are the victims and feminism is the ‘enemy’.

While it shines light on the discourses of MRAs in relation to online violence and feminism, the chapter also shows how more social scientific research is necessary to understand ‘toxic technocultures’ (Massanari, 2017a) such as various subreddits, the evolution of Men’s Rights movements and their online presence, the resurgence in misogyny and sexism online (including online harassment of women), and also the ways in which these online communities attempt to police, regulate and control those groups/individuals who are ‘permitted’ to occupy online spaces and social media through various strategies of ‘online othering’ of those outside of the (techno-)culture.

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Notes

ⁱ r/Pizzagate was a subreddit for people who believed that high-ranking staffers of Hillary Clinton’s Presidential campaign, and possibly Clinton herself, were trafficking child sex slaves (Marantz, 2018).

ⁱⁱ Later joined by Christopher Slowe and Aaron Swartz.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ging (2017) notes that the term first appeared in 2009 on a Blogspot blog to describe an online network of men’s interest communities. It was popularized by the porn marketer and author Ian Ironwood, porn marketer.

^{iv} These far-right communities include white ethnonationalists, Islamophobes, and misogynistic men’s rights activists (Massanari and Chess, 2018: 1).

^v Beaumont-Thomas, B. (2016). Ashley Judd to press charges against Twitter users over sexual harassment. *The Guardian*. URL (accessed June 2018):

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<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/mar/18/ashley-judd-to-press-charges-twitter-sexual-harassment>

^{vi} Diels, K. (2013). The shocking ways that women’s free speech is under attack. *Alternet*.

URL (accessed June 2018): <https://www.alternet.org/gender/womens-free-speech-under-attack>

^{vii} Alter, C. (2015). U.N. says cyber violence is equivalent to physical violence against women.

Time. URL (accessed June 2018): <http://time.com/4049106/un-cyber-violence-physical-violence/>

^{viii} A term originating from youths in the late 2000’s/early 2010’s which means ‘feelings’.

^{ix} ‘Tradcon’ refers to someone of traditional conservative politics.