

Chapter 5

Legitimising Misogyny

It is a very scary time for young men in America, where you can be guilty of something you may not be guilty of ... Women are doing great. (Donald Trump, 2 October 2018, on the #MeToo movement)

The virtual war against women is not confined to or predominantly fostered within incel spaces, and it is also not occurring entirely online, though much of the support and dissemination of the misogynistic and anti-feminist messages are generated and propagated by men with extensive public platforms and followings, which then extend offline. Much of what is being espoused, however, long predates the internet and patriarchal ideologies about the inferiority of women are being regurgitated and recycled online, into the minds and mouths of people offline, in a continuous misogynistic loop. This chapter shows how even though there are ‘acceptable’ forms of misogyny – the day-to-day micro-sexisms easily dismissed as ‘lad culture’ or banter, and seemingly extreme forms – such as incels, gender inequality is preserved via normalised practices of everyday misogyny. All modes are components of the same war on women, comprising of vitriol directed towards any challenge to the patriarchal status quo and demonstrating opposition towards progression. This chapter also explores the impact of leaders, known misogynists, yet able to maintain powerful and public platforms, for example, the political success of men like the former President of the United States (POTUS) Donald Trump contributes to perceptions of women, enabling further objection towards gender equality. Then, there are those associated with the alt-right and the manosphere, including the so-called intellectual dark web. Jordan Peterson, Milo Yiannopoulos, Roosh V, Paul Elam, and others espouse the same right-wing rhetoric as that propagated by incels, Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) and the alt-right, yet are able to maintain a veneer of respectability and credence emboldening these movements, and there is evidence that their influence is leaking into public life and the mainstream.

The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women, 97–115
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Everyday Misogyny

There is established knowledge about sexual violence. In most Western democracies, the rates and patterns are very similar – 1 in 5 women and 1 in 20 men will have experienced sexual assault or rape in their lifetime. Many more will have experienced sexual harassment, street harassment and other unwanted sexual behaviours and advances. Women are overwhelmingly the victims of these harms, and men are commonly the perpetrators – including against other men. Those bodies and experiences, however, that sit outside of dominant heterosexual and cisgender norms are often targeted with sexual violence, harassment and abuse, and often this violence is motivated by discrimination and hatred. Thus, whilst the focus here is on women's experiences of sexism, harassment, sexual abuse and violence, they are not the only ones to suffer from these harms, yet the elephant in the room, the issue that often instigates defensiveness, is that almost always it is some men's use of violence, and many men's misuse of power.

When Laura Bates created the #EverydaySexism Project, initially involving a website, Twitter and Facebook accounts and hashtag, in 2012, the significant breadth and extent of sexism, sexual harassment and sexual abuse experienced by women in their everyday lives was laid bare. Millions of women used and continue to use the hashtag or send in their stories to the website, documenting both the micro and macro aggressions that occur in unexceptional and familiar ways against them – from the catcalling, the sexist 'jokes, discrimination in the workplace, right through to threats and sexual assault'. On 15 October 2017, the Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano wrote on Twitter 'If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write "me too" as a reply to this tweet' prompting the beginning of a global outpouring of individual experiences of sexual violence and harassment and the trending of the hashtag #MeToo. Milano posted this in response to the succession of sexual harassment and assault allegations against the high-profile producer Harvey Weinstein, although MeToo had existed as a movement since 2006, founded by black activist Tarana Burke to help young women of colour who were survivors of sexual violence. Following Milano's co-opted tweet, however, the hashtag proliferated, first in response to the harassment and abuse experienced by celebrities and others employed within the Hollywood film industry at the hands of Weinstein and other powerful men – and then rapidly evolved into broader consciousness-raising and a call for collective action, including victim/survivors as well as alleged perpetrators of all genders. #MeToo, nevertheless, is widely regarded as a movement rooted in feminist digital activism, emphasising the magnitude of sexual violence experienced by women (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). Both #EverydaySexism and #MeToo highlight how seemingly innocuous sexism through to sexual violence and rape are routine and anticipated experiences that come with being a woman. The connection between the smaller, every day and sometimes banal intrusions into women's sexual autonomy – and the rarer, though certainly no less problematic – instances of rape and sexual assault, is a recognisable concept to feminist scholars. Following Liz Kelly (1987), sexism, sexual harassment and sexual violence are not independent behaviours, instead they exist on a continuum whereby the micro-sexisms such as the sexist

comments, for example, occur so frequently that they are concurrently disregarded and embedded into our everyday lives. This creates a culture of normalisation and acceptance for these everyday incidents, in which the more serious acts of sexual violence and harassment are excused or validated. Researchers have also highlighted the reach and immersion of digital technologies in our everyday lives, which enable an increased potential for greater saturation of sociocultural support for sexual violence (Jane, 2016; Mantilla, 2013; Megarry, 2014; Powell & Henry, 2017). Regarding sexual violence and harassment, women have always experienced both contact and non-contact sexual violations. Digital technologies merely extend the repertoire of non-contact forms of harm. As Sheila Brown (2006) in her influential essay 'The Criminology the Hybrids' argues, rather than seeking to understand online crime as distinct from offline crime, a technosocial framework is necessary – technology and society are mutually constitutive.

Liz Kelly (1987) also emphasised the importance for women to be able to define their own experiences as sexual abuse. This ownership and recognition of experiences is pertinent in the context of Elizabeth 'Betsy' Stanko's intimate intrusions and safety work, which addressed women's justifiable fears and the measures they employ, in the context of the wealth of sexual crimes and domestic violence, which they endure, that go unreported or unrecorded (Stanko, 1985, 1990). Vera-Gray's (2018) 'The right amount of panic' provides further insight into the methods and self-policing women use to avoid sexual violence and presents the thesis that rather than women needlessly engaging in these behaviours (as the risk of serious sexual assault is minimal), such safety work might also be saving some women from harms, particularly as they are doing what is expected of them. Hence, there are socio-structural factors underpinning women's experiences of harm and sexual violation. These concepts are incredibly useful as they make explicit the links between sexism, harassment, abuse and sexual violence.

Australian feminist blogger Emma Pitman, in writing about the 'human pyramid of misogyny' (in Meanjin, 2018), suggested that viewing misogyny as a spectrum is problematic, due to it not being a sliding scale of harm – with jokes situated at the low end and rape at the other. The notion of a pyramid, where minor acts support the major, creating at best a 'foundation of blithe indifference' and at worst a culture of amusement at women being belittled, provides another avenue for thinking about why it is that even seemingly small acts of sexism, violation and harm must be seen as inherently connected with sexual assault and rape. Misogyny endures because it is collaborative, and it is preserved via embodied structures of societal support that individuals actively uphold, especially those with the political, legal or cultural capital to effect change, but choose not to. Pitman describes the way that rapists and sexual harassers are able to stand on the shoulders of others, and she means mostly, though not exclusively, the shoulders of other men.

On every level of the pyramid intent is varied, but the impact remains. Expanding upon Pitman's original conceptualisation, on the bottom are the silent bystanders, who observe sexism, harassment, even abuse, yet do nothing. Their silence might be down to pure ignorance or indifference or affected by external

factors such as intimidation; however, the impact does not differ – silence equals complicity – creating a foundation for other men to evade retribution. Above them, are men who laugh along and find amusing the sexist ‘women belong in the kitchen’ or ‘make me a sandwich’ comments, along with rape jokes – because they are abstract, edgy and dark humour – dismissing the lived experiences of statistically 1 in 5 women and 1 in 20 men, as well as emboldening the perpetrators who via the ‘hilarity’ feel reassured that their actions are really not that bad. On their shoulders are those men who go a step further and join in on the joke. Then there are the apologists, those who when a woman discloses an experience of sexual violence or harassment, dismiss it as a misunderstanding, provides an excuse, or responsabilises or blames the woman instead. They will find ways to justify and support when intimate images are disseminated without the consent of the women in them (she shouldn’t have taken the pictures in the first instance), or the tales of how their mates had ‘fun’ with a woman they got so drunk that she was barely conscious (she shouldn’t have drunk so much – she should have known what was going to happen). They view feminism and conversations about sexual predators (as per #MeToo) and tackling sexual exploitation as ‘witch hunts’, going ‘too far’ and demonising men. On top of these are men who become aggressive in response to being turned down – calling women names like ‘prick tease’ and accusing them of leading them on, the sexual harassers at work, on the street and those who make rape or violent threats online against women. The voyeurs, who take pictures of their sexual partners without their consent and send them on to their mates. The stalkers, the men who try to constantly monitor and have complete control over their target’s lives, both online and offline, including those knowledgeable about their legal limits, who avoid the boundaries of a ‘repeated course of conduct’ and avoid making direct threats and instead post prolifically on social media about rape and violence against women. The blackmailers, the men who were consensually provided intimate pictures for their consumption only as part of previous sexual or dating encounters, who then threatens to publicly disclose these or send to friends/family/employers when their partner wants to end the relationship. Then, there are what Pitman refers to as ‘the brokers of power’ – the men who are actively working to protect the structural interests and will remind women of their place and quash allegations with reminders that women will be disbelieved, such that women do not report their victimisations. It is these persons who provide institutional support for abuses to occur. Then, there are those who commit the indecent and sexual assaults through to the rapists and, on top of the hierarchy, ably supported by all the behaviours from the benign to the more sinister below them, are those sexual predators who have such power that they are protected and to an extent, visible. These are men like Donald Trump, Woody Allen, Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein, Clarence Thomas, R. Kelly and Roman Polanski. Men who have either been accused or convicted of various sexual offences against women and who were able to continue their abuses despite them being well documented (until the public found out) or have since experienced little impact upon their careers. Unfortunately, this is not an extensive list and one that I fear will continue to be added to unless greater strides are took to disrupt the systemic misogyny preserving these types of abuses of power.

'No man is an island, and no man offends in isolation' states Pitman (2018). The pressure to exert dominance over women and less powerful men comes from above and is embedded within the patriarchal system, and the societal foundation of gender inequality ensures that women are denied sexual agency and subjectivity comparable to men, whilst men are positioned as entitled to access to women's bodies. This is underpinned by rape culture (Herman, 1989), which refers to the social and political norms, structures and practices that minimise the harms, fix the blame upon victims and excuse perpetrators of sexual assault and harassment (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993). Nicola Gavey (2005) in her hugely influential text *Just Sex?* argued that normative forms of heterosexuality operate as a 'cultural scaffolding' for rape (p. 2). Gavey (2005) was not suggesting that normative forms of sex are rape or are the same as rape, rather that there are areas within heterosexual sexual encounters that could fall between the realms of rape and sex. Other scholars (e.g. Allen, 2005; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998; Jackson, 1999; Larcombe, 2005; Powell, 2010) suggest that there is an uneven playing field created by heterosex cultural norms and prescribed gender roles for male and female identities negotiating heterosex, which excuses, facilitates and even exalts unwanted sex, pressure and coercion. Rape culture, applied in this context, addresses the sociocultural premise that there is a shared social responsibility for sexual violence, rather than it being caused solely by individual pathological reasons. Rape culture is also a concept used to challenge the ceaseless responsibilisation of women and girls for their own sexual victimisation. It gives prominence to a culture of non-consent, where women and girls are denied sexual autonomy, have no agency over their own bodies and are disbelieved.

The infamous */r/incels* subreddit was closed down in 2017 for advocating rape, as well as death threats against Chads, after Reddit changed its rules of conduct. Posts lamented the criminalisation of marital rape: 'if it was good enough for our ancestors then it's good enough for us' and 'no way people here believe it is a thing', applauded gang rape via a twisted utilitarian lens – 'the majority are enjoying it so what about the person who isn't', and engaged in the victim-blaming tropes where they damned 'stupid intoxicated irresponsible females at parties'. Threads were replete with heteronormative discourses and gendered assumptions that contradicted other supposed concerns about men being victims of rape and sexual assault, for example, the notion of the older female teacher having sex with their male student was much revered, rather than viewing it as a predatory act upon a minor and an abuse of power 'I wish I had a teacher like that'. Although the */r/thread* is an excessive example of incel misogyny, hence its removal, this was what was occurring away from public view, infiltrating the mindsets of impressionable young men and normalising oppressive attitudes towards women and girls. It is almost as if society had its own pill to take in awakening to the realisation of the harms arising from these online spaces.

Nevertheless, even though incels are undeniably associated with misogyny, there are those within the community who have no problem stating their hatred of women yet struggle to view themselves as misogynist. Even a cursory inspection of incel forums reveals individuals who present this erroneous juxtaposition,

who challenge the very notion of misogyny, whilst at the same time espousing how women are worthless and better off dead. On the surface, this may seem that incels are concerned with their presentation and potentially being negatively perceived; however, this is a subculture that actively, and in some way, seeks to set itself apart from the rest of society, who they believe has turned its back on them anyway. They are distinct from what they imagine the mainstream to be, via their belief in the blackpill and how this ideology has opened their eyes to how forces beyond their control have shaped their lives. Therefore, being considered pejoratively would not be their primary concern, especially when they have such an unfavourable view of themselves, although being labelled negatively has had a detrimental effect on incels in potentially isolating them further. The denial of misogyny, however, relates to their dismissal of the existence of misogyny rather than seeking approval from norms. Due to their knowledge of the ‘truth’ of how the world unfairly operates in favour of women and handsome men, incels are justified to hate women; although for incels, it is not really hatred if it is legitimised. As per Sykes and Matza’s (1957) techniques of neutralization, victims – in this case women, who are on the receiving end of incel abuse – are denied this status, and they are also denied injury – as due to their supposed privilege over incels, they will continue to have the upper hand, and further, incels appeal to higher loyalties – in adhering to the blackpill this provides credence to pejoratively call out women. Another way that incels refute the notion of misogyny is to counteract it with misandry, something which Marwick and Caplan (2018, p. 548) describe as being employed as ‘a synonym for feminism and a false equivalence to misogyny’ since its very inception. A major stance on incel forums, with clear links to the Men’s Rights Movement (MRM), is that of fighting misandry and standing up for men’s rights. Incels view themselves as the victims, and they are unable to meet the required hegemonic masculine standards, and due to their perceived misfortune in being born ugly, they are entitled to retaliate against women and others who oppress them.

Marwick and Caplan (2018) explored the use of the term misandry within the manosphere and found that it serves to act as a weapon to counter feminist language and ideas. Similar to MRAs, incels use tropes of male victimhood to strike back at feminism. Terms such as ‘toxic masculinity’ are co-opted, with discussion threads and videos dedicated to ‘toxic femininity’, and extreme claims that feminists are actively seeking the annihilation of men (notwithstanding the Chad alpha males naturally), with Solanas’ Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM) often presented as evidence of this.

Manosphere logic and tactics of reversing the roles of victims and perpetrators have become intimately aligned with traditional hyperbole involving sexual violence, such as rhetoric about false rape allegations and male victims of domestic abuse. In addition to this, fears about fathers losing access to their children and (unknowingly) raising other men’s children are actively renewed. Incels denigrate the notion of misogyny, claiming that women face no structural oppression or inequality; hence, misandry is used as a counterargument to feminism rather than calling attention to and seeking solutions for men’s problems. In addition to this archaic misogynistic and racist discourses involving pro-rape, eugenics and anti-semitism are regurgitated by incels, which is then picked up elsewhere online.

Such rhetoric did not emanate online; nevertheless, incels as well as other manosphere groups have advanced exaggerated superficial depictions of these issues to the point where they have almost become established fact. They are not just narratives advocated in online subcultural groups within the manosphere though, rather they are symptomatic of, reinforcing and reinforced by, more acceptable and normalised forms of misogyny, as well as antiprogressive heteropatriarchy support.

Although there is the denial of misogyny within incel communities, justifications defending the hatred of women are presented. As discussed previously, this is less to do with preserving character but more about refuting women's ability to suffer in a society that incels believe is structured to their advantage. Regardless, incels still provide rationalisations as to why their hatred towards women is warranted. A common theme prevailing amongst incels is that of rejection. As evidenced earlier, rejection is presented as not only a reason to loathe women but also what made them initially self-identify as an incel:

Most incels that hate women do so because they have not had that affection or intimacy given to them as they are promised that they will find someone someday. (Tom)

We are sick of getting rejected and sick of being led on by women. (Lee)

I feel like a loser because I can't find anyone. (Carl)

Further strengthening the notion that misandry is a pervasive problem in contemporary society, as well as undergirding the reasons for them being sexually rejected is the incel's perspective that women are naturally corrupt. However, this is presented in contradictory terms, because, on the one hand, women are seen as inferior subordinates – who are less than men in all aspects – for example, in intelligence, strength, empathy, rational thought. Whilst, on the other hand, they have power because they are able to fabricate sexual violence and oppress men by withholding sex, by exploiting their sexual market value (SMV) superiority. Women are dehumanised and demonised such that they are the logical enemy of incels and the harbinger of all incel problems, which therefore permits aggression and hatred towards them.

Incels do, however, resent the inaccurate and often homogenising portrayals of them, and I as a researcher and an outsider to the community, as well as the 'female enemy', am acutely aware that my analyses and interpretations of them might be disagreed with. It is also noted that incel forums and sites, although often publicly accessible, do have an insider status to them such that outsiders are not welcome. In particular, these are spaces that are clearly not for women, and so incels have stated that if women see and become upset at the vitriol against them that is propagated in these sites, then it is their fault for being there. The indication is that incels are posting content for each other rather than for public consumption, in a perverse combative manner, whereby they battle over who is the 'biggest

loser' and who can post the most preposterous content. It doesn't escape me that in drawing public attention to incels misogyny and their offensive vernacular this exposes more women to the harms of what incels are expressing, as well as the risks of homicidal others jumping on the incel bandwagon to establish notoriety. Nevertheless, the alternative, ignoring them and allowing the hatred to flourish unchecked, would be far worse, and certainly, incels were dismissed as a random online subcultural group for too long such that their harms were overlooked.

Within incel communities, there is also evidence of othering occurring, with some attempting to distance themselves from those who they consider to be more extreme or problematic. Often these individuals do recognise how the hateful comments do amount to misogyny and vocalise this, much to the chagrin of others within the community. One of the interviewees stated the following:

When I carefully assess myself it is difficult to [reconcile] myself with the kind of men that tell stories on Reddit. I do resent women sometimes, however, I have two sisters and I wouldn't forgive myself if anything happened to them. (Pete)

It is interesting that empathy for women is only based off the fact that they have female family members. This was also observed on incel forums where amongst the fantasies of raping and murdering women, there would also be reference to how mothers and sisters were distinct from other women and therefore worthy of their affection and respect.

In assuming the blackpill ideology, incels have supposedly woken up to the delusions of the world and are rejecting societal expectations. It was the importance that society places on romantic and sexual relationships, and finding the perfect partner, that created them in the first instance. Discussions on incel forums, however, expose a further contradiction, as many incels unambiguously declare how they still want a partner and so have not entirely abandoned all hope of having sex and finding love and thus could be questioned as to whether they are truly blackpilled. Such declarations are often met with derision, and suggestions for those individuals to self-harm or even take their own life for being so cucked, such is the 'support' available within the communities. Essentially, a consensus is sought, with the blackpill ideology the cement to bind beliefs together and those that show deviation or disagreement to this are berated. There is a feeling of being lied to, and within this mindset, the trope that women don't like 'nice guys' and instead prefer 'bad guys' is proliferated. Incels believe that women will only find the extremely 'hot' men attractive, as if there is a standardised objective consensus amongst women in regard to height, facial structure and race. As a result, women are deemed to only date and have sex with Chads, as well as hating men who are unattractive, again adhering to the notion that there is an agreement amongst women as to what constitutes unattractiveness. Since incels consider themselves to align with such supposed measures of ugliness, they resign themselves to the fact that women will never like them. Therefore, listening to women and treating them with respect isn't going to get them to have sex with them because women are inherently programmed to dismiss the 'nice' incels, and

so incels realise that it would be futile to try, and instead, look to remove women from their lives, or turn to hating them and wishing them ill, which undermines their declaration of being 'nice guys' somewhat. Hence, when incels hear about women who have been abused by their boyfriends or husbands, they rejoice that women are receiving what they deserve for their poor choices.

This victim-blaming sentiment is also extended to women who are murdered by men. During the time of writing this book, a 33-year-old woman named Sarah Everard went missing in the United Kingdom. The investigation over the course of a week changed from a missing person's inquiry to a homicide investigation, with her body subsequently being found. Although this case is unfortunately far from isolated when we consider the extent of men's violence and abuse against women, it captured the public imagination. The case reignited the tiresome debates about women's responsibility and accountability for their safety – with police reportedly advising women in the Clapham area of London, where Sarah was abducted from, to avoid going out at night. Furthermore, all the measures women implement in order to protect themselves from men's violence (Vera-Gray, 2018) were highlighted. Women took to social media to vocalise their fears about male violence only to be labelled hysterical or have their lived experiences undermined, whilst the #NotAllMen resurfaced to highlight how women shouldn't generalise about or fear every man. This completely negates the fact that women already know that not all men are dangerous. It is not the fact that women think all men are going to hurt them, rather it is because there are enough men who have or who are capable of hurting them and women don't know which ones these are, that women have these justifiable apprehensions. This added to the experiences of everyday sexism, intimidation, abuse and sexual violence – Liz Kelly's (1987) astute conceptualisation of the continuum of sexual violence that all women have invariably experienced in one shape or form means that women have learnt to be aware of the violent threat that men pose to them. A resistance, however, grew online, with women and male allies, calling out this blatant victim-blaming. Offline, in many cities across the United Kingdom, drawing inspiration from the second-wave feminists who undertook 'Reclaim the Night' marches in the 1970s,¹ 'Reclaim these streets vigils' were organised to pay tribute to Sarah and challenge the control of women's bodies and behaviours. During this, some incels posted horrific comments revelling in the killing and what this symbolises to women, which I

¹The first Reclaim the Night march in the United Kingdom took place on 12 November 1977 in Leeds, organised by the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group who wanted to express their concerns about the violence and harassment women faced from wolf-whistling to rape and murder, particularly as Peter Sutcliffe – the Yorkshire Ripper was still at large at that time. The group had been inspired to undertake their own Reclaim the Night marches after learning about how women in Germany had taken to the streets there to protest against their mistreatment at the hands of men. At least 12 Reclaim the Night marches took place across the United Kingdom at this time. Since 2004, annual Reclaim the Night marches have been organised by the London Feminist Network.

won't reproduce here so as not to cause any further upset to Sarah's loved ones or disrespect her memory. Unfortunately, this is not unprecedented, as incels have made similar offensive comments about other high-profile murdered women previously, from current news stories as well as historical cases. Even though incel threads are generally personal rather than overtly political, incels are responsive to what is happening societally and politically and will comment from their perspectives accordingly. For example, in regard to COVID – what incels term Chad-19-chan – incels have been rejoicing at the fact that lockdown means that others (predominantly the Chads and Stacys) are unable to 'hook-up' and so incels are not the only ones having to go without sex. They have also used the example of the growth in popularity of OnlyFans during lockdown, a platform that allows users to post content and receive payment directly from their followers, to warrant their labelling of women as whores and sluts – drawing comparisons with street sex work – as some OnlyFans users distribute explicit pictures of themselves. It is not just (heterosexual) women, however, who are using OnlyFans though, gay men are capitalising on the lucrative opportunities that the platform provides.²

There appears a logical crossover between Trump supporters and incels, however, as with the link to the alt-right – which Trump supporters may well be aligned with, this is not straightforward and, in reality, nebulous. There is a shared sense of entitlement, of being deprived of something they automatically deserve, whilst Trump voters have a clear goal – to get/keep/restore Trump in the presidency, incels have diverging objectives – to ascend, to retaliate against their 'oppressors' or have none. Meanwhile, although incels may not necessarily have a political position nor be supporting him, the actions and ideologies of Trump himself are impactful not just to incels and the manosphere but over Western democratic societies.

At the time of writing, there was chaos in Washington, DC, as a mob of pro-Trump rioters, angered by the then outgoing president's false assertions that the electoral vote was rigged, stormed the US Capitol in a violent act of anarchy. But this was predicted and certainly the rhetoric espoused by Trump had been stirring up his supporters long before his failure at being re-elected. On the eve of the election, Trump tweeted that a court decision he did not favour would allow cheating and also lead to violence in the streets:

the supreme court decision on voting in Pennsylvania is a VERY dangerous one. It will allow rampant and unchecked cheating and will undermine our entire systems of laws. It will also induce violence in the streets. Something must be done!

Before this, no president had ever spoken in ways that linked their elections prospects and violence immediately prior to election day. Now suspended,³ Donald

²<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/05/07/what-is-onlyfans-gay-porn-app/>

³After the storming of the Capitol, on 8 January 2021, Twitter permanently suspended the @realDonaldTrump account due to the risk of further incitement of violence https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html

Trump's Twitter account had been a continuous diatribe of poorly worded, repetitive declarations imbued in ignominy and wilful ignorance, as well as sheer hatred, much of which was directed against women. In 2019, Trump was amongst the most prolific users of Twitter, with almost 60 million followers, 41,000 Tweets and an average of 7.5 Tweets posted per day. Kreis (2017, p. 614) notes that his language was 'direct and simple' and his messages 'succinct and polarising', a strategy favoured by right-wing populist discourse.

From denigrating numerous women in the public eye for not being attractive enough, calling women bimbos or comparing them to animals, to expressing disgust at breastfeeding, Trump used his power and privilege as POTUS to run his Twitter account as a platform for misogyny. In response to the many criticisms he received about objectifying women through sexist language, both on and offline, Trump downplayed his comments, referring to them as 'locker room talk' (Farenthold, 2016). His victory in the 2016 US elections even after his 'grab them by the pussy' remarks⁴ were publicly released, may have, depressingly, reflected and reinforced cultural prejudices regarding gender differences and Americans' attitudes towards gender discrimination. Twitter itself is also regarded as a 'toxic place' for women (Amnesty International, 2018), due to the relentless abuses, threats and harassments used throughout the platform. Amnesty International's report discusses how Twitter's 'inconsistent enforcement and application of the rules as well as delays or inaction to reports of abuse when users breach the Twitter rules', in combination with the absence of any human rights policy commitments, demonstrate a 'failure of the company to adequately meet its corporate responsibility to respect human rights in this area' (p. 45). Corporate interests are an omni-present mediating influence in gender-based online violence that often perpetuate – or exacerbate – harms (Kim, 2020).

Giuseppina Scotto di Carlo (2020) undertook critical discourse analysis (CDA) upon a corpus of Trump's tweets from the beginning of his 2016 campaign (July 2015) to February 2019, in order to investigate the linguistic strategies, he used to negatively represent women. The study highlights how Trump's vocabulary perpetuates a male-centric hierarchy, significantly impacting upon his supporters, whilst his political domination shows how his belief systems were able to penetrate wider language and society (di Carlo, 2020). Seven core lexical and rhetorical strategies were identified by di Carlo (2020), which sound remarkably familiar to incel attitudes towards women:

1. Women are weak, lacking in strength and ability, incompetent and 'mentally instable'.
2. Women are dependent beings.
3. Women are to be judged based on their appearance rather than their intelligence or personality.
4. Women are dishonest liars and worse than men.
5. Women are disgusting animals.

⁴<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>

6. Women are no more than possessions.
7. Women can be described with vulgar terms.

Both Trump's and incels' perspectives are influenced by patriarchal ideologies concerned with the derogation and objectification of women. They believe that women have juxtaposing attributes – they are fragile, helpless and needy, whilst also being untrustworthy and debased – hence their only worth is in their looks and they can be dehumanised. Like incels, Trump's Tweets portrayed his misogyny in an overt way, often used under the guise of humour; however, Trump's position of authority provided permission to engage in this behaviour unchecked for so long. Once the explicit sexism and misogyny abundant in incel discussions received external attention, site moderators commenced shutting threads down, before then, incels were able to espouse their virulent loathing and vicious fantasies about women with relative impunity because they were away from the public view. It should also be noted that Trump embodies the ideals of power deeply embedded within hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and so he and his ideologies are appealing to those prioritising traits of male dominance, superiority, and heteronormativity.

Trump also employed the 'men are the real victims' argument favoured by incels. This was particularly evident in his responses to the #MeToo movement, where he reignited concerns over false rape and sexual assault allegations with his comments about it being a scary time for young men who could be guilty of something they may not be guilty of. Similar to incels, Trump's opinions about women are also contradictory; on the one hand, he describes them as subordinates whose only value is in their looks, whilst on the other hand, Trump suggests that women are society's victors – they're 'having a great time' at the expense of men. Trump's response, however, was not isolated and is only part of the wider backlash against the movement and accusations of it having gone 'too far' (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). There are many posts on incel forums decrying #MeToo, drawing on the MRM's anti-feminist rhetorics and adopting a disbelieving stance of those who come forward to tell of their experiences of sexual abuse and harassment, for example:

[The] MeToo movement has also created fear in the minds of young men that they'll be falsely accused of sexual harassment even when they just wanted to ask a girl out and did not mean to harass her.

I personally know 5 men, young and older, who had their lives ruined because their wife falsely accused them of domestic violence, and this was before MeToo happened. False accusations by a woman can destroy a man's life, even if he is innocent. Moreover, when such issues are brought up they're pushed aside instead of being addressed, which creates even more frustration and resentment among young men.

In fact, a depth of hostility and trepidation remains within the American public, towards survivors who speak out against powerful men, despite the seemingly

significant impact of the #MeToo movement (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). The public and political backlash to the testimony of Dr Christine Blasey Ford is confirmation of this. In September 2018, Dr Blasey Ford accused the now associate justice of the US Supreme Court – Brett Kavanaugh – of sexually assaulting her when they were both in high school. Despite being, in Trump’s words ‘credible’ and compelling’, Dr Blasey Ford’s powerful disclosure of her experience did not prevent Kavanaugh – who had been nominated by Trump – from advancing to the Supreme Court. This was in addition to three other women (although one later recanted) also accusing Kavanaugh of sexual misconduct, highlighting the continued failure to take seriously the experiences of survivors.

Further validation for incel philosophies comes in the form of public figures, who have been described as being part of the so-called intellectual dark web and those who are the faces of men’s supremacist movements. In being provided platforms and often part of the mainstream (despite that being what they claim to critique), these people are the further ‘respectable’ faces of misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism.

The Intellectual Dark Web

The rationale behind the emergence of the intellectual dark web is the rejection of identity politics. The intellectual dark web is comprised of scholars who view themselves as dissidents and mavericks and position themselves as truth tellers. Whilst many are based outside of academia, some do hold university posts, with perhaps the most prolific being Jordan B. Peterson, the Toronto professor who rallies against political correctness. Peterson is notorious for his seething critiques against feminism and ‘cultural marxism’ – the (conspiracy) theory that Marxist Jewish academics at the Frankfurt School in the 1930s are responsible for devising the ideas underpinning multiculturalism and critical theory – essentially embedding Marxist ideals into cultural values (Neiwert, 2020). According to opponents such as Peterson, the influence of cultural Marxism is so significant that it dominates contemporary academia and culture, with feminism being one of the products of this duplicitous cabal. Peterson’s ideas have infiltrated mainstream public consciousness, with his books which normalise and rationalise the patriarchal social order, regularly appearing in bestselling reading lists of literary stores.

Despite espousing many of the same ideologies, which in turn has led to him being revered by the movement, Peterson has carefully maintained a distance from the alt-right by proclaiming an alternative political stance and describing himself as a ‘classical liberal’. Furthermore, Peterson has never explicitly declared affiliation with white nationalism, white supremacy or male supremacy; nevertheless, both white nationalists and supremacists, as well as incels and the broader manosphere, utilise his views and have interpreted Peterson’s denial of social justice and gender equality progression as an endorsement of racial and gender hierarchies. Sharing a distain for postmodernism with the alt-right, notwithstanding purporting many of his own post-truths, Peterson rose to fame after his zealous opposition to a proposed Canadian bill prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity and expression. Peterson challenged this with claims of

free speech being hindered due to the use of gender affirming pronouns. In 2019, Peterson launched a subscription-only, 'anti-censorship' website called Thinkspot. For a fee, the platform assured its users that only a successful legal action would lead to their content being removed. The person invited to test this guarantee was none other than the far right YouTuber and Gamergater Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad).

Peterson has weighed in on discussions about gender inequality, such as the gender wage gap, which he claims to be a lie based on bunk statistics and defaulting to gender role stereotypes – that women aren't in high-pressure leadership roles because they don't want them as it would be a conflict with women's 'agreeable' nature. Peterson also validated incel violence as a means to counter rejection, in the *New York Times*⁵ in regard to Minassian's Toronto attack – 'he was angry at God because women were rejecting him. The cure for that is enforced monogamy. That's actually why monogamy emerges'. After receiving backlash for these comments, Peterson claimed he was misunderstood, and rather than reinforcing the incel narrative of sex redistribution and calling for women to be provided to incels, he was emphasising the logic of societies that expect monogamy:

'Men get frustrated when they are not competitive in the sexual marketplace (note: the fact that they DO get frustrated does not mean that they SHOULD get frustrated', Peterson wrote. 'Pointing out the existence of something is not the same as justifying its existence). Frustrated men tend to become dangerous, particularly if they are young. The dangerousness of frustrated young men (even if that frustration stems from their own incompetence) has to be regulated socially'.

In 2017, three scholars linked with the intellectual dark web – James Lindsay, Helen Pluckrose and Peter Boghossian, who describe themselves as left-leaning liberals and seemingly have more time at their disposal than most academics – coordinated a scam against gender, queer, critical race, masculinities studies, amongst others nicknamed *Sokal Squared*. Heavily influenced by the *Sokal Hoax*,⁶ the ploy involved the creation of 20 fake papers using fashionable jargon submitted to various journals in these fields, with the aim of exposing ridiculous conclusions. When editors of one of the journals became suspicious that the article submitted to them was fake, the trio were compelled to publicly announce their hoax, claiming their hypothesis had been proven. That there was indeed corruption of scholarship in what they term 'grievance studies', whereby ostensible progressive goals and ideological bias are advocated against intellectual validity. Unsurprisingly, this case has been used as ammunition in the current political culture wars, with conservatives dismissive of the studies highlighting deep-rooted societal injustices, have leapt on the Sokal Squared bandwagon and are besmirching academics with accusations of being partisan culture warriors.

⁵<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/style/jordan-peterson-12-rules-for-life.html>

⁶<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/new-sokal-hoax/572212/>

Male Supremacist Personalities

Blaming feminism for the decline of Western civilisation and deriding those on the left or having liberal or progressive attitudes as social justice warriors (SJWs), male supremacy is inexorably linked to the alt-right, with notably dignitaries – Milo Yiannopoulos, Roosh V and Paul Elam, amongst others, leading the men’s revolutionary charge.

Milo Yiannopoulos, during his stint as the technology editor for Breitbart, the right-wing, pro-Trump news site, provided a mainstream platform for the alt-right and assisted with creating a semi-respectable veneer for the movement. Like Peterson, Yiannopoulos became a martyr for free speech, a darling agent provocateur for the far right, after he was criticised for making anti-Semite, racist and pro-paedophilic comments. In an infamous video, Yiannopoulos is supercilious about sex with 13-year-olds and indicates that he was present at a party where minors were sexually assaulted. In another, he draws on the ‘statistical fact’ that Jews own most of the banks and dominate the media. Yiannopoulos rationalised his comments, emphasising his homosexuality and alleging that he is a victim of child abuse, as well as referring to his Jewish mother and being raised Jewish. In 2015, Yiannopoulos engaged in what was supposedly an intellectual debate with a UK scholar about the topic of lad culture, only to use his platform to espouse what Laurie Penny describes as ‘performative bigotry’, where he was disinterested in entering into an actual informed and respectful deliberation (Koulouris, 2018). Instead, Yiannopoulos made deliberately outrageous claims such as even though feminists are a minority, they run the world, women who allege rape ought to be told to ‘grow up’ and women use their sexuality as a weapon. Yiannopoulos dismissed data from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabularies (HMIC) and peer-reviewed academic research evidencing the severity of men’s sexual crimes against women, as feminazi propaganda seeking to establish a new gender order, in which misunderstood men are the real victims (Koulouris, 2018).

For a long time, Yiannopoulos relied on the defence mechanism of being gay; however, in March 2021, he stated that he is now ‘ex-gay’ and demoted his husband to a housemate.⁷ Yiannopoulos has claimed that his being gay was a façade to antagonise liberals who would go crazy to view a ‘handsome, charismatic, intelligent gay man riotously celebrating conservative principles’ and is now supporting conversion therapy. In 2019, he was permanently banned along with other far right commentators – Alex Jones, Laura Loomer, Louis Farrakhan and Paul Nehlen, from Twitter and Facebook for breaching their hate speech rules.

Daryush ‘Roosh’ Valizadeh established the blog *returnofkings* (RoK) in 2012 for ‘heterosexual, masculine men’ with the aim to

usher the return of the masculine man in a world where masculinity is being increasingly punished and shamed in favour of creating an androgynous and politically correct society that allows women to assert superiority and control over men.

⁷<https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/activist-milo-yiannopoulos-is-now-ex-gay-consecrating-his-life-to-st-joseph>

Articles published on the blog include topics such as why women shouldn't be allowed to vote, why young girls are better than older women, women's intellectual inferiority and how attractive girls become ugly freaks because of feminism. Roosh V, who started his career as a Pick Up Artist (PUA), claims to have coined the term 'neomascularity'. This relates to the idea that women only have value when they are young and fertile, and men prove their value in their resources, intellect, character and by having sex with young and fertile women. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) describe Roosh V as one of the 'most public and reviled online misogynists' and presents him as a male supremacy extremist on their site,⁸ along with examples of some of his most abhorrent posts and comments. Before 2015, Roosh V was relatively unknown outside of the manosphere; however, his article in February 2015 proposing rape be legalised on private property, brought him to the attention of the wider public. The article is replete with familiar victim-blaming tropes such as women being drunk and the scenario of the stranger in an alley way being 'real' rape, along with the narrative of avoiding infantilising victims:

Less women will be raped because they won't voluntarily drug themselves with booze and follow a strange man into a bedroom, and less men will be unfairly jailed for what was anything but a maniacal alley rape. Until then, this devastating rape culture will continue, and women who we treat as children will continue to act as children.

Although the term rape culture is employed, here it is applied in complete contradiction to its original feminist conceptualisation; rather, it is used to support the notion that there is a culture of sexual activities being unfairly labelled as rape. So, in this instance, the use of the term rape culture is used to further perpetuate rape culture in excusing perpetrators and fixing the blame upon victims. Following the criticism of this article including protests against him making public speeches (such that he was eventually banned in the United Kingdom), Roosh claimed it was satirical; however, it is not out of line with his entitlement towards sex and attitudes towards women and so this is subject to debate.

Roosh also claimed he was not political, although he did publicly express his delight when Trump was inaugurated, recognising that this presidency legitimised the very sexist and misogynistic behaviours he engaged in himself. In response to Trump's infamous 'pussy' quote, Roosh wrote on RoK 'if the president can say it then you can say it'. Trump's use of the manosphere looks numerical scale was also praised by Roosh 'we now have a president who rates women on a 1–10 scale in the same way we do and evaluates women by their appearance and feminine attitude'.

Adhering to accepted talking points within the manosphere and the MRM, Roosh fuelled the idea of the hypergamous nature of women, caused by the decline of the patriarchy, and fed into the narrative of male oppression, describing men

⁸<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/daryush-roosh-valizadeh>

as ‘the mules of society’. He wrote, in his founding neomasculinity document, in May 2015:

We’ve arrived at the point where men are so consistently oppressed from birth to adulthood that any notion of female oppression can be immediately laughed at on its face A boy born today will be institutionally, systematically, and deliberately oppressed by all facets of society while a girl born today will be given undeniable preferential treatment over him.

Although the adoption of male victimhood is identical to the strategies of MRAs (as well as incels), Roosh was critical of MRAs for seeking support of authority figures instead of adjusting to contemporary realities. For Roosh, men do not need to be permanently victims as they can change their circumstances through the ‘game’ – PUA seduction techniques. In fact, Roosh blamed Elliot Rodger’s attack on Rodger’s lack of knowledge of the game ‘we’re the solution to this sort of murder rampage, he is self-delusional and massively entitled, but exposing him to game may have saved lives’. Rodger, however, had in fact, been exposed to the game, having been a member of PUAHate, where he had expressed his anger at the PUA techniques proving unsuccessful at helping him to achieve sex with women. Within this community, anger was then channelled into calls to commit violence, especially against women. Nevertheless, Roosh was careful that he and his PUA community were distanced from Rodger’s atrocities. In March 2019, apparently embarrassed about his previous writings, Roosh has allegedly converted to the Armenian Apostolic Church and condemned extramarital sex.

Protégé of Warren Farrell, Paul Elam established the men’s rights website *A Voice for Men*, which maintains that misogyny is taking over the world and is often replete with violent rhetoric. Elam has dubbed October ‘Bash a Violent Bitch Month’, declaring that men who are physically attacked by women should ‘beat the living shit out of them’. ‘I don’t mean subdue them, or deliver an open-handed pop on the face to get them to settle down’, states Elam,

I mean literally to grab them by the hair and smack their face against the wall till the smugness of beating on someone because you know they won’t fight back drains from their nose with a few million red corpuscles. And then make them clean up the mess.

Defending such visceral aggressiveness, Elam claims that *A Voice for Men* deploys over-the-top language and tactics in order to overcome public indifference and draw attention to the urgent problems facing men and achieve what the earlier men’s liberationists were unable to. Elam has adopted a rape apologist position and stated that if he was serving upon a jury overseeing a case with a male defendant accused of rape, he would automatically declare the defendant not guilty irrespective of the facts of the case. Elam uses his platform to indulge in his violent fantasies against women, for example, *A Voice for Men* launched a now defunct site called *Register-Her.com*, modelled after sex offender registries.

Purporting to track female murderers and rapists, as well as women who scheme against men, women were listed alongside their picture and castigated for not being imprisoned. It included women who were deemed to have falsely accused men of rape or domestic violence, women who had protested men's rights activist gatherings as well as those who had gotten on the wrong side of Elam. One such person, the feminist writer Jessica Valenti, ended up fleeing her home in fear of her safety such was the online harassment she endured. The site's motto was 'Fuck Their Shit Up', and the aim was to encourage others to pile on the abuse to these women.

Political Culture Wars

Described by Berry and Sobieraj (2014, p. 5) as comprised of 'venom, vilification of opponents, and hyperbolic reinterpretations of current events', outrage media has long been a *raison d'être* of the political right. Shock jocks have long been in existence (see Howard Stern and his ilk); however, modern provocateurs (see Alex Jones, PewDiePie, amongst others) fuelled by audience appetite for controversy along with the addition of networked and social media have enabled an expansion of the global shift to the right. As Alison Phipps notes (2020, p. 84), the outrage employed by the contemporary right always follows the same pattern: (1) say something outrageous, (2) wait for outrage to build, (3) claim to be silenced and no-platformed, (4) build platform from outrage this generates and (5) start all over again. Such methods exploit the effects of outrage to achieve notoriety. Outrage facilitates the building of brands and is fundamental to right-wing political movements, bringing together informal political dissemination and official political activity. Far right narratives are dominating conservative media, particularly in the United States, United Kingdom and parts of Europe, but they are also increasingly featured within liberal outlets in a bid to be more balanced. From here the growth of clickbait has flourished, in what Phipps (2020, p. 85) aptly describes as the 'outrage economy' of contemporary media, intersecting with Banet-Weiser's (2015) economy of visibility.

Loud claims about being silenced from people with significant political and institutional power demonstrate that the exact opposite is occurring. If they were truly silenced, as those who are oppressed, then we would not hear or see them, and they certainly would not have the wealth of access to the public consciousness in the manner they do. As Sara Ahmed so eloquently puts it⁹ 'whenever people keep being given a platform, or whenever people speak endlessly about being silenced, you not only have a performative contradiction; you are witnessing a mechanism of power'.

Claiming to be silenced amplifies and distributes reactionary forms of speech generating outrage. This is how figures such as Jordan Peterson and Milo Yiannopoulos have created platforms, by alleging they have none.

⁹<https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/02/15/you-are-oppressing-us/>

Conclusions

The war against women is not virtual, is very real and has been waging historically in response to women's movements and strides for equality and freedom from men's violence for far too long. Contemporary misogyny has found a new venue on the internet, enabling it to disseminate and advance in unprecedented ways and to appeal to and reach new generations of young men. Incel is the present-day depiction of all that is misogynistic, yet it is but one, albeit egregious, form. Misogyny is also not unique to cyberspace; it is embedded within mainstream culture and is regularly reinforced and validated by those in positions of power, mostly men, who lament that their freedoms are encroached when their discriminatory and bigoted behaviours are challenged. Moreover, misogyny continues to thrive, from the seemingly banal types of lad banter right through to the shadow pandemic of significant numbers of men murdering women globally. The issue here is men's violence against women and girls. Women are not being violent towards each other and are not murdering each other (aside from any isolated incidents), and there are no trends where this is happening. This is not to say, however, that all men are perpetrators or violent; in fact, the majority of men are not. Nor does this overlook men and boys, and certainly trans persons, and those who do not conform to the gender binary, experiences of violence, although they are too mostly caused by men. Without naming who is committing the violence against women and girls, the problem can never truly be eradicated, because it will be impossible to tackle the root causes of it. Let's stop legitimising misogyny and discussing it in passive terms of violence against women, which presents it as a women's problem. Recognising the issue for what it is – men's violence against women – shifts the focus on to the group who is committing or perpetrating the vast majority of the violence and takes it off the group experiencing it. It signifies to society that behaviours and attitudes advocating and enabling men's violence against women, whether through the everyday forms of sexism, through to the shocking incel rhetorics, to the physical harms, are no longer tolerated or permitted.