Digital Contexts

Media, Attention Economies and the Manosphere

Launched on the occasion of the
3rd MenEngage Global Symposium,
the Ubuntu Symposium
10-12 November 2020

MenEngage Alliance
working with men and boys for gender equality

This Discussion Paper is an extract from the paper, Contexts and Challenges for Gender Transformative Work With Men and Boys, 2020, MenEngage Alliance. The chapter, 'Digital Contexts' has been re-published here as a stand-alone paper ahead of the 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

The technological affordances of social media are especially well suited to the amplification of new articulations of aggrieved manhood.[1]

Media technologies and patriarchal masculinities

The political, economic and social contexts discussed above have all been shaped by, and in turn shaped, the pace and nature of technological change, especially in relation to digital communications. As this section will discuss, rapid technological change is affecting expressions and experiences of patriarchal masculinities. This means that gender transformative work with men and boys must develop a better understanding of the technological contexts in which it is operating, and both the challenges and opportunities created by technological change.

Anti-patriarchal work with men and boys has long had an interest in the role of media and communication technologies in maintaining patriarchal norms, and especially its role in socializing young men into patriarchal masculinities

Anti-patriarchal work with men and boys has long had an interest in the role of media and communication technologies in maintaining patriarchal norms, and especially its role in socializing young men into patriarchal masculinities.[2] Much of this work has focused on issues of media literacy in relation to the objectification of women and girls across many forms of media (from TV shows, to music lyrics, to advertising campaigns), and the role played by representations of violence (in movies, TV and computer gaming) in desensitizing boys and young men to patriarchal violence.[3]

1   Ging, Debbie. 2017. "Alphas, Betas, and Incels:Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere." Men and Masculinities:1-20. p16

2   Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. 2020. "If He Can See It, Will He Be It?" Emmitsburg, MD: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, Promundo-US and the Kering Foundation.

3   Larasi, Marai. 2012. "Media as a Site to Prevent Violence against Girls and Women." Pp. 1-12

More recently, gender justice advocates have highlighted the impact of digital technologies in deepening the marginalization of women, girls and LGBTQIA+ communities. In 2019, the number of internet users worldwide stood at 4.13 billion, which means that more than half of the global population is currently connected to the world wide web.[4] The number of smartphone users worldwide today surpasses three billion and is forecast to further grow by several hundred million in the next few years.[5] But gender-based barriers continue to constrain women's access to and uptake of this digital connectivity. The Association for Progressive Communications, in its recent submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, notes that "[w]hether in terms of access, affordability, meaningful connectivity or digital literacy, women's overall participation in the digital space remains disproportionately limited."[6] The Web Foundation reports that men remain 21% more likely to be online than

women, rising to 52% in the world's least developed countries (LDCs).[7] Once online, research suggests that women are 30-50% less likely than men to use Internet access to increase income or participate in public life.[8] Such barriers continue to slow progress toward SDG 9, which set a target of universal and affordable access to the internet in least developed countries by 2020, and the "leave no-one behind" commitment of Agenda 2030 more generally.

At the same time, as a medium of both interpersonal communication and public discourse, the internet both reinforces and expands the operations of oppressive behaviors and hierarchies. In 2015, the UN Broadband Commission reported that women were 27 times more likely than men to be targeted by tech-related violence.[9] A 2018 report by OHCHR emphasizes that women and girls "face online forms and manifestations of violence that are part of the continuum of multiple, recurring and interrelated forms of gender-based violence against

in UN Women In cooperation with ESCAP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO Expert Group Meeting: Prevention of violence against women and girls Bangkok, Thailand 17-20 September 2012.

4   https://www.statista.com/topics/1145/internet-usage-worldwide/

5   https://www.statista.com/statistics/330695/number-of-smartphone-users-worldwide/

6   APC. 2020. "Covid-19 and the Increase of Domestic Violence against Women: A Submission from the Association for Progressive Communications to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences." Association for Progressive Communications.

7   https://webfoundation.org/2020/03/the-gender-gap-in-internet-access-using-a-women-centred-method/

8   Web Foundation. 2015. "Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment." Geneva: World Wide Web Foundation.

9   UN Broadband Commission. 2015. "Cyber Violence against Women and Girls: A World-Wide Wake-up Call." New York: UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender.

women."[10] This experience of online violence and digital exclusion is also affected by "intersectional forms of discrimination based on a number of other factors, such as race, ethnicity, caste, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, abilities, age, class, income, culture, religion, and urban or rural setting."[11] As the report continues:[12]

It is therefore important to acknowledge that the Internet is being used in a broader environment of widespread and systemic structural discrimination and gender-based violence against women and girls, which frame their access to and use of the Internet and other ICT. Emerging forms of ICT have facilitated new types of gender-based violence and gender inequality in access to technologies, which hinder women's and girls' full enjoyment of their human rights and their ability to achieve gender equality.

A growing body of evidence shows that the impacts of digital misogyny and online violence are limiting women's participation in public and political life.[13] Women Human Rights Defenders continue to face online violence and harassment for their political activism on issues ranging from climate justice to sexual and reproductive rights.[14] Recent research with college-aged women participating in online political discussions in Colombia, Kenya and Indonesia found that they experienced similar types of violence including insults and hate speech, embarrassment and reputational risk, physical threats, and sexualized misrepresentation.[15] The OHCHR report notes that:[16] Women human rights defenders, journalists and politicians are

A growing body of evidence shows that the impacts of digital misogyny and online violence are limiting women's participation in public and political life

10   OHCHR. 2018. "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences on Online Violence against Women and Girls from a Human Rights Perspective." Human Rights Council Thirty-eighth session, 18 June–6 July 2018. Agenda item 3: Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development. Geneva, Switzerland: UN Human Rights Council. p5

11   Ibid. p8

12   Ibid. p5

13   https://www.apc.org/en

14   Anon. 2019.

15   NDI. 2019. "Tweets That Chill: Analyzing Online Violence against Women in Politics." Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute.

16   OHCHR. 2018. p8

directly targeted, threatened, harassed or even killed for their work. They receive online threats, generally of a misogynistic nature, often sexualized and specifically gendered. The violent nature of these threats often leads to self-censorship.

Not only do digital misogyny and online violence have political effects; they serve specific political purposes and interests. Recognizing that digital technologies facilitate not merely interpersonal communication but political speech and action means that the political forces at work on the internet must be acknowledged.

Attention economies of platform capitalism

Together with this important emphasis on the ways in which an ideological commitment to misogyny and male supremacy is manifest online, it is also important to understand the logic of exploitation and oppression organizing the operations of internet platforms themselves. There is a growing recognition that the ownership structures and network effects of "platform capitalism" concentrate power in unprecedented ways. The world's richest corporations (including Google, Amazon and Facebook) have built their business empires on digital platforms, marketing them as open, innovative and liberating.

Yet, as Easterling suggests, a "platform celebrating its broad reach, open access, and free circulation of information within an internet of things may also become a network concentrating authority in an organization with a highly centralized disposition."[17] A 2018 report by DfID on Doing Development in a Digital World warns that the "benefits of the internet are also being accompanied by new risks of harmful concentration and monopoly, rising inequality, and state and corporate use of digital technologies to control rather than empower citizens."[18] The lockdown measures imposed in response to the

---

17　Easterling, Keller. 2014. Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space. London and New York: Verso.

18　DfID. 2018. "Digital Strategy 2018-2020: Doing Development in a Digital World." London:

COVID-19 pandemic heightened awareness not only of the centrality of digital technologies to the functioning of everyday life in many societies, but also the vulnerabilities this creates to both State and corporate control and surveillance.[19]

At worst, the very possibility of rational public debate and decision-making is undermined by manipulation and exploitation of communication infrastructures, and the increasingly hidden nature of decision-making by automated systems and their algorithms

At best, this concentration of power results in a new paternalism, in which the freedoms and limitations of online speech, which increasingly is the medium of political life in many societies, are determined by platform content moderators rather than the rights of the citizen, or indeed the sovereignty of political institutions. At worst, the very possibility of rational public debate and decision-making is undermined by manipulation and exploitation of communication infrastructures, and the increasingly hidden nature of decision-making by automated systems and their algorithms. As a 2018 report on the challenges of governance and accountability in the contemporary era makes clear, in "the increasingly noisy and complex digital landscape, the nature of political dialogue is open to new forms of manipulation."[20] The term agnotology has been coined to refer to this use of manipulation to sew disinformation and create doubt and suspicion of previously accepted facts. As has been argued, "[w]hether we're talking about the erasure of history or the undoing of scientific knowledge, agnotology is a tool of oppression by the powerful."[21]

Such a tool is designed into the commercial logic of platform capitalism. Where communication technologies used to be understood in terms of their capacity to create and share meaning, the digital communications of platform capitalism are fundamentally not about the articulation of meaning, but keeping our attention in

Department for International Development.

19   Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power. New York: PublicAffairs.

20   McGee, Rosie, Duncan Edwards, Colin Anderson, Hannah Hudson and Francesca Feruglio. 2018. "Appropriating Technology for Accountability: Messages from Making All Voices Count." Making All Voices Count Research Report. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. p23

21   boyd, danah. 2019. "Agnotology and Epistemological Fragmentation." Data & Society Research Institute. Retrieved: August 3, 2020 (https://points.datasociety.net/agnotology-and-epistemological-fragmentation-56aa3c509c6b).

order to extract and exploit our data. As Seymour explains:[22]

On social media platforms, the incentive is to constantly produce more information: a perpetual motion machine, harnessed to passions of which the machine knows

If the "algorithm is there to keep users glued to the screen with content likely to be addictive," the evidence suggests that the more provocative the content, the more addictive it is.

nothing. This production is not for the purpose of making meaning. It is for the purpose of producing effects on users that keep us hooked.

If the "algorithm is there to keep users glued to the screen with content likely to be addictive,"[23] the evidence suggests that the more provocative the content, the more addictive it is. Whether provoking outrage or delight, misogyny and other

forms of oppressive online speech "keep users glued to the screen." In 2017, one analysis found that Trump alone was worth about $2.5 billion to Twitter, a fifth of its share value at the time.[24] The proliferation of conspiracy memes and conspiracist thinking online is the product of this commercial logic and the crisis of democratic decision-making and accountability it has helped to fuel. For Jameson, conspiracy "is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age,"[25] an age characterized, since the onset of neoliberal economic reforms from the early 1980s onwards, by a technocratic hollowing out of democratic processes.[26]

The business models of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are organized by a "competitive structure, pitting all against all in a ceaseless struggle for likes" which "creates a culture of social Darwinism in which the 'strongest' prevail; and its consequent promotion of hierarchies, or personality cults, inhibits egalitarian discourse while inciting would-be Führers."[27] Equally, the conspiracism fostered by platform capitalism has found one of its clearest expressions in the "red pill" meme, whose cross-cultural appeal

22   Seymour, Richard. 2019. The Twittering Machine. London: The Indigo Press. p160

23   Ibid. p169

24   Ibid. p127

25   Jameson, Frederic. 1990. "Cognitive Mapping." Pp. 347-60 in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

26   Brown, Wendy. 2019. In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West. New York: Columbia University Press.

27   Eagleton, Oliver. 2019. "Mind Forged Manacles." New Left Review 120(November-December):161-68. p164

can, in part, be explained by the global success of The Matrix movies. This "red pill" meme encourages men to see through the illusions of contemporary life:[28]

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, and is the key concept that unites all of these communities.

Ging notes that although the "red pill" meme originated on a relatively obscure online forum (as the subreddit, r/TRP,) it has since proliferated into other domains of the "manosphere", the term that is used to refer to the online ecology of sites, memes and message-boards focused on male insecurities and resentments whose content is frequently deeply misogynistic.

Rise of the manosphere

The patriarchal masculinities of the manosphere have thrived in this digital media environment. The masculine coding of the red vs blue pill is clear; "in the alt-right sphere 'blue pill'

is a term that is usually attached only to men portrayed as spineless, desperate and sexually unappealing to women - all traits antithetical to most understandings of hegemonic

The manosphere is constructed around a narrative of feminism's oppression of men, and a rejection of the evidence of men's patriarchal oppression of women

masculinity", Kelly emphasizes.[29] The manosphere is constructed around a narrative of feminism's oppression of men, and a rejection of the evidence of men's patriarchal oppression of women. In this manner, the manosphere has helped to foster a transnational ecology of aggrieved male entitlement and virulent misogyny, so central to the Men's Rights activism discussed in the previous section. The manosphere's loose networks, in Ging's formulation, come together around stories and feelings of men's "personal suffering to build [an] affective consensus about an allegedly collective, gendered experience, namely men's position in the social hierarchy as a result of feminism."[30]

28   Ging, Debbie. 2017. "Alphas, Betas, and Incels:Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere." Men and Masculinities:1-20. p3

29   Kelly, Annie. 2017. "The Alt-Right: Reactionary Rehabilitation for White Masculinity: Us Alt-Right Extremism Is a Logical Consequence of Mainstream Neo-Conservatism." Soundings: A journal of politics and culture 66(Summer):68-78. p74

30   Ging 2017. p16

As Seymour suggests, "[r]edpilling is, for many of its users, potent self-medication, better than any combination of cognitive behavioural therapy and prescription drugs."[31]

"The most vehement and explicit attempt to protect a masculinist world-view is the contemporary loose coalition of social and political movements around men's rights and father's rights, with shared roots and overlaps with the alt-right, in the Anglosphere and Europe," Nicholas and Agius make clear.[32] Murdoch notes that "[m]anosphere ideas have snowballed into an ideology that has taken on a life of its own, and for some it has served as a route into wider far-right politics."[33] With reference to the increase proliferation of far-right messaging and memes online under the category of the "alt right",[34] Dibranco emphasizes the deeply concerning trend that "misogyny is not only a significant part of the Alt Right, it's the 'gateway drug' for the recruitment of disaffected White men into racist communities."[35]

The extremist violence of misogyny itself has become evident with the increasingly serious incidents of violence that have been committed by young men predominantly in the United States and Canada who self-identify as incels (involuntary celibates).[36] As a recent study emphasizes:[37]

While incels have not yet formed organized violent groups or cells, the existing attacks have been premeditated, politically motivated and perpetrated violence against civilians. These factors clearly designate incel attacks as a form of terrorism and require incel ideology to be

The term "ideological masculinity" has been coined to name this ideological commitment to misogyny and male supremacy, and to insist on it being recognized as itself a form of violent extremism.

31   Seymour, Richard. 2019. p167

32   Nicholas, L. and C. Agius. 2018. The Persistence of Global Masculinism: Discourse, Gender and Neo-Colonial Re-Articulations of Violence. Chan, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. p34

33   Murdoch, Simon. 2019. "Why Understanding the Uk Anti-Feminist Movement Is Vital to Countering the Far Right." Huffington Post. Retrieved: February 26, 2019 (https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/anti-feminist-movement-far-right_uk_5c6ae7cae4b01757c36e8b77). p2

34   The term "Alt-Right", an abbreviation of alternative right, is a loosely connected far-right, white nationalist movement based in the United States. A largely online phenomenon, the alt-right originated in the U.S. during the 2010s, although it has since established a presence in various other countries.

35   Dibranco, Alex. 2017. "Mobilizing Misogyny." Boston, MA: Political Research Associates. p15

36   Hoffman, Bruce, Jacob Ware and Ezra Shapiro. 2

37   Zimmerman, Shannon, Luisa Ryan and David Duriesmith. 2018. "Recognizing the Violent Extremist Ideology of 'Incels'." Women in International Security Policy Brief. Washington DC: Women in International Security. p2

explored as a form of violent extremism.

Central to incel ideology are misogynistic notions of gender roles and shared beliefs about heterosexuality, male supremacy and the need to violently reestablish 'traditional' gender norms. Online communities, meeting on message boards and in other internet venues, validate this misogynistic world view and encourage direct action in pursuit of their goals. The term "ideological masculinity" has been coined to name this ideological commitment to misogyny and male supremacy, and to insist on it being recognized as itself a form of violent extremism.[38] Misogynist online groups, from men's rights activists, to 'pick up artist' communities and incels, have increased in number and size over recent years. The online message board "subreddit r/incels" had roughly 40,000 members when it was shut down in 2017 for inciting violence against women. Recent research highlights the evolution of the manosphere. A 2020 study analyzing 28.8 million posts from six forums and 51 subreddits reports that:[39]

Milder and older communities, such as Pick Up Artists and Men's Rights Activists, are giving way to more extremist ones like Incels and Men Going Their Own Way, *with a substantial migration of active users. Moreover, our analysis suggests that these newer communities are more toxic and misogynistic than the older ones.*

Indeed, this misogynistic trend has been recognized across diverse expressions of violent extremism. As Zimmerman et al. make clear:[40]

The misogynistic anger and conspiracy thinking that proliferate online, reinforced as they are by the commercial logic of platform capitalism, pose significant threats to the work of gender justice movements

Incels represent just one end of a spectrum of extremist groups spanning a vast range of political ideologies, all united by militant misogyny. These groups range from white-supremacists and neo-Nazis to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Incels are just one aspect of a violent ideological masculinity, an ideology that is growing.

38   Roose, Joshua. 2018. "'Ideological Masculinity' That Drives Violence against Women Is a Form of Violent Extremism." The Conversation.

39   Ribeiro, Manoel Horta, Jeremy Blackburn, Barry Bradlyn, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini, Summer Long, Stephanie Greenberg and Savvas Zannettou. 2020. "The Evolution of the Manosphere across the Web." Computers and Society 00(00):1-12. p1

40   Zimmerman, Shannon, Luisa Ryan and David Duriesmith. 2018. p3

The misogynistic anger and conspiracy thinking that proliferate online, reinforced as they are by the commercial logic of platform capitalism, pose significant threats to the work of gender justice movements. The appeals such movements make to the 'facts' of gender justice are undermined by the "crisis of knowing" discussed above. As Doctorow makes clear, "we're not living through a crisis about what is true, we're living through a crisis about how we know whether something is true. We're not disagreeing about facts, we're disagreeing about epistemology."[41] The business model of platform capitalism is organized around an attention economy, in which the extraction and exploitation of data relies on fostering a screen 'addiction', via the emotional intensities of anger and resentment, easily mobilized for patriarchal purposes. As Seymour emphasizes, the masculinism of social media platforms is not only explicit in misogynistic speech but also implicit in their design:[42]

For they have created a machinery whose natural hero is the antisocial outsider, the hacker with no ties, the troll, the spammer. They have created a regime of competitive individualism in which perplexity and paranoia are a constant state of being.

Implications for transforming patriarchal masculinities

At the same time, it is also true that digital technologies have opened up unprecedented opportunities for transnational activism and social justice movement building, needed now more than ever in the midst of the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. From #MeToo, to #BlackLivesMatter, to #GreenNewDeal, digital technologies have enabled political education and organizing across a range of social justice issues. That online educating and organizing can have powerful and immediate offline effects was clear in the protests that swept anti-democratic leaders from power in 2010-12, sometimes characterized as the Facebook revolutions. Equally, the global success of the Occupy movement owed much to its use of digital communication technologies. The fact that platform capitalism is so oppressive should not detract from the fact that the digital tools and protocols used by corporate platforms can also be applied for liberatory purposes. As Eagleton writes:[43]

---

41   Doctorow, Cory. 2019. "Danah Boyd Explains the Connection between the Epistemological Crisis and the Rise of Far-Right Conspiratorial Thinking." BoingBoing. Retrieved: May 15, 2019 (https://boingboing.net/2019/05/07/production-of-ignorance.html).

42   Seymour 2019. p154

43   Eagleton, Oliver. 2019. "Mind Forged Manacles." New Left Review 120(November-December):161-68. p168

In the conjunctural crisis of late capitalism, socialist principles have re-asserted their relevance. Our immediate task is to harness the affective energy of those principles and channel it through digital and non-digital mediums, instead of abandoning the former as a hopelessly corrupted domain.

But this activism and organizing is shadowed by the enhanced infrastructure of surveillance afforded by these same technologies, which serve as a reminder that digital security must be a priority for the communication channels used by global social change networks such as MenEngage Alliance. The growing influence of media and online space on all aspects of everyday life and political debate, including expressions and experiences of patriarchal masculinities, means that the feminist systems change agenda is necessarily concerned with gender transformative work on media systems. Gender transformative work with men and boys can contribute to this agenda in a number of different ways, in solidarity with feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements. This should include continuing to develop and expand media literacy work, especially with boys and young men, to help them understand the patriarchal effects of sexist representations of women and girls, as well as the desensitizing effects of media portrayals of violence.

There is also an urgent need to develop more contextually-specific analyses of and responses to digital gender-based violence and men's involvement in the manosphere, including strategies for building alternate online community-building spaces for young men in particular, which can support young men in rejecting the misogynistic messaging they are often surrounded with online. Such alternative online communities can also become spaces for building trusting relationships of 'knowing', by sharing factually-based peer knowledge to counter the deliberate spread of false information, not least in relation to the local facts of gender inequalities. In the efforts to act in solidarity with and accountability to the radical systems change agenda of feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements, those involved in gender transformative work with men and boys should also identify ways in which it can contribute to movement critiques of the gender injustices produced by platform capitalism. In participating in online organizing to call for a radical overhaul of platform capitalism and mechanisms of State surveillance of civil society, one must pay greater attention to security and safety issues within its own digital communications with members and partners. ■

M

MenEngage Alliance

working with men and boys for gender equality