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Into the Manosphere: How Reddit Facilitates Online Misogyny

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Abstract

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Social media has become an increasingly integral part of everyday life. For many, it may be hard to imagine going even a day without checking Instagram or Twitter. However, the platforms we utilize today are not exactly what social media developers foresaw. Whilst they imagined that social media would facilitate the development of a utopian online world, in reality it facilitated the development of a misogynistic network known as the manosphere. This thesis examines the social media platform Reddit to uncover why the imagined utopia was never realized and why the manosphere thrives. Ultimately, it is concluded that Reddit's business model, algorithm, and affordances readily aid in the existence and spread of manosphere ideology. The continued existence of the manosphere endangers women and needs to be dismantled in order to progress society closer to the imagined utopia.

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Introduction

On April 23, 2018, Alek Minassian committed the deadliest terrorist attack in Toronto's history. Minassian rented a van three weeks prior to the attack which he used as a battering ram to take down pedestrians. He drove the van down busy inner-city sidewalks, swerving to hit as many people as possible. Prior to beginning his attack, Minassian posted to Facebook, "Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!" After killing a total of 10 people and injuring 16 others, Minassian was confronted by police and detained (Boyko). In subsequent interviews, Minassian expressed frustration that he was not able to target more women in his attack. This violent event came to be known as the Toronto Van attack.

In his Facebook post and in police interviews after his arrest, Minassian cited Elliot Rodger as a role model. Rodger is well-known for having carried out the horrific Isla Vista shooting. Rodger murdered seven people and injured dozens of others citing his deep hatred for women and frustration with his lack of sexual experience as his motivation ("Elliot Rodger"). Since the attack, Rodger has been hailed as a hero by other misogynists and as evidenced by the Toronto Van attack, he has also become an inspiration. Like Minassian, Rodgers' ideas about gender were heavily influenced by the content he saw online.

Minassian's and Rodger's actions were not unique, nor were their motivations. Their killing sprees stand in a long line of terrorist attacks motivated by ideas perpetuated by an

extremist network known as the manosphere. Minassian and Rodger's specifically identified as Involuntary Celibates, a subgroup of the manosphere. The manosphere is "a group of loosely incorporated websites and social media communities where men's perspectives, needs, gripes, and frustrations, and desires are explicitly explored" (Farrell et al. and Mamie et al.). Though the collective manosphere community advertises themselves as seeking to improve the lives of men, discourse in these forums is more commonly the hostile critique of women and the feminist movement (Farrell et al.). The manosphere is not pro-men but anti-women. In fact, manosphere ideology originated in response to the successes of feminist movements which have historically fought "for rights of women, including the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to earn fair wages or equal pay, to own property, to receive education, to enter contracts, to have equal rights within marriage, and to have maternity leave" (Witt). The manosphere is an insidious and dangerous internet-based community that seeks not to improve the lives of men, but to control and oppress women.

The crimes committed by Minassian and Rodger demonstrate that misogynistic online discourse is inspiring actions to be taken offline. Minassian and Rodger were inspired by the manospheric content they absorbed online to commit violent crimes. Unfortunately, the threat that the manosphere poses is only going to increase as research shows its members are becoming even more extreme (Farrell et al.). Newer factions within the manosphere, who are getting substantial migration of members from older subgroups, are notably more toxic and misogynistic in their ideologies. The increase in misogynistic discourse has also coincided with

an increase in online expressions of violence towards women (Farrell et al.). This trend suggests the offline expressions of violence will also be increasing.

Of course, the cases of Minassian and Rodger are very extreme examples of the harm that manosphere misogyny can enact. There are many other less severe but more common and widespread problems to which manosphere ideology contributes to. Namely, the spread of misogynistic ideology increases the likelihood of women facing gender-based violence and harassment (TileagA). It also can lead to women experiencing individual discrimination such as not being considered for a job because of their gender (TileagA). Instances of institutional discrimination, like the gender pay gap, are also a result of misogynistic ideology and can have severe day to day effects on women. Misogyny also contributes to harmful ideas about masculinity which can negatively impact men's mental health. As it is so deeply engrained in boys growing up that traditional masculinity is the goal, when they are unable to meet those expectations, their mental health declines (Pearson). While men do face issues because of the manosphere's continuation of misogyny, women ultimately suffer the most because misogynistic ideology brings into question women's "rights to participation in public life, freedom of expression, and personal safety" (TileagA).

The manosphere is problematic and should be taken down. To begin taking steps toward dismantling it, its online presence must be thoroughly explored. The manosphere is a large and widespread network of forums on multiple platforms and sites. However, there are some social media platforms that are known for hosting manosphere-related discourse. In this thesis, I will examine how the manosphere functions on one such platform, Reddit. Reddit is a

popular, internationally used text-based social media platform. It makes for a valuable case study in exploring the manosphere because it is a popular forum amongst manosphere members as well as being one of the most mainstream platforms they use.

The misogynistic ideas manosphere members adopt and spread have inspired multiple violent and deadly attacks in an offline space, as well as vicious harassment in an online space. Through allowing misogynistic discourses to take place on their platforms, social media sites are inadvertently contributing to violence against women offline and harassment online. This thesis examines the social media platform Reddit to determine why some social media platforms are more suited to facilitating the manosphere. To answer this question the history, algorithm, business model, affordances, content, and policies of Reddit will be explored. As evidenced by the growing number of manosphere-inspired crimes and the increasing toxicity within the community, the public's current method for taking down the manosphere, ignoring its existence and hoping it voluntarily dissipates, has evidently not been successful.

Ultimately, I argue that the business model, algorithm, and affordances of Reddit lead to and support dangerous misogynistic discourse and behaviors. As a community-based platform, Reddit has attracted millions of users looking to share and absorb knowledge. A problem arises when that knowledge is damaging to both consumers of it, and to society in general. The first chapter of this thesis serves to add valuable background information on the history of social media platforms and online misogyny. In the first chapter, I will demonstrate that social media was conceptualized with utopian idealizations which have guided their creation, but that the existence of the manosphere suggests that this conceptualization has failed.

The second chapter seeks to uncover how and why Reddit specifically facilitates the formation of manospheric groups via a close analysis of the platform's history, business model, algorithm, affordances, and examples of content. As I will demonstrate in chapter two, the reasons behind this facilitation lie in both Reddit's prioritization of profit, the unintended outcomes of its algorithm, and its built-in affordances of international connection, social participation, communication and collaboration, expansion of learning, and lack of identity development and portrayal. I will also address Reddit's algorithmic design in the second chapter. In order to generate advertisement revenue, Reddit's algorithm is designed to keep users on the site as long as possible which inherently exposes users to more niche and more extreme content. However, algorithms are presented to the public as neutral, simply showing users the best content, when they reflect the ideals of their human creators. This situation can lead to a problematic outcome in which Reddit users understand misogynistic posts to be popular and mainstream. In essence, this chapter serves to deduce why the utopia that social media was meant to usher in hasn't happened.

Lastly, the third chapter is used to investigate previous attempts to moderate misogyny on Reddit and barriers preventing adequate moderation. Reddit's lack of moderation maintains the manosphere and thereby prevents the realization of the utopian ideals on which it was built. The presentation of misogyny and other forms of extremism as acceptable is a dangerous message to send as evidenced by the growing number of violent actions being taken in their name. Through this thesis, I hope to add valuable information in regards to how the manosphere operates online and therefore help in taking another step towards subduing it.

Chapter 1: The Rise of Social Media and Online Misogyny

The following chapter investigates the history of social media platforms and online misogyny. The technology, principles, and affordances which guided the development of social media platforms will be explored to establish how and why social media platforms were created in the first place. Specifically, the utopian ideals on which social media was developed will be established. Then, as will be demonstrated by exploring the history of online misogyny, although scholars believed that by facilitating international connection that social media platforms would positively progress society, this imagined utopia was not realized. Instead of a peaceful utopia, social media platforms now play host to a network of misogynists collectively called the mansphere. An examination of previous research into the mansphere will prove that misogyny online has and will continue to be a serious issue. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to prove that there is a relationship between social media platforms and online misogyny.

Developing Social Media

The historical development of social media demonstrates that platforms were created with utopian idealizations in mind. In 1997 the first social media platform, Six Degrees, was born. By 2001, Friendster was the site the beat. After that came Myspace (Edosomwan). Though the lives of most of these rudimentary sites were short, they marked the beginning of modern social media platforms. Today, web users have a plethora of platforms and modes of online socializing to choose from including Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. To truly grasp the

successes and failures of the rise of social media platforms the principles, affordances, and technology which guided their creation must be understood.

Principles

The goals and principles which guide social media platforms were initially quite utopian. The earliest forms of social media existed to simply connect individuals with their friends, family, coworkers, and others who share their interests (Newman et al.). These spaces were created because platform creators and users imagined a utopian world full of people connected to each other online. Specifically, they imagined a society in which “information, independent thought, and freedom are promoted” (Duque). Citizens in this utopia would live harmoniously together, embracing social and moral ideals and welcoming individuality and innovation (Duque). The earliest platform creators and users believed that the communicative power of social media would facilitate the development of a utopia like this and saw boundless potential in creating online spaces “to ease interaction with people that share a common interest in music, education, movies and so on” (Edosomwan).

Even before social media started being developed, scholars saw huge potential in increasing communication between citizens of the world. In her book chapter, *Annihilating Space, Time, and Difference*, Carolyn Marvin explores the idea that new forms of communicative technology, such as social media, eliminate physical boundaries that previously dictated how far a message could spread. In the early 1900s, when new means of electric communication were being explored, many philosophers and scholars truly believed that

civilization would be best furthered by abolishing communication barriers between people (Marvin). Today many of those barriers have been abolished affording internet users the ability to communicate instantaneously with an international audience, but the utopia many imagined this would bring has not come to fruition.

Affordances

The affordances of social media help shape an understanding of the utopian idealizations of social media development by revealing what behaviors are important to platform creators and users. Before these behaviors can be uncovered, the concept of affordances must be introduced. Put simply, affordances are potential actions that objects provide users. Affordances are notably “not an outcome of the artifact alone nor of the actor alone, but of the complex interaction between multiple actors and the artifacts,” (Zhao et al.). When applied to social media, this means that affordances don’t arise just from the platform itself nor from its users, but from their interactions. There are several affordances that social media provides including international connection, social participation, communication and collaboration, identity development and portrayal, and expansion of learning (Zhao et al., Moreno and D’Angelo). There are of course both positive and negative sides to these affordances. The next chapter will investigate how these affordances specifically play out on Reddit, for now they will be only introduced and defined.

International connection is one particularly incredible affordance of social media platforms. Thanks to social media, for the first time in human history anyone can reach millions

of others, sharing any content they want to. The power and potential that this affordance gives people is limitless. Another affordance is social participation, an individual's engagement in activities that involve interactions with other members of society and community, such as chatting online with friends or playing multi-player online games (Norman et al.). Social participation is extremely important, not just for society to function but also for the wellbeing of individuals (Norman et al.). Communication and collaboration are also important aspects of people's wellbeing. Social media platforms allow for nearly instantaneous uploading and downloading of information, which makes instantaneous communication and collaboration possible. Identity development and portrayal are additional affordances of social media platforms. Social media helps individuals form ideas about who one is in relation to others, how one may be perceived by others, and what the optimal way for one to portray themselves is, although this optimization varies greatly (Moreno and D'Angelo). Lastly, the expansion of learning is afforded by social media platforms. Examples of this affordance include "increasing awareness of global news events using Twitter or learning a new strength training exercise on YouTube" (Moreno and D'Angelo). Some social media platforms do a better job of facilitating certain affordances over others, but they all embody each of these affordances to some degree.

The integration of the affordances of international connection, social participation, communication and collaboration, identity development and portrayal, and expansion of learning into social media platforms suggests that these behaviors are parts of the imagined utopia social media was to bring. Taken as a whole, these affordances suggest that a high level

of connection with a wide range of people as well as open discourse are two of the utopian ideals on which social media was built.

Technology

The development of the technology on which social media platforms exist also suggests that connection with others is a utopian idealization on which social media was built. This idealization is apparent in both kinds of computer technology, hardware and software, both of which are required to utilize social media platforms. Hardware refers to any physical parts of electronic technology such as a monitor, keyboard, or mouse (Zhu and Pham). Software on the other hand is a set of instructions that tells a computer what to do such as Google Chrome, Macintosh Operating System, or Photoshop (Zhu and Pham). Neither hardware nor software can operate without the other. Hardware requires software to perform functions and software requires hardware for its set of instructions to be executed (Zhu and Pham). When applied to social media for instance, to access the platform Instagram a person needs both their smartphone, hardware, and the Instagram application, software. When looking into the rise of social media platforms it is important to consider the development of both hardware and software.

The technological basis of communicative computer hardware dates back hundreds of years. The first electronic hardware that facilitated communication was the telegraph, invented in 1792. Then in the late 1800s, the radio and telephone came into play (Rimskii). Notably, commercial Radio only allowed for one-way communication, however the telephone could be

used by multiple parties in two-way communication. This type of electronic communication was revolutionary and inspired people to invent out-of-the-box ways to utilize it. By the 1950s, telephone technology was being utilized for phone phreaking, a process in which homemade electronic devices were used to illegally access the telephone network. People would hack into corporate unused voice mailboxes to host what is akin to modern-day podcasts and blogs (Edosomwan). Phreaking is the first method of electronic social networking, though it is of course not a form of social media (Edosomwan). The phenomenon of phreaking also suggests that people enjoy using technology in atypical ways, particularly if it increases their communicative reach. With each hardware development, communicative power also increases.

The basis of the software on which social media platforms are built comes from ARPANET, a U.S. government project that created a network of computers in 1969. ARPANET is the foundation of the modern-day internet. In addition to ARPANET, early versions of electronic mailing (email) came about in 1969, although the public did not have access to either email or any modern-day internet-like technology until 1991. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Multi-User Domain's (MUD) and Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) were popular, allowing users to exchange messages and information (Edosomwan). Like all other social media, BBS and MUDs are "collaborative mass media systems, in which the audience is the primary source of media content as well as its receiver" (Rafaeli and Larose). Entirely text-based, BBS was particularly influential on the development of modern text-based platforms. Bulletin Board Systems can be conceptualized as the digital version of physical bulletin boards where individuals could pin flyers and advertisements. Once internet users connected to the computer which hosted the

online bulletin board, they could “pin” digital messages on a variety of topics (Henderson). Early forms of BBS existed on ARPANET but as their popularity grew, they started to crop up on Usenet, a different computer network, because it allowed for the archival of postings. Through commenting on postings and commenting on those comments a thread could be developed and then saved for later use (Henderson). In addition to messages, users could upload and download software containing games, text documents, images, and auditory files (Henderson).

At their inception in the late 1970s, online Bulletin Boards were viewed as a significant departure from other mass media systems in that they afforded users the ability to partake in many-to-many communication. Older mass media systems such as commercial television and radio only offered one-to-many, preventing any interactivity. Tens of thousands of both private boards and public boards filled with anywhere from a dozen to hundreds of participants were in use at the height of BBS throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Rafaeli and Larose). Private bulletin boards were typically used by groups who knew each other outside of the online world. Specifically, they were often used by businesses as well as interest groups as an organizational and communication tool. Public bulletin boards on the other hand could be utilized by anyone who had access to the hardware and software necessary to join a server. Public Bulletin Boards are an example of “collaborative mass media in which the exchange of information is in itself the reason for being,” (Rafaeli and Larose). Put another way, those that used these boards did so simply because they wanted to exchange information without any external incentives like money or engagement.

Almost anything could be posted to these boards including news, software, questions, and ideas. Unfortunately, this also meant that individuals were able to add obscene and abusive messages to the boards. One study reported that in their sample, over two thirds of online bulletin boards had instances of inappropriate postings (Rafaeli and Larose). This finding highlights the fact that offensive discourses, particularly misogynistic ones, did not begin with the inception of modern social media platforms and instead have been around since even the earliest forms of social media.

Throughout these software developments and all the way up until 2004, the internet was in its first iteration known as Web 1.0. During this period, the internet looked significantly different than it does today. The vast majority of those using Web 1.0 were doing so to communicate with others through email or Instant Messaging software (Newman et al.). Most web pages were used by businesses to promote themselves and there was scarce user-generated content. Currently, the internet is in its second iteration, Web 2.0. This new conceptualization of the web is notable for its shift towards participatory culture and encouragement of user-generated content (Newman et al.). In fact, user-generated content is an integral aspect of Web 2.0 given that anyone can publish articles, posts, and comments to share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Social media platforms provide an online space for users to share that content with others. Ultimately, Web 2.0 “harnesses the Web in a more interactive and collaborative manner, emphasizing peers’ social interaction and collective intelligence” (Murugesan). The technological developments of computer hardware and

software demonstrate a steady increase in communicative power that points towards the idea that people want to be as connected to others as possible.

Algorithms

Computer algorithms are an integral part of the technological basis of social media and without them, social media simply could not exist as it is today. Therefore, understanding how algorithms in general work will be needed before the specifics of Reddit's algorithm can be investigated. At their most basic, computer algorithms are a set of rules or guidelines created from computer code, the language used to write algorithms, that outline how to perform a task (Garcia). Algorithms are also usually machine-learning meaning that they are programmed to become better at their coded task through learning about its users over time (Garcia). Social media algorithms are consistently looking to show users content that they will engage with in order to maximize the time users spend on the platform. The more time a user spends on the site, the more information a machine-learning algorithm can gather about their preferences, and therefore the more exact its presentation of their interests can be. This inherently narrows the content that users are exposed to over time (Dijck and Poell). The algorithm of course has no concept of right or wrong, it is only a computer program. Therefore, it will simply keep digging deeper and deeper to find engaging content even if that content is neither good for the user nor society in general.

Algorithms also contain biases. An algorithmic bias is said to have occurred "when seemingly innocuous programming takes on the prejudices either of its creators or the data it is

fed,” (Garcia). Without a strong understanding of the inevitability of biases, people come to believe that “no moral valence can be ascribed to a technology, it is only when someone uses that technology that any value can be found” (Brinson). Those with this view argue that technology is simply a tool and that it is up to each user how they implement that tool and thereby whether it is used for good or bad. However, there are aspects of algorithmic development that directly oppose this view (Miller).

Firstly, all algorithmic technology is created for a purpose, with the intention of it being used for specific tasks. The values of the creator of the algorithm and the values they imagine others to possess, are inherent in the very conceptualization of the algorithm (Miller). Creators design their algorithms in a way that serves themselves, though often subconsciously, but also in a way that serves their audience. Additionally, all algorithms are built by people who are making decisions on default settings and the way that content is displayed (Miller). For instance, the order in which the results of a Google Search are displayed is determined algorithmically. Google Search’s algorithm orders results based on a multitude of factors including “the words of your query, relevance and usability of pages, expertise of sources, and your location and settings” (Google Search). For the algorithm to know what factors to include, someone had to code it. In the case of Google Search, if the coder heavily valued a specific information source like Wikipedia, they could code the algorithm to prioritize showing Wikipedia sites. In essence, behind every platform’s algorithm lies the code created by a person who possesses their own ideas, morals, and desires which are *always* reflected in the algorithm they created. Algorithmic bias is therefore inevitable (Garcia).

Though the coder may not intentionally alter the code in a biased way, unconscious biases are part of human nature (Wheeler). Unfortunately, these biases, whether intentional or not, pose a serious problem because technology is so often presented to the general public as neutral. Neutrality suggests unbiased truth when algorithms actually reflect the biased ideas, morals, and desires of people. Continuing with the theoretical Google Search example, if it is suggested that algorithms are objective and the users of Google Search do not know that Wikipedia is coded to be prioritized, they will believe that Wikipedia is objectively the best source of information.

Algorithmic biases can be very harmful, often leading to discriminatory outcomes (Garcia). For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s St. George's Hospital Medical School used a computer program to screen initial applications. However, the computer program ended up being biased against women and people of color. Since the computer program was designed to make choices like those the admissions office had historically made, all the gender and racial biases that admissions staff had previously were coded into this program. The outcome was that the school denied interviews to several qualified applicants because they identified as women or had non-European sounding names (Garcia). Even within early algorithms like this, which are now considered rudimentary, biases are present and clearly have serious life-changing consequences such as unfair denial from medical school. A more recent example comes in the form of police forces across the United States beginning to use mass facial recognition software to identify potential suspects. These technologies have been shown to be inaccurate and inconsistent, often misidentifying people of color and leading to wrongful and

dangerous arrests (Del Villar). Previous research has found that false accusations and arrests have long term psychological, physical, and financial consequences for its victims (Brooks and Greenberg). Just like rudimentary ones, modern algorithmic biases have serious life altering effects.

Algorithms and algorithmic biases demonstrate that technological neutrality is a myth and that technological developments can have unexpected outcomes. Algorithms have the biases of their creators built-in and can therefore never be neutral. This lack of neutrality is made dangerous by the fact that technology is presented to the public as neutral, leaving people vulnerable to the unintended outcomes of biases. As demonstrated, these outcomes can be very serious but are often unknown until the effects of them are already felt and it is too late.

The Internet's Misogyny Problem

The exploration of the development of social media established that platforms were created to facilitate free speech and connections between people from all over the world. The principles kept in mind during development as well as the affordances built into platforms signal that increased connection through communication was an essential aspect of the imagined utopia. Additionally, each technological development exemplified this same desire by progressively increasing communicative power, thereby abolishing the communicative barriers that scholars believed were preventing a utopia. However, as demonstrated by an exploration of algorithms and their unintended biases, the effects that new technology will have cannot

always be foreseen. Therefore, although during their development many imagined social media platforms would lead society towards a utopia, that is not the reality. Some of the unforeseen consequences of social media development are the hateful discourses taking place on platforms. The following section is an exploration of the history of online misogyny and will demonstrate that the very presence of online hate signals that a utopia has not been reached.

Much of the very limited research surrounding misogyny online questions if it is a phenomenon born from the internet or if the internet simply provided a platform for men to express the misogynistic beliefs they always had (Shaw). Ultimately, researchers have concluded that there are distinct affordances of the internet and of social media platforms that facilitate misogyny in an online space, but that these ideas existed long before the public had access to the internet (Shaw). As mentioned, the public gained access to the internet around 1991. However, as demonstrated by the occurrence of offensive discourse taking place on BBS, misogyny online likely began before that. Current evidence suggests that “misogyny is not only continued online but it is further intensified” (Ging and Siapera).

The roots of the manosphere predate both the public gaining access to the internet and the coining of the term “manosphere.” The manosphere grew out of the men’s rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Men’s rights movements developed in tandem with feminist movements and sought to understand and address social, political, and cultural issues that men faced (McDonald). Eventually, the movement split into two factions. The first faction remained aligned with the feminist movement, continuing to believe that gender stereotypes perpetuated by society were detrimental to men and women. The other faction rebranded as

Men's Right's Activists. They saw feminism as a threat to masculinity because they believed gender stereotypes to be positive for men (McDonald). Once members of the Men's Right's Activists groups gained access to the internet, they were able to move their discourse online and connect with other misogynistic groups with similar goals to form the manosphere (Bates).

The manosphere is an extremist network that has utilized the affordances of social media platforms to spread a message of hate and misogyny. As previously mentioned, the manosphere is a network of niche communities that are connected by their interest in masculinity and their belief that its traditional form is being threatened by the feminist movement (Ribeiro et al.). While a broad approach to conceptualizing the manosphere as one large group is appropriate, there are nuanced differences between subgroups that are worthy of exploration. This thesis considers the four largest subgroups within the manosphere network: Men's Rights Activists, Men Going Their Own Way, Pick-Up Artists, and Involuntary Celibates.

Men's Rights Activists (MRA) believe that social issues and institutions are discriminatory and oppressive towards men. Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) think similarly, but instead of trying to change society, they take a more extreme approach and believe that men should forsake women and western society altogether (Ribeiro et al.). Western society in this context is any society in which men and women are given equal rights and treatment. Unlike MGTOW who want nothing to do with women, Pick Up Artists (PUA) advocate for the use of misogynistic techniques to attract women. They believe that the modern man has been feminized and that the use of these techniques, which are often forms

of sexual harassment, is a way to combat said feminization. Finally, Involuntary Celibates (Incels) possess strong feelings of rejection by women which typically manifests as excessive anger and violent rhetoric or even actions toward women (Ribeiro et al.). Despite some differences, research has proven that “communities in the Manosphere shared large amounts of users throughout their history and that there was substantial migration from older to newer communities,” (Ribeiro et al.). These newer communities have proven to be more misogynistic and toxic than their older counterparts (Ribeiro et al.).

The hostile critique of women and feminism are typical topics in manosphere forums no matter which subgroup it is affiliated with (Farrell et al.). Further, researchers have found that online expressions of violence and hate towards women are increasing in all subreddits concerning the manosphere (Ribeiro et al.). This is an unfortunate and exceptionally problematic trend that suggests that misogyny online will be increasing. Not only does the discourse in these discussion threads point to increased extremism, but so do the shifts in memberships of subgroups. Recent studies have shown that “older communities such as Men’s Rights Activists and Pick Up Artists have eventually been overshadowed by new communities like Men Going Their Own Way, and Incels” and that these newer communities are significantly more misogynistic and toxic than their older counterparts (Ribeiro et al.). For example, there was over a 50% overlap in members of older MRA subreddits and newer MGTOW subreddits for the first two years of their existence (Ribeiro et al.). The next chapter investigates manosphere phenomena on the social media platform Reddit.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the rise of social media platforms and the rise of the misogynistic manosphere network. An examination of the history of social media established that platforms were initially developed with utopian ideals in mind. Specifically, an investigation into social media affordances and technology demonstrated that free speech and connection with others are influential utopian ideals of social media development. However, even though these ideals and others were realized through modern social media's facilitation of instant connection with an international audience, this utopia was not. Instead, the insidious manosphere network of misogynists which seeks to oppress women has developed and spread on the very social media platforms meant to lead humanity towards a brighter future. The next chapter seeks to determine why this imagined utopia has ultimately failed and the manosphere has been able to thrive through a case study of the social media platform Reddit.

Chapter 2: The Manosphere on Reddit

The following is a close exploration of the Reddit's development and positioning, business model, algorithm, affordances, and content to determine why the manosphere can thrive on the platform. An investigation into Reddit's development and positioning establishes that Reddit, like other social media platforms, was developed with utopian ideals in mind, specifically that of free speech and connection with others. Through looking into Reddit's algorithm, the ways that its design contributes to the platform's facilitation of the manosphere will be revealed. Further, the social media platform affordances addressed in the previous chapter will be applied to Reddit to establish how they can play out on the platform neutrally. Then, content from manosphere subreddits will be looked at to determine what the negative consequences of those same affordances are. The chapter ultimately investigates how misogynistic communities are so readily formed and maintained on Reddit.

What is Reddit?

One of the most common criticisms inexperienced users of Reddit have, a platform hosting text-based message boards, is that the platform is difficult to navigate. When users first visit www.reddit.com, they will be brought to the default home page for users who have not registered for an account on the platform. It is also known as r/all (Shmidt). "r/" denotes that the term following it is the name of a subreddit. Therefore r/all is translated to mean a subreddit named "all". Subreddits are the message boards used by a community who share a common interest (Shmidt). Within subreddits users can post links, videos, pictures, stories,

ideas, information, and anything else given it abides by the rules laid out by moderators as well as Reddit's general policies. Moderators are volunteer individuals tasked with enforcing the rules of the subreddit they work with and Reddit's general policies. Moderators are given privileges that regular users cannot access such as the ability to delete content in their subreddit and to ban other users.

Moving from the top left to the top right of the site home page, there is a Reddit logo, a search function, an advertising function, two buttons prompting users to log into a previous account or to create a new one, and a drop-down menu that offers links to other functions. In the middle of the web page is content from r/all which is an amalgamated list of highly interacted posts from subreddits with high subscriber counts. A post is considered highly interacted with if it has received multiple comments and votes from other users. To view more posts, a user simply has to scroll down the page while the platform digs up endless content. Right above that are links to trending stories in popular subreddits. On the left sidebar is a list of growing subreddit communities, followed by a list of community categories such as gaming and sports, and a set of links to more information. If a new user sees a post on a topic they are interested in, they could then visit the page of the subreddit it was made in. Now a user without an account can absorb information on Reddit but they cannot interact with it without an account. Once a user has an account, they can make posts within subreddits.

After an initial post is made, users can leave comments and then comment on those comments creating a theoretically endless cycle of discourse. As previously mentioned, Reddit is closely tied with early internet platforms and culture, specifically that of the Bulletin Board

Systems (BBS). Like BBS which had both private and public message boards, Reddit has both private and public subreddits, each of which may be utilized for a variety of different purposes. Private subreddits are generally used by smaller groups who have a connection separate from wanting to just absorb and spread information (Massanari). Those connections can be anything from being friends outside of an online space, to sharing an interest in a specific sports team. Public subreddits are more complex since anyone, even those without a Reddit account, can absorb information and anyone with an account can add information. While most public subreddits still have specific topics and rules that participants must follow, there is inherently more freedom in the types of discourses present.

While Reddit users can share any information they want, the value of their contribution will be reflected back to them by other users. Regular users cannot express their dissatisfaction with a post by deleting it like moderators can, but they are able to express it through Reddit's voting system. The voting system allows registered users to either "up-vote" or "down-vote" content depending on how they feel about it. If they enjoy the content, they can up-vote and if they don't, they can down-vote (Shmidt). Each vote contributes to an overall vote score. The higher the vote score, the better the post is considered, and the closer to the top of the subreddit it goes (Massanari). If posted information is deemed unhelpful, irrelevant, or against policy, then this is reflected to the user in a low vote score or even in deletion of the post. On the other side, if a post is helpful then this is similarly reflected to the user in a high voting score and high engagement (Shmidt). Reddit is all about what an individual can bring to the table, whatever that may mean within individual subreddits. For instance, in a subreddit about

birdwatching, sharing knowledge about the migration patterns of birds or even simply expressing passion about the activity adds value to the community. As it is up to all the members of a subreddit to determine if content is good or bad and thereby what actions should be taken with it, Reddit users are encouraged to think about where their post fits in within the larger community.

This section demonstrated that as a platform, Reddit was designed to facilitate behaviors that align with utopian idealizations on which social media was built, particularly those of free speech and connection. As mentioned in the previous chapter, scholars imagined a world in which internet users were so connected with each other that society would naturally progress positively. In turn Reddit was designed to facilitate connection through posts, comments, and the formation of subreddit communities. Reddit was also designed to facilitate free speech by limiting moderation and providing users online spaces to talk about anything they wish. However, as established in the previous chapter in the exploration of algorithmic bias, just because technology, in this case a platform, is developed with utopian ideals in mind does not mean that the effects are always good. As will be demonstrated through a further exploration into Reddit and its hosting of manosphere subreddits, these effects can be quite problematic.

Business Model

A major reason that the utopian conceptualization on which Reddit was built has failed lies in its designed business model. As established, Reddit is a social media platform, but it is

also a business which seeks to turn a profit. Reddit was created in 2005 by two recent college graduates, Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian with a \$100,000 investment backing. The two wanted to create “the site people go to to find something new,” that would also serve “as a place where open and honest discussion can happen” (Robertson). Evidently, Ohanian and Huffman developed Reddit to promote free speech and to help internet users find something whether that be information or connection to others. The site grew quickly and by 2006, Huffman and Ohanian were able to sell the platform to Conde Nast Publications for \$10 million though they retained leadership positions (Clifford). Despite the success the platform found, Huffman and Ohanian eventually left the company in 2009 and 2010 respectively (Pepper). By 2011 Reddit ranked among the top platforms for online discussion and separated from Conde Nast Publications. Then, Yishan Wong stepped in as the new CEO the next year. As Reddit continued to become more popular, content on the site was put on the public’s radar. Eventually, the public became aware of objectionable content being posted and shared on the site. Wong then found himself entangled in several high-profile scandals concerning Reddit’s content including one concerning a mass celebrity nude photo leak, known as the Fappening, and another concerning illegal gun sales (Pepper). Amid mounting criticism for his handling of said scandals, Wong left the company.

Ellen Pao was appointed as interim CEO after Wong. Ohanian also returned to the company to serve as Executive Chairperson. Like Wong, Pao dealt with many controversies while working at Reddit before she too left the company. In 2015, Huffman returned to the platform and has run it with Ohanian ever since. Through all the tumultuous leadership changes

Reddit has continued to grow, cementing itself as one of the top social media platforms. Under Huffman's reign, it has become home to 2.8 million unique communities filled with members from all over the world ("Reddit"). Reddit is a household name with millions of people having utilized the platform and leaving behind a trail of billions of posts and comments in their wake. Despite Reddit's massive popularity and its generation of revenue, the platform has never made a profit.

Reddit currently generates most of its revenue through advertisements and a smaller portion of it through the offering of premium memberships that exclude advertisements. Due to its reliance on advertisements to make money, its monetary value is tightly bound to the number of views the site is garnering (Massanari). Therefore, Reddit as a business is inherently motivated to keep users on the site as long as possible so they can maximize the number of advertisements being viewed. While other social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube rake in billions in revenue, Reddit has consistently only generated between \$50 and \$200 million per year, never making a profit (Isaac). This is quite unusual for a social media platform as popular and as old as Reddit. Reddit has been able to maintain itself through investment funding alone because it has such a high market value. Currently, the company is valued at over \$10 billion (Isaac). Put simply, even though Reddit does not currently generate profit, it can. It seems foolish for a profit seeking business to not actually turn a profit when they can, but leadership at Reddit has explained that they have been prioritizing platform growth so that in the future they could rake in massive profit (Isaac). Essentially, the company

has been throwing all its resources into growing its user base so that they will already have a dedicated audience when it does start heavily advertising.

Even though Reddit does not turn a profit, there are still internal costs associated with running a massive social media platform. However, one way Reddit has been able to cut some of these internal costs is through relying heavily on user generated content. As discussed in the last chapter, user-generated content is a key aspect of social media platforms and Web 2.0 in general. Naturally, if a social media company does not have to pay people to create content which drives views and therefore revenue, then they are saving money. On the surface this seems like a perfect situation for both Reddit, who gets the content they need for free, and for users who get to express themselves however they wish. However, as will be demonstrated by an exploration of Reddit's moderators and the Reddit Revolt, this design actually creates an irresolvable contradiction between Reddit's free speech ideals and its profit goals.

Reddit Revolt

The Reddit Revolt demonstrates an irresolvable contradiction in Reddit's business model that contributes to the platform's failure to facilitate an idealized utopia. The Reddit Revolt was sparked by tension between moderators and administrators. As explained, moderators are tasked with enforcing the general policies of Reddit as well as the specific rules of the subreddit they are moderating (Massanari). This job can become extremely hard particularly if there is one moderator for a subreddit that is getting hundreds or thousands of posts a day. Further, it is relatively difficult and time-consuming for moderators to do their job. To report and ban

content or users, moderators must go through a third-party site (Massanari). Above moderators, there is a set upper-level administration that oversees the platform.

The revolt began when then CEO Ellen Pao fired Victoria Taylor, the director of communications (Abad-Santos). The reasons behind Taylor's dismissal remain unknown. Taylor was highly respected by Reddit users and was most well-known for popularizing Reddit's Ask Me Anything subreddit. Reddit's Asks Me Anything subreddit is a space in which users can introduce themselves and invite other users to ask them questions. For example, a user may post that they are blind and invite others to ask them anything pertaining to living with blindness. Interestingly, the Ask Me Anything Subreddit has also been used by celebrities and politicians usually as a form of self-promotion (Abad-Santos). For instance, Barack Obama posted to the Ask Me Anything subreddit to engage voters during the 2016 presidential election cycle.

Beyond popularizing Ask Me Anything, Taylor was also known as the liaison between administrators and moderators. After her firing, the Reddit Revolt began and the moderators of some of the most popular subreddits at the time switched the subreddits to private. This meant that anyone not subscribed to the subreddits wouldn't be able to access the content there ultimately freezing out millions of Reddit users (Abad-Santos). The moderators of these subreddits understood that by making popular subreddits private they could disrupt Reddit's revenue flow enough to get the administration's attention. The moderators knew that without users to access the subreddits, advertisers would pull their ads from Reddit, something that

does not align with the administration's monetary interest. After the administration realized what was happening, Pao issued the following official apology to the moderators:

“Your message was received loud and clear. The communication between Reddit and the moderators need to improve dramatically. We will work closely with you all going forward to ensure events like today don’t happen again. At this point, however, the blackout has served its purpose, and now it’s time to get Reddit functioning again. I know many of you are still upset. We will continue to work through these issues with you all, but redditors don’t deserve to be punished any further over an issue that is ultimately between Reddit and the moderators” (Abad-Santos).

Reddit administration’s poor treatment of their moderators came back to haunt them. Pao essentially was begging for them to reopen the subreddits and thereby allow Reddit to keep making money from advertisements. As moderators are not receiving monetary compensation, they expect a certain amount of involvement in critical decisions being made for a site that their work is so integral to. Removing their main method of communication with administration, Victoria Taylor, without warning and without a replacement, was an unwise move.

Administration’s response to the Reddit Revolt exemplifies an irresolvable contradiction of Reddit. Reddit consistently touts its belief in freedom of both discourse and action. As Reddit’s founders, Ohanian and Huffman, themselves expressed, Reddit was created to promote free and open discourse between those connected on their site. This supposed belief has undoubtedly contributed to the site’s massive popularity and yet in this instance the administration sought to control the discourse and actions of its moderators. Of course, the way administration wanted their moderators to act also aligned with the company’s monetary interests. Ultimately, they cannot have it both ways. The Revolt demonstrates that Reddit is

choosing to prioritize profit over the utopian ideal of free speech that they initially established themselves on. By prioritizing profit, Reddit is creating a barrier in reaching the imagined utopia.

The Algorithm

This section will demonstrate that Reddit's algorithm is another barrier preventing the realization of the imagined utopia. Specifically, it will explore how Reddit's algorithmic design contributes to the existence and spread of the manosphere. Notably, without an algorithm, a platform simply cannot exist. Therefore, it is critical to examine the mechanics of Reddit's algorithm to understand how the platform operates. Similarly to other algorithms, Reddit's is designed to maximize the time users spend on the site in order to maximize advertisement views and therefore revenue. Reddit's algorithm operates in such a way that a user's actions directly influence the algorithm which in turn influences the user in a cycle. If users participate on the site, the platform's algorithm learns and customizes to their interests which encourages more participation and then more customization. The algorithm gathers information on content that users engage with via upvoting and downvoting and subscribing to specific subreddits. With this information, it can then push similar content to the user to keep them engaged. There are aspects of this kind of algorithmic design that can contribute to problematic outcomes like the spread of the manosphere network.

The problematic nature of Reddit's algorithmic design is further compounded by the fact that it is kept secret. Reddit, like all other technology businesses based in the United States,

can keep the exact nature of their algorithm secret, thanks to Trade Secret protection laws (Yeh). While these laws are ultimately determined at the State level, all but three states have adopted some form of the Uniform Trade Secrets Act of 1985 (“Office of Policy and External Affairs”). This Act ensures the protection of Trade Secrets, which is any secret that is not general knowledge, has commercial value and has been reasonably protected by those who know it (“Office of Policy and External Affairs”). One example of a Trade Secret is the recipe for Coca-Cola. The natural flavorings used in making the soda are kept under wraps to prevent another company from being able to profit from it.

In the case of algorithms, this means that businesses have the right to keep secret the “recipe” they coded into their algorithm. Therefore, very few people know which factors Reddit accounts for and how heavy they weigh them when coding their algorithm. Unfortunately, this means that there is very little information about it available to the general public and therefore when potential instances of algorithmic bias occur, it is impossible to know exactly how it happened. What can sometimes be deduced however are aspects of Reddit’s algorithmic design and the consequences of those design choices. One identifiable algorithmic design choice is the fact that the first few votes a post receives have more weight than the rest. In essence, “the first 10 upvotes count as high as the next 100, e.g. a story that has 10 upvotes and a story that has 50 upvotes will have a similar ranking,” (Bozdag). Therefore, the algorithm is designed to be in favor of those that first view the content and vote quickly on it (Bozdag). As most of the user generated content is coming out of North America, individuals who first view content tend to be others in North America because they are awake when it is posted. This

design aspect does not necessarily reflect any intentional bias, but it does contribute to this outcome in which those from North America have more power than those outside of it.

Another potentially problematic design aspect is that the algorithm relies on user participation to customize the content displayed, however, many internet users may find themselves simply browsing Reddit without signing up for an account or participating directly with posts. When this is the case, users are likely to see all kinds of content because of Reddit's practice of aggregating material from multiple subreddits into the default home page, r/all. As noted, r/all features content from posts with high vote scores from within subreddits with high subscriber counts. Unless the moderator of a subreddit specifically asks for all content in their community to be excluded, then the algorithm will automatically post highly scored content to r/all. Consequently, "plenty of posts from popular and objectionable subreddits," make it on the r/all page, which if a user hasn't spent time subscribing to multiple subreddits yet, they will see as their home page (Massanari).

Another problematic aspect of Reddit's algorithm is that it is designed to consider pinned and highly voted on posts as important and to aggregate them in r/all. Moderators can 'pin' individual posts to the top of a subreddit like pinning a flyer on a physical bulletin board. The pinned content will remain at the top of a subreddit feed until it is unpinned. As a concept, this algorithmic choice is not inherently problematic, but there is evidence that this design has facilitated the spread of offensive content. Research into r/the_donald, a subreddit known for highly offensive racist, sexist, and homophobic discourse, revealed that moderators in the subreddit were able to learn about this aspect of Reddit's algorithmic design and use it to their

advantage (Shepherd). The subreddit did not have a high subscriber count nor did its post have high vote scores, and yet posts from the subreddit dominated r/all for months in 2016 (Shepherd). To achieve this, moderators pinned posts to the top of the subreddit and then encouraged users to upvote those posts until they were aggregated to r/all. Posts notably only needed to reach 100 votes in order to satisfy the algorithmic requirement and be considered highly voted on. The moderators followed this course of action repeatedly until the majority of posts aggregated on r/all were from r/the_donald. Since content on r/all is supposed to display the most popular and trendy content on Reddit, it is implied to Reddit users that the content from r/the_donald is also popular and trendy. As the content from that subreddit is actually niche and offensive, this is a very problematic consequence of algorithmic design.

This section demonstrated that the design of Reddit's algorithm helps facilitate the manosphere, leading society farther from the imagined utopia. The previous section exploring Reddit's business model revealed that ultimately it was designed to prioritize profit and it seems that Reddit's algorithm was created with the same priority in mind. The algorithm is coded to keep users on the site as long as possible by showing them more and more content even if it happens to be misogynistic in nature. Further, as exemplified by the success of r/the_donald taking over r/all, there are often unintended outcomes associated with computer algorithms. Therefore, there are both intentional and unintentional consequences of Reddit's algorithmic design that can benefit the manosphere and lead society closer to a dystopia than a utopia.

Affordances

While social media affordances are conceptually neutral, the way that these affordances emerge on Reddit suggests that affordances have the potential to push society closer to either a dystopia or utopia. This section explores the ways that the affordances of international connection, social participation, communication and collaboration, identity development and portrayal, and the expansion of learning facilitate positive discourse associated with a utopia. In the following sections which analyze specific subreddits and events connected to the manosphere, the negative outcomes of these affordances will be investigated.

Two affordances Reddit facilitates well are international connection and social participation. Reddit affords users the ability to participate in social interactions with people from all over the world through private messaging, replying to postings, and the formation of subreddits. Reddit's design is particularly well suited to social interaction when compared to other social media platforms because it encourages free-form discussions. Subreddits, the basis of Reddit's operation, specifically offers users the ability to form their own communities that they may otherwise not have been able to in an offline space.

Reddit also facilitates communication and collaboration well. The encouragement of free-form discussion and replying makes communication easy. Users can message directly to other individuals, to their subreddit community, or to the general audience of Reddit, easily opening a line of communication to be used by others. By affording users the opportunity to discuss nearly anything in subreddits, collaboration is a common occurrence. As previously mentioned, Reddit is the offspring of early internet BBS in which the exchange of information was often the only reason for their formation and ongoing use. Similarly, there are many subreddits that are

dedicated simply to the exchange of ideas related to specific topics thereby creating an archive of collective knowledge within subreddits. Communication is inherently the basis of collaboration with others on social media. One instance of mass collaboration occurred in 2017 in a subreddit called r/place. Over a million people contributed to a massive collaborative art project in which users were only allowed to add one pixel of color before having to wait for at least five minutes before adding another (Fernando). Users could also add color over an already used pixel which complicated the project further (Fernando). The collaborative culture of Reddit allowed the following image to be rendered after 72 hours:



(Schozinator)

Despite the project being contributed to by over a million users and the almost chaotic nature of the rules surrounding additions to it, very distinct words and images were ultimately created

including the Mona Lisa, an American flag, and depictions of the popular video game Mario Kart (Fernando).

Identity development and portrayal are affordances of social media platforms that Reddit is not particularly well suited to facilitate (Moreno and D'Angelo). Firstly, most Reddit users chose anonymous usernames which may reveal something about their interests but do not reveal any personal identifying information (Kilgo et al.). Secondly, "the emphasis on Reddit is more on what content a user contributes to group conversations rather than the personal identity of who posts," (Moreno and D'Angelo). As previously mentioned, the information, questions, and ideas a user can provide to their community is highly valued and rewarded. The amalgamation of knowledge that can facilitate societal change, the learning of new ideas, or even happiness and escapism is more important on Reddit than an individual being credited for something. Since Reddit does not emphasize personal identity, it therefore facilitates the affordance of anonymity well (Kilgo et al.).

Anonymity is not a common affordance amongst social media platforms. Most users on Reddit choose to stay anonymous in their usernames, inherently making the identity of a user less important than what they can offer their community's collective knowledge (Kilgo et al., and Moreno and D'Angelo). Anonymity can help individuals say and do things that they may not if they were able to be identified. Additionally, by allowing users to create multiple anonymous accounts, the behaviors of individuals on Reddit are even further removed from their offline identity. Not only can they be anonymous, but they can present themselves as multiple characters. The effect that this kind of anonymity has on online behavior varies. On one hand, it

can promote antisocial and anti-communal behavior when individuals feel comfortable disseminating hateful ideology, like that of the manosphere, because they are anonymous. This type of behavior under anonymity will be further explored later in this chapter. For others, anonymity creates a safe atmosphere in which there is no fear of personal attack or judgement. As previous research has shown, anonymity can promote emotional catharsis and the sharing of information without fear of personal identification which an offline space cannot offer (Zimmerman). This can help people on Reddit share things with their community freely and openly without fear of personal ridicule. As strong communities are primarily built on feelings of belonging and mattering, the fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection, anonymity on Reddit is an important aspect of community building (Hyde and Chavis).

Lastly, Reddit facilitates the expansion of learning well. On Reddit, users have access to more information than any individual could get through in a lifetime. With over 2.8 million different subreddits dedicated to an array of topics, the potential expansion of one's learning is limitless. A user could learn about insects on one subreddit and then about ancient civilizations in another all within a few minutes. It should be noted that not all information on Reddit is accurate or objective. Particularly because Reddit only has a small team of moderators sorting through content, this is something important to keep in mind. There is huge potential in this set up for misinformation if users do not understand that Reddit is not an objective news source but a platform encouraging subjective discourse. However, just because information isn't objective doesn't mean that it still can't be relevant and useful to expanding one's learning. For instance, there are many subreddits dedicated to discussing specific video games. Users often

share their experiences playing these games and the struggles they have. This kind of information could be incredibly useful to an individual who has just started playing and wants to connect with others who are in the same position.

This section demonstrated neutral and positive outcomes of social media affordances as they play out on Reddit. As previously mentioned, social media affordances are a result of interactions between a platform and its users. Therefore, while these affordances can lead to positive content such as that just looked at, the affordances can also lead to offensive content. The negative aspects of social media affordances will be explored in the following section.

The Manosphere on Reddit

The following section is an exploration of content emerging from manosphere subreddits. As mentioned, the very existence of the manosphere on Reddit indicates that the imagined utopia that social media would lead mankind to has not been realized. An examination of the manosphere on Reddit provides insight into how social media affordances specifically can detract from the imagined utopia being reached.

r/TheRedPill

This subsection explores the negative consequences of Reddit's affordances of social participation and international connection via a study of the discourse taking place in the misogynistic subreddit, *r/TheRedPill*. *r/TheRedPill* self-describes as a "discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men" ("Reddit"). It is specifically "part of Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), a set of interconnected groups that promote anti-

feminist discourse online,” (Chandrasekharan et al.). Though r/TheRedPill advertises itself as aiming to improve the wellbeing of men, most of the discourse in the subreddit focuses on the attack of women and the spread of misogynistic ideologies. The name of the subreddit, TheRedPill, comes from the dystopian science-fiction film, *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999). In the film protagonist Neo must decide if he will take a red pill or a blue pill. The blue pill would allow Neo to return to his old life in the Matrix, a massive computer simulation, forgetting that the Matrix isn't real. Taking the red pill would mean being awoken to the true reality of his life and surroundings. In the manosphere and other extremist groups, when someone is said to have taken the red pill, this refers to their successful radicalization into the extremist belief system (Maime et al.). Members of the manosphere, however, do not see themselves as radicalized. Instead, just as Neo awakened to the truth of the Matrix, they view themselves as awakened to the truth that men are systemically oppressed.

There are many members of r/TheRedPill from all over the world who actively sought it out. It must be noted though that most individuals do not seek out r/TheRedPill or communities like it because they hold misogynistic beliefs, but instead because they are in search of help. Men who used to ascribe to Red Pill beliefs but have since left the community, have stated that they joined as lonely teenagers who lacked romantic or sexual experience with women (Tait). Others cite a messy and confusing divorce as the reason they looked for it. Often these individuals are really just looking for advice and emotional support during a difficult transitional period of life in which they are unsure of their place in the world (Tait). The r/TheRedPill ideologies offer them an easy way to deal with these complex emotions by telling

them women are completely to blame for their problems. Instead of helping each other to ease their struggles through community building and support, they redirect these strong emotions towards anger at women. Two experiences that can drive men to seek out r/TheRedPill, loneliness and divorce, can be experienced by men internationally so in turn it is not surprising that men from all over the world would seek out help from r/TheRedPill. Through subscribing to r/TheRedPill and participating in discourses there, international connections are formed. These connections only serve to make the manosphere stronger by providing them a sense of power and influence in multiple nations. Members of r/TheRedPill are exceptionally good at targeting vulnerable people who may be “young, nerdy, insecure, virgins, or simply going through a difficult time in life,” and offering misogyny as the solution to their woes no matter where they are from (Tait).

The discourses taking place in r/TheRedPill demonstrates the negative consequences of the social media affordance of social participation. As mentioned, social participation is any activity which involves interaction with other members of society. Therefore, if a user posts to r/TheRedPill, receives comments from other users, and then comments on those comments, they are socially participating. As demonstrated by the increasing extremism within the manosphere, affording misogynists the ability to socialize with each other is not positive (Farrell et al.). The results of this social participation are exemplified the coded language used in r/TheRedPill and other manosphere forums. The manosphere operates in strategic ways that maximize the scope of damage they can enact. The spread of their ideologies and the indoctrination of new members is a central strategy in amplifying their reach and therefore

allowing them to be more destructive. One way that they are able to not only bring in new members but also retain their current members is by using coded language to create an “us” versus “them” mentality. Psychology explores the mechanics of this tactic via social identity theory. This theory posits that groups give individuals a sense of social belonging and allow people to categorize not just themselves but all those around them as well (McLeod). Once a person has identified which group they belong to, they begin to take on the behaviors that they ascribe to that group. So, the first step in getting men to take on misogynistic behaviors is to get them to identify as part of the manosphere group (McLeod). Special coded language that only the in-group understands is a powerful way to create that divide.

The extent of this coded language is exemplified in the “Updated Glossary of Terms and Acronyms” posted by a r/TheRedPill moderator who goes by the username MachiavellianRed. The post offers an A-To-Z list of the definitions of the coded language commonly used by members of the manosphere. There are dozens of terms listed in the original post and even more submitted by other users in the comments. Some examples include, AWALT which is code for “All Women Are Like That”, and “The Wall”, which is code for a theoretical age at which a woman supposedly loses all value in the SMP (sexual marketplace). While terms like this are unique to the manosphere, some of the terms listed are commonly used words that the manosphere has given new meanings to. For example, feminism is defined by them as “a doctrine built on the pre-supposition of victimhood of women by men as a foundation of female identity. In its goals is always the utilization of the state to forcibly redress this claimed victimization. In other words, the proxy use of violence and wealth appropriation”

(MachiavellianRed). This redefining of terms is a clever approach in that it creates a direct oppositional view of a very emotive topic between manosphere members and the general public. Here we see social identity in action as an incredibly powerful and influential force. The coded language directly separates members of the manosphere from those outside of it creating a sense of grouping and belonging. Once men feel that they are a part of the group, social identity theory posits that they will begin to take on the misogynistic beliefs and behaviors of the manosphere (McLeod). The more members the manosphere can garner, the farther society is from reaching a utopia.

As demonstrated in this section, the affordance of social participation can have negative outcomes on Reddit. Specifically, by allowing members of the manosphere to interact, the coded language just looked at was able to emerge. As this language can be used to both bring in new members and maintain established ones, the consequences of affording social participation can be vast.

r/Braincels

This subsection explores the negative consequences of Reddit's affordances of anonymity and the expansion of learning via the study of content emerging from r/Braincels. r/Braincels is an online space specifically dedicated to the plights of involuntary celibates (Incels). Incels believe that they have been rejected by women. They possess strong feelings of frustration and anger because of the perceived rejection. In r/Braincels, Incels and others with similar views are invited to ask questions and share advice with other men navigating similar feelings. The

number of subscribers and daily engagement this subreddit garnered was significantly lower than that of r/TheRedPill, but the type of content was more extreme. For example, a question such as “Why is it OK to punch Nazis and not OK to punch women?” was answered with “Nazis and women both believe in Eugenics; it's just that women don't have the balls to admit it. Nazis want Jews, blacks, gays, etc. to go away. Women want ugly men to go away. I fail to see how one ideology is worse than the other” (“Quora”). Another user reflecting on a film following infamous rapist and murderer Ted Bundy, wrote that it “was pretty epic when he got away with 30+ murders and rapes for 10 years” and summarized Bundy as “just a murderer Chad pumping and dumping a bunch of dumb women” (“Quora”). The name Chad is a coded term specifically used by Incels meaning a man who has successfully had female sexual partners. As demonstrated by these example posts, the content posted to more niche forums that are regarded as deeper in the manosphere is far more extreme than that found in r/TheRedPill. While a post in TheRedPill subreddit may refer to women as ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’, a post in Braincels was likely to call for violent and unconsented action to be taken against women. As trends continue to demonstrate significant migration from older communities like r/TheRedPill to newer and far more toxic ones like r/Braincels, the average level of extremism just within the Manosphere is likely to rise (Chandrasekharan).

There are also several affordances of Reddit that encouraged this type of discourse on its platform, anonymity due to a lack of identity development and identity portrayal being the most obvious. As mentioned, anonymity facilitates very open discourse on Reddit since users have little fear of personal identification and thereby judgement based on who they are. On

one hand, this can be quite positive in allowing for emotional catharsis, but it can also encourage users to say highly offensive things because they have no fear of being identified and facing consequences. In fact, previous research has demonstrated that anonymity can encourage people to engage in unethical behaviors (Dawson). The members of r/Braincels embrace the unethical behaviors that anonymity protects them from being blamed for by unabashedly advocating for and laughing at violence against women. This is not a behavior that most people would want their personal identity to be connected to. Additionally, the negative consequences of Reddit's facilitation of the expansion of learning are exemplified in r/Braincels. Users can absorb content from r/Braincels and learn things from the discourses taking place there. From the "Why is it OK to punch Nazis and not OK to punch women?" post, they may learn that women are comparable to Nazis and therefore it is okay to hit them. From the review of the Ted Bundy movie, they can learn that men who are violent towards women are praised by other men. Not only are these lessons negative but they detract from the utopian ideals of freedom and equality by communicating to its viewers that women are lesser people than men.

r/KotakuInAction and Gamergate

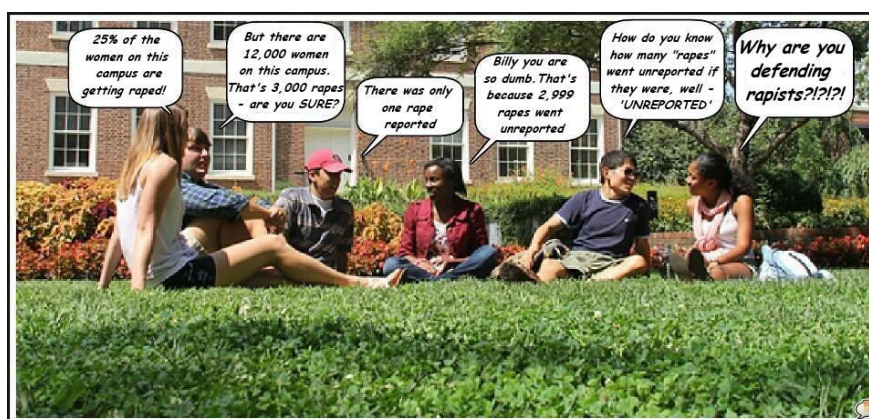
The Gamergate controversy of 2014 was a very public harassment campaign which demonstrates the negative consequences of the affordances of communication and collaboration. An exploration of the events of Gamergate will demonstrate manosphere collaboration. Further, an analysis of content emerging from r/KotakuInAction, a subreddit closely tied to Gamergate will exemplify how the affordance of anonymous communication facilitates the trivialization of feminism.

The origins of Gamergate lie in a blog post, more accurately a manifesto, that was posted by Eron Gjoni. Gjoni detailed intimate information about his previous romantic partner, game creator Zoe Quinn. While some of the information revealed was true a lot of it wasn't (Quinn). There was one key piece of false information that propelled his post from being just the ranting of a disgruntled ex-boyfriend to the inspiration of an entire movement. Gjoni accused Quinn of having sex with a video games journalist in exchange for a positive review of her game. This accusation was refuted by both Quinn and the journalist who had yet to review any of her games (Quinn). Quinn's harassers "purported to be frustrated by a perceived lack of ethics within gaming journalism," but even after learning that Quinn did not have sex with the journalist, it was repeatedly cited by her harassers as the reason behind their attacks. This points to the idea that Quinn was being attacked because of her status as a female game creator and not because she had actually done anything wrong. Gamergate was truly just "a campaign of systematic harassment of female and minority game developers, journalists, and critics and their allies" and not a cry of concern for ethics in journalism (Massanari).

In her book, Quinn writes that the harassment began with members of the gaming community but then spread to Men's Rights Activists and other members of the manosphere, and then to white supremacists, and so on. Quinn and eventually other prominent women in the gaming industry including journalist Anita Sarkeesian and fellow game designer Brianna Wu, suffered months of harassment, doxxing (sharing of private information such as a home address), and threats of death and sexual assault (Mortensen). Even though Gamergate lacked centralized leadership, members of the manosphere and other extremist groups successfully

communicated and collaborated on Reddit to perpetuate the harassment. Members of r/KotakuInAction, known for its anti-feminist discourse, were encouraged to dig up private information on their targets and share that information with other users so that it could be used to threaten said targets (Massanari). The name of the subreddit comes from Kotaku, an online gaming magazine that the journalist Quinn allegedly had sex with wrote for. The affordances of anonymous communication and collaboration that Reddit provided the manosphere contributed to the harassment of Gamergate victims. In fact, it worked so well that at the height of Gamergate, Quinn had to uproot her entire life. She fled her home, deleted her social media accounts that had not been hacked, switched phone numbers, and even applied for a restraining order against Gjoni (Quinn).

Though the discourse taking place in r/KotakuInAction was very misogynistic and harmful, the subreddit was the public face of Gamergate (Massanari). The following meme is an example of content emerging from the subreddit in 2014, the height of Gamergate:



(u/cryobabe)

This meme questions the truthfulness of the rates of rape occurring on college campuses as well as implying that there are women touting these facts without having evidence to back them up. Misogynistic memes like this can serve as ways to trivialize serious issues facing women by turning them into a joke. An internet meme can be defined as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; that were created with awareness of each other; and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman). Internet memes also have certain innate qualities that differentiate them from other internet content. One essential quality of memes is that they are intertextual meaning that they are connected to each other, and other popular culture phenomena, in complex ways. Though memes tend to be humorous and playful, they can also reflect and can be used to shape a general social mindset (Shifman). However, many memes are also created simply because they are humorous, especially within the context of internet culture at the time of their creation. Ultimately, for a meme to reach virality it requires humorous tones, simple packaging, and the ability for people to participate (Shifman). Since memes are positioned as humorous, those who view this meme will believe that it is meant to be funny. This ultimately trivializes a very serious issue that women face, rape on college campuses. Ultimately, the meme turns rape and the feminist movement into a joke, which serves to create division between those that ascribe to the ‘serious’ and ‘fact-based’ manosphere ideology and those that are feminists.

The KotakuInAction subreddit still proudly touts that it is the “almost” official Gamergate subreddit welcoming discussions of the controversy as well as other issues

pertaining to the gaming industry. Upon an initial scroll through the subreddit, one will find a mix of posts discussing anime and video games, links to various articles and YouTube videos, and instances of both racism and misogyny. Notably, there are still ongoing discussions of the women harassed during Gamergate even though the controversy peaked in 2014, about eight years ago. For instance, a user recently posted the link to a YouTube video about Anita Sarkeesian, one of the victims of Gamergate (u/Airplaydoc). The video frames Sarkeesian and other feminists in the gaming industry as pandering, disingenuous, and working against the spirit of video games. One user commented that the only reason a man would defend Sarkeesian's right to discuss feminism in video games is because "they are ashamed of enjoying boobs and games, and the women in their lives have them whipped," (u/Airplaydoc). Another wrote that Sarkeesian is "nothing more than a hand puppet for male feminists/big corporate trying to make games unisex to get that additional (non-existent) gamer-girl revenue (outside of Candy Crush)" (u/Airplaydoc). The comments also trivialize Sarkeesian and the feminist work she does. The first insinuates that only a man who doesn't enjoy traditionally masculine things like female breasts and video games would ever respect Sarkeesian or her ideas. For manosphere members, embodying traditional masculinity is incredibly important, so saying this very directly insults Sarkeesian and her feminist work. The second comment blatantly attacks the gaming industry for creating games with diverse female characters and insinuates that women are only interested in more simplistic mobile games like Candy Crush. Again, these insults and trivializes the feminist work that Sarkeesian does to increase female representation in the gaming industry by saying that it is only a ploy for corporations to make more money.

r/TheRedPill, r/Braincels, and r/KotakuInAction demonstrate the negative consequences of Reddit affording its users international connection, social participation, communication and collaboration, identity development and portrayal, and the expansion of learning. As previously mentioned, affordances are morally ambiguous and can emerge from social media platforms in both positive and negative ways. The manosphere was able to emerge and has continued to spread because of the very qualities designed into Reddit that were meant to lead humanity towards a utopia.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that Reddit facilitates the existence of the manosphere and the spread of its ideologies through its business model, algorithmic design, and affordances. An exploration of Reddit's business model revealed that it is designed in two phases. The first prioritizes growing a massive user base so that in the second Reddit can generate huge profit through advertising. Unfortunately, because Reddit's future profits are determined by having lots of users and they have allowed for unmoderated growth, the manosphere network has been able to thrive on their platform. An analysis of Reddit's algorithm identified potentially problematic aspects of its design which have contributed to unintended outcomes. The existence of these unintended outcomes proves that algorithms are not neutral and that therefore the content they push to users isn't either. Lastly, an exploration of the ways that social media affordances play out on Reddit and specifically how they are utilized by the manosphere demonstrates that social media affordances facilitate online misogyny. Reddit's facilitation of the manosphere exemplifies the failure of the utopian ideals on which the

platform was built. Now that it has been established how the manosphere is maintained and spread on social media, the next chapter will be used to explore possible ways to fight against the network and start bettering online spaces.

Chapter 3: Moderating the Manosphere

The following chapter is an investigation of the barriers preventing or discouraging Reddit from moderating the manosphere. Specifically, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act will be looked at to explore the laws which have protected Reddit from properly moderating the manosphere. Then, this chapter looks at Reddit's design and policies to explore why the company does not adequately moderate the manosphere. Lastly, this chapter will touch on future moderation on Reddit. As demonstrated in the last chapter, Reddit's designed business model, the affordances it provides users, and the policies it adheres to readily facilitate the gathering of manosphere communities and detract from its utopian ideals. While there are several reasons that the company avoids moderating their offense discourses, this decision ultimately makes the public vulnerable both to potential indoctrination and to the harmful actions its members are inspired to take. Subduing the manosphere which harms all of society is essential if the imagined utopia is to ever come to fruition.

Section 230

As a company based in the United States, Reddit is protected from taking responsibility for outcomes that manosphere discourse on their platform contributes to. The company derives huge legal protections from Trade Secrets laws and from Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (Yeh). As mentioned, Trade Secrets laws are relevant to protecting Reddit's algorithm. On the one hand, this protection has allowed Reddit to become incredibly successful. No other company can utilize their specific algorithm whose customization features have added to the platform's success (Yeh). On the other hand, Trade

Secrets laws also prevent the public from accessing information relevant to their lives. As it is evident that the content consumed online can influence actions taken offline, wanting to understand the factors that determine what content is being presented to you seems reasonable, but Trade Secrets laws ensure Reddit never has to tell you.

Section 230 serves to protect Reddit from being held responsible for content generated by its users. Written in 1996, the law states that “no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider” (Kosseff). Section 230 is only 26 words, but it has been massively influential in the development of the internet. The writers of the law, Congressmen Chris Cox and Ron Wyden, intended for Section 230 to motivate online platforms to moderate user content and to help the industry continue growing. They imagined that online platforms would feel free to ban users and delete inappropriate content because they wouldn't fear legal consequence. However, Section 230 has come to indicate to platforms that they “are not liable for the comments, pictures, and videos that their users and subscribers post, no matter how vile or damaging” (Kosseff).

Similar to Trade Secrets laws, there have been both positive and negative outcomes of Section 230. On one side, without Section 230, internet services like Reddit would not exist as it would be too legally risky to allow for user-generated content. By extending free speech rights to the internet, Section 230 has allowed for a booming internet industry in the United States. However, it has also had significant social costs. On a smaller scale, victims of online harassment are unable to successfully sue the platform or website through which they are

being targeted “even if the platform encouraged the user to post horrific content and refused to remove it” (Kosseff). On a greater societal level, Section 230 also protects social media sites like Reddit from being held responsible by the public. Section 230 can be seen at work in the case of r/jailbait, a subreddit dedicated to sexually explicit or suggestive photographs of minors. Even after the public was made aware of the reprehensible discourses taking place in the subreddit, Reddit had no legal obligation to remove it and so they didn’t (Taylor). Only once actual child pornography was posted to the subreddit was it banned. Even then, Reddit as a company could not have been held legally responsible even though the argument that their allowance of a subreddit celebrating the fantasy of sexual activity with minors contributed to the posting of a sexually explicit photo of a minor.

While Section 230 has fostered free speech and vast online discourse it has also allowed online platforms to get away with not monitoring the content posted to their platform. This overarching protection of free speech online has allowed for hate groups like the manosphere to gather on platforms to grow their ranks and disseminate information. Reddit is simply not legally liable for the content that the manosphere posts nor are they monetarily motivated to moderate it as will be demonstrated in the next section. Without any monetary or legal motivation to moderate, Reddit has avoided taking responsibility for the offline actions that are taken as a result of content absorbed on their platform.

This section demonstrated that Reddit and other social media platforms lack any legal motivation to moderate offensive content on their platforms. Similar to the ideals on which social media was developed, the ideals used in the development of Section 230 were utopian.

The writers of the law imagined it would be used to protect platforms from being sued for moderating, not as a way for platforms to get away with not moderating. Ultimately, just like the idealizations of social media, that of Section 230 failed. The next section looks at Reddit's design and policies to explain how its current relationship with moderation reflects the failure of utopian idealizations of social media.

Reddit and Moderation

Reddit's refusal to properly moderate the manosphere reflects the utopian idealizations on which the platform was built, whilst simultaneously contributing to the ultimate failure of those same idealizations. Reddit has historically employed a hands-off approach when it comes to content moderation. While this lack of intervention has certainly helped Reddit become successful, it has also caused the company some controversy over the years. Reddit is undoubtedly popular because it encourages free speech and discourse, but when the public becomes aware of the darkest parts of that discourse, controversy begins. In 2011, when questions about objectionable content on Reddit were being asked, a then administrator stated, "we're a free speech site with very few exceptions (mostly personal info) and having to stomach occasional troll reddit (sic) like r/picsofdeadkids or morally questionable redds like r/jailbait are part of the price of free speech on a site like this" (Robertson). A few years and a few controversies later, Ellen Pao, a previous CEO, attempted to crack down on offensive subreddits. She began by outright banning five offensive subreddits for violating their harassment policy including r/fatpeoplehate, a thread dedicated to posting and ridiculing pictures of random people for their weight without consent. In an announcement of the

decision posted to Reddit, Pao wrote “we want as little involvement as possible in managing these interactions but will be involved when needed to protect privacy and free expression, and to prevent harassment” (“Removing Harassing Subreddits”). After this, Pao received waves of criticism and was viewed quite unfavorably by most Reddit users at the time. Though the hate initially stemmed from genuine concerns about free speech and future moderation, it quickly turned personal. Subreddits dedicated to the attack of Pao began cropping up including one called r/EllePaolaBigC***.

Both the language used in Pao’s announcement and Reddit users’ reactions shed light on why Reddit is so hesitant to moderate content. Neither administration nor Reddit’s user base, at least a loud faction of it, want increased moderation. Pao and the other administrator deliberately stated that Reddit administration does not want to moderate users’ interactions and wants to facilitate free discourse. This is a sentiment harkened to the public by Reddit leadership repeatedly because it is a major reason people choose to utilize Reddit over other more moderated social media platforms. Further, Reddit’s users’ responses of dissatisfaction and of personal attack against Pao indicate that they really did not want Reddit to start moderating them. Moderation just does not align with the principle of completely free speech that Reddit has built itself on and that its users have come to expect and enjoy. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Reddit leadership would be hesitant to moderate. This lack of motivation is then compounded by how Reddit’s business model is designed. Reddit generates revenue through advertisements, but this is contingent on Reddit having a lot of users. Without lots of users to view advertisements, advertisers would not find it worth it to pay for their product to

be displayed on Reddit. If Reddit loses its manosphere subreddits and users, it risks losing money.

Despite these moderation barriers that Reddit's design creates, Reddit has progressively turned farther away from its roots of completely free speech and has slowly begun to implement stricter policies and forms of moderation. Ellen Pao notably introduced the first round of policies to protect users from harassment in 2015 albeit as just touched on, it sparked considerable backlash from Reddit users. In the same year, Reddit announced that it would, "allow but not publicize nor profit from hate-filled subreddits," but this does not fix things. Instead, it means that all other subreddits, including those created to fight against objectionable material, are financially supporting hateful ones (Massanari). When these other subreddits with advertisements are viewed, Reddit claims an advertising fee which in turn allows for the site to be maintained and continue to support manosphere subreddits. In 2016 Reddit announced the implementation of quarantine in addition to outright banning after mounting public pressure to do something about hateful subreddits. Quarantine is a status that subreddits with controversial content are given to warn users that they may encounter offensive discourse in the subreddit.

Besides having a warning page added, if a subreddit is quarantined "their posts would be scrapped from the Reddit front page. Gone from recommendations and subscription feeds, invisible in the search function," and it "could only be accessed with the direct URL or from Google" (King). If a user does find a quarantined subreddit then they are issued a warning screen before being shown any content. This means that the user would have to make a

deliberate choice to be exposed to potentially objectionable content (Chandrasekharan et al.). Further, “quarantined subreddits also no longer appear in non-subscription-based feeds, recommendations, or search results,” making it very difficult for someone to stumble across while casually browsing (Chandrasekharan et al.).

In 2018, Reddit again came under the same pressure and announced the revamping of the quarantine function. The official statement was that quarantining would begin to be used for subreddits containing content that “while not prohibited by the Content Policy, average redditors may nevertheless find highly offensive or upsetting” (u/landoflobsters). They further explained that “the purpose of quarantining a community is to prevent its content from being accidentally viewed by those who do not knowingly wish to do so or viewed without appropriate context” (u/landoflobsters). Reddit had high hopes that its revamped policy would prevent them from coming under further scrutiny, even noting in their official statement that quarantining publicly signals to members of those subreddits that their discourse is problematic. However, the effectiveness of quarantining in preventing hate and misogyny has come into question since its implementation.

For Reddit, ultimately the goal of quarantining is to prevent users from accidentally viewing offensive or objectionable content, while still maintaining free speech. While Reddit’s success in maintaining free speech will always be a topic of debate, the general public is certainly better protected from seeing objectionable content because of quarantining. They do not have to worry about accidentally stumbling across offensive content because it will be marked as so before they view it. Beyond just protecting the general public, quarantining offers

serious protection for potential new members of the manosphere. Meaning that those that are vulnerable to indoctrination into the manosphere, such as lonely teens or recent divorcees, are less likely to be able to seek “help” from manosphere subreddits since they can't even find them.

To determine if quarantining is an effective strategy in curbing hateful discourse, researchers looked at the rate of new users joining r/TheRedPill and the amount of misogynistic language used before and then after the quarantine. They found that after quarantining the rate of new users joining r/TheRedPill dropped by over 79.5% (Chandrasekharan et al.). Not only is the general public better protected from seeing this content, but potential new members appear to respond well to quarantining as shown in the significant decrease in the rate of new members subscribing to the subreddit. By indicating to potential new members that a subreddit contains offensive content and by making it more difficult to access this content, Reddit successfully decreased the rate of new users (Chandrasekharan et al.).

While Reddit successfully decreased the rate of new subscribers to r/TheRedPill, the level of misogynistic content within the forum did not change (Chandrasekharan et al.). These results demonstrate that users who are already active members of r/TheRedPill did not change their misogynistic behaviors despite the warning that quarantine gives them. Reddit specifically wrote to the moderators of r/TheRedPill explaining that to leave quarantine they would need to significantly reduce the number of misogynistic posts and that they needed to maintain this reduction. However, the results of this research show that this did not happen, suggesting that quarantining is not an effective strategy to curb offensive or hateful posts from active users

(Chandrasekharan et al.). In fact, “despite the quarantine, community members on the subreddit continue to violate the existing harassment policy by calling for domination and control over the social, physical, and sexual spaces of women” (Carlson and Cousineau).

Since revamping quarantine, Reddit has introduced and updated other policies. Under their official content policy, there are only eight rules listed, but within those rules, there are hyperlinks to more in-depth explanations. Put as simply as possible, the first and most relevant rule in regard to this thesis is set to protect people from harassment, bullying, threats of violence, and discrimination (“Reddit Help”). Of course, what exactly these behaviors actually mean is up to interpretation, particularly the interpretation of moderators and administrators. In the case of r/TheRedPill, misogyny is not considered discrimination though it likely would be in other subreddits. However, according to Reddit administration, which is more powerful than moderators, discrimination based on gender identity is against the rules which brings into question why r/TheRedPill, a clear violator of these rules, is allowed to continue to exist on the platform. As demonstrated though, Reddit’s business is based on free-form discussion and advertisements meaning they have no reason beyond one based in professional ethics to ban subreddits. Historically, Reddit has only banned subreddits after coming under serious pressure from both the general public and its users. For instance, r/jailbait was only banned after CNN anchor Anderson Cooper put the subreddit on the public’s radar (Taylor). Notably, the subreddit was not removed when the public became aware of its existence. In fact, the subreddit ended up getting four times more page visits than normal for several weeks until an image of a girl proven to be 14 years old was posted and then CEO Yishan Wang was forced to

ban it (Taylor). The r/jailbait subreddit, if still around today, would notably violate the fourth rule which prohibits the posting of sexual content involving minors (“Reddit Help”).

Reddit’s second rule is to abide by additional rules set out by subreddit moderators when interacting in those subreddits (“Reddit Help”). The third tells users to respect the privacy of others which means users are not allowed to post others intimate information or images without permission (“Reddit Help”). The fifth rule states that while you don’t have to use your real name in your username, you cannot impersonate another individual or group (“Reddit Help”). The sixth rule demands that subreddits properly label themselves as graphic or potentially offensive if that type of content is allowed there, and the seventh rule prohibits engagement in illegal activities or transactions (“Reddit Help”). The last rule forbids users to do anything that effects the code and therefore the accessibility of Reddit (“Reddit Help”). If an individual or community is found to violate any of these rules, then moderators and administrators have a set guide of enforcement. A user or community in violation will first be private message and asked nicely to stop, then less nicely, and then are in danger of having their accounts suspended. If they continue to violate rules account restrictions will be implemented, followed by added restrictions to the entire subreddit often in the form of quarantining. After that, content may be removed or subreddits may be banned in their entirety. Based on Reddit’s own enforcement policies, r/TheRedPill should be banned because there was not a shift away from misogynistic discourse. Therefore, it seems that while administration was able to overcome some of the barriers of Reddit’s design in preventing moderation, there are still many to go.

Ultimately, Reddit's lack of moderation has thus far prevented the imagined utopia from being realized. However, in the investigation of Reddit's implementation of quarantine and the updating of its policies, it is made clear that Reddit is beginning to implement stricter moderation tactics. Nonetheless, as long as Reddit allows the manosphere to utilize its platform, Reddit is supporting its existence over the potential existence of an online utopia. On the other hand, it could be argued that a lack of moderation also facilitates free discourse which is an aspect of the proposed online utopia. However, because the harm the manosphere can cause is so great, moderating their speech and dismantling the network is likely the best path towards a utopia.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that Reddit has neither internal nor external motivation to moderate the manosphere. Reddit's position as a free form discourse platform and its reliance on advertisements to generate revenue discourages the site from moderating because it could detract from their user base and therefore potential profits. Further, although Reddit has gotten progressively more comfortable with moderating offensive subreddits as exemplified by the implementation of quarantining and other policy changes, it has not yet found a true solution. Without properly moderating the manosphere and other nefarious groups, the utopia imagined cannot be realized.

Conclusion

Overall, this thesis demonstrated that the original utopian idealizations on which social media was built have failed. The first chapter explored the development of social media and the rise of online misogyny. It established that although social media fulfilled many proposed ideals including those of international connection and free speech, the utopia it should have ushered in was not realized as evidenced by the existence of the manosphere. The second chapter investigated the social media platform Reddit specifically. Through an examination of Reddit's positioning, development, business model, algorithm, affordances, and manosphere content, it was determined that these aspects of social media platforms contribute to the facilitation of the manosphere. The last chapter investigated why the manosphere has been allowed to continue existing despite the threat it poses. It established that Reddit and other social media platforms possess little motivation to moderate the manosphere and that those platforms could be monetarily hurt by moderation. Therefore, while the manosphere is problematic it seems unlikely that social media platforms as they are now designed will independently be able to stop it.

Beyond Reddit and social media specifically, this thesis explores some of the potential challenges of future media development. As demonstrated, when social media was first being developed, it was created with utopian idealizations in mind. This utopia never came to fruition and instead negative outcomes such as the manosphere emerged. The Metaverse, a new emerging form of media, has the same idealistic conceptualizations, specifically those of increased connection between people (Aten). Just like social media, there are likely to be

unforeseen outcomes associated with the Metaverse. Currently, the Metaverse is best thought of as a version of the internet in which people can interact in 3D online spaces. Beyond this description, the potential of the Metaverse is immeasurable and unknown. It is unclear to scholars what exactly the Metaverse will look like and how it will be operated, but many believe that eventually things happening in the Metaverse will be more important than those in real life (Aten). Society is looking over the precipice into the future of the internet and of life and is sorely unprepared. Despite having existed for nearly two decades society has yet to appropriately moderate social media and protect the public. The emergence of a new media form is therefore worrying and raises concerns about how society will tackle misogyny and other forms of hate within something completely new.

Though this thesis does cover a lot of information on the manosphere, it is also limited. Firstly, it only focuses on one social media platform, Reddit. To strengthen the argument that the ideals on which social media platforms were created ultimately failed, more platforms should be investigated. This thesis is also limited because it does not address social media platforms or the manosphere internationally. Future studies could be used to explore the manosphere in other countries. Nevertheless, this thesis contributes valuable information about how the manosphere operates online as well as exploring barriers preventing its destruction. The negative consequences of the manosphere can impact the lives of every member of the public. Every year, people are quite literally killed because of ideology propagated by this insidious network. Therefore, the manosphere is this is not only a problem

for social media platforms to solve, but one for all of society to tackle. To prevent the next Alek Minassian or Elliot Rodger the manosphere must be stopped.

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