Review

Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere

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Abstract

Since the emergence of Web 2.0 and social media, a particularly toxic brand of antifeminism has become evident across a range of online networks and platforms. Despite multiple internal conflicts and contradictions, these diverse assemblages are generally united in their adherence to Red Pill "philosophy," which purports to liberate men from a life of feminist delusion. This loose confederacy of interest groups, broadly known as the manosphere, has become the dominant arena for the communication of men's rights in Western culture. This article identifies the key categories and features of the manosphere and subsequently seeks to theorize the masculinities that characterize this discursive space. The analysis reveals that, while there are some continuities with older variants of antifeminism, many of these new toxic assemblages appear to complicate the orthodox alignment of power and dominance with hegemonic masculinity by operationalizing tropes of victimhood, "beta masculinity," and involuntary celibacy (incels). These new hybrid masculinities provoke important questions about the different functioning of male hegemony off- and online and indicate that the technological affordances of social media are especially well suited to the amplification of new articulations of aggrieved manhood.

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The contemporary men's movement has long been a conglomeration of different groups with divergent ideological positions. Inspired by second-wave feminism in the 1970s, the "men's liberation" movement was committed to critiquing conventional understandings of masculinity (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985) but soon split into pro- and antifeminist factions (Messner 2016), due largely to disagreements over the claim that male privilege adversely affects women (Messner 2016). According to Messner (1997, 1998), the antifeminist factions continued to deploy a narrowly conservative language of sex roles, while the profeminist movement adopted instead a radical discourse of gender relations aimed at ending men's institutional privileges and violence against women. For Messner (2016), three key changes have occurred in the intervening years that facilitate the current gender-political conjecture, namely, the institutionalization and professionalization of feminism, the emergence of a widespread postfeminist cultural sensibility, and the development of a neoliberal economy.

Messner asserts that postfeminism's taken-for-granted discourse of equality won, combined with a widespread "decline of males" rhetoric engendered by deindustrialization, has created fertile ground for a resurgent men's rights movement. However, for Messner (2016), the institutional deck is stacked against overt antifeminist backlash; he argues instead that the key danger is posed by a "kinder, gentler" variety of men's rights, taking the form of a neoliberal, professionally institutionalized "moderate men's rights strategy that skirts analysis of structural inequalities in favor of a common-sense celebration of individual choice for women and men" (p. 16). Messner rightly claims that this form of gender politics is both pervasive and problematic. He is also correct in his assertion that a more orthodox antifeminist movement—those groups which mobilized men around specific issues, such as domestic violence against men, child custody, divorce, and the feminization of education—is in decline. However, although he alludes briefly to a more virulent strain of antifeminism online, his account overlooks both the pervasiveness and the distinctiveness of this phenomenon.

This study suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the online context, not only because it offers evidence of a widespread and particularly malicious antifeminist men's "movement" but also because these assemblages demonstrate a radical shifting of the parameters of antifeminism, which is not accounted for by current writing on men's rights politics. Since the locus of debate and activism has migrated onto the Internet and, in particular, into the realm of social media, the discursive tone and communicative politics of men's rights have changed substantially. Now, referring to themselves as men's rights activists (MRAs), these groups have established complex connections with a myriad of interconnected organizations, blogs, forums, communities, and subcultures, resulting in a much more extreme and ostensibly amorphous set of discourses and ideological positions (Nagle 2015).

In popular discourse, this loose confederacy of interest groups is broadly known as the manosphere. First appearing in 2009 on a Blogspot blog to describe an online network of men's interest communities,[1] the term was later popularized by Ian Ironwood,

porn marketer and pseudonymous author of the self-published *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity* (2013). Readily adopted by both MRAs and journalists writing about them, the manosphere has since received considerable media attention, most notably for its extreme misogyny and association with high-profile, off-line events; from the Isla Vista and Oregon mass shootings (Garkey 2014; Dewey 2014; Williams 2015; Chemaly 2015) and cases of college campus rape to the sustained abuse and death threats directed at female gamers and journalists that culminated in Gamergate.[2] Central to the politics of the manosphere is the concept of the Red Pill, an analogy which derives from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which Neo is given the choice of taking one of the two pills. Taking the blue pill means switching off and living a life of delusion; taking the red pill means becoming enlightened to life's ugly truths. The Red Pill philosophy purports to awaken men to feminism's misandry and brainwashing, and is the key concept that unites all of these communities.

In the wake of the Oregon shootings in 2015, the Federal Bureau of Investigation began an investigation into comments posted on the /r9k/ channel of the social media site 4/chan, notorious for its libertarian invocation of free speech principles to defend unfettered misogyny, racism, and "niche" pornography. Calling themselves "betafags" and "incels" (involuntary celibates), and claiming to applaud Isla Vista killer Elliot Rodger, contributors to these boards appeared to be using social media to organize a campaign of revenge against women, "social justice warriors" and the "alpha males" who had deprived them of sexual success. This spawned a series of journalistic articles on the manosphere, the "beta uprising" and beta masculinity, speculating on the links between the attacks and the claims to victimhood and aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2015) being made by young, sexually disenfranchised white males. Beta masculinity thus became a topic for debate among journalists and bloggers, whose explanations for such expressions of "toxic masculinity" ranged from sexual rejection and unstable employment to video game violence, pornography, and the erosion of white male privilege. Although the term "toxic masculinity" has become widely used in both academic and popular discourses, its origins are somewhat unclear. In psychoanalytic contexts, it has been used in essentialist terms to describe "the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men" (Kupers 2005, 713). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), however, reject such usages, which imply a fixed character type or an assemblage of toxic traits. For them, hegemonic masculinity may in some contexts refer to men's engaging in toxic *practices* but they stress that these are not always the defining characteristics, since hegemony has numerous configurations, including distancing oneself from such toxicity. It is in this sense that the term is used here.

In a recent article on the beta uprising, Nagle (2016) rejects the view of the "social media–centric feminist commentariat" that beta masculinity is "just another emanation of hegemonic masculinity," arguing that to theorize these masculinities as patriarchal is incompatible with their acceptance of "gender-bending pornography, discussions about bisexual curiosity, and a male My Little Pony fandom."

Nagle asks, "Can a retreat from the traditional authority of the nuclear family into an extended adolescence of video games, porn, and pranks really be described as patriarchal?," and concludes that it cannot. Addressing these questions, which arise from the ostensible contradictions inherent in MRA masculinities, is a key concern of the current study. To date, academic research has been limited to specific aspects of the manosphere, tending to focus on individual platforms such as Reddit (Massanari 2015) and 4/chan (Nagle 2015) or notorious "flash point" events such as the Fappening (Massanari 2015), when illegally acquired nudes of female celebrities were distributed via Reddit.com and anonymous image-board 4chan. The current study attempts a broader and more systematic analysis of the manosphere's categories and the relationships between them. More specifically, it sets out to theorize the masculinities behind these "affectively charged" narratives (Papacharissi 2014, 17), to interrogate their relationship to hegemonic masculinity, and to determine whether the technological affordances of social media, such as speed, anonymity, platform algorithms, and social disembodiment, facilitate new and different ways in which to assert male hegemony.

Digital Hegemony? Theorizing Antifeminist Masculinities

In the following, I outline some of the key debates around hegemonic and hybrid masculinities that have taken place in recent years, in order to provide a context for understanding the apparent contradictions inherent in what MRAs refer to as alpha and beta masculinity. I also consider scholarship on the technological affordances of social media, with a view to better understanding how these masculinities operate; most notably, how they relate to off-line masculinities, whether they can be considered as discrete discursive hierarchies in the gender order, and what role social embodiment/disembodiment and transnationalism play in the establishment of hegemony in the online context.

   In the past ten years, there have been intense debates in masculinity studies about the meaning of changes in the performance of heterosexual masculinity—from effete clothing and hairstyles to greater emotional expression and reduced homophobia—and how they impact on gender relations and power dynamics. Anderson (2008a, 2009) and McCormack (2012) have been to the fore in advancing a highly optimistic interpretation of these changes, arguing that reduced homophobia has facilitated the emergence of more "inclusive" or nonhomophobic forms of masculinity, which allow men to be more emotionally expressive and physically tactile. Others (O'Neill 2014; De Boise 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014) disagree that such superficial signifiers have had any significant impact on gendered power relations. They rightly reject Anderson's claim that Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity does not apply to contemporary masculinities, arguing instead that what Anderson calls "inclusive" may be little more than another strategy for straight, white, middle-class men to secure economic, social, and political power in an era of gay rights. Similar concerns have characterized debates about geek masculinity. As

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have pointed out, geek masculinity "both repudi-ates and reifies elements of hegemonic masculinity." According to Kendall (2011), geek males embrace some aspects of hypermasculinity, such as the valorizing of intellect over emotion, but do not comply with others, such as sexual and sporting prowess. Therefore, although they are white, male and possess significant cultural capital, they perceive themselves as marginalized. According to Massanari (2015), this makes geek males less able or willing to recognize their own privilege.

Interestingly, Anderson's argument rests on the assumption that nonhomophobic or homoerotic masculinities—whether described as inclusive, subordinated, or com-plicit—are somehow not engaged in hegemonic patterns of practice vis-à-vis women. Contrary to this, the consideration that gay or progay men can also be misogynistic is central to the current study, in which both mainstream MRAs such as A Voice for Men (AVFM) and some of the geekier beta males of 4/chan and Reddit were seen to support sexual fluidity, actively promoting publications such as Matthew Lye's *The New Gay Liberation: Escaping the Fag End of Feminism*. As O'Neill (2014) argues, "Anderson overstates the centrality of homophobia to cul-tural definitions of masculinity and in so doing downplays the sexual politics at stake in the reconfiguration of masculinity formations and practices" (p. 111). By focusing exclusively on relations between men, therefore, it is easy to overlook some of the more contradictory patterns of practice that characterize the new online articulations of masculinity, which are expressly concerned with men's relationship to women.

Demetriou's (2001) and Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) measured contributions to the debate are particularly useful in making sense of such contradictions. Demetriou argues that subordinate and marginalized masculinities have been perceived as having no impact on the construction of hegemonic masculinity. He argues that this dualistic paradigm ignores the "dialectical pragmatism" of internal hegemony, whereby hegemonic masculinity borrows aspects of other masculinities that are strategically useful for continued domination. For Demetriou, the result is not a homogenous pattern of hegemonic masculinity but rather a strategically woven together hybridity of patterns, which—in an ongoing process of negotiation, appro-priation, and reformulation—function to secure external hegemony. According to Bridges and Pascoe (2014), these hybrid masculinities symbolically distance men from hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously compounding existing social and symbolic boundaries. In other words, they "work to conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014, 246).

Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere is further complicated by the transnational nature of this space and its attendant overlaps between local, regional, and global configurations of practice. In addition to this, the processes of social embodiment central to the project of hegemonic masculinity can be both erased and intensified, as required, by the technological affordances of social media. Anonym-ity enables contributors to create fantasy personas or avatars, liberating them from physical limitations. It also facilitates hostile and often illegal performances of masculinity (Turton-Turner 2013), which would not go unchecked in face-to-face

contexts but are effectively impossible to regulate online. On the other hand, the body and physical presence can be revealed and exaggerated for purposes of intimidation. As current research on dick pics (Thompson 2016) demonstrates, the practice whereby men send women unsolicited photos of their penises, often on dating apps such as Tinder and OkCupid but also in the context of anonymous rape threats, reinscribes the body into the communicative act as a means of threatening women or punishing them for rejection. Similarly, Flores and Hess (2016) have observed that, on Tinder, fantasy performances of the hypersexual male body are used to establish female submission.

While this type of sexual subjugation is by no means restricted to online environments, there is clearly far greater scope for it in virtual spaces, where identity, the body, and socioeconomic status can be obscured or reimagined, and where legal and moral culpability are radically reduced (Filipovic 2007; Turton-Turner 2013; Citron 2014). It has also been argued (Massanari 2015) that the algorithmic politics of certain platforms such as Reddit aggregate material in ways that prioritize the interests of young, white, heterosexual men. According to Massanari, "herding" or power law effects create consensus or echo chambers around particular material, giving certain groups, such as those under analysis, an "outsized presence," which is unreflective of or disproportionate to the "real" size of the community in question. Moreover, the Internet has been particularly adept at facilitating political assemblages that coalesce around emotional involvement and empathy rather than political principles. According to Andrejevic (2013), these "affective publics" (Papacharissi 2014), which discursively link political groups through personal storytelling, have particular appeal and currency in an era of information overload. Given this, the technological affordances of social media and, in particular, the affective power of meme-based communication (Shifman 2013) appear to be especially conducive to Demetriou's "dialectical pragmatism," whereby emotionally charged claims to victimhood can be strategically amplified in a bid to dismantle perceived threats—both online and offline—to power and privilege. Of particular relevance to the current analysis, therefore, is the reminder from Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 840) that "Men can dodge among multiple meanings according to their interactional needs. Men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable; but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments. Consequently, 'masculinity' represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices."

Methodology

This study seeks to determine how antifeminist men are positioning themselves through the manosphere's discursive practices. It identifies the manosphere's key categories and maps the dominant trends and developments in men's rights rhetoric that circulate across Web 2.0. The approach adopted was inductive, using repeated searching and cross-comparison over a period of six months to

identify the manosphere's most cross-referenced sites, with antifeminism as the baseline criterion. Such an inductive approach is helped, in particular, by the intensive hyperlinking that occurs between these sites (e.g., the r/TheRedPill subreddit, theredpillroom.blogspot.ie, AngryHarry.com, and Manosphere.com all link to a largely identical list of websites, blogspots, subreddits, and YouTube channels).

   The most frequently cross-referenced sites were selected for analysis, producing a list that was capped at thirty-eight, after which cross-referencing diminished significantly.[3] These sites were subsequently categorized using thematic qualitative analysis (Lindlof and Taylor 2010). The five key categories or interest groups identified as hubs of the manosphere were MRAs, men going their own way (MGTOW), pick up artists (PUAs)/game, traditional Christian conservatives (TradCons), and gamer/geek culture. It is important to note that, unlike the other categories listed, only a subsection of geek and gamer culture are part of the manosphere, and these communities exhibit some important communicative and ideological differences from the other categories. There is very little obvious concordance, for example, between TradCons and geek/gamer culture on topics such as marriage or abortion. Thus, while there is substantial overlap between most of the categories, not all of them intersect neatly, and many categories (e.g., MRAs and PUAs) exaggerate their differences in displays of infight posturing, in spite of the fact that their philosophies are almost identical. However, as O'Neill's (2015a) work demonstrates, some PUAs have a purely commercial investment in the seduction industry and are not engaged in MRA politics.

   Content samples of roughly equal size (one blog post, article, or discussion thread) were selected from each site, on the basis of what was most prevalent on a given site on the day of capture (i.e., the top thread or the main feature article), and subjected to critical discourse analysis. This allowed for the identification of rhetorical and ideological tropes, which cut across all of the categories identified.[4] These are prolific cross-fertilization, a highly personalized politics of emotion and a preoccupation with evolutionary psychology and high levels of ideological elasticity. These tropes not only signal significant departures from earlier iterations of masculinity politics but also point to important and often contradictory reformulations of antifeminist masculinities. The following is an attempt to identify and theorize these articulations of masculinity in relation to the political, ideological, and technological contexts from which they have emerged.

The Red Pill Men: Where Global, Local, and Regional Masculinities Converge

Firstly, the data indicate that the technological affordances of social media have radically increased the flow of antifeminist ideas and information across groups, platforms, and geographical boundaries. Hyperlinking to and reposting articles, blog entries, memes, and videos have enabled the rapid spread and homogenization of

MRA rhetoric throughout the Anglophone world and beyond. AVFM provides links to affiliates in twelve different countries, while the UK site AngryHarry. com contains links to a raft of mostly American groups and blogs, operating across a broad range of platforms, including Twitter and YouTube. The geekier/ r/TheRedPill subreddit, which links to nine other Red Pill-related subreddits, also provides links to more mainstream sites such as the Rational Male, Illimitable Men, Dalrock, Alpha Game, and The Red Pill Room. The most striking manifestation of this homogenization is the proliferation of red pill terminology, which started on the /r/TheRedPill subreddit dedicated to antifeminism and the defense of rape culture but which has subsequently spread into MRA and MGTOW spaces. Even the TradCon site Masculine by Design features a Red Pill tab, along with Bible studies, Christianity, game, sex, and never marry a woman over thirty (NMAWOT). This rapid propagation of Red Pill "philosophy" across multiple platforms demonstrates how a compelling cultural motif has succeeded in balancing emotion and ideology to generate consensus and belonging among the manosphere's divergent elements, and suggests that these assemblages have fused together in very similar ways to the affective publics described by Papacharissi (2014).

This prolific cross-fertilization of ideas is also strongly evident in discussions about Gamergate, which garnered widespread support from PUAs, MRAs, MGTOWs, and even TradCons, despite the fact that its antifeminist rhetoric is largely dominated by atheist and libertarian sensibilities. PUA Roosh V has used it as an opportunity to launch a gaming website called *Reaxxion*, devoted to hosting Gamergate's antifeminist propaganda, while Christian science fiction writer and game designer Theodore Beale (Vox Day) perceives it as symbolic in the fight against threats to Western values. According to Beale, "At this point, #GamerGate is about more than games now. It is a *Schwerpunkt* in the ongoing cultural war for the West."[5] This coalescence of diverse and transnational political sensibilities around affectively charged focal points such as Gamergate and The Red Pill calls to mind Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) call for greater recognition of the interplay among local, regional, and global masculinities. Moreover, these examples demonstrate how the rhetoric of free speech and antipolitical correctness can be used to serve both conservative Christian and atheist interests when the common enemy is perceived to be feminism.

Toxic Technocultures and the Politics of Sentiment

Besides transnational homogenization, the most striking features of the new antifeminist politics are its extreme misogyny and proclivity for personal attacks. This marks a significant departure from men's rights before social media or what Papacharissi (2014) terms "the rationally based deliberative protocols of public spheres," coupled with a clear move toward what Ahmed (2004) describes as "the cultural politics of emotion." It is common in MRA discussion threads for women to be

referred to as "cumdumpsters," "feminazis," "femtards," and "cunts." This is especially prevalent on 4/chan/b, on subreddits such as /r/TheRedPill, /r/MensRights,[6] and /r/MensRants, and on the anti-PUA site Sluthate.com. Interestingly, the mandatory anonymity associated with these geekier spaces is now increasingly evident on more mainstream forums such as AVFM or AngryHarry.com, where almost all commenters operate under pseudonyms.

Closely linked to this unchecked misogyny is an increasing shift away from activism and lobbying toward *ad hominem* invective and personalized, often spectacular, attacks on individual feminists. This has been most evident in the proliferation of death and rape threats made by men's rights advocates to female journalists, game developers, and games journalists. Contrary to mainstream media coverage, as Shannon Sun-Higginson's documentary *GTFO* (2014) demonstrates, hate campaigns against women and female gamers precede by several years the targeting of Zoe Quinn, which sparked the Gamergate controversy in August 2014. Originating mainly but not exclusively from the geek and gamer category, strategies include the mass filing of fake rape reports, hacking women's websites and Wikipedia pages, doxing (retrieval and online broadcasting of personally identifiable information), distributed denial of service attacks (attempts to incapacitate an online service by swarming it with traffic from multiple sources), using graphic porn as a weapon against women, and manipulating images. Cum tributes, known as "tribs," involve videoing the act of ejaculating on the photos of women's faces and uploading the video, often without consent. In 2012, self-described "feminist humiliator" Benjamin Daniel debuted an online game called Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian, which allowed players to punch and disfigure the Canadian feminist and media critic, while others made memes of her being raped by the game character Mario. At the time of data collection, Sarkeesian continued to be attacked across multiple manosphere platforms. The following comments, posted in response to an article in Tech News Today and linked on KokatuInAction, were typical:[7]

A: You don't understand. She has a vagina, so therefore is physically incapable of sin. She received the same amount of abuse and harassment as Jack Thompson, but her vagina entitled her to boatloads of money, while Thompson crashed and burned.

B: Not a day goes by that I don't get called a cunt on Twitter, and threatened with death. The affect on my health has likely been positive since I laugh at the idiots who send me death threats and correct their grammar. Perhaps attempting to navigate the world as an adult would help Neetie?

C: The difference between an adult woman and an insecure lying attention whore.

While Gamergate is strongly associated with Reddit, 4/chan, and the beta uprising, this shift toward the personal intimidation of women is not restricted to the manosphere's geek factions, as is evidenced by AVFM's publishing of a fake White

ribbon.org site in 2014. AVFM has also been involved in numerous cyberstalking campaigns, most famously of Canadian feminist Chanty Binx in 2013 by AVFM blogger Dan Perrins, with the result that her face has become ubiquitous in antifeminist memes (Futrelle 2016). Binx's case also demonstrates another key trope of the new antifeminism, namely, its appropriation as a platform for Islamophobia and racism. In January 2016, Richard Dawkins shared a cartoon video featuring Binx on Twitter with his 1.3 million followers. The video, entitled Feminists Love Islamists, was posted by notorious British antifeminist Sargon of Akkad and ended with Binx encouraging the "Islamist" to rape her. This perversion of intersectionality not only appeals to the Islamophobic sensibilities underpinning both atheist and Christian elements of the manosphere but it is also routinely used as a strategy to deny the existence of rape culture in the west and thus to recuperate the virtue of white Western masculinity. The following comments posted in response to an MRA YouTube video about the alleged Cologne attacks in January 2016 exemplify this discursive trope:

A: What's funny is Western women often treat men from their country like rape happy peons, but the moment they're in actual danger of sexual assault from men who were raised to actually see them as sex objects, then they want their "real men." Too bad ladies. Let's see how good having a man's balls in your purse will do you when Abdul Mohammed Yousef Camel Jockey tries to give you some "cultural enrichment" dribbling down your chin.

B: These women are not just getting non-con'd (raped), they're copping it in a truly diverse fashion—in the ass, mouth, and vag. And its all on themselves. Lube up, ladies, it's time for the diversification you've been asking for.[8]

This tendency toward personalized attacks supports the argument made by Papacharissi (2014) that emotion—in this case anger—is a key driver in the political coalescence of digitally networked publics. In an article posted on Return of Kings entitled "Top 10 Worst Female Role Models In The Entire World," Matt Forney opines that, "One of the most disturbing aspects of modern culture is the mainstream media's obsession with promoting slutty, corrupt, and untrustworthy women under the guise of 'empowerment.'"[9] Among the women listed are Hilary Clinton, Lena Dunham, Angela Merkel, Beyoncé, and Sheryl Sandberg. Also captured in the data were numerous threads on the /r/MensRights subreddit attacking British lawyer Charlotte Proudman and Australian feminist writer Clementine Ford. The following comments were posted on /r/MensRights in response to an article entitled "Man Who Called Feminist Writer Clementine Ford A 'Slut' On Facebook Loses Job":[10]

A: This bitch and all the other "feminist" whores like her are destined for a slow painful and lonely death. Because no self-respecting man worth his name will have anything to do with her except sex. And when she gets older as all women inevitably do, not even that.

B: Clementine forward needs to do more yoga and be less of an angry cunt.
     edit: how did I guess she would have gross tattoos?
C: What an incredible slut whore.

Taken together, the above findings indicate a marked shift from a predominantly political to a broadly cultural discourse, including a move toward more visual, video- and meme-based articulations of men's rights. This is accompanied by a greater preoccupation with men's personal relationships and psychological and emotional pain rather than with collective political action. While many men's rights sites still give advice about family law, their focus is intensely personal and anecdotal. As Andrejevic (2013) has argued, in an era of information overload, information sources and interpretative authority have been radically relativized, and systemic analysis is often subordinated to fact checking and "gut feelings." In this sense, most men's rights rhetoric functions less as a call to political action and more as a channel for the collective venting of anger.

To what extent, then, can these toxic practices be described as hegemonic? The data tell us nothing about Red Pillers' age, social class, or how they enact masculinity offline, allowing for the possibility that, in some instances, these may be subordinated masculinities performing forms of hegemonic masculinity online. In a recent Guardian article entitled "Swallowing the Red Pill: A Journey to Heart of Modern Misogyny," Stephen Marche (2016) asks, "Are we our real selves online or off? Is the screen the place where we indulge the fantasies that our offline selves would never dare? Or is the screen where we perform the truth of our being that that world of faces and consequences does not permit?" The question risks slipping into essentializing discourses of the "real self" and false dichotomies between the online world and "real life" as well as overlooking the fact that multiple and hybrid masculinities are regularly performed in different social contexts in order to maintain male hegemony (Demetriou 2001; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In this sense, it is irrelevant whether these masculinities relate to men's "real selves," as they have *both* the intention *and* the effect of reasserting male sexual and cultural dominance. That this might be achieved through exaggerated performances of misogyny and the simultaneous mobilization of tropes of victimhood is nothing new. As David Savran (1998) and others (Hanke 1998; Carroll 2011) have noted, the discourse of white male suffering has become a dominant trope in American culture and is a deliberate strategy to reinstate the normalcy of white male privilege through the articulation of its loss. This oscillation between hegemonic and subordinate patterns of discourse is especially evident in the manosphere's appropriation of evolutionary psychology, discussed in more detail below.

Alpha, Beta, and Zeta Masculinities

To the extent that they shared a common doctrine, pre-Internet men's rights groups relied mostly on sex role theory (Messner 1998). The political rhetoric of the

manosphere, by contrast, is almost exclusively dominated by evolutionary psychology, which relies heavily on genetic determinism to explain male and female behaviors in relation to sexual selection. Notwithstanding the objective limitations of evolutionary psychology, whose problematic influence has been noted across a range of social and cultural contexts (Ging 2009; O'Neill 2015b; Cameron 2015), the manosphere's engagement with this field is limited to the superficial interpretation and recycling of theories to support a recurring catalogue of claims: that women are irrational, hypergamous, hardwired to pair with alpha males, and need to be dominated. Moreover, these evolutionary biological concepts have been heavily masculinized and geekified to give rise to a uniquely misogynist, heterosexist, and racist lexicon, which includes terms such as cuck (a weak man whose girlfriend cheats on him, usually with black men), negging (giving backhanded compliments designed to undermine women's confidence), friendzoning (sexually rejecting a man because he is a friend), going caveman (sexually dominating a woman), zero night stand (having sex without staying the night), shit testing (see below), the bitch shield (female defense against unwanted male attention), and pawning (using attractive women to demonstrate high SMV or sexual market value). Although this terminology originated among the PUAs or seduction community, it is now prevalent across all categories of the manosphere as well as in mainstream Internet spaces such Urban Dictionary. In a typical article posted on /r/TheRedPill entitled "HumanSockPuppet's Guide to Managing Your Bitches,"[11] the original poster (OP) offers the following advice:

> Remember, women are children: mentally, behaviorally, and evolutionarily. They are not like us. They don't think like us or have the same deep sense of personal responsibility.
>
> Even the most sociopathic man will intuitively know when he has crossed a boundary and offended another man . . . . Evolving this instinct was the key to a man's ability to either strategically make enemies or avoid unwanted conflicts.
>
> Women, on the other hand, evolved no such instinct. On the contrary, women evolved the instinct to push a man's buttons as a way of testing his willingness to face conflict head-on (what we call shit testing). A man who is willing to fight against her will also fight *for* her. Likewise, a man who caves before her will most certainly cave before his enemies.

In a piece on the /r/mgtow subreddit entitled "Men ARE the primary victims of female nature," OP LonelyDalek recommends avoiding women completely on the grounds that they are hardwired not to care about men:[12]

> Women's nature is procreation oriented because it is their bodies that carry the wombs to gestate and deliver the next generation . . . In this paradigm of things, there is no incentive for the women to actually give a damn about the well-being of the man/men providing for her; in fact, it is in her best interest to not be attached to a single man in particular, but keep monkey branching to a stronger, better provider.

This turbocharged genetic determinism is most blatantly and consistently mani-fested, however, in the manosphere's confused and contradictory theories about alpha, beta, omega, and zeta masculinity. The most prevalent of these is "alpha fux beta bux," a key MRA and PUA argument positing that women seek alpha males for sex—or, as one commenter on Sluthate.com puts it, "They want the bad boy thugs who make their pussy tingle"[13]—but, due to scarcity, will settle for and financially exploit beta males. A version of this logic operates on the TradCon sites but is referred to as the "alpha widow" phenomenon, whereby women who have had sex outside of marriage will always be haunted by fantasies of their previous alpha male lovers and will never be satisfied by a beta male husband.[14] It is frequently argued by TradCons such as Dalrock that this is the main reason for marriage failure and divorce.

Responses to the alpha–beta conundrum are confused and contradictory. Some argue that men, having swallowed the red pill, should reject their beta status and strive to achieve alpha masculinity. Ironwood (2013), for example, claims that the mano-sphere is the key space in which alpha masculinity will be collectively revalorized, enthusiastically positing that, "The process has already begun. The Revolt of the Betas is at hand." According to AVFM's Paul Elam, however, alpha masculinity has been hijacked by feminists and is now part of the "gynocentric establishment." There is nothing to be gained, therefore, in aspiring to become "beta enforcers masquerading as alpha controllers." Paradoxically, he argues that feminism is the natural articulation of women's "raw, biological power," since women's choices determine the survival of the species. He calls on men to transcend biology by becoming zeta males, who do not fit into the current hierarchy. The zeta male is a sociosexual warrior, who "is emergent and unpolished and struggling to find his legs, but is doing so thanks to the fertile, safe ground, provided by, of all things, other emerging zetas on the Internet."[15]

The geek and gamer elements of the men's rights community have adopted a significantly different strategy regarding beta masculinity. These cultures rail against rather than aspire to the alpha males of jock culture, whom they refer to as chads, normies, and frat boys (Nagle 2015), and instead embrace self-deprecating identifiers such as "incel" (involuntarily celebate) and "betafag." This language of victimhood and aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2015) became especially pro-nounced in the rhetoric of the "beta uprising" and has been linked almost exclusively with 4/chan/. However, although the beta factions of the manosphere consider them-selves to be subcultural and perform complex linguistic and memetic boundary work (Miltner 2014) to establish their difference and to exclude women, "n00bs" and chads, their discourse of beta victimhood has spread back into the manosphere's mainstream MRA and MGTOW spaces. On most platforms, confused debates about alpha and beta masculinity prevail. As one Reddit commenter resignedly put it:

> Bringing red pill to the masses isn't going to fix society because every man can't be the "alpha" and just like feminists can't force men to be attracted to tattooed hambeasts with rainbow hair, TRP can't force women to be attracted to omegas and beta orbiters. TRP is about dealing with what *is*, not what we wish it was.[16]

It is difficult to take beta male claims to subordinated and marginalized masculinity seriously. Their extreme expressions of misogyny and racism and frequent engagement in hacking and doxing are clearly indicative of a desire to establish male hegemony in the online spaces they inhabit, even if they may lack such claims to power in off-line contexts. It seems more accurate, therefore, to describe them as hybrid masculinities, whose self-positioning as victims of feminism and political correctness enables them to strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously compounding existing hierarchies of power and inequality online (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). The concept of hybrid masculinity thus seems especially well suited to explaining the ways in which geek masculinity "both repudiates and reifies elements of hegemonic masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and, in particular, to how beta males may position themselves through radically different discursive practices in their online and offline lives.

Gay Brahs[17] and the Manosphere's Ideological Elasticity

This "dialectical pragmatism" (Demetriou 2001) is arguably at its most sophisticated in the deeply contradictory discourses around homosexuality that characterize the geek and gamer factions of the manosphere. While homophobic language is rife, the culture is generally accepting of homosexuality, as it is of any sexual expressions that are perceived to be transgressive. On a lengthy /r/TheRedPill thread entitled "Gay Men vs Feminism: An Unexpected Ally," both gay and heterosexual men profess antifeminist sentiments, frequently engaging both misogynistic and homophobic language that goes unchecked. The following comments are typical:

A: Anytime you have 2 or more gay guys, they either have or will attract some histrionic, overly dramatic fag hag orbiter that they *will* try to unload on your cock ASAP just to get her to leave them alone.

Easiest pussy ever or I'll eat crow.

B: RP gay men are truly our greatest allies. Your established victim status means that you can say shit that we couldn't say in a million years. You won't just get away with it; people will love you for it.

C: A gay man's ability to resist the lure of pussy has allowed us many of us to become wealthy and politically active. I truly believe gay people will play a pivotal role in resisting the feminist movement, just as lesbians played a key role in getting it started.

D: Hey. I'm gay too and I am a man first and foremost. I'm just glad to see that I'm not the only one here swallowing the red pill.[18]

According to Nagle (2015, 2016), beta males cannot be theorized as hegemonic on the basis that they are anticonservative, queer-friendly, and nonathletic. However, here we see masculinities conventionally described as subordinated (homosexuals) and

marginalized (geeks) mobilizing progay discourse in a bid to establish internal hegemony (Demetriou 2001) over women. Moreover, as Nagle (2016) herself argues, geek culture is on an upward trajectory in terms of its external hegemonic status:

> In the information age, the tastes and values of geeks are elevated above the masculine virtues of physical strength and material productivity that preceded them. Today, the market ideology of the information society is ascendant . . . and it is immensely comfortable with its cultural power, which means that it happily accommodates transgression, gender fluidity, self-expression, and an abundant choice of niche online subcultural identities.

Thus, while they may reject the conventional signifiers of more traditional variants of hegemonic masculinity, such as homophobia, physical prowess, and wealth-based status, it appears that these men are no less invested in achieving hegemony over women than their jock predecessors.

Significantly, this gay positivity among MRAs is not restricted to 4/chan and Reddit. The mainstream American men right's group AVFM boasts A Voice for Gay Men page, in which Paul Elam claims that gay men "are the original 'MGTOW,' which has always made them the object of ire in a culture where men are supposed to be indentured, not free to pursue life without the typical biological chains." These progay antifeminist discourses thus discredit Anderson's (2009) claim that a less homohysterical culture engenders more inclusive masculinities. On the contrary, gay positivity functions here to unite white, middle-class men, irrespective of sexual orientation, against feminism and other forms of "political correctness" that are perceived as threats to freedom of expression and, ultimately, to their social privilege. The ideological machinations of the manosphere serve as a stark demonstration, therefore, of how reduced homohysteria can happily coexist with extreme expressions of misogyny and racism, indicating that inclusive masculinity theory's concept of inclusivity is limited to white, middle-class men.

Conclusion

It is difficult to determine the extent to which the expressions of aggrieved entitlement that characterize the manosphere are genuinely felt and/or strategically motivated. Certainly, white male privilege has been disturbed by a number of well-documented factors; destabilization of the labor market and the alleged "feminization" of the postindustrial workplace (Messner and Montez de Oca 2005); downward mobility, wage stagnation, and underemployment (Kimmel 2015); and a growing recognition of the rights of women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender people, and people of color. What is clear from this analysis, however, is that these hybrid masculinities are increasingly adept at confounding certain gender expectations in their attempts to defeat feminism and secure various online spaces as homosocial. Their capacity for hybridization is enhanced not only by the transnational nature and technological affordances of social media, whereby

interest groups with similar agendas can more easily find one another though polarizing tropes such as the red pill, but also by the intense personalization of men's rights politics. Freed from older models of political consensus and rational debate, a new politics of emotion and individualism facilitates ever greater creativity, ideological fluidity, and strategic performativity. While the manosphere is by no means an ideologically homogenous bloc, accommodating much infighting between Christian and atheist, homophobic and progay, and pro- and anti-MGTOW and PUA elements, what is perhaps most striking is the way in which ostensibly contradictory masculine formulations—alpha, beta, jock, geek, straight, gay, Christian, and atheist—can coalesce around any number of contentious issues or flash point events when the common goal is to defeat feminism or keep women out of the space. What unites these multiple masculinities, then, is a common preoccupation with male hegemony as it relates to heterosexual—not homosexual—gender relations, whether that relationship is one of wishful identification with or strategic disavowal of the alpha male ideal.

The loose networks of the manosphere thus materialize and disband around connective conduits of sentiment (Papacharissi 2016), by mobilizing and reifying narratives of personal suffering to build affective consensus about an allegedly collective, gendered experience, namely men's position in the social hierarchy as a result of feminism. Given the ways in which these echo chambers function, most notably to exclude, intimidate, and spectacularly punish some women with a view to warning off all women (Siapera 2015), the issue is not whether there is a direct or meaningful correlation between the manosphere's articulations of antifeminism and the actual people who produce them. Rather it is in understanding the manosphere as a discursive system or network of systems and in seeking to determine the extent of the ideological, psychological, and material power it exerts. In 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt believed there was little reason to think that hybridization had become hegemonic at the regional or global level. However, the manosphere's transcendence of local, regional, and global categories and its capacity for discursive aggregation and amplification complicate this picture considerably: notwithstanding the Internet's considerable limitations as a functioning public sphere (Dean 2003), if women cannot work, represent themselves, or articulate gender-political opinion online without fear of hate speech or harassment, the outlook for gender equality and democracy generally is bleak. Unlike earlier, geographically specific formulations, the hegemony of hybrid masculinities in the manosphere cannot be contained or localized: they travel *to* whichever spaces they perceive as threatening male privilege and thus also exert a powerful chilling effect on the Internet's nonmanosphere spaces (Jane 2017, 4). In this sense, they at least threaten to become digitally hegemonic. Further ethnographic research is needed to explore this claim, both with adherents of these groups and with women whose online and offline lives and careers have been adversely affected. At present, however, it appears that masculinity politics have reached a deeply affective and toxic juncture, representing a significant threat to the capacity of digital feminisms and women generally to operate online.

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Notes

1. http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/manosphere
2. The Gamergate video game controversy began in August 2014 when game developer Zoe Quinn's former boyfriend published a blog post naming a list of men she'd allegedly slept with to promote her game Depression Quest. Although his allegations were false, this sparked a movement that continues to be framed as an ethical stance against corruption in the gaming media. Female gamers, journalists, and game developers are still receiving rape and death threats.
3. These were /r/KotakuInAction, /r/TheRedPill, /r/MensRights, /r/MensRants, 4/chan/b, Sluthate, Thunderf00t, PUAHate, Chateau Heartiste aka Roissy, Roosh V, Mystery, RSD Nation, Julien Blanc, Return of Kings, A Voice for Men, MensRights, MensRightsMovement, Stand Your Ground, Fathers 4 Justice, AngryHarry.com, Vox Day, Red Pill Philosophy, manosphere, MensActivism, TheAntifeminist, VivaLaManosphere, Puerarchy, The Rational Male, Illimitable Men, The Red Pill Room, MGTOW, Vox Day, Male Defender, Dalrock, Alpha Game, The Cydonian Signal, Things That We Have Heard and Known, and Masculine by Design.
4. This is a necessarily imperfect process as content is always changing and samples vary in both format (blog posts, videos, and discussion threads) and size.
5. Accessed October 30, 2014, http://voxday.blogspot.ie/2014/10/brad-wardell-sets-record-straight.html.
6. The /r/MensRights subreddit was included in a list of twelve websites in the spring 2012 issue of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Report in a section called "Misogyny: The Sites."
7. http://www.technewstoday.com/28193-tropes-vs-women-on-the-verge-of-close-down/, posted on /r/KokatuInAction, "Anita Sarkeesian's Tropes vs. Women series is "looking forward to its last few days," January 23, 2016.
8. Comments in response to YouTube Video "Thoughts on Cologne Germany" posted on subreddit https://www.reddit.com/r/MensRants on January 12, 2016 by MRMRising (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCEupFTYKG8, uploaded January 7, 2016).
9. http://www.returnofkings.com/78093/top-10-worstfemale-role-models-in-the-entire-world
10. Max Chalmers, New Matilda.com, https://newmatilda.com/2015/11/30/man-who-called-feminist-writer-clementine-ford-a-slut-on-facebook-loses-job/, November 30, 2015.

11. Accessed October 21, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/comments/3pltm2/humansockpuppets_guide_to_managing_your_bitches/

12. Accessed November 29, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW/comments/3urya2/men_are_the_primary_victims_of_female_nature/.

13. December 25, 2015 on thread "The reason we're INCEL" on Sluthate.com (http://sluthate.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=1007032).

14. https://dalrock.wordpress.com/?s=alphawidow

15. http://www.avoiceformen.com/men/the-plague-ofmodern-masculinity/

16. Thread entitled "I'm sick and fucking tired of men who enable women and their 'it's not my fault' bullshit victim complex," /r/TheRedPill, December 5, 2014.

17. Brah is a variant of bro, a now mainstreamed term for man or male friend, which has given rise to multiple neologisms (bromance, brojob, broner, etc.).

18. Gay Men vs. Feminism: An Unexpected Ally, /r/TheRedPill, January 30, 2015.

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