

Understanding the Manosphere: Risk, Reach, and Responses

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The manosphere

- A diverse ecosystem of online anti-feminist and male supremacist communities, influencers, and platforms
- Defined by:
 - A focus on men's issues, masculinity, and gender relations, and
 - A hostility towards women and feminism
- Including: Men's rights advocates (MRAs), Fathers' rights advocates, Incels, Pick-up artists, Men Going Their Own Way, and other "red pill" communities

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The manosphere

- Overlaps with *offline* male supremacist / 'men's rights' movements
 - Some of the manosphere's constituent parts have offline organisations, events, and advocacy
 - Others are predominantly digital

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How the manosphere is changing

- Mainstreaming
- The rise of influencers / manfluencers
- Commercialisation and monetisation
 - Manosphere grift: Tap into male insecurities, offer simplistic solutions, and monetise it all
- Cross-fertilisation
- Diversification

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What's wrong with the manosphere

- The manosphere is dangerous for women and children, limiting for men themselves, and harmful for communities
 - Focuses on defending and extending men's power over women and children
 - Shows a venomous hostility towards women
 - Attacks and silences women and feminist advocates and organisations
 - Is based on a fundamentally flawed analysis of men's lives and situations
 - Contributes to regressive ideological shifts among men

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What's wrong with the manosphere *cont'd*

- Harmful also to men and boys:
 - Fails to address actual forms of male disadvantage
 - Fails to provide support to men
 - Reinforces rigid gender norms that limit men
 - Promotes adversarial gender relations, distrust, and conflict
 - Harms men's health, dating and relationships

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The impact of manosphere ideologies and participation

- Manosphere influencers can impact men's attitudes:
 - Exposure to manfluencer content intensifies men's misogynistic attitudes
 - Manosphere ideologies and influencers may have shaped an increase in boys' and young men's sexual harassment, sexist abuse, and intimidation of female teachers and students
- Participating in manosphere communities can contribute to radicalisation:
 - Joining manosphere communities results in increases in the traits associated with radicalisation
 - These digital environments can serve as "both amplifiers of existing grievances and incubators of new masculine identities"
 - But some people who enter manosphere spaces are only tourists, while others become residents

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How men and boys come to participate

- Project, "The manosphere: pathways and patterns of participation", Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery grant, Deakin University
 - Associate Professor Joshua Roose
 - Professor Debbie Ging
 - Professor Michael Flood
 - Dr Benjamin Hemmings
 - Dr Vivian Gerrand
- Caveats:
 - Men's pathways and forms of participation are heterogeneous
 - This is not an exhaustive account of the dimensions of men's pathways to participation

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1) Young men's interests and connections to the manosphere

- Algorithmic recommendations from content on specific hobbies to manosphere content
- Collaborations between non-manosphere or manosphere-adjacent creators and manosphere figures
- Creators' own shifts towards manosphere content
- Manosphere discourses within interest communities

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2) Spectacles of hypermasculinity

- Performances of:
 - Extravagant wealth and lavish lifestyles
 - Intellect and persuasive skill
 - Muscular embodiment
- Appealing
 - In speaking to felt insecurities
 - As entertaining
 - As 'what men like'

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3) The affective pull of the manosphere

- The affective pull of manosphere content
 - Engaging in ways that feel thrilling and transgressive
 - Feeling anger
- Affective infrastructures, connecting individual grievances to wider insurgent political projects
- Affect as a key but ambivalent dynamic: it can draw individuals in and intensify their engagement, but can also create the fatigue that prompts them to leave

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4) Advice and information seeking

- Seeking information and advice
 - As a response to a sense of failure or inadequacy
 - In response to particular life events
- Including
 - Older men navigating family court systems and custody disputes
 - Men from migrant backgrounds, seeking familiar patriarchal norms or navigating unfamiliar Western contexts
- What kind of advice?
 - Including: advice on how to control or dominate women or find submissive partners
 - Validating feelings of grievance

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5) Recommender algorithms and the stickiness of manosphere content

- Manosphere content was frequently and consistently delivered to men via recommender systems.
- Once it entered men's algorithms, it often persisted
 - Even despite their efforts
- This 'stickiness' is a function not only of algorithmic design but also of commercial incentives
 - The political economy of the manosphere

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6) Friends and friendship

- Friends were a pathway to initial engagement in the manosphere
- Participation in the manosphere for some men was *homosocial* – a means for forming and maintaining bonds with other men
 - Watching, sharing, and debating manosphere content, trolling women, etc.

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What can be done

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What can be done: By governments and policy-makers

- Fund evidence-based prevention and gender equality programs
- Regulate digital platforms
- Invest in services that reduce isolation and insecurity
- Strengthen responses to online abuse and harassment
- Promote positive alternatives to manosphere content
- Challenge misogynist social norms
- Sustain investment in women's services and violence prevention

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What can be done: By technology and social media companies

- Increase transparency around algorithms
- Reduce amplification and monetisation of misogynistic content
- Strengthen content moderation
- Promote constructive alternatives to manosphere content

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What can be done: By schools and teachers

- Teach respect, healthy relationships and gender equality
- Build media and digital literacy
- Challenge rigid and patriarchal ideas about masculinity
- Promote caring, equitable and emotionally healthy forms of manhood and personhood
- Build empathy, emotional literacy and conflict-resolution skills
- Create cultures of belonging, equity and inclusion

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What can be done: By advocates and activists

- Speak to pain: acknowledge men's difficulties and offer better solutions
- Provide alternative male voices and models
- Challenge misogyny and anti-feminism
- Engage men as allies for gender equality
- Strengthen feminist and social justice movements

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What can be done: By parents

- Connection matters more than knowing every meme or acronym
- Talk openly about gender, relationships, consent and online experiences
- Build critical media literacy
- Challenge sexism and gender stereotypes
- Support boys' emotional development
- Teach that vulnerability, empathy and help-seeking are strengths

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Wider reflections

- Sexism is pervasive, not confined to the manosphere
 - Mundane and everyday sexist cultures and relations are present in a wide variety of online and offline spaces
- Some sexist dynamics in the manosphere reflect everyday sexism
- We must be vigilant about colluding with the manosphere's dodgy narratives
 - Men's 'unmet needs' may be based in patriarchal orientations and desires

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Reflections *cont'd*

- The problem is also among adult men
- Adult and older men:
 - Make up substantial proportions of manosphere participants
 - Draw on manosphere ideologies in adult institutions
 - Are influential architects of the manosphere
 - Use their economic resources, political capital, and organisational capacity to support broader cultural and political interventions
 - Also have anti-feminist and misogynist attitudes
- Concentrating primarily on boys and young men may mean we:
 - Miss important dimensions of the manosphere's workings and impacts
 - Miss important pathways to participation
 - Reinforce too narrow a scope for prevention efforts

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The challenge and the opportunity

- The manosphere is part of a wider backlash against feminism and social justice
 - It can worsen misogyny, violence, gender polarisation and authoritarianism
- But it is neither inevitable nor invincible
- We need to:
 - Challenge and regulate harmful online spaces
 - Build institutions based on respect, equality and care
 - Hold digital platforms accountable
 - Give boys and men purpose, connection and dignity
 - Promote compelling visions of healthy, equitable relationships and communities
- Harmful gender norms and inequalities have changed before. We can change them again

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Resources and further reading

- Mapping the Neo-Manosphere(s): New Directions for Research (Journal article, free): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1097184X25135027>
- Hustle, muscle and grift: how the manosphere has grown into a money-making machine (The Conversation): <https://theconversation.com/hustle-muscle-and-grift-how-the-manosphere-has-grown-into-a-money-making-machine-262432>
- Diverting boys and men from the manosphere: Resources: <https://xyonline.net/content/diverting-boys-and-men-manosphere-resources>
- Accessible commentaries and critiques: <https://xyonline.net/content/mens-rights-and-manosphere-collection-accessible-critiques>
- Scholarly critiques: <https://xyonline.net/content/mens-rights-and-mras-mens-rights-activists-academic-critiques>
- Further resources: <https://xyonline.net/category/article-content/mens-fathers-rights>
- Michael's writings & speeches: <http://www.xyonline.net/category/authors/michael-flood>

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