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5.1 The “Incel” Phenomenon in the Digital Era—How Echo Chambers have Fueled the Incel Movement

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Abstract

The “incel” phenomenon began after 2010 when like-minded young – mostly straight white – men started to share similar thoughts and worldviews on certain digital platforms and online forums leading to an exclusive community. The phenomenon is characterized by misogynism, racism and homophobia. The most extreme forms of the phenomenon have led to violent hate crimes. The aim of this paper is to understand this phenomenon and analyze it by applying the echo chamber theory.

Keywords: Incel movement, echo chamber, spiral of silence, exclusiveness, group identity, digitalization, online forums, social media, Alt-right, liberalism, violence, machine learning

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The incel culture is an exclusive online culture, usually shared by young, heterosexual and white men who are unable to engage in sexual relationships and have difficulties finding partners. The term “incel” is combined from the words “involuntary celibates”. The phenomenon became known to a larger public after the mass murders in 2014 and 2018 committed in the US and Canada. The term “incel” was already used in the 1990’s to describe people with difficulties in finding romantic love but the phenomenon itself and notably the violent attacks inspired by it, is rather recent. Today’s incel culture is characterized by self-pity, misogyny, racism, sexual frustration and it is sometimes seen as a part of the rise of the global extreme right. In this paper, our intention is to review the incel culture and to explore it with the help of the echo chamber theory. The central thesis of this theory is that Internet debates exist in enclaves individuals build around themselves. Our aim is to evaluate how this theory can explain the growth of incel culture. Lastly, we will introduce policy recommendations and solutions for the threats to which incel culture exposes our society.

1. Theory

To understand our point of view on the incel movement and especially echo chambers as the fueling phenomenon behind it, we should clarify some other concepts first. The first one is the spiral of silence, as formulated by a German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. The second one is the concept of critical mass. We start by outlining what Noelle-Neumann meant by the spiral of silence and how it is important in understanding recent developments, especially those regarding social media. The concept of critical mass helps us explain how social movements are not bound by the spiral anymore, and rather are blaring in chambers.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann came up with the idea of the spiral of silence to explain how there seemed to be a “last-minute swing” in German general elections. The Christian Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Party were at the time (1960’s and 1970’s) always neck and neck in general elections (Noelle-Neumann 1986, 2-3). Only the social democrats were openly showing their support, where the Christian democrats were shy to show which party they supported. When polls showed that a party was gaining momentum, the gap usually started to grow faster. This was not new per se, already known as the bandwagon effect or the last-minute swing.

Noelle-Neumann was interested in the initial stage before the people hopped on the bandwagon. Noelle-Neumann recognized that a fear of isolation was the force that set the spiral of silence in motion (Noelle-Neumann 1986, 6). People are content when on the winning side, but if your opinions belong to the minority, it requires strong self-esteem and confidence to state them aloud. Saying no is more difficult than staying silent. In addition, as staying silent can be interpreted as an agreement, it is also the more tempting option. (Noelle-Neumann 1986, 7). To understand how the spiral of silence might curb people from speaking their mind, one needs to appreciate

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that people are usually aware of public opinion. Whether they agree or not with the majority, people are good at recognizing what the dominant opinion is.

Noelle-Neumann has identified three elements to public opinion that help explain the spiral of silence (1986, 62-63): “1) The human ability to realize when public opinion grows in strength or weakens; 2) the reactions to this realization, leading to either more confident speech or to silence; 3) the fear of isolation that makes most people willing to heed the opinion of others.” On these premises, Noelle-Neumann builds her understanding of public opinion: “opinions on controversial issues that one can express in public without fear of isolation.” (Noelle-Neumann 1986, 62-63).

Mark Granovetter formulated a threshold model of collective behavior, in which he explains how people make their decisions to join collective action or to abstain from it. Granovetter’s idea is that individuals’ decisions always have costs and benefits. In addition, we can classify people according to their perceived radicalness or conservativeness (Granovetter 1978, 1422). We do not need to define radicalness/conservativeness in detail, as it is a perceived attribute. The idea is that some people are pioneers while others need a differing number of forerunners before they hop on the bandwagon. Assuming that there are enough people, this kind of behavior will lead to a domino effect (Granovetter 1978, 1424).

The model, as formulated by Granovetter, resembles critical mass theory from physics. In order for social movements to originate and grow, a critical mass of people is required. This requirement might have been hard to achieve in the past, but the technological advances have made it much easier nowadays. The digital revolution has opened new opportunity windows for social movements. No matter how niche your agenda is, the social media platforms allow people to establish contact with the like-minded. In other words, the platforms make it easier to gather the critical mass, which can break the spiral of silence. As communication has grown more global, the spiral of silence has lost some of its relevance. This does not mean that the model is wrong, only that the domain where it is applicable has shrunk. As one may have observed, in the digital era it is not so meaningful to explain the world by silence. Rather, a constant noise and row is what define our social media platforms.

Cass Sunstein has explored the mechanisms of group identity, polarization and Internet behavior in his book *#Republic – Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (2017). He cites Marshall Van Alstyne’s and Erik Brynjolfsson’s working paper *Electronic Communities: Global Village or Cyberbalkans* from 1996 (!): “Because the Internet makes it easier to find like-minded individuals, it can facilitate and strengthen fringe communities that have a common ideology but are dispersed geographically. ...In many cases, their heated dialogues might never have reached critical mass as long as geographical separation diluted them to a few parts per million” (Sunstein 2017, 65). The Internet era has changed the social dynamics definitively. A perception of shared group identity, which is now easier to achieve,

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strengthens the influence of others’ views on oneself. In the case of unshared identity, this effect might even disappear altogether.

Sunstein talks about echo chambers, by which he means enclaves that we build around ourselves. These echo chambers are paramount in understanding how group polarization and radicalization work online. By filtering and gravitating toward like-minded people online, we are insulating ourselves from differing opinions. This alone is not necessarily dangerous, but in some cases, it leads to extremism. If individuals are only exposed to arguments from like-minded people, it easily leads to individuals adopting more and more extreme positions. It also makes the groups increasingly homogenous (Sunstein 2017, 69).

In the case of the incel movement, these dynamics have already led to violence. This process is not easily reverted, although some people might abandon the movement once it has resorted to violence. According to Sunstein the most important reason for group polarization and extremism lies in the exchange of new information. Polarization happens as people spread information that is skewed in a predictable direction. (Sunstein 2009, 21) Information per se is not dangerous, quite the contrary. However, the echo chambers as understood by Sunstein, significantly limit the argument pool. (Sunstein 2017, 72)

Another mechanism, which accelerates group polarization, converges with the ideas of Noelle-Neumann. People want to be perceived favorably in their communities, the opposite of isolating oneself. This drives people to adjust their position to match the dominant position (Sunstein 2017, 73). Here the dominant position can be understood as public opinion in Noelle-Neumann’s sense. Marc Sageman, a scholar on terrorism, describes how Islamic radicalization on the Internet can also be explained through echo chambers. Sageman also emphasized interactivity among community members. In his example a “bunch of guys’ acted as an echo chamber, which progressively radicalized them collectively to the point where they were ready to collectively join a terrorist organization” (Sageman 2008, 116).

Group polarization is a vicious cycle. The mechanisms described above, and our social nature combined with the features of the Internet, particularly anonymity, can easily lead to unintended consequences and violence. Our desire for conformity can act as a soundboard for even the most absurd comments online. The dangers are real and already concrete.

2. The incel culture in general

According to the article “Our Incel Problem,” by Zack Beauchamp (2019), the incel phenomenon originates from the late 1990’s when a lonely teenager decided to start an online group for those who are like-minded: lonely, introverted and awkward – especially with girls. The article states that this group eventually grew into a larger community and the members of this community started to call themselves incels, as they were all in, as they would put it, an involuntary celibacy.

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As the years went by, the incel community grew larger. It also changed drastically. The incels were filled with more and more hatred, mostly towards women and those men, who could get the woman they wanted. According to Beauchamp (2019), incels think that 20% of the population are made up of attractive men who have their way with women and who they call Chads. The article says that incels also think that 80% of all women are only interested in Chads. Then, there is a smaller group of beautiful women, who incels call Stacys. Stacys will only consent to have sex with Chads, and usually incels are most angry with them. According to Beauchamp’s article, incels place themselves at the very bottom of their hierarchy of attractiveness. Between incels and Chads, there are several groups, such as “betas”, “cucks” and “normies”.

The incel ideology very much focuses on race and other external characteristics (Beauchamp 2019). For example, according to Beauchamp (2019), incels have different names for Chads of different races. Chad itself is usually used for Caucasian men, Tyrone for black men, Chang for East Asian men, Chadpreet for South Asian men, and Chaddam for Arab men. Incels always focus on the way people look, believing that women care only about the looks and incels remain in celibacy because of their looks.

In the 2010’s the incel phenomenon changed remarkably as the radicalization of certain incel individuals escalated to the point where these frustrated and angry men started to act extremely violently. The first attack that can be considered as an incel attack occurred in 2014 when Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen others in Santa Barbara, California (Duke 2014). Duke says that before this vicious crime Rodger also did other, milder things to act out his frustration and anger. He, for example, splashed coffee over a young couple he saw kissing at a Starbucks. According to Duke’s article this happened in 2011, three years before the actual attack, but already then Rodger was filled with anger. Rodger wrote that: “When they left the store I followed them to their car and splashed my coffee all over them. The boy yelled at me and I quickly ran away in fear. ... I had never struck back at my enemies before, and I felt a small sense of spiteful gratification for doing so” (Duke 2014). It is clear that Rodger’s state of mind was not just sad and lonely, but something more serious than that.

Rodger has been regularly praised by other incel extremists for his so-called belief and courage to punish all of the popular people and young couples who had done him wrong for finding love, the way he did not. For example, according to Beauchamp (2019) he is often praised on online incel platforms, as well as by another incel who ended up committing a vicious incel attack, Alek Minassian. Beauchamp (2019) also says that this is because of the manifesto Rodger wrote. This is what separates him from other hate crime perpetrators against women: he actually explains his motives and justifies them in his manifesto. Beauchamp (2019) states that Rodger was the first one to use the term incel in relation to a violent crime. This also changed the incel community, as a lot of moderate incels did not approve of Rodger’s actions.

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After Rodger, there have been several other incel attacks. For example, in 2015, Chris Harper-Mercer killed nine and injured seven before killing himself in a shooting in Roseburg, Oregon (Collins & Zadrozny 2018). In 2018, Nikolas Cruz killed seventeen people and injured seventeen. He, too, praised Rodger by writing that “Elliot Rodger will not be forgotten” (Collins & Zadrozny 2018). These are only the crimes with the most victims. In addition, there have been several other incel attacks where the committing incel had one to a few victims, with the same motives as Rodger’s. Some of them even praised him or have written their own manifestos explaining their acts.

Beauchamp (2019) states that the most crucial event that wholly changed the incel phenomenon occurred in April 2018. Back then, Alek Minassian, who called himself an incel, drove a van specifically targeting pedestrians. He ended up killing ten and injuring sixteen. Most of his victims were women. It was clear that this horrible attack was indeed caused by radicalized incel culture, since the attacker published a post on Facebook after the attack, hailing the beginning of the “Incel Rebellion” (Williams 2018).

According to Beauchamp (2019), the incel community has become unrecognizable in the past twenty years. In the 1990’s the community was supportive and there were also women who helped the insecure men to talk to women and get over their anxiety. Now, according to Beauchamp’s article, the incel community has become a toxic, misogynist and extremist group of almost entirely men, who blame women for their own romantic problems.

The incel community is quite heterogeneous one. It mostly consists of men, but there are also some women posting regularly on incel forums. It is quite ironic that, according to Beauchamp (2019), the very first incel community was actually founded by a woman. In college, she started to identify as bisexual and her whole dating life had been very awkward and distressing for her. When she managed to find a person she loved, she wanted to help others to do the same, and so she founded her own website on involuntary celibacy (Beauchamp 2019).

Incel men are a heterogeneous group as well. Like with almost every ideology or belief, some people are more extreme than others. Beauchamp (2018) states that many members of the incel community are simply sad and lonely men, who might be depressed or have anxiety in social situations. Even though the community includes extremists who are willing to kill people just to punish all women, most of its members are just regular men. According to Beauchamp (2018), some of these more moderate incels have also worked with police in more serious crimes that other incels have committed or were planning to commit.

Today the incel community is very broad, functioning in several different places online. It is indeed more like several communities rather than just one. The most significant and popular online platforms for incels to communicate seem to be Reddit and 4Chan. They are both anonymous online platforms. According to Hauser’s (2017) article, Reddit has banned an incel thread on grounds of their new policy that

states that “content that encourages, glorifies, incites, or calls for violence or physical harm against an individual or a group of people” will be banned. These online platforms are usually moderated but it is very difficult to moderate such a large group night and day. This is also one of the main issues concerning the incel phenomenon.

3. Previous research on the incel movement

In her article, Adrienne Massanari (2017) considers how the community site Reddit has become a hub for anti-feminist activism. Reddit was also one of the main hubs for incels before the site started to actively moderate content that glorifies or encourages violence against individuals or groups of people (Zimmerman et al. 2018). Massanari (2017) shows how Reddit’s design, algorithm and platform politics supported “toxic technocultures” that came to public awareness for example during the “Gamergate”. Toxic technocultures use actively different sociotechnical platforms as a channel of coordination and harassment as well as attacks against certain individuals or groups of people. In other words, these communities can be understood as a form of cyberbullying. The communities take advantage of websites and platforms where there is less control, rules and regulations and where users’ anonymity is protected.

According to Stephanie Baele et al. (2019), the incel online community is part of a broader anti-feminist and misogynist movement. Generally, the movement defends crimes on women, whereas incels represent an extreme position in this ideological landscape. According to Zimmerman et al. (2018), incels are one aspect of a growing ideology of violent masculinity that has grown significantly, especially on the Internet. Baele et al. (2019) argue that different Internet platforms have enabled the formation and radicalization of the incel community through echo chamber dynamics. The Internet provides platforms where individuals are able to discuss and relate as well as recognize themselves as incels and to learn the essential features of the culture (e.g. the incel slang).

Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019) argue that the online community of incels originated from the pick-up artist community that teach online networks of heterosexual men how to seduce women. According to Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019), men who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to become pick-up artists, usually end up in the online communities of incels. They point out that incels are a networked set of actors who feed each other with misogynistic conceptions and content. The feelings of loneliness and other emotional issues are not new phenomenon amongst men, but incels have successfully used modern technology to connect with each other, to inspire as well as to encourage each other to share misogynistic ideas and to act violently towards women.

Baele et al. (2019) have analyzed the worldview shared by participants of the incel movement. For their analysis, Baele et al. studied the narratives used in the online incel forums (particularly on Incels.me). The analysis shows that incels use similar narratives to other extremist worldviews. Incels have created “outgroups” (e.g. Alphas, Chads, women) that are extremely negatively depicted and an “ingroup” (e.g.

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ugly men) that is positively talked about. The general narrative within the incel communities is that the members of the ingroup have positive psychological traits and prosocial values which the members of outgroups do not have. Incels also use and share flawed scientific data and statistics to support their arguments as well as to create polarization between the outgroups and the ingroup.

What is typical for incels is that they use the language and forms of warfare, revolution and terrorism to defend patriarchal values. Similar to other extremist movements, the incel movement has its own heroes and martyrs. These declarations of war are a new dimension in the violence against women (Bratich & Benet-Weiser 2019). Baele et al. (2019) point out that authorities are increasingly taking the relationship between incels and violence seriously.

Zimmerman et al. (2018) argue that the nature of the incel attacks are a form of terrorism. Therefore, the incel ideology should be considered as a form of violent extremism. They also point out that history has shown an undeniable link between misogyny and violence. For example, the Islamic State is largely based on the dominance of men, which is also actively highlighted in the ideology’s recruitment materials. There are also many other cases where a link between misogyny and violent attacks has been found.

Obviously, not all incels are willing or able to carry out violent attacks. However, the ideology actively promotes violent solutions, which makes members of the incel communities dangerous actors and increases the probability that they will be amenable to broader extremist recruitment tactics (Zimmerman et al. 2018). Also, Baele et al. (2019) find that the widespread support for violence is prevalent in the incel communities. However, according to Beale et al., what sets incel ideology apart from many extremist groups is that incels do not particularly look for societal change to motivate their violence. Violent attacks are rather a reaction to the constant oppression and abuse perceived by incels. This is mainly due to the nihilistic nature of the incel communities, which makes community members more likely to harm themselves than to take violent action on others to change their social environment. On the other hand, Zimmerman et al. (2018) argue that incels see themselves as “victims of oppressive feminism, an ideology which must be overthrown, often through violence”.

Bratich and Banet-Wiser (2019) argue that incels are, above all, the result of failure. Prevailing neoliberal ideas promote that achieving success requires mastering certain technical skills, such as picking up women. Incels fail to master these skills and to “entrepreneurialize themselves” to be able to attract women, which leads to failures in picking up women and, eventually, to the loss of confidence. As Baele et al. (2019) put it, incels have created different social categories for individuals (such as Chads and Stacy’s) that are seen constant and unchanging. In other words, incels believe that individuals cannot climb the social hierarchy ladder. This is why incels, as the lowest group in the hierarchy, are unable to form any romantic or sexual relationships with women. According to Bratich and Banet-Wiser (2019),

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neoliberalism itself cannot manage its failures since incels are unable to restore their confidence and wind up behaving hostile towards women.

Vito et al. (2017) have studied the relationship between the concepts of masculinity and violence. Their study focuses on analyzing Elliot Rodger’s online manifesto. Vito et al. argue that because of his characteristics (such as short height, muscle weakness), Rodger felt that he did not meet the standards of masculinity that were imposed on him by society. He also did not receive societal confirmation of his masculinity despite his efforts (e.g. spending time doing his hair). Rodger went through a crisis of masculinity and started to direct his feelings of anger toward those who he thought were lower on the social hierarchy, particularly women. He then adopted a violent and “true” masculinity to prove his manhood.

As stated above, the incel communities have praised Rodger’s actions, and he is still considered a hero in the incel online communities (Vito et al. 2017). Rodger can be seen as a part of the incels’ “lineup of ‘Saints’” that includes members of the community who have engaged in violent attacks for the good of the ideology (Baele et al. 2019). Vito et al. (2017) argue that the worship of Rodger in the online communities indicate that, just like Rodger, many incels feel pressure to uphold hegemonic masculinity standards. Maintaining hegemonic masculine ideals put us all at risk of violence, which should be recognized especially with regard to younger generations.

4. Analysis

In this part, we will discuss the question of the echo chambers fueling the incel movement in the digital era. How well suited is the theory to explain this phenomenon? What kind of criticism has the theory faced? Will the echo chamber theory help us understand better the emergence and the dynamics of the incel movement?

The echo chamber theory, as discussed in the earlier sections, includes the idea of online discussions taking place in closed “chambers”, where people surround themselves with others sharing the same thoughts and values as them. This theory has not been applied to the research of the incel culture before. According to Karlsen et al. (2017) the echo chamber theory has been criticized for not being sufficiently able to explain the logic of online debating and behavior in general. According to this research, people tend to become more certain about their own opinions after Internet debates with those who disagree with them (Karlsen et al. 2017).

One could ask whether incels actually try to avoid different opinions or whether they seek out and then attack different opinions and the people presenting them. The idea of the trench warfare dynamics of online debates presumes that the opposite opinions and arguments actually fortifies individuals’ existing opinions. Also, if the opinion or belief of someone is already very intense, so is that person’s will to defend it. (Karlsen et al. 2017)

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There are many examples of incels trying to actively silence unwanted people, e.g. women, by using aggressive messages and insulting language towards them (Jaki et al. 2019). There are also many occasions where incels have found women outside their own community and platforms and attacked them verbally. Is this just an outcome of being surrounded by similar thoughts, as in an echo chamber, or is it something more?

In addition, the idea of the spiral of silence seems to be inadequate to explain the incel movement. As mentioned in the previous section, the main argument is that people tend to stay silent rather than reveal their divergent opinions since they are afraid of becoming isolated from the rest of society. Yet the basis of the incel movement is the shared experience of not-belonging and already being in a way isolated from the world of Chads.

We can see a broader pattern of growing misogyny in the past years (Jaki et al. 2019). The movement can be seen as part of our popular culture, appearing in the language used by politicians, in justifications for changes in abortion legislation, as well as in terrorist attacks towards women. Feminist theory sees the incel culture as part of a larger rise of old-fashioned patriarchy (Higgins 2018). We could view these cultural patterns as not just a part of the incel culture, but actually a very fundamental feature of the movement.

The misogynist idea of women being especially the sexual property of men can be tracked back to the Victorian era (Collins 2018-2019). The idea that men have the access to the female body whenever they feel like it, is something very much underlying in the incel culture, too, and thus seems not to be something particular just for the digital era. In their essay, Brooke Collins brings up the prospect of violence against women committed by incels as not something new and unusual in our societies. Instead, Collins sees patriarchal violence towards women, who challenge their designated sexuality and sexual roles, as a phenomenon that has existed for centuries. A crucial part of the incel culture is the notion of something utterly wrong with the free choice of women and the free expression of female sexuality. Incels see men as inherently superior to women, and women existing only for the sexual pleasure of men (Collins 2018-2019). The new digital tools have of course helped spread these ideas, but can we say they have fueled them? Is the increased number of misogynist attacks inspired by others online or by normalizing the misogynist language everywhere else in society? This might be the crucial question in understanding the incel culture and in evaluating whether the echo chamber theory explains it: do misogynist ideas spread in echo chambers, or is society accepting this type of language more generally, at other levels, as well?

Some scholars have argued that the incel culture is part of the rising alt-right movement in the US and elsewhere. This is a complex phenomenon entangled with evangelical Christianity, corporate interests and media, e.g. the 4chan forum (Michelsen & De Orellana 2019). But there can be seen a correlation between the rise of the extreme right and the increasingly violent incel culture. It is important to notice

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that even though not all mass killings in, for example, North America, are committed by incels, Bratich and Banet-Weisen point out: “since 2007 in North America, many mass killings have been claimed by them [incels], and almost all are White” (Bratich & Banet-Weisen 2019).

It seems not adequate to look at the incel culture as a separate movement of lonely men isolated from the rest of society. The alt-right movement sees cultural liberalism as a hegemonic ideology which the members of the movement want to resist. The main focus is not only to form a group identity by sharing misogyny and other kind of hatred towards different groups of people, but the movement is about resilience and resistance (Michelsen & De Orellana 2019). The incel movement seems to be a part of this broader “critique” or “resilience” towards cultural liberalism, focusing primarily on its gender ideology. Incels accuse the modern gender ideology of disrupting human nature and their resistance is shown e.g. in the language and words they use, such as “feminazi” (ibid). The idea of resistance and resilience seems to be something more active than just staying in a chamber listening to one’s similar thoughts and views echoing from the walls.

Nonetheless both the Alt-Right and incel cultures use the same platforms – e.g. 4chan and Reddit – as well as similar language, memes and other shared cultural concepts (Daniels 2018). There have been far-right extremist terrorist attacks wherein the attacker has explicitly named the Internet as being an important element in their radicalization (Quek 2019). On the other hand, far-right ideology is generally based on perceiving a threat (ibid.). Can we say the same about the incel culture? At the end, the Internet has been an important element in spreading the extreme ideas of these two phenomena and it has enabled the attackers to share their thoughts and manifestos with a broader audience. In the most unfortunate occasions, this has inspired more mass murders. The importance of the different online platforms must not be underestimated when researching the incel culture. But are the ideas formed online and then spread elsewhere, or is the Internet just another location where growing misogyny and far-right ideology can be spread?

5. Policy recommendations

Based on our analysis there are a number of policies that could be applied in order to tackle the incel phenomenon. To clarify, the problem that these policies could fix refers to the social conditions where certain individuals feel such anger and resentment towards the surrounding society and its members that they would resort to extreme, violent measures, not the phenomenon itself per se. As our main argument was that echo chambers fuel the phenomenon, the solutions lie in the digital platforms’ handling of these chambers. In this case, reductionist strategies would be appropriate, and enhancing community rules and moderation on these digital platforms should be considered.

The problem is that even though these platforms, for example Reddit and 4chan, are monitored and moderated, this is quite difficult because even as a comment

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or a thread is moderated another one pops up. These platforms are usually based on unilateral moderation, which means that a few community members are chosen to act as moderators and go through the conversations. They can use “automoderation” as a tool to help them make their job more efficient. This basically means that moderators can apply filters, i.e. key words to find comments that do not follow community guidelines (Renfro 2016). These filters are easy to trick, however, by using euphemism or slang – something that is already common in the incel community – making them less efficient.

Some anonymous digital platforms, such as Jodel, have used user moderation. This means that a significant portion of community members are given moderation rights who then review reported posts. The moderators’ decisions are based on the post at hand, not the user. A moderation algorithm then calculates how many moderators are needed to reach a decision and there is always a minimum number of moderators needed – no moderator can decide alone whether the post is banned or not (Jodel 2017). User moderation is an intriguing idea, but even though Jodel has had positive experiences with this system, it would not be a suitable solution to tackle the incel issue, as the main problem is that like-minded people gather in their own threads or platforms.

Automatic filters are also in use in some digital platforms, for example Facebook. However, automatic filters can be seen as too restricting, as these platforms rely on the content users create. Hence, automatic moderation is seen as a way to diminish users’ freedom and democracy in the platform (de Zwart 2018). If community rules and standards are clearly stated, we would not regard automatic moderation as a problem. However, if we consider the incel phenomenon, this might not be the most efficient solution: we have seen in the past that if one platform gets too restrictive, users will find another platform (for example when the more radical incels moved from 4chan to 8chan, which then later got shut-down altogether).

When it comes to the reductionist approaches, we still consider the use of algorithms and machine learning as tools to moderate digital platforms more efficiently to offer the best solutions for the more extreme forms of the incel phenomenon. The popular anonymous platform Reddit has already implemented some machine learning tools to support their moderation, but these are merely tools that helps prioritize more urgent reports (Robertson 2019). Reddit also took action when it comes to enhancing community guidelines, as when they implemented a new policy and banned one popular incel thread (Hauser 2017). Together with clear community rules, the continuous evaluation of the adequacy of the rules, as well as the wider use of algorithms and machine learning, we believe that the most extreme forms of the incel phenomenon can be more easily detected and in the best-case scenario violent hate crimes can be prevented.

However, as our analysis stated, digital platforms do not fully explain the incel phenomenon even though they work as means to spread the incel message and, in worst cases, manifestos before mass killings. It is important to consider the

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moderation of these platforms but as surrounding society plays a significant role in creating an environment where misogyny and hate speech is tolerated, an even better way to answer the problem are more holistic policies considering society as a whole.

Zimmerman et al. (2018) suggest that misogynistic ideology ought to be addressed with the same seriousness as other forms of violent extremism. Violent attacks by incels have often been dismissed in the media as random acts of violence. Even at the government level – especially in the United States – attacks have been claimed to be the result of mental illness if the perpetrator was a white male. This discourse needs to change in order for the phenomenon to be taken seriously. Zimmerman et al. (2018) encourage implementing policies against hate speech and clearly sanctioning people who try to incite violence or harm against others with their speech. It is one thing to have your thread deleted from Reddit where you can anonymously write basically anything, but quite another to have a real fear of the authorities getting involved. However, it is hard to see these kinds of restrictive policies being implemented in the land of the free. If we consider the United States, a more appropriate policy recommendation would be stricter gun control. Zimmerman et al. (2018) suggest that one option could be closing background check loopholes that make it possible for individuals who are prohibited from buying guns to purchase them anyway.

Another way to approach the incel phenomenon is through education. Some aspects of the ideology might be addressed in schools by trying to curb misogynist ideas in the early stages rather than trying to block conversations on online platforms later on. This would demand changes in the curriculum and encouraging diverse dialogue in the classrooms. Education could also address the importance of healthy sexual culture and healthy ways of expressing one’s sexual needs. Healthy sexual culture could also be promoted at a societal level, by for example making sex toys and dolls more available and the use of them more accepted. This could be done through sexual education in schools as well as promotional campaigns lead by NGO’s or the government. The government could also address the issue of loneliness among young men by subsidizing different services that offer physical engagement. “Hug as a service” is already a popular concept in the United States (Tikkanen 2017) and the government could promote similar, non-sexual, low-threshold services.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered how digitalization has fueled misogynist movements over the last ten years. In the digital era, different misogynist movements have blended into the incel culture that is characterized by hostile behavior towards women and resistance to liberal values. It is evident that women have been subject to harassment and violence throughout history. However, technological development has created platforms where like-minded individuals can share their views and see themselves as communities. These online platforms often work as echo chambers where certain ideas are reinforced and opposing opinions are suppressed.

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Following the development of different online platforms, misogynist communities have taken more organized and extreme forms. Over the last few years, communities have shifted from words to action and many violent attacks have been committed by individuals who identify themselves as members of incel communities. In many cases, decision-makers, public and scholars have brought up the responsibility of online platforms in these violent actions. Some platforms have changed their policies towards stricter moderation (e.g. Reddit), whereas some platforms have been completely removed (e.g. 8chan).

We find that platforms' stricter moderation policies can diversify discussion to some extent, which in turn, could reduce the most extreme views and actions. However, we have also found that incels have been able to reorganize from one platform to another when moderation policies were changed. This also indicates that incels are particularly looking for echo chambers, where they can express their opinions freely. Therefore, echo chambers theories alone do not completely explain why the incel movement has grown so rapidly over the last ten years.

We discovered that the incel culture is closely related with broader movement that resists prevailing liberal culture. The so-called alt-right movement also has its roots in online communities from which it has found its way into public debate. We find that closing or strongly moderating online platforms, that work as echo chambers, will not tackle the issues that are the building blocks of these movements. Decision-makers need a deeper understanding of how surrounding society creates an environment wherein certain group of individuals feel anger towards other groups. A better understanding of these issues will guide us to find solutions through different policies and education.

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