

HOW ANTI-FEMINISM FUELS ONLINE HATE AND SECTION 230 SHELTERS IT

BY RACHEL GUY*

Hate proliferates online. The substance of hate online is not novel; the internet is merely the newest ‘location’ for age-old bigotries. Over the last decade, the manosphere has become a central hub for much of this enmity—growing in prominence through increased online engagement and scholarly attention.¹ The manosphere is a loose network of men’s interests and alt-right groups interacting across online platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, 8chan and others.² The group got its name for its focus on men’s societal and interpersonal grievances.³ The content is a mix of self-help and increasingly extremist indoctrination: groups trade advice on getting what they want out of women (usually sex and affirmation of their power), debate conspiracy theories, share manifestos and memes, and generally stoke each other’s feelings of injustice.⁴

What is remarkable about the manosphere is the slew of disparate ideologies that unite under its banner. It is comprised of such ideologically divergent groups as Men Going Their Own Way (who advocate for a positive masculine identity not reliant on relationships with women), Pick-Up Artists (or PUAs, who dehumanize women and treat them as sexual targets to be acquired by emotionally disinterested men with ‘game’), and TradCons (or Traditional Conservatives, who envision an ideal masculinity in the restoration of traditional patriarchal values and domestic structures).⁵ More seriously, the manosphere also encompasses—and the aforementioned groups overlap with—alt-right and white nationalist groups, meaning that men frequently escalate from anti-woman sentiment to other extreme and racist views.⁶ The objectives of these groups rarely align. The individuals who interact on the manosphere do not have monolithic politics, and despite the large overlap in the pursuit of sexual partners, they do not all promote the same goals and strategies.⁷ Some advocate for political change, while others preach political abstinence and self-improvement.⁸

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¹ See Debbie Ging, *Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere*, 22 MEN AND MASCULINITIES 638, 639–40 (Oct. 2019).

² *Id.* at 638.

³ *Id.*

⁴ See Helen Lewis, *To Learn About the Far Right, Start With the ‘Manosphere’*, THE ATLANTIC (Aug. 7, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/08/anti-feminism-gateway-far-right/595642/>.

⁵ See HOPE NOT HATE, STATE OF HATE 2019: PEOPLE VS THE ELITE? 39 (Nick Lowles & Jemma Levene eds., 2019); ALICE MARWICK & REBECCA LEWIS, MEDIA MANIPULATION AND DISINFORMATION ONLINE 7, 14–15 (2017), https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline-1.pdf.

⁶ See generally MARWICK & LEWIS, *supra* note 5.

⁷ See Ging, *supra* note 1, at 640.

⁸ See Alexandra Krendel, *The Men and Women, Guys and Girls of the ‘Manosphere’: A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Approach*, 31 DISCOURSE & SOC’Y. 607, 609 (2020); Helen Lewis, *To Learn About the Far Right, Start With the ‘Manosphere’*, THE ATLANTIC (Aug. 7, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/08/anti-feminism-gateway-far-right/595642/>.

The dogma uniting these men is hate. And though myriad forms of hate and ‘-isms’ proliferate among these groups—including overt and vitriolic racism, antisemitism, homophobia, and transphobia, among other chauvinisms—the manosphere coalesces around anti-feminism.⁹ The reasons for this are three-fold. Anti-feminism provides the communities on the manosphere the ability to unite via definition by opposition and by providing a focal point for their grievance. It also increases the accessibility of the manosphere’s creeds, thereby magnifying recruitment potential. Meanwhile, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (“Section 230”) has enabled the manosphere to thrive on social media and other sites by disincentivizing platforms’ self-regulation. Thus, in order to combat virulent online anti-feminism and the manosphere as its haven, renewed legislative reform must provide for proactive regulation of social media platforms.

I. Strength in Unity

A. *Definition by opposition*

It is common for groups, especially those that lack superficial cohesive identifiers, to define themselves by what they are not, rather than what they are.¹⁰ Unity and a cohesive identity are lacking among the groups on the manosphere, and even within groups. The nature of the manosphere as a loose collective of mostly decentralized interest groups—which men log on and off of voluntarily, and often anonymously—makes unification and cohesion through any sort of forced conformance unattainable.¹¹ Therefore, they seek unity, which brings validation, belonging, identity, and a sense of power,¹² through a pronounced anti-feminist ideology.

A stark but fitting analogy for this concept is post-World War I Germany. Having just acquired new state boundaries that cut across preexisting communities and affiliations, the new German state was unable to draw on a shared history, shared language, or shared traditions to create national cohesion.¹³ Instead, the ruling party looked to stoke patriotism and a sense of unity among its war-weary citizens by blaming the country’s problems on the Jewish population.¹⁴ Antisemitism not only allowed the ‘in-group’ to define what they stood for and what they were

⁹ See MARWICK & LEWIS, *supra* note 5, at 29.

¹⁰ See Eric Hobsbawm, *Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914*, in *THE INVENTION OF TRADITION* 263 (Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger eds., 1983).

¹¹ Group cohesion is typically attained through formalized education, as it has been in the United States through free public education, or through strong centralization, such as is the case of the United States military. See ERNEST GELLNER, *NATIONS AND NATIONALISM* 57 (1983).

¹² The unity created by the manosphere arguably provides more than just a sense of power. Alice Marwick and Robyn Caplan note that the coordinated large-scale attacks that manosphere members carry out, dubbed networked harassment, carry serious real-world effects for their victims. See generally Alice E. Marwick & Robyn Caplan, *Drinking Male Tears: Language, the Manosphere, and Networked Harassment*, 18 *FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES* 543 (2018).

¹³ Hobsbawm, *supra* note 10, at 278–79.

¹⁴ *Id.*

not—it also encapsulated a broader social critique about the power structures that allowed ‘others’ to occupy positions of power and wealth to the disadvantage of the in-group.¹⁵

Anti-feminism functions in the same way to unite men who otherwise lack common roots and shared experiences in society. A recent study of the manosphere’s linguistic corpus found that the masculine gender role is less well-defined and less discussed overall than the female gender role.¹⁶ Without having to tightly delineate the included masculinities (thereby enabling a broader spectrum of men to participate in the manosphere), the manosphere can define its community by what it’s against: feminism and feminists. The men on the manosphere see themselves as individuals and the groups on the manosphere vary widely in their discourse, but the manosphere exists because in their caricature of women they have created a common myth and defined a common enemy.

B. Expression of grievance

This positioning of women as the enemy offers another benefit for the group. Anti-feminism on the manosphere succinctly captures the sense of grievance that unites the various men there. Each in their own way, these men are reacting to their changing relationships with women interpersonally, but even more so with women as a group.¹⁷ The manosphere sprang up in a time of relatively rapid societal shifts in which new groups of people are demanding social space and political power. The men on the manosphere are feeling their social power diminish in a multitude of real and imagined ways.¹⁸ Women and, in particular, feminists are the perfect scapegoats of this distress. Feminists are a visible icon of the changing structures these men resent: feminism is, at least in part, the reason these men cannot access sex as easily—the main grievance of PUAs and Incels—and will not be guaranteed a wife who stays at home to cook and rear children—the main desire of TradCons.¹⁹ Though these men experience the loss of their power in different ways, anti-feminism captures all of it.

Framing of women as villains secretly in control and ruining their society is a particularly powerful tool because it can be backed up by selective statistics, which they duplicate all over the manosphere. Posters on the manosphere frequently cite the increasing number of women in positions of power and in higher education to bolster their claims that men are the underdogs, the victims.²⁰ For men who worry about the end of ‘their culture,’ statistics about the falling birth rate among Western, educated, and especially white women are proof that

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ See generally Krandel, *supra* note 8.

¹⁷ *Cf. id.* at 613 (finding that women, more often than men, are discussed as a collective on the Manosphere, and noting a “tendency towards reductive generalization”).

¹⁸ See Ging, *supra* note 1, at 639.

¹⁹ See *id.*

²⁰ Lewis, *supra* note 4.

women are working towards its end.²¹ The right-wing conspiracy book *The Great Replacement* documents these trends warning that Western culture will soon be overrun by ‘nonwhites’ and further stoking the sense that these men are facing unparalleled loss.²² Thus, anti-feminism not only enables the manosphere to harness the emotional power of their feelings of injustice,²³ it also enables their arguments to appear grounded in fact.

II. Recruitment and Indoctrination

Finally, harnessing both of the ideological aspects above, anti-feminism functions as a fantastic recruiting point for many groups on the manosphere—even those who do not limit their bigotry to misogyny. A significant portion of the manosphere is dedicated to virulent racism and white supremacy.²⁴ However, much of the growth in the engagement with these ideas is fed from radicalizing men who initially participate in online anti-feminism.²⁵ In large part, this is because anti-feminism is not seen as particularly radical or offensive in much of Western society.²⁶ One British civil society group found that people felt more comfortable voicing anti-feminist sentiment than similar opinions on race—meaning that if white men are disturbed by their changing place in society, it is easiest and most acceptable for them to voice this concern in relation to women.²⁷ Anti-feminist content can thus flourish on relatively public platforms online, and in offline discussions, without being shut down.²⁸ This is a particularly significant advantage for the most accessible parts of the manosphere that operate on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—platforms that have relatively strict community guidelines against hate speech and may take down posts deemed too offensive.²⁹ With anti-feminism permitted to flourish on the internet, disaffected and aggrieved young men may stumble across it on the platforms they are already using and be drawn into the manosphere from there.

Just as easy as anti-feminism is to enter, it quickly grows into an all-encompassing conspiracy theory. As discussed above, anti-feminist rhetoric inflames and validates the sense of injustice that these men are already feeling. In the process, a single wrong quickly blooms into a robust framework explaining

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ Manosphere scholar Debbie Ging notes that “the Internet has been particularly adept at facilitating political assemblages that coalesce around emotional involvement and empathy rather than political principles.” Ging, *supra* note 1, at 643.

²⁴ See generally Sophie Bjork-James, *Racializing Misogyny: Sexuality and Gender in the New Online White Nationalism*, 1 FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY 176 (2020).

²⁵ See Lewis, *supra* note 4; MARWICK, *supra* note 5, at 9–17.

²⁶ Lewis *supra*, note 4.

²⁷ See Lewis, *supra* note 21 (quoting Simon Murdoch of Hope Not Hate).

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Sophie Bjork-James, *Racializing Misogyny: Sexuality and Gender in the New Online White Nationalism*, 1 FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY 176, 180 (2020). See also Simon Copeland, *Reddit Quarantined: Can Changing Platform Affordances Reduce Hateful Material Online?*, 9 INTERNET POL’Y REV. 1, 3 (2020) (describing the varying measures that large platforms are taking to police hateful and violent content).

that women are the cause of every social ill these men can point to. Once men ‘see’ the effects of feminism on their society, it’s convenient to imagine that all the control is actually in the hands of feminists. Like many other forms of extremism, a central conspiracy theory is essential to the manosphere because it provides simple and self-reinforcing answers that keep believers steeped in the hateful ideology.³⁰ This is the same rabbit-hole process that leads men on the manosphere to increasing levels of radicalization and extremism.

III. Regulation of the Internet

Misogyny and anti-feminism are nothing new, nor is the willingness to use violence that is displayed on the manosphere.³¹ Instead, it is the capabilities of the internet that make the manosphere a novel and dangerous force. In order to combat its vicious online anti-feminism, we cannot rely on public campaigns against hate. Rather, the time is right to devote serious attention to curtailing the internet’s role in the promulgation and amplification of traditional misogyny. The internet provides the foundation for the most threatening advantages of the manosphere. For example, in the vast, flexible expanse of the internet, when one site shuts down hateful anti-feminist rhetoric, new platforms stand ready and waiting to accept the manosphere’s content and the traffic it drives.³² And, the sites that are shut down quickly pop back up.³³ Fed by the utilities of the internet, the manosphere grows every day.³⁴ Of course, regulating the hearts and minds of all of these newly converted men is impossible, but through intentional regulation of the internet—as any other consumer good—we can mitigate the harm it allows.

Section 230, as it is popularly known, is the centerpiece of any discussion of regulation of the internet. Originally enacted in 1996 as an amendment to the Communications Decency Act entitled “Protection for Private Blocking and Screening of Offensive Material,” it was designed to shield internet platforms from liability in their good-faith efforts to moderate content on their sites.³⁵ However, over the past two decades, through questionable interpretation by the judiciary, willful blindness by the legislature, and faulty analogies to the First Amendment, Section 230 has turned into a virtually impenetrable shield, protecting internet companies from liability for the content their users post—

³⁰ See Lewis, *supra* note 4. See also Murdoch, *supra* note 27, at 38.

³¹ See Nancy Gibbs, *The War Against Feminism*, TIME (Jun. 24, 2001), <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,159157,00.html>; Ging, *supra* note 1, at 639.

³² For example, in 2019, when manospheric 8chan was kicked off of its service provider, Gab.com—already supporting vile manosphere content—seamlessly collected thousands of new users a day, presumably those migrating from 8chan. See Bjork-James, *supra* note 29, at 176.

³³ See, e.g., Oscar Gonzalez, *8chan, 8kun, 4chan, Endchan: What You Need to Know*, CNET (Nov. 7, 2017, 5:45 PM), <https://www.cnet.com/news/8chan-8kun-4chan-endchan-what-you-need-to-know-internet-forums/>.

³⁴ See Bjork-James, *supra* note 29, at 179.

³⁵ Danielle Keats Citron & Mary Anne Franks, *The Internet as a Speech Machine and Other Myths Confounding Section 230 Reform*, 2020 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 45, 49 (2020).

meaning they are not legally required to regulate their content practically at all.³⁶ Without legal incentive to take down or bar hateful content, platforms are financially incentivized to allow it: negative and shocking content draws the most views and algorithms that draw users into increasingly extremist content prolong engagement with the platform.³⁷

In this environment, platforms are only responsive when pressure from the public, advocacy groups, and advertisers finally threatens their bottom lines.³⁸ This avenue, too, is unpromising for substantive change. As multi-billion-dollar corporations with societally essential products, Facebook, Google (which owns YouTube), Twitter, and others remain impervious to all but the loudest public pressure about the most egregious issues. Consequently, tangible change is slow, mind-numbingly incremental, and largely nonexistent.³⁹ Public pressure cannot be counted on to deliver the type of sweeping reforms that would be needed to unseat the manosphere's hate in all its various forms from so many different platforms.

Instead, the current moment presents an opportunity for thoughtful reform of Section 230. Though for markedly different reasons, both Democrats and Republicans have begun to set their sights on changing the law.⁴⁰ In the past year, Congress and other regulatory bodies have undertaken efforts to better understand the issues posed by the law.⁴¹ In this space, advocates and legal scholars have proposed a broad spectrum of reforms.⁴² Many rather simple options—including incentives to increase platforms' good-faith efforts at self-moderation and strict prohibitions on profiting from hateful and violent content—would go a long way in corralling the manosphere.⁴³ However, in light of platforms' history of skirting regulation, the increasing threat posed by anti-feminism on the manosphere demands a more comprehensive response.

To be truly effective, change to Section 230 will require robust public discussion about what will be tolerated on the internet in the name of vibrant 'free speech'

³⁶ See *id.* at 48–51. There are four exceptions to this protection for otherwise illegal conduct: actions that constitute federal crimes, violations of intellectual property law and the Electronic Privacy Communications Act, and the facilitation of sex trafficking. This last front of liability was added in 2018 in response to pressure from advocacy groups. *Id.* at 50 (citing 47 U.S.C. § 230(e)).

³⁷ See *id.* at 52.

³⁸ *Id.* at 53.

³⁹ See, e.g., Neima Jahromi, *The Fight for the Future of YouTube*, THE NEW YORKER (July 8, 2019), <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-fight-for-the-future-of-youtube>; Tom Jackman, *Father of Slain Journalist Alison Parker Takes on YouTube over Alleged Refusal to Remove Graphic Videos*, WASH. POST (Feb. 20, 2020, 6:00 AM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/crime-law/2020/02/20/father-slain-journalist-alison-parker-takes-youtube-over-refusal-remove-graphic-videos/>.

⁴⁰ Republicans would like to see platforms held liable for what they believe is systematic suppression of right-wing speech. Democrats hope to hold platforms to higher standards for moderating hateful and violent content. See Citron & Franks, *supra* note 35, at 46–47.

⁴¹ See *id.* at 47.

⁴² See, e.g., *id.*

⁴³ One study found that Reddit's 'quarantine' of pages that it deemed offensive successfully decreased traffic and cross-reference to those pages. See Copeland, *supra* note 29.

and what type of content even qualifies as speech.⁴⁴ Most importantly, any efforts to combat the manosphere will require examination of the incredibly powerful algorithms that put its content in front of new eyes and draw those already exposed deeper into its vitriol. Companies whose profits are tied to these capabilities of their algorithms should not be given long regulatory leashes. Successful legislation in the void created by Section 230 will only come from a deep understanding of the threats posed by online hate and the mechanisms by which it thrives and will likely entail a large and complex regulatory scheme. Curbing hate on the internet is possible, but it requires that the internet is no longer treated as a novelty that must be allowed to grow freely, and more like the incredibly complicated social tool it is today.

⁴⁴ See Citron & Franks, *supra* note 35, at 56–68 (discussing the misconceptions surrounding Section 230 and the constitutional protection of free speech).