Abstract

This paper discusses how online communities can radicalize users by spreading and developing dangerous ideologies. To achieve this, an analysis has been made of the "incel" (involuntary celibate) community whose members generally gather around online forums to discuss their issues with dating, and who often spread misogynistic beliefs and advocate for violent retribution against women. The paper considers why this community can be attractive for young men, how they interact in it, the language that is used in it, the radicalization of members, and how the internet has helped facilitate the growth of this group. It concludes that the incel community takes advantage of online platforms (mainly forums) to spread misogynistic ideology which can have the effect of radicalising users and instilling within them dangerous beliefs.

Keywords: incel, community, radicalization, misogyny, online forum

Misogynistic radicalization of users in the online incel community

The internet has provided a space for individuals to form connections and communities with people who share similar interests, without being restricted by their geographic location (Delanty, 2018). While many of the communities that are formed online can be extremely positive for individuals, who may gain a sense of belonging that they may not be getting in their off-line lives (Holt et al., 2016; Simi & Futrell, 2010), some of the ideologies that are spread in these spaces can be quite toxic and can contribute to the radicalization of their members (O'Malley, 2020). In 2018 Alex Minnassian killed 10 people (mostly women) when he drove a rental van into pedestrians on a busy footpath in Toronto, earlier that day he referred to the "incel rebellion" in a Facebook post as justification for his actions (BBC, 2018a). The incel, or involuntary celibate, community is a group of mostly young men aged between 18 and 25 who gather in online forums to discuss their issues with dating and attempt to find meaning in their rejection from popular culture (Tolentino, 2018). Members of the group justify their misogynistic ideas by presenting women as inherently evil and argue that they have been given too much power in today's social environment (Jaki et al., 2019). The community can be attractive for young men as it often engages in discussion around normative anxieties about dating and social culture (Tolentino, 2018). However, once users are entrenched in the community they are exposed to misogynistic ideals, degrading

language and calls for violent retribution which may cause them to develop radical beliefs (O'Malley, 2020). The incel community takes advantage of online platforms (mainly forums) to preach their misogynistic ideology which can have the effect of radicalising users and instilling within them dangerous opinions.

The rise of the internet has brought with it a myriad of web 2.0 tools that have given users the ability to form connections and communities without being restricted by their geographic location (Delanty, 2018). The way these communities organise themselves can vary, though the incel community mainly exists on online forums like the one found at incel.is. Forums are online communities that provide a space for participants to engage with specific areas of discussion (Holt, 2007). Users can escape their more traditional social hierarchies, that may be rigid and expect a high degree of conformity, and participate in a variety of on-line forums that they may find more interesting and liberating (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). These shared online spaces can be extremely positive for individuals who can find a sense of belonging that they may not be getting in their off-line life (Holt et al., 2016; Simi & Futrell, 2010). The problem with some of these communities, though, is that they can cause the formation of dangerous sub-cultures where members develop a shared ideology that can justify deviant and criminal behaviour (Holt, 2007).

The incel, or involuntary celibate, community is a group of mostly young men aged between 18 and 25 who gather in online forums to discuss their issues with dating and try to find meaning in their rejection from popular culture (Tolentino, 2018). The community can be an attractive option for young, outcast men as they often engage in rhetoric that reflects normative anxieties for them (Tolentino, 2018). The community, that was established around these normative anxieties, has now developed a delusional and dangerous ideology to attempt to make sense of their social rejection (O'Malley et al., 2020). This ideology shifts responsibility away from themselves and puts the blame mainly on women who are seen as having an unfair and disproportionate amount of power in today's social environment (Jaki et al., 2019). In a study of posts on incel forums, analyses found that the community was structured around five interrelated normative orders: the sexual market, women as naturally evil, legitimizing masculinity, male oppression, and violence (O'Malley et al., 2020). A key characteristic of the incel community, as with other deviant sub-cultures, is that it operates in rejection of the values of the dominant culture (Quinn & Forsyth, 2005). Their dangerous ideology and rejection of cultural norms makes this community a significant threat as it can

have the effect of radicalizing young members who might not have been exposed to such toxic beliefs if they had not found them online (Holt et al., 2019). There is growing evidence of subcultures that directly target women for their perceived role in subjugating men (Gottell & Dutton, 2016) and the incel community is one that poses a significant threat to the misogynistic radicalisation of young men.

There are a number of ways that the incel community works to radicalise young men and entrench them within their toxic community (Holt et al., 2016). Pseudonyms are adopted by the users of incel forums which gives new users a sense of safety as they are able to explore and express ideas without the consequence of social rejection from their physical peer group (Holt et al., 2016). New users are then freer to explore radical beliefs that they may not be exposed to in their off-line lives (Holt et al., 2019). The forums are also set up so that individuals do not need to directly engage with threads to accept their content, they are able to just browse through the posts to find a sense of belonging and then possibly accept the radical ideology (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017; Holt et al., 2019).

New users who may have come across one of these forums as a result of their genuine feelings of isolation and loneliness are then exposed to a mixture of content ranging from genuine advice forums to radical ideology and hate speech (O'Malley et al., 2020). This paper will focus on some of the content analysed by O'Malley et al. in 2020 in which the authors looked at over 8000 posts to identify the norms, values and beliefs of the incel community. In the study, analyses found that the community was structured around five interrelated normative orders: the sexual market, women as naturally evil, legitimizing masculinity, male oppression, and violence (O'Malley et. al, 2020). On one incel website, users shared stories of men murdering women and "normies" (normal looking men) into a folder named "lifefuel", stories such as these were intended to provide incels with a sense of joy as they felt that their supposed enemies were being dealt some sort of justice (O'Malley et al., 2020). Throughout the forums there were also various posts denigrating women and suggesting that they were inherently evil. One user, f1recel, posted: "Women use lies to manipulate men into doing what they want. It's nothing except how nature has designed them." By pushing the narrative that women are inherently evil, users can then try to justify violent retribution. The following is a statement posted on the incel thread incel.me:

I really want to kill this whore. I would punch her in her face over and over again and force her to say this phrase over and over again: "Teehee you are not entitled to this, but I am entitled to anything, now rot." I will make her rot in hell for sure. I will turn her life into a living hell. (O'Malley, 2020)

The type of violent rhetoric shown above is a common theme throughout incel threads and can have the effect of radicalising new users (O'Malley et al., 2020). While expressing normal feelings of anxiety about romantic relationships may be expected from men in this age group, the type of content being posted on these forums suggest a communal willingness and desire to act on these feelings with violence (Baele et al., 2019) which should be cause for concern.

Members of the incel forums further develop their sense of community and signal their belonging by using language that is exclusive to them (Hamm, 2002, Holt, 2010). Women are regularly degraded with language that is aimed to present them as the enemy of the community: "Femoid" is a term used to refer to all women and acts to reinforce the incel belief that women are machine-like in their cruelty; "Stacy" is used to describe attractive women who are presented as particularly cruel; and "roasty" is used to denigrate sexually active women (Baele et al., 2019). Users who wish to become further entrenched within the community will adopt this type of degrading language to prove their attachment to the sub-culture and identify outsiders (Hamm, 2002, Holt, 2010). Those who seek acceptance by the group will first have to adopt the misogynistic language that is often used to advocate for violent retribution against women. As a result, members that progress within the community are likely to become more radical in their beliefs with time.

Whilst many of the violent threats are mainly performative, there have been several examples of real-world violence that have been committed by incels (Baele et al., 2019). In 2014, Elliot Rodger killed six people in a stabbing and shooting spree in Isla Vista, California (BBC, 2018b). Before committing suicide, he uploaded a "retribution" video to YouTube which is full of the type of incel rhetoric that can be seen online (BBC, 2018b). In the video, Rodger talks of how he had "no choice but to exact revenge on the society" that had "denied" him sex and love (BBC, 2018b). In another case in 2018, Alex Minassian killed ten people (predominately women) when he drove a rental van into pedestrians on a busy pavement

(BBC, 2018a). Earlier that day, Minassian posted this to his Facebook account: "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! ..."(BBC, 2018a). The link between the incel community and real-world violence is quite clear. This is not surprising as it has been argued that sub-cultural members can become entrenched into deviant norms that free them from traditional social constraints (Cohen, 1955). Members who commit their acts of violent "retribution" against what they perceive to be a dominant an oppressive culture are less worried about what that dominant culture thinks of them. Instead, they may take comfort in the knowledge that the members of the incel community will likely encourage their actions.

There are a number of ways in which the internet and web 2.0 platforms have helped facilitate the forming of toxic communities and the radicalisation of some users (Holt et al., 2016). The perceived safety of online spaces allows users to engage with content that they may not share in public out of fear of social rejection (Holt et al., 2016). Also, individuals aren't required to directly engage with others to be exposed to radical beliefs, they only need to scroll through the content on radical pages (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017; Holt et al., 2019). Once users become entrenched in an online community it has been argued that they can also become immersed in "echo chambers". Echo chambers occur when users on a platform mostly interact with and are exposed to people who share similar ideological beliefs, which can cause them to have a distorted view of the conversation around a particular topic (Du & Gregory, 2017). It is imperative to consider how the internet is being used to form and develop dangerous ideologies, such as that of the incel community, so that strategies to disrupt the radicalisation of users can be developed.

The incel community takes advantage of online platforms (mainly forums) to preach their misogynistic ideology which can have the effect of radicalising users and instilling within them dangerous beliefs. The community acts as a safe and insular environment for those who have struggled with dating and feel that they have been rejected by the dominant culture and who may harbour genuine feelings of sadness and loneliness as a result. The community then plays on these feeling by regularly presenting the argument that women are inherently evil and deserving of violent retribution. In this way, users can shift any blame for their romantic failures away from themselves and onto women who are presented as the source of their discontent. Further research into how new users are exposed to the incel community may prove useful in combatting the radicalisation of young men in the future. The internet has provided spaces for toxic subcultures to develop and grow, and it is

important to understand how they can radicalise new users so that steps can be taken to disrupt this process.

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